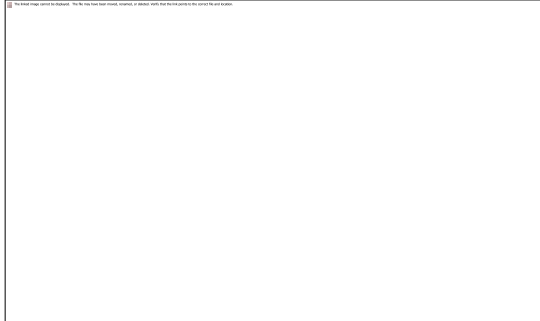


~ Conqueror and Amazon: Echoes of Darkness

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Part I

by romansilence



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Disclaimer 2: This story deals with violence and its aftermath, some graphic descriptions included.

Disclaimer 3: This is a work of alternative fiction, i.e. subtext is maintext. So, there are rather graphic scenes of consensual sex between adult women. There also may be allusions to non-consensual sex, sexual violence, and child abuse (not graphic, of course!). If this is offending to you, or if you're under age: Go away, now! (There are a lot of great general X:WP stories waiting for you.) If this stuff is illegal where you live: Just move to a more liberal country or state!

Disclaimer 4: Timeline -- this is the sequel of "[Conqueror and Amazon: Towards a new life](#)". Reading it probably would facilitate the reader's understanding. Though there will be some flashbacks I doubt that they will satisfy a curious mind.

Just to get you up to date: Xena has conquered all Greece and Rome, and defeated the Persians. Her home is safe and she is weary of ruling and also regretting some of the things she did in the past. Together with Gabrielle she goes to Amazons to balance the scales with them. She is found guilty of sacrilegious behaviour and now lives with Queen Melosa and her tribe as a warrior, teacher, and temporary slave. This story begins one moon after "Towards a new life" ended.

Disclaimer 5: English still isn't my first language, so please be kind. I apologise for language violation, grammar abuse, and punctuation neglecting. I'm deeply indebted to my beta readers, Mary and Wendy. They really came through for me and without them I couldn't have done it. So if there are still some minor or major mistakes left, I am the one to blame.

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Chapter One: Making Up

It was the third day after her second whipping. Xena was lying flat on her stomach, silently berating herself for having so easily given in to Gabrielle's request. She had promised to stay in bed for at least four days after her punishment, and by now she was cursing herself of being unable to resist the pleading eyes of the blonde.

The objective part of her mind, however, told her that all in all it had been a good decision. A moon ago, when she first submitted to the Goddess' whip, she had had to acknowledge, at least to herself, that the strokes had been harder to take than ever before. This time, it had been even worse; every stroke felt like fire and lightning hitting her back. Every stroke felt like it would need suturing, and some of them really did. For the fraction of a heartbeat she even had begun to doubt the wisdom of her decision to offer herself up to Amazon justice.

More than a season ago, when she left her palace in Corinth to personally look into the rumours about an Amazon uprising at the north-eastern border, she just had had in mind a peaceful trip with her lover, some quality time away from the every-day demands of ruling Greece and Rome, with as small a compliment of guards as she could get away with. Her frontier fort really had been destroyed, but not by Amazons.

Nearing the Amazon border, she found them at the brink of a battle with soldiers wearing her colours, and she instinctively had stepped in to keep those men from breaking the almost five summers old peace treaty she had with Amazons and Centaurs. Gabrielle, her fair haired, kind hearted lover, had been gravely injured -- along with all of her surviving guards. She had offered herself up as a prisoner to ensure that all of them would be taken care of. While tending to the injured and caring for Gabrielle whose right leg had been almost shattered, all the feelings of a past long put aside had come back to her.

She remembered the time spend with the Northern Amazons and how she had repaid their kindness. She remembered the seasons she had lived in an Amazon village while still a child. Looking down at the peaceful face of her sleeping lover she once again felt that she wasn't worthy of the younger woman's love but she desperately wanted to be.

So, Xena the Conqueror stepped down from her throne and declared that she wanted to stand trial for her crimes against the Amazon nation, only then realising that she probably would have to pay with her life. To her utter surprise she wasn't condemned for murder but only for sacrilegious behaviour; and next moon, she had to be whipped a third and last time to scale the balances of justice with the Amazons who now no longer called her the Conqueror but a friend, and even a sister.

More than two candlemarks ago, the younger woman had left to get some more of the repugnantly smelling poultice the Amazon healer insisted on putting on her back. She couldn't blame her companion for taking her time coming back, she knew as a rule she wasn't easy to live with when injured but now, with the Goddess Artemis having granted her plea, it was even

worse. Lying there with nothing to do but to think was slowly driving her stir crazy, and she was hard pressed to keep the anger and irritation she was feeling from showing in her voice. She was healing agonisingly slow, and that alone made her cranky and hard to keep from being bored.

More than a moon ago, Gabrielle had been livid when she found out what her stubborn lover had done -- begging the Goddess to take away her supernatural healing abilities in her eyes was not only stupid, it also bordered on suicidal.

When the Amazon jury came up with their decision, the sentence for sacrilegious behaviour, they had taken this special ability well in account. But with the execution already set in motion the sentence could not be changed. Gabrielle was exaggerating, the whipping didn't endanger her life but as it was it would leave a whole set of new scars on her back -- and in a twisted way she would be as proud of them as she was of the scars left by the gauntlet. Her blonde lover hadn't been the only one angry with her.

Queen Melosa had given her a lecture that Amazon justice was nothing to play with and that no culprit had the right to make it neither better nor worse for herself by asking someone, be it God or human, for help. Anara also lectured her -- on the dangers the repeated whipping could present to the muscles in her back and the fact that the blatant disrespect for her own health and well-being was setting a bad example for the other equally stubborn Amazons.

Only Eponin and Theano showed some kind of support. Eponin told her that she didn't like her decision but that a warrior had to follow her instincts and her heart regardless of the consequences. Theano was the only one to really understand her need to atone for the crimes she had on her conscience and the deaths she had caused over the years. She understood her motives and her reasoning but not her methods. The older Amazon just knew her too well.

These thoughts automatically brought back the reason Xena had to tell them about her deal with Artemis in the first place -- without the incident with the barn, she was convinced, she would well have been able to cover it up.

After the first whipping and her somewhat surprising proposition to Gabrielle slightly over a moon ago, Eponin and Theano laid her down on her bed and Anara began to clean the lash marks. Part of her verdict stated that no painkillers could be administrated but the healer still applied a soothing balm to her torn flesh and insisted that she took at least a minimum amount of sleeping herbs. She wouldn't have given in if not for the stern look of the Queen and the hurtful expression of Gabrielle's eyes.

In the afternoon of the second day, Xena was still half asleep, she heard the distinct whiny of her horse. At first she thought it was part of a dream but then she was convinced that Argo was afraid of something. She closed her eyes to concentrate on the sound. There was no doubt, Argo was in danger. The tall woman hoisted herself out of bed, put on one of her sleep shirts, jumped

out of the window, and ran to the barn. She could smell the fire half across the compound and accelerated her steps. Out of the corner of her eyes she could see others also hurrying towards the barn and stables.

When she threw the double door open the smoke already was thick enough to cause her eyes to water. She stifled a cough and entered. The horses were in a frenzy, she couldn't get near enough to let them loose. Argo alone stayed relatively calm when she heard the voice of her mistress. The next horse she was able to approach was Eponin's black stallion. With the two of them gone she managed to near the others from the front, and as soon as they knew they were free most of them bolted away. It was an arduous process and took her longer than anticipated. The smoke was burning in her lungs when she reached the far corner of the barn.

The last two horses didn't move an inch, two mares, much smaller than most of the other horses. They belonged to the delegation of the mountain tribe, the first one was black with white spots, the second one white with black spots. They didn't react at all to her, they just stood still, seemingly petrified. Only when she put two burlap sacks over their eyes was she able to lead them out of the smoke infested barn.

Xena knew the fire was on the upper level where the bigger part of the hay supply was stored in bales. She let go of the two small horses. The Amazons meanwhile had organised a chain to douse the flames leaking out of the roof and she turned around to make sure that there was no living thing left in the barn. She knew it wasn't the safest or most sensible thing to do but she somehow felt that it was important.

The tall woman once again closed her burning eyes and concentrated on the sounds surrounding her. One by one she shut them out, the Amazons shouting orders, the horses running wild through the central square, the crackling of the flames, and the angry hissing when water hit them -- so far, so good, but there was more. It was a sound like the subdued wailing of a small child too feeble from hunger to really cry. The sound definitively came from the barn. Xena took some steps inside, the smoke making it impossible by now to see anything and concentrated once more.

Under a blanket in the corner where Argo had been stabled she found a small bundle of fur. She couldn't see what it really was but she cradled it in her arms and turned to get out. Xena almost had reached the doors when a ceiling beam came down in front of her. She hopped back to avoid the flames, stumbled over a pitchfork and crashed backwards in the central stone column that guaranteed the stability of the barn. Instinctively she took a deep breath and almost lost her cargo from coughing.

The burning beam was blocking the entrance, there was no way around it, and she knew she was running out of time. She had to get out, immediately. So, she gathered all of her energy to push back the pain that was radiating from her back through the rest of her body, went as far back as possible, took aim and somersaulted over the flames. She made a few stumbling steps forward, still almost completely blinded by the smoke.

Xena more sensed than heard the front part of the barn collapse, instinctively regaining her

balance she propelled herself in two flying flips to better get out of the way. The Amazonian bucket chain froze for a second and then frantically continued to douse the flames in order to keep the barn from totally burning down and also keep the other buildings in the vicinity from catching any sparks.

The furball in Xena's arms began to squirm and to sneeze at the same time, and it was only then that she took a closer look at her charge. Her eyes still rimmed with burning tears she at first took him for a dog but the pointed ears and rather narrow and long muzzle identified him as a mountain lynx puppy, not older than two or two and a half moons. She carefully knelt down and put him on the ground but he didn't run away. When Gabrielle and Anara found them only a few candle-drops later they were still staring at each other.

They slowly brought her back to her hut, with the puppy only inches from her heels. They showed her what was left of her sleeping shirt after they had to cut it from her body to tend to her back. The back part was literally soaked with blood, most of the whip marks obviously having broken open when she collided with the central column. The following conversation was nothing she was too fond to remember, well most of it. Gabrielle was nearly out of her mind with worry and Anara was clearly puzzled.

"I don't get it. This isn't healing as it should, not at all." The Amazon healer was mumbling to herself. "The lash marks should have scabbed by now but there's not a trace of it. I don't understand it. This back looks as if the wounds just recently have stopped bleeding but that's impossible. I know you crashed into this damned column but still, there shouldn't be this much damage. It's against everything I know about your healing abilities."

Xena knew that Anara didn't expect a reply but she also was sure that at least some of the wounds would need stitches. The older woman had to know the truth to treat her back accordingly. Not only healing would take longer now, her sensibility to pain was also considerably heightened. This much she knew since the first stroke had hit her back the day before, and in a strange way she had welcomed the pain. But it also made it more difficult to cut her mind from her body's reactions, to keep a distance from her injuries.

When she had finished her 'confession' Anara was speechless and Gabrielle now was not only worried but also very angry. At the time the blonde still depended on the wheelchair to move around due to her shattered leg, and Xena was certain that if she had been more mobile the younger woman wouldn't have stopped by pounding only the armrests but also stamped her feet. As it was she began to shout at her lover and soon had herself worked up in a full fledged temper tantrum. The tall woman couldn't help but find her adorable in her wrath.

While Gabrielle was still venting her anger something happened that guaranteed that this afternoon always would count among Xena's more pleasant memories. She knew the puppy had entered the hut with them but she soon had all but forgotten about him. In the midst of

Gabrielle's outburst she heard a faint growling. She turned her eyes from the younger woman's face to her feet, and there he was.

His tail was pointing straight to the sky and he did his best to appear taller than he was. He was growling at Gabrielle, his upper lips drawn back and his pointed teeth gleaming in the daylight. Anara and Xena started laughing at the same time. The young woman stopped her tirade and the puppy turned to Xena and wagged his tail, obviously proud of having silenced the other one.

Xena told him that he was a good boy but that Gabrielle was a friend and that she had every right to be angry with her, and that it now was his job to protect her as well. He looked at her as if understanding every word but the pattern repeated itself with everyone from the Queen and Eponin to Theano and Ephiny. Xena first had to approve of them before he tolerated them around her.

The tall warrior knew that as soon as he was big enough to survive on his own she had to bring him back to where he belonged, back to the mountains. She didn't have a clue how he came to take refuge in the barn but after only a few days she knew that she would miss him a lot. That's why she didn't want to name him while Gabrielle and the girls soon began to throw name suggestions in her face whenever she talked to them. More than once she tried to get them to see reason but the lynx puppy quickly was becoming the darling of the village. Even Queen Melosa and the rather stoic weapons' master couldn't help being enchanted by his antics; and though some of the elders were loudly complaining about wild beasts running rampant through the village square and scaring the live stock out of a year of growth they also weren't totally immune to his charm.

Having to spend the day after the fire in bed, Xena nonetheless was able to give the Queen and her carpenters some pointers about the rebuilding of the barn. Officially she was a slave carrying out the Queen's orders, in reality she soon was supervising the whole operation. She even enlisted the help of her brother who still was staying with the rest of her soldiers waiting for a message telling him about their mother.

The barn would become bigger and more solid. The central column would be supplemented by four more of the same built. Beside the two ladders inside of the barn an external staircase would lead to the upper level. The opening for the hay bales in the back would be enlarged and there also would be a second one at the front side of the building. Two metal beams embedded in the ceiling would make handling the heavy bales easier and more comfortable. All in all, the barn would become a much bigger reproduction of the one standing next to Amphipolis' inn.

Xena took advantage of her new assignment to get out of bed and to the building site. Despite her best intentions she soon involved herself, and not only theoretically, in the rebuilding process. She was carrying beams and helping to erect the outer poles though her rational mind knew that this wasn't one of the smarter decision of her life.

At the moment, she easily was able to ignore the pain her back still gave her. What was lost to

her was her innate sense of how well her back was healing. A very new and unsettling feeling. She knew that this was one of the reasons why she tended to overdo it.

On the fourth day she was about to take a step up a ladder when something connected with her other foot and sent her to the ground. Moments later the steps of the ladder burst under the weight of one of the newly cut roof beams. When Xena shook herself back to reality the first thing she saw, apart from Gabrielle's rapidly approaching wheelchair was the young lynx growling at the beam. She slowly eased herself in a sitting position but wasn't able to suppress a groan of pain. The puppy turned around and found her eyes.

"You know, buddy, you just saved my live. We're even now."

He looked at her for a long moment, and then jumped aiming right for her chest and began to lick her face furiously thus effectively ruining her tough warrior image. The Queen took a look at the blood stains on her shirt and sent her to the healer's hut. The next two and a half days she had to spend flat on her tummy and also had to suffer through another set of lectures from Queen Melosa, Anara, Toris and Gabrielle.

During daylight she did what she was ordered to do: nothing. The nights, however, found her sneaking out of the infirmary to her own hut. She didn't dare to lie down but she knew that Gabrielle needed her next to her in order to sleep undisturbed without the help of herbs. She told the puppy to take care of Thania and the other Amazon warriors still in the healer's hut and he reluctantly stayed behind. When she returned long before dawn she always found him curled into a ball sleeping next to Thania's cot. Anara wasn't at all happy to have 'a dirty animal' in her hut but whenever she tried to get rid of him he looked at her with his green and yellow speckled brown eyes and she no longer had the heart to send him away.

The day Xena was released from the healer's hut, Thania also was allowed to spend a few candlemarks outside for the first time. The gut wound she had received from the renegade Amazon's arrow while saving Toris' son, Lyceus, now was healing nicely. Anara was convinced the change in scenery would speed up her healing even more. The middle aged Amazon healer especially was concerned with the nightmares disturbing the young girl's sleep, dreams she refused to acknowledge.

Under an old tree next to the training grounds two bedrolls were spread and a lot of fluffy cushions were waiting for her. Eponin gently sat her down on the furs and told her to pay attention to the staff class so she wouldn't fall behind her age mates too much. But there were a lot of other things going on that were more fun to observe.

Having spent the whole morning checking on the barn's progress and smoothing the feathers of some of the Amazon craftwomen who didn't take well having to listen to a man in her absence, Xena now was teaching archery. Though there were no absolute beginners in her class their arrows more often than not missed the targets. The puppy one moment was quietly sitting at her feet and the next raced to retrieve the misguided arrow and proudly brought it back to her.

He was at her side when she helped Gabrielle to take the first tentative steps with the help of crutches. He also stayed next to her when a late afternoon sparring session with some members of the Royal Guard began. Xena barely avoided being knicked at her right arm while trying not to stumble over the puppy who obviously believed that he was taking part in some sort of exciting game.

She was annoyed at her obvious lack of coordination due to the fact that she hadn't been able to do her usual drills during the last moon and a half. She only now was getting back to her routine and wasn't at all pleased with her performance.

The dark haired woman ordered the excited puppy to go and stay with Thania and Gabrielle but to no avail, he didn't budge an inch. Then the Amazon girl shouted as loud as she could. "Shadow, come here," and the small lynx followed her command immediately.

When evening came and it was time for Thania to return to her cot in the infirmary Shadow longingly looked from Xena to the young Amazon to Xena 'til the tall warrior took him in her arms, whispered in his ear and returned him to the ground. He had to hurry to catch up with Eponin and Thania -- and slipped in the healer's hut just before the door fell shut.

From that day on he all but abandoned Xena and stayed with the girl -- at first to Anara's great annoyance. Then she had to admit that the injured girl's sleep was much more peaceful with Shadow at her side. She even was healing faster. So, after only three quarters of a moon of recovery Thania was allowed to move to her room in the Queen's hut.

"You were as morose as Amazons on a rainy summer when I left. What happened that you are smiling now, Xe?"

"Do you know that you're the only one that can get this near to me without me knowing you're there before you even enter the hut?"

"So you keep telling me but your mind obviously was miles away. It's time for your salve. I know you don't like its smell, but it works and Anara is very proud of it."

"I do appreciate her ingenuity. The poultice does speed up the healing but it doesn't numb the pain. It's perfect for my needs, and as soon as I'm out of here, we'll work together on improving the smell."

"You didn't answer my question."

"I was thinking about Shadow and the fire in the barn. We still don't know how it happened and it's driving Solari to distraction. It could have been anything, glowing embers flying from one of

the fire pits, a piece of metal or glass in the sun. She is sacrificing too much time to this accident."

"Solari feels responsible not only for the security of the Queen but also for the security of the whole village. It's part of her job to worry about these things. She just wants to make sure that it really was nothing but an accident.. She's suspicious of everything and everyone since Najara's treason. -- Still, a burning barn is no reason to smile."

"No, the fire in itself is nothing to smile about but it had some unexpected side effects. Because of Shadow Thania no longer has bad dreams. The barn soon will be bigger than ever, and the village will need the new stalls. It's still too soon to be absolutely sure but considering the trouble we had to recapture some of the horses there probably soon will be a whole group of foals. Argo wasn't the only mare in heat at the time."

"How do you feel about Argo possibly becoming a mother?"

"I don't know, Gabrielle. I'm not sure that Argo will make a good mother."

"Why not? She's very protective of her mistress, she certainly will also be very protective of a foal or a filly of her own."

"Perhaps you're right, love." All of a sudden Xena's high spirits were gone but before the younger woman could question her about this unexpected mood swing there was a knock at the outer door.

"Come in, Thania. We're in the bedroom."

"Hello Gabrielle, Queen Melosa wants you to come to the council's hut as soon as possible. She also wants you to come, Xena."

"I gather it's official?"

"Yes, I think all the adults will be there."

"Good, Gabrielle could you get the Amazon leathers from the dresser. Please don't look at me as if I've lost my mind. What ever else I may be to the Amazons, officially I'm still a slave -- and now I have to dress the part."

Gabrielle went to the dresser and handed the rather skimpy leather outfit to her lover. "I love the way you look in these, though I'd prefer to keep the sight of this much skin to myself. I just think that it's still too early for you to get up. -- Do you know what this meeting is all about, Thania?"

"No, I only know that one of the carrier pigeons arrived earlier this day."

"Carrier pigeons?"

"Yes, we use them to communicate with some of the more remote Amazon villages and with the Centaurs. -- Xena, the Queen told me to accompany you to the council's hut."

Xena now was dressed but still barefooted. She answered. "I'm at your command, little one."

The girl's smile wasn't completely sincere. "I don't like giving you orders, Xena. That's not the way it should be, and I will be happy when it's finally over at the end of next moon."

"I know you don't like it, Than, but it's part of your duty as the Queen's apprentice. Just try and look at it from another point of view. You're just the messenger giving the Queen's orders to a slave. It's nothing personal."

"I still don't like it, and I will be happy when this damned collar will be gone."

"Me too, Thania," answered Gabrielle. "It's less than a moon 'til then. The time will be up before we even know it."

Gabrielle entered the council's hut and took a seat next to Ephiny. The room was packed with women, some of them came visibly directly from the training grounds and others were still wearing the clothing of their respective crafts. Thania and Xena came in through the back door and knelt next to the Queen on the ground, the tall warrior on her left, the young Amazon on her right.

"Members of the council, Amazon sisters," the Queen spoke, "the time has come for our annual meeting with the Centaurs and their leaders, Tyldus and Kaleipus. The invitation arrived today. I called upon you to let you know whom I've chosen to be with me on the journey. Solari already has decided upon three members of the Royal Guard: Kelara, Silea, and Siana. Akyra and Theano will represent the elders. Last year I took members of the crafts, so this year Solari, Ephiny and Chandala will be there for the warriors. Gabrielle, the bard, will be the ninth member of my party."

"Gabrielle isn't even an Amazon, why take her?" An unidentifiable voice came from near the entrance.

"It never was the habit of Amazon Queens to give any explanations of their decisions, and I certainly won't be the one to start. -- We will leave the village tomorrow at dawn, Eponin will be in charge until I'm back, with Anara as second in command. This meeting is adjourned."

Soon the big room was empty except for the members of the delegation, and Xena. The tall woman had tried to leave with the others but the Queen's hand on her shoulder had stilled her movement. "I should go and prepare your travelling gear, Queen Melosa."

"I'm perfectly capable of packing my things myself, thank you. You're not a servant, Xena, you're one of my warriors and teachers. Besides, you will have enough to do to prepare your own

gear and to help Gabrielle. You will go with us, the Centaurs asked for your attendance."

"But that's impossible, my... Queen Melosa. I will not be prosecuted for the crimes my men and I committed during the war but the peace treaty clearly states that I'm not allowed to enter Centaur territory, under no circumstances. You must have been mistaken."

"I also was surprised, Xena. You will not be allowed to wear weapons at the village but that's about all. Read for yourself."

Melosa handed her a small piece of parchment with the encrypted message. "It's written in another hand, probably by someone not really comfortable with the code, someone rather young."

"My thoughts. It could be a trap, a way to get you to the village, and to try and kill you. There still are a few among them regretting the treaty and your role in it. It's your decision. I understand if you'd rather avoid going there. You could stay here and we'll send a message if the invitation was genuine."

"There also are others remembering the time I almost annihilated the village and the Centaur nation. Yes, it could be a trap but the things I did during the war are among my debts still unpaid for whatever the treaty says. I'm ready to take the risk. It's possible that Kaleipus and Tyldus don't know about this extended invitation. They won't be happy about it, and the treaty gives them the right to punish my trespassing according to their laws. If they insist, please don't interfere, please."

There was a long moment of silence, finally the Queen, knowing the stubborn streak of the tall warrior, sighed and answered. "I won't promise not to interfere. But I can promise that I won't oppose any of their decisions. However, I will try to influence them. They don't know you. They only know someone who no longer exists. I will try and make them see the real woman behind your warrior's mask."

Xena nodded her consent, she knew this was the best she could hope for from the outwardly stern but deeply caring Queen, and though she also knew better than to think that the old Xena, Xena, the Conqueror, Xena, Destroyer of Nations, was well dead and gone, there was a small part of her that desperately needed the other woman to be right and revelled in Queen Melosa's confidence and friendship.

Gabrielle was excited to get the chance to see a real, living and breathing Centaur but she also was angry with the reaction of her raven haired lover. So when they were back in their hut she loudly burst out.

"You're the most stubborn, pig-headed, single-minded being I ever met. I don't want you to go with us. Tell the Queen that you've changed your mind. You're still dealing with the aftermath of your last guilt trip and now you're rushing headlong into the next. What by Hades is wrong with

you? Did Athena hit you in the head as a child instead of giving you brains? Damn it, I won't let you harm yourself further...."

The young woman was so absorbed by her temper tantrum that she didn't see the changes in Xena's face that went from amusement to hurt to anger to coldness. She just stood there and looked at the blonde whose head just barely reached her shoulder level. Gabrielle's outburst continued on and on, invoking every God on Mount Olympus and beyond but the older woman didn't even try to stop her ranting.

When Gabrielle finally finished Xena's eyes were about as warm as chips of ice in the middle of winter, she still didn't react to the other's accusations but every single muscle in her body was tensed and ready to explode in action. Her voice was calm and expressionless.

"I'll check the bedrolls and see that you are provided with a horse of your own. You certainly don't want to ride with someone as stupid and insensible as I am. You better decide upon at least one change of clothes for yourself and pack some bare scrolls and quills. Don't touch what is mine. I'll be back."

Xena turned and even managed to close the door quietly though she rather felt like rattling the whole house to its foundations by slamming it with all her might.

She could feel anger and hurt rising in her heart and felt the temptation to act on these emotions as she had done so many times before. Years ago she would have gone berserk, killing everybody unfortunate enough to get in the proximity of her sword, replacing anger with battlelust, and later on quenching battlelust with sex.

At the palace she would have held a sparring session with the soldiers of the First Order and probably sent a lot of them to the healers, and in the evening she would have returned to her rooms too tired to think or to feel.

A familiar voice snapped her out of her musings. "The Queen wants you to wear your leather dress and armour during our trip -- and now I think you need to burn out some energy. Move it, to the training grounds."

"You know me too well, Theano."

"You're very good at hiding your feelings but you never could fool me. Your eyes always gave you away. Now, move it, little one." Came the gruff response.

When they reached the training grounds Eponin was already facing off against three of the more experienced warriors. "Seems as if I'm not the only one with anger management problems."

"Don't talk, little one, fight."

A seemingly negligent sweep of Theano's staff send the tall woman flying but she didn't land on her back as most others would have. Instead she turned her fall in a rolling motion, flipped and faced her opponent. It was midday and the banging of the staves and clanging of the swords at this rather unusual hour soon brought them an audience. The Queen and Gabrielle among them.

The training square was a blur of motion but while Eponin's sparring partners soon were weaponless and with some minor scratches from the tip of her blade, the staff fighters didn't show any signs of stopping or slowing down. They obviously were equally matched, well versed with the other's moves, and they were moving so fast that for the first two candelmarks it was difficult to tell whom was attacking whom or even where one began and the other ended.

The audience slowly began to thin out, after all most of them had their chores to tend to. Gabrielle, Eponin, Solari, Ephiny, Melosa, and a few of the warriors stayed. When their movements began to get slower, the intensity of the strokes increased, considerably. Theano's weapon connected with the hollow of Xena's knees and she went down on her knees but didn't break her own striking rhythm. She effectively used the suddenly changed angle of attack to her advantage, the older woman went down, Xena jumped to her feet and Theano was pinned to the ground, the end of a staff at her throat.

Theano took the taller woman's hand and got to her feet. The Amazon lawyer could tell that she still was angry. "You've greatly improved since our last sparring session. Congratulations. I think we both have earned a long, relaxing bath. Come with me, my second daughter."

"I'm honoured, me second mother. It has been too long." Xena answered and followed her to the bathing area. The others cast questioning glances at each other until Eponin broke the silence.

"It didn't work, she still is angry. -- Oh, please, Gabrielle, don't look at me with these big innocent eyes. You know what I'm talking about. She was intrigued and slightly worried about the Centaurs' message, nothing more. During the fight with Theano, anger was literally dripping from her like sweat. She's calmer now but there still are storm clouds in her eyes. You must have said or done something to push her this close to the edge."

"I don't know what you're talking about, Eponin, and how can you even have the slightest idea of what Xena was thinking?"

"That's easy to tell. It was in her eyes, a single unguarded moment, not longer then a fraction of a heartbeat. There's more to her and the Centaurs than she is ready to admit. And you know damn well what I'm talking about. Theano and her, that fi..., it was the same kind of fight Xena and I had the day we found out about the girls, about Najara and the others abusing them. We both were trying to get a better grip on our emotions but it seems that this time all the good it did to her was physical exhaustion."

Gabrielle suddenly found something very interesting to observe at the ground, and to cover her up Ephiny asked. "Queen Melosa, do you know more about Xena's history with the Centaurs? I remember that at the time of the treaty negotiations she stayed outside of Amazon as well as Centaur territory, except for the signing of the treaty. It struck me as rather strange that she

insisted on coming to terms with the first draft of the treaty by way of emissaries."

"It was and still is a really unique situation, Ephiny. She stopped a war both our nations had been involved in for more generations than anyone cares to remember. But you're right, it was rather strange that she used different messengers for either party instead of trusting only one. -- During our first visit I asked Tyldus but he was rather evasive in his answers and unwilling to tell me about Xena. However, I found out that about two or three seasons after the deaths of the Northern Amazons Xena launched an all out war against the whole Centaur nation. She had them all but defeated when she suddenly stopped and turned her army around to conquer Corinth. She just stopped and didn't look back. We can ask her what this was all about but I doubt that she will be very forthcoming with her answers."

There was a long moment of awkward silence, then Gabrielle found Ephiny's eyes. "Would you help me to get some items from the storage hut, Eph? I think there is something I can do to improve Xena's mood."

Moments later the weapons' master and the Queen were alone. "Are you still angry with me, Ep?"

"No, my love, please forgive me. I hadn't the right to react as I did. I didn't want to let you go without my protection though I know that you're very capable of protecting yourself and that Solari and the guards will see to it that you're safe -- but still. While I was looking at Xena and her second mother, I understood that you want to give me the opportunity to spend some time with Thania, and now I appreciate the effort, my love. I'm still not sure that I'm mother material but she has the right to know me better."

"Sometimes you can be as stubborn as a mule, as stubborn and single-minded as Xena even but I love you, Ep. Perhaps after I've packed my stuff I can find a way to assure you of my forgiveness." The Queen answered with a smile.

"Your orders are my deepest desires, my Queen."

Xena and Theano were soaking in the big bathing tub. They were alone, so the only movements in the hut were the steam clouds rising from the water. "It didn't work this time. Tell me why?"

Xena tried to avoid the eyes of the older woman, without success. She took a deep breath and answered. "It worked, Theano, but not the way you expected it to. Years ago you taught me to transform emotions, negative emotions into action, into energy, and spending this energy cleaned my soul from the emotions. But it doesn't work this way any longer, it hasn't for a long time." The younger woman fell silent but Theano let her take her time. "It doesn't work when I'm really angry or hurt or both."

"I simply spent too many years letting anger and hatred rule every aspect of my life. They still tend to take control if I don't reign them in. The old techniques now only would lead me to kill

my opponents, no matter if its for real or sparring, no matter if there is only one or many, no matter if I'm injured or not. It's what I do while on a battlefield.

"Still, spending excess energy helps to put some distance between me and these emotions; it helps me to clear my head, at least enough to control them by meditation. This way they don't get the chance to overwhelm my rational mind."

Xena took another deep breath and lowered her eyes to the steaming water. "There's a lot of darkness in my soul, there always will be. I've learned the hard way that negative emotions trigger this darkness -- and since I have someone to love in my life I can no longer afford to give free reign to the darkness, not even for a moment."

"Even when these feelings appear because of this loved one?" The older woman speculated.

"Especially then, my second mother. My head knows that she only said these things because she is afraid for me and because she doesn't want to see me hurt or in pain.

"I told her a lot about the years after I took Corinth and the time I united Greece, and even the campaigns against Persia and Rome. But I only let her know bits and pieces about the time before. She knows about Caesar but I didn't mention M'ila. She knows about the crucifixion but not what it really did to my soul. I told her about Borias but not why he died. She doesn't know why I fought the Centaurs or why I stopped. She doesn't know the extend of my crimes, and there's a part of me that is afraid to let her know, a part that's afraid to loose her love."

"Since the trial Gabrielle knows that there are a lot of things too hurtful to you to talk about. She also knows that the burden of guilt you carry is much heavier than any of us knows or ever will know, little one. Your anger and hurt comes from another source, they didn't call to your dark side, they were dark in themselves."

"You're right, my pride was hurt. She told me that I was stupid, and that what I'm doing now isn't real but only a guilt trip."

"Uh oh."

"Yeah. Don't get me wrong, I know that I can't right all my wrongs by letting the people I've hurt punish or kill me. Revenge won't give back what they lost because of me but the Amazons and the Centaurs are special. I owe them, more than most of them ever will know. Before the trial started I tried to explain it to her but she couldn't understand, and today, she didn't even ask why I want to go there. She didn't ask, and there's a part of me that really longs to let her know -- despite my fears."

"It's hard to live with a secret like this, little one. But there's more to it. It wasn't just your pride, your anger was born out of fear."

While the wads of steam around them began to thin out, the silence became almost oppressive.

"Talk to me, Xena."

The younger woman's answer barely was audible. "She said, that she was sorry that I rescued her from slavery and saved her life, only to have her see me suffer and die. -- I love her so much, and her life out-weights mine more than a hundred times. I can't stand the thought to lose her, but one day soon I will 'cause I keep hurting her."

The dejected undertone in the younger woman's voice and her obvious self-loathing made the Amazon lawyer's heart ache, but she also knew that only the blonde haired bard had a chance to re-adjust the tall warrior's perspective. She had to get them back together in a room, with no distractions for at least a couple of candlemarks. Then they would be able to work it out.

"You know she only said this because she's worried, because she's afraid for you, don't you?" The dark head nodded tentatively. "Then, let's get back to the problem at hand. I suppose you still love her more than your life." Xena nodded vigorously. "You want her to ride behind you during our journey and to close her arms around your waist?"

"Yes, but how do you know?!"

"I had a whole moon to get to know her. I listened to her stories, one of her favourites is you rescuing a whole bunch of slaves and saving her life. She also told me how she fell in love with you and how you made the pain and fear go away, and she told me about a romantic trip to a certain Amazon village, about long candlemarks of riding, cuddled against your back and hearing your strong heartbeat. She told me about nights spent next to you at a secluded camp fire, away from the protective eyes of your soldiers, sharing a bedroll and searching patterns in the night sky

"This young woman is madly in love with you, little one. -- Help me out of this tub before I turn into a dried grape, and then go and tell her that you're sorry at getting this upset, and that you love her, and why you were hurt. And then...."

"Please don't, Theano, I know what I have to do to make it up to her."

"Hey, I only wanted to say: prepare for tomorrow!"

They both were laughing when they left the bathing area, and Xena went directly to the dining hut. Talking with the only human being that knew all her secrets and fears got her more relaxed than meditation ever could.

Shortly after, Xena struggled to open the door to her hut while balancing a tray overflowing with food on her upraised right knee. She had raided the kitchen before the dinner crowd came in. With the help of the head cook who had a soft spot for the tall warrior who always managed to get her the fish she wanted, Xena had assembled a lot of Gabrielle's favourites: mulled cider, venison stew, nut-bread, honey cakes, vinegar cornichons and other treats reflecting the younger woman's fancy for sweet-and-sour dishes.

The blond woman had apparently been pacing the central room when Xena put the tray on their table. She looked up and found herself rapidly engulfed in her tall lover's strong arms.

"I'm sorry, I got angry, Gab, I know you're just worried about me." The tall woman was surprised to feel tears trickling down her chest. "Hush!, please don't cry, my love, don't cry. Everything will be all right. I owe the Centaurs as much as I owe the Amazons, perhaps even more. Please believe me, I don't want to go there just to get punished, I don't enjoy hurting but this is a risk I simply have to take. I love you and I plan on being with you for a long time to come. Please, don't worry."

Gabrielle pushed her upper body from Xena's comforting embrace and green eyes found blue ones filled with love and devotion.

"I'm sorry, my warrior. I shouldn't have said what I did. I know you're not stupid and I never will regret the day you walked into my life. You're the most intelligent, most caring woman I ever met and ever will meet. And I know you're very earnest in your need to atone but I can't help worrying. I love you but this whole thing is scaring me half to death and I don't want you to hurt. I hate the feeling that there's nothing I can do to help, and I hate..."

The young woman was silenced by a kiss. It was soothing and gentle at first but gradually grew more passionate when Gabrielle invitingly opened her lips to the other woman's gently probing tongue. They soon were thoroughly exploring the other's mouth only coming up to breathe. Xena took the blonde's chin in her right hand and looked at her as if she were trying to memorise every square inch of her face.

"I love you, Gabrielle. You are my life and my soul. You command my heart and my body."

Now, it was the smaller woman's turn to seek out Xena's mouth but instead of exploring, she posed tiny kisses on her lips and slowly worked her way down to Xena's throat. She had to get to her toes to comfortably reach the taller woman's pulse point and lingered there while her hands gently eased down the straps of Xena's leather top. With one hand the warrior opened the laces holding her bra in the back, and Gabrielle quickly made use of the opportunity and began to worship her lover's breasts. Meanwhile Xena proceeded to loosen the belt around the smaller woman's waist.

"Please don't, Xe, I'll do it this time. Just enjoy the show -- for now. I want to feel you and I want you to feel me. Our stuff is all ready and waiting, we have all night."

"Do you know how much I adore you, my lovely bard? Do you know what a ..." Xena managed to get out between moans of pleasure, "what a simple touch from you can do to me? When I wake up with you in my arms, our legs entangled, your head resting on my shoulder I know that I found something I never had expected to find, something I don't have the right to ex...."

Gabrielle's index finger sealed the tall beauty's lips. "Hush! I don't want to hear what you think you deserve or not. Let me be the judge of that. I plan on exploring every inch of your body."

These passed days I so longed to take possession of your skin, your scent, the way you move with me..."

"Gab, you're driving me crazy." Xena's voice was nearing a low angry murmur.

"I do?" The blonde asked teasingly. "So, perhaps, we should eat first? Have to keep my strength up..."

The tall woman now was growling but only in mock frustration. Her sensitive sense of smell told her that her young lover was at least as ready to push their game to a the next level as she was. So, she tried to turn the tables.

"Eat? Food? Yeah, there's something I'd love to feast on, two luscious apples I'd like to get all smooth and hard. I'd like to chew every single pore until they go all mellow on me, and then I'd love to make them stand at attention once again."

Gabrielle visibly gulped but she also wasn't ready to relinquish control yet, so, she answered. "That's a privilege you will yet have to earn, my beloved warrior."

Xena growled like a caged animal but when the blonde once again turned her attention to her breasts, it slowly morphed in a very sensuous moaning that sent shivers down Gabrielle's spine and directly to her own overexcited centre.

Gabrielle's hands wandered down Xena's sides, conspicuously avoiding the tall woman's back, and she began to undo the thin leather straps holding the short skirt in place. It fell to the ground leaving her only in her briefs. With her thumbs the smaller woman was retracing the outlines of the suede leather garment while her mouth continued the assault on Xena's ample chest. She placed quick wet kisses on tender skin, never even coming near the proudly erect nipples.

They somehow managed to negotiate their way from the table to the fireplace and by then there was no fibre of cloth or leather left on Xena's body while Gabrielle apart from the belt still was completely dressed.

Xena's heart was racing, she had a hard time standing still. Part of her was itching to take over, to simply rip away the young blonde's clothes and ravish her but she also knew that soon she would get her chance and deep down she loved relinquishing control to her lover.

Early in their relationship, she had stopped questioning herself about the reasons, the tall independent warrior just knew it to be true. With Gabrielle she felt free, free to let herself revel in her emotions rather than ignoring them, carefree and playful, opened up to new experiences. The burden of her past wasn't half as heavy when she was with the younger woman.

Xena suddenly snapped out of her passionate haze when hands and mouth were abruptly removed from her skin. She opened her eyes and saw Gabrielle standing more than three feet

away, hands on her waist. Her facial expression was inscrutable. She didn't say a word, just standing there, staring at her. Xena's heart still was racing and her skin was burning with the need to once again get showered with kisses. Finally she found her voice.

"Let me undress you, my love, please."

"Why should I do this? You weren't even paying attention to what I did to you."

"Oh, sweetheart, you're so wrong," the tall woman whispered. "Your kisses sent me in a world of bliss, you make me feel safe and loved and cherished. Please let us go there together."

For the fraction of a heartbeat a mischievous smile was flickering over Gabrielle's face, and Xena knew without the shadow of a doubt that she just had swallowed the bait hook, line, and sinker.

"All right, my sweet warrior, you'll get another chance. Clasp your hands behind your back and kneel in front of me. I want you to watch while I strip for you. Don't move, just watch."

Xena visibly gulped, she knew she was in for a show. As a rule the young woman loathed to make use of her training as a body slave when they were making love, it simply brought back too many dark memories. This day she obviously was willing to make an exception.

The thought alone made Xena's hard nipples ache with readiness and brought her throbbing clit even more to her attention. She sank to her knees, opening them up to let Gabrielle have something to look at herself and entwined her fingers behind her back.

Gabrielle took another step back and began to slowly undo the buttons of her long, oversized shirt. The upper two afforded her audience a view of the silver necklace with the jade pendant Xena had given to her after their first night of making love. It snugly rested just where her breasts were beginning to swell. Her hands were hovering over the third when she hesitated and instead let them lingeringly travel down to the last one. While she continued her torturously slow unbuttoning, her tongue dreamily slid over her lips, her eyes half closed as if she were tasting something extremely delicious. Xena's breath caught for a moment in her throat, her arousal went up another notch and she had a hard time to stay in her assigned position.

While the last button was opened the younger woman began to sway her hips in a very slow, very sensual rhythm. Instead of discarding the garment immediately she turned around, let it slowly slide down her back thus revealing her slightly bronzed skin. But she wasn't naked underneath!

The tall woman couldn't help but moan at the sight of her lover wearing a set of light brown Amazon leathers complimenting the tone of her skin. The skirt was hugging her hips and thus accentuating her lean calves, from the top all she could see was a braided strap but there were no laces to open it up. Gabrielle's hands appeared at the small of her back and found the clasps holding the skirt in place. She tenderly caressed them but it was just a tease. Instead she put her fists on her hips, the sensuous circular motion immediately stopped and she turned around.

"Enjoying the view?" She asked with sparkling eyes.

Xena barely managed to nod; she was way beyond reasoning and no longer able to utter a lone syllable.

"Thought so." There was a predatory smile adorning Gabrielle's face.

She closed the distance between them and soon stood less than a foot from the kneeling woman. Near enough for Xena to smell the scent of the younger woman's arousal mixing with her own. For long heartbeats Xena's face was on a level with the other's centre but she had no appreciation for the intricately woven pattern of the broad girdle adorning the front part of her skirt. Gabrielle bent her knees and soon was whispering in her ear.

"You're the most beautiful woman in the whole village. I love the way your will is commanding the urges of your body. You're doing fine. You're so amazing."

No one ever had talked to her like this, they would have paid with their lives for even trying, with Gabrielle, however, she simply didn't mind. -- But still, she was surprised to feel something akin to pride at the words of her lover.

The blonde once again stood and gently posed her right foot on Xena's left shoulder, the rim of the sandal almost touching the slave collar. Her eyes were holding Xena's while she bent and untied the leather laces holding her footwear in place. Falling down one of them grazed an erect nipple and the tall woman almost jumped at the sensation, almost.

Gabrielle's feral smile intensified when she discarded the sandal and began to repeat the process with her other foot. The sole resting on Xena's collar bone she once again bent down. Her hands reached for the laces but then her movements stilled. She straightened up, and said.

"You do it! But keep your hands where they are."

The raven haired beauty struggled once again with the desire to take control. It would have been easy to overpower the younger woman, to let lose of her raging need. The years she'd spend as a warlord and leader no one dared to refuse anything to nearly took over - however, in her heart she knew that this display above all was a sign of Gabrielle's trust and also of her slow healing. The damage done to the blonde's soul in the years of slavery was bit by bit losing its hold on her. She tentatively began to act on her dreams and desires, and Xena knew that this day was an integral part of it.

So, she smiled, bent her head and bit down on one of the laces. She tucked and the knot easily opened. She stopped in mid-motion when her eyes followed Gabrielle's thigh under the skirt. She saw the almost glistening wetness of the other's arousal -- not on her panties but on the blond curls of her nether region. Xena's stomach did a flip, her heart missed a beat and she involuntarily began to shiver in anticipation.

The sandal was shook from Gabrielle's foot but the taller woman's eyes remained fixed on the

skirt and its now hidden treasure she craved. The young bard was mesmerised by her lover's reaction but before she gave in to her own desires there was one more thing she longed to do.

She asked. "Xena, what do you want me to do now?" Knowing for certain that the tall woman wouldn't be able to speak, and she was right.

Xena's mouth opened but she wasn't able to form even a single coherent sentence. Instead she quickly leaned forward and tucked on the leather skirt with her white teeth.

Gabrielle smiled. "Good answer, my beloved. Now, I want you to spread your legs a little wider, as wide as you can. -- Yeah, that's good. -- Now, your upper body needs to go backwards, as far and as low as you can. Use your hands and arms to steady yourself. And now, look at me."

The kneeling woman somehow managed to lower herself on her elbows. The position by no means could be called comfortable but she didn't care. She had to strain her neck to once again establish eye contact with her lover but the vision she was presented with was well worth the effort.

Gabrielle was gyrating her hips, slowly accelerating the speed of her movements. Her hands were waving an intricate pattern in front of her, suddenly she turned and bent forward, giving Xena an uninhibited view of her bottom cheeks lurking from underneath the skirt. When she raised herself and turned once more the leather top was gone. Taut nipples were looking down at Xena, and she spent some candledrops playing with them and making Xena groan with frustration.

The younger woman knelt down, her voice was heavy and deep with arousal. "Close your eyes and enjoy, my warrior."

Xena gladly complied and almost cried out when her clit immediately was sucked on. She had been more than ready but the aggressiveness Gabrielle showed was unexpected. She gave herself over to the experience and the intense emotions when a small hand found its way to her right breast and began to circle the nipple area. She soon was completely lost.

The way her body was stretched out made it almost impossible to move her hips. She could hear Gabrielle lapping up her juices and the sound alone brought her nearer to the edge. Xena tried to hold out as long as she could but when she felt the flat of a tongue rubbing over her clit and then quickly dipping into her centre she cried out Gabrielle's name in ecstasy.

The blonde didn't stop. When Xena began to relax from the first wave of orgasm two fingers were thrust into her centre, teeth grazed her clit and her left nipple was rolled between thumb and forefinger. Her inner walls clenched around the blissful intruders and another cry was wrenched from her throat. But her lover was insatiable, she helped her to unfold and stretch her legs. The blonde lowered herself on the longer body, pushing up the skirt to let pubic bone rest on pubic bone. She used her arms to keep some leverage and went for the proudly protruding breasts with her lips and teeth.

Xena was lost in a haze of desire and longing, satisfaction and newly building need, fulfilment and sensual overload. A mouth harshly bit down, she felt the additional wetness from her lover's release and Xena's arms gave way landing her flat on her still slightly hurting back. She instinctively grabbed for her smaller partner and pulled her up in her embrace. Her chin resting on Gabrielle's head she murmured. "Love you, Gab," and promptly fell asleep. The other woman smiled and followed her in sleep.

Xena opened her eyes to a sound halfway between rumbling and growling. She was laying on her back, vaguely aware of the silly smile adorning her face, with Gabrielle tucked securely in her arms, still wearing the skirt. Her partner obviously was hungry, so she carefully unwound herself from her human blanket, and went to the table.

The sun was just about to go down, so she had been sleeping for a couple of candlemarks. She picked up the tray with their food and also retrieved Gabrielle's belt. She built a backrest of cushions and pillows near the fireplace after putting the tray on a low table nearby. Having built a small fire to heat up the stew and the cider she turned her attention to her lover. Gabrielle still was sleeping soundly. She unclasped the skirt and used the belt to bind the young woman's hands in front of her. Then suddenly changed her mind and discarded the belt. She took her in her arms and made herself comfortable, the blonde's back now resting against her chest.

Xena began to place gentle kisses on the other's shoulder and neck. Finally she breathed in her right ear while her hands were keeping Gabrielle's crossed wrists immobilised. The smaller woman's eyes flew open and she immediately began to strain against her lover's grip.

"It's all right, my love, it's just me. You're safe. Just me holding you. I want to feed you now." The blonde instantly grew calmer. "I will do nothing you're not comfortable with, sweetie."

"I trust you, Xe. You hold my heart prisoner, you may as well hold my hands."

This brought a dazzling smile to the tall woman's face. She shifted slightly from behind her beautiful lover and placed a gentle kiss on her cheek.

"Do you smell the stew? It soon will be ready for you. But to keep your strength up, there's some nut-bread waiting. You won't need your hands, I will feed you, bit by bit and morsel by morsel."

When Gabrielle took the first slice of nut-bread out of her fingers, the younger woman's tongue lingered on her fingertips, and Xena was acutely aware of her once again strongly building arousal. She took in the scent of her lover's hair mingling with the warming venison stew. She let go of Gabrielle's hands to get the steaming bowl, and her former captive used the opportunity to let her fingers wander, retracing the strong muscles sculpting the tall warrior's thighs, then turning sideways journeying up to her hips, lingering at her waist and somehow finding her way to already erect breasts and hard nipples.

Xena couldn't suppress the long, growling moan these attentions elicited but she also didn't care.

She took a piece of venison between her teeth and offered it to the blonde. They shared the meat and a kiss at the same time, their tongues still playing long after the morsel had been swallowed. The warrior put the stew back to the fireplace, and began a thorough sensual exploration of her lover's mouth and eyes and throat and chest and

It took them a long time to finish eating their food, and when they finally migrated to the bedroom the games were only just beginning.

Xena left the hut about one candlemark before dawn after having checked their saddlebags and rearranged some items to make them more balanced and easier for Argo to carry. She brushed the mare down and gave her an apple to munch on.

In the bathing area she ran into Theano and Akyra; and inevitably she took some teasing for the rather vocal signs of passion emanating from their hut almost the whole night through. Her only answer was to give them a smug grin and continue to wash.

A trip to the dining hut provided her with some trail bars, a strange mix of honey, cereals, and fruits she always has been kind of fond of, and another small loaf of nut-bread, her lover's all time favourite. Not to mention a hearty breakfast for her still slumbering partner.

By the time she had put on her leathers and armour Gabrielle opened her eyes. She still was half asleep but her stomach was wide awake. "If you ever go anywhere without me I'll have to send a warning ahead, my bard, to let them know how to properly feed you and the monster living in your stomach."

The blonde launched herself out of bed intend on bringing Xena to the ground but she safely was caught in strong arms. Her naked skin produced goose bumps at the contact with the cold brass breastplate. The raven haired warrior bent down and kissed her passionately, only coming up to breathe.

"What a way to wake up! I'm beginning to think that you're way overdressed, Xe."

"Oh no, I'm not. You on the other hand are underdressed. I wouldn't approve your riding Argo in your birthday suit. Better hurry, Queen Melosa wants to get going shortly after sunrise."

"I'll get you for teasing me like this, for totally neglecting my need, o warrior of mine."

"Yeah, you're right, I'm yours, yours alone, my beloved. Besides, I brought food, there's cereals with milk and honey and sliced pieces of apples, peaches, and oranges, and tea -- waiting only for you."

The younger woman peeked around Xena's shoulder at the table and began to smile broadly. "I think for once you will be forgiven, my warrior."

"Thank you, my princess. I'll go and saddle up Argo and check on the Queen's mount." Xena answered and shook herself free from the hypnotising sea green eyes of her partner.

Half a candlemark later everyone was ready to go when Thania stormed out of the Queen's hut, Shadow hard at her heels. "Xena wait," she shouted, "you have to take him with you. Shadow will protect you like he did at the barn."

Xena jumped down from Argo and knelt in front of the girl thus ensuring that they were eye to eye. "Shadow and I have balanced the scales, Thania. I saved him and he saved me. He made his choice, and moved on to a new companion. Shadow now is your protector and your friend. And he always will be. He will be by your side as long as he lives."

"But I don't want you to go all alone." The girl answered defiantly.

"I'm not alone, little one. I'll be with my friends the whole time, and they all will keep an eye on me and see that I don't get in too much trouble, I'll be back, I promise." To her own utter surprise the tall woman found that she really meant what she said. "But while we are gone you and Shadow will have to take care of Eponin and Anara and you also have to keep an eye on Lyceus. Promise?"

"Lyceus? But he's just a boy!"

"Yes, he's a boy but I also know that he's really, really good at getting into trouble. You saved his life, so you also have to see that he stays safe. You can't risk your effort being in vain, can you? Besides, I know that he's really bored with all the soldiers in the camp."

"I'll do it. You know the other girls say that he's kind of cute -- for a boy, but I think he would rather like to be looked upon as tough and strong."

"You're right, little one, but one doesn't exclude the other. Think about it."

Thania nodded, got a heartfelt hug, and the Queen's party quietly left the village.

Chapter Two: Journeying

After a short visit at the encampment of Xena's soldiers, they were riding the whole morning in comfortable silence due to the fact that Gabrielle almost immediately had fallen asleep on Xena, their long, practically sleepless night taking its toll on the younger woman. The blonde's arms were tightly clamped around Xena's waist and one of the warrior's hands protectively rested on top of them to keep her in place.

"How can she sleep like that? It looks awfully uncomfortable." The Queen asked.

"She learned to sleep whenever and how ever she got the chance but only a few moons ago, when she first learned what it meant to be free, then, your words would have sent her back to reality in the blink of an eye. That she's sleeping like this is a sign of her healing. Her body needed a lot more time to understand that her suffering is in the past than her mind did but finally it's taking roots even there."

"She will have the swirls of your armour imprinted on her cheek when she awakens."

"No, she won't, my Queen, Xena put a folded cloak under her head shortly after she fell asleep, as a pillow." Theano answered with a bright smile. "I always knew that you're a romantic at heart, little one, but you're developing into a real mushball where Gabrielle is concerned."

"You wanna tell me that I'm pussy whipped, old woman?" Xena said with a deep rumbling in her voice.

Theano only laughed and the tall warrior broke in a smile. The threesome fell silent and then the Queen asked. "Why do you call Xena 'little one', Theano? It's a somewhat odd name for someone more than half a head taller."

"Well, she wasn't always this tall." The Amazon lawyer answered with a grin. "Where I come from 'little one' is reserved for second daughters only. Actually I never told you how she came to be my 'little one'."

"I never insisted but I'm still curious. I never heard of an Amazon taking an outsider's child as a second daughter, not during the last two or three generations and even then it was very rare."

"The proceedings were registered in my home village, my Queen." The older woman answered with a hint of defiance in her voice.

"Theano saved my life when I first met her, Queen Melosa." Xena interfered to disperse the growing tension.

"You would have found a way, little one. Even as a child you were rather inventive." The Amazon answered with a smirk.

"Now, you two got me really curious."

"It was in my seventh summer." The raven haired woman answered. "There was a ravine next to Amphipolis. Since I first saw it some two or three summers earlier I wanted to see the other side, I wanted to stand on the other side but my mother and all the others told me that it was too wide to jump and too long to walk around in one day and that there was nothing different or exciting to see. They didn't let me return there on my own but I didn't forget, and I practised jumping,

soon I could outdo most of the other children, even the older boys.

"One day during summer festival, I stole away from my mother's inn where the whole village seemed to mill around. I studied the chasm between me and the other side, then I took my chances, ran and jumped. As you can imagine, I missed the edge but nevertheless I was lucky. I landed on a ledge and everything went black. When I came to, my whole body was screaming in pain, something I never had to experience before. At the time it looked like a sheer cliff, impossible to climb. I tried to get on my feet but I couldn't. I tried to use my arms but I wasn't strong enough. I don't know how long I tried. -- I was about to give up when the end of a long rope began to dangle in front of me and a voice told me to stand up and wrap it around my waist."

"At the time I was on my way to another Amazon village in the south," Theano continued with some hesitation, "crossing the ravine would have been fastest but there was no bridge, and I wasn't ready to risk my horse by trying to jump. The ground at the edge just didn't look solid enough. I was getting bored when my mare picked up on a rather unfamiliar sound. Some heartbeats later I heard it also. It was the voice of a child, yelling curses more suited to a tavern brawl than a peaceful country-side."

For a few heartbeats Xena's warrior mask gave way to a dazzling smile, her eyes glinting mischievously.

"When I finally managed to get her to the top she had a dislocated shoulder, bruised ribs and a broken leg. I'm still not sure how she managed to secure the rope and hold on while my horse was pulling her towards the edge." Sensing the tall woman's discomfort, a familiar reaction whenever someone close to her mentioned her extraordinary skills, the Amazon lawyer came back to the subject at hand. "I had to knock her out, not only to stop the constant expletives but also to set her shoulder."

"When I opened my eyes," Xena once again took over the story-telling, "I was looking at the sky, the clouds looked like a rooftop with a smoking chimney. They were slowly moving away from me. It took me some time to discern that it was me that was moving, not the clouds. I tried to sit up but I couldn't. I raised my head and saw the ground also was moving, that's when I became aware of the ropes binding me to the litter. I wanted to fight the ropes but the pain once again flooded my mind and I drifted off to a realm where it couldn't reach me."

"When dusk approached I made camp and tried to put her injured arm until then bound to her litter in a sling. Before I even was able to touch her the other hand was wrapped around my wrist. She didn't have the strength to keep me from doing what I had to do but the instincts were there, even then. I searched her face but her eyes were closed. I tended to her bruises and put her leg in a splint. I once again looked up and was captured by the most intense blue eyes I've ever seen."

After a long moment of silence Xena continued their tale. "It took more than four days to walk around the ravine and return to Amphipolis. I don't know how Theano put up with me. I was a real pain. I was hurting and I didn't want to show it. I also didn't take the painkillers she offered.

And I felt sorry for myself for failing in my quest."

"I had more pleasurable journeys, that much is true but behind all her grumbling and ranting there was an intense passion for life I never before saw in someone this young.

"Half a day's ride outside of Amphipolis we were met by a search party. The men obviously never before had seen an Amazon and so were rather suspicious of me. Their leader was a man with more muscles than I've ever seen. He said 'thank you' and wanted to leave me to my own devices. He said something to the effect that this unruly child already had taken enough of my time and that this time she would be severely punished for her antics.

"I still don't know how she did it but before I could think of an answer, she was standing in front of him, with spread feet, totally disregarding her broken leg. Her eyes sparkled with anger and she told him that what she did never would be his business, and that he should go and try and scare someone else. She also told this bulk of a man that I was her friend and that her mother certainly would like to thank me personally for saving her life."

"To make a long story short. Theano and my mother quickly became friends. They have the same twisted sense of humour, and I was fascinated by the stories about Hypolita and Penthesilea and Artemis and Athena she told while my leg was healing. When she left I was determined to become an Amazon myself, one day. -- She came to visit about every other season and each time she taught me more about Amazon history and lore. She gave me my first staff lesson and taught me how to train by myself, how to build up my strength and stamina."

"I know, my Queen, it still doesn't explain why I took her as a second daughter and why her mother didn't oppose it."

"I suppose you fell in love with her mother."

"Good explanation, and one in tune with our traditions but that's not how it happened. Actually I had a hard time convincing Cyrene, Xena's mother, that I didn't want to take her daughter away from her. Cyrene always was a very proud woman, she had three children to raise and ran the local inn all on her own after her husband's disappearance some five years earlier. She didn't have the time to cuddle her children the whole day long and she felt that they missed out on a lot of things because of this. But I'm ahead of my story. It was exactly one year after we first met when I once again returned to Amphi....

She could feel the eyes of the villagers on her back, following her progress along the main street of Amphipolis towards the inn. Her back was straight and she wore her long dark blonde hair in a loose braid. The Amazon leathers were partly obscured by a light summer cloak. A single tail

whip was coiled and rested on its hook at her hip, and her staff was secured to the saddle. She ignored the part curious, part hostile, part anxious looks she got, and was in the process to dismount when she heard the crying and cheering of children. At first she thought that it was just a game but somehow it didn't sound right. She changed direction and her mare brought her to the backside of the barn.

Most of the village's children seemed to be present. The younger ones were standing around a heap of bodies in the middle of the pasture. They were cheering and yelling indiscernibly. When she slid from her horse she saw that Xena and her younger brother were in the centre of the constantly shifting pile of arms and limbs, and that the village's teens obviously were ganging up on them. She let out a shrill whistle and cracked her whip over their heads. But most of them were too high pitched to react. The Amazon began to take them out, one after the other. For the most part it was enough to get a grip and yank them away from the commotion but some of them had to be knocked out.

Xena obviously sensed what was going on and began an attack of her own instead of only trying to keep them at bay. She was breathing hard, her sleeveless shirt was ripped and there was blood trickling down her temple but her eyes were sending lightning bolts towards her opponents. A quiet moan distracted her and a fist got through her defences and impacted with her stomach. She doubled over, avoided another blow by going with her body's momentum and a knife aimed for her chest sliced through her left shoulder. This definitively wasn't any longer an innocent brawl among children, and with renewed energy Theano strove to end it.

The girl was standing over the moaning body of Lyceus, oblivious to the blood flowing down her arm. Only one of the attackers was left, he was tall and muscular, more than two heads taller than Xena. In his right hand was a blood-dripping dagger, and he had a sneer on his face as he once again advanced towards her brother. She stopped his booted foot with her unprotected shin. Theano could see pain flickering across her face but instead of backing off she drove both of her fists in his stomach with all her might. He reacted and her knee found his chin. He dropped to the ground, unconscious.

The girl turned around and slowly knelt next to her brother but before she even could take his hand a low menacing voice brought her back to her feet.

"What by Hephaestus' anvil did you do to my poor nephew? This time your mother's influence won't save your hide. You are an abomination of nature and a danger to every single child in the village."

Meanwhile his shouting had attracted a bunch of other villagers. The man, still wearing the apron of a blacksmith, advanced towards Xena who stood her ground. Her eyes were stormy. With the help of her staff, the Amazon woman stopped him before he could reach out and grab the girl. She could feel the anger radiating from the small body behind her and saw the surprise on the smith's face.

"This is none of your business, Amazon." He spat out. "She attacked my nephew, look at him. She could have killed him."

At this moment Cyrene and the village elders rounded the corner of the barn, led by a frantic boy, the slightly taller, male version of Xena. They wanted to know what had happened. "A moon ago I told you that this abomination has to be locked up. A girl has to learn that her place is in the house and in a man's bed, not running around in the woods, playing boys' games. But you all didn't believe me, and your leniency almost got my nephew killed today. That's what happened."

There was a murmur going through the ranks of the assembled villagers. Encouraged he continued. "She attacked him. She has to be locked up and purged from her sinful ways."

"If this only was between Xena and your nephew why are all the other kids here, why is my son unconscious, and why is my daughter bleeding?" Cyrene countered.

"I knew you would take her side but this time you won't sway the elders' opinion with your sweet-talking."

"The elders don't have an opinion yet, Castritius, don't try to make up our minds for us." The silver haired man now asked Theano what had happened and she told them what she had witnessed and what she had done to end it.

"I don't know how it began, venerable elders, but I know that Xena only tried to defend herself and her brother against an opponent much older and bigger than she is, an opponent attacking her with a knife he still holds in his hand. The wound in her shoulder was made with this weapon; if it hadn't been for her fast reflexes the boy could easily have killed her. Now, if you don't mind I'll take her and her brother to the healer now."

One of the younger children tucked the old man at his tunic, he bent down and the girl whispered hurriedly in his ear. The elders then formed a circle and only three or four candelrops later the spokesman addressed the villagers as well as Castritius and Theano.

"My granddaughter just told me that the older boys attacked Xena's younger brother. She sent her older brother to get their mother and rushed to his defence but didn't stand a chance against the superior number of opponents. The Amazon woman arrived and stopped them one after one. Castritius' nephew was their leader, he cowardly came at her with a dagger and wounded her but she still managed to put him out. Xena is not the one to blame here.

"It only is fair that the attackers of today suffer the same fate as Xena did a moon ago when she was found guilty of striking one of her peers without a reason. Starting tomorrow the parents can make appointments with the council to ensure that there are at least two witnesses to the punishment.

"Castritius, your nephew not only goaded the others in this cowardly deed, he also used a weapon against a child. I don't want to know what would have happened if she hadn't been able to defend herself and if this Amazon warrior hadn't been here to interfere. Since he came here,

one and a half moon ago, he caused nothing but trouble and bad blood in our village. You will keep him confined to your own property for at least three seasons or immediately send him back to his mother. We won't tolerate any more disturbances."

The tall smith growled but didn't dare to oppose the council's decisions. He dragged the still half unconscious teenager to his house, and the villagers slowly returned to their chores.

"Cyrene, Xena, after what happened today, I apologise for what the council made you go through last moon. I now believe that you were provoked in slapping Castritius' nephew, and I'm sorry that I didn't know better." The old man continued.

"I never lie, and I'm still not sorry." The young girl said before her knees gave way and she hit the ground.

When Xena opened her eyes once again, it was dark outside, a candle was flickering next to her bed and her left arm was strapped to her chest. She tried to sit up. "Stay put, little one."

"Lyceus -- I have to make sure that he's okay. They hurt him."

"Your brother is sleeping, Xena. He wasn't hurt, just the wind knocked out of him. You weren't as lucky. The dagger was dirty, it caused a small infection but your mother got it under control. She's a very good healer. You slept for more than two days. You both will be all right."

"I want to see him. He's my responsibility and I didn't keep him safe."

"I'll help you to get dressed. You'll check on your brother and then we will go down to the kitchen and get you something to eat. And then we will talk."

"It was a very long talk and I didn't like what she told me one bit, most of it at least. But somehow she convinced me that being stronger and faster also meant having more responsibilities. I always felt responsible for Lyceus but she made me understand that I also was responsible for everyone not as fast or strong or bright as I was. I learned my lesson and she helped me to develop my natural abilities. This night Theano offered to become my second mother. She taught me how to fight and how to think, and she taught me not to take my skills for granted but to hone them. She taught me how to work for the things I really wanted, how to focus."

The tall warrior whose eyes until then fixed to the path they were following, now looked up to the older Amazon. "I'm sorry I perverted your teachings, my second mother, and I'm sorry I twisted the sense of what you really meant with responsibility." Her blue eyes were full of

sorrow and once again cast to the ground.

"Look at me, Xena. Do you remember, the following evening when I told you about what it really means to have a second mother?"

It had been a rhetoric question but still Xena answered. "I remember. I didn't understand it then. It took years and years of darkness to finally accept in my heart that you really were sincere then. 'A second mother does not judge but guide. She demands no explanations but offers understanding. She is the voice of love and reason, she reminds of the things you're not willing to hear....!'" Her voice trailed off.

"Hey, little one, you found your way back, that's all that counts." Xena gave the older Amazon one of those rare smiles usually reserved for the young woman behind her, and they once again fell silent.

What Queen Melosa just had learned explained a lot but she still didn't have the faintest idea why Theano took the tall woman as a second daughter in the first place. There would have been other ways to teach her and develop her natural skills. A strong part of her wanted to know more and wanted to know it now but there also was an equally strong part telling her that now wasn't the time and place to ask these questions. It was the priestess in her that cautioned her to take her time and wait. So, she decided to join Solari and Ephiny in the front of the line.

A rumbling noise let her reign in her horse, and a sleepy voice said. "I'm hungry."

"I know, my love. How about some trail bars? We'll take our lunch on horse back. There's a clearing about five candlemarks from here, with a small creek. We'll be there with enough time to take a swim and have something warm to eat."

For the rest of the ride there were no further in-deep conversations, just some stories and chatter. They had a mayor water fight while bathing after Xena caught a string of trout for dinner. Now they all were sitting at the fire place. They still were on Amazon territory, so there was no need for guards. Gabrielle was comfortably nestled between Xena's thighs, leaning against the tall woman's chest, and just about to finish the second story of the evening, dealing with Amazon spirituality.

Gabrielle's story told about a time long ago, a time when the Amazons believed that every Amazon had been gifted with a guiding spirit at the day of her birth by the Goddess herself. The guiding spirits usually appeared in the form of an animal and helped to find peace of mind and harmony. Once, so the young woman related, there was an Amazon warrior who wasn't at all happy with the choice of her guiding spirit for to her it took the shape of an ant, and so she left her sisters and began to search the known world for her true guiding spirit. She fought giants and dragons, men and nature but whenever she called upon her spirit only the ant appeared, and she kept on searching.

One day she found herself in the middle of a great battle. The enemy had withdrawn behind the gates of a well fortified city holding the inhabitants as hostages. They were stuck and camped in front of the gates. Every day five of the citizens were led on top of the fortifications, killed and thrown down. The first nights the Amazon didn't want to believe what her dreams told her but as day followed day she knew that she couldn't risk to not at least try.

After speaking with the few refugees they were able to round up she found the entrance to a system of caverns and tunnels crossing beneath the acres and also leading towards the city. She nearly got lost with her soldiers but this time when she called upon her guiding spirit she did what the ant proposed. They ended in a cave full of wine near the city walls, were able to open the gates, and the enemy was defeated. She then returned to her home village where she was named weapons' master and died decades later as the leader of the council of elders.

"But that's ridiculous, an ant guiding a warrior." One member of the royal guard said.

"Really? I don't think so. Ants live in a very complex community. Every one of them knows what to do without being told, every one of them is able to carry many times their own weight, and every one of them values the community more than its own life." Akyra answered.

"I never saw it that way. But I still don't think that such a thing as a guiding spirit exists."

"Tell me, Kelara, did you never dream of running through the forest without exactly knowing why? And wasn't it much easier then than it is in reality?" The silver haired Amazon with the black eyes asked.

"No, venerable Akyra, but sometimes I dream of flying over the forest and the fields. I see the village and the temple and the training grounds from high above and I even see landscapes I never visited in reality. -- Do you think my guiding spirit could be a bird of some kind? Would you help me to find out when we return from the Centaurs?"

"I'll tell you what to do but this is a journey you'll have to take on your own. I think we should call it a...."

The Amazon elder suddenly fell silent when Argo appeared out of the darkness and butted her tall mistress in the head. Xena slightly twisted her upper body and answered while one of her hands patted the tall mare's neck. "Yes, girl, I know."

"Don't tell me your guiding spirit is a horse, Xena." Ephiny said, amusement tinting her voice.

Xena's muscles immediately tensed at the teasing but Gabrielle's hand on her left thigh helped her relax and return the banter. "Okay, I won't tell yah." The tall woman answered, enjoying the confusion on the lawyer's face. "No, Eph, Argo has nothing of a spirit. She is my friend, and she came to let me know that there are three panthers out there stalking the other horses. I will go and bring them nearer to the fire."

"The guards will see to the safety of the horses, Xena, stay." The Queen's words stopped her

attempt to get up from behind the blonde.

"So, you know what the horse is thinking?" Akyra who was sitting to her left wanted to know.

"No, not really. There's a lot of tension radiating from her body, her heartbeat is slightly faster than normal and her ears are twitching. So all I had to do was observing and listening." She answered and then continued much quieter, so only Akyra and Gabrielle could hear her. "What ever you may make yourself believe, I am no shaman and I never will become one."

The members of the royal guard took turns guarding the camp but the night was uneventful.

Long before the break of dawn, when the night is at its coldest and darkest, Xena extricated herself out of the bedroll she shared with her blond lover, donned her leathers, and stole away. As soon as she was out of sight, she began to run through the forest without making a sound. Half a candlemark later she came to a stop in the middle of a small clearing.

Xena closed her eyes and knelt down on a knee, her hands rested lightly on her left knee. She waited. A few candledrops later, she heard them. They slowly entered the clearing and circled her. Two of them lay down at her sides, right and left, and the third sat down in front of her.

The tall woman could feel the hot breath on her face, and slowly opened her eyes, locking her blue orbs with the pitch black but vividly sparkling eyes of the animal in front of her. The panther was one of the biggest she ever saw. They almost were eye to eye. Her hands seemingly of their own accord left her knee and began to stroke the two smaller cats at her sides.

When the first hints of predawn began to colour the sky, she once again closed her eyes, and the formidable creatures left the clearing as soundlessly as they had come. She stayed motionless for another candledrop, and returned to camp after having caught three rabbits for the morning meal.

They had an early start and were able to cover a lot of ground. So, the Queen decided to let the horses rest and walk for a few candlemarks, soon Gabrielle was engaged in a friendly conversation with the guards and Xena brought up the rear. Half a candlemark later she was joined by Ephiny.

"You' okay? You seem awfully quiet today, even for you."

"Yeah, I'm good, Eph. No need to worry." The tall warrior looked at the curly head. "What do you really want?"

"This morning, I followed you."

"I thought it was Akyra, spying on me." The tall warrior answered shrugging her shoulders.

"It wasn't my intention to spy, Xena," Ephiny said slightly wounded, "but you left camp without your weapons. I was worried."

"I'm sorry, Eph, I didn't want to snap at you." Xena gave the curly haired woman a small smile and fell silent, arguing with herself if she should down-play the incident or tell the truth. The slightly younger Amazon lawyer had become a good friend of hers and Gabrielle's, especially after the trial. She deserved the truth but...

Her thoughts were interrupted when Ephiny spoke again. "I asked Akyra about it but she only smiled and sent me over. I never before saw someone treating one of the most dangerous predators around like harmless kittens. They could have killed you."

"They would have killed me, had I come with my weapons and armour. Not wearing them was a sign of trust on my part. Letting me touch her daughters was a sign of trust on hers."

There were a lot of questions pursuing each other in Ephiny's mind but one was more powerful than the others, and so she followed her instincts. "What did she tell you? The panther, I mean."

"She told me that there's danger ahead, and that I will need all my strength and all my weakness to keep safe the ones I love and care for. She told me that my past once again has risen to haunt me and that what I do about it now will influence not only my own future."

"You should warn the Queen, if it's this dangerous, maybe, it would be better to return to the village and postpone the meeting."

"I'll warn her as soon as we leave Amazon territory but I can't go back. I was told that more harm would come from avoiding the danger. I don't know what is expected of me but I can't afford not to find out."

Ephiny nodded, and they continued in silence but finally another question burst forth. "The panther is your guiding spirit as the lynx is Thania's, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"I always thought that one contacts them in the dreamscape or something. I never believed them to be real, living beings."

"Guiding spirits can speak to you through your dreams but they also can pop up in your mind during the day. Usually a guiding spirit isn't really a separate being. Once you accept it, it becomes part of you, of your soul. You simply know it's there. But you're right, usually they don't appear in flesh and bone." Meeting the inquisitive eyes of the lawyer, Xena swallowed the remainder of her trepidations and continued quietly. "Akyra probably would tell you that they only come to people with great spiritual powers, to a shamaness, a priestess or a Queen. But that's not the only answer. They can come when a young Amazon is just learning to find her way. They also can come when an adult has lost her path."

Xena fell silent. She didn't dare look at her bright eyed friend when she finally took a deep calming breath and said. "I think this is what happened today. -- Years ago, I was proud to have such a powerful and independent animal as a guiding spirit. It carried me through a very dark and confusing time when I still was but a child. -- When my soul lost itself in darkness I also lost my guiding spirit. I thought it never would come back. I think they came to let me know that I'm on the right path but that I also still have a lot of ground to cover."

This time Ephiny respected her friend's silence. She still had a lot of questions, actually now she had even more, but she also knew that Xena wouldn't answer any of them. In the past moon, she had learned enough about the raven haired woman to know that her openness today was a rare privilege; probably brought forth by the fact that the meeting with her guiding spirit still had her preoccupied and somewhat disturbed. The warrior could talk for hours about fighting techniques or battle strategies but apart from Gabrielle she seldom let anyone have a look in her heart.

Some candlemarks before dusk and still in the middle of the forest, they reached the edge of the Amazon territory. According to the peace treaty regulations with the Centaur Nation the border was unguarded by both parties. It was a sign of trust Queen Melosa had had real difficulties to get approved by the council. Ephiny, with the royal guards Siana, Kelara and the newly appointed Silea, was busy building solid lean-tos to ward off the heavy rains expected during the night. Meanwhile Xena told the Queen and the others about the warning she had received.

"You must be kidding, Xena. This whole thing with guiding spirits, it's nothing more than a children's story. You must have been dreaming." Solari, the captain of the royal guard replied.

"Guiding spirits exist, my unbelieving friend. Why do you think I have a squirrel in my crest?!" The Queen turned her attention from her speechless warrior back to Xena. "Apart from being careful and keeping our eyes and ears open for trouble, is there anything we can do?"

"I'd like to send Gabrielle and the elders back to the village to keep them out of harm's way."

"No way, Xena," Akyra and Theano answered with one voice. Akyra continued for both of them. "I may be older than the stones, Xena, but I still can hold my own in a battle. Besides, if the threat you told us about is coming from the Centaurs, you young folk may need my help. I have more experience with fighting them than I care to remember."

Meanwhile the discussion had attracted the attention of the others, and as could have been expected Gabrielle also wasn't willing to go back.

"Please, Gabrielle, be reasonable. Your leg may be healed but it still isn't as strong as it was. I won't risk your life, not again. We'll send you back to safety."

"No way, Xena." The younger woman retorted angrily. "You have no right to talk about my health while you're still recuperating from the whipping. Do you really think I don't know that

your back still is hurting with this heavy armour throbbing against your back all day? And you'd better not forget that no one has the right to order me around, Conqueror. I'm my own woman, and I follow my own command."

This said she stomped off towards the cover of the trees. Xena was stunned by the force of her partner's outburst, so she didn't pay attention to what the Queen was saying, telling everyone to keep their eyes open from now on and ordering a look-out constructed in the trees.

"What are you waiting for, Xena? I want the look-out ready in no more than a candlemark. You better get started."

"I have to follow Gabrielle." Xena's voice came from far-away, her eyes still fixed to the spot between two old trees where her lover had disappeared.

"Xena, don't force me to punish you for disobedience. Just get going. -- Give Gabrielle some space to calm down. You can make your apologies later."

The tall woman visibly was fighting her instincts but finally she bent her head and muttered. "Yes, mistress."

Less than half a candlemark later, while the royal guards still were busy with the lean-tos, the look-out was ready, big enough to comfortably seat two warriors and with a solid roof of intertwined leaves and branches.

Xena found Gabrielle by hearing alone, following the sound of a staff hitting a tree trunk. When the young woman came in her line of view at the edge of a clearing barely big enough to be called thus, Xena took off at breakneck speed, jumped, and landed against Gabrielle, effectively bringing her sideways to the ground.

The big boar that had targeted her lover missed by mere inches. The tall woman barely managed to get them both back on their feet when the animal charged again. She shoved Gabrielle towards a stand of trees and told her harshly to hide. Her hand reached for her sword but it already was too late. All she could do was turn to the side to try and get out of the way but still the force of the onslaught took her to the ground, pinning her beneath his weight; the boar's big tusks dangerously close to her face.

Her sword was all but useless in such close quarters and the chakram was trapped under her own body together with her right arm. She tried to turn the tables but pinned as she was, she didn't have enough leverage to affect the infuriated animal. She somehow managed to press him backwards a few inches but that was all. Xena could feel one of his fangs grazing along her upper arm protector and then slicing through her skin towards the elbow, leaving a burning gash. She had a short glimpse into the small, beady eyes of the animal and groaned when another slice was made, crossing the first one and much deeper.

Blood was dropping to the ground, and time came to a stand-still. Her left arm was weakening. She knew she couldn't hold him off much longer. In her peripheral vision she could see Gabrielle slowly creeping nearer, staff at the ready. She took aim and slammed it as hard as she could against the boar's rib case.

Seemingly unfazed by the attack the boar slowly turned his head as if measuring the new target with his red rimmed eyes. He shifted his weight towards the blond woman thus freeing Xena's right arm and giving her the opening she needed. She wound her injured arm around his neck and pulled as hard as she could at his front legs with the other hand.

The beast toppled over, and Xena slit his throat with her chakram, holding it down with her whole body until it had bled out. She came to her feet and turned to the young woman, still breathing hard.

"You all right, love?"

"Oh, Xena. I'm sorry. I almost got you killed. Please forgive me," she blurted out when her tall lover wrapped her in her arms, "I'll go back to the village. You're hurt and it's all my fault. I'm so sorry."

"Gab, my love, it's all right. We're safe now. It wasn't your fault. You just saved my life. He would have killed me, if you hadn't diverted his attention. What you did was very, very brave, my bard, and"

One of Gabrielle's hand sneaked up to her lips. "And incredibly stupid, I know. You're not angry at me for running away?"

"No, I'm not angry, just relieved that you're not hurt. You, my love, have every reason to be angry with me. I'm worried about your safety but I shouldn't have ordered you around. I'm sorry. I'll try and not do it again. Forgive me?"

"You're forgiven, my warrior. I love you." The young woman answered smiling but still slightly trembling. "Let me put something on your arm, you're still bleeding."

"Not yet, Gab. Let's wait another two or three candledrops. The bleeding will get rid of most of the dirt. This way there will be less risk of an infection." Seeing the worried frown in Gabrielle's face she continued. "Did I recently tell you that I love you, sweetie?"

"I'll never tire of hearing it, Xe, and I love you too, with all of my heart." Gabrielle snuggled closer to her, deeply breathing in the scent so specific to her lover.

Xena was about to field-dress the boar when her sensitive hearing picked up on the sound of two warriors coming their way. She stood and issued a series of bird-calls that immediately were answered. Soon Kelara and Siana dropped out of the trees and helped them to get the huge beast back to camp.

While Gabrielle let all the others know what had happened and Theano tended to Xena's wounds, the others were cutting the boar to pieces. One part was designed for dinner and the rest set aside to smoke-dry throughout the night.

Cyrene was riding at the point of the slowly advancing column of horses and wagons, together with the Commanders Palemon and Theodorus.

More than a moon ago, almost a moon and a half, the two men had appeared at the backdoor of her house in Corinth in the middle of the night, to save her life, they had claimed.

By now, she knew they had been right, her house having been burned down the day after her escape. The ruling council of Greece and Rome, as they called themselves, this day not only had announced the 'unfortunate, accidental death of Xena, the Conqueror', they also immediately began to try and destroy everything associated with her reign, declaring that now would begin a 'long period of peace and prosperity'. Her banners were taken down, the streets in the newly built quarters of the town renamed, and some of her laws revoked. Xena's sudden disappearance didn't cause any kind of riot or civil war, just as she had predicted. She also had been right to assume that the people personally associated with her, be it by choice, by blood, or by rumour only would face some danger by the new rulers of Greece.

The clearing Palemon and Theodorus had let her to in the first place turned out to be an easily guarded valley where soon more than three hundred refugees were assembling -- only a third of which were soldiers. Most of them were craftsmen with their families, workers and even some farmers. They now were headed towards a small fortified island Xena had prepared for her followers in case of an emergency, together with most of the soldiers of the First Order, Xena's personal guards and elite squadron.

Cyrene herself and about half a dozen veterans had started out to join Xena or as they called her 'the General' at the Amazon village, after a detour to Amphipolis where Xena's mother wanted to gather some medicinal herbs. They not only had found the herbs but also the first three of the wagons now trailing behind her. Word of their destination must have spread with lightning speed for almost every day they were met up by small groups of soldiers or other wagons loaded with goods, families or elders. Everyone of them seemed fiercely loyal to her daughter, and every single conversation she had with one of these newcomers left her disbelieving, bewildered and unsure of herself.

The feelings Cyrene had for her only daughter for a long time now were somewhat ambivalent and confusing. She never really managed to hate her child, not even in the darkest of times, and regardless of the things she voiced out loud. But she had been more than certain to hate the Conqueror. And now she on a daily basis had to deal with people who for one reason or the other defended most of her actions.

The new messenger they had encountered a few days ago didn't make things easier for her. He told them of a great battle fought by Xena and the Amazons against one of her former commanders intend on destroying the Amazon Nation and the frontier outposts Xena had established along the whole length of the northern border. He also told them about Xena's brother, Toris, and an Amazon girl saving the life of Cyrene's grand-son, and her daughter saving the life of the girl by some sort of strange Amazon magic.

The middle aged woman was jostled out of her musings when Palemon, a tall dark haired man brought their caravan to a sudden stop. When she looked up she saw one of the scouts advancing towards them at top speed. Immediately all the soldiers on horse back fanned out in a defensive pattern and the others readied their weapons. When he drew nearer he signalled that there were friends ahead, and the men visibly relaxed.

"Palemon, it's the children from Corinth and Cirra. They'll cross our path in about three candlemarks. They'll need food and some rest. The new leaders ... they tried to kill them. Some of them are injured, too."

"Theodorus, take the others and set up camp at the end of the woods on our left. That's where the crossroad from Cirra ends. We'll need some more meat." The blonde man he had spoken to signalled that he would send out the hunters and also asked how many children they were talking about.

Palemon cast a questioning look at the scout who immediately answered. "Fifty to sixty children and about five adults."

"Damn bastards, the orphanage in Cirra alone had close to fifty children. -- I'll take a score of soldiers and see what we can do to help them now. Cyrene..."

"I'll be with you, Palemon. Perhaps I can help." She kneed her horse into motion and soon they were on a fast canter along some sort of half overgrown forest path.

When they had to slow down to cut trough a denser part Cyrene asked him about the orphanages. "I know the children are the ones suffering most from war, so I can understand that Xena sponsored an orphanage for the children of her soldiers but surely there aren't enough of them to fill more than one."

The tall man looked at her as if she had spoken in a foreign language, then there was a shadow of a smile on his lips, signalling to her that her words once again had ventured in a realm she did not have the slighted idea of. He shook his head and answered. "You'll just have to wait and see for yourself, Cyrene."

The following day of travel saw no excitement at all. To be on the safe side Queen Melosa once again had a look-out erected and Ephiny, Solari and Chandala volunteered to take watch. They weren't the only ones going practically without sleep.

To everyone's relief the wounds on Xena's arm were healing remarkably fast, Xena herself, however, didn't seem to notice. She was surrounded by a cloud of dark brooding that even began to affect the easy chatter of her fair haired companion. Her answers to questions were monosyllabic at best and she didn't venture any comment of her own. After everyone had retired to their bedrolls she listened to Gabrielle's even breathing but this night it didn't give her the solace she longed for, the solace she had become accustomed to.

Xena's mind kept wandering back to her past, to her campaign against the Centaurs, and to how driven she had been by the need to find that damned stone. While signing the peace treaty more than four years ago she didn't feel the pull of the stone she wasn't able to ignore the first time. She could feel its rhythm, like her own heartbeat but the longing to possess it was gone, even then. Now -- more than four years later --, she had a hard time to remember why it ever had been important in the first place.

Even Gabrielle's body snuggled close to her own, the familiar feeling of the younger woman's legs intertwined with her own, this night was not able to keep the nightmares at bay, nightmares born out of memories usually hidden in the deepest and darkest part of her brain. She needed all of her mental strength to keep her mind void, and one after the other played through all the meditation techniques she knew. Still she couldn't help her growing anxiety.

The night was still dark and cold when Xena couldn't stand it any longer. Once again she slipped out of their bedroll careful not to awaken her young lover. She donned her leathers, armour, and weapons and headed for a clearing nearby.

After some candledrops of stretching and loosening up her muscles she unsheathed her sword and began to swirl it in front of her in an easy rhythm. Soon her movements became faster and the simple figure-eights she had started out with grew into intricate patterns. When she was satisfied with her range of mobility she began to fight invisible opponents by adding the occasional jump and flip. When the sun started to rise her uneasiness had dropped to a manageable level, and she was pleased with the range of her abilities.

With a smooth movement she sheathed her weapon, suddenly knowing what it was that had her on the edge the whole night long; she turned around and growled. "Show yourself, Ares. I hope you enjoyed the show."

The morning air began to shiver, sparkling blue light morphed to a solid leather-clad body. One hand casually resting on the hilt of his sword, he was eye to eye with Xena. "Why do you always have to spoil my fun, Conqueror? Oh, I forgot, you no longer are the Conqueror. You're a lowly Amazon slave, wearing a collar like a good little lap-dog."

"So, why does the mighty God of War waste his precious time speaking with me, a lowly slave? What do you want, Ares?" She growled.

"I really don't know why I put up with your arrogance, Xena, but you still are my favourite mortal, and yes, I enjoyed the show. You're as lethal as ever. I came to give you one last chance. Swear allegiance to me, and you and your beloved little Amazons will live to see the harvest festival. Refuse me, and you all will be destroyed."

Xena's lips curled in a smile that didn't reach her eyes when she answered. "You're really tenacious, Ares. But my answer is still the same. I didn't fall for your charms and promises when I longed for power and blood-shed more than for everything else. Why should I now fall for idle threats? Go, and search someone else to play with."

"Finish what you started almost ten years ago. Destroy the Centaur nation, find the Ixion stone and use it -- then I will give the world to you. This is your last chance. The Centaurs will go down before this season is through. They will be easy pickings for my army. Fight on my side, and get the Amazons to stay clear of this war, and they will be allowed to live their boring little lives. If not, if they're stupid enough to side with my enemy, they also will be destroyed. So, for one time in your life, be smart, and lead my army."

"Thanks, Ares, but no, thanks. Besides, if I really would use the Ixion stone, the world would be mine even against your will. I'm not interested."

She turned around ready to leave the small clearing. A big hand grabbed her left shoulder. In a fraction of a heartbeat, Xena bent her knees, her strong fingers encircled the God's wrist and she pulled forwards with all her might, propelling the dark haired figure on the ground in front of her.

His astonishment quickly turned in a smirk. "Glad to see that you haven't lost all of your fire, Xena. I didn't plan on you leaving Amazon territory. But things will definitely get much more interesting now. For all the entertainment you gave me with your battles, I'll give you one last piece of advise. You soon will be facing my army, if you fight them you will die. That's what the Fates see in your future but if you can keep them from finding and using the Ixion stone, the Amazons and the Centaurs will have a chance to survive. Think about it." Without bothering to get to his feet he disappeared in another wave of red-blue light.

Breakfast was ready when Xena returned to her companions. She internally debated with herself if she should tell Queen Melosa about her discussion with the God of War, but then decided to wait and see what the Centaurs knew about this army and its commander or if Ares had only been bragging and pushing her buttons.

Only a few candelights after their midday break, Solari joined Xena at the end of their steadily advancing column. "What will we do about our stalker?"

"What we did from the beginning, ignore him. He's just a child, I don't think that he poses any kind of threat. He kept his distance for more than two candlemarks but since our break he's trying to overtake us. He probably is planning some kind of ambush at the edge of the forest. We should just wait and see."

The Queen however had other plans, she ordered her Amazons to speed up their journey, and soon their stalker was left far behind. They returned to their former travelling speed about a candlemark later, and reached the edge of the forest at mid-afternoon, about two candlemarks early.

"We'll wait for the Centaurs to escort us to their village. Xena, please put your weapons away. We don't want to offend their leaders should the invitation be genuine."

Xena nodded, slid gracefully to the ground, and did as she was told while the others also dismounted. Her ears were still toned towards their stalker who once again had caught up with them. The tall warrior turned her back to her companions and waited for him to show himself. Soon he dropped out of a tree, brandishing a sword twice as long as his arms.

His unruly hair was of a light brown, with hints of blond in the summer sun. He wore a simple tunic and loosely fitting trousers. He was short of 5 feet tall and couldn't have more than ten or eleven summers. His shining blue eyes seemed oblivious to everything except the dark haired woman in front of him. He attacked wordlessly but Xena easily side-stepped his thrust. The momentum of his weapon let him lose his balance and he landed face first on the hard ground.

He quickly turned around and got back on his feet. "You killed my father, you killed the great Borias, and now you will die."

He renewed his attack, Xena just stood there, rooted to the ground, and didn't even attempt to avoid the oncoming weapon. Years of fighting experience kicked in and instinctively her right arm shot upwards, she stopped the blade with her bare hand. The boy loosened his grip and the weapon fell on the sun-bleached grass. He looked at the tall woman's bleeding hand with an expression of utter astonishment on his face.

When Xena knelt to retrieve the weapon, her sensitive hearing picked up on a group of Centaurs rapidly approaching. She also was aware of the scrutinising eyes of her Amazon companions. At the same time a frighteningly familiar tingling feeling coursed through her fingertips and her eyes found the ornate hilt of the sword.

"This was your father's weapon. It was a good choice to try and avenge his death with but it should have been maintained better." Xena balanced the blade on her right knee, almost caressing the hilt with her uninjured hand. "I didn't kill your father but I'm responsible for his death. You have the right to take my life, young man. I'll show you how to do it."

Xena turned the hilt towards him and he automatically took it. Then she sat down on her heels

and opened the clasps holding her breast and back plates in place. She put the heavy brass pieces on the ground and once again grabbed the blade with her still bleeding hand. She put the tip against her chest, between her breasts, slightly to the left. The Amazons surrounding them seemed as mesmerised by her display as the child in front of her.

"The tip of your blade is still sharp enough to break through my ribs. Take care to keep this angle when you press down with your whole body. This angle will not only pierce my heart but also part of my lungs. This way most of the heart's blood will end up in the lung, there will be less blood on the ground. My dying will be quick."

Heartbeats stretched to candlemarks while they stood motionless. Xena's hand still was wrapped around the blade, the blood dropping from her palm colouring the hard ground. Her blue eyes locked with his. She almost could feel the boy's inner turmoil. Her hand went down to her side, and shortly after, the weapon once again fell to the ground. The child's whole body was shivering, and there were angry tears in his eyes.

"Killing someone in cold blood isn't easy, Solan, it never should be easy, regardless of the reasons. Every time you take a life, a tiny part of your own soul also dies. I don't want you to ever experience this kind of emptiness. Take your father's sword and return to the village, and one day I will tell you everything you want to know about Borias and me."

"How do you know my name?"

"Your uncle, Kaleipus, told me when I was in your village almost five years ago."

"I still am your greatest enemy, Conqueror." Solan picked up the sword, sheathed it, turned around, and was facing a group of six Centaurs and two humans.

"What are you doing here, Solan? No, I don't want to know. We'll talk later. Go back to the village and wait in your room." The tall, one-eyed Centaur now turned his attention towards Queen Melosa and Xena whose hand was quickly cleaned and bandaged by Gabrielle. The tall warrior unsuccessfully tried to ignore the more than disapproving gaze of her younger lover. "Melosa, Queen of the Amazons, why did you violate the peace treaty and bring her on our lands? Conqueror, you are not welcome."

Instead of an answer the Queen rummaged in one of her saddle-bags and produced the message they had received from the Centaurs. Kaleipus studied it curiously, and turned his head to the boy. "Solan, we have a lot to talk about. Leave us now."

"Kaleipus, please, don't punish him. He only followed the voice of his heart."

"You, Conqueror, have no right to tell me how to deal with 'my' son. He never will be yours." Xena swallowed hard but didn't object. "But I will try to honour his word. With signing the peace treaty you were granted a pardon for the things you and your army did during the war. But you

can't enter the village without facing dire consequences for trespassing. I grant you freedom of movement outside of the village. You can stay in an old hut about one and a half candlemark's ride west for as long as the Amazons are our guests."

Xena could see that Queen Melosa was itching to interfere, and Gabrielle was literally bristling with indignation. She had to speed up this conversation. "Tyldus, Kaleipus, I knew the consequences when I entered Centaur territory. Please, tell the council of elders that I will submit to Centaur justice without questions or reservations. I will stand trial for illegal trespassing whenever they are ready."

For the first time the Centaur next to Kaleipus spoke. He was as tall as his brother with slightly darker hair, his left front foot inadvertently scraping the ground. "You are wearing the collar of an Amazon slave, Conqueror. As far as I know you don't have the right to decide on such things."

"Xena may officially be a slave to the Amazon nation but she also is one of our best warriors and teachers. As soon as her punishment for sacrilegious behaviour is completed, the collar will be removed for good and we will gladly accept her as one of our own. That's why I granted her the freedom to satisfy her obligations to the Centaur nation should the need arise."

Before anyone could answer, they all heard the sounds of rapidly approaching hoofbeats. Everyone turned their heads when a Centaur galloping at full speed quickly drew nearer. He stopped dead in his tracks when he recognised Xena, shook his head disbelievingly and scooped her up in a breath taking bear hug.

"Xena, so glad to see you. The Gods did hear my prayers. Thank you that you changed your mind, father." The young Centaur said to Tyldus.

"Calm down, Phantes. I'm sure you didn't come all the way from the village just for me."

Immediately the fair haired Centaur sobered up. "No, I didn't but my wife really needs your help. -- Father, uncle, one of the advance scout is back. He has spotted a large army heading our way."

"How large and how far away?" Kaleipus and Melosa asked simultaneously.

"About two hundred on horse back and another three hundred on foot. They are well equipped and disciplined. They are about seven days of fast travel away but are advancing rather slowly. The scout estimates we have at least eleven or twelve days before they reach our border. Their progress is slow because they are thoroughly searching every single cave in the hills."

"So, Ares was right." Xena whispered quietly to herself but not quiet enough not to be overheard by Solari.

"Did you just say Ares? As in Ares, the God of War?"

After two heartbeats of hesitation, Xena told them about her encounter with the dark haired God earlier this day, however, without mentioning his threats against her or what he had told her about the Fates.

"Why should Ares try to destroy the Centaur nation? They're great fighters. He should be pleased with their existence. It doesn't make any sense." Akyra said.

"Yes, it does. Centaurs fight to defend their homes and their families as do the Amazons. They don't fight for the sake of fighting, and they always refused to pledge allegiance to Ares." Xena answered. "Their searching the caves means that they are looking for the temple of Ixion. I really doubt that they'll find the stone there -- and then their advance movement will speed up considerably. I know I was close when I stopped my campaign against your forces. So, my guess is that we'll have nine days at best."

The tall woman knelt and began to draw lines on the hard ground at the edge of the grass land with a short stick. "Here's the village, the mountain range begins here and drops down to a mere hill side about here. I suppose the enemy at the moment is about here." She looked questioningly to the young Centaur who nodded in agreement. "Good, I was about two and a half days march from the village when Borias began to get nervous. I put it down to other circumstances then, but now his behaviour begins to make sense. We'll have about four days before they'll find the real temple. Enough time to find out more about the army and its leader. If he is any good, he will send scouts of his own to find out about our defences. You should double the sentries."

"This isn't your fight, Conqueror. We don't want your help." Tyldus angrily retorted.

"An army of 500 hundred men isn't something you can face alone, Tyldus," Queen Melosa replied, "the peace treaty also includes a mutual defence agreement -- and Xena will fight with the Amazons. Just over a moon ago, we were able to defeat an army three times our size with her help. I sincerely hope that you won't disregard our assistance just because of the former Conqueror." Almost unconsciously the Amazons now were facing the Centaurs.

To ease the tension, Kaleipus took two steps forwards and offered his arm in a warrior handshake. "Queen Melosa, we'll gladly accept every help you and your warriors are willing to offer. These last years, I learned to trust your judgement. Do you trust your slave, Queen Melosa?"

"Yes, I do, with my life and the lives of my people." Xena couldn't entirely suppress the surprise flickering over her face at the Queen's statement. "She's living with us for over two moons now, we fought side by side, she saved my life and the life of many of my sisters, not only on the battlefield but also in the healer's hut. She isn't the Conqueror any longer, she's just a honourable warrior with a very dark past."

"Tyldus, the Con..., Xena's advice was sound. I may not like it but she is a great general, an even better fighter, and she knows these hills almost as good as our best scouts. We learned this the hard way, all those years ago. So, we would be foolish if we didn't accept her input." Kaleipus

pleaded with his brother.

"I can understand your reasoning but I for my part won't turn my back on her, and she will not be allowed to enter the village, not without facing Centaur justice first."

"Father, please don't," the young Centaur entered the conversation. "Ter..., my wife needs her now. She is in labour since last night and the midwife doesn't know what to do. Xena asked us not to tell anyone but it was her who helped her birthing my son. She needs her help. I don't want to lose her."

"Tyldus, please let me try and help. I will stand trial as soon as your daughter in law is out of harm's way. And I will submit to every punishment you and the council of elders find suitable. She is a friend and I owe her, please."

The tall Centaur nodded, Xena grabbed one of her saddlebags, mounted on Phantes' back, and off they went without even a single word of explanation to the other women.

Chapter Three: Daughters

Cyrene sank to her bedroll and wearily closed her eyes. The small tidbits of information she had been able to overhear about the attack on the orphanage disturbed her greatly, with more than fifty innocent children killed at the break of dawn and killed by men whose duty it should have been to protect them.

The bright spot of her day had been the fact that the injuries of the survivors were less severe than the scout's report had lead her to believe in the first place. Obviously they had been properly tended to some time ago. On the other hand, they all were completely exhausted and on the point of starving; some of them driven forward by will power alone.

So, Palemon reluctantly agreed to a full day's rest the following day to give the children a chance to regroup. They also had to take into account that now there were 73 more hungry stomachs to fill . Therefore a larger group of the men would dedicate this day to hunting for edible plants, fruits and game.

The next day, Cyrene found herself working in the make-shift kitchen area side by side with a tall woman about her age whose attention every now and then turned towards a young woman with blond, curly hair. She was almost as tall as her own daughter but her shoulders and hips were considerably less broad and her eyes were of a dark shining brown. She wore a black leather dress with a lot of silvery adornments, strategically placed to double as armour pieces. The gleaming hilt of a sword strapped to her back completed the warrior-like image. She also had the easy catlike motions of a good fighter. To Cyrene's utter astonishment, for the better part of the morning, she stayed in the middle of the smaller children, obviously telling stories, helping them to wash up and even patiently combing their hair.

"What is it you find so intriguing about my daughter?"

Cyrene looked the other woman in the eyes and slowly answered. "I don't know for sure. -- She looks every inch the warrior, except for her eyes and the way she holds herself with the children."

"Oh, she knows how to use that weapon of hers and a whole lot of others. Without her a lot more of us would have been killed. She stopped those soldiers. She had the best teachers the General could find. -- Since Cirra was destroyed almost eight years ago, she thinks that she has the obligation to keep me and the few other survivors safe. Xena tried to convince her that there are better ways to do this than fighting but even as a child she was rather headstrong."

"Eight years ago. She couldn't have been more than ten summers old."

"Eleven. Palemon told me that you're the mother of the General. You should know. Xena had her first staff lessons when she had barely more than eight summers, didn't she?"

"Yes." There was an awkward silence between the two of them. "I never was comfortable with the idea but it meant so much to her."

"Neither was I. -- But over the years, like you, I learned that her fighting exercises serve more than one purpose. My daughter learned how to contain her temper and she learned how to let go of her anger. After our village burned to the ground, Xena was a great help to keep her from becoming angry and bitter. She dissipated the darkness in my daughter's heart. I'll always be in her debt."

"I'll never understand you, either of you." Cyrene muttered to herself while seemingly concentrating her attention on the big pot of stew they were preparing.

"What are you talking about, Cyrene?"

"You're from Cirra, Xena destroyed your village, most of your fellow citizens were killed, Arleia -- she told me so herself -- and still you're speaking about her with kindness and gratitude. I really don't understand you."

"Let's take a walk, Cyrene, the stew will be fine on its own. There are some things you should know about your daughter and her history with Cirra. I suppose she told you that she is responsible for the destruction of my village and that's probably what she still believes -- but it's not the truth."

The two women walked towards the edge of the encampment and found a shady place with a view towards the crossroads where the two treks had met. Xena's mother patiently waited for the other woman to gather her thoughts.

"When the General was on her way to conquer Corinth, about nine summers ago, her army also passed through Cirra. It was a small village, shepherds and farmers. She promised to protect us in exchange for provisions. Our council agreed -- though at the time we thought that she was just another of these marauding warlords who never even intend to keep their promises.

"The harvest promised to be good, exceptionally good even and so she got enough to keep her and her army going for a long time.

"One year later, she once again passed through. This time she didn't ask to be provisioned. She said her army had all it needed at the moment. And she also said that she was on her way west and that there had been some rumours of other warlords nearby. She said that they all should know by now to stay clear of Cirra and she told us to send a messenger if one of them was stupid enough to threaten what was hers.

"She left and rumours about a big battle against the combined armies of some of the smaller city states reached us, together with news about a new warlord rampaging our area. We tried to appease him with provisions, as we had done numerous times in the past but he wanted more, much more. We didn't know what to do, so, the council sent a message to the General. The warlord caught one of our messengers, but the other one somehow got through.

"He was furious and decided to set an example by destroying us. He also saw it as a way to challenge Xena. He surrounded the village, so no one could get out. He told us to surrender and perhaps he would show some compassion and kill us quickly. We didn't answer fast enough, I suppose."

The tall woman fell silent for a long moment, obviously trying to hold her emotions in check. She took a deep breath, steeling herself for the horrors she now was about to give voice to.

"They sent flaming arrows into our grain storage. The tips were coated with Greek fire and water did nothing to douse the flames. While all of us were out trying to save what we could, he led his men to the village square. They killed every man they could find and then proceeded to herd the women and children into the communal barn. His men began to place shackles on our wrists but he stopped them." Arleia's voice now was almost toneless, only the slight quivering of her lower lip betraying the depths of her emotions.

"He told them to leave us alone and for the fraction of a candle drop, I, we hoped that he would let us go for good. Instead he set fire to the hay in the barn and closed the doors. As we later learned, they also set fire to the outer walls and suddenly there was no way to escape. The last thing I remember was his voice telling his men to also burn all the other buildings and kill every living thing from cat and dog to sheep and oxen. He said: 'This will show the Thracian Bitch what it takes to rule Greece.' And he laughed."

"Mother, are you all right? I could feel your distress."

"Yes, darling. I'm good. I want you to meet Cyrene. She's Xena's mother. I was just telling her

how we met her daughter."

"You were telling her about the barn?"

"Yes, Cassy. Perhaps you should tell her what happened after Krykos torched the barn."

The young woman looked at her mother with an expression that seemed to say. 'Are you really sure that you want me to go there?'

"Cyrene believes Xena to be responsible for the deaths at Cirra, Cassandra."

"But without her, none of us would still be alive." The young woman sank to her knees next to her mother and sought Cyrene's eyes. "I know Xena blames herself for what happened; but that's simply not true." The young woman took a deep breath. "The gates were closed, the barn was burning, the women were crying and shouting but none of us had the courage to try and open the doors. The roar of the flames around us slowly began to drown out the noises from outside. I heard shouts of fear and pain and I was sure that Krykos had found another group of my fellow villagers. The shouting was getting louder, I heard the clashing of swords. Before I could tell the others, I realised that my younger sister was missing. She had been hiding in the hayloft when the warlord came. Callisto always was in some kind of trouble or other and the hayloft was where she usually went to wait out our parent's anger.

"I spotted the ladder, still about three feet away from the flames. Up there under the barn's roof it seemed to be even hotter than next to the fire. I later learned that the thatch roof was already burning. I didn't find my sister but from the opening we used to get the hay bales to the loft I was able to see most of the village. I just stood there, looking at the street below and not believing my eyes. There were a lot more fighters than before; one group fighting the other and Krykus' men were losing.

"I saw him at the end of the street. By now, most of the buildings were ablaze but my attention solely was focused on him. He was fighting someone with broad shoulders and long black hair flowing over a light, equally black cloak. Even to my inexperienced eyes it was evident that he was way out-classed. To me, the motion of their swords was almost a blur and then one of the swords came flying straight through the air and embedded itself in the wall of one of the houses. Krykus was lying on the ground; the other fighter sheathed their sword, bent down and put her hands to his throat. They were talking.

"The cloaked figure turned around. It was Xena, her eyes found the barn and she broke into a run. Within heartbeats she was next to me in the hayloft. She didn't say anything. She unclasped the cloak from her shoulder guards, swept it around the both of us. Out of the corner of my eyes I could see red-hot embers dropping from the roof like raindrops. She took me into her arms, made a few steps and jumped right in the middle of the barn. The shock of her arrival effectively silenced even the most hysterical of the women.

"She told us that as soon as the barn doors were opened the flames and the heat would increase. She told us to get down on the ground and to protect the children as best as we could. By then,

the doors already were burning but I knew she could do it and the others also knew it. She ordered me to hide under her cloak but I couldn't help watching. She went as far as possible to the rear end of the barn, began to run and somersaulted right into the flames. The barn doors burst open, an immense heat wave thundered over our heads and suddenly there were a lot of men with cloaks and blankets carrying us away."

"When the flames died down early the next day, there were only five buildings left." Arleia continued their tale. "Over one hundred and twenty people were dead and another three scores badly injured. Cassandra and I had been lucky, we got away with a few scratches and bruises but my husband was among the fatalities and there was no trace of my younger daughter. We were staying in tents Xena's soldiers had prepared and as soon as Cassy was asleep I went to offer my help in the healer's tent.

"There were a lot of burns as well as sword and mace wounds. Some of my fellow citizens still were too terrified to accept the help that was offered to them and I tried to calm them down, as much as my own grief would allow. The injured were lying down in neatly arranged rows of ten, some on cots and some on blankets. When I came to the end of the third row, Xena was kneeling next to one of the makeshift beds. It was one of the children, a small boy of about six or seven summers with curly brown hair and dark brown eyes. A spear had pierced his chest, penetrating his lungs. He didn't have a chance and he knew it. Xena's left hand suddenly shot forward, two of her fingers stabbing a point to the left of his throat. He smiled, his mother kissed him a last time and he died."

"So, she killed him with one of these damned pressure points." Cyrene whispered.

"She ended his suffering, Cyrene." Cassandra continued. "She didn't kill him, she just blocked out the pain. She allowed him to die in peace. -- I followed mother when she left our tent and while she was calming down the others I had my eyes on Xena. She still wore her armour but the feral glint I saw in her eyes when she first landed at my side in the hayloft was gone. There now was only sadness. As soon as Grigori had closed his eyes, she stood and left the healer's tent. I followed closely behind. She ordered a score of her men to mount up and come with her. I heard her saying: 'We'll hunt them down. None of them will ever have the chance to brag about the destruction of Cirra. They won't live long enough to tell anyone.' My eyes were irresistibly drawn to hers. They now were burning with cold hatred. She left and didn't return but two days later. I once again sought her eyes but now they were void of any emotions.

"Then, I didn't understand what her face and her eyes really told me but I was highly intrigued, so I followed her whenever I got the chance. She asked me why. I didn't answer. She knelt in front of me and suddenly I was eye to eye with these amazing blue orbs of hers. Later, I learned that the expression they held was one of slight amusement. She didn't say anything and finally I found the courage to ask if she had killed them all. The amused glint vanished and I began to regret asking. She answered: 'Yes, never again will they harm innocents.' I asked: 'Did they have a quick death?' She nodded. I said: 'They should have suffered for what they did. I would have liked to see them suffer.' My eyes must have told her that I meant what I said. I wanted to hear them cry and beg for their lives and to see them die and I wouldn't have felt any regret for them.

"The blue eyes facing me turned darker. She said: 'Killing them in cold blood won't give you back the people you love and lost. It won't undo the damage the fire has done and it won't take away the pain you now feel, it won't take away the mourning.' I didn't understand what she was trying to say and she must have sensed that I didn't, so she added: 'They will pay for what they did with an eternity in Tartarus. Hades doesn't take kindly to people who kill just for the sake of killing.' I asked: 'How do you know?' She smiled and answered: 'I know, young one, I know.'

"I wanted to know how she could be so certain but there was so much sadness and hurt in her eyes, I didn't have the courage to ask. I didn't want to end our conversation, so I told her that my name was Cassandra. She replied that hers was Xena and that we should go and find my mother."

A pensive expression was in the young blonde's face while she studied Cyrene's features. "Xena's army stayed about half a moon. They built wagons to transport the injured and what was left of our belongings. We then were escorted to Corinth to start a new life. 'Til then we spoke every day and the hatred that had filled my heart slowly subsided. Through the following years, whenever she was in Corinth, we spent some time together. She taught me the basics of staff fighting and when I insisted on also learning how to handle a sword, she gave me the best teachers available. I not only learned how to defend myself, I also learned how to control my temper. Without her I would long ago have given in to hatred and violence. Your daughter saved my soul, Cyrene and over the years she was as close as a sister to me as someone not of your blood can be."

There were long candelights of silence. Finally Cyrene, almost despite herself, asked. "How did she know about their souls suffering in Tartarus? Did she ever tell you?"

"Yes, she did, one year later. But I didn't believe her at the time because I wasn't able to read her face like I can now. It sounded like an outlandish story only children and fools would find some truth in. She told me that some time ago she had been badly injured, at the brink of paying Charon's fare. For a moment, she said, she had been able to see the Elysian Fields from afar but then she found herself in Tartarus, hanging from a Roman cross with her legs broken. There was pain radiating through her whole body, consuming her soul. At the foot of the cross Hades and Celesta appeared, they were arguing. Hades said that Xena wasn't supposed to be there yet and his sister admitted that she had taken her prematurely to spare her a painful death. She said that Xena shouldn't be here at the deepest level of Tartarus, but Hades retorted that she had earned her stay there the day she gave in to the darkness in her soul after her brother's death, the day she first killed not to defend herself and others but out of hatred and a sense of revenge.

"Xena told me then that there was no way to save her own soul, but that she didn't want me to make the same mistakes."

Cassandra's words left the grey haired woman totally stunned. Only some candelights later, she finally found her voice. "Listening to you, one could get the impression that she's some kind of selfless hero or something."

Arleia and her daughter just laughed but the older of the two soon sobered up. "No, Cyrene. I

don't think one could call her a hero but she also isn't the monster you see in her. She is capable of great violence and even cruelty. Otherwise she wouldn't have killed the remainder of Krykus' army. She's ready to do whatever it takes to get what she wants. She asks a lot of the people next to her but from herself she demands even more. If Greece is a safe place to live now and to raise children, it's only because of her. But she tends to forget this and more often than not sees only the heartless killer, not the loyal friend.

"I won't ask you to change your mind about your daughter. She certainly gave you reason to think the worst of her -- but regardless of what you or even she herself believes, regardless of how dark her path seems to be, I know that her soul holds a spark of light that one day will win out against the darkness."

"You have no idea how much I wish you were right, Arleia." Cyrene whispered.

For a few heartbeats Queen Melosa and the other Amazons stared after the galloping young Centaur and Xena. "Would you care to explain what just happened, Tyldus?"

The big Centaur was almost squirming under her inquisitive glare but before he could come up with an answer Solan's young voice piped in. "Aunt T is expecting. She told me that the Conqueror taught her what to do the first time, when she had Xenon. I think she is gone to help her again."

"But I read that normal women die when forced to birth a Centaur?" Gabrielle asked.

"They did, but four years ago my son, Phantes and my daughter-in-law disappeared at the end of her pregnancy. It didn't strike us as unusual then, because when there is real love between a woman and a Centaur they sometimes are reluctant to share the last moments of the woman's life with others. About two weeks later they were both back and with a son. I wasn't thrilled when I learned that they named him Xenon -- now I know why. When the next woman found herself pregnant my daughter-in-law taught her and the midwife some relaxation techniques and breathing exercises. We never again had to mourn the loss of a woman."

"Aunt T was with the Conqueror's army. She even went away for a while to help defeat the Romans." Solan proudly declared. "She is great, she knows a lot of neat stories and is the best scout ever and..." He fell silent for a moment, thinking very hard. "If aunt T really needs her help, then I'm glad I didn't kill the Conqueror."

Most of the adults looked at him with confusion but Gabrielle said. "I'm also glad, Solan. -- Why don't we start for the village? We won't find out anything about this army if we just keep on standing here."

"Gabrielle is right. Let's go."

When Xena entered the medium sized hut at the edge of the village, she found the midwife crying in front of the fire place. She didn't turn around when she heard the footsteps but said between sobs. "She will die. The baby won't come out. It will tear her up from inside. Did you bring the herbs to ease her passing over?"

"I'm not ready to let her go with Celesta and the Goddess of Death isn't here yet."

The old woman turned around surprisingly fast at the deep unfamiliar voice coming from the door. "How would you... You're the Conqueror. You're not welcome in this village."

"I'm well aware of this, old woman, believe me. But Terreis needs help you obviously cannot give."

The woman facing Xena seemed to size her up. She noticed the bands protecting her upper arms and the heavy knee and shin protectors, the leather dress emphasising her womanly built as well as her muscular legs, shoulders and arms. When she observed Xena's face she found impatience warring with concern. She made her decision.

"You saved her life once, when delivering Xenon. -- Terreis trusts you. -- I don't, but she should have a chance to live and see her sons grow. She is in the next room but I'll keep an eye on you."

The ghost of a smile crossed Xena's face. She opened the door to one of the adjoining rooms and was confronted with darkness. She couldn't see beyond the point of light coming from the living room reached. A string of curse words burst forward and she was about to turn around and snarl at the woman behind her when a voice came out of the darkness. "Xena? Is it you? It must be, no one else I know uses as colourful a language. -- Or am I dreaming?"

"If this is a dream, it's a Gods' cursed nightmare. It's as dark as in a pitch in here. Where's the damned window?"

"Two paces forward and then five to your right. Marianna believes that the Goddess of Death won't find me in the darkness." The melodious voice answered though Xena also could distinguish the strain it tried to mask.

The tall woman opened the window and the heavy shutters keeping the light of day out. She turned around and had to force a smile on her face when she saw her friend. Her usually curly hair was damp with sweat and plastered to her skull, her vibrant eyes were glazed over with fever and deeply sunken in. "It's good to see you, Ter. I'll do everything to keep Celesta from getting too close to you, I promise."

"I also would have preferred to meet with you somewhere in an inn, with roasted pork and a mug of good ale. It's been too long." Meanwhile Xena had reached the bed and knelt down at the side. Terreis' right hand slightly touched the collar fastened around her neck. "So, the rumours we

heard were true. You'll have a lot of explaining to do, Xena, my friend. But I'm really glad to see you."

The pregnant woman rapidly closed her eyes to ward off another contraction and the pain concentrated in her lower torso. "No, Ter, don't try to resist the pain, breathe with it and it soon will subside. Yeah, that's it. You're doing fine. Here, take a sip of water." Xena offered the water skin she always kept with her medical kit to the woman's parched lips. "I'll have to take a look at you, feel your baby."

"Go ahead, do what you have to do, Xena."

The midwife, Marianna, took a better observation position at the end of the bed. Xena pushed Terreis' shift upwards and began to follow the outline of her protruding belly with her hands and then the tips of her fingers. She then put her ear repeatedly to either side of it. About twenty candledrops and another contraction later she locked eyes with her patient and smiled.

"Congratulations, Terreis, you'll have twins. There are two strong heartbeats but I don't think that they are Centaur. I could feel at least one human foot."

"But that's impossible, Xena. Centaurs always father other Centaurs, that's how it has been since their creation."

"It may seem impossible but nevertheless it's true. And that's not the problem. The problem is that one of them is a breech, it's upside down. I'll have to try and turn it around."

"You'll have to reach inside to do this, like with a mare having a filly?" Xena nodded.

"Marianna, you will have to hold me down."

"I'll first give you something to relax your muscles, so it will be easier on you." The midwife answered.

"No! I'm afraid that's not possible. -- Ter, if I succeed, you will need control over your muscles to get them out as soon as it is turned around. We also have to take care that they don't get entangled in the umbilical cord. It could choke one of your babies to death."

"Do what you have to do, Xena. Marianna, come here, give me something to bite on. I don't want to alarm the whole village by screaming out loud. Put your hands on my shoulders and hold me down while Xena is working."

The older woman did as she was told reluctantly; her pride was bristling at the thought of this stranger, this murderer simply taking over. But her compassionate heart told her that if the Conqueror was right, a closer examination on her part could have spared Terreis a lot of suffering.

"I can't take away the pain, Ter, but I'll put the pinch on your thighs. You won't be able to move them any longer because you won't feel them. It's important that you don't move around too

much. Everything will be all right soon."

Xena stood and went to the central room to wash her hands with the hot water simmering over the fireplace, wincing slightly when the steaming liquid met her bandaged right hand. She took an earthen jar out of her healing kit and coated her left hand and lower arm liberally with some sort of grease or jelly, after having removed her bracers. She closed her eyes for a moment as if in prayer and began her arduous task. For the next candle-drops all one could hear were three sets of breathing, Xena's low and steady, Marianna's faster but still normal, Terreis' matching her frantic heartbeat and the grinding of her teeth against the wooden bit.

The tall warrior withdrew her arm, loosened the pressure points and with another pinch to Terreis' neck put her to sleep. Then she motioned for the midwife to follow her. She once again washed her hands and stood in front of the fireplace staring into the flames. For two long heartbeats her face was open, reflecting anguish and fear. Expressions not lost on the midwife who couldn't help but rejoice in the obvious helplessness of whom she saw as her adversary.

"So the great Conqueror doesn't know what to do. You're as helpless as I am. How does it feel? Having to tell her that she will die, having to tell her that her son will grow to be a man without her guidance and without his brother?"

Xena whirled around, her left hand automatically reached for a weapon no longer on her back. At the same time her still bandaged and slightly damp right hand curled itself around the woman's throat. She easily lifted her from the ground and saw the uneasy triumph in the woman's face change to utter fear. She held her, for one heartbeat, two heartbeats, three heartbeats, and then she slowly put her back on her feet; once again facing the flames. Marianna's first impulse was to run and alert the militia, but she just stood there as if mesmerised by the silent figure in front of her.

Heartbeats became candle-drops, finally Xena turned around and asked her if some rare herbs were available in the village or the surrounding area. For two of them the midwife knew there were none and two others she didn't even know by name. The tall woman looked at her for a long time and made her squirm under her cold blue eyes.

"If Terreis accepts, I'll need your help, midwife." She once again turned, re-entered the bedroom and began to gently wake the pregnant woman.

"What happened?"

"I put you to sleep because I didn't know how to tell you, Ter."

"Tell me, what? You didn't manage to turn my baby around, I know. I could feel your hand inside. You checked them out but you didn't turn them. Why?"

"They can't go out one after the other, Terry. They are connected, somehow, maybe intertwined. I don't know for sure but we will have to take both of them at the same time and there...."

Terreis put two fingers on Xena's lips. "I understand. You only call me Terry when it is really bad news. Regardless how much I relax, there's no way I can open up enough to let both of them pass at the same time. Right?" Xena nodded and the other woman took a deep breath. "Then there is only one way left. Open my belly and take the babies out. This way at least they will survive. My life isn't important."

"I disagree, Terry. There is a possibility to slow down your heartbeat. The internal bleeding wouldn't be as bad and you would also have a chance to survive. The easiest way to reach this state would be with the help of herbs but I don't have them in my kit and Marianna tells me that they can't be found around here. There's another way. It's dangerous, but it can be done, Terry."

"I'm certain, I won't like what you're going to say but I'm willing to listen."

"I didn't come here alone, Terreis. I'm part of Queen Melosa's entourage. -- No, please wait, let me speak my mind. After Persia, on more than one occasion, I showed you that the mind could control the matter, the body. Your mind can tell your heart to slow down but you will need a guide to do so and also to come back. I'm not good enough to guide you myself, especially with my attention focused on more physical matters like cutting and sewing. But there's one person in the Queen's party who is."

"You know how I feel about Melosa knowing that I'm still alive. I usually leave the village while she is here."

"I know but the Queen doesn't have to know, Melosa doesn't have to know. What I intend to do will give you a chance to survive. There's no guarantee. Phantes told me that he would be lost without you and Xenon also needs his mother. -- Akyra can keep her mouth shut if you and I ask her to. Please, Terry. Please think about it, the sooner we begin the better." The raven-haired woman turned around and regained her former place in front of the mantle.

Marianna didn't know what to say. What they were talking about was pure craziness. It was foolish and dangerous and arrogant and... She simply was speechless because at the same time it was the only possibility left.

About three candledrops later, Terreis called Xena's name. She returned to the bedroom. "Do it. Ask her. I don't understand what makes you think that she could be my guide but ask her."

"Thank you, Terry."

"Would any of you care to tell me what by Hades' helmet is going on here! Why is Lyceus hanging upside down and why are you all standing there, laughing like a bunch of damned hyenas?" Eponin barked.

The five girls immediately fell silent and suddenly found great interest in something on the ground. One of the girls named Coryma, part of her staff class, finally answered. "We were practising tree climbing when Thania asked if she and the boy could join us, but he was clumsy and fell."

"Get him down, now!" Thania cut the rope and three others helped him on his feet. "And now, I want the truth. I saw him playing catch with some girls of his age and he is all but clumsy. Coryma, you have one last chance to tell me the truth."

"We didn't practice. When Thania told us that she didn't have time to play with us because Xena wanted her to play with the boy; we thought this would be a great chance to have some fun. We played some hide and seek and he wasn't as bad as we expected. So we made it more interesting and took to the trees. We then wanted to make it even more of a challenge and went to the practice area for the scouts and hunters. That's how he ended upside down." The girl answered with a quivering voice.

"I suppose you all knew that there were traps and you all knew what to look out for, right?" She got hesitant and embarrassed nods as an answer. "And none of you thought of at least warning him." Even smaller nods. "Do you think that you acted like an honourable Amazon warrior should? Lyceus may be a boy but he also is a friend. Would you do this to your friends?" Their heads now were hanging even lower.

"It's one candlemark to sunset. I'll accompany Lyceus to his father's tent and I want you all to return to the village. I want you all to go to your mistresses or mothers and I want you to tell them that you acted without honour and that you have to be punished accordingly. Tomorrow morning, you all will go to Lyceus and the other men and you will tell him that you are sorry and that they shouldn't judge all Amazons by what you have done."

"But then everyone will know." One of the girls said.

"Well, that's what you will have to live with for acting as you did, isn't it? Go now, all of you."

When the weapons master entered the Queen's hut, some two candlemarks later, she found Thania kneeling in the far corner of the central room, naked, her back turned towards the door and a cane lying on a table next to her.

"Come here and put your clothes back on." The girl slowly got to her feet, picked the cane up and presented it to the dark haired warrior with trembling hands.

"I won't beat you, Thania. Corporal punishments are for adults only. It's a sign that they accept their guilt and are willing to pay for the damage done to the nation or individual Amazons. With first time apprentices, punishments serve to teach them, to help them not to make the same mistake again and again. Beatings don't serve this purpose, they don't teach anything."

"But by acting as I did, I dishonoured my mistress, I dishonoured the Queen. Only pain can help wash away something like this." Thania answered with tears in her eyes. Meanwhile the girl was once again on her knees in front of Eponin who sat in one of the chairs next to the desk.

Discarding the cane still offered to her, Eponin knelt next to the slim child, she took her chin in one hand and forced her to look into her eyes. "Thania, look at me and listen well. Honour is something one has here," she touched the girl's heart with the other hand, "and here." She touched the girl's head. "It's deep inside of you and nothing you do can taint the Queen's honour. It's her alone who can do damage to it or preserve it. What you all did to Lyceus wounded your own honour, not hers. Come on, stand up and then we'll sit down and you'll tell me what you really had to do with this stupid game."

Thania's whole body was trembling and having no great experience with kids Eponin at first was at a loss what to do. Finally she encircled the girl's shoulders and drew her nearer to her until she had her head against the warrior's chest. With the other hand she grabbed a soft blanket from the other chair and reluctant to let go of her charge, wrapped it around both of them. Small arms encircled her waist and the girl began to cry, silently at first but then sobbing loudly.

"It's all right, baby girl, everything will be all right. There was no harm done and Lyceus isn't angry with you. He told me that the children in Britannia also tried to make fun of him at first, but that they became very good friends. He also said that he doesn't need an apology but lessons in finding and avoiding traps."

"But I want to apologise, Eponin. I knew from the beginning when we changed the playing ground to the hunter's exercise area what they were up to but I didn't have the courage to say anything. I was a coward." The girl looked up to her with tears still running down her face.

"It's difficult to act against a group of one's peers, my girl, but I know that next time, you will think before you go along with any of them, even with your elders. Won't you?"

"Yes, Eponin, I'll try my best. What will be my punishment? -- I still think caning or whipping would be best."

"That's out of question, Thania. No. -- I spoke with the head cook, for the next five days you will spend three candlemarks daily helping in the kitchen. You will help to wash the plates and clean the frying pans and pots, scrub the floor in the dining hall, whatever the cook tells you to do, whether you like it or not. -- And now go and put some clothes on, I brought something to eat."

"I'm not really hungry. May I go to my room? I have a lot to think about."

"Of course you can, but don't be too hard on yourself. You're trying to find your way, you're still learning and making mistakes is part of learning; it's part of growing up. Everyone makes mistakes once in awhile, I know I do and even the Queen does." The Amazon warrior bent down and kissed the girl first on the forehead and then on both eyes. "Sleep well, baby girl."

Not wanting to eat alone, Eponin put the bread and cheese away to serve as their breakfast and sat down to do some paperwork. Some candlemarks later she woke with a start from soft paws insistently scratching her knee. The torches anchored in between the windows at the wall were fuming slightly having evidently just burned out and she still was sitting at the desk. While she was about to gather her wits, she heard a sound between keening and wailing coming from Thania's room.

Eponin patted the young lynx on the head and whispered. "Well done, little friend." She cautiously went over and peeked around the door. The young Amazon was crying and thrashing around on the mattress, obviously deep in the grip of a nightmare. Eponin lit the candle next to the bed and sat down. She didn't have the faintest idea what to do.

When Thania felt the mattress move under the weight of the weapons master, her body got absolutely still and rigid. She whispered. "Please, Mistress, don't do it, I promise, I'll never do it again. Please don't use the harness. Please, I'll never again eat without your permission. Please...."

Another wave of anger rushed through Eponin's veins. Her heart was breaking with every word the girl uttered, so she took her in her arms and began to awkwardly hum an old lullaby she remembered from her own childhood. She gently rocked her to and 'fro, stroking her hair. It seemed to work.

Thania slowly settled in a more normal breathing rhythm. The woman carefully turned around and made herself comfortable against the headrest, still cradling the smaller body in her arms.

For the first time in years, Eponin felt completely at peace, at least for a few precious moments, before her thoughts began to run rampant. Since the truth about Najara and the others had become public knowledge she never was far from wanting to kill the traitorous woman. But she also held herself responsible for the suffering of the innocent girl sleeping in her arms and now, in the middle of the night, she gave voice to her thoughts.

Eponin continued to stroke her hair, the girl's head resting comfortably between her breasts. "It's all my fault, baby girl. I failed you. I always tried to make sure that you were happy and that you were loved, but I failed you. I watched you grow from a helpless baby to an active toddler and a beautiful and smart kid but I didn't do what I should have done, I didn't keep you safe. I just hope that one day you will be able to forgive what your mother did to you."

"Why didn't you tell me, Eponin?" The warrior's body was paralysed with surprise but when the girl continued it once again drove a dagger in her heart. "I must have done something wrong to make you reject me. Tell me what it is and I promise I'll try to get better. I just found you; I don't want to lose you again."

"Oh, baby girl, you didn't do anything wrong. It's me, I'm not worth having someone as perfect as you as a daughter." The girl turned her head to look the older woman questioningly in the eyes. "I have to tell you the truth, you deserve to know the truth. The woman you knew as your

second mother was my older sister." She fell silent but Thania didn't make any move to hurry her.

"She and our mother were weavers. I grew up in an Amazon village far south from Corinth. My mother and her mother and grandmother before her were famous for the quality of their fabrics but I never had patience enough to walk in their footsteps. I wanted to see the world; I wanted to go to Athens and Delphi and Ephesus and Rome and Britannia. So, I decided to become a warrior. I trained very hard during my first apprenticeship and got my mistress and the weapons' master of our village to recommend me for further training to the local regent. My folks weren't happy with my decision but finally I was able to convince them. The day I received the beads of a warrior was one of the happiest days in my life."

The Amazon once again fell silent and Thania said. "You don't have to tell me if it hurts too much. You can tell me later or not at all."

"No, Thanny, you have to know the truth, all of it. -- I did guard duty and tagged along with the hunters and the scouts. But a few moons after my initiation, I got the first mission leading me outside the confines of the village and its hunting grounds. A party of weavers and leather makers and other craftswomen went to a harvest market in a village about three days voyage west. Three other warriors and I were to escort them. It had been very peaceful and the contact with our neighbours was pretty good, so the Regent decided that more than four guards would equal a provocation.

"We made good time the first two days and decided to have an early night. We were looking forward to the market and the fair, especially the warriors because we were sure to win the archery and running competitions. I took the first watch and was also scheduled for the last one. In the middle of the night I got up because I couldn't sleep. I told my superior that I would take a walk and that I would be back for the last watch. She just nodded and turned around to continue to sleep. I got lost in the unfamiliar forest and when I finally found my way back, dawn already was breaking.

"I found my sister and my fellow Amazons surrounded by a group of men, outnumbered and bound. They were slavers and prepared to transport them the Gods only know where. I had to do something but instead of hurrying back to the village and getting help, I decided that I had to save them all on my own. I just walked into their midst and taunted them. It was a stupid plan but somehow it worked. They were able to escape but I was captured."

Eponin stopped talking and soon she felt a small hand caressing her cheek. Thania who some time ago had recognised the intonation Xena used to speak about something she was ashamed of or about something that still was hurting her said. "Please, don't hurt yourself. I can imagine what happened next."

The weapons master's left hand captured her right by the wrist, she gently turned it around and kissed its palm. "What is causing me pain is not what these men did to me while I was their prisoner, it's what I did after my sisters had freed me, Thania.

"The four or five days I was in their hands I didn't receive any physical injuries. I was bound, unable to defend myself, unable to hurt myself, unable to end my life. My Amazon sisters killed thirteen of them but another seven escaped. I didn't return to the village. All I wanted to do was to end their lives. And that's what I did. But I didn't stop when I had found them. I kept on killing, every man who had the courage to look into my eyes, every man coming near enough to touch me. I didn't care if they were slavers or soldiers or simple village folks. When one of them ended his life at the end of my sword I felt alive and only then the images of the men grabbing my breasts and thrusting their cocks inside of me disappeared. I was about to lose my soul and I didn't even care.

"About three moons later, I stumbled exhausted into a temple. I just wanted a place to sleep and I didn't know whose temple it was. To me it was just a building, a means to take shelter in a storm. I collapsed in front of the offerings to the left of the altar and when I regained my spirits I was laying on a comfortable cot, surrounded by warmth and the scent and sounds of a fireplace. I tried to get up but I couldn't feel my legs, from the waist downwards everything was numb. I heard footsteps and instinctively reached for my sword but it had disappeared along with my daggers, bow and arrows.

"There was a curtain facing the bed, it opened and a tall woman with big blue eyes glided through. Thinking of it, she bore a great resemblance to Xena. She told me that her name was Lea and that she was the high priestess of Hestia. I began to laugh but she didn't see anything humorous in finding an Amazon in front of the statue of the Goddess of Virginity and to make it worse, a pregnant Amazon. That's when I stopped laughing.

"I spent the winter with the Hestian virgins. They mostly left me to my own devices; Lea was the only one who insisted on talking to me. Bit by bit, I told her what had happened and she talked to me of love and forgiveness and about the dangers and temptations of darkness. She also saw to it that I had lots of things to read. I'm not really fond of reading, but with my legs being immobilised there was nothing else to do. Most of the scrolls she gave to me were about Amazon law and Amazon history, about victories and sacrifices. She never told me where she got them. Slowly I began to feel the new life growing inside of me.

"The first days after she told me all I wanted to do was to get rid of this thing," Eponin internally flinched at her own words, "but the stories I read changed my mind. I learned that every life is a gift regardless how it came to be and I began to talk to you about the things we would do when we were back in the Amazon village. The day I first felt you kicking me, feeling returned to my legs. It took another half moon before I was strong enough to begin my journey back to my sisters. For a while I even thought to become a weaver to give you the peaceful life I felt you deserved.

"But there was no village left, only the long burned out ruins of our huts and remnants of hastily erected funeral pyres. There were faint traces of footsteps in the ground of early spring. I followed them to a cave we had intended to use for emergencies. Only four of my fellow Amazons were left, my sister was one of them, the others had been killed or taken to slavery about one and a half moon earlier by a warlord and his army. When my sister told me how my mother had died, trying to defend herself with one of her weaving spindles, I was blinded by

anger and hatred and darkness, a darkness I thought I had left behind in the temple of Hestia. All I wanted to do is kill them. Then you began to kick out, as if you were able to feel my emotions.

"We decided to join one of the other Amazon villages but we waited for about four moons after your birth to set out on our journey. We were on foot and though we tried to stay clear from the main roads, I still had a lot of fighting to do and every time I had to kill one of our opponents I was tempted by the darkness lingering just behind the surface of my soul. I felt that I couldn't risk that you might suffer from my violent heart or fall prey to the darkness, so, when we came here I asked my sister to take care of you and not to let anyone know who your birth mother was. -- It's sad to know that by trying to protect you from the darkness, I made you the victim of a dark soul."

Silence settled over them like a blanket, finally Eponin closed her eyes and continued. "I can understand if you don't want to have anything to do with me any longer, Thania, now that you know the truth."

"Eponin, is it okay to call you 'mom'?"

"You really want to?" The older woman asked with wonder in her voice.

"Yes. I always dreamed of having a mother as powerful and honourable and sincere as you are. Before Xena came here, I wouldn't have understood why you believed you had to keep your distance from me, but she taught me a lot about the temptations of darkness when telling stories about her past. I know that it hurts her to recall her actions; I can hear it in her voice as I just heard it in yours. She told me that the memories were helping her not to go back to those dark times. I loved my second mother and now I once again have someone to give this love to, now I have you, mum."

Eponin closed her arms even tighter around the girl's body, kissed her hair and whispered. "Thank you, my daughter."

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~ Conqueror and Amazon: Echoes of Darkness

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Part II

by romansilence

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Chapter Four: A Call to Arms

They both slept 'til way after sunrise and were only awakened by someone banging on the front door. The weapons master reluctantly rose and opened the door; facing half of the council of elders and the mothers of three of the girls she had reprimanded the day before, all talking loudly at the same time. She looked at them with still sleepy eyes for at least five candlemarks and was unable to make herself understood. She finally put her index finger and thumb to her mouth and produced an ear-piercing whistle that effectively silenced them all.

"Good morning, I suppose this ruckus is about what happened yesterday afternoon between some of the first time apprentices and Xena's nephew, Lyceus? -- No, I'm not willing to listen to you now. You have complaints, bring them before the council. As Queen Melosa's chosen representative I hereby summon a council meeting, exactly one candlemark from now." She rapidly turned around and threw the door shut.

"You know what, mum, you would have made a horrible weaver. You don't have the patience."

"Well, you may be right and I'm really glad that I don't have to do this council stuff for the rest of my life. I want you to be at my side during the council session, after..."

"After I go and apologise to Lyceus, yes. Do you know what they are all worked up about?"

"I have a pretty good guess. The mothers of your friends are upset because I dared to order their oh so innocent little girls around by making them apologise. And the elders are upset because they think that it would have been their task to decide upon your punishment and not mine. They also think that the whole incident should have been brought to their attention yesterday."

"How do you know?"

"That's what you get from listening to their badgering for years and also from spending a whole winter reading about Amazon law and customs, Thanny. Now, let's get cleaned up and don't forget to grab something you can eat on your way to the men's encampment. I'll start the session by letting them vent their anger and irritations first. It'll clear the air and will give you more time."

About one and a half candlemarks later, the reservoir of Eponin's patience and calm was running dangerously low. The back door suddenly burst open and Thania stumbled in, completely out of breath. Immediately, irritated and annoyed voices mouthed their protest and Eponin barked to

them to shut up or else have their staves shoved up to their rear end. It worked. The girl quickly calmed down and began to tell her story.

When she arrived at the men's encampment, only one of the other girls had made an appearance. She still was in Toris' and Lyceus' tent due to the fact that she simply had collapsed soon after her arrival. Xena's brother found Coryma's body covered with lash marks and heavy with fever.

"Anara, get your healing kit and follow as fast as you can. Guards, Coryma's mother is with the Queen, I want her mistress arrested immediately and you," she angrily looked at the assembly, "this meeting is adjourned. Thanny, wait for me in the infirmary."

It didn't take Eponin more than one candlemark to find out what had happened to the girl, take her back to the healer's hut to be tended to, fight down the urge to kill her mistress and call another council meeting. Once again they were about to complain, but now she no longer was willing to listen to them.

"Shut up, all of you! I already lost enough time listening to your senseless bickering. This is what will happen now: I'll give you the facts about yesterday afternoon, I'll answer your questions, sensible questions and then we all will hold trial over Coryma's so called mistress. I don't have Queen Melosa's patience or her good heart. Nevertheless she gave me command, so feel free to file charges against me as soon as she returns."

It only took a few candledrops to recount yesterday's happenings and then the questions began. The mothers were surprisingly easy to reason with and they even more surprisingly wanted to go with their daughters to apologise to Toris and his son. As soon as they had left the council's hall, it was just Eponin and the elders and they weren't half as easy to satisfy. They reluctantly agreed that she was right to deal with the other girls as she did but, just as she had suspected, they contested her right to decide upon Thania.

"We all accept your authority as the Queen's representative, weapons' master, but the law says that whenever neither the mother nor the mistress of an apprentice is available, it's the council's duty to care for the girl and to mete out punishments."

"I'm well aware of the law, honourable elders. There's only one thing you are not taking into account. Thania's birth mother is here and she already has decided upon her punishment. I sentenced her to kitchen duty for the next five days." Eponin paused to let her words sink in. "Thania is my daughter! - And now, we have a more serious matter to discuss, Coryma's mistress, whom I will not honour by speaking her name."

"Every mistress has the right to discipline her apprentice however she deems fit." One of the council members shouted.

"Where by Athena's shield were you when we had to deal with physical and sexual abuse of innocent children?" Another voice retorted.

"This is something completely different and you all know it." While the elders continued to

pointlessly argue, Eponin ordered two of the guards to go and get the prisoner. She once again whistled to get their attention.

"Amazon law clearly states that physical punishment is only to be used for adult members of the tribe. It also declares that it can only be applied with the consent of the delinquent."

Another round of discussion and murmuring ensued but the council fell silent when the guards entered the big hut with the other woman in tow.

"Mistress of Coryma, we fought side by side more than once. I know you as a fierce fighter but I also know you as a good friend and a dedicated teacher. Are you ready to answer my questions?"

To the utter surprise of most of the assembly the woman fell to her knees and answered. "Eponin, representative of Queen Melosa, I know I acted against Amazon honour and dignity. I will answer your questions and I will accept every punishment for my wrong-doings."

"What happened yesterday evening?"

"Coryma was late. I had told her to come back two candlemarks before sunset because she wasn't finished with her lesson on historical strategies yet. When she entered, she immediately knelt in front of me and told me what had occurred. She told me that she had dishonoured the Amazon Nation, that she deliberately endangered a younger child and that she had lied to the weapons' master. She told me that she had to be punished and punished hard. I didn't believe her, I couldn't believe that the child I was so proud of had done the things she claimed doing. Then she recounted every detail of this afternoon's events...."

"Please continue!"

"I lost my temper, I lost control. I took the ruler I had intended to use to point out certain angles of attack for our lesson and began to beat on her. I don't know how long, how many..."

"Do you have a habit of beating your apprentice?"

"I had never before raised my hand against her. I can't even recall what happened. I hadn't been drinking but when I woke up I was still in the central room with a headache worth at least half a keg of beer. I stumbled to Coryma's room but all I found was a note telling me that she was gone to apologise to the boy. I didn't know that I had hurt her."

The woman's eyes dropped to the ground, her posture spoke of guilt and remorse but Eponin had one last question. "Do you think that you can be trusted to never again do something like that, Etare?"

"No, I'd like to assure you that it will never happen again but I can't. I don't know what made me do it in the first place, so I also don't know how to hinder it the next time. After my punishment I'd like to retreat to the sweating hut to explore my conscience."

Eponin was about to answer when the front doors opened to one of the scouts struggling with two other guards. "Artemis' bow, isn't it possible to get through a council session without being interrupted?! -- What do you want?!!"

"There's a large trek of wagons and riders headed our way. They will be at the edge of the forest around sunset, weapons' master."

When Akyra entered the hut in the Centaur's village, Gabrielle was with her. She ran towards her tall lover and was rapidly engulfed in strong arms. "I was so afraid for you, Xena. These people, they hate you, they want to kill you. I'm so glad you're okay."

"Gab, Gabby, my love, calm down. It's all right. They won't kill me. I wouldn't have come here if I thought they would. Remember, I promised. Everything will be all right, love, but you also have to understand that they have every reason to hate me. I killed their brothers, their sons, their mothers and their fathers when I fought them ten years ago. I almost wiped them from the face of the earth. And they have a right to punish me for coming here without being invited. -- Please, don't look at me with those innocent, unbelieving eyes of yours. I'll answer your questions soon but now there's something more important to do."

"I just had to see you; had to make sure that you were all right. I was so worried. When this woman came to get Akyra, I simply ran after her. I don't want to intrude."

"No, stay my love! I'm glad you're here; I always feel much better when you're with me. And besides, we'll need all the help we can get." The tall woman slid an arm around Gabrielle's waist before turning towards the silver haired Amazon. "Akyra, I don't know how...."

"You're gonna ask me to do once again what I don't do any longer, right?" The impatient older woman asked.

"Yes, venerable one." Xena answered without hesitation. "There's a young woman in there, heavy with twins. One of them is a breech. I'll have to cut them out of their mother's womb, that's the only way. To give all three of them a fighting chance, you'll have to help the mother to control her heartbeat and the flow of her blood. Please, you already made an exception for Thania. Without your help we both would be dead by now. Please, do it again."

"Xena, it was difficult enough then, but the woman you're talking about probably doesn't know even the basics. I can help her and guide her but the better part she will have to do on her own. Centaurs are not known to choose their women because of their spiritual strength."

"Phantes is different and the woman we're talking about is very special. She's my friend. She's an Amazon. She's of royal blood. -- It's Terreis." Xena added after a short moment of deliberation.

"Terreis??? You're kidding! -- No, you're serious. -- I suppose Queen Melosa is not to know about her." Xena nodded. "I'll do it, if she hasn't forgotten all about her roots, we'll stand a chance -- but I hope you know that this will cost you, Xena."

"Yes, I know." The tall warrior answered with a sad smile. "You'll get your wish, that's a promise."

Both, Gabrielle and Marianna were burning to know what the others were talking about but they both had enough sense to know that now wasn't the moment to indulge their curiosity.

Candlemarks later, the moon already had made its descent, two sets of lungs greeted the night with piercing cries. The umbilical cords had been wrapped around the forearms of the babies thus maintaining them in some sort of unbreakable warrior handshake. The midwife tended to the new-borns while Gabrielle assisted Xena in suturing the mother. There wasn't too much bleeding and the raven haired beauty was certain that Terreis would be all right -- provided that Akyra was able to guide her back.

Xena sat down under the window, cradling Gabrielle in her arms, her eyes fixed on the bed. She hated being helpless and she hated having to wait but Akyra had made it abundantly clear that trying to interfere would only endanger them both. She tried to keep her mind from all the things that could have gone wrong this night and also tried not to speculate on what would happen when the time came to honour her promise to the old Amazon. When Cyane had tempted her with it, she hadn't been ready -- and she more than doubted that she ever would be, after all she was a warrior, not a ...

She felt Gabrielle's heartbeat matching her own while stroking the younger woman's hair. Her eyes, however, were directed towards the bed. When the night was at its darkest, Terreis' eyes fluttered open and trying to sit up she took a deep breath. Xena checked on her patient, thanked Akyra and left the hut holding the still sleeping blonde securely in her arms. She immediately was escorted to Kaleipus' hut.

When the first rays of sunlight reached the bed, Terreis once again opened her eyes. It took her some time to recall what had happened. She tried to prop herself on her elbows but was held down by the familiar hand of her husband kneeling next to the bed. He kissed her and told her that they now had two beautiful daughters, their hair the colour of his fur and eyes of a dark brown, just like her own. He scooped her up in his arms and carried her into the living room where they were lying on the couch in a makeshift crib. And they were more than beautiful, they were perfect, two legs and ten toes; only their arms still showed the marks of the umbilical cord deeply embedded in their skin.

"How?"

"I don't know, my love, but it's not important. They're perfect and they're ours. Perhaps it's a gift of the Gods. I don't care. But now I'll get you back to bed. Marianna said that you will need a lot of rest. -- She also said that even if she gets to see one hundred summers she never again would be able to participate in something as crazy, as impossible and as awesome as last night. You know, we now will have to think about two female names, Tyldus or Kaleipus certainly won't do for them."

Terreis now found out that laughing at the moment wasn't that good an idea. "I'm sure we will come up with something suitable. -- Where's Xena? I thought she would still be here and I'm surprised that Marianna didn't insist to stay by my side."

The young Centaur carefully put his wife back on the mattress and tucked her in. He didn't look her in the eyes when he said. "Marianna is with the council. She insisted on talking to them before they decide upon Xena's punishment for trespassing. She was very impressed with her."

"Is Xena allowed to speak to the council herself?"

"No, she's a slave to the Amazon Nation, Queen Melosa will speak on her behalf. Meanwhile they all know what Xena has done for us, they won't decide on anything too harsh, I'm sure."

"Harsh. That's a question of definition. The Amazons obviously still think that justice can be obtained by whipping and flogging. Did you see Xena's back? Most of it was covered up by her leather dress but I clearly saw recent marks of a whip. Do you know what happened?"

"No, my love. All I know is that she is wearing a slave's collar but is treated as any other warrior by the Queen as well as the other Amazons. Try to get some sleep. I'll go to the communal hut and listen in on the meeting. I'll tell you what they came up with." He kissed her on the forehead and left the room.

It was close to midday, Xena was standing with her back to the door, staring out of the window. At the inner courtyard of the Centaur village's stronghold Centaur and Human children were playing ball. All the communal buildings, the council hall, the grain storage, the barn, the well, the quarters of Kaleipus and Tyldus as well as a central fire place, kitchen area, enough space to house the entire population in case of an emergency, a fully equipped infirmary, and an armoury; all these essential buildings were situated in a circle in the middle of the settlement. Xena knew from experience that it could easily be cordoned off from the rest of the village to create a last line of defence. Short of burning it to the ground, there was no way to get in. But that's not what Xena's mind was dwelling on at the moment. Her heart was back at a dark night ten summers ago.

She clearly remembered walking out of the cave-like outcropping she had spent the last three quarters of a moon in; citing a conference with the God of War himself to explain her absence to her men. It had been a night of a full moon. Her meeting with the leader of the Centaurs was to take place at a small clearing in the middle of the forest. She was alone and so was Kaleipus but

he came to her with his sword drawn. She remembered his words as if it had been yesterday.

"Stop it right now! You won't get the Ixion stone. All of us are willing to die to keep you from that power! And Borias, the man who betrayed Xena to become the greatest friend of the Centaurs, told us everything! He may have died at your command but he will live forever in our legends."

Thinking about Borias and the last time she had seen him, lying on the ground with unseeing eyes, didn't hurt as much now as it had all those summers ago but she still didn't know who had acted against her orders and killed him. She had wanted him captured alive.

Xena tried to picture in her mind's eye what the Centaur dwarfing her by almost two feet had seen this night. Her dark hair had been cascading down her back and she had been clad in a long black cloak held in place by equally dark clasps. She knew her face must have been pale; she knew she had been tired.

He had laughed when she had told him that she was prepared to withdraw her army. "The Destroyer of Nations isn't known to bargain!"

He had been right, the Destroyer of Nations never would have but Xena had had no other choice. She had thrown back the cloak and unveiled the child. She still wondered how she had been able to make her voice sound steady and calm.

"Take this child. He is my son and the son of Borias. If he stays with me, he'll become a target for all those who hate me and he'll learn things a child should never know. He'll become like me."

She also remembered his answer. "The son of Borias will be raised as my own."

She had been relieved while at the same time a whole quiver of arrows seemed to pierce her heart. Somehow she had found the way back to the encampment of her army but she didn't exactly recall how....

The voices of children happily playing and a hand gently touching the small of her back brought her back to the present. Gabrielle's arm sneaked around her waist and she felt the smaller body snuggle close at her side. They now both were watching the players.

"Tell me about your son, Xena."

"How did you know?"

"Yesterday, seeing the two of you side by side. It's more than evident. He has your eyes, your face, your smile. He even moves like you. Look. The way he brushes back the hairs obscuring his vision. That's all you. Tell me about Solan, how did he get his name?"

"It was Kaleipus' choice. The day before Solan was born, Borias, his father, sneaked into my tent. He wanted me to come with him and make peace with the Centaurs. He wanted me to give up my quest for domination and begin a new life. Settle down with him, become a family. I sent him away and I laughed. Raising a child, me! I wasn't ready to give up my dreams."

"Xena, please, it's me you're talking to. Try and be honest with yourself. That's not the only reason you gave up your son. Your eyes tell me what you feel for him. Tell me the truth, my love."

The tall woman turned sideways and looked the younger blonde in the eyes. "You're right, Gabrielle. I thought it would be easy, getting rid of the child and continuing with my life as if nothing ever happened. I was wrong."

"A lot of people think that giving birth ends when a baby takes its first free breath but that's not true. My son has grown inside of me every day, stronger and stronger. I can try to deny it but I can never ignore it."

Simply winning a battle from this day on wasn't enough for me. I was more interested in how to gain my victory. It suddenly became important to also keep the non-combatants safe. Solan is the reason why I interfered in the war between the Amazons and the Centaurs, why I forced them to make their peace with each other. I never wanted him to follow the way of the warrior, to know the fears and hurt coming with war but it seems this time the fates are not...."

Loud knocking stopped her from saying anything further.

Shrill whistling was the only way to stop what to Eponin sounded like a whole flock of geese in an uproar. "What by Hades' boots are you? Squabbling old women or Amazons? -- Keep quiet while I question the scout." The weapons master now turned her attention to the young woman in front of her. "Solari's a good teacher, so don't tell me that's all you have to say!"

"Of course not, weapons master. The exact numbers will be here in about two to three candlemarks but we counted thirty to forty soldiers, about three and a half score of children and a score of civilians. We're not yet sure but one of the men looks like the tall Commander Xena sent away to Corinth. It's not my place to decide but I don't think that they're here to cause any kind of problem for us or the village."

"All right, this is what we'll do: I want a squad of Royal guards ready to ride out in a candlemark. Three representatives of the elders should also be there. I also want one of the craftswomen. We'll meet them halfway. The session is ad..."

Once again Eponin's words were cut short. Another member of the Royal Guards hurriedly

entered the council's hall, carrying a small piece of parchment. "Queen Melosa sent a message from the Centaur village."

"Read it to the council." Eponin answered.

"Eponin, members of the council. An army largely outnumbering them threatens our allies, the Centaurs. I want you to send all the warriors we can afford without compromising the safety of our village to the Centaurs' where we will set up a line of defence.

"This is the first time we really have to prove that we honour the peace treaty with our neighbours. So, I'm looking forward to showing to them that the Amazons are worthy allies. The enemy army is still about a quarter moon away. I expect our forces in three to four days. I want you all at peak efficiency when you arrive. Melosa, Queen of the Greek Amazons, Priestess of Artemis."

The woman then looked at the weapons' master. "There's an addendum, meant for your eyes only, Eponin."

The dark haired Amazon took the small slip of paper, as always amazed about the amount of text the Queen was able to put on something this tiny. It said. "The only other Amazon village near enough to send troops is the one to the north just outside of Greek territory. They still send their tributes but we haven't seen head or tail of them for more than three summers now. So, I don't expect them to come to help the Centaurs. I still remember the heated discussions I had with their regent regarding the peace treaty but summon them anyway. -- Eponin, I'm sorry to cut short the time with your daughter but I'm also looking forward to once again have you at my side in what probably will be a difficult fight. With all our forces combined they're still outnumbering us about two to one."

Before any more babbling and squabbling could break out, Eponin's voice rang out over their heads. "No, there won't be any more discussions. I have neither patience nor time for such bullshit. The orders of the Queen were very clear. So, you can rant all you like, but I have more important things to do. -- I'll read the Queen's call for arms to the village at the main square. The horn will be sounded as soon as this meeting is adjourned and then I'll ride out to meet the wagon train or whatever it may be. Etare, your punishment will be suspended for the time being. I want you to get all our warriors ready to move out at first light. I'll be heading the army. Anara, I know you well enough to realise that you won't stay behind. You always were in the middle of things. So, choose your representative here wisely. Yolica will take over for me. She will be in charge of the village, together with Solari's second in command."

Surprisingly there were no further discussions and soon Eponin's stallion was saddled to get her to meet the wagon train. At the forest's edge another scout confirmed the first report.

About two candlemark's ride out of the forest they were met by an advance group of the wagon train consisting of Palemon, Theodorus and six other riders. They soon agreed that they would postpone any serious conversation until all of them were settled at the camp with Xena's soldiers and brother. The Amazons were just as curious to know what brought Palemon back so quickly

and with all those children as he was burning to have some news about his General.

The closer they came to the village the more the tall Commander feared that Xena would already have been found guilty and executed for her crimes. The messenger who had told them about the battle against Darphus' army had left the Amazon village shortly before the trial began.

After she had been escorted to the council's hut by four heavily armed Centaurs, no one was more surprised than Xena when she heard the council's verdict. Though she was found guilty of illegal trespassing, her only 'punishment' was a period of probation of three moons to prove to the Centaurs and Humans in the village that she no longer was a bloodthirsty warlord. She even was allowed to wear her weapons and armour and would be treated like any other of the Amazons. Tyldus, the council's speaker, however, also emphasised that for his part he still didn't trust her and that their leniency was due to the fact that her teachings had saved their women's lives.

A scouting party, including Solari and Silea, had been sent that morning to gather more information about the slowly approaching army. Travelling at top speed it would take the scouts a whole day to reach them, another half day to find out as many details as they could and a whole day to get back to the village. Meanwhile, all the others could do was to wait; and to prepare for the worst.

The council session about Xena's future standing with the Centaurs had occupied the better part of the village inhabitants, so the real preparations only now were about to begin.

The hunting parties that had left with the scouts were just coming back. Artemis had been kind to them and it would take the cooks the rest of this and the better part of the next day to prepare all the field-dressed carcasses for storage. Personally, Xena didn't think that Ares' army would settle for a siege but it also didn't do any harm to be prepared for the worst and all the non-combatants had something to do while the warriors were busy with polishing their weapons and armour, with making javelins, arrows and crossbow bolts.

Gabrielle, Theano, Ephiny and Akyra were helping in the kitchens. The royal guards were with the Centaur warriors. The Queen was in conference with Tyldus and Kaleipus. So, Xena unexpectedly found herself with nothing to do.

She already had checked on the new mother and her baby girls. Terreis had been anxious to get out of bed and resume her role as head of the village's scouts but the tall warrior finally managed to convince her to stay in bed for another three days and only to take on light duty afterwards. She would be able to command the scouts but not to go with them. It took a rather graphic description of what could happen if she tore the sutures not only holding her skin together but also reattaching the muscles in her abdomen.

There also was the question of how to deal with Queen Melosa. Simply staying in the hut and out of sight would be the easiest way out, but Terreis sense of duty never would allow this. When she left Xena's army and settled down with Phantes after the peace treaty had been signed, she knew that one day she would have to face her older sister and the shadows of her own past. But, at least, she wanted to stay on her own two feet when speaking with Melosa. Xena supposed that was the real reason behind her willingness to stay in bed.

Xena decided to take Argo for a walk and visit Borias' grave. It was on top of a hillock about a quarter candlemark's ride north of the village. She first headed west towards the mountain range, then to the north and turned back by going south-east thus describing an almost perfect circle. She let Argo choose the pace and the mare took the opportunity to run full out.

The tall woman found the marker where she had last seen it, almost five summers ago, in a blooming meadow in front of an old oak tree, looking protectively down on the village. She had heard the rustling of leaves and the unmistakable sound of someone trying to breathe lightly even before reaching the grave; and she internally debated of calling him on it or letting it go. Finally, without looking towards the tree she said. "You can come down now, Solan. I know you're up there."

She felt his eyes on her. "Get away from my father and mother."

Xena still didn't turn around. "I came to pay my respects."

The boy glided down the tree and the warrior woman couldn't help smiling inwardly at his surprising agility. The scabbard with Borias' sword was still hanging from his waist, the tip of it almost touching the ground. She could almost feel his hatred. "I didn't kill your father. I wish you'd believed that."

Solan knelt next to the grave. "You killed him and my mother was left all alone."

"What do you know about your mother?" The question slipped out of her mouth and she immediately regretted asking. She could see the boy's shoulders stiffen.

"What do you care?"

"I care." Was all that came to her mind, but then she decided that she really needed to know. "What was she like?"

"My uncle says, she was wonderful. She never thought bad things about anyone, even you. She had a smile like a breeze on a warm day and she could sing like Orpheus. I wish I could have heard her sing."

Solan still had his eyes on the gravestone and so he missed the short moment of complete bewilderment crossing Xena's face before she continued her questioning. "Did your uncle ever

tell you that she didn't want you to become a warrior?"

Still on the defensive the boy answered. "How'd you know?"

"Well, a woman like her, without evil in her heart, wouldn't want her son to take up a sword."

"My father fought you," Solan angrily retorted, "fought and died for something noble...."

Xena couldn't keep the anger out of her voice either. "Don't confuse nobility with anger and revenge. Your father wasn't like that." Her voice became more normal now but she wasn't able to cover up all the emotions running through her mind. "I know because we were very close once. Did you know he could sing. We used to sing toge...."

Solan bolted away.

They were close enough to the village for the boy to be safe, so Xena decided not to follow him. Instead, she took his place next to the gravestone and traced the engravings with her fingertips. Outwardly the picture of calm composure, her mind was reeling and though usually she wasn't one for words, this time she gave voice to her thoughts.

"Kaleipus did a good job raising your son, Borias, ... our son. I can't possibly blame him for wanting to kill me and he has such a high opinion of his mother. 'Mother', I shouldn't even think this word. No one deserves to have someone like me as a mother. I may no longer be the ruler of Greece but I'm still a murderer -- and that's what I'll always be, no matter what Gabrielle and Theano persist on telling me.

"Solan is such a bright boy. I don't want him to be a warrior. You should have heard the argument I had this morning with Kaleipus, well, perhaps you did. I know the dead can hear the thoughts of the living. However, he was right. My son, our son must have the right to choose his own path. But still, I don't have to li..."

Xena fell silent, hearing the rustle of very light hoof-beats trying to sneak up on Argo: a Centaur-child.

She didn't try to creep up on the boy, but slowly came towards him from the front. He looked up, but didn't shy from her presence. "You're Xena, aren't you? You're very tall for a Human female."

"And you're very smart for a young Centaur-boy, Xenan. Won't you be missed at the village?"

"Oh no, they're far too busy at the moment. Besides, Solan and I spend a lot of time here. It's one of his favourite places. I just was trying to find him and then I saw your horse. She's beautiful, she's carrying, too."

"Usually Centaurs and horsemanship don't mix. How do you know?"

"Usually, a Centaur doesn't have an Amazon as a mother. -- Do you know where Solan went?"

"Did your mother ever tell you that you're too smart for you own good?" The woman retorted, only barely remembering what her friends, Phantes and Terreis, had told her about the by human standards premature development of Centaur children.

"More than once. Where's Solan?"

"I made him angry. I suppose he returned to the village, as we also should. It's getting late. It wouldn't do to miss dinner, would it, Xenan?"

"Let's go. I'm hungry." Xena took Argo's reins and comfortably walked side by side with the boy.

While Xenan was amiably chatting about games of hide and seek and other pass-times, Xena wondered about his reactions towards her. His mother was her friend, but living with the Centaurs, he certainly had heard a lot about her history with his people. He should have been more prejudiced. Perhaps he was too young to make sense of it.

When they entered the village they met a group of young, heavily armed Centaurs. They still were about twenty paces away, but their body language spoke clearly of their less than friendly disposition. It was what she had suspected entering Centaur land, but it was nothing she was ready to confront an innocent child with. So, Xena decided to try and talk to them first.

These people were supposed to be their allies, but as she had suspected, it didn't work. After listening to their insults for some time she bent down to Xenan and told him to go, take Argo, and alert his father. He galloped away when the apparent leader of the group said.

"You shouldn't be allowed any contact with our children, Destroyer of Nations. You will poison their souls. -- The elders think, that we will need you to defeat this latest threat to our Nation, but I say you're nothing but a fraud, Conqueror."

"Well, if I am, there's no reason for you to be afraid of my being here." Xena answered with only a hint of a smile that didn't reach her eyes. She knew that they were far beyond caring; they probably also didn't have the faintest idea of what they were so eager to get into. And a big part of her also was eager to get things started. So, the tall warrior didn't have to wait too long for her challenge to be registered.

Four of them were now behind her; they stood still but were nervously swishing their tails. Together with their friends they were forming an uneven circle with Xena as the centre point. Centaurs were a proud race; they wouldn't attack her all at once. The leader gave an almost imperceptible nod to one of his friends on his right side, who charged her with his sword drawn. She simply rolled out of the way and kicked the upper part of his front leg in. The next one came from behind; he reared on his hind legs, trying to crush her head with his powerful front hooves. Xena dropped to her knees, her arms shooting upwards with lightening speed; she caught his legs

just above the hooves, managed to bend them inwards and thus toppled him over face first.

Two down, six to go. Soon only the leader was left to try and attack her; and he did, with a staff. She deftly avoided his side sweep, but then was taken by surprise by his next move and landed hard on her back. She instinctively rolled left and his staff hid the earth where only moments ago her head had been. Xena got back to her feet.

Out of the corner of her eyes she saw another side sweep coming. Instead of simply ducking away from it she launched herself in a flying flip and landed on his back. Her long arms reached over her surprised opponents head, grabbed his weapon and jerked it painfully back. She could feel his muscles fighting against her own. He reared, but her powerful legs securely held her in place. She pulled his arms steadily towards her, just to the point where his shoulders were about to become dislocated. The moment his front legs once again touched ground, she got her feet on his back and somersaulted over his head, way out of reach of his staff.

The woman warrior, once again, was in a circle of, now, slightly bedraggled opponents. She presented a picture of outward calm, never once betraying the loud but steady pounding of her heart. The dark part of her soul, the one always associated with Ares' gift wanted to take them all down with swift strokes of her still unsheathed sword. The rational part of her mind, however, told her that the skill level she just had shown would go a long way to get the Centaurs more comfortable with her and the Amazons.

"I never will get bested by a human female. They're just good for breeding. Centaurs attack." The second of her attackers yelled.

But then again, maybe not.

Only four out of eight Centaur warriors followed his enraged summons. This time she had to draw her sword to fend them off -- and the urge to do more than that rushed through her veins like a powerful drug. She could feel it getting stronger with every sword strike and spear thrust she avoided or deflected. Her blood was pulsing in her ears. The almost completely healed boar scratches just under her upper arm protector were partially reopened by a chance attack and the smell of her own blood invaded her nostrils. The part of her ready to get lost in this rush of blood was getting stronger with every heartbeat and the only thing keeping her from acting on those impulses was the thought of the expression on her lover's face, a mix of bewilderment, understanding and disappointment.

Suddenly, there was a horn signal that Xena had only heard once before in her life. It meant: 'Retreat!' She immediately stopped her sword attack in mid-motion, slightly shuddering under the brunt of the first Centaur's sword. Her eyes were wandering from one of her opponents to the other and though they evidently took more time to react to the call, they also halted in mid-attack. The raven haired warrior had a hard time keeping her body from taking advantage of the situation and kill them all.

Her mind prevailed. She slid out from under her opponent's blade, stepped aside and sheathed her own weapon. She was trembling from head to toe. The need to kill pumped through her body

like poison and it took all her willpower to stay and listen to the voice now ranging throughout the whole village, but only reaching her ears as if through several layers of thick leather.

"What by Hades' boots do you think you're doing? Xena was granted guest status in our village. Centaurs don't attack their guests. You dishonoured our whole nation."

"Tyldus, please," Queen Melosa's voice interrupted. "This seems to be nothing more than a sparring match."

The tall Centaur turned his attention to the Amazon Queen. "A sparring match that got totally out of hand. Besides, the Conqu..., Xena may not know where the exercise grounds are but my warriors do. I also came here before you did and as long as they were busy with one on one attacks I wouldn't have intervened. As things were, however, I didn't have a choice. I'm responsible for the training of our young warriors. They are my responsibility and they will have to face my judgement.

"If there is any way for the Amazon Queen to recompense a slave to the Nation I humbly and strongly suggest you do just this. Xena could have killed every one of them more than once in the last few candledrops and she would have been in her right but she didn't. For this we owe her. -- And, you others, every one of you, you will spend the night doing the first perimeter watch, not only the first but also the second shift. And, I want you all at the exercise ground at sunrise tomorrow where you will receive your new assignments."

In her peripheral vision, Xena could see her opponents and the crowd gathered around them slowly dispersing. She still stood ramrod straight, still feeling the rush of blood in her ears. Several candledrops passed.

Then there was a hand reaching up to her left cheek. Her body immediately recognised it and sought out closer contact. The fingers trailed down her neck, along her shoulders, just barely touched her upper arm bracer, slid down to her wrist and then softly squeezed the still sensitive palm. Some of the tension seemed to be seeping out of her at the touch alone.

"Come!" After walking swiftly for about a quarter candelmark, they came to a small hut just out of hearing distance of any other building of the village. Gabrielle opened the door but her tall companion stopped dead in mid-step.

"No, I can't. I ..., I have to go away. Now." She said, her heart still pounding in her chest.

"Xena, I know what you need and I'll give it to you. And we both know that this is the better of two ways to get you back to normal."

"I'll hurt you."

"No, you won't. You didn't the last time and you won't now." Gabrielle answered locking her

pleading eyes with Xena's. "Please, just this once. Let me do something for you."

"It's not the same. Last time, it just was a sparring session that got out of hand. I could feel Ares' call but it was nothing but practice, a game." After the slight respite just after the fight, Xena had a hard time keeping her emotions under control. "This time was different. I wanted to kill them and I still can feel this energy running through my body. I'm not sure if I'd be able to control myself this time."

"Xena, just do it. Trust me. Everything will be all right, my love."

"I don't want to hurt you." The tall warrior retorted, but her resistance had lost quiet a bit of its earlier vehemence.

"Trust me, my love."

Xena sighed, but unhooked her chakram, loosened the sheath of her sword on her back and began to unclasp her armour. Meanwhile the blonde bard was busy taking off her leg protectors. Taking her by both hands, the younger woman once again pulled her towards the door. "Gabrielle, I ..."

"Xena, you're my heart. Act on your impulses, I love you and I can take it. Just do it."

Xena abandoned her doubts and stepped inside. Ares' call still was strong and loud in her blood, louder even then after the fight against Darphus' army. Outside, Gabrielle had been the one urging her on, now, the roles were reversed.

As soon as the door was closed and the bolt securely pushed in place, the younger woman fell to her knees, her eyes demurely on the ground. A tiny part in her raven haired lover's brain knew that reliving her past as a body slave was extremely hard for the blonde, but there was another, darker part of her now in charge.

"Strip, slowly!"

Gabrielle rose from her lower legs and undid the knot holding her tunic in place. "Stand up, I want to see all of you, wench!"

She flinched internally at the cruelty in her lover's voice and even more when she cast a glance at icy cold eyes having lost their customary shades of blue to be replaced by glinting silver. This indeed was different than the last time and she knew she somehow had to get through to the woman behind the warlord's mask.

"I love you, Xena."

"You will address me as 'lord'." The other woman snarled while swiftly cutting the smaller woman's clothing open at the front with one of her boot daggers.

"Yes, my lord, I love you."

The warrior now ordered her to take off her breeches and sandals, leaving her naked. "On your knees. My boots, open the laces. Hands on your back, use your mouth."

Gabrielle's mind flashed back to the last time they had made love, when it had been her speaking these words, but this evening her mind was far away from the playfulness of a few days ago.

"Yes, my lord, I love you."

Her teeth closed around the hardened tip of the leather laces and the slip opened at the first try. She repeated the action with the other boot. The laces now easily fell away from the upper two levels of hooks needed to snugly fit the sturdy footwear around Xena's lower legs. Gabrielle continued to tuck at the laces until all the hooks were undone.

"You may use your hands to remove the boots completely."

"Yes, my lord, I love you." When finished, she briefly sought eye contact with the tall woman but instead of locking eyes with her, Gabrielle's gaze once again found the ground.

"Look at me. You should be trembling with fear but I don't see fear in your eyes. Aren't you afraid?"

"Yes, my lord, I'm afraid, but I love you."

For the fraction of a heartbeat Xena's eyes changed colour but then the silvery coldness was back. "Get on the bed, face first. I need to find something to tie you down."

"May I help you, my lord? There's something in one of the saddlebags."

"Go and get it."

Gabrielle began to rummage through the bag holding most of her things and soon produced a bundle Xena had taken for blank scrolls when checking their gear before they left the Amazon village. She opened it and revealed among other things, six long leather straps, a black scarf, and most prominent of all, a leather harness with an intricately decorated ivory phallus attached to it.

Xena regarded the harness with a cold smile. "So, you came prepared. Before long, you'll have every reason to be sorry for your thoughtfulness, girl."

"I'll never be sorry for loving you, my lord." The younger woman answered while scooting on the bed. A strap was fastened around her left ankle, but instead of securing it to the bedpost, Xena ordered her to turn around. She quickly was spread eagled to the four corners of the big bed and the warrior looked down at her with a predatory glint in her eyes. Gabrielle tried to reach her with a smile, in vain.

Xena lit the torches on either side of the bed, quickly undressed and donned the custom-made harness. Gabrielle's breath caught in her throat when she looked at the perfect body of her lover, who now was exuding a raw, sensual energy she rarely displayed.

The tall warrior straddled her blonde companion and ordered her to suck the ivory giant. At the inside of the harness, a small knob made sure that her clit was stimulated with every movement of the big phallus. Gabrielle's skilful manipulations soon brought her to the edge of orgasm, but instead she hastily repositioned herself between the spread legs.

Two hands were squeezing her breasts and the young woman couldn't help but cry out in pain. During the last time, after an especially hard sparring session with the soldiers of the First Order, the first cry of pain from her lover had been enough to end Xena's bloodlust.

Now, a mouth descended on her right globe and gave her more reason to cry out. The warrior's eyes were shining silver-blue, all her attention focused on the body beneath. Gabrielle, to her utter surprise, found herself not lost in pain but also in arousal, something she never had had happen before.

While tears welled up in her eyes, she whispered. "Please, my lord, take me. I need you, I love you."

But the tall woman warrior took her time. Her hands once again were fondling breasts arching into the contact, thumbs and index fingers expertly but without gentleness rolling the nipples. When her nose had reached the level of Gabrielle's belly button she was assaulted by the scent of the other woman's arousal now mingled with her own. A low growl left her throat, echoed by a loud moan coming from above her head. With one swift and fluent movement she shifted her weight on her right arm only; her left hand guided the phallus towards the younger woman's vagina, just introducing the tip.

She bent her head towards the younger woman's ear and whispered. "You're not allowed to come without permission." And was answered by an equally whispered. "I love you, my lord."

Xena started out with slow movements, entering deeper with every thrust. When the whole length of the ivory tool was firmly inside she stopped; by the small strokes against her clit, she literally could feel the blonde's vaginal muscles pressing against it, squeezing it. Her thumb massaged Gabrielle's hard nub. Her hips began to move back and forth, changing the angle to create a circular motion, thus once and again hitting the most sensitive spot of the younger woman's anatomy.

She relished the sound of breathing getting faster and faster, could feel the accelerated heartbeat under her nipple licking tongue. The golden sparkles in Gabrielle's green eyes were calling to her, the whole face a silent plea. But she didn't want her to come, not yet. She once again bit down hard on the already marked breast to get her back to reality.

The bard, however, was too far-gone. The pain registered in her brain at the same moment as the phallus hitting her secret spot and she toppled over the edge. Her orgasm strong enough to make

the leather straps holding her in place crack under the strain. She cried out Xena's name and sank into oblivion.

When Gabrielle once again opened her eyes, she still was on the bed. Her arms still were fastened at the edges of the headboard; the leather straps at her ankles were dangling loosely. Her legs were stretched wide open. Two more leather straps fastened around her knees and the upper end of the bedposts bound her in some sort of spread-eagled jack knife.

A low voice coming from the left side of the bed caught her attention. "You came without permission." She turned her head. Xena was smiling but the smile didn't reach her silvery eyes. "You have to be punished."

It took her some heartbeats to find her voice. "Please forgive my failure, my lord. I spoiled your fun and deserve to be punished. Please, don't have mercy on me. I love you, my lord."

A small voice inside Gabrielle's head asked where this was coming from. Who as a slave she had hated to be punished, hated having to ask for it, hated having to be thankful for the punishment, suddenly knew her words to be true. And with sudden insight, she also knew why. Whatever the warrior's eyes were telling her, she still trusted her lover, trusted her with her body and her soul.

"Don't worry. Mercy is not what I have in mind, girl." The raven-haired woman said almost conversationally. "I thought about flogging you 'til I climax but I won't. I know what your problem is. Your front hole is just too sensitive, so now, I'll take you by the ass."

Gabrielle's breathing stopped for a heartbeat and she pleaded with her captor. "Please, my lord, I'll never be able to take something this big. You'll tear me apart. Please, my lord, don't do it." She sought for her lover in the eyes of this stranger and didn't find her -- but still she trusted the other woman.

"You're mine to do with as I please." Was the growled reply.

Xena now was on her knees in front of the bound woman but Gabrielle didn't dare to look in her eyes. Two big hands firmly gripped her hips and lifted her upwards. The phallus still glistening with her juices inched closer and closer. She already could feel the tip touching her sphincter.

Finally she closed her eyes, resigned to her fate and whispered. "Do with me as you please. I love you, Xena."

"Oh Gods, Gabrielle!" The taller woman's head jerked back, she saw Gabrielle's tear streaked face, cut all of the younger woman's restraints with one swift movement of a dagger and tore at the harness as if it were on fire. She jumped from the bed and retreated to the farthest corner of the one-room-cabin. Her eyes, now a pale blue, were reflecting the horror of what she almost had done to her lover and best friend. She sank to the ground.

Gabrielle cautiously stretched her muscles, her heart still pounding in her throat. One look at Xena and she knew that there was no bloodlust left in her companion. She went towards her but the woman retreated even further into the corner.

"I love you, Xena. I knew you'd never hurt me. Please, look at me."

"I did. I hurt you. I bit you and drew your blood. I, I raped you. I promised to always protect you, but instead I raped you. I'm a monster."

The young bard took Xena's chin in her hand and looked deeply into her haunted eyes where fear and self-disgust were warring for dominance.

"I love you, Xena. I did from the first time I almost drowned in your then tired eyes, after you saved my life; and I always will. You own me, my heart and my soul and my body, my today and all my tomorrows. Please, come back to me."

"I raped you."

"No, you stopped, like I knew you would. I love you. Remember what you taught me: 'To conquer oneself is to know the way.' Today you conquered the dark part of your soul and you did it for me. If it even were possible I'd love you more for it. Please come to bed and make love to me."

"How can you even think about making love now? I hurt you, I..." Xena's hand was shaking when she touched the bite marks at the other woman's breast. When Gabrielle calmly took her hand and gently kissed its palm, the last of Xena's barriers fell. She began to cry and for a long time the blonde held the taller woman in a loving embrace, slowly rocking them back and forth until Morpheus claimed them both.

When she once again opened her eyes, it was in the middle of the night and Xena was still sleeping with her head in her lap. She caressed her shoulders and back, relieved beyond belief to have her Xena back. When her lover finally woke, they went to bed, not once losing contact with the other's skin. They snuggled together and in the first candlemarks of dawn they gently made love thus banning the demons of the night and both of their pasts -- at least for some time.

When the young blonde woke from a short but deep and refreshing sleep, the sun was already up, but its rays were blocked by a naked body standing at the only window of the simple hut. She rose from the large bed and pressed her own body against her lover's back, her arms circling the taller woman's waist, stroking a flat, smooth stomach.

A couple of candledrops later, one of her hands was slowly lifted upwards. She felt soft lips at her wrists, kissing the marks left from the restraints. Surprisingly there only were slight bruises and no rope burns. She also could feel points of wetness falling on the back of her hand. Xena was crying, as always, without making a sound.

More candledrops passed, there were slight tremors running through Xena's body and the green-eyed woman couldn't stand the silence any longer. "I love you, Xena."

"Gabrielle," the tall woman answered with a voice that had nothing familiar, "you have to leave me. Staying with me is too dangerous. I'll go and tell Queen Melosa what happened tonight and gladly submit to the punishment for attempted rape. That's the only way."

"Are you completely out of your mind, Xena?" the younger woman retorted and forced herself between the windowsill and her lover. "I won't leave you. I love you; you are my heart and my soul. My body knows when you enter a room without having to see you. You're the first thing I think about in the morning and the last thing in the night, you're in my dreams. I need you, my love. Don't throw away what we have just out of misguided guilt, please. Look at me; don't hide behind your pride. I love you, Xena."

Still overflowing blue eyes found green ones. The tall warrior could see tears glistening at their inner edges, these eyes were pleading with her. Gabrielle slowly pulled the other woman's left hand towards her and began to pose tiny kisses on the knuckles and fingers. The loving gesture let the walls Xena had spend the candlemarks since dawn rebuilding crumble upon themselves. She sank on her knees, desperately clinging to her smaller lover.

Xena whispered. "I'm so afraid I'll hurt you. Next time, I might not stop. Next time, I might even kill you."

"There's something I have to tell you, my love. What you did yesterday happened with my consent. I knew what I was getting into from the beginning, but that's not all. When you bit my breast, I... It's hard to tell, I, I never thought it possible. When you bit me, I was aroused and ... and even in the end, I knew that it would be all right, that I would be all right. I love you."

"You're only saying this to ease my mind. I hurt you and I could do it again in a heartbeat."

"No, my love, you won't. You didn't last night and you never will. I trust you and have faith in you. Please, look at me. I believe in you." The kneeling woman turned her head. "I know it would be easy to say that what you did yesterday, that this person wasn't you. But we both know it's not true. Darkness and violence not only are a part of your past, they also are a part of you, of what and who you are. You need the darkness to fight and to win, to survive, but it doesn't control you. The light in your heart always will defeat the darkness. Please believe in yourself."

"I don't know if I can, Gabrielle, I hurt you. It can happen again."

"Xena, please, cut yourself some slack. After the fight against Darphus' army, when you came back to the village, I could feel the darkness emanating from you. It was there but it didn't control you. It did last night but that's understandable. You're in an emotionally very difficult situation, right now. Ares is pressuring you -- oh, please, don't look so surprised. I know you didn't tell us everything about your conversation with the God of War, but I can wait 'til you're ready.

"Anyway, there's Ares and seeing your son for the first time in years, the threat against the Centaurs, the Ixion stone, delivering the babies, your memories, the hostility of the people in this village. The fight yesterday was only the last straw. No one would have been able to withstand this much tension and pressure without losing it somehow. -- I know, it might happen again and I hope that I'll be there to take care of you, then as I was yesterday. I love you, Xena. I'll take the risk."

"There are no excuses for what I did to you, Gabrielle. I don't deserve your love."

"Let me be the judge of that. I love you, Xena. Please, if you can't believe in yourself, believe in my love for you, believe in my belief in you."

"I love you, Gabrielle. I love you so much." For more than a quarter of a candlemark they stood motionless and in silence, with Xena still on her knees, her head pressed against the blonde woman's firm abdomen. "I still have to speak with Queen Melosa. I have to be punished."

"Xena, please don't. Let it go, do it for me."

"But I..." A slender finger gently sealed the tall woman's lips.

"I know, my love, but you are harder on yourself than anyone else could. Nothing the Amazons could come up with could ever be as harsh as you are to yourself."

"What are you talking about, Gab?"

"Xena, my love, you're a brilliant general, an even better fighter and a very complex woman, but sometimes you're as predictable as..." Gabrielle's stomach made its presence known, loudly. "...well, as predictable as the monster living in my stomach. Last time it took you almost a full moon before you were once again able to touch me without fear in your eyes. I know that you will torture yourself with images of last night, that you will be afraid of your own shadow whenever we are together. That's punishment enough because I really hate to see fear in your eyes. Last night is nothing the Amazons have to know about, at least not more than they already suspect. Do it for me."

Xena's pride wanted to contest the younger woman's words but another part of her had to acknowledge that her lover was right. She gently kissed the smooth skin in front of her. "You win, my love." Murmuring endearments between kisses the warrior's mouth found its way to Gabrielle's nether region where her tongue began an intricate dance. The blonde's hands anchored her at her lover's shoulders, leaving pronounced scratch marks when she reached her pinnacle.

Chapter Five: Revelations

Xena was about to carry her lover back to bed when she stopped in mid-motion. "We'd better get dressed, Theano is com..." She was silenced with a passionate kiss.

They were still catching their breaths when a sharp knock at the door brought them back to reality. "We'll be out in a candledrop, Theano." Gabrielle yelled back and proceeded to kiss the raven haired woman still holding her firmly in her arms. Another knock. Another kiss. Another knock. Gabrielle sighed and slipped out of her lover's arms. Grabbing a fresh tunic out of her saddlebag she went to open the door when the older Amazon's head appeared at the window.

"All right, the two of you, you had enough playtime. Xena, Queen Melosa and Tyldus want your input regarding the village defences and traps. Gabrielle, Akyra and I need your help gathering medicinal herbs and roots. Hurry up, you already missed the morning meal, you don't want to miss the whole day."

"You? Gathering herbs?!" Xena said while putting on her leather dress, totally disregarding the fact that the older woman just had seen her in all her naked glory. "What did Akyra bribe you with? You don't like grubbing in the dirt."

"Xena, be good. I'm sure Theano does it for the company -- and you should really show more respect for your second mother." The younger woman quipped in with an impish smile.

With a twinkle in her eyes, Xena responded. "You're right, Gabrielle. Please forgive my disobedient tongue, venerable elder."

"This afternoon, at the training grounds, I'll show you 'old', little one, and now move your lazy behind, there's work to do, both of you." The Amazon lawyer answered with a mock growl.

The morning sun was tentatively reaching through the thick canopy of leaves over her head when Eponin was riding towards Centaur territory -- at the point of a long trek of Amazon warriors and most of Xena's soldiers; she furtively glanced around, taking in the riders behind her.

Palemon was animatedly talking to one of the few soldiers that had survived the battle against Darphus' army with Theodorus at his other side. Behind him were Cyrene, Cassandra, Toris, and Meleager. She couldn't see it, but she knew that one of the supply wagons was driven by the young Persian, Tarik, and another one by his wife, Shirin. She still didn't understand why these civilians and a handful of others had insisted on accompanying the war party, and she could even less understand how she had been talked into letting them.

The weapons' master's mind wandered back to the night before. The encampment of Xena's soldiers didn't offer enough room and other necessities to house all of the newcomers. So, they decided that the younger children and their caretakers would stay at the Amazon village while

the other adults made camp at the clearing. When she returned to her quarters in the middle of the night, after exchanging the most important news, and arguing in vain with Xena's mother; Eponin knew without the shadow of a doubt where the raven haired warrior got her stubbornness from.

She only wanted to sleep but first had to deal with last minute preparations, and with an Amazon youngster who also insisted on going with the army. She had tried to explain that it simply was too dangerous, but her daughter didn't listen to reason. "I don't want to loose you, mum."

"I'll be back, Than, I promise. Nothing will happen to me, and I don't want to leave you behind."

"Then, don't." The stubborn girl interjected.

"I have to. Your safety is more important than anything else to me. I failed you once." The stoic weapons' master answered with a sad smile. "I won't let any harm come to you." Sensing another protest, she continued. "Please, let me finish. If I let you come with me, a big part of my mind will not be on the fight or on trying to keep the Queen safe, it will be with you, with your safety. And if I don't ..."

"I know, if you're distracted you can easily get killed, and I'm not good enough to fight at your side." The girl said dejectedly.

"Yes, baby girl. You're not good enough yet, but one day you will, and then I'll be proud to have you at my side during a battle. I'm glad you understand. I'm proud of you. Perhaps, one day, caring for my safety, it will be your turn to tell me to stay home while you go and fight for the nation." The weapons' master's attempt at lightening the girl's mood completely failed, so Eponin changed the subject. "Besides, I have an assignment for you, you and Lyceus. There were a lot of children with the wagon trek. I want you and your friends to help them, play with them, make them welcome. They're orphans, and I'm sure you can have lots of fun together." She saw the ill-concealed twinkle in her daughters eyes. "Hey, without driving the elders crazy. -- Promise!"

After a long candledrop of deliberation, Thania answered, slightly pouting. "All right, I promise. But I still don't like being left behind, not one bit." Eponin smiled, and opened her arms to embrace the feisty girl.

"I'm proud of you, Thanny."

A voice from her left snapped her out of her memories. "Weapons' master, I want to thank you for taking us with you."

"I didn't have much choice, did I, Cyrene? You would have followed us, anyway. -- When I first met your daughter, I was sure that she was the most stubborn woman in the world, but now I'm no longer sure. -- You waited such a long time to talk to her, why can't it wait 'til we're back from the Centaurs?"

The older woman looked at her with a very familiar hint of a smile curving her lips. "Did it ever occur to you that she could die during this war, Eponin? This is perhaps my only chance to get to know her."

"She won't die, Cyrene. She's the best fighter I ever saw. With Gabrielle she has a reason to come back from the battlefield, and she's far too stubborn to die before she has suffered through the last part of her punishment in front of Artemis' temple. No, it didn't occur to me."

"Tell me about it, please."

"Tell you about what, exactly?" Eponin knew that she was stalling for time, but this really was a question she'd rather not have to answer.

"The trial, the punishment. Tell me why?"

"Why? I don't know why, Cyrene. That's one question only Xena can answer, perhaps she thought it was the right thing to do. At the trial we had to force Xena to defend herself, but in the end it worked out. You better ask Theano about it."

"Theano? What has she to do with this whole mess? Well, if she was there, at least she did a good job at defending Xena."

"Theano was the prosecutor. She was the one at the other side of the whip during the forced interrogation, but without her help it would have been much more difficult to come to a fair verdict."

"Forced interrogation?"

"Amazon law states that whenever a defendant refuses to answer the questions of either her own attorney or the prosecutor, there is the possibility to encourage truthful answers by having the accused whipped. It's an old tradition and this time it really worked."

"Whipped? Theano whipped my daughter?"

"Yes, and she really did a good job. It was fair."

"Fair? Being whipped during a trial, fair? And this so-called sentence. Being whipped half to death three times in three moons, that's not what I would call fair. What by Hades was Theano thinking? She's supposed to see to her safety. Did she forget everything she told me about Amazon traditions?!"

"A second mother is not to keep her charge from making mistakes. Her primary goal is to keep her soul safe, and that's what Theano did. The way she did it may be unconventional but there's nothing conventional about your daughter." When the older woman didn't answer, Eponin continued. "Apart from the older scars, the lash marks from the forced interrogation were still

visible when the first part of her punishment began. She cried out for the next to last stroke but otherwise held her tongue. I never saw someone as strong and as brave before. And when after asking Gabrielle to join with her, she bade me to help her back to the village I was at least as proud as the day I was named weapons' master."

"What about the second punishment? Even the first one must have brought back a lot of dark memories for her." A voice from her right asked. When she turned her head she saw the blonde warrior named Cassandra. Her eyes spoke of her curiosity but they also gave away a great deal of genuine concern and compassion.

"You're probably right but she never speaks about the gauntlet. She only told me that this was the price she had to pay for misjudging her men, misjudging Darphus. Well, at least this scum bag is taken care of, once and for all."

"Darphus? I thought he disappeared for good after Xena cut his balls off." Cassandra queried.

"He led the army attacking us more than a moon ago. Xena killed him, rescued her brother and the other outsiders, and led us to a glorious victory though we were outnumbered three to one." Eponin was glad for this change of topic though she also knew that it wouldn't last.

"Gauntlet? What are you talking about? No one survives a gauntlet."

"No one but Xena," Palemon unexpectedly answered. "On the way back to Greece, after her campaign against Persia, the men of her advance group decided to have some fun with one of the undefended villages, close to the Grecian border. When Xena came back, the village was in flames, and she had a hard time to stop the raping and pillaging. Darphus convinced the other men that Xena intended to keep all the spoils of war for herself and they made him their new leader. He refused to fight the General one on one, but she somehow had to give the few survivors enough time to get away. Accepting the gauntlet was the only way to keep them otherwise occupied."

"She saved the lives of more than thirty villagers, elders, women, and children, that day. When I asked her about it, she told me that a few scars on her back were a small price to pay for these innocents lives." Cassandra continued. "You were talking about the second whipping, weapons' master?"

Eponin internally sighed. "Xena is a very strong woman, inside and out, but the knowledge of what would happen let the second whipping have more impact on her than the first. I didn't tell you yesterday but Xena made a deal with Artemis."

"A deal? That's unlikely. She always kept her distance to the Gods, despite my best efforts. If she had been protected by one of them, perhaps...."

"I don't know what she was like before she came to us, Cyrene, but the Xena I know prays almost every evening at the temple of Artemis. She prays to Gaia, the Goddess of the Earth and mother of Gods. She told me once that she choose the older Goddess because she rarely tries to

interfere with the life of mortals."

Eponin ignored the older woman's disbelieving frown and turned her attention to the blonde.

"The night before the first punishment, the great Artemis granted Xena a favour. Given her amazing healing abilities, Xena feared that the punishment wouldn't have the effect on her it should have. So, she asked the Goddess to take them away, at least for the punishment itself. At the time, she didn't know that the jury had taken her abilities into account when deciding on the number of strokes. Now, it's too late to change anything.

"Xena was and is still healing faster as most other people would but her sensitivity to pain was considerably heightened. She also told me that she lost her innate sense of how well her body was healing.

"I suppose that's why the second whipping was emotionally harder on her. She now knew exactly what she was in for. She told me that towards the end, the pain had been almost overwhelming and that she had to fight not to lose herself in it. Yes, the second whipping was harder on her -- not that anyone would have been able to tell. She didn't even once cry out this time, but I could see it in her eyes when I helped her back to the village."

"How does Gabrielle take it?" Cassandra asked.

"You know her?"

"I only met her twice, Cyrene, but she undoubtedly is one of the most kind-hearted, most loving and caring persons I ever saw. She loves Xena, and Xena returns this love with all that she is. They only have to be in the same room, without being next to each other even a blind man could see their love. I'm sure she at least tried to change Xena's mind about this whole punishment business."

"You're right, Cassandra. She tried, but finally she understood that a warrior has to follow the voice of her heart and her conscience. She still isn't happy about it, but she respects Xena's decision."

"Tell me about her life with the Ama..."

The day went by quickly, and Xena strolled to the training grounds with the knowledge that the non-combatants, the children and elders, would be safe within the confines of the village. She found Theano already waiting but instead of her earlier promise, Gabrielle was nowhere to be seen.

"Where's Gabrielle?"

"Hello to you, too. Yes, I had a wonderful day, myself."

"I'm sorry, Theano, but I can't help but worrying whenever I don't know where she is. Hello, my second mother." Xena answered, with a sheepish grin, disregarding the queasy feeling in the pit of her stomach.

"Some of the women were gathering herbs and berries with a bunch of children. The children were bored; Gabrielle offered to tell them a few stories. They're at a clearing about two candelmarks' fast walk east of here. She promised to be back before dinner. Don't worry, she has her staff, and they are within hearing distance of the outer watch. -- And now, I think we should address this 'elder' remark."

Their sparring started out rather slowly but soon attracted quite an audience. Well into the second candelmark (and the nth chance for Xena to end this match,) she suddenly dropped her staff and fell to her knees when a piercing pain assaulted her head. It disappeared as quickly as it came but now the queasy feeling in her guts was back with force.

The older Amazon urged her to lie down for a few candledrops, and insisted on Akyra taking a look at her. The tall warrior first brushed her off, then her stomach revolted but having skipped the midday meal, she only came up with dry heaves. Akyra and the village's healer couldn't find anything wrong with her, and speculated that her body just needed something to eat, so the proud woman was escorted to the dining hall. She wasn't hungry but managed to keep down a slice of bread and half a pitcher of cider.

The sun was down and Xena's anxiety was growing though the physical effects had all but vanished. She was in the middle of saddling up Argo to search for the younger woman when one of the inner perimeter guards escorted Gabrielle to the central square, supporting most of her weight. There were blood stains at her tunic and a makeshift bandage around her head.

At the beginning of her third story, a band of enemy soldiers had invaded the clearing where she and the kids had settled down, about two scores of heavily armed men.

"I knocked a few of them out with my staff but meanwhile they had rounded up the children. There was nothing I could do. Their leader offers a deal; an exchange, Xena and the Ixion stone for the children. The exchange will take place the day after tomorrow at midday on top of the hill three candelmarks' ride east of here. Then they knocked me out."

"The leader, was he about my height, with hair not quite as dark as mine, and a scar disfiguring the right side of his face?"

"Yes, how do you know?"

"Dagnine, he was one of my lieutenants when I fought the Centaurs all those years ago. At the

time he was even more obsessed with the powers of the Ixion stone than I was, and he obviously still is. He always overestimated his own fighting abilities but he's cunning and ruthless. Even then, I never would have turned my back on him. He never kept his word, if there was any other way out. I doubt that he can resist the temptation to sell the children as slaves; Centaurs should bring a very good price. How many children are we talking about, Gabrielle?"

The exhausted younger woman closed her eyes and mentally counted. "Twelve. -- Xenan and Solan are among them, Xe."

Within a heartbeat, the tall warrior was on Argo's back, ready to storm away but the voices of Queen Melosa and Kaleipus -- and mot of all Gabrielle's hand on top of her thigh stopped her. All she really wanted to do was to go and find their camp and kill them all. However, she had to concede that she probably would need help to get the children back without putting them in harm's way. Less then a quarter of a candlemark later, the rescue party was ready, consisting of eight Centaurs, including Kaleipus and Phantes, all of the Amazons except for Gabrielle and Akyra, and three mounted villagers.

"Wait, I'll go with you." A female voice shouted from about hundred paces away. Every head turned towards the slender figure who obviously had a hard time staying on her feet.

Queen Melosa made two steps forward, then froze and whispered. "Terreis." She began to run towards the younger woman, she had thought dead for more than six summers, murmuring under her breath. "Terreis, daughter of Hippolyta, you have a lot of explaining to do." When she reached her, the curly haired woman collapsed in her arms.

A moment later, Xena was at their side, scooping the former Amazon up in her arms as if she were nothing more than a child and carrying her back to her hut. Fortunately, the sutures in her stomach were only strained but not broken from the exertion. Bed rest was now even more important than before but the stubborn woman refused to see reason.

"Xenan is my son, I have to go!"

"Think about the babies, Terry. Think about his sisters, they also need you. We'll get him back, I promise. The girls won't have to grow up without their big brother. I won't let any harm come to him, to any of them. Please, you have to take care of yourself. Promise that you will stay in bed, for at least another two days, please." The injured woman reluctantly nodded. "Queen Melosa, would you please keep my friend company and see that she really stays in bed?"

"Oh yes, I will, I won't let her out of my sight." The Amazon Queen growled, still overwhelmed by the fact to find her younger sister alive. "Go and get the children back to safety, and you, daughter of Hippolyta, you have a story to tell." She added sternly though her eyes betrayed the depths of her emotions.

With Akyra now taking Queen Melosa's mount, the departure of the search party was no longer

delayed. They found the dead bodies of the outer perimeter watch, and a candlemark after leaving the village they came to the clearing in question. It was getting dark, too dark to properly see. They had to wait until the moon and the stars were out to effectively follow the trail left by the kidnapers. Another two candlemarks later, they once again were on their way.

At first the children had been walking, leaving ample evidence of their passage. These tracks suddenly disappeared, but even with the faint moonlight Xena was able to make out that now some of the hoof prints were slightly deeper than before. The tracks also indicated that the horses were from then on going in a fast canter.

The whole night through they followed their enemy, leading the horses. The Centaurs would have been able to go faster but Xena neither wanted to lose the tracks, nor was she willing to risk even one of their horses by rushing along. She knew, they would need all of their speed to get the children out of the enemy's camp.

When dawn was breaking, they rested for about a quarter of a candlemark. According to the hoof prints the enemy by now had a head start of at least eight candlemarks. She was worried but with the sun slowly rising they finally could pick up their own speed. They steadily were moving north-east, following the tree line. At midday, the enemy still was six candlemarks ahead of them, but the tracks suddenly turned directly north, further into the forest.

Xena brought her party to a halt. "Venison, roasting over a fire. Their camp is near. Ephiny and I will check it out."

"I'll be with you." Phantes said. "I know, Centaurs are not known for stealth but I had a very good teacher."

Xena only nodded, slid from Argo's back, and the three of them disappeared between the trees. They easily manoeuvred around the double guards posted within hearing distance of the camp. The campfires indicated the presence of not two but at least six scores of soldiers though only about half of them were visible. Ephiny and Xena crept closer, and learned that the rest was busy digging for the Ixion stone at a nearby cave system.

The children were in a wooden enclosure at the right edge of the encampment, with manacles at their feet and hooves. So, letting them run away wasn't an option, they had to be carried out. Within a candlemark, the scouting party was back with the others and Xena outlined her plan.

"The soldiers busy with mining are not expected back before sun-down, so we have to hurry. There are only two guards keeping an eye on the children, they will be easy to take out but I still doubt that the escape will go completely unnoticed. Solan is kept apart from the others, in a cage dangling from a tree, at the other side of the encampment. I'll get him out of this cage and thus create a diversion. Meanwhile Ephiny and Theano will set the horses free. We will make it as difficult as possible for them to follow you. I'll hold them back for as long as I can, and with a tiny bit of luck, they will follow me and not you and the children."

"What makes you think they would, follow you that is? Eleven children are more valuable than

only one. Why should they follow Solan, and where do you intend to go?" One of the Centaurs asked.

"We'll go towards the mountain range. There, it will be easy to lose any pursuer. At the least he will have to split up his forces, not to lose both of his prizes. I know Dagnine and I'm sure that he will order most of his men to go after me, not Solan. He hates losing and he thinks he has enough men and the leverage to best me in a fight. Before I go and get Solan, I'll make him furious enough that he all but forgets about the other children."

"Sounds like a good plan to me." Theano gave voice to the others' opinion, only Kaleipus was violently shaking his head and twitching his tail.

"I don't like it. This plan of yours is good for the others, but it's far too dangerous for Solan. The boy may have the heart of a fighter but he doesn't know how to defend himself. I don't like it."

"I don't like it either, but I don't see any other way. Solan and I can take to the trees, that's an advantage Dagnine and his men don't have. We'll head straight for the mountain range. The underbrush there is too thick to follow on horseback. It probably will add a day to our return journey but once we lose our pursuers, we'll be home free.

"I'll do the best I can to keep him safe and sound. Besides, the more men on my trail the less trouble for you and the others. When you get the children," Xena turned her head towards the other Centaurs and their human companions, "each of you can take one child, while the Amazons guard the retreat. Their bows will keep them at a distance."

"All right, we'll do it your way. But Xena, I want you to take care of Solan as if you were his mother."

"I will, Kaleipus." She answered softly, her face as unreadable as ever. Only Theano also saw the pain carefully hidden behind these incredibly blue eyes.

Half a candlemark later, all of the perimeter guards were tightly bound and gagged to keep them from alerting the others. Theano had volunteered to take Argo back to the village, but at the moment she was silently creeping towards the enemy's horses, dagger at the ready to cut their bonds. Ephiny meanwhile was soaking one of the hay bales with oil. A burning arrow would set it ablaze as soon as Xena gave the signal. They then retreated back to the tree line to take their positions in the tree tops.

Meanwhile Dagnine checked on Solan, playing with the key to the cage he was wearing around his neck, and bragging to his second-in-command about his cleverness. When he entered his tent situated in the middle of the encampment, he was in for a surprise.

The enemy's leader stopped dead in mid-motion. There on his bed sat Xena, leaning against the many cushions littering its surface. Her long legs were comfortably crossed, and she looked as if

she didn't have a care in the world. "You are an amazing woman."

"And you haven't changed a bit. Still as charismatic as ever." Xena answered, sarcasm seeping from her voice.

"No, no. I have changed, a little bit. Look," Dagnine tore at his shirt, showing off a scar of a knife wound. "that was from Tersites. I heard you took care of him. And I'm smarter, a lot smarter. You see, I found your fatal flaw. You were right to keep him secret so long, and giving him to the Centaurs, a stroke of genius. But I know, and I possess."

Xena's face still wasn't betraying her growing anger. "So, you know. Who told you?"

"I have friends in high places. The other brats were just a bonus, the Centaurs especially. I will enjoy seeing them sold on the block."

'Ares! of course. Yes, it made sense.' Using her son was the perfect way to get her to back off. Xena was thinking while she said. "I always knew that deep down in your heart you're nothing but a coward, Dagnine. You proved it all those years ago when you didn't have the guts to show your face after defying my orders and losing half of your men. You're showing it now, hiding behind innocent children. Tsk, tsk, tsk!"

His scarred face distorted with rage, Dagnine made a step forward as if to strike her, but then he suddenly relaxed. "Says the woman who ran away from ruling Greece to become an Amazon slave, a plaything for their Queen. Admit that you were too weak to rule."

"That may be as it may be," she answered with an enigmatic smile. "Let's get back to business. You were always a bargaining man. I assume that's what you wanna do, otherwise you would have called your guards by now."

"That, and the fact that you could kill me in two steps. -- Oh, but you'd never see your boy again, would you? -- Very well, there are three things that I do want. One: the stone."

"Don't have it, don't know where it is." Xena answered shrugging her shoulders.

"I do, it's in the Ixion caverns. Somewhere near those hills. It's only a matter of time before we find it. Which leads me to number three: I want you out of the way. Leave the valley."

"Not without my son."

"You're hardly in a position to bargain now, are you? I'm sure you'll get through all these guards and into this cage but your son would be dead. No, I'm the one who has the power now, Xena. You are at my beck-and-call." He said with triumph.

"You forgot the second thing."

"Oh yeah, well." With three steps he reached the couch. Sitting down next to the raven haired

woman, he put an arm around her shoulders. "For remembering that I have your son, I just want a bit of warmth, of human kindness."

"If only you were human." Xena retorted while easily knocking him out with her elbow. She then took the key to the cage he had on a leather band around his neck, bound his wrists behind his back, and left the tent the way she had entered it by a newly cut hole in the roof.

After seeing the rescue party off, the Queen of the Amazons returned to Terreis and found the younger woman deeply asleep due to the herbal tea Xena had made her drink. She sat down and studied her peaceful face, noting the changes more than six summers had brought. There was a faded scar at her right biceps, the remnants of a large gash probably going straight to the bone, and a few laughing lines at the edge of her eyes. Her mind began to wander back to the time she last had seen her in the flesh, when the princess and a scouting party had gone to investigate some problems at the western border.

The Queen refused to delve deeper into the past but couldn't help and remember the time, a couple of days after their departure, when she had first heard about her sister's death, when the traitor Velaska had bragged about killing Terreis and throwing her down the cliff just outside of Amazon territory.

Velaska, a wave of cold rage swept through her whenever she thought about the traitorous woman.

After the death of Velaska's mother in battle with the Centaurs, Melosa's mother, consort to the Queen, had taken the orphan in. Though Melosa's junior of some years they grew up like sisters. When Velaska was twelve, having successfully finished her first apprenticeship, Terreis was born. Their mother died shortly after from blood-loss. Melosa from the first moment had felt very protective of her small sibling, not so Velaska. After almost letting the child drown one summer day a couple of years later, the young warrior was sent to another Amazon village at the coast where Melosa's aunt just had been named regent.

Shortly after Melosa succeeded her mother's lifebond as Queen of the Greek Amazons, Velaska returned, and was greeted with open arms by the newly appointed Queen. Terreis in the meantime had become a good warrior herself; she was very popular with the younger warriors and craftswomen, as a friend and a lover. She held the right of caste, and during the council sessions proved that her sister's trust wasn't misplaced.

There had always been tensions with their northern neighbours, the Centaurs, minor skirmishes

and even the occasional battle, but there never was a reason to risk an all-out war with them. However, that was all Velaska was talking about after her return.

She filled the heads of the young warriors with dreams of glory and of becoming a part of the renewal of Amazon greatness. She filled the hearts of the older warriors with dreams of revenge for their loved-ones fallen in battle. She preached that not Artemis but Ares was the true patron god of the Amazons, that every Amazon following the peaceful, self preserving ways of the Goddess of the Hunt was betraying her true calling.

She didn't speak openly but loud enough to be heard and loud enough to undermine Melosa's position. Only the support of Terreis and her friends enabled her to keep the peace. Finally, Velaska unanimously was banned from Amazon territory -- and soon was all but forgotten.

'Til the day she returned, breaking Terreis bloody staff over her right knee and challenging Melosa for the mask of the Queen. Melosa's favourite weapon next to the bow always had been the staff but she knew that it was extremely difficult to deliberately kill someone with a staff. You had to literally beat your opponent to death, and with a fighter as good as Velaska she undoubtedly would get her share of bruises or broken bones. On the other hand it would allow her to give the younger woman a chance to yield.

In retrospect, she never was able to explain why she had been so sure to win, but she was, and she did. She vividly remembered the moment when her temper had snapped. Velaska was trying to taunt her by describing how she had pierced her sister's heart, and thrown the innate body down a cliff. The younger woman already had at least two broken ribs but she still was attacking.

Melosa ducked a high strung back sweep and brought her opponent down on her knees. She swirled around, fully expecting her move to be blocked, instead it struck Velaska's neck. There was an unnaturally loud crack, her neck was broken and she fell to the ground.

A burial detail went to the cliff only a candlemark later, led by the Queen herself, but there weren't able to recover the bodies or even get close enough to identify them.

"You're looking rather grim, Queen Melosa. I hope I didn't cause your foul mood." A still familiar voice brought her out of her musings.

"Yes and no. I remembered the day, when Velaska told me about your death, and how I didn't believe her until I saw the dead bodies of my sisters at the bottom of the ravine. I should have insisted on going down and getting them, then I would have known."

"I'm glad you didn't, my sister. When I came to, I was lying on top of them, and even I had a hard time, to tell them apart, to recognise them. Apparently Velaska had had some fun with their bodies before tossing them over the edge, I'll never know why she didn't the same to me." The

younger woman answered with bitterness in her voice.

"She told me that her sword had pierced your heart."

"It would have, but she aimed for the left side. I was lying on the ground, with my leg broken and my sword two body lengths away. I could see the blood lust in her eyes. She plunged her sword in my chest but I survived because she didn't know that I'm not like other humans. It's strange, we lived in the same hut, and later in the same village for years, and yet she didn't know. Xena knew after speaking with me for less than a candle drop. -- Speaking about Xena, what by Hades' helmet did you do to her? A slave collar. It's just not right."

"I'll tell you about Xena, later. First I want to hear what really happened this day at the western border, and why by Tartarus you didn't come back." The Amazon Queen answered while trying to keep calm.

"You're right, my Queen, I owe you an explanation. And I freely submit to Amazon justice for leaving the village without permission, marrying a Centaur, and giving birth to his children." Terreis said trying to bow to her older sister.

Queen Melosa put her back into the pillows. "I don't want to judge you, I just want to understand. And speaking of your children, I think I hear them calling for attention."

"Yes, it's time to feed them, and they probably also need changing. If you could bring them over, I'll do it and still keep my promise to Xena."

Melosa stood, and shortly after was back with two bundles in her arms. She inquisitively looked at her sister and asked. "But they're human."

"And they're girls. I don't know how and why it happened but Phantes tells me that we should take it as a gift from the gods." The babies were quickly fed and cared for, and soon were contentedly slumbering on the big bed, next to their mother and their aunt.

Queen Melosa finally came back to their central subject. "I know, when I sent you to the western border we didn't see eye to eye on a lot of things, namely issues concerning traditional Amazon law and justice, but that's no reason to simply disappear."

"That's not why I didn't come back, Mel, please believe me. I always knew that you did what you thought was right, and though I didn't understand it then, I do now. You can't lead an army by committee. And sometimes physical punishment is the only way to reach people as physical and hands on as the Amazons.

"No, we certainly would have had more discussions, in the council and in private but with time and experience I would have understood. -- I didn't come back because... We were five, and when we came to the western border Velaska used us as target practice. At first we didn't know who attacked us. We were shot upon, attacked from behind, my sisters died one after the other, and there was nothing I could do."

"But Terreis, Velaska was crazy, it wasn't your fault."

"My head knows that, now, but my heart still believes that I failed my sisters, my tribe, and my Queen. That's why I didn't come back. I was afraid to see the disappointment in your eyes. I'm sorry, Mel."

"I think I understand but I hope from now on, you won't be a stranger to us. You don't plan on running away again, right?"

"No, Queen Melosa. I can't change what happened in the past but over the years I also learned that my remorse also shouldn't keep me from remembering the good times. And I think I really would like to have the chance to reconnect with this part of the past, my sister."

"I'd like this very much, little sis. -- Hey, you still have a story to tell!"

"Guess I do." The younger woman took a deep breath. "I remember crawling away from the dead bodies of my sisters. I tended to my wounds, without even thinking about it. Hunting was out because of my broken leg and the blood loss, but somehow I survived. I suppose I had good teachers. Anyhow, between feeling sorry for myself and feeling guilty, I just couldn't get myself to go back and face my sisters."

"I walked away, as far away from Amazon territory as possible -- and I ended up in Corinth where the Conqueror was recruiting for her campaign against Persia. I joined her army as a scout, and soon began to understand why her soldiers were so loyal to her. On the return journey we became friends. Don't get me wrong, she was my commanding officer but we also talked and argued and had fun."

"One year later, we heard that the skirmishes between Amazons and Centaurs were becoming more frequent and more dangerous. Xena sent me and a couple of others on a reconnaissance mission, and we found that the rumours were true."

"One of the things I'll always regret. Eponin just had been named the new weapons' master. One of the other women felt more worthy; she challenged her and was defeated, soundly. She was relegated from the Royal guard and joined the hunters. I thought she had learned her lesson but I was wrong. It was almost like a repeat performance of what had happened with Velaska. She managed to convince some of the hunters to go and attack the Centaurs to finally push both of our nations into an all out war. That started the rumours."

"Yes, I know. I'm sorry you had to go through all of this. With me at the village it might never have happened."

"Stop it, Ter. It's useless to cry about spilled water. It happened. And thanks to Xena, we now are the better for it. When we heard of her army approaching our borders it brought us and the Centaurs together because we now had a common enemy -- or so we thought."

"Yes, I know. That's what she wanted you and the rest of the world to think. She went here in force, and all of her advisers thought she would destroy the Amazons and the Centaurs once and for all. And for a while, that's what I also thought, though she had told me from the beginning that she wasn't out to harm either one or the other. With part of the army in the background, she had all the incentive she needed to get you to talk."

"Oh yes, I know, she did. Though I never understood why. To consolidate her reign it would have been better to let us and the Centaurs fight it out, another frontier fort and all would have been said and done."

"That's what her advisers and her commanders also told her. She only told them that she had other plans for both nations. I decided to wait and see what she wanted to do. And there was never a sign that she wanted to attack the Amazons, so once again I trusted her. She sent me to the Centaurs as mediator and Phantes was the one dealing with you. We got to know each other, and finally we began to talk -- and fall in love. That's all there is to say."

"I'm sure there's more to it than that but I can wait. But I still don't understand why. Over the passed two moons I got to know Xena pretty well, I think but still... She's not the easiest women to read -- and this slave thing was basically her idea."

"Sounds like her. She had personal reasons."

"The boy with the sword who can walk through the tree tops?"

"Solan, yes, he not only has her eyes."

Less than five candelights later, Xena was crouching on the sturdy branch that the cage holding the blue eyed boy was hanging from. She got his attention by using one of the Amazon's bird calls. After tossing him the key, she tried to loosen the knot of the cord the cage was held by without causing the whole thing to simply crash to the ground. It didn't work. While Solan still fumbled with the key, the tall warrior uncoiled her whip. The tip wrapped itself around the ceiling bars of the cage, and she slung the other end around the branch to gain more leverage.

The whip was too short to lower the cage all the way down, so she began to pull it upwards. Solan finally managed to open the padlock holding the cage's door but instead of trying to get out as fast as possible, he reached for his sword, causing the cage to swing forwards and back.

Having cut the original cord, Xena needed the strength of both of her arms to hold and steady the heavy cage with her son. The boy finally took hold of the weapon. The freely swinging door banged loudly against the blade and attracted the attention of the guards. Xena saw one of them aiming a crossbow at the boy's chest, and to her, the world dropped into slow motion.

This was not going according to plan. She gave the agreed-upon signal to the others, a hunting hawk's cry, fastened the whip, flipped out of the tree, and caught the crossbow bolt before it had a chance to get near the boy's skin. At the same moment, the oil-soaked hay burst into flames spreading instantly to the rest of the hay supplies and sending the horses running in all directions. The raven-haired woman snatched another three bolts out of the air before she managed to get Solan out of the cage and down on the ground.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw the rest of the children being taken care of by the other members of the rescue party. A group of five soldiers was now charging her. She roughly shoved Solan behind her body, and silently cursed herself for not seeing them sooner. They already were too close to effectively use her chakram. Nevertheless, she unhooked it from her waist and at the same time unsheathed her sword. Her blade repelled the attack of three of her opponents while the round weapon cut the throats of the other two in one swift motion. She heard the boy's surprised gasp. A line of archers formed about thirty paces away, and before they even had a chance to ready their bows or take aim, those were cut to pieces by Xena's flying weapon.

One of the archers then shouted a warning about their other prisoners also escaping, and Xena used the ensuing confusion to give her son a boost up towards the treetop. She then somersaulted over one of the men trying to best her from behind and knocked him unconscious with the hilt of her sword. The better part of Dagnine's men had turned their attention to the children's escape. Xena was about to taunt them, when the voice of their leader rang throughout the encampment.

"Get Xena and her brat! The others are not important. I want Xena!" He yelled at the top of his lungs with his hands still firmly bound by his own leather strap.

The woman warrior dispatched another two of his minions, propelled herself upwards, seemingly without any kind of effort, and disappeared behind a curtain of leaves. She found Solan huddled against the tree trunk. There was something akin to astonishment in his eyes but for the most part they reflected worry and anguish. "Xena is hurt. We have to get him out of here."

"Don't worry, Solan. Kaleipus, Phantes and some other friends are already taking care of him and the others. To make it easier for them, I'll need your help, Solan. We have to get the men to follow us, not our friends. Terreis is a good...."

She was cut short by Dagnine's triumphant voice. "They're stuck up there in the tree. Get the archers and crossbows ready. I want them to nail down every single leaf moving out of order." Without needing to see him, Xena knew that he now was straightening his shoulders and taking a deep breath. His voice was almost imperceptibly higher when he continued. "Xena! I'll get you. I'll get you both. I'll have you down on your knees, begging for the life of your son. But he'll die with your own sword piercing his heart, just like I killed Borias with his own weapon. The last thing you'll ever see in this life will be Solan dying -- and the blood of your son will be on your hands, Xena."

The wide-eyed look on Solan's face told the tall warrior that she had a lot of explaining to do. She was as unprepared for the warlord's revelations as the boy was, but she also knew that now wasn't the right time or place. They still had to get out of the camp, and had to bind the enemy's

attention on their own escape giving the others a better chance.

So, she locked eyes with him, nodded, and whispered. "Later. -- Do you see the low-hanging branch to your right? I want you to use it to get down, hurry to the other side, and take to the next tree. That's the easy part. I also want you to make them believe that you're hurt. Give them the impression that we're easy pickings. I'll keep them busy while you get away and also distract them from the others. We have to hurry, so... Solan." He still looked at her with disbelieving eyes but finally nodded.

Solan jumped down the low branch, tucked his body in a roll, and quickly went towards the next tree line at the edge of the camp, with a pronounced limp. Xena wasn't at all sure if it really had been play-acting. The archers once again positioned to cut them down broke rank when they saw the boy, and hurried to catch him. The tall warrior flipped down in their midst and began to take them out one after the other.

The camp was in an uproar. Some of the men tried to capture the few horses that hadn't run away yet. Others were cut down by Amazon arrows seemingly coming out of nowhere. There was no sign of the other children. Instincts honed in hundreds of battles made Xena duck just in time to escape a sword thrust from behind, Dagnine's sword.

"That's really disappointing, Daggy-boy. Can't do any better, can you? Still lousy as a swordsman." She taunted him. "I'm not nearly as easy to kill as women and children. If you want me, you'll have to come and get me." Sweeping her left foot around, she knocked him from his feet, jumped over his prone body, and with a series of cart-wheels was at the edge of the forest, only two feet away from where Solan still was hiding. A few Amazon hand signals let him take off towards the mountain range, and Xena sent a silent 'thank you' to Terreis for teaching him so well. The warrior followed close behind, smiling grimly at Dagnine's shouted commands.

"Leave the damned horses alone. I want that bitch captured, her and her bastard son. -- Send a runner to the second unit. Tell them to spread out. We'll encircle her like the wild animal she is. Hurry, you stupid fools."

For the next couple of candlemarks they made good time but their pursuers still were within hearing distance. Xena signalled the boy to continue on while she rigged up a few surprises. She had just finished with the last of her traps when her sensitive hearing picked up a faint sound that immediately sent her running as fast as she could.

The boy must have run into a group of enemy soldiers coming from the other side. Xena cursed herself for leaving him on his own, her mind racing with scenarios, one bloodier than the other, while running along. Just before the underbrush became too thick for a horse to safely pass through, there was a gap between the trees. A seasoned Amazon warrior wouldn't have had any problem at all, but to a child it called for a tricky manoeuvre.

Solan was on the ground, entangled in a net in a circle of six men with their swords pointed at

him. They were arguing about the best way to get their prisoner back to the encampment.

Xena mentally kicked herself for allowing this to happen. She took a deep breath and launched herself from her vantage point in the tree top, yelling her famous battle cry. The startled men took two steps back when she easily landed between them, effectively shielding the boy with her own body. She tossed one of her boot daggers towards him, so that he could cut himself free -- and then the fight was on.

By the time Solan had freed himself from the net, there were five bodies on the ground, three dead, two moaning and bleeding while their last companion preferred to run.

Xena helped Solan to his feet. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, just embarrassed. I should have seen them; I should have focused on what was going on in front of me. I... I'm sorry!"

"Don't be sorry, just improve." She answered with a smile to take the sting out of her words. "They came from the front, from the mountain range, didn't they?" The boy nodded, and Xena knocked out the two survivors after making sure that their injuries weren't life-threatening. "All right. That's what we'll do. We'll prepare a false trail for them to let them think the ambush forced us to change direction. This way we'll get them to search the whole forest for someone no longer there. Then we'll double back and pass through their lines."

For once everything went according to plan. They encountered no other patrols and soon found themselves at the foot of the mountains. There were about fifteen men mulling around, probably waiting for new orders. The boy -- who until then had been exceptionally level-headed -- now panicked and darted towards one of the cave entrances to the left of the men, leaving Xena no choice but to follow him.

Their run didn't go unnoticed but surprisingly none of the men even made an attempt to go after them. They were in a small cavern from which three tunnels departed in different directions. Xena stood just inside the entrance and listened to one of the soldiers giving orders.

"You two, over there by the fire, go and find General Dagnine. Tell him that the woman and the boy just ran in a cave. We now have them in a trap. There's no other way out of the cave system the boy ran into. We'll wait for his arrival but I want the entrance prepared to be closed for good. As far as I'm concerned they both can rot in there. This will be your job." Xena imagined him pointing towards a couple of his companions. "Us others will get our bows and crossbows ready in case the woman is stupid enough to attempt an escape. Even the mighty Conqueror can't ward off ten arrows at the same time."

"This time, I really fucked up. Now, we will get killed, one way or the other. I only hope at least the others got away." The boy mumbled after also hearing the soldier's words.

"Solan, I'm sure Kaleipus wouldn't be happy to hear you use such foul language. And I admit that we do have a problem here, but that's no reason to give up." She smiled at him in

encouragement. "Dagnine certainly won't just close up the entrance. We hurt his pride by escaping. As soon as he arrives, he'll insist on going in and get us. He wants to see us dead but he also wants to do the deed himself. His pride will overrule his reason. That's why we have to go further in and explore these tunnels as best as we can. We have to find a way to defend ourselves against his men."

"How can you know what he'll do?"

"I fought him, and I fought with him. The way a person fights can tell a lot about them, and from what I saw today, he hasn't changed since I last saw him about six summers ago. He always had the tendency to let personal issues come in the way of reason. This time will be no different. Let's go and find a way out of here. I promised Tyldus that I'll take good care of you, and I never go back on my word. Choose one tunnel to explore."

"But we don't have any torches."

"I know, we'll simply have to use our other senses. It will be okay. Just stay close behind me. Which one?"

"The left one."

As soon as they stepped in the tunnel, the last remnants of daylight vanished. Xena's right hand kept contact with the rough wall while her left held the sword and moved it rhythmically from the left to the right; each time lightly brushing the stone. The sounds and echoes told her that they were walking almost straight ahead with a slight incline downwards and to the left. There were no other tunnels crossing.

The boy and the tall warrior walked on for what her innate sense of time told Xena were about three candlemarks. By now the others should be easily out of reach of Dagnine and his men. They probably would arrive back at the village in the middle of the night. She was brought out of her musings by Solan's stomach announcing its presence.

The woman sheathed her sword and began to rummage in her right belt pouch. She only had some dried jerky and a couple of trail bars but it would have to do. Xena handed him one of the bars, leaving the jerky for later. They didn't have any water and the dried meat was slightly salty. They stopped to eat their meagre meal and then continued on at the boy's insistence.

The tunnel they followed got constantly steeper. Soon Xena had to once again put her weapon away, and tried to steady herself with both of her hands touching the rough walls. She hoped for a reprieve but another half candlemark later the ground also got slippery. She could hear the boy's increased breathing.

Xena slipped but managed to stay upright; then she stopped dead in her tracks. A whiff of slightly colder and more humid air suddenly came from below, and all her instincts told her that there was danger ahead. Unfortunately, for Solan it was too late to stop. He lost his balance and together they tumbled down a hole in the ground.

Feeling the ground coming nearer she automatically prepared to tuck herself in a ball and roll out of the way. She slowly stood, and found herself unharmed. Solan had a harder time to get back on his feet but at first sight seemed no worse for wear. To her surprise the walls of this new tunnel were embedded with some sort of crystal that somehow emitted enough light to see where they were going. They followed the broad passageway and soon came to a large cavern. She still didn't have any idea where the light came from but in there one could see almost as good as in plain daylight.

Solan suddenly stood and sat down on a boulder. "Ah, wait! My arm hurts a bit."

Xena bent down, examined his arm, and knelt in front of him. "Solan, your arm is broken. I have to deaden the pain while I set it."

She hit a pressure point at his neck. "It doesn't hurt." The boy commented with surprise.

"I can only cut off the feeling for a little while." The tall woman answered, and kept on talking while she was working on him. "When I put it back, it's gonna hurt worse than before, okay?"

"Okay." Solan said after swallowing hard.

"I need a splint." Xena said while reaching for his scabbard.

"No!!"

"What good is a sword without an arm to hold it?" She pulled the weapon out of its sheath, looked at the hilt for the fraction of a heartbeat, and gave it to her son.

Solan reluctantly nodded. Xena fastened the sheath around his arm with some leather straps decorating it. While she was working the boy asked. "Why did you come for me?"

"I thought that maybe you could use my help. You were very brave at the camp. You didn't freeze."

"I was too scared to freeze. And besides, it was me that got us into this mess. I panicked." He answered avoiding her eyes.

Xena crooked her index finger, put it under his chin, and lifted it up, so that he could see the sincerity in her eyes. "Solan, it's all right to be afraid every once in a while. Even hardened warriors sometimes have a fit of panic. I saw it happen. It's a perfectly normal reaction when one was in a very dangerous situation, and then the tension lessens, and suddenly he finds himself faced with even more danger."

"You didn't panic." He stubbornly insisted.

"No, not this time. Over the years, I got used to situations like this. They tend to make me more aggressive, usually."

"You would have gone after the men outside if it weren't for me, isn't it?"

Another smile graced her face. "Yes, I probably would have tried to get out this way, but the man we overheard was right. Even I can't catch ten arrows at the same time. I would have tried but by now I could have been dead. Sometimes fear can be a voice of reason. All day today you were very brave, you showed very good instincts. Most people react the other way. Your father also was very brave."

"He was a great warrior." Solan gave back with pride.

"His bravery wasn't in being a warrior. It came from knowing what was in his heart. He recognised what was right, and he stood up for it." Xena answered softly.

"Against you."

"Yes, against me. That was very important to him, even though he and I were very close friends for a very long time."

"I don't wanna talk about my father anymore." The boy said evasively, but after a while curiosity got the better of him. "Before he became good, did he hurt a lot of people?"

Xena first swallowed and then answered. "Yes, he did, but if it weren't for him the Centaurs wouldn't be alive now. Kaleipus, your friends, they'd all be gone."

"You would have killed them." It wasn't really a question.

"Yes, I would have killed them all." The still kneeling woman said with sadness in her voice. "Thanks to Borias I didn't do it, and for that I owe him more than you'll ever know." She now was finished fussing with his make-shift splint. "This is the best I can do for you right now." She stood up and sat next to him on the boulder, ready to undo the pressure point. "This is going to hurt. Ready?"

After she was done, tears were pouring down his eyes, and she took him protectively in her arms, gently rocking the smaller body. To her surprise he didn't stiffen but leaned into the touch. Xena knew that they should get going once again but she also was reluctant to let go of him. Some candledrops later, he asked. "Is it true what this man said, their leader."

"Yes, it's true. Borias is your father but you were born from my body."

"Why did my uncle lie to me?"

This was a question she hadn't expected. "It was the only way to guarantee your safety, at the

time. When I came back to the Centaurs to sign the peace treaty with the Amazons your uncle and I agreed that we should keep it this way. We didn't want you to become a target. Apart from Kaleipus and me, there only were two other people who knew the truth."

"But why? Didn't you love me?"

Her warrior's instincts told her to make him believe that she left him with the Centaurs to get rid of an unwanted burden. This way he probably would hate her but he also would stay with them, and thus stay safe for the rest of his life. But her heart didn't listen to her complicated reasoning. So, she answered. "I loved you, I still do, Solan." Her gaze for a moment turned towards the ground then she once again found the boy's eyes that still reflected confusion and hurt. "It's hard to explain. Ten summers ago, I wasn't a very nice person. I only would have ended up hurting you, just like you were hurt now, just because of me."

"But...."

"Solan, please listen to me. I'm sure you heard a lot of stories about the Conqueror, about the Destroyer of Nations, didn't you?" He hesitantly shook his head in confirmation. "Do you really think that someone like this, someone with evil and darkness in her heart should have been allowed to raise a child? It was better to let you believe that both of your parents are dead."

"My father could have helped you."

"He tried, Solan, I didn't let him, I was so obsessed with conquering the world, I didn't listen to reason, and I didn't listen to my heart. Borias was a very wise man. He found his way a lot sooner than I did. But perhaps he really would have been able to change my mind, had he still been alive. I'll nev..." Xena fell silent and put a finger to her lips. The echo of heavy footsteps reached their resting place. "I'm sorry, we have to go. We'll talk some more later."

Solan insisted on carrying his father's sword in his free hand. The big cavern only had one exit. Some sort of doorway, so small Xena had to duck through. They found themselves in a great hall with an altar at its centre, highlighted by an opening in the ceiling.

The boy whispered with awe in his voice. "The temple of Ixion."

"One of them. When my men searched the mountain range, they found at least three of them but we never located the stone."

The altar was bare except for a tripod like receptacle for the stone -- about one foot tall, its lower ends are curved upwards like ivy seeking purchase at a tree trunk; in the middle six brass bands are forming a globe to symbolise mother earth, and three other vines are curved upwards as a resting place for the stone.

"Your father found the stone, all these summers ago. All the evil from Ixion's wicked Centaur is

in that stone." Xena continued without telling the whole truth about the powers of the stone. "He hid it to keep me or anyone else from finding it."

The fading impression of a big hand attracted the boy's attention. "These hand prints -- that means, they're my fathers?" He asked while putting his left hand in the marks.

"Yeah."

"Wow!"

"We got to find a way out before Dagnine and his men get here."

Solan turned his head from the contemplation of his hand and the faded prints back to Xena. "But you can take them on. What you did on top was incredible."

Xena didn't answer but contemplated the sturdy air roots descending from it. Most of them were firmly connected to the wall. The tall warrior hoisted the boy on top of the altar, told him to hold tight around her neck and began to pull them both upwards, using one of the few root vines dangling freely. The sound of running feet prompted her to climb faster but suddenly a dagger cut through their rescue line. They dropped back to the altar while Dagnine shouted. "Grab the boy."

Xena flipped to the ground and launched herself sideways, bringing down two thirds of the warlord's escort. She immediately jumped back on her feet and kicked one man straight in the chest, quickly followed by another equally effective kick. A third one ran straight into her elbow. A cartwheel and a flip brought her back to Solan's side who still was standing on the altar.

Dagnine threw another dagger, aimed at Solan's heart, but the woman warrior easily caught it. His men were down, writhing on the ground or not moving at all, so Xena tried another escape. She negligently flipped the dagger back towards his owner, without trying to kill or maim him but causing the scarred man to jump back in panic.

She put her left arm around Solan's waist, and launched the both of them straight upwards. She grabbed the vine high enough to rely on the power of her legs to hold them securely at their rescue line and used her free right arm to pull them the rest of the way to the ceiling. She didn't look down, but her ears told her that the enemy soldiers were slowly getting back on their feet, and she knew that she had to hurry.

Chapter Six: Allied Forces

With effort she propelled the boy over her head; he suddenly dangled half-ways over the edge of the ceiling opening. He tried to also get his legs over, and lost the grip on his father's sword. He instinctively reached for it with his broken arm but only managed to loosen the leather strips

holding his make-shift splint in place. Sword and sheath fell to the ground. The hilt of the weapon first hit the altar, then fell to the ground, and a big green stone popped out and rolled over the edge directly in front of Dagnine's feet.

The scarred man bent down and picked it up. A cruel smile distorted his ugly face. "Xena, I have the stone. I have the Ixion stone." He was shouting and closed his fist around his treasure. "This is your end, Xena. As soon as all the Amazons and Centaurs are killed, I'll come for you. Run away as long as you can."

Holding the sword of her former lover in her hands after her first encounter with her son, Xena had known about the treasure hidden in its hilt. She mentally was kicking herself for not having better taken care of the weapon. When one of Dagnine's men grabbed another root, she had to forcibly shake herself out of her state of shock. She quickly dug two flint stones out of her supply punch and set fire to the vines. This way they wouldn't have to worry about being chased any further.

She helped Solan to get on his feet but the boy's eyes still were locked on Dagnine, the stone, and his sword. He whispered. "The Ixion stone, now we are doomed. I didn't know."

"Solan, look at me." The boy didn't move. "Please, look at me." He slowly turned his head towards the tall woman. "Yes, that's better. The fight isn't over yet. Ixion's evil creation will never be able to overcome all the good the Centaurs stand for."

"But..."

"Solan, we found a way out of the darkness of the caves. We'll also find a way to survive Dagnine's madness. Dagnine now will turn himself into the Great Centaur but this makes him neither immortal nor invulnerable. We'll find a way to outwit him. That's a promise."

"But how? You don't know what he's going to do."

"We will survive, Solan, you and me, the Centaurs and the Amazons. This is all my fault. I knew the stone was in the hilt of Borias' sword, of your sword. I should have better taken care of it."

"How did you know?"

"I could feel it." Not wanting to explain any further, she continued. "I never lost a war, and I certainly won't start now. There's too much riding on this one."

"Tyldus says that arrogance always is the first step towards defeat." The boy defiantly answered.

"He's right, but I'm sure, he also taught you that a warrior without self-confidence would do better to stay at the fireplace than venture to a battlefield." She answered while keeping one ear on the retreating footsteps of Dagnine's men. "I don't have a plan, yet, but together with Kaleipus, Tyldus, and Queen Melosa we will find a way to keep the Centaur village safe. -- There's about two candlemarks of daylight left. We should get going."

"Okay. What do we do with my arm? It really hurts. I think I twisted it while rolling over the edge. Can we use your scabbard to make another splint?" He said trying valiantly to keep his evident discomfort from his face.

"I'm afraid, no. Mine doesn't have any leather strips to fasten it with. It's clipped to my armour. But I can hear what sounds like a small creek nearby. If my memory is correct, there, we'll find a more permanent solution."

Solan didn't know what she was talking about but followed her without arguing as she purposely strode through the forest and then along the narrow but powerful stream towards the tree line. About fifty paces further a hillock of about six feet height and 25 feet length stretched towards the water. Its other end touched the base of the mountains.

Xena searched the area with her eyes. First, she found an almost round stone and placed it next to Solan on the ground. Then she brought another stone, flat and rather large, and positioned it next to the first one. She then went to the top of the hillock, knelt down and quickly was back with an armload full of white crystals. She went back three times to gather more. The tall warrior once again knelt down and began to ground the crystals using both stones thus creating a fine powder.

Solan observed with fascination while she proceeded to put the powder in a small hole in the ground, not more than an indentation really. Finally, he asked. "What are you doing?"

"It's for your arm. This stuff here is called plaster. It comes in a great variety of forms and can be used for a lot of things. Mixed with water, the powder first becomes a paste, and a few candledrops later it becomes hard, very hard." She answered while continuing with her work. "I first saw it in the Norse Lands. They use it to easier transport their injured after a battle. So, when one has to be carried for a long time, it can be done without putting any further strain on the bones or muscles. A lot of my men would have died on the way back from Persia without its help. It also can be used in construction work, if you put it between the stones of a wall, the wall becomes much more stable and solid. -- So, that's it."

"Where does it come from?"

"I don't know. I only know that it often is found where there are mountains, sometimes near former volcanoes, like here. It also is found next to lakes with saltwater. It works, that's all that counts. -- Solan, now I need you to be very brave. I once again have to set your arm."

"Will you use this jabbing thing?"

"It's called pressure points. Yes, I will, unless you don't want me to."

The boy vigorously denied her assumptions. "Kaleipus didn't raise a fool. Why should I feel pain when there's an easier way out. No, go on, do it."

"I knew you're a smart one." Xena answered with a smile. "But first we need something to put around your arm. I won't put this stuff directly on your skin." She then stood, loosened parts of her breast armour, took one of her daggers and cut through both straps holding the linen tunic she always wore under her leather dress. She wriggled out of the shirt, refastened the armour plates, and began to tear the cloth to hand wide stripes. "Now, we're ready to begin."

Xena once again deadened the nerves leading to his arm, and with a gut wrenching 'pop' realigned his bones. She bent the arm at the elbow and told Solan to hold it this way with the other hand. When the boy grabbed his wrist, she gently repositioned the grip to his fingers. She then wound the linen strips around his arm, careful to cover every square inch of skin, from the palm of his hand to over the elbow.

"Hold it this way. Now, comes the messy stuff." Forming a bucket with both hands, she quickly poured water over the plaster powder. Stirring it with a stick, she soon had a homogenous white paste. "All right, we now have to hurry. This stuff hardens faster than still water in the middle of winter." The tall warrior scooped up handfuls of the gooey substance and put it on the boys arm. Soon a smooth surface covered the broken limb, with wrist and elbow equally immobilised. Before the plaster cast had any chance to really harden she cut away some of it to give Solan more freedom of movement, especially at his hand and thumb.

"How does it feel?"

"It's really tight, and very hot. I don't think I can stand it for very long."

"The heat will go away in less than a quarter candlemark, and soon it also will get more comfortable. The plaster expands when it hardens, that's why it's so good for building. It won't be tight for long, but still will hold your arm securely. I have to undo the pressure points but now the pain won't be as great as it was before. The ends of your broken bone no longer grind one against the other, and your muscles no longer are needed to keep them still."

"Will you hold me while you do it?" Solan asked hesitantly.

She took him carefully in her arms, not really believing his request, put her fingers at his neck, and asked. "Tell me, Solan, when you're ill or injured, do you heal faster than your friends?"

"Yes. Aunt T says that's it's a gift of the Gods. Do you too?"

"Yes, I do. When I was a child, younger than you are now, I had a broken leg. To me, it took an eternity to mend, but in reality it only was half a moon, and later I learned broken limbs usually need at least twice or three times as much time. I think you'll be rid of this thing in no time at all." While speaking, she undid the pressure point, and was awarded with only a flinch from the boy.

Afterwards Xena and Solan followed the small river for another candlemark. Dusk was on them, and Xena spotted a big tree with comfortable branches that would make a great shelter for the night. She doubted that Dagnine would bother to send some of his soldiers on their trail but she also didn't want to take any chances, with Solan at the moment in no condition to outrun the enemy in the trees.

"We'll spend the night up there. Put your arm around my neck and hold on, I'll get us up." The tall woman bent her knees to give better access to the boy. He sneaked his arm over her shoulder but instead of holding on to her neck, he grabbed the breastplate of her armour.

Xena bent her knees further and propelled both of them straight upwards. Soon they were sitting on two sturdy branches next to each other half-ways up the tree. They were completely hidden from view, and the smaller branches around them would keep them from toppling over and falling down during the night.

Solan, however, had trouble finding a comfortable position, and finally asked somewhat annoyed. "Why did you have to make this damned thing so damned big? With my elbow and wrist free, I could have easily climbed this damned tree myself."

"You know, Solan, you should learn to put some variety in your cursing. Three times 'damned', that doesn't bode well for your imagination." Xena answered with a hint of amusement in her voice but Solan only glared at her in response. She smiled and continued.

"I know that you could have climbed this tree by yourself, even with your arm as it is. This way, it just was faster. With your wrist and elbow immobilised, your arm will heal faster, and it will be less painful. Give me your hand, I'll show you why."

The warrior woman undid the bracer on her right arm. "Now hold my arm a couple of inches over my wrist. That's how it feels when the wrist is kept still. Now, I'll move it, only a little bit, and you tell me what happens."

"Your arm moves along with your wrist." He loosened his grip but kept contact with her skin. "I think I understand. Moving the wrist, means to also move the broken part of my arm, and if it moves, it can't mend."

"Yes, that's it. I'm not very good with words but if you want to talk..."

"No, not now. I have a lot to think about."

"Okay, then let's try and catch some sleep. Tomorrow morning, I'll catch us some fish to eat, and then we'll head back to the village as fast as we can." The boy nodded and tried anew to find a comfortable spot. He sighed and closed his eyes, still visibly not at ease.

Xena loosened the clips holding her back- and breastplates in place and stacked the armour pieces next to her sword in a small fork. She told the boy to scoot forward and seated herself behind him. Her long arms pulled him back until he rested against her. He stiffened but didn't

resist. With one hand resting on his plaster cast and the other stroking his hair, she began to sing an old lullaby.

Lullaby and good night, in the sky stars are bright. Around your head flowers gay, set your slumbers till day. Close your eyes now and rest, may thy night be all blessed. Close your eyes now and rest, may thy night be all blessed.

Lullaby and good night, thy mother's delight. Handsome and brave, thy father's great pride. Close your eyes now and rest, may thy night be all blessed. Close your eyes now and rest, may thy night be all blessed.

Lullaby and good night, fates are smiling all right. Wisdom, love, honesty -- your future should be. Close your eyes now and rest, may thy night be all blessed. Close your eyes now and rest, may thy night be all blessed.

Lullaby and good night, in the sky stars are bright. Around your head flowers gay, set your slumbers till day. Close your eyes now and rest, may thy night be all blessed. Close your eyes now and rest, may thy night be all blessed.

His breath soon began to even out; he slightly turned in her protective arms until his head was snugly nestled under her chin. But to her the old song didn't bring peace but memories of the past.

During the final stages of the treaty negotiations, in the middle of the night Xena was sneaking through the streets of the Centaur village and to Kaleipus' hut. She simply wasn't able to resist the temptation and climbed through the window of Solan's room -- not for the first time.

This night, she found him high with fever. She silently cursed herself for not bringing her healer's kit. Solan's skin was burning and he was shivering violently. The fever was too high to simply let it run its course. She had no choice but to wake up the one-eyed Centaur in the next room to get the herbs she needed. He wasn't thrilled; actually she had a hard time to convince him to get what she needed. But when he saw that the boy was not sleeping but unconscious, he put his misgivings aside. Meanwhile, Xena washed his body with cold water, and put a fresh night shirt on him.

When Kaleipus finally came back to his hut, Xena prepared a strong tea. In order to make him swallow the concoction, she gently lifted him up, and slid behind him. She held him in her arms and was happy to have forgone her armour against her guard's advice. The Centaur was standing in the doorway but didn't interfere. About half a candlemark later, his eyes fluttered open. Both adults sighed in relief.

Xena had half expected him to shy away from her touch, but he didn't. He quickly fell asleep; his

breathing rhythm still wasn't like it should be. The healer in Xena, however, knew that she couldn't give him more of the powerful drug. So, she did the only thing she could think of. She sang.

In the predawn twilight, only candelights after the boy's fever had broken, the tall warrior slipped out of the house and returned to her camp.

Xena returned to the present when the boy in her arms moved slightly. She extended her senses as far as possible but couldn't hear or smell anything unusual. She didn't dare to sleep herself but she relished the feeling of having her son in her arms. Unwanted, her thoughts drifted back to the day he was born.

Borias had changed sides only a couple of days ago. He had betrayed her, and she didn't tolerate betrayal. She had ordered her men to capture him alive. Whatever they had shared, this wasn't something she was ready to forgive.

She knew, even without Borias' help, the total annihilation of the Centaurs was only a question of time, of days rather than quarter moons. There was no need to risk the life of her soldiers by senselessly attacking their stronghold. They only had to keep them in, and wait -- and that's what she intended to do.

She remembered the last time they had talked, sort of. He had talked. He had wanted to take her away from the army, to raise their child without war and violence. He wanted to give them a chance at peace and happiness -- but at the time she didn't understand. She wanted to rule the world, without regard for the price she or anyone else would have to pay. So, she had sent him away.

Later that evening, long after sunset, she was roused from sleep by the first contractions hitting her hard. At the time, she didn't know much about giving birth; only what she had overheard when her mother was called to a neighbour in labour or came back from helping one or the other of the village's women. She desperately tried to remember when the unmistakable sound of an attack snapped her back to reality. She immediately recognised Borias' battle yell and the sound of Centaur hooves. Her warrior's instincts sent her to her feet but half way up she collapsed at the pain suddenly ripping through her lower body and taking her breath away.

When she finally was able to leave her tent, the first wave of the Centaur's attack had been repelled by her men. She gave orders to clear up the camp and dispose of the corpses. Her eyes fell on the inert body of a man close to the fire ring next to the rear of her tent. Borias was

without his sword, he was lying with his face in the dirt. She carefully examined him. He had been stabbed from behind. Another contraction hit her, and she knew that she had to hurry to reach her hide-out before her water broke. She instructed her lieutenants to hold the current position, to defend themselves if need be, and never to attack on their own. She told them that Borias once had been favoured by the god of war himself and that Ares also had wanted him alive to be punished for his betrayal. Now, with Borias dead, she had to seek the council of her patron god.

This night, almost ten summers later, she still wondered why Dagnine and his peers so easily had accepted her story. Even more surprising was the fact that Ares hadn't tried to use the potential power her words gave him over her. With her calling him her 'patron' he could have pressed his point -- and at the time he probably would have succeeded. Her almost insane ambition would have made her easy prey; she would have welcomed his help and gladly pledged herself to him. She slightly shuddered at the thought because now she knew that the god of war never acted in the interest of mortals but only in his own -- and if she could help it, Xena of Amphipolis never would be the plaything of the gods.

Her fingers played with Solan's light brown strands of hair. Borias had told her about his childhood and youth, so she knew that given time, they would darken but never would be as dark as her own. He also had the same cute little dimples at the corners of his mouth. A sigh escaped her lips when she once again couldn't keep her mind from wandering back to the past; though her memory was sketchy in some areas.

When she jumped from her horse's back at her chosen destination, her water finally broke. The site she had chosen had thick bushes almost as tall as she obscuring the view to her hide-out. A narrow path led up to what from a distance looked like a rock overhang but at closer inspection was a cave with an entrance area big enough to house her horse and a big fireplace, a few yards into the cave there was spring water pouring out of the left wall. Xena managed to unsaddle her grey mare before the next contraction sent her to the hard ground. She had everything prepared days ago, food, firewood, a stack of linens, a big cooking pot, and other items.

Xena somehow managed to light the already prepared fire and to unroll the sleeping furs. The next contraction came and she knew that it was too soon, way too soon. For the first time since leaving Chin she tried to use one of the meditation techniques she had learned from Lao Ma -- and it really was working. Her breathing evened out, her stomach muscles relaxed; she soon was able to get up and put some water to heat.

With the next contraction she suddenly became aware that not all was as it should be, something

was very wrong. Xena panicked. She tried to stand up and find help, someone more experienced but she didn't even make it to her knees. The same kind of pain that already had got to her in her tent now was back with a vengeance. She instinctively curled in a fetal position, well, as close as she could get to one; wishing to be able to knock herself out. She wasn't prone to imagination, else her mind would have been busy conjuring up visions of herself bleeding to death, a stillborn child or other horrors. Then she probably would have missed the subtle change of position of the baby. It wasn't enough to get it out yet but it was a beginning, a promising beginning.

Having arrived just after daybreak, the sun was now almost at its turning point. She had managed to get rid of her clothes and was lying on her sleeping furs. An herbal tea had her muscles relaxed. Her eyes were closed and her hands roaming over her swollen stomach. The baby still hadn't completely turned and she tried to force the issue from the outside. She felt the tiny body squirming in protest, something, a foot or a knee, connected solidly with the back wall of her uterus. She shot upwards in reaction as if trying to protect herself against an enemy, attempted to once again even out her breathing, and saw the blood oozing out, covering her thighs and the sleeping furs.

Not for the first time this day Xena was thinking about her mother and that she undoubtedly would know what was wrong and what to do against it. She reached for the linen scraps she had prepared for the baby. Another contraction threw her on the furs before she could put them between her legs to stem the flow of blood. It was stronger than the last time and made the baby shift another couple of inches. By the third time, the bleeding had slowed down to a trickle and the body of her child finally was in place.

From listening to her mother speaking with other women she knew that now would be the right time to push and she did, methodically clenching her well developed stomach muscles. She felt the baby move. Another kick or punch sent a wave of pain through her whole body and she lost consciousness. She opened her eyes to darkness, the roaring fire reduced to smouldering embers she soon had rekindled. She vaguely became aware that she was running a fever when the next contraction hit. She had barely enough presence of mind to push with all her might.

She felt first the head and then the shoulders slipping out of her. The rest of the body soon followed, and she was acting on instinct alone: cutting the umbilical cord, registering that the baby was a male, cleaning his face and making him cry out in protest, disposing of the after-birth by tossing it in the fire, making him drink, and falling asleep with his tiny body on her chest.

Xena took stock of her surroundings and her body before opening her eyes to the midday sun glaring down on her. Everything seemed fine; the fire was out, her horse calmly stood nearby. Her hands were resting on a warm skin. She tried to sit up but her muscles refused, she felt weak as a kitten. After numerous attempts she managed to roll to the side, gently putting her son on the sleeping furs next to her and shielding him from the sun with her body. Using a water skin and some more of the linen she cleaned him up as best as she could. He was hungry. She knew it wasn't the best idea letting him drink from her as long as she was running a fever but she also didn't have any other options. He latched onto her nipple, and the next thing she knew was waking up to his squirming body, obviously uncomfortable in his dirty diapers.

He fell asleep immediately after being changed and fed. Xena looked at him. She knew the eyes behind his closed eyelids were blue, as blue as her own. She didn't know if it was because most babies have blue eyes or if it was hereditary. His hair was blonde, like his father's had been when he was still a child. It hurt to think about him, so instead she concentrated on counting his fingers and toes. Finally she took stock of her own condition. She didn't try and stop the fever, taking it as a sign that her body was busy healing itself. The bleeding had stopped, surprisingly there wasn't anything else torn. As weak as she still felt, she must have lost a lot of blood. She had to clean herself and the furs up not to attract any scavengers, shield the baby from the sun and get something to eat.

She still wasn't able to sit up normally but painfully got on all fours and then forced herself up in a sitting position. Her abdominal muscles screamed from the abuse, it hurt to breathe and she was light headed. She tried to push herself to her feet, lost her balance, and crashed face first back on top of her furs. The sun was going down when she finally came to. The baby was crying. Xena took a deep breath and was surprised to find the fever gone. When the last rays of sunlight disappeared behind the horizon, he was once again sleeping. She prepared and lit another fire, unrolled the second sleeping fur, lit a torch and went to clean herself and the furs. She also washed the used diapers. Her body was still aching but since Caesar she had trained herself in putting the pain out of her conscious mind.

They quickly developed a routine. Feeding, changing diapers, sleeping. With every candlemark she grew more and more attached to the boy -- and she finally accepted that Borias had been right. 'If he stays with you, he will become a target.' -- 'If he stays with you, he will see things no child should ever see.' -- 'If he stays with you, he will become like...'. His honesty still hurt but it had been the truth. She wasn't fit to be a mother; there was too much darkness in her life and in her soul.

But what to do? Take him to her mother, letting him grow up at the inn? She knew he would be loved but she also knew that it wasn't really safe. Not safe enough for her son. Since her return to Greece there already had been three attempts on her mother's life, intercepted by the spies she had left at Amphipolis when taking to the sea two summers ago. She couldn't burden them with the responsibility for a child; it was hard enough to keep an eye on Cyrene and Toris. At first, giving him to the Centaurs seemed absurd and insane. They had no reason whatever to protect her son, on the other hand, they would do everything to protect the son of Borias.

Xena didn't know if it was her innate sense of time that did wake her or the unfamiliar weight resting on her chest. She relished the feeling of her son tucked against her body, but before her mind could wander to speculations about how it would have been to see him grow up to the smart, kind-hearted youth he now was, Solan moved in her arms trying to ward off the pre-dawn chill. She didn't want to lose this feeling, but she also couldn't ignore the fact that they had to get going to warn the village about Dagnine as soon as possible.

As she had promised the day before she offered to catch and grill some fish before starting their journey once again. Solan refused, stating that they now had something more important to do, and they easily could find some berries or nuts on the road. Once again she was amazed at the similarities between her son and herself. There also was enough jerky left to tide them over for another two days, so they would be able to cut short their rest periods. Xena would have felt better if she at least had been able to fill a couple of water-skins but she didn't have any. Finding water shouldn't be a problem in this area, but still ...

The fastest way to get from one point to another in this case wasn't a straight line. They first had to follow the mountain crest, a few hundred feet below it. The sun was up by now, and the two of them kept a steady pace. The pride Xena was feeling for her son was growing with almost every step. Finally they came into view of a pass. She knew this was the only way to enter the Centaur's valley from this side. It was extremely steep and tended to be prone to rock-falls, so it was unlikely to serve as an access route for an army or anything else except for mountain goats. That's why Xena almost automatically discarded it.

They continued on for another half candlemark when Solan suddenly stopped in mid-step. "Look, there's a big black cat over there. What's it called?"

Xena turned her head. The panther she had 'talked' to only a few nights ago was sitting there, the tall female. They were farther away than even the most powerful arrow could ever fly but still she was able to feel the animal's eyes burning on her skin -- and then her black head turned towards the mountain pass.

"It's a panther, Solan. Usually they are very dangerous animals, but this one is special. I think it's trying to show us something. We should go and have a look." From where they stood the pass looked like the mouth of a dragon, wide open and turned towards the sky, complete with pointed teeth.

"But we have to hurry and warn the others about Dagnine and the Ixion stone."

"I know, but I also learned to trust my instincts. And right now they're telling me to take a look at the other side of the pass. We can go together or you can stay here and wait for me. It'll take me about four candlemarks to scout the area and get back."

"I'll go with you. I don't want to stay alone." They hurried towards the pass, with Solan doing his best to keep up with Xena's longer stride. One and a half candlemark later they had reached the great boulder where the boy had spotted the panther. The animal was gone.

Another half candlemark later, they crested the pass. The steep incline that should have been there, had been replaced by some sort of man-made ramp, granting easy access to any kind of vehicle. But this wasn't the only reason to worry. At the foot of the mountain was a large army camp. It was obviously well ordered, the tents laid out in neat rows, guard towers evenly spaced all around the encampment. The tree trunks at the foot of the mountain were witness that they had been there for a long time already -- and what the wood had been used for was also more than obvious. In the centre of the camp was a whole arsenal of siege engines. She counted 35

campfires and knew that on top of Dagnine's forces they now would have to deal with another army of about 350 men. Xena longed to get down there and take a closer look but in plain daylight and with her son to worry about she didn't dare.

Without uttering a single word, she let the boy back to their side of the mountain. "Solan, we have to hurry back. We have to tell Tyldus and Kaleipus about this new threat." She sank to one knee. "I want you to step behind me. Put your arm around my neck, and your legs around my waist. I'll carry you, this way we'll be faster."

"No, I can walk on my own. I can run. I won't slow you down, I promise. My arm is broken, not my legs. How would you feel in my place?"

"All right, you win, Solan. We'll run together."

They soon arrived at the foot of the mountain and started into the forest. It probably wasn't the safest route to take but it would bring them straight back to the village. Solan visibly was running as fast as he was able to but for Xena it only was a leisurely jog. Half a candlemark later, the boy's foot got caught in a root. He stumbled, lost his balance, and fell. He instantly tried to get back up but his leg didn't support his weight, and he grunted in pain. One look at his ankle told her that it was sprained and should be soaked in cold water. Unfortunately, right now, they didn't have the time.

This time, he didn't protest to being carried. She had to look where to put her feet but nonetheless quickly picked up speed. Around midday, they stopped for a short break at the edge of a small river. When they started again, Xena was making full use of her long legs. Though she could feel the strain from the additional weight on her back, her ground-eating strides brought them to the edge of the forest a couple of candlemarks after midday. If she would be able to keep up the pace, they would be back at the village around midnight. Her thighs already were burning but she knew that she would put the pain aside easily, just like she always did.

A few candledrops after leaving the comforting shadow of the forest, Xena heard the distinct, familiar, and very welcome snicker of a horse. She whistled and as if appearing out of thin air Argo immediately was at her side. The mare was without bridle or saddle but now they would reach the Centaur village around sunset.

And they did. Xena knew that there was a lot to talk about, strategies to devise and plans to put in motion. But first things first, Xena thought to herself when an obviously relieved Kaleipus swept Solan unceremoniously in his arms. The woman warrior herself moments later had her own arms full with a crying blonde. She agreed to meet with the other leaders a couple of candlemarks later, scooped up Gabrielle, and carried her to the hut where they had spent the night before last.

To her surprise there was a bathing tub waiting for her and a tray with cold cider and something to eat. "Let me help you with your armour, Xena. I prepared the bath as soon as the perimeter

watch reported Argo coming back. That horse of yours gave us all quite a scare when she broke out of the corral in the middle of the night. But I'm glad, she did, otherwise you wouldn't be here yet. I hope the temperature is ..."

The young woman was silenced with a kiss. "You're babbling, my love. I missed you, too. Care to join me in the tub?"

She didn't have to ask twice. The young woman was naked and in the tub before Xena had finished peeling out of her leathers. The tall warrior's eyes lit up, and she quickly followed. She closed her eyes in bliss when the warm water began to soothe her sorely abused muscles.

Small soapy hands were running over her front, and suddenly getting clean was no longer at the centre of Xena's mind. She tried to get in contact with Gabrielle's skin, but the smaller woman firmly put her hands back to the rim of the tub. She then continued with her tender ministrations but she wasn't smiling. It was as if she not only had to see but also to feel that her lover was back, and that she was unharmed. And the tall woman knew better than trying to dissuade her from her explorations. They were late for the strategy session.

Xena first listened to Solari's report of the scouts. They would have to deal with about 170 horsemen and 300 foot soldiers, with the survivors of Dagnine's advance party more than 500 men in total.

"Silea, tell me more about the layout of the camp." The question took the young Amazon off-guard. She blinked in surprise and searched Terreis' eyes before answering. The still recovering woman had insisted on taking part in the planning, after all she was the Centaur's chief scout.

"The guards are posted at regular intervals all around the encampment, within viewing distance of each other and the camp. Most of them are alert and focused, but a few don't take their duties very seriously. They were easy to slip by.

"The eastern corner of the camp is well ordered, just like it should be; the tents in neat rows, the latrines and fires well cared for, a corral for the horses, even a bathing area. The rest of the camp was a mess, tents pitched up without any regard for security, sometimes dangerously close to a campfire. Weapons and provisions carelessly stacked one over the other. I can't even think how someone should be able to efficiently run an army under these circumstances. And the stink, their body odour alone should scare the wild life away for leagues around."

Xena adopted a thoughtful expression. "Phantes, what can you tell me about Dagnine's second in command?"

"Dagnine's second?"

"Yes, when we took the children, what did he do?"

"He..., yes, when I think about it, it was rather strange. He didn't do anything... Most of the men were focused on you and Solan, but he stood in the middle of this pandemonium of horses, men, and fire as if he were vastly enjoying himself. It was as if he was nothing more than a slightly amused observer."

"Yes, now it's beginning to make sense."

"Xena, could you please be less cryptic, and tell us what you found out. Patience isn't one of my strong points."

"I'm sorry, Queen Melosa. I'll explain but first there is some bad news." In her usual matter of fact style, Xena told the war council about Dagnine now being in the possession of the Ixion stone, and about the second army stationed at the other side of the dragon's pass.

"That's just great, 500 from one side and 300 from another. If we send in every able-bodied Centaur and Human of the village, we still can't muster more than seven scores of fighters. Even with the Amazons bringing in about the same number, we still don't stand a chance." A council member burst out.

"Perhaps Dagnine will leave us alone, now that he has the Ixion stone?" A hesitant voice came from the doorstep.

"Solan, what are you doing here? You should be at the infirmary." Kaleipus growled.

"I ran away. The healer wanted to take off this plaster splint but with it my arm doesn't hurt. I don't want to give it up. Please."

"I'll speak with the healer, Solan." The tall, grey eyed Centaur answered.

"Please, let me stay." Kaleipus reluctantly nodded, and Gabrielle invitingly padded the chair next to hers.

"I'm sorry Solan, but he won't leave us alone. It is said that once the evil of Ixion's creation is restored to life it's primary goal is to destroy everything that reminds him of the good Ixion gave to the Centaurs. At the moment, Amazon and Centaurs for Dagnine are stepping stones on his way to conquer Greece, as soon as he turns himself into the Great Centaur, the need to destroy all of you would take over anyway."

"How can you be so sure that he won't use the stone in any other way, Con... Xena? There are other ways." One of the Centaur elders said.

"That's the only method of using the powers of the stone I told him about. When he held the stone in his hand, his personal power was all he was thinking about. He wants to rule Greece but he wants to conquer it himself, without the help of an army. In his mind, that's the only way to best me."

"To become the Great Centaur, he has first to melt the stone down. The liquid then has to cool down, then he will drink it." Xena explained to the benefit of Solan, Gabrielle and the Amazons. "The whole process will take about three days. So, he won't come here before the day after tomorrow. Enough time to come up with a plan to take him out, choose a battlefield, and find a way to get rid of this other army."

"The crossbow men and archers should be able to take care of the Great Centaur." Tyldus answered.

"I don't think that ordinary arrows are able to penetrate his skin. No, I suppose we'll need something bigger, much bigger."

"Xena is right." The same elder than before said. "The book of wisdom states that no ordinary weapon can harm the Great Centaur. It is written that he has the strength of a hundred Centaurs, and that he will be fifteen feet tall."

Silence suddenly was thick in the room, only broken by the scratching of a quill on parchment. Xena was bending over the central table where some maps had been unrolled and was calmly sketching, slowly capturing the attention of the others. No one questioned her, and no one said anything. A few candledrops later, she stretched and turned around to a pair of curious green and visibly frightened blue eyes. She smiled at her son and for once let the warmth of her smile also reach her eyes.

"As I said, we'll need something bigger than a simple crossbow. Do you think your blacksmith can make something like this?" She asked and gave the piece of parchment to Kaleipus.

The one-eyed Centaur studied it. "That's great. A giant crossbow hitched to the back of a supply wagon, loaded with a crossbow bolt with a tip as tall as a man's head. -- Yes, I think it can be done but I better go and get Lattenis to start right now. One and a half or two days are not much time." He turned and left the room.

"There's one problem, though."

"I know, Tyldus. This has to work with the first try. If he even suspects something like this, he will be able to avoid the bolts. With all the equipment on it, the wagon won't be easy to move around. So, we have to somehow get him in place without being obvious. I should be able to focus his attention on me."

Xena and Tyldus then discussed where to await the attack of the Great Centaur. They finally agreed upon a stretch of land a two candelmarks' ride outside of the village. The location Tyldus first had favoured was more than a day's ride away, and thus would offer more security for the village but less time to prepare for the attack.

At the chosen site, there were large boulders on both sides, some of them as big as a hut. The great expanse of lush green pasture was usually used for farming but at the moment left bare to give the soil a chance to regenerate. A band of trees bisected the pasture, ideal to hide the

crossbow wagon and a part of their army. Xena and Kaleipus volunteered to attract Dagnine's attention and get him where they needed him. The question of the other army was postponed to the next day to give everyone the chance to come up with new ideas.

The room soon was empty, except for the Centaur leaders, Queen Melosa, Xena, and Gabrielle. "Tyldus, Kaleipus, wait. I want you to know that I'm responsible for the loss of the Ixion stone. I should have taken better care of Borias' sword."

"How can you be responsible? Even we didn't know that the stone was no longer in one of the temples." Kaleipus answered.

"You knew. So, that's what the pensive expression was about when you picked up the weapon after the boy's attack. But how? It looked like any other sword." Queen Melosa was wondering.

"Yes, I knew. When I held the weapon in my hands, I could feel it. -- Ten summers ago, I felt its presence but I wasn't able to pinpoint its location, and I also knew that it was in the village when I came back for the peace negotiations." Xena's eyes fell on Gabrielle, and she continued. "Ten summers ago, I could feel its call like an imperious demand, but this time it was a warm and somehow familiar feeling. -- I'm sorry, I failed the Centaur nation by loosing the sword, and I gladly accept the consequences."

"We will balance the scales when this war is over, Xena, but please know that what happened was an accident, nothing more." Tyldus answered softly. "The Ixion stone to the Centaurs always was more of a threat than a blessing, perhaps it's good that when all is said and done, it will be gone for good. -- But now, we should all try and get some sleep."

They left the council's chamber. But before they definitively went to their respective huts, Xena said. "Tyldus. Thank you!"

"You're welcome, Xena." Was his answer, and for the second time her name didn't sound like a curse in his mouth.

Xena spent the first candlemarks after sunrise in council with the Centaur leaders and the Amazon Queen, discussing her plans for the second army waiting just beyond the dragon's pass. While the first steps were set in motion by the healer and the keeper of the Centaur book of wisdom, she went to help out at the smithy.

That's where the messenger announcing the arrival of the Amazon army found her, lending her strong arms to the task of banging the different parts of their giant crossbow in shape. For a heartbeat her whole body stiffened when she heard who was accompanying the war party.

Xena told the Amazon runner that she would be by as soon as her current task allowed, knowing full well that they'd need at least the rest of the day to get all the parts together -- and feeling strongly that this would be too soon in her book. She just wasn't ready to take on her mother;

instead she focused on her work. She didn't even stop for the midday meal.

"Xena, take a break, Queen's order." Eponin said from the doorway, one and a half candlemark after the others came back from the dining hall. "What'd you say about a quick bath? There are a lot of things to talk about and decide upon."

"I have work to do here, weapons' master."

"Two of our sisters will be here shortly to take over for you, Xena. You are needed elsewhere. Besides, you really do need a bath, my friend."

The shadow of a smile tucked at the Xena's lips. "You won't give up, right?"

"Not in my nature. By the way, the Centaur blacksmith will sure be glad to get his smithy back. You certainly took over five candelights after coming in."

"She wasn't this bad. It took Xena at least half a candlemark, but I also learned a lot from her. Go, the weapon will be ready before sundown."

"Thank you, Lattenis. It was a pleasure working with you."

The raven headed warrior took her big leather apron off, revealing a short skirt and a sweat soaked linen top that was clinging to her curves. They left the smithy, and after a few steps the dark haired Amazon burst out. "You're disgustingly sexy in this outfit, Xena, if you weren't taken, I'd ..."

"Yeah, as if," Xena retorted with a smirk, "I wouldn't throw you out of my bedroom either, well I wouldn't have. And we won't mention the fact that Queen Melosa and Gabrielle would have both our hides if we even thought of trying something like this. -- What about this bath?"

"You're sooo right. Let's go."

On the way to the river, Xena every now and then cast quick glances all around her, as if searching for someone.

"Don't worry, your mother is in the kitchen. On the way here, I had the chance to taste her cooking. She took objection to the seasoning of the venison stew. The head cook probably will recruit her on the spot."

"Yeah, and in a couple of days, he will gladly follow her orders."

"Might be. Cyrene can be a force to reckon with, and she certainly is the most stubborn woman I ever met, present company included." Xena didn't take the bait, so the weapons' master changed topic. "Palemon can't wait to speak with you. He's still worried about you. Talk to him, it will ease his mind. You'll also have to decide how to use your other soldiers."

"My soldiers? Ep, what are you talking about?"

"Two scores of your men, all seasoned warriors. They volunteered to fight at our side. One of them said, and I quote: If this stubborn mule head of a General thinks it's worth fighting for, so do we! End quote -- though I doubt he would ever have said so in your face."

"You're talking about Meleager, right?" The Amazon nodded. "He would, and he has. He never minced his words or was afraid to speak his mind -- and surprisingly it never made me angry. He's a damned good soldier, saved my hide more than once. -- Forty men, you said? Tyldus and Queen Melosa will certainly make good use of them."

Meanwhile, they had reached the river, and Xena jumped in without bothering to take off her clothes. The cool water was like a balm to her overheated body and aching muscles, while her mind was busy adapting the plans including her men and thinking of arguments to convince the Centaur leaders. She made quick work of washing her clothes and herself, hanging them up to dry, and then stretched out at the sunny shore.

"Xena, it's you who'll have to decide how to use your men and the rest of the army." Eponin sat down next to her, and continued their conversation as if there never had been a break. "You were named commander of the allied forces, unanimously."

"You're kidding, right?"

"No, Xena, it's true."

"But how? Did they bar Tyldus from the council?" Xena asked.

"It was Queen Melosa's idea but she also told me that he was the one who convinced the rest of the council. He supposedly said that he still didn't trust the Conqueror but that he also wasn't stupid enough to discard the fighting skills and the strategic mind of an ally of the Amazons. He said that by rescuing the children you have proven your loyalty. -- Believe it or not, you're the new leader of the combined army of the Amazon and Centaur nation. So, what are your orders, General?"

"You're really not kidding, Ep?" Xena asked with a touch of wonder in her voice.

"No, I'm not, General."

"Stop calling me general, Ep. That was in another life. Use my name, else I have no choice than calling you 'weapons' master' from now on."

"Point taken, Xena. So, what are you going to do now, apart from letting your clothes dry?"

"Wow, I never would have thought this possible. Do we have any new intelligence about our enemies?" Xena asked, still lying naked on the ground but her grey matter visibly working overtime.

"Not that I know of. We have scouts out; the perimeter watch has been extended. It now includes the battlefield you have chosen. There's nothing we can do but wait, and organise our forces." The weapons' master answered.

"Do they really want to risk trusting me with an army? I might not be ready to give it up afterwards."

"Trust in yourself, Xena." A voice sounded from a few paces to the left. "You're no longer out to conquer the world, and Amazons and Centaurs are certainly not an ordinary army."

Xena looked up. Theano was casually leaning against one of the few trees dotting the river line. "I'm sorry to cut your free time short, little one, but I saw Gabrielle heading towards the kitchen. After what I did to you during the trial I better keep my distance from your mother -- but I don't think you can draw it out much longer."

Xena shot up. "Gabrielle and my mother, together. This only spells trouble. My mother doesn't hold back her opinion, and Gabrielle tends to get a bit overprotective. I better go and talk to them."

"That's the understatement of the year. Gabrielle has a protective streak a league wide when it comes to you. I should know." Theano quipped. "Now, get going."

When Xena a few candelights later entered the communal dining hut she found it mostly empty. There was no sign of her mother, but Toris, Palemon, Gabrielle, and Ephiny were sitting at a table talking with a familiar blonde warrior. She soundlessly sneaked closer. Before she could reach her prey, the tall woman jumped to her feet and swirled around, a dagger at the ready.

"Did I pass the test, General?"

"As always, Cassy. It's been almost two summers since I last was able to sneak up on you. What clued you in? I know I didn't make any noise."

"This time it really was easy. It was Gabrielle's face. It literally lit up when you appeared in the doorway." The young woman said teasingly.

"Your lips are smiling but your eyes are not. Let's have a walk. Tell me what happened. -- Gabrielle, could you help the others to get settled in. I want to do some drills later in the afternoon. Amazons and Centaurs have to learn to work together."

"Xena, you have a war to prepare for. There's no need to talk about what cannot be changed. But you were right, it changed everything."

"Yes, there is." With her hand at the younger woman's elbow she guided her out of the room.

"Talk to me, Cassy. Trust me."

"I failed you, Xena. I couldn't protect them, I saw them dying. They were innocents and I failed them all." She answered, pausing almost between every word.

"It's all right, Cassy. We're alone now." The taller woman said after leading her charge to a narrow alley next to the dining hall.

The younger woman dissolved into tears and clung to Xena's chest as if her life depended upon it, as if -- since the attack on the orphanage -- she had saved up all her tears for this very moment which in a way she had. They both sank to the ground and the warrior woman held her as if cradling a child. They stayed like this until there were no more tears left to cry and Cassandra had most of her composure back.

"Now, tell me what happened. What brings you here?"

"When one of your soldiers brought the message that you had resigned from ruling Greece I was happy for you. I knew that you didn't like it, not the life at court nor the council sessions or judgement days. Since you are with Gabrielle it's more visible but you were bored with these things after coming back from defeating the Romans.

"A few days later, maybe four or five, I don't know for sure, the children from the orphanage in Corinth arrived. They all were hungry, some of them were injured. They had been forced to leave the city the day after your resignation. They said you were dead but we knew better."

"The council closed the orphanage?"

"Closed? They had the building destroyed, together with most of the schools, and the kitchens for the poor and homeless. They weren't even allowed to take anything with them. We suddenly had another eighty children to care for and had converted the stables to house them. We were already planning to build a few more houses." Her voice tapered off and the blonde once again fought against her tears.

"It's all right, Cassy. It takes strength to show weakness. With me you can be weak."

After another crying spell Cassandra continued, her words interspersed with more tears. "We, some of the caretakers and most of the adolescents, were getting ready to go and cut down some trees to build a few more huts. Being already armed with an axe might really have saved some lives. -- They came upon us. Out of nowhere. Surrounding us. They didn't ask any questions, didn't have any demands. They just attacked. I don't...

"They were upon us like a swarm of angry hornets. Coming from all sides. We tried to defend ourselves, using every weapon possible. We defeated them and they told us they would be back with reinforcements. -- They ran away, but it wasn't enough. All I saw were my friends dying, a child bleeding to death from a sword piercing its chest. That's when I stopped thinking."

"You just followed your instincts."

"I followed my instincts, yes, and they told me to kill. I didn't simply defend myself or my friends. I just inflicted the most damage I possibly could. I didn't think of who I was killing." Her voice now held a slight dose of self-disgust. "There were more than forty men. I was told I killed at least half, alone -- but still more than half of the children were killed. The others told me that they all would be dead without me defending them. I didn't defend them, I didn't even avenge my friends, I just killed. That's all I thought about. And I loved the sound of my sword slicing through their flesh. I laughed. I totally lost control. I'm so afraid that it will happen again."

"I know, Cassandra. Tell me, what did you do after the fight?"

"I helped with the injured."

"No, immediately after they began to retreat. Did you follow them?"

"I wanted to. I wanted to see them all dead. I took a few steps. I looked around me. All I saw was death and destruction. I dropped my sword. I fell to my knees. I was covered in blood." She spoke in short breathless sentences.

"If I close my eyes I can still see my hands, dripping with blood. I see this soldier directly in front of me with his head half cut off. His mouth still open in a silent shout and surprise in his eyes. He was young, so very young, too young to be a soldier."

"I knew I had killed him. I knew I had become a monster. I threw up, lost consciousness."

"When I came to I was in my room, wearing a clean shift. We decided not to wait for them to come back. So we, mother and the other three caretakers left, took the surviving seventy two children and came here. We didn't know where else to go. Four of them died on the way from their injuries. I failed them."

"Cassandra, look at me. You didn't fail them. You did what you had to do and you paid a high price for saving their lives, but you're not a monster and you never will be. A monster wouldn't have stopped until they all were dead. A monster wouldn't mourn the dead of an enemy. A monster wouldn't feel guilty. I know -- I was a monster once."

"Then why did I laugh, Xena? My sword ended lives and I loved the fear in my opponent's eyes. I shouldn't feel good about killing. I remember the feeling, and I don't like it."

"But you don't, Cassy. Can't you see it? What you felt while fighting and what you feel now, one has nothing to do with the other. You lost your blood innocence to protect the people you love. You didn't feel good during the fight because you wanted to see your enemies dead, you felt good simply because you were fighting. For the first time you had to use everything you learned. The sword was a part of your arm; your body became a weapon. It was a feeling as if the whole world was at your command."

"Is this what you feel when you fight?"

"Yes, Cassandra, it's what I feel. It's what every good fighter, every good soldier feels. It's called battle fever, some call it blood lust. It's a natural reaction and there's no shame in it. The energy set free by the feeling of power -- it takes very different forms but most of the time it's needed to fight and win even against the odds. What counts is what you do after the fight.

"I've known fighters to become depended of the feeling of power; they then do everything to feel it all the time and senselessly risked their lives. For some warriors it's the only thing they are capable of feeling. Others go and have sex to get rid of the energy coursing through their veins. Others only want to be left alone because they know that they can be a danger to their peers. Others tend to get violent. It helps us to do what we have to do. It's useful but you can learn to control it."

"How? Can you control it?"

"No, not really. I learned to put it aside, to concentrate on other things but it doesn't work all the time. If it doesn't work I need to feel in control, absolute control over another human being. But, Cassandra, that's not how it will be with you. For a long time, only the pain I inflicted on others let me feel alive. I love to fight but if I'm outnumbered fighting for me is plunging in a sea of dark energy, very familiar dark energy and then it's hard to find my way back to the light. Your soul isn't tainted by darkness, Cassy, that's why it will be different. Don't be afraid of the feeling, it can be a friend, and if you don't fear it, it can't control you."

"Are you sure? I'd rather give up fighting."

"If you really want to give up your sword do it. There are a lot of other things you can do but don't act out of fear, Cassandra. If you give in to fear you will lose an important part of your soul. Do what your heart tells you. I wish there were more I could do or say but there isn't. Come to me if you need to talk. You don't have to fight this battle alone; I'll be at your side."

"You already helped, thank you, Xena. I'm feeling better now." The blonde woman for the first time looked at the entrance of the alley. "Palemon wants to talk to you. He's still worried about this whole slave and punishment thing."

"I know. He guarded our privacy."

"Go and talk to him. I have a lot to think about, I'll be all right."

They both stood and Cassandra left Xena with the tall commander. She patiently answered his questions. His reactions told her that he still had a hard time to understand why she was so willingly going through with this whole thing. But she also knew that he understood enough to respect her decision and support her.

Then he told her about their journey back to Amazon territory, about the number of refugees who by now must have reached the fortified island Xena several summers ago had had prepared for an eventuality like this. Marcus, the dark skinned soldier who had proven his loyalty to Xena during Darphus' treason on the way back from Persia, commanded the six scores of First Order soldiers keeping them safe. He told her about her mother's decision to come and talk to her, about their detour to Amphipolis and how their number had steadily increased from only a handful of soldiers to two scores and a half as well as a rather big wagon trek full of non-combatants and children, totalling slightly more than one hundred and fifty people.

"That's a lot of mouths to feed for the Amazons left at the village." Xena said pensively.

"Yeah, it is. That's why I left our best hunters with the Amazons, despite their protests. The non-combatants also are ready and eager to pitch in. Arleia and the silver haired Amazon now in charge at the village hit it off at the first moment. The children are staying there and will probably have a lot of fun with their Amazon peers. I don't think that there will be any problems."

"We only can hope. I'm glad you and the others are here. We'll need your help. I want to run some drills. Get the men ready while I grab my weapons and armour and have a talk with Queen Melosa and Tyldus. We'll meet at the training grounds in one and a half candlemark."

After almost five candlemarks of putting Amazons, Centaurs and her own soldiers through their paces, Xena was confident that they would be able to work together. Given some more time to train they could be made into a virtually unstoppable force. She couldn't help but speculate about what she would have been able to achieve with an army like this all these years ago. Part of her revelled at the possibilities, she could be empress of the whole world by now. Part of her was relieved that it didn't come to this.

Halfway through the drills, one of the scouts reported that Dagnine's army had broken camp in the morning and was now on the move towards the village. They would reach the chosen battle field at about noon the next day. At the end of the extended training session, she once again met with Queen Melosa, the Centaur council, and the commanders of the different divisions.

There were Palemon and Meleager for the soldiers of the First Order, Philiades for the Human fighters from the Centaur village, Terreis for the scouts, Eponin and Solari for the Amazon warriors, Tyldus for the Centaur fighters, Kaleipus for the Centaur archers who also would be responsible for the firing of the giant crossbow, Duinos, the leader of the group she had had a fight with only a few days ago, the one with the staff, for the Centaur runners, and Etare for the Amazon archers. She had about 320 fighters to count on, most of them seasoned warriors and all of them highly motivated. That didn't even the odds but their chances were rather good -- or they would have been, without the second army waiting at the other side of Dragon Head's Pass. She had scouts out monitoring them but still felt uneasy about their presence.

During the second part of the drills, her mind was busy playing with different scenarios. Should the plan to kill the Great Centaur not work out she would send a group of forty Amazons, half of her men, and about a dozen Centaurs to destroy the pass best as she could and thus hold up the

other army. The rest of them would retreat to the village, and hope to turn the tables during a siege. That was the worst thing that could happen. It all boiled down on her adequate assessment of the situation.

Xena finally decided to take only about half of the army with her, leaving the rest behind to defend the village should Dagnine or more probable, his second in command try to get to the non-combatants while the army was otherwise occupied. She hoped to goad her former lieutenant into a fight before he sent his forces against them and kill him with the crossbow thus demoralising his men. That's where his second in command came into the equation. She only had his actions or lack of them during the rescue of the children to go with and the similarities between the other army's camp and a part of Dagnine's encampment. Not much really, but there also was this gut feeling over the years she had learned not to deny. He could send the army against them but she was sure that he was reluctant to risk his own men, hoping for an easier victory with the help of the siege engines but not above taking the opportunity to let others do the dirty work of decimating his opponents.

They would leave right after sunrise; the different divisions already knew where to take a stand, and so all that was left to do was have a good night's sleep and wait for the enemy to make the first step.

Not eager to go to the crowded bathing area she once again washed up in the river. When she returned to shore after a short swim to loosen her muscles, Gabrielle waited with a clean set of clothes. Walking hand in hand towards the dining hall, Xena's younger companion was exceptionally quiet. So, instead of entering the hut the tall warrior led her to the western side of the stables and they sat down on a big hay bale, silently watching the setting sun.

"Everything will work out, Gabrielle. Try not to worry too much."

"I'm not worried about tomorrow. I know I should be, you and a lot of my friends could die or be seriously injured. I read enough about your battles and campaigns to know that war is not only a game of skill but also of chance. I know you'll do everything you can to come back to me, though I still don't like being left behind. -- Please don't, I understand your reasoning and I'll keep my word. I just have this feeling that everything will be all right."

"What else is bothering you, my love?" She searched the younger woman's eyes. "What has you upset?"

"It's nothing, Xena, nothing important, anyway."

"Please tell me, Gabrielle. I hate to worry about you."

The younger woman nestled deeper in Xena's arms, took a deep breath and answered. "I met your mother." She fell silent and Xena silently lifted her on her lap. "I knew who she was and I wanted to make a good impression. I blew it. I gave her a piece of my mind when she said that

you are a coward and that you don't stand up to your responsibilities. I'm sorry, Xe."

"Don't be, my love. I'm glad there's someone defending me." She kissed Gabrielle tenderly on the mouth and forehead. "I know it's a lot to ask for but please don't be angry with my mother. She has every reason to be suspicious of everything I do, every reason to hate me. Her youngest son was killed because of me, friends and relatives died because of me; some of her friends were executed at my command. I took her away from her home and forced her to live in a city she hated. I failed her, more times than I can count. Try to understand her, please."

"She should be proud of you, Xena. You made Greece a safer place to live. She judges you but she doesn't know you."

"Even if I did, Gabrielle, she still paid a high prize for my ambition. Amphipolis was all but destroyed, Lyceus died to fulfil my dreams. It's hard for a mother to lose a son and see her only daughter become a murderer all in one day." Xena answered, closing her eyes at the unexpected pain.

"Your brother chose his own path. I never faulted you for his death. He died doing what he thought was right." A voice coming from the left side said. "I fault you for betraying your own dreams, and his. I fault you for becoming what in the beginning you were fighting. You may have brought peace to Greece but you did it at the price of our freedom. We traded one or the other warlord every once in a while against one warlord dominating our lives all the time. We are, we were no more than slaves to you."

"Slaves, what do you know of slaves?" Gabrielle angrily retorted, jumping from Xena's lap and placing herself between the tall woman and her mother. "Were you ever beaten just for..."

Xena suddenly had her arms around the smaller woman's shoulders, circled her and silenced her with a kiss. She found her still angry eyes and let all the love she had for the blonde filter through her own while effectively shielding her from Cyrene's view. "It's all right, Gabrielle. She's hurt and doesn't know what she's talking about. Don't let her bother you, my heart. What'd you say, we grab something to eat from the kitchen and then retire to our hut?"

The younger woman only nodded. Xena then turned around and found her mother's eyes. The worried lover was gone, giving way to the hardened warrior. "Mother, I didn't ask you to come here. And I really don't care what you think or say about me. You made it abundantly clear, years ago, that you have no daughter. I learned to live with having no mother; I learned not to care. But I care about Gabrielle. And if I ever hear that you hurt her or upset her again, I'll make sure that you won't be around to do it a third time. Did I make myself clear, Cyrene of Amphipolis?"

She didn't wait for an answer but tenderly guided the younger woman back to the dining hut.

After having spent the better part of the night beating herself up over what happened to the orphanage at Cirra, Xena knew that she had to do something. The death of these children was

weighing heavily on her shoulders. It was her responsibility. With her still in charge at the capital it never would have happened. Her mother was right, she ran away from the responsibility of leading Greece but despite what had happened she didn't find it in her heart to regret her decision.

Shortly before sunrise, Xena sat down and wrote several messages she asked two of her men to deliver to Corinth. She chose them for their knowledge of the palace and its hidden passages and corridors. They were to put the scrolls in the bedchambers of the council members.

The messages contained threats to make sure that they stopped destroying everything she had accomplished during her reign, especially concerning the orphans, the old, and the poor. She knew they had the kitchens and the schools destroyed to make sure that nothing reminded of her, of the Conqueror -- and she really didn't mind who would take the credit for her charity work but she also wasn't ready to totally give up on them. It was far too important.

The scrolls were intended to scare the men now ruling Greece into good sense by giving them the impression that at any moment she could pay them a visit and personally change their minds about things. They included the promise that she would come back to make them see the light if the ruling council, her former council members, didn't mind their ways. She wasn't really sure if the messages would do the trick but they all knew that she always kept her promises, and at the moment, it was the only option she had.

At sunrise she kissed Gabrielle good-bye and rode at the head of the army towards their chosen battlefield. According to the scouts, Dagnine's army would arrive shortly before noon, having marched well into the night and only made a cold camp without fire and something warm to eat. Another point in her favour, Xena thought: cold rations tended to make for grumpy soldiers, and grumpy soldiers tended to become sloppy.

[Continued in part III](#)

Author's comment to chapter six:

First of all: We all know the lullaby I let Xena sing wasn't born out of my imagination though I changed some of the verses -- largely due to the fact that I really don't like the original German text. (Honestly, who wants to be poked by nails when snuggling under one's duvet?!) My version is based on the verses presented in Céline Dion's CD "These are special times".

Solan's birth and the events leading to Borias' death are depicted very differently to the way the show presents them. Though in this story I generally tried to stay as close as my story line allowed to the relevant episodes, especially "Orphan of War", I still couldn't get over my dislike of Satrina ("Past Imperfect" -- if I remember right). So I decided to simply not include her in my

Xenaverse. I hope no one is deadly offended.

[romansilence Scrolls](#)
[Main Page](#)

~ Conqueror and Amazon: Echoes of Darkness

~

Part II

by romansilence

Disclaimers: [See Part 1](#)

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Chapter Seven: Aftermath

About one and a half candlemark after sunset, Xena was slowly approaching the small hut that over the past few days somehow had become her home. Even from the distance, she could see light pouring out of the window. Gabrielle must be waiting for her. In an effort to get rid of the dark energy that had settled in her soul during the fight with Dagnine's men and was still cursing strongly through her veins she consciously recalled the day's events.

Everything and everyone was in place and ready about two and half candlemarks before noon. The placement of the giant crossbow had been carefully chosen to make sure that it wasn't visible at first glance. The Amazon archers were hidden at either side of the battlefield on top and behind the great boulders forming its natural enclosure. The Centaur archers were waiting just inside the tree line, everyone of them having prepared his own escape route should things not work out as planned. They were under orders to fall back to the village to give the remaining part of the army more leverage. The rest of her troops also was at the copse of trees bisecting the pasture, half of them in full view of the approaching enemy, half of them hidden behind the tree trunks or in the tree tops. The scouts in regular intervals brought news of the enemy's progress -- all that was left to do was to wait.

Xena hated waiting, always had and always would -- but she also was very good at it. She never got careless or overconfident, fidgety or angry. She was the picture of calm confidence, a confidence soon mirrored by the army though they were awaiting a fight with an enemy more than three times their number.

Dagnine's men finally took their stand at the other side of the pasture. They stretched out over the whole width of the field, foot-soldiers standing shoulder to shoulder, some of them menacingly waving their weapons at them. They didn't make any attempt to attack or even get in any kind of battle formation. It was more as if they were out to enjoy a good show. The scouts reported that the cavalry was holding back for now. They obviously were ready, the horses saddled, the riders armed but not on horseback. They were standing five lines deep about five candle-drops away from the battlefield, just holding position. So far, everything was working out as planned.

Suddenly the enemy soldiers fell silent, their line parted in the middle. A Centaur galloped onto the field, leaving a cloud of dust in his wake. He was larger than average, from hooves to hair about ten feet. He was straight in line, just where they needed him -- but the crossbow had been planned with someone much bigger in mind. To get a good and sure shot he had to come nearer and they had to adjust the aim. Xena exchanged worried glances with Kaleipus, gave her orders to the smithies and archers, jumped on Argo's back, and rode out to somehow delay him, the one-eyed Centaur at her side.

Surprisingly it had worked. She taunted him and got him to talk. He was brandishing Borias' sword and once again bragged that it was him who had killed 'the traitor'. An Amazon bird call told her that the crossbow was ready. She stayed in front of the raging Centaur with Dagnine's disfigured face for as long as she dared. Another bird call and she dropped to the ground. The crossbow bolt swirled over her head, reflecting the midday sun. Xena saw the expression of disbelief and surprise on the face of her former lieutenant when the pointed tip crushed his rib cage and pierced his heart. He was dead before his body hit the ground.

The raven haired warrior picked up Borias' weapon but before she could store it in her scabbard the fight was on. Outraged at their leader's death Dagnine's men attacked -- and ran into Xena's trap. Amazon and Centaur archers combined silently reduced their numbers before they came in range of the other fighters. Eponin and Queen Melosa were at Xena's right while Tyldus and Kaleipus were fighting at her left side, taking care of the lucky few who got past her. The tall warrior was fighting like someone obsessed by the spirit of war, using two swords, her own and Borias', as if they were one. The blades were moving too fast to discern one from the other, cutting down everyone unfortunate enough to get in range.

No, these memories certainly weren't fit to calm down her blood lust. Xena forced herself to think of something else but still the scent of blood was in her nose.

Pushing it in the back of her mind, she somehow had managed to tend to the injured, send out the scouts, instruct the perimeter watch, and even get something to eat. Her assessment had been right. The enemy's mounted forces hadn't intervened, Dagnine's second in command had been conspicuously absent the whole day. Later she learned that he and two thirds of his forces had tested the village's defences. They had triggered some of the traps and ran into a volley of

arrows. Of the foot soldiers only about four scores had made it from the battle field on their own feet. More than two hundred against 32 dead and 25 injured on their side. Not bad for a day.

No, Xena sternly ordered herself, don't even think about it. Take a deep breath and calm down. Gabrielle is waiting for you, a staff meeting is scheduled the first thing tomorrow. You need to get some sleep.

Sleep, however, wasn't an option. The dark energy was driving her to do something, anything to get rid of it, to tame it. A few candlemarks of drilling should do the trick. By now she had reached the secluded hut, and had already half turned around when a voice let her freeze in midstep.

"Where do you think you're going, Xena?"

She didn't move but answered in a quiet voice. "To the practice field."

"Xena, you spent the whole day fighting and soon you'll have to do it again. Come to bed, my love."

"Gabrielle," Xena's voice was deeper than usual but without the sensual undertone the blonde loved so much. To the younger woman there definitively was an undercurrent of fear audible, "please, don't tempt me. Don't!"

"Xena, turn around. Please, look at me. Trust me!"

The younger woman's hand touched her right shoulder but instead of triggering her honed reflexes, it somehow sent a light straight to her soul. She slowly turned around. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, my love. I trust you. Please, trust yourself."

Gabrielle gently took the taller warrior's hand in her own, led her to the hut, and in front of the brightly burning fireplace next to a large wash basin. Without saying a word she began to unclasp Xena's breast and back plates, took off her upper arm bands and her bracers, taking the time to tease the sensitive skin at the inside of the raven head's arms.

The shin protectors were taken care of with the same quiet efficiency, and before the former Conqueror knew how, her naked body was illuminated by the flickering flames. She automatically stepped into the wash basin, and Gabrielle began to wash away the last remnants of today's battle, revealing only two insignificant nicks to her dark, smooth skin.

The bard had started her ministrations at Xena's back and when she finally came into view and attended to the front, her dark green tunic was gone and all she was wearing was the water soaked sponge she was holding in her right hand. The warrior caught a glimpse of her lover's eyes. They were sparkling with desire, with hunger.

A low growl came from Xena and the order. "Step back and turn around, legs further apart. Give

me the sponge and bend over, grab your ankles."

Gabrielle felt the taller woman's fingers on her firm buttocks, retracing their curves in a slow circular movement. Heat already concentrating between her thighs.

"Hmm, how beautiful -- and all mine. Isn't it?" Her only answer was a sensuous moan and the wriggling of a small ass trying to gain more contact with her hand. "Oh no, you don't. Don't move! Unless you want me to stop." The wriggling stopped immediately and a low frustrated growl came from the smaller woman.

Xena smiled. Her dark side was delighted with the blonde's obedience and another part of her marvelled at her inner strength enabling her to let herself be treated like nothing more but a slave. She squeezed the sponge gently, letting a few drops fall on Gabrielle's smooth skin. Instantly, there were goose bumps covering her. The first drops were reaching her hair line and she couldn't help but arch towards the next drop. Gabrielle heard skin impact with skin, warmth and pain were equally engulfing her behind and more. This definitively had been more than a friendly slap and certainly would leave a hand print on her ass cheeks. She lost her precarious balance and fell to her knees. She made a half turn offering her pert nipples to Xena's inspection and searched the stormy eyes.

There was no conscious thinking involved when Xena's self control was shot right to Hades, and she roughly yanked the blonde to her feet and carried her towards the bed. Gabrielle held on for dear life when strong arms tried to throw her on the mattress. So, they both fell and landed in a tangle of arms and legs, with Gabrielle's legs only letting go of the warrior's waist when a tongue was demanding entrance into her mouth. Soon, warrior and bard alike were lost in the sensation. Fingers, skin, mouth, and eyes mapping out very familiar territory and at the same time exploring as if it were for the first time.

Xena's hands were far from gentle. She kneaded the firm buttocks while her mouth sucked the breast that still bore the faint traces of her teeth. Gabrielle felt the hard pull and arched into the touch, her own hands seeking purchase on Xena's smooth skin. When she felt the pressure at her nipple increasing and a hand fondling her sex, the young woman instinctively stretched her hands above her head.

The suckling intensified, a thumb was slowly grazing her clit while two fingers were inside of her, touching the centre of her pleasure with rhythmical intensity. The young woman followed her body's commands, her legs opened wide, and her arms also spread, her eyes were dilated, her breathing ragged.

Suddenly the hand was withdrawn from the younger woman's centre. She whimpered in disappointment but immediately was silenced by the mouth of her lover on her lips. She eagerly invited the other woman in, their tongues duelling, their hearts pounding. Her hips were bucking upwards, seeking contact with Xena's skin. Her first attempt was successful; her second try, however, only hit thin air.

"No, you're mine, your body's mine, your pleasure's mine. Mine alone." The dark haired woman

whispered in Gabrielle's ear, though it sounded very much like the growl of a hungry predator. She abruptly sat up, straddling the younger woman at her waist.

Her eyes were as hard, cold, and distant as the last time. The blonde knew that she had every reason to be afraid of this stranger inhabiting the body of her lover but instead a wave of excitement rushed through her from head to toe, concentrating at her centre. Unblinking she looked up. Her voice was hoarse when she whispered. "Yours alone, my proud warrior."

Xena's pupils widened when she found arousal instead of fear in Gabrielle's eyes, when she found acceptance instead of disgust. She was ready to drown in these green orbs. Her hands roamed over the smaller woman's body, once again settling on the proudly erect breasts. She knew Gabrielle was close to the edge but she didn't want her to come just yet. So, she maintained a steady rhythm, not really gentle but also without hurting her lover, and thus also holding her at the edge.

"Do with me as you please, my lord." The younger woman almost inaudibly said.

Xena shot back, her eyes widened, a low keening sound came from her throat. She scrambled backwards 'til her back hit the wall. Her head was darting to the left and right as if searching for an escape route. Her whole body was trembling, when she slid down the wall. She first looked at her hands, then her arms closed around her upraised knees and her shoulders slumped in defeat.

Gabrielle had difficulties coming down from her sensual high and understanding what just had happened. Never before had she seen her lover in such a state, not even when she had had to coax her out of her shell after the incident with the abused Amazon children more than a moon ago, when she learned about the abuse Xena had suffered herself at the hands of the village's smith. She stood up and knelt next to Xena.

"Please, look at me, Xena." No reaction at all. "I'm sorry, Xena. I didn't mean for this to happen. I didn't mean to hurt you. Please, look at me. Forgive me."

The taller woman slowly raised her head. Her eyes were full of pain, and when she opened her mouth it was so soft, Gabrielle had to strain her hearing to understand.

"It is me who should ask for forgiveness but I can't. What I am can't be forgiven. A selfish monster that should be kept under lock and key. I should be punished the way I punished Darphus, yes, that's what I have to do."

Before Gabrielle had a chance to react the distressed woman was on her feet and next to her discarded armour. A heartbeat later she held the breast dagger in her hand and lowered it towards her sex, intend on cutting off her clit. "Xena, stop it, immediately."

Surprisingly, she stopped in mid-motion. "I won't let you do this. I won't let you maim yourself."

Xena's eyes were still fixed on the dagger. "Don't you understand. It's the only way. I have to be punished for what I did, today and the other night. It's the only punishment adequate for rapists, this way they no longer can hurt anyone, and they will have to live with the consequences for the rest of their lives. It's the right thing to do."

There was so much self hatred oozing out of Xena's voice, Gabrielle couldn't stand it any longer. She closed her right hand around the taller woman's bigger one while her left hand gently touched Xena's cheek. "I love you, Xena. I can't let you hurt yourself. You didn't hurt me, and you're not a rapist. I can't let you do it. It would hurt me if you did, probably more than it'd hurt you."

The warrior's eyes found Gabrielle's. She didn't know what she had been expecting but she found concern, love, and a quiet determination in these green orbs. The dagger fell from her hand. "I still have to be punished. I need to be punished. Try to understand, I have to talk to Queen Melosa."

The blond woman closed her eyes for the fraction of a heartbeat, and then took a deep breath. The expression in her eyes suddenly grew cold. "Are you sure that this is what you want, my love?"

Xena slowly was regaining her confidence and self-control. "I know, you can't understand, but I have to get it out of my system. Queen Melosa will know what to do without doing any permanent harm. It's for the best."

Gabrielle took two steps back. Her face was stern, and her posture spoke of innate authority. "I already told you, I don't want the Amazons involved. This is only between you and me. If you insist on being punished, I will be the one doing it. Do you understand, Xena?"

"Yes, I understand." The woman warrior swallowed hard. "I accept any punishment you deem fit."

"You may not like what I have in mind."

"That's the nature of punishment, Gabrielle. It's not meant to be a walk in the garden, and it's not meant to be pleasant."

"Go to the bed, lay down, no, not on your back. Hold on to the headrest, don't let go." Xena did as she was told. Gabrielle followed quickly and straddled her firm buttocks. She took a small vial from the night stand, and let a certain amount of the creamy liquid drop in one of her palms. She warmed it with both hands, and began to massage Xena's well muscled back, with practised moves easing the tension, loosening the knots, and leaving the tall woman with a pleasantly tingling sensation.

"Hmm, this feels so good. Gabrielle, you should make me suffer, not enjoy."

"Patience, my love. Tonight you will be mine, all mine. You will learn that you belong to me, just as much as I belong to you. You're not allowed to touch me, you're not allowed to even move a muscle without my permission. Tonight, your will doesn't count. It may seem easy at the moment, a little like it was at the beginning, when I wasn't sure of myself. But believe me, what I have in mind will be much harder. Tonight, you will learn a lesson, you will learn how to let go, how to lose control, my proud warrior."

Gabrielle put another dollop of oil on Xena's skin and resumed her gentle ministrations. When all the muscles were relaxed, she began to let her hands roam in intricate patterns over the whole glistening surface of the warrior's back, building up an entirely different kind of tension. The hands were withdrawn and the younger woman resettled her weight to Xena's thighs.

The warrior moaned at the loss. "Oh, Gab, Gabrielle, please..."

"Oh no, my warrior. You're not allowed to beg, you're not allowed to utter a single word, you're not even allowed to moan."

Xena answered with a low growl that sent shivers down Gabrielle's spine. More oil was applied, and two small hands now concentrated on the lower back and firm buttocks. She revelled in the feeling of smooth, soft skin covering steely muscles, and poured every ounce of her training as a body slave in her ministrations, sending the taller woman in a sensual haze that made her burning with arousal but at the same time too limp to act on it.

After what seemed like an eternity, Gabrielle ordered her to turn around and close her eyes. Her fingers of their own accord once again grabbed the bars of the head rest. Oily hands cupped her breasts and gently squeezed them, carefully avoiding contact with the aureole and the nipples. When Xena arched her back into the touch, the hands stopped until she stilled her movement with a frustrated growl. She felt Gabrielle's body shift and a low voice was whispering in her right ear.

"Remember, you are mine, mine to play with, mine to torture, mine to bring fulfilment."

The squeezing and kneading resumed, setting her whole front on fire though Gabrielle only was touching a small part of it. The younger woman was still breathing steadily while her own was getting ragged, her heart beating a staccato rhythm in her chest as if it wanted to pop out at any moment. The hands changed their rhythm, accelerating until it matched her frantic heart beat, becoming one with it. And then her heart beat began to slow down in sync with the decreasing rhythm of Gabrielle's hands but she heard the other woman murmur. "Yes, that's a good girl."

All the energy seemed to leave Xena's upper body and concentrated between her thighs. Her clit was pulsing with a rhythm of its own, creating a throbbing ache she was utterly defenceless against. Once again, all she could do was moan. Suddenly, Gabrielle grabbed her already hard nipples between thumb and index finger, and twisted them. Her whole skin became alive, her hips bucked, and she almost shouted. "Oh gods, do it, do it now, fuck me. I can't stand it, fu..."

Gabrielle's left hand with snake like speed and precision jabbed a pressure point under Xena's ear and behind her jaw line. Her jaw was effectively blocked with her mouth standing slightly open, she no longer was able to speak. A tiny part of the warrior's brain applauded the accuracy of the move she herself had taught to her lover some moons ago. Her right nipple was harshly twisted.

"Tsk, tsk, tsk! What did I tell you about speaking without permission, moving without permission?! Tell me what to do now. Use restraints?" The tall woman vigorously shook her head. "All right, you'll get another chance. Close your eyes, and don't even think of opening them before I tell you to."

Fresh oil was applied to her skin, and it began again. A slow and steady squeezing that made her heart beat run a league a minute, the kneading and squeezing rhythm picked up, gradually bringing her heartbeat down and finally brought another burst of arousal at her centre. This time, she didn't try to move but abandoned herself to the sensation. She opened herself to Gabrielle's mastery.

Then the hands were gone, and the smaller woman left the bed. She was tempted to open her eyes, and she felt the bard between her thighs. "Lift your hips up, Xena. Hold position."

Xena felt leather straps fastened around her waist and between her thighs, the leather harness, and judging by its weight with the ivory phallus attached. The fit was perfect, without even the slightest slack. Her spread legs were guided back together, leather straps were fastened at her ankles and the bed posts, effectively keeping her feet shoulder wide apart, with a third strap between them to guarantee that they stayed this way. Gabrielle seemed to be playing with the phallus. The woman warrior imagined the still oily hands sliding up and down the shaft, lubricating it before mounting her and the phallus.

The blonde impaled herself, and then sat absolutely still, waiting for Xena to take stock of her situation. Yes, she wore the harness, but the small nubs inside to stimulate her clit were gone.

Gabrielle bent forward, and whispered into her ear while she undid the pressure point. "Remember what you said about the nature of punishment: It's not meant to be a walk in the garden, it's not meant to be pleasant. I know you had other things in mind but I don't want to hurt you. However, for you to learn your lesson, you'll have to suffer for a while."

To her surprise, there was no growl of protest but only a small nod. "Open your eyes!"

Xena was greeted by the sight of Gabrielle's gloriously erect nipples. Her arms tensed for a moment but instantly relaxed when she found her lover's eyes. The green orbs were dotted with golden sparkles, showing the same desire she knew her own eyes were filled with. Their gazes remained locked when Gabrielle began to move her hips in almost imperceptible circles. Her hands went to her breasts and mirrored the movement around her aureoles while her tongue slowly was retracing the contours of her lips. The tall woman was mesmerised by the show but surprisingly and though her own arousal was hitched up another notch she didn't feel any desire to participate and disobey the younger woman's orders.

The grinding motion became more pronounced, Gabrielle's wetness dripping down the apex of the taller woman's thighs and mingling with her own juices. She added an up-and-down movement that was becoming faster and faster with every heartbeat. Her dilated eyes told Xena that she was at the brink of orgasm, only held back by the conscious effort needed to keep her balance. And she was close to falling when warm hands closed around her waist and steadied her. For a moment she was startled but when Xena didn't try to do anything more the rhythm resumed.

Gabrielle now could bend forwards and caress the prone woman's luscious globes. It didn't take long for her to reach the peak, her inner muscles clenched around the phallus, she cried out her lover's name and sank down on Xena's chest, catching her breath. The tall woman could feel the tremors still running through Gabrielle's body when she cautiously removed her hands from the slender waistline and put them back where she felt they belonged, over her head, her fingers grabbing the headrest.

Gabrielle recovered from one of the most forceful orgasms she could remember, her mind still intoxicated by the power she visibly had over the stronger woman.

Yes, they had played games like this before, and more than once, but then Xena had consciously held her reactions in check. Her surrender then had been a question of mind over matter. And at the beginning of their relationship, the taller woman's willingness to put aside her own pleasure was what she had needed to overcome her fear and bolster her self esteem but there always had been a lot of tension running through her body.

Today had been different. For the first time, Xena's mind and her body seemed to be in harmony, that's why she made the chance decision to go a step further.

The blonde woman pushed herself up and forward, letting go of the phallus with a small plop. She crawled towards Xena's face and straddled her. "Clean me up, my love."

Without hesitation a tongue found a trail of wetness at her right thigh, leaving her skin tingling with renewed arousal. The skilled woman was clearly doing more than just a clean-up job but Gabrielle didn't mind. She closed her eyes in bliss and concentrated on her breathing. But she didn't want to come just yet, so she tried to distract her lover.

"I'm proud of you, Xena. You're more beautiful than ever. You did really good, except for this one little slip that kept me from tumbling over. You even resumed your position without being told... Oh, gods, sweet Artemis, stop." The blonde's hands grabbed the head rest and she took a few calming breaths. "Remember, you're not allowed to come until I tell you to. Put your hands on my hips, help me to keep my balance. You now will make me come but take your time. You'll have to make me last for at least five candledrops."

Xena still felt the weight of the phallus pressing down on her swollen centre. She wasn't aware of having consciously listened to her lover's orders but still she obeyed. Gabrielle's scent was mesmerising, intoxicating; the temptation to send her to Cythera growing with every breath she took. She tried to clear her mind but there were the blond curls wet with sweet juices just in front

of her eyes. The restraints kept her from closing her legs to try and ease at least some of the throbbing.

The tall woman eagerly lapped at Gabrielle's opening, gently suckling one nether lip after the other with only her lips and tongue. She inadvertently buried her nose in the enticing folds and had to jerk back her head, almost hitting the head rest, not to be totally overwhelmed. Three shuddering breaths later she resumed her task, caressing Gabrielle with the tip of her tongue, circling the younger woman's clit without really touching it while at the same time trying to keep as much distance as possible between them.

Gabrielle by now was way beyond reasoning, having abandoned herself to the sensations and the overpowering feeling of safety, else she would at least have smiled at her lover's predicament. As it was, she was too busy to moan, whisper and shout Xena's name.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, she gave the order. Xena reaffirmed her hold and dove directly for the clit. She flattened her tongue and the first stroke brought her lover over the edge. She stayed without moving until the waves coursing through the small body had subsided. Before any kind of afterglow relaxation could set in, her front teeth grazed the sensitive nub and she began to suckle. Gabrielle instinctively rocked her hips and despite Xena's best efforts almost toppled over when the next wave of orgasm hit.

Trying to catch her breath she somehow ended lying next to the taller woman, one of Xena's arms pinned beneath her, the other one still resting on her hip. A quarter of a candlemark passed by without either of them moving or trying to talk. Gabrielle then let herself roll to the left. Sitting, she guided the warrior's hands back over her head and to the metal bars of the head board. She knew Xena was ready to explode and almost succumbed to her pleading eyes, now a very dark blue with a hint of silver at the edge of the irises.

"Close your eyes, my brave warrior." Kissing both eyelids she slowly stood and freed her lover from the restraints. She unfastened the harness, careful not to touch the oversensitive skin. Avoiding to even look at Xena's engorged clit, she turned to the now cold water next to the wash basin and cleaned the phallus of her juices. Taking it back to the bed she nudged long legs further apart and settled down between them. Her earlier resolve to take it slowly and push her lover further almost forgotten. The musky, yet sweet scent of arousal was too much to take. She had to do more, she had to taste it, she had to taste her now.

Gabrielle began with small kisses to the taller woman's nether region, barely touching the skin. The dark woman's hips rose to greet her, and instead of reprimanding her for the forbidden movement, Gabrielle accepted the invitation. The tip of her tongue sneaked deeply in her lover's centre, as deep as she could. She felt powerful inner muscles clenching and quickly withdrew, her breath accidentally touching Xena's unhooded nub; she bucked in response, and the blonde began to eagerly lap up the increased flow.

Exhaling, she directed her breath purposely on her lover's clit, the tall woman began to undulate

seductively. Only then did she concentrate on it, grazing the hyper sensitive skin with the tip of her tongue only. She could feel it twitching, and Xena's sensual moan sent bolts of lightening in her own centre. She gently circled the nub. The moaning intensified. Gabrielle forced herself to sit up. One moment longer, and they both would have embarked towards Cythera.

She hit another pressure point directly under Xena's rib cage, close to the solar plexus -- one the dark haired woman hadn't taught her. Hips sank back to the mattress, now unable to move of their own accord while the rest of the warrior's body visibly tensed but still she held fast to the head board and still her eyes were closed.

"It's all right, my love," Gabrielle said while caressing her sides, "I just had to ease up on the tension there for a bit. We still have half of the night."

The muscles in Xena's arms relaxed, her breathing steadied and a tentative smile crept on her face. "I know you ache for release but remember, my love. This is supposed to be a punishment, so we will take our time. I have a few questions I want you to answer. Keep your eyes shut. Concentrate on my voice and on my hands."

She now gently massaged the prone woman's shoulders. "That's it, relax. Tell me: What's your name?"

"Xena Itone, daughter of Cyrene."

"Itone? You never said that you have a second name. What does it mean?" Gabrielle knew the questions were distracting her lover -- and that's what she wanted to do, taking her mind off of the needs of her body, focusing her attention on her voice while maintaining the level of arousal with her touch. The difficult part was not to lose control herself.

"I don't know for sure. I never used it. It has something to do with a period of draught the year I was born. When my mother went into labour, it began to rain for the first time in almost three seasons, and I was told that the rain only stopped when I took my first free breath more than sixteen candelmarks later. It is said to commemorate the day Athena granted the village's plea for rain."

"Xena Itone, I like it -- Does Toris also have a second name?"

"No, I was the only one in the whole village but everyone soon learned that it wasn't wise to make fun of it." The tall woman answered with a hint of a growl to her voice, and Gabrielle decided that it was time for a change of topic.

"Do you love me, Xena?"

"Yes, I love you, all of you."

"Do you believe that I love you?"

"I can see your love in your eyes, even when by all rights you should be afraid of me. Though I don't deserve your love, I know that you love me."

Gabrielle didn't take the bait and continued with her questioning. "Are you in love with me Xena?"

"Yes, Gabrielle, I'm in love with you. For the first time in my life, my body, my heart, my mind, and my soul feel the same.

"From the moment I heard these slavers talk about this unruly slave, I knew I had to find you. When I saw your bloodied body in the barn, I knew I had to take you to safety.

"In the healer's hut I could feel your will to survive and when you first opened your eyes I drowned. I fell in love with you -- and when one day we will sit on our porch and see our great-grandchildren play in the back, I'll still be in love with you." The prone woman answered between gasps.

The younger woman was close to being lost in the hypnotising voice.

"I'm yours, Gabrielle. Do with me as you please."

That's what the green-eyed woman had wanted to hear from the beginning and where her questions ultimately would have led them. She knew there had been no pretence in Xena's words, and so she finally acted on her heart's desire.

While interrogating she had adjusted the harness to fit her own body and put it on. She positioned herself on top of her lover, the tip of the phallus just touching her opening, her own weight resting on her left arm only. She undid the pressure point and at the same moment buried the whole length of the phallus in Xena's centre. The tall woman's hips jerked but she held her ground. She didn't say anything and she didn't move. Xena's mouth opened as if to say something but then only her lips were moving. "I'm yours, Gabrielle. Please, take me."

Xena's orgasm was so forceful that she lost consciousness, a definitive first she thought wryly when she later held a sleeping bard in her arms, a summer blanket draped over their sweaty bodies, without any memory of what had happened after Gabrielle had begun to grind her hips to her own motions, after the moment she had been told to open her eyes and to let go.

The torches had long burned out, and the flames in the fire place were reduced to ashes. The tall warrior knew she should get some sleep or at least think about more pressing problems, but her head was still puzzling about the night's events and her reaction to it. She replayed every single step in her mind's eyes.

A punishment it definitively hadn't been, but it certainly was the most extraordinary experience in her life. Even the time spent with Lao Ma or Queen Cyane hadn't been this intense. She

always had tenuously held on to at least a tiny bit of control.

This time, she consciously had abandoned all control and had given herself over to Gabrielle. Never before had she felt so free and so safe. Almost from the very beginning, she had known that she belonged to Gabrielle, body, heart, and soul -- but this night, for the first time she also had felt it. The young bard was more than a lover, she was a part of her, as she herself was a part of Gabrielle.

"Good morning, my love. Thank you for last night." Xena said when the young blonde opened her eyes to the first rays of sun.

"I have to thank you. Last night was very special to me. I love you."

"Love you too, Gabrielle. What I said last night, I really meant it. I'm yours, now and forever. I can't wait to declare my love in front of the whole Amazon nation. I just wish, I could give you more than my heart."

"Oh, my big dumb warrior. I don't need promises or official declarations. Your feelings for me are in your eyes whenever you look at me -- and if I hadn't known before, last night would have told me all I ever needed to know. Last night was a gift I can't thank you enough for." Gabrielle answered softly.

"I still think, that I should be punished for what I did a few nights ago but now I see your point. My head and my heart always knew but now..." Xena sought Gabrielle's eyes. "Last night, I learned something very important. My whole adult life I spent keeping my distance from people, and the one time I didn't, I was betrayed and ended up on a cross. My body learned to trust no one, to let no one in -- until last night."

The young woman tried to say something but Xena put her index finger on the other's lips. "No, please, let me speak my mind. -- My body's reactions have become automatic, almost natural. I grew accustomed to always being on my guard. You were the first person ever for whom I wanted to change this, but I always had to keep control of my body, my reactions. Last night, this changed. Last night, for the first time in I don't know how long I felt free and safe. I never said this to anyone, Gabrielle, but I'm yours, and I hope I always will be."

The smaller woman looked at her in astonishment, for once out of words, so she did what came natural to her, she kissed Xena, and she put all the love she felt for her in this one kiss. Their kiss broke and became more. With the last of Xena's barriers gone, they not only made love, they celebrated the joining of their souls. There always had been a connection between them, from the very beginning. But now, it was more than that; it was as if their connection suddenly had become visible.

Chapter Eight: Fighting against the odds

Though Gabrielle officially wasn't part of the war council she didn't let go of Xena's hand when they entered the council's hut to attend the staff meeting -- and no one challenged her presence.

"Good morning," Xena said. "Yesterday, we all fought bravely and we were victorious, on the battle field as well as here at the village. The Great Centaur was defeated and never will rise again. We all have every reason to be proud of what we accomplished. However, this war is far from over. We still have to face an army of two times three hundred fighters with a highly trained cavalry and some impressive siege engines.

"We also have to take into account that our enemy now probably has a new weapon. Dagnine wasn't big enough. He didn't benefit from the whole power of the Ixion stone. The lore keeper of the Centaurs will later tell us what to expect. For now we will prepare to destroy their machinery and to keep their reinforcements from clearing the pass. Do you have the lists with qualified volunteers ready?"

Only a few heads nodded while most of the others found something interesting on the ground. An awkward silence was about to settle on the assembly when Philiades found his voice.

"We don't have anyone experienced with mining. I know you also asked for people experienced with rockslides. However we have never had a need to create one before now. If the sketch you made is correct, the possibility of all the rocks coming down on our side and not on theirs is more than big."

"Philiades, I respect your concern for the safety of your men but I won't leave this to chance. I intend to control where these rocks are going to fall. That is if all the things I asked for have been found." She answered.

"Yes, we did, thanks to one of the wagon drivers that came with the Amazons. It was all pretty straight forward but we had some problems with the last item. Never heard of it before. Shirin told us what exactly to look for." The one-eyed Centaur said.

Xena refused herself to dwell on the possibilities this statement opened up, especially because there only were a few. She now had to focus on the problems at hand, she chided herself. So she put her concerns in the back of her mind and answered.

"That's good to hear. I'll take care of it as soon as possible. Where did you put the supplies?"

"I had them transported to the hut I first offered you, one and half candelmarks ride west of the village -- away from prying eyes and at a safe distance, just as you wanted. I have a couple of my fighters keeping watch." Kaleipus said. "Since yesterday evening we were able to release another four patients from the infirmary. They're fit to do light duty and thus should be deployed to the central village. All in all, we can rely on about 210 warriors, two scores of them are only fit for limited duties."

"Very good. I want the volunteers ready at a moment's notice; timing is crucial. And now we'll

have to decide on how to deal with the bigger problem: Dagnine's second and the rest of the Ixion stone solution probably in his position. -- Venerable elder, what does the book of wisdom say? If I'm not mistaken there are a quite a few possi..."

Xena was interrupted by one of the scouts. "I'm sorry to disturb but there are about thirty Amazons heading straight for the village, with their weapons at the ready. They'll be here in about two candlemarks."

Before Queen Melosa could answer, Xena took charge. "This meeting is adjourned until further notice. Please direct them to the encampment of Queen Melosa's Amazons. Solari take some of the guards and see to it that there's no trouble."

The captain of the royal guards hesitated for a heart beat until Queen Melosa confirmed Xena's order with a subtle nod.

Xena wanted to change into her Amazon leathers to take her place as the Queen's slave as tradition demanded but Melosa would hear nothing of it.

"Xena, though you wear the collar of a slave, every member of my tribe has learned to see you as one of our own, a warrior and a friend. I can't change the rules when we have to deal with official business or religious rituals, then you have to play the part but this is an entirely different situation.

"You are the official leader of our combined forces, and this is the role my Amazon sisters will have to accept you in. When they make their entrance, you will stand behind me, together with the weapons' master and the captain of the royal guard. And that's an order."

"Thank you, Queen Melosa."

"My pleasure. Please see that Tyldus and Kaleipus are also attending. I want to make a clear statement that we're allies."

The belligerent tension the arrival of the new warriors created could have been cut with a knife. The newcomers had their weapons out and guarded themselves against their escort of Centaurs, men and Melosa's Amazons. So, instead of the formal greetings she had hoped for the Queen first had to get their attention.

"What by Hades do you think you're doing? Stand down! Put your weapons away, we're among friends. The Centaurs are not the enemy we have to fight. We are here to fulfil the mutual defence agreement that is part of the peace treaty with our neighbours. Who is your leader?" She said, her voice ringing out throughout the compound.

The women slowly and with a lot of murmuring complied, and finally a young redhead about Gabrielle's height stepped out of their midst and knelt in front of the Queen.

"Greetings to you Melosa, Queen of the Amazons. My name is Carani, daughter of regent Calliope of the northern tribe. My sisters and I have come to assist you in your time of need, just as you requested, my Queen. I apologise for our behaviour, we misjudged the situation. On the way here, about three candelmarks of fast walk away, we found the remnants of a battlefield. There weren't any dead but arrows with Amazon markings, feathers, and other things that made us believe that you and yours are in danger from the Centaurs and their male allies. I'm sorry." She said with her eyes fixed firmly on the ground.

"The field you passed was yesterday's battlefield and we came out victorious but it's far from being over yet. Apology accepted, Carani. I appreciate that you all followed my call for arms. Please, stand up. Eponin, Solari, show them where they can make camp. Xena and I will fill Carani and her second in command in on what's going on. Please follow me to my tent."

The young Amazon hesitated but when none of the others made a move to join her she turned around and followed her queen. Xena cast a long pensive look at the back of the slowly retreating group, shook her head, and followed as well after whispering to Eponin to keep an eye on them, just in case.

Queen Melosa was well into explaining the situation to the young woman who nervously stood near the entrance her backpack at her feet when Xena entered the tent. She visibly shrank back towards the Queen when she caught sight of the tall warrior and almost fell over her own gear. Then she saw the slave collar around Xena's neck. "In our village slaves are not allowed to handle weapons or wear clothes. Are you really the Conqueror?"

"Yes, she was. She's Xena and she leads our combined armies. But I don't appreciate being interrupted. As I said...."

The redhead instantly was on her knees in front of Melosa, handing her the leather strap that had been hanging from her belt. "Please accept my apology, my Queen, and punish your undeserving servant."

The dark haired Queen looked at her as if she had spoken in a foreign language and contemplated how to react when Xena told her to have a look at the woman's back. So she did and couldn't hold back a gasp. Her whole back was a mass of angry red welts, some of them oozing blood. "Xena, there's a healer's kit in my saddlebag, right on top. Anara insisted. -- Who did this to you, Carani? Why?"

"It's all right. I disobeyed. I had to be punished. Usually her punishments aren't this hard but I deserved what I got."

"It was done with a whip... with five tails... with knots at the end... no, something sharp, metal bits, I think. The lash marks should have healed by now if not for the back pack. I think it was done about a quarter moon ago." Xena said while gently cleaning the younger woman's back and applying some disinfectant and painkiller. "Thirty lash marks, none of them need stitches. There was a real expert at work, designed to give a lot of pain but not to leave any permanent marks."

Even with the pack reopening some of them, it should leave no scars."

"This isn't a punishment fitting for disobedience. I only would order something like this for repeated dishonourable behaviour." The Queen mused.

"It's dishonourable to oppose the Regent's decisions, my Queen. She was in her right but I still had to follow my own judgement."

"So that's why there are only very young fighters with you?"

"What are you talking about, Xena?"

"They are all very young, Queen Melosa. Just out of their second apprenticeship, I presume. The seasoned warriors probably applauded the Regent's decision not to follow your call for arms. They will be in a lot of trouble when they get back."

"Is Xena right, Carani?"

"Yes, my Queen. I'm ready to accept every punishment you and your Regent will see fit. I know I will have to serve a few years as a slave for inciting this riot against Artemis' representative among the northern village." The young woman once again was on her knees.

"Artemis' representative?"

"She's talking about her mother, the Regent, Queen Melosa. A few days before we left the village, Gabrielle told me about an ancient scroll she found in the library. It said that the leader of an Amazon settlement, regardless of its size, has to be respected as the representative of the Goddess of the Hunt and the sole executioner of the Goddess' will. Disobeying even the slightest order is frowned upon as dishonourable and can even be seen as treason..."

"Of course, I remember," the Queen answered while slapping her forehead with the palm of her hand, "I also read about it while learning about Amazon history. The Goddess herself had to intervene because some of the Regents and Queens tended to abuse their power. I suppose they weren't strong enough to withstand the temptation of absolute power. Now, if an Amazon decides that her conscience doesn't allow her to follow an order and she is within the law, not even the Goddess herself can force her to obey. She has the right to go and follow her heart, and if the council decides that her disobedience didn't endanger the village she will not be punished for being true to herself. The Regent had no right to punish you or anyone else for following the orders of your Queen."

Before the young woman could answer an Amazon scout came in and knelt before the Queen. "My Queen, there are more reinforcements coming. We counted twenty-two heads. They are wearing masks, are heavily armed, and are marching in battle formation. They'll be here in about one and half candlemark if they keep up their current speed."

"Great, just what I needed. -- Xena see that they are escorted in; this just became official. I have

to change."

"Yes, Queen Melosa. Pollana, go to the hut I share with Gabrielle. My saddlebags are on a chair next to the fireplace. Open the left one and bring my Amazon leathers back here. Carani, come with me, you and your sisters have to be present."

A heartbeat later, Xena was on her way to find the young Amazons. She located them at the centre of the Amazon encampment, gathered around an impromptu lunch. She sent Eponin and two scores of warriors to escort the newcomers to the Queen. Solari was to assemble the complete royal guard and see that there was a dais prepared for the Queen to greet them according to Amazon tradition. If these Amazons wanted to play by the old rules, then that's what they would get, she thought grimly.

After having made all the arrangements with the Amazons, especially reminding them of wearing their masks, she found Tyldus and Palemon to tell them not to interfere in what was about to happen. It was an internal Amazon affair they had to sort out alone. To say that Gabrielle wasn't thrilled to hear about the upcoming problems and the role Xena once again would have to play, kneeling at the left side of the Queen, would have been a great exaggeration but after a few kisses she calmed down enough to understand the necessity.

Finally she found Terreis and helped her to put on her own set of Amazon leathers, feathers, and beads though the younger woman said that she looked ridiculous with her middle still wrapped in bandages. Her own leathers fit like a second skin, the only concessions she made to the potentially hostile situation were to keep on her arm bracers, upper arm protectors and boots.

Xena took her place next to Queen Melosa who looked untouchable in her full Amazon regalia. Terreis was standing to the right of her sister as befitting an Amazon princess.

The Amazons stormed in, completely ignoring their also armed escort. The woman in the lead pushed up her mask when entering the three sided square lined with the rest of the Amazon army. Calliope was in her early forties, a few white strands streaking her red hair, very well muscled, and about half a head taller than her daughter, a fighter projecting aggressiveness with every breath she took. The kneeling warrior couldn't help but think that being named after the muse of epic writing in her case was highly ironic.

The Regent didn't even acknowledge the Queen's presence but concentrated on the young warriors assembled to the left of the dais. "You all are guilty of disobedience and dishonourable conduct, collect your gear and prepare to be punished as soon as we are back at the village. Carani, you are their leader and thus were also found guilty of inciting revolt. You will learn to obey your elders while serving the village as a slave for the next two summers. Step forward and strip, you are not worthy of wearing Amazon leathers."

The woman's booming voice held the whole assembly captured and Carani hesitantly made a step forward. Then another voice arose, just loud enough to be heard by everyone, and as cold as

ice. "I, Xena of Amphipolis, personal slave to Melosa, Queen of all Amazons, high priestess of Artemis, challenge your right to issue punishments of any kind. Someone who disrespects her superior as blatantly as you just did isn't worth of giving orders or being obeyed."

"Keep your toy out of this, Melosa!" Though there was a lot of disdain discernible in the woman's voice, it wasn't entirely convincing -- as if she were playing a role she didn't really believe in. "This is an internal affair of my village and has nothing to do with you and your traitorous decisions."

Everyone could see that the Queen was hard pressed not to jump up and take the woman to task herself but she was honour bound to follow tradition, once again surprised at the depths of Xena's knowledge about Amazon customs and history. She turned her head towards the still kneeling warrior at her side.

"Do you know that you won't be allowed to use any weapons, Xena?" The tall woman just nodded and Melosa stood. "I trust Xena, I trust my slave. So, Calliope, regent of the northern village, do you really challenge my authority? This is your last chance to mend your ways."

"Yes, Melosa, daughter of Hippolyta, you are not worthy of leading the Amazon nation. Yes, I challenge your right to rule." The Regent answered with an almost regretful side glance to one of the women of her retinue.

Xena fluidly stood and jumped from the dais when Carani ran forward and knelt in front of the Queen. "Please, my Queen, don't let this happen. I accept my punishment. I don't want th... your slave to die. The Regent is the best fighter our village has."

The tall warrior answered in the Queen's stead. "Carani, please return to your sisters. I'm sure the Queen appreciates your offer but this no longer has anything to do with you. Your mother challenged for the Queen's mask, and I will answer the challenge for she is not worthy of being fought by the Queen herself. I know, Queen Melosa would prefer to fight this battle without any interference from me or anybody else and I also have no doubt about the outcome but by not greeting the Queen properly, by not paying her the due respect she disregarded the rules she usually has no problems using to her own advantage." Her words were not only meant for the young warrior but foremost for the other Amazons. "Someone who wants to be treated as Artemis' representative at least should show some respect to the high priestess of the goddess."

Xena then turned her attention to the older woman. "Are you ready or do you need a couple of candlemarks' rest after your long march? I don't want to overtax your stamina, Regent Calliope."

"Oh, I'm ready. This will be over soon -- and then I will teach you some manners, slave, that is if you survive."

Before Xena was able to discern if her words were really meant in earnest, Calliope unsheathed the two swords hanging from her hips and immediately attacked. Though the dark haired woman topped her by a few inches she obviously intended to overpower her with her bulkier form and her weapons. Xena easily side stepped, and for the next few candledrops continued to simply hop

out of the way of the other woman's increasingly powerful sweeps and thrusts.

To the two groups of newcomers it looked like the older woman was getting closer and closer to her prey with every move. Queen Melosa's warriors knew better, having all spent at least a few candlemarks on the training grounds with the former Conqueror. Xena was playing -- and she visibly was enjoying herself, though she didn't try and taunt her adversary with disparaging words as she usually did in similar situations. Another near miss brought a glint in her opponent's eyes, indicating that she now knew how to anticipate her reactions.

The taller warrior had to fight a grin. The next attack was even fiercer than the ones before. Xena waited until she was committed to the move but instead of trying to avoid it, this time she ducked under the woman's defences. The heel of her hand connected with Calliope's right wrist. She lost the grip of her sword but before it hit the ground Xena snatched it and negligently tossed it towards the Queen's feet. Though Amazon law gave her the right to use any weapon she could take from her opponent to her advantage. She rolled out of the way and waited for the redhead to get her bearing.

Calliope turned around, facing the unarmed woman in a more defensive stance. For the first time she studied her evenly muscled opponent and she didn't seem to like what she saw. She began to move her weapon in varying figure-eights, creating some sort of shield with her blade, and slowly advanced towards Xena. The ravenhead just stood and smiled, seemingly unconcerned with this impressive display of skill.

The Regent was good but not good enough. Xena saw every minuscule hole in her defences and a few mayor ones, ready to be exploited. At the first opportunity she exploded into motion. Her hand grabbed a wrist, effectively immobilising the weapon but the woman's body didn't stop moving and she cut her other arm with her own sword. A pressure point opened her hand and the second weapon was tossed at Melosa's feet.

Xena once again put some distance between the two of them and said. "Don't you think that it's time to give up and pay your respects to your Queen, Calliope?"

"You were just lucky, slave. Let's see what you can do against a spear." One of her companions tossed her a sturdy spear, she immediately was on the move again. When Xena was surprised to see her use the spear as one would a staff she didn't show it. Her feral smile broadened and her eyes grew colder.

She jumped, blocked the weapon with her bracers, and even after a quarter of a candlemark wasn't the slightest bit out of breath. In contrast, her opponent's face was beet red with exertion or anger or both. The tall warrior decided to end this game, she was having fun but it was close to midday and she still had a battle to plan and some siege engines to destroy. There also was a small voice telling her that it wouldn't be wise to humiliate the older woman in front of her sisters.

She somersaulted over her opponent, immediately whirled around, took the other woman's legs out and wrenched the spear out of her hands, dislodging Calliope's left shoulder with the force of

her jerk. She landed on her back and before she could get up the tip of her spear was at her throat. "Surrender! I don't want to kill you. The Queen needs fighters like you in the upcoming battle."

The woman didn't answer.

"Please, mother, end this fight honourably." There was a slight switch but she didn't even turn her head at her daughter's plea.

"Kal, please. We knew from the beginning that we took a chance by not telling them the truth." The woman with the spear now said, the insignia she wore identified her as the weapons' master. Like the majority of the other women she had a bow tucked over her shoulder with the quiver at her side not her back. She was about the Regent's height but less heavily muscled and about ten summers younger, with auburn hair and shining eyes of the same colour. "The Conqueror is the best fighter the world has ever seen. You said so yourself not too long ago, it's no shame to lose against her."

The two women locked eyes and finally the older one almost imperceptibly nodded. "I surrender. You put up a very good fight. Help me to my feet, slave." This time there was no harshness in her voice. Xena took her uninjured arm and helped her to stand. She made a few steps towards the dais and knelt in front of Queen Melosa.

"Melosa, Queen of the Amazons, high priestess of Artemis, I, Calliope, daughter of Caberia, former Regent of the northern village, swear allegiance to you as the rightful ruler of the Amazon nation. I apologise for my behaviour and will submit to every punishment you deem fit, I just beg to let my companions go free."

"I, Melosa, accept your apology and your oath." The Queen answered, and having closely observed the slightly older woman's body language and the glances she cast towards her younger sisters she continued. "As for your punishment: you will continue to serve the nation as the Regent of the northern village. If I'm not mistaken only the concern for your sisters' safety prompted you to act this way. Report to my tent after the healer has seen to your injuries. This meeting is adjourned."

Only half a candlemark later, Calliope, her weapons' master and Carani entered the Queen's tent. Melosa had changed back into her more comfortable fighting leathers and Xena was back in her leather dress and armour with her sword and chakram solidly attached. The older redhead had her arm in a sling, she knelt in front of Melosa and without looking up asked. "How did you know, my Queen?"

"Please, get up and take a seat, Calliope. I don't know but there's something in your eyes that I couldn't ignore, and then there also is what your weapons' master, beg your pardon, your bond mate said." Melosa corrected herself when she became aware of the matching joining bracelets both women were wearing. "Care to enlighten me?"

Still not sure what to make of the former Conqueror turned slave but wearing weapons the Regent concentrated her attention on her Queen only. "It may sound superstitious but about half a moon ago I had dream. I was outside of Amazon territory checking on our border patrols. I had the dream only once but I couldn't forget it nor ignore it. The warriors left to fight and the village was destroyed. No one survived. That's why I ordered everyone not to follow your call for arms. Before coming after my daughter and her friends I sent the elders and children to our emergency shelter, I hope that all we will lose are a few huts."

"Why didn't you tell me, mother?"

"The safety of the village is my responsibility, Carani. But when you and the others decided to fight we had to follow. None of you has ever seen battle. We couldn't let you face this alone. And when we found the remnants of the battle field it was obvious that the Queen and the Centaurs were fighting against a much bigger force. They're fighting against the odds -- and the only thing I wanted to do was to get you all back to the safety of the village." The redhead turned her head towards the Queen. "I overreacted, my Queen. The warriors of the northern village will gladly support you in your fight. Thank your slave for getting me back on track by kicking my butt."

The Queen nodded and motioned for Xena to continue the conversation. "Your help is very much appreciated, Regent Calliope. And you're welcome. This dream, you said you had it outside of Amazon territory? Did it come back during your journey here?"

"I think this no longer is of any importance but if you insist, Conqueror. As I said I only had the dream once but it was always on my mind. No, it didn't come back, nor any other dream of this kind."

"Please use my name. I'm no longer comfortable with this title. Did you see how the village was destroyed or did you only see the results?"

"The results. -- Queen Melosa, I really don't see what this questioning is all about. I think there are more important things to deal with."

"Xena is leading the combined army of Centaurs and Amazons. I'm sure she has a perfectly good reason for her line of questioning. Just answer as best as you can."

"Did you see a red-blue light sometime during the dream?"

"No, not that I... yes, now that I think about it; the whole dream had a frame of red-blue light. I found it rather strange at first but then I totally forgot about it." Calliope answered, visibly puzzled.

"What does your village specialise in? What are your warriors best at?"

The older warrior once again looked at Queen Melosa but answered hesitantly. "Our

craftswomen are famous for their earthenware and our warriors for their accuracy with a bow. But I'd really like to know what these questions are all about."

"It's hard to explain but I'm sure that your dream wasn't a premonition. Your village isn't in danger, never was. I think it rather was a vision, planted in your mind by the god of War. Red-blue light is his signature. He counted on me staying at the main village and he wanted you to stay at yours. This could help us to anticipate our enemy's next move." Xena cast one look at the older woman and then explained. "I know at the moment I don't make much sense. I know your not inclined to trust me, you have no reason to but please at least try. Queen Melosa will explain to you the situation we're in. Meanwhile I'd like to see what your warriors can do with their bows and I'd like to have a short training's session with the other parts of the army. Care to give me a demonstration, weapons' master?"

The auburn haired woman cast a questioning glance at the Regent who shrugged her shoulders and nodded. She now was committed to fighting at the side of her Queen and would do everything necessary to come out alive -- even if it meant to follow the orders of a slave. She still couldn't really wrap her mind around it and so her first questions aimed to solve this mystery.

"Are not!"

"Are too!"

"Are not!"

There were about thirty children at the clearing just outside of the Amazon village. Eight of them facing the rest with Thania and Lyceus in the middle of the smaller group. The larger group consisted of orphans, led by a boy with short cropped brown hair, about thirteen or fourteen summers old. While once again shouting "Are not!" Thania tried to understand how a friendly game of hide-and-seek could possibly have gone downhill this fast.

Lyceus and she had done what Eponin wanted them to do, make the orphans welcome and have some fun together -- and surprisingly it had been working. There were a lot of games to play and a lot of things to talk about. They had fun until about five candledrops ago, when this bone headed dork began to insult her people.

He said that the Amazons only agreed to the peace treaty because they knew they didn't stand a chance against the Conqueror's First Order. He said that they were weak and would be better off in a fortified city being protected by real men. They rapidly grew past exchanging arguments and now were at the brink of trading insults.

A quick glance to her left and to her right told her that there also were a few orphans in her group, and she knew she had to do something to stop this whole mess. They all would be in a

wagon load full of trouble if any of the adults caught wind of their shouting feast. She once again tried to reason with him but she also was beyond angry and so it didn't quite come out as she wanted.

"Xena is a woman. Are you really stupid enough to think that she's weak?"

Big mistake, she thought when he jumped her and they both landed on the hard ground. Thania desperately tried to remember what she had been taught about hand to hand combat and fighting a bigger opponent but before she came up with something there was the distinct sound of bone meeting bone and his body tilted to the left, setting her free. She scrambled to her feet and saw Lyceus trying to pin the taller boy down. She whistled and both of them immediately stopped their tussle.

"We're not supposed to fight each other. At this very moment my sisters and Xena's soldiers probably are fighting side by side. What will they think when they come back and see that we don't get along?"

The older boy stood and dusted his pants off. "I'm not stupid but you are right, the Conqueror is not weak. And yet... I listened to the adults and I don't understand. She could be ruling the whole world by now but instead she's living as a slave. Why?"

"I don't know for sure. I didn't really understand her answer when I asked this question but I'll tell you what she said. She said that ruling is more than giving orders and making sure that they are obeyed. She said that there are two ways to rule, one is through fear and that this was how her reign began. The other way is through loyalty. She said that's the way of the Amazons. She said that when she looked into the eyes of her subjects she saw fear not loyalty -- and that's why she gave it all up."

The girl looked into his eyes and knew that he wasn't convinced yet but she also saw that she got him to think about it. So she continued. "It's almost midday, why don't we go and get something to eat?"

A couple of candlemarks later, the so abruptly interrupted council session was resumed. Introductions were made and the uneasy apprehension that had begun taking hold of the villagers on behalf of the Amazons thus was dispelled. Xena first complimented the Regent on the proficiency of her archers. They were not mounted archers but able to hit a moving target with great accuracy while moving themselves. She considered them a great asset for the combined army.

"Now, venerable elder," Xena now directed her attention towards the white haired Centaur with the Great Book of Wisdom held carefully in his hands, "what do you think Dagnine's second will do with the Ixion stone liquid? With the stone itself gone, we no longer have to fear the most

dangerous use he could have made of it but it still could be very dangerous."

"You're right. He could have used the stone itself to control people's minds, to take away their free will. That's no longer possible. There still are a number of possibilities." A white haired Centaur answered. "Creating another Great Centaur is one but it's not likely. Judging from the strength and size of Dagnine, he's in possession of about a third of the liquid. A new one would only be slightly taller than one of us. The attack he led against the village spoke of someone very concerned with his men and his resources. It may be farfetched but I think he will use the power of Ixion's wicked creation to make his soldiers invulnerable, or at least almost so. Diluted in water and mixed with grounded stone it can be applied like a salve that can make the skin impenetrable to arrows or swords. The third he took would be enough for the riders and the surviving foot soldiers."

"Would a god have any use for the solution?"

"Not to my knowledge. Ixion's power only can affect mortals, at least the Book of Wisdom doesn't mention anything in this regard. Why?"

"Ares, he has taken a very personal interest in this war. He warned me to go back to the Amazon village before we came here. He tried to keep Regent Calliope from joining troops with us. Ares never does anything for the benefit of mortals. He's always following his own agenda. So, what does he hope to gain from destroying first the Centaurs and then the Amazons? If the Ixion stone doesn't give him additional power, what else does he want?"

"Perhaps he just wants to see a great fight." Regent Kallipe's bond mate said.

"From what Xena told me and what I read about the god of War, he loves a good fight but he even more enjoys to play with mortals as if they were puppets on a string." Gabrielle answered. "Amazon loyalties are to Artemis alone and the Centaurs worship Demeter and Athena. Even when their conflict was at his heights none of them abandoned their own gods. Perhaps this is about revenge?"

"Gabrielle may have a point but how does it help to anticipate our enemy's next move? Making this army almost invincible may be a goal of the God of War in itself. A few hundred men could conquer the whole world in his name, rule in his name." Kaleipus commented.

'So he'd finally get what I always denied him. I thwarted his plans with the Persians and I also will this time.' Xena thought but answered. "Not invincible but very difficult to defeat. They don't become better fighters by using the liquid. Though their skin would be very hard to penetrate; they still can be killed by aiming for their eyes or mouth.

"That's where you and your archers come in, Regent Calliope. They'll be a decisive element in this fight, probably just the edge we need against them. In any case it will be a rather bloody battle and we'll need every advantage we can get. The sword fighters should sharpen their weapons and get in an extra round of drills, concentrate on their throats. It should be their most vulnerable point. Anyone familiar with a battle mace should also go for their throats. It may not

be elegant but a crushed windpipe is as effective in taking out an enemy as a blade through the heart. Still, our best bet are the archers.

"Then I'd better go and organise another drill. We're trained to attack from above or at eye level with the enemy. To stand a chance against men on horseback we'll have to adjust our aim. With your permission, my Queen..."

"You have a point here, weapons' master. Get going and have a look at the other archers, please, some of them are at a skill level equal to your own if you give them some pointers. Etare will introduce you." Xena said while a wicked smile crept on her face. "And we'll go and even the odds a bit after I've prepared the surprise for his other army. I need a score of volunteers, experienced horsemen and -women, able to move without a sound, one hour before sunset."

"What do you have in mind, Xena?"

"Oh, it's quite easy, Gabrielle. We're going to try and take away their horses. Even if we don't get all of them, it will certainly interfere with his plans and he'll have to rethink his battle strategy. This meeting is adjourned."

While Xena was riding towards the hut where Tyldus at her request had stored the supplies, Cyrene and Toris were sitting on a bench next to the river. Having filled his mother in on his time in Britannia and more extensively on the last moons, living with his sister and the Amazons, the subject naturally turned to Xena.

"She has changed so much. It's as if my little sister finally came back and the cold hearted warlord disappeared for good. She's as fun and caring as when she still was a child."

"You're as bewitched by her as everyone else. She didn't change. She's as selfish and cruel as ever. Not two days ago she threatened to kill me should I ever 'upset' her slave again."

"Xena doesn't do threats, Cyrene. Never has and never will." Theano said almost incidentally while coming towards them from the right. "Whatever she said, it rather was a promise or a statement of fact. She is very protective of Gabrielle. And if you were insensitive enough to call her a slave, frankly you don't deserve any better. So stop your bitching."

"How dare you! First you almost get her killed during this trial and now you're taking her side, Theano. By the way, how dare you hurting my child with this blasted whip of yours!" Cyrene angrily retorted.

Theano couldn't help but laugh and even Toris was unable to hold his snicker. "Oh Cy, first you accuse Xena to threaten your life and the next moment you get your skirts all in a wad about someone hurting her. Don't you think that's a tad inconsequential?" The Amazon lawyer

answered after having recovered from her laughing fit but broke in a new round of laughter when her friend blushed deeply.

"I'm a mother, I'm allowed to change my mind." She said pouting but held her position right in the other woman's face. "And you're not off the hook, Amazon. You could have convinced them to find another punishment than these stupid whippings. I know you're no champion for corporal punishment. Why didn't you stop this?"

"It follows Amazon law and traditions, Cy, and it's what your daughter needed. She gained a lot of respect by submitting to the whip among my sisters. But more important: She needed closure.

"It won't take away the guilt she feels over what she did. Nothing ever will but it will allow her to begin a new chapter in her life. And Gabrielle has everything to do with this desire. My little one's heart was locked away until she met her and now she once again is free, free to finally become the woman she was meant to be from the beginning."

"I really wish I had your faith in her, Theano." The innkeeper answered and regained her seat, surprised to find her son gone. "I'm so confused. During the journey here, all the things I learned about her, about what she did and how she cares for her men and the orphans and all. I almost was convinced that I got it all wrong, that all these summers I misjudged her. And then the other day, I speak to her for the first time in almost three years, and she, she..."

"Tell me what happened, please."

"I had words with Gabrielle, angry words about Xena. She told me that I'm a heartless bitch who doesn't know anything about her own child. Then she stormed away. Later I found her talking with Xena. She told Gabrielle that I had every right to be angry at her for what happened to Lyceus. I was surprised to hear the sadness and mourning in her voice even after all these years." Cyrene answered, every once in a while searching for words.

"So, I told her that I no longer hold her responsible for his death, and for the fraction of a heartbeat her eyes were filled with wonder. I don't know why I did it but I continued talking. I told her that by making Greece a safer place to live, she also made all of us into slaves. Then Gabrielle jumped from Xena's lap, shouted and burst into tears. Xena calmed her down. I never saw her this gentle with anyone. Then she turned around and her eyes were as cold as the morning air at winter solstice. She told me that if I ever again upset her lover she would see to it that I wouldn't be around to do it a third time."

"As I said, she's very, very protective of Gabrielle. And I'm sure, she only wanted to say that she intends to make sure that you won't hurt Gabrielle again just by keeping an eye out that you're nowhere near her.

"This young woman has a strength of heart I rarely have seen before. She has overcome incredible odds but somehow was able to salvage her soul, her humanity. She's still very sensitive about slavery and as far as I know was more than angry with Xena for accepting the slave collar of the Amazons. But she also has a protective streak as wide as mount Olympus is

high when it comes to your daughter. You know she even attacked me during the trial. She launched herself out of her wheelchair and tackled me."

"Chair? Wheels?"

A few candelrops before sunset Xena returned to the core of the village that at her orders was now in the process of being shut off against their enemy. She just had spend the last couple of candelmarks in the supply hut and now was ready to take on the other half of the enemy army. They only had to wait for the new commander to dispatch a messenger to his reinforcement and siege engines to march out. Instead of the twenty volunteers she had asked for, the central area was filled with almost three score of people, half of the First Order soldiers, ten of Melosa's Amazons among them Eponin and her black stallion, about a score of men and women from the Centaur village with Terreis leading them. There even were a few Centaurs, together with Calliope and Carani. It was out of the question to take all of them and she didn't have the time to sort out the most skilled but she also didn't want to offend them by simply issuing an order.

She sat atop of Argo, the proud war horse picking up on the air of anticipation pervading the central square. "Listen up! I'm honoured by your eagerness to participate in our little venture but I can't take more then twenty to twenty-five volunteers." She slowly dismounted. "If we want to pull this off successfully we're depending on speed and stealth. Time is of essence, so, please don't be offended when this time I'll rely on people whose skills I know from experience. Palemon get twelve of your men ready. Eponin, take eight of your best riders."

There were surprisingly few protests but Xena had a hard time to convince Terreis to stay at the village. Yes, she was the best choice for a scout but she wasn't fully healed yet and the tall warrior didn't want to risk her health. The former Amazon only gave in when Phantes pleaded with her.

"Xena, I know we're no real horse people but both Carani and I can handle a horse. My warriors are now committed to this fight and I want to see what we're up against with my own eyes."

"And you want to find out if I'm a leader worth following." Xena answered and got a sheepish smile in return. "Somehow I owe you, Regent Calliope. You're welcome to ride at my side." The square by now was empty, except for the raiding party and the young Centaur Duinos. "I'm sorry, Duinos, but horses tend to get very nervous in the presence of Centaurs."

"Let me show you something, General." He turned around and went straight towards one of her soldiers and his horse. Instead of shying away the animal interestedly sniffed his outstretched hand and even took a step towards him. "For some reason horses feel comfortable with me and I'm good at taking care of them. It's a gift that has come in handy more than once. Please, I owe you for our stupid attack."

"You're in, Duinos."

Xena kissed Gabrielle good-bye, mounted Argo and was off with her group of horses thieves to be. They would be gone for the better part of the night if everything worked out, if not they would try to lead the pursuing enemy away from the village. In any case the remaining fighters had to be prepared for the worst case scenario.

Gabrielle was pacing the ramparts, too nervous to sit with the others in the dining hall. From time to time she stood and looked out in the enemy's direction whose camp fires were faintly visible at the horizon. "Everything will work out just fine, Gabrielle. I'm sure."

The young woman was startled by the voice at her shoulder and quickly turned around. "Solan?! What are you doing here? You should be sleeping."

"Few people are. They're too nervous about the fight to come. But I know everything will be all right. Do you know why I'm so sure? I'm sure because I just found her and the Gods won't allow that I lose her without getting to know her better."

The blonde lay her arms around the boy's shoulders. "Your mother is a very special person, Solan. Tell me about the time you spent together. She only told me the bare details. Please! Perhaps it will take me from worrying."

"I didn't believe him when Dagnine said that she is my mother. I didn't want to believe him, not even when he proudly declared that he had killed my father. But then we spent the night in a tree and she held me in her arms to make me more comfortable and she sang. Her voice is so pure, it simply swept all my doubts away. And when she carried me through the forest, I felt so safe and protected like never before."

"I know the feeling. That's how I feel when I curl up in her arms at night. That's what I feel when I can sense her eyes on me, even from the other side of a room. -- I'm sorry I didn't want to interrupt. You know I plan on writing down the story of this war, so every detail is very important to me. It will make for a better story. I'm sure you'll be a better source of information than she is."

A few candlemarks ride from the village turned fortress, Xena was up in a tree just inside the horses' corral, reviewing her preparations and waiting for the right moment to strike. A short reconnaissance trip had shown her that Dagnine's former second knew more about warfare and strategy than his late commander ever did. The horses were held in a corral behind the encampment and next to a part of the forest thick with underbrush and dense foliage. Additionally, he had several guards posted around the perimeter. For an average opponent this alone would have prevented any tempering with the precious animals. But he wasn't facing an average opponent. Far from it.

A feral smile crept on her face when she felt her excitement slowly growing. The raven haired warrior was confident to achieve her goals. She planned on taking the horses from right under his nose and in the process create as much havoc in the army camp as possible. Her plan was simple and rather risky but if it worked out it would serve more than one purpose.

The sentries already had been taken care of, they were either dead or securely bound. Getting the horses to move, and in the direction she wanted them to, would be a far more difficult task. The attack on the village the day before and the reports of the scouts had her convinced that the animals were highly battle trained and thus unlikely to panic confronted with noise, the scent of blood, or even fire. Xena, however, also knew that even the most highly trained animals usually were dependent on their masters. A knowledge she based her plan on.

They had left their own horses behind and now were either up in the treetops or just behind the tree line, waiting for the perfect moment. The lead stallion was about fifty paces away, a magnificent beast, at least two hands taller than even Argo, with a gleaming dark grey coat and a silver mane. His head was turned in Xena's direction. She soundlessly opened the bottle she had held at the ready, letting a few drops of clear liquid fall on the ground. His interest almost instantly was picked; he smelled a mare in heat.

Thirty paces, twenty paces, Xena readied a simple leather halter, fifteen paces, she bent her knees, ten paces, she held her breath, sensing his anticipation and nervousness. He turned his head rapidly up and down, left and right; only a few more steps. Xena jumped, landed next to his left shoulder, and before he had a chance to shy away from her had slipped the halter over his head. He tried to rear but suddenly felt an unfamiliar weight on his bare back. Her legs clamped around his sides, one hand entangled in his mane, the other caressing a sensitive spot behind his left ear.

Now the difficult part began: The stallion reared again and Xena held tight, still stroking him but without making any attempt to hold him back by using the reins. Obviously and luckily the men stationed next to the corral didn't pay his behaviour any attention. Shows of strength towards his fellow stallions seemed to be the rule with him. The soldiers didn't even turn their heads. One problem out of the way, the tall warrior thought. A few candledrops passed with him still violently trying to get rid of his burden. When his front hooves touched the ground for more than a fraction of a heartbeat, the woman warrior grabbed the reins, and finally managed to calm him down.

This was the signal for the rest of her men and half of the Amazons to get on the backs of some of the other horses. The cry of a barn owl was the signal for the rest of the Amazons to shoot smoking arrows at the forest edge of the corral. There were small pouches bound to the tips, on impact with the ground they produced a thick smoke reminiscent of a big forest fire but smelling like rotten eggs. Xena knew there would have been an easier way but still... The forest patches were an important protective measure for the Centaurs' fields and she didn't want to risk them.

Some of the animals were getting excited and nervous. The new riders encouraged the others to also follow their instincts. Xena urged the grey stallion forward when burning arrows embedded

themselves along both sides of the corral. He easily jumped the fence, inciting the others to follow. And follow they did.

More arrows flew towards the tents, setting them ablaze, and creating a pathway through which the horses ran, right through the middle of the enemy's camp, trampling down everything in its path, fireplaces, tents, and men alike. Xena's plans were working out, better than she ever would have thought possible. A very quiet voice in the back corner of her mind told her that it simply was too easy. And she was right.

The moment she thought herself home-free, a shrill whistle reached her ears. She had to fight to stay on the stallion's back as he reared once again and attempted to follow the call of his master. Having noticed the bloody spur marks at his flanks and the scars left by some sort of whip, Xena held on tight, stroked his neck, and whispered shooting words to him. She only could hope that it would work.

Of course she had a backup plan but she really didn't want to use it. It called for her to kill the horse and let Duinos' considerable skill with horses help to lead the others out. However, they were lucky. Though the lead stallion came to a halt, the other horses didn't slow down, not even by a fraction. They now were running full out. Her own mount didn't any longer try to throw her off but he still was reluctant to leave the compound. Xena could feel some of the soldiers around her regaining their wits and knew she had to somehow get the animal going. But all she could think of at the moment was to continue her soothing words and caresses. She literally could feel his tension, the fight between what he painfully had been taught to do and what he longed to do.

A crossbow bolt flew past her head. The next was aimed for the stallions throat. She caught it inches before its intended goal. The horse now began to run. She could hear the distinctive sound of close to a dozen crossbows releasing almost at the same time and braced herself. She knew she neither could catch nor avoid all of them; surprisingly not one found their target.

Xena finally turned around. The enemy camp was in flames, and from the intensity of the fires she presumed that the Amazons' arrows had struck at least one of the supply tents and a few balls of hay. There still were horses behind her, some of them being recaptured by the other soldiers. Behind her she also found Duinos and two women on horseback. The Centaur had a bolt protruding through his right shoulder and Regent Calliope pressed one of her palms tightly against her left side. Yes, her plan had worked but apparently not without paying a price. She also knew that by shielding her from the crossbow bolts these three probably had saved her life.

When they rejoined with their own horses, Xena opted to stay on the back of the stallion instead of returning to Argo. She made sure that all members of her raiding party were present and they rode on for another candlemark, not directly returning to the village but keeping their distance while ostensibly having lost their heads and running away acephalously. Only then she was sure that they hadn't been followed. She dismounted to care for her companions.

"I owe you, Regent."

"From what I saw today, I'd follow you in more than one battle. -- And the other point: well, you

kicked my butt, I saved yours. We're even." Calliope answered while clenching her teeth at the pain in her side. Xena understood the tougher-than-leather attitude of the Amazons, perhaps better than anyone else. Still, Calliope's wound had to be tended to, as well as Duino's. That was one of the main reasons why she'd called the stop in the first place.

The young Centaur was equally stubborn; he simply told her that this was the least he could do to make up for his initial behaviour. She cared for both of them as best as she could and turned her raiding party with their prey in a wide arc back to the Centaur village; eager to get this mission over with. To be on the safe side, she doubled the rear guards and made sure that only the best of the scouts were monitoring their enemy's actions. For now, there were no threats -- and she hoped that there wouldn't be any.

They arrived at the village compound about four candlemarks before sunrise. She already had given orders on what to do with the abducted animals and let the stallion run with the rest of his herd. Xena felt deadly tired and at the same time strangely elated. All she longed to do was to crawl in bed and close her arms around Gabrielle, but her mind was still working furiously.

Her plan had gone off without a hitch. Her opponent had lost three quarters of his horses, along with his own personal mount, his camp was in ruins, and the raiding party undoubtedly had had an effect on the morals of his soldiers. On the one hand, they now were angry, and like a wounded animal, more dangerous for it. On the other hand, they at the same time were probably demoralised for being bested so easily by only a handful of opponents. Apart from Calliope and Duinos they only had had two more injured: an Amazon with a sword's slash at her arm and one of her soldiers with slight burns.

They really had been lucky. And so Xena decided to do something she hadn't done in years, not since she took Athens without a fight. She easily found the small shrine of Athena in the southern corner of the compound. There were freshly cut flowers in front of the wooden statue. She lowered herself to a knee and thanked the Goddess.

From the stories her mother and Theano had told her as a child, she knew that Athena wasn't one of those gods thriving on their constant interference in mortals' lives. So her prayer wasn't to thank the Goddess of Wisdom and the Art of War for her help but more for giving all of them the brain to come up with this plan and the courage to see it through.

It only was a short prayer and when she rose she felt eyes on her. Two of them belonged to Gabrielle who was standing in the doorway, and two were her mother's who turned her back when she left the small structure.

About one candlemark after sunrise there was a firm knock on the door to the hut Xena shared with her young lover. A male voice told her that there was news from the scouts and that they were awaiting her orders. She answered that she would be there in a half a candlemark.

She knew she should get up but instead opted to spare a few candledrops to reminiscence about the welcome she got from Gabrielle. The blonde had almost dragged her towards their hut and was quick in getting her out of her armour and leather dress. At first, Xena wanted to protest she was far too tired to do anything else than sleep right now. But then Gabrielle's behaviour wasn't one of an all too eager lover; the expression in her eyes and the earnest set of her jaw spoke more of determination and something close to anxiety. She looked at her taller lover and touched her cheek, her arms, the scars on her back -- and finally Xena understood and let her lover patiently finish her thorough examination. This was no time for words but when they finally found their customary spots in each others arms, she whispered.

"I love you and I missed you too, my Gabrielle." A contented sigh was her only answer and she found Morpheus' realm with a smile on her face.

Xena and Gabrielle arrived almost on time. They grabbed a mug of tea and Xena went to stand next to Tyldus and Melosa while listening to the scout's report. A messenger had been send towards Dragon's pass, at the same time another one went out to the east. And while the first one was not to be messed with, Silea who had been in charge at the time had ordered the other one intercepted and brought back for questioning. When Xena saw the frowns on some of the older council members' faces she complimented the young Amazon for her quick thinking and initiative.

"Kaleipus, Queen Melosa, please assemble all the villagers and soldiers, I want to speak to them. The volunteers should be ready to go by then, only the names on the list and three scores of warriors: soldiers, Centaurs, and Amazons. Regent Calliope, you and your Amazons stay with the defensive forces here at the village. Your archers are our best weapon. Queen Melosa, Palemon, Tyldus, you three will have joint command of the rest of our forces. I count on Dagnine's former army to attack tomorrow at dawn, so you all should try and get some rest. Could you now please give me a few candledrops with Gabrielle."

The room emptied quickly and the shorter woman flew in Xena's arms. They didn't speak but the warrior could feel the fear radiating from her lover. "Please, take me with you, Xena. I can't stand not to know what's happening to you. I don't want to lose you."

"I'll come back to you, my love. Everything will be all right. I promise." Xena answered, stroking the other woman's hair. "I love you. I need to know you're safe. If I let you come with me, all I'll do is worry about you. Please, Gabr..."

The young woman closed her lover's lips with one of her fingers. "I had to try, Xena. I understand your reasons, believe me, but I don't have to like it. Please try to come back unharmed, my love."

"I will, baby. Keep an eye on Solan and Terreis for me, would you?"

Gabrielle just nodded and snuggled deeper in the raven heads arms, burying her head in Xena's cleavage. She felt the taller woman's lips on top of her head and decided to give her something to

come back to. Her tongue sneaked out and she licked her way up to her lover's throat. The reaction was almost immediate. Xena's heartbeat accelerated and got really fast when Gabrielle expertly sought out her lips. Her left hand sneaked under the warrior's battle dress, stroking her most sensitive spot. Her lover moaned.

"Gabrielle, do you know what your doing to me?"

"Oh, yes, my darling warrior." The blonde answered while continuing with her caresses. "See it as an incentive to come back to me, then we will finish this. And that's a promise."

"I love you, my bard. Take care."

Chapter Nine: Memories And Dreams

Xena's fighters and volunteers reached their goal about two candelmarks before sunset. The army at the other side of the pass obviously was in the process of breaking up their long time camp but experience told the seasoned warriors among them that they wouldn't be ready to march out before late morning the next day.

"Xena, don't you think that now would be a good time to tell us about your all so secret plan? It was hard work to carry all this stuff up here. What are we to do with it? Whatever it is."

Philiades' question had an obviously provocative undercurrent to it Xena didn't like at all. She tried to keep her calm but only barely succeeded. "It should be obvious, Philly. We'll create a rock slide that will destroy the siege engines and hopefully the better part of this army."

Before the man had a chance to question her, Eponin stepped forward and muttered. "Sounds like a lot of work, we should get going then."

"You're right, Ep. -- I want you, Meleager, and Kaleipus to take the fighters and keep our friends busy. Don't take any risks but let them know that we're here and that we mean business. It's not important to do great damage, just keep them busy and off-balance. Think you can do that?"

"Piece of cake, Xena, it will be fun. I was afraid all we would have to do is to sit around and wait all night for you guys to finish."

"Send a few scouts along the crest for prudence sake, okay?" Seeing the uneasiness on the villagers faces she added. "And before you ask, Philiades, we won't be able to muffle all the noises we make while preparing our rock slide. We'll drill holes the rocks with hammer and chisel, big enough to put the pouches in I prepared yesterday. I had you wrap the hammer heads with pieces of fur to keep the noises down but it won't be enough. I'll tell you where exactly I need them. If they're not positioned as they have to be, the pass will not collapse the way I want it to. As soon as we've finished, you and your men will hurry back to the village, the Centaurs will be your escort. With luck, you'll all be back before the fighting starts. Now, get your tools,

we've got lots of work to do."

"What's in the pouches?" One of the men asked.

"Something I learned about in Chin more than ten years ago. It's a powder they call Huo-pau and use for entertainment, mostly. I also saw it used to destroy a big two story stone house and to cauterise a gaping wound. As soon as the holes are ready, I'll pack the pouches in and connect them with a cord soaked in oil I also prepared. When our friends down there are at least half way up with their machinery, I'll set fire to the cord which in turn will react with the powder. We'll hear a sound like very loud thunder and a lightning bold combined and Dragon's pass will no longer exist."

"We know what the powder consists of but how do you mix all these ingredients? It would be helpful if we ever need to do something like this again." Philiades wanted to know.

"You mix them with great care." Xena answered with a smile that didn't reach her eyes. She didn't like the greedy glint in his eyes, and she had a promise to keep. She had asked for far more ingredients than were really necessary to create the powder, so it was more than unlikely that anyone at the village would be able to reproduce it. She also had made sure to carefully count every single packet of powder, while putting them in the saddle bags, while unloading them and a last time while attaching the quick match.

"I promised to let nobody know how to make it, it's too dangerous and too tempting, and I never break my word." She also had promised that she never would use it to attack but only in defence and hoped that this would count as such. Her mind was tempted to wander and dwell on the past but with an effort she concentrated on the task at hand. "All right, folks. The sooner we start, the sooner you can get back to the village."

Two candlemarks after the fighters had begun to harass the enemy from the front and from the sides, they sent a small scouting party to find out what was going on. They didn't return. Xena's chakram killed three in one swipe, cutting their throats before they knew what happened, Carani's arrows took out the remaining two. They didn't make any other attempts.

The work was finished shortly after midnight and Xena sent her workers and the Centaurs back to the village. She spent the next couple of candlemarks patiently and meticulously connecting her stacks of Huo-pau, of black powder, to the priming line. Then all that was left to do was to wait. She ordered the remaining fighters to feign a retreat and get some rest while she and a few others were keeping watch. This time she didn't stop her mind from wandering.

In the middle of the night Xena limped along one of the corridors of the palace, her night once again having been cut short by an only dimly remembered nightmare. It was hard to keep her balance on her crooked legs without the help of her short crutch but LaoMa insisted that she at

least tried. She had told her that her mind needed the crutch more than her body and that it was the coward's way out.

No one else would have said something like this to her and have survived but coming from the maddeningly calm Chinese woman Xena took it as a challenge. Every step hurt but she kept going, exploring the palace. Even a fortnight after being hunted by MingTsu's dogs, she hadn't seen all of it. She was ready to turn back to her room when she saw an unusual shadow at one of the fabric covered walls of the corridor, a concealed door, now standing slightly ajar.

She cautiously manoeuvred the stairwell obviously leading to a lower level, there was a faint light coming from below. She followed a scarcely illuminated corridor and finally came to a big room with numerous barrels and bamboo poles. LaoMa was standing at a low table, mixing something. She didn't look up but she knew that Xena was observing her, as Xena knew she would. She told her to come closer.

"What are you doing? This smells awful."

"I just received word that not far from here the entrance of one of our mines collapsed. A lot of workers are trapped inside and it would take too long to remove the stones by hand. What exactly do you smell?" She asked while continuing to work.

"Charcoal, sulphur, and there's something else I don't recognise."

"I don't know your word for it. It's called Siao Si. It's occasionally found at cellars, barns, and stables but with some patience it can also be made artificially." LaoMa answered while carefully closing the upper end of a thin piece of bamboo. "Do you want to come with me and see how it works?" She put it in a satchel together with two similar containers and a coil of strangely gleaming rope.

Having not had any opportunity to leave the palace since her arrival, Xena didn't need a second invitation. She resigned herself to use one of these confining, litter like carriages and was pleasantly surprised when horses were waiting for them. Only then did she realise that the older woman wasn't wearing one of her habitual flowing gowns but pants and a long sleeved shirt falling to mid-thigh. "I told you, time is of the essence, Xena."

They were riding for almost four candlemarks at full speed, the sun was slowly creeping over the horizon. As soon as they came into view of the accident site all work ceased and people prostrated themselves on the ground. They were told to stand up and step aside. While LaoMa prepared the powder charges she explained to Xena what she was doing and why. She put the end of a torch to the nitric saturated rope and shortly after the whole mountain seemed to shake with a sound loud enough to wake the dead in far away Greece. When the smoke had dispersed, the almost man-sized boulders blocking the entrance had been reduced to rubble and the trapped miners were easily freed.

The way back to the palace was taken at a more leisurely pace. Giving the warrior woman time to think about what she had just seen. They rode in silence for the first candlemark. "Will you

teach me how to make this Huo-pau?"

"Yes, I will, if you give me your word that you'll never use it as a means of attack. Give me your word that you never will use it for the sake of killing. Use it only for the good of mankind. And you have to promise that you never will teach anyone else how to make it."

"But LaoMa, with this stuff in your possession the whole world could be yours, why don't you use it?"

"You know why, Xena."

"Yeah, to conquer others... yadda, yadda... I know, there doesn't a day go by you don't say it." The young woman said with a face of a scolded, pouting child.

"You hear the words but you still don't understand. Try to see it this way. Would you want to live in a world where warlords could kill the supporters and soldiers of their enemy without even unsheathing their sword, a world where victory is not for the strong and cunning but for those who have more of the black powder? You can kill hundreds of people at once with its help, without making a difference between friend and foe." The Chinese woman with the compassionate eyes fell silent to let her words sink in. "Would such a world be worth living in?"

"That's where you're wrong, life isn't worth living. It's to be taken and beaten and wrestled and formed into your image. That's where the meaning lies, in what you can twist life into. For those who just endure life, yeah, it's a nasty joke but for those who form it with their will, the joke is on those who get in the way. The world is nothing but a playground for the strong."

"Strong words, but they don't sound sincere out of your mouth."

LaoMa was right, these weren't her words, not by a long shot. It was something Ares had said to her whenever she began to doubt her self assigned mission of protecting Amphipolis from other warlords and marauders. However, she wasn't ready to admit to it just now. "Given you were right, where would this place you, now?"

"I don't understand your question."

"If my actions were fuelled by what you just said, where would you be?"

"I would be in Tartarus by now, ripped to pieces by a pair of blood hounds." Xena said after another period of silence. She half turned in the saddle. "I, Xena of Amphipolis, give you my word that I will not use the secret of the black powder as a means of attack. I give you my word that I will never use it for the sake of killing but only in defence. I give you my word that I will never share the secret with someone else."

Suddenly, a white fox crossed their path from the right. LaoMa's horse shied, one of his legs got caught in a root sticking out of the ground. The Chinese ruler would have fallen, had Xena not dragged her over to her own horse where she stayed for the rest of their journey -- thus beginning

another stage in their relationship.

No, these thoughts were certainly not the best a few candlemarks before breaking her promise and using the black powder to kill. Yes, it was imperative to destroy the siege engines but taking out the soldiers was almost as important. At least half of them had to be killed by her man-made rock slide -- else the combined army of Amazons and Centaurs wouldn't stand a chance.

Just before dawn, when the night is at its coldest and darkest, Xena ordered the Amazons to take a stand in the tree tops and her men to hide behind the trunks. She supposed that their enemy first would send another scouting party to make sure that the pass still was safe, and they would find nothing amiss. She even had camouflaged the priming cord. They came with the first rays of the sun and carefully tested the solidity of the rock walls to their left and right. They even ventured down to the tree line, peering in the forest without noticing even one of the forty pairs of eyes observing them. Back at the pass, they signalled the men below and the long column of men, horses, supply wagons and siege engines was set in march. After the random attacks had ceased, they obviously had spent the rest of the night to completely break up camp.

Xena was flat on her stomach on top of the left side of the pass, her flints at the ready next to the end of the priming cord. Eponin held the same position at the other side, waiting for her signal. The first group of about sixty soldiers reached the pass when the siege engines were just starting their long climb up. The men continued on to the tree line. A third of them took guarding positions while the rest began to cut a path for the wagons. Whenever a sentry ventured out of sight of his comrades, he quietly and effectively was taken out of the equation thanks to a well placed arrow or the silent hiss of knife.

A second group on horseback crested the pass. They dismounted. Every fourth of them stayed with the horses, holding the reigns of the nervous animals. Their skittish behaviour should have clued their riders in on the fact that something wasn't right and that they were not as alone as they believed to be. But they were oblivious; they just stood there, waiting for the main part of the army to bring the siege engines up. Xena listened in on their self satisfied conversation.

"Hawk was right: Mars is with us. It will be a child's play to take the village, judging on the pathetic display last night."

"That's General Hawk for you, you moron. But what did you expect. The Centaurs really are nothing but farmers and the Amazons... I always knew that their reputation was all smoke without a fire. I'm really looking forward to teach them were a woman really belongs, between the legs of a real man."

"A real man. Thanks for the compliment, 'cause you're certainly not speaking of yourself,

youngster."

With them bragging and bantering half a candlemark passed. Xena tried to tune out their mindless chatter and concentrated on the advancing column of wagons. There was a battering ram, a thickly shielded tower, three big sturdy catapults able to hurl rocks the size of a goat, a wagon with ladders, another with smaller items she couldn't discern clearly. The last wagon held a few barrels that sure as the river Styx didn't contain water or wine. Though still two candlemarks until midday, it was almost time to act, another thirty paces to make sure to get a maximum effect.

A hunting hawk's cry was the signal for Eponin to light her end of the oil soaked cord and to run as soon as she was sure that it was burning. She sent a prayer to Athena and Gaia and did the same on her end. It was also the signal for her soldiers to attack the woodcutter detail. Xena ran towards the tree line. She heard the explosion and was propelled forwards. She lost her footing and tumbled down the hillside, almost losing orientation.

Stopped by a fallen tree, she regained her composure just as an axe was trying to split her head in two. The tall warrior instinctively rolled out of the way and reached for her sword. She heard a distinctive thump, an arrow was protruding her enemy's chest, and he sank to the ground with the triumph of an easy kill still etched on his face. Carani was running towards her with another arrow already notched and ready. Xena dropped back to the ground, the young woman let the arrow fly and a second opponent was down.

"Thanks, Carani. Didn't you tell me that the bow isn't your favourite weapon?"

The small redhead grinned sheepishly. "Yes, but I never said that I couldn't handle it almost as well as any other of my sisters, Con... Xena. -- What are we going to do now?"

"Let's first make sure... Ahh, there comes Meleager. I presume the men in the forest are taken care of?" It wasn't really a question; she didn't expect anything else from him or any other of her men.

"As we speak, their bodies are taken care of. We had a few insignificant injuries that are being treated. I told everyone to report back to you in a quarter candlemark for new orders."

"Good. Get everyone ready to move out towards the village. I suppose the battle is already in full swing. Every sword and every bow will count. Hurry to get there. I need a few volunteers to make sure that everything worked out at the pass, not more than six. Send them up as soon as you're ready." She didn't wait for an answer but began to walk up the incline she just had stumbled down.

Xena felt a presence at her side and stopped. "What do you think you're doing, Carani?"

"Staying with you. I'm volunteering." The archer said with a stubborn shrug of her shoulders.

"No, you're not. You don't know what will wait for us at the other side. And I don't want you to

know."

"I know what we'll probably have to do, Xena. I'm not this naïve. I was well trained."

"Trained to be a killer? I don't think so, that's not what Amazons are about. Knowing is one thing, seeing it is harder to do, and doing it can cost your very soul. Killing someone in battle is hard enough, making sure that not one of this army will be able to follow us, is not something I want you involved in. Going back to the village is riding into battle, I don't want your soul tainted by murder before you have to defend your sisters and the children at the village fortress. Turn back."

Xena wasn't sure if her words had had any impact but there was a thoughtful expression on the young woman's face. Finally she answered. "My mother told me that there probably would come a moment when you'd send me back. She told me to obey your orders and that's what I'll do. I don't have to like it, though." She bowed slightly, turned around, and went back to where the horses were already waiting.

Half a candlemark later, Xena found Eponin on top of what once had been Dragon's pass. "You sent the youngster back to the village?"

"Yes."

"Good. I ordered Silea to keep an eye on her. She wasn't happy."

"Good choice. It's better this way, Eponin. They both have killed but they still are innocents. They don't know the calling of darkness."

The Amazon only nodded and grimly turned her mind to the problems at hand. "Looks like your Huo-whatever did a thorough job. The siege engines are nothing but splinters and it looks like only a few of the men were able to get away. I suppose less than twenty."

"That's good news." Xena answered without any joy in her voice. "We'll still have to make sure."

"Help's just coming up." The weapons' master replied with a shake of her head. Two senior members of the Royal Guard hurried up the hill side, flanked by Meleager and two other former members of the First Order. They didn't need any orders. Everyone knew what had to be done.

Gabrielle had been restless since the moment she no longer was able to see her lover's group of warriors and craftsmen at the horizon. She nervously paced the ramparts until Queen Melosa put her to work; she was helping with some of the traps, preparing shafts to make more arrows, carrying boulders to be placed in the small catapult the Centaur smith had improvised out of the giant crossbow with the help of his Amazon counter-part.

When evening approached she fled the company of the others, having had enough of being told that everything would be all right and that she should stop worrying. She finally had returned to their hut and buried her nose in Xena's sleep shirt, inhaling the familiar and comforting scent of her warrior. She spent a sleepless night -- and it was showing in the set of her shoulders as well as the bags under her eyes.

The craftsmen and Centaurs returned a couple of candlemarks before sunrise. They told her that everything was working out fine and that 'these bastards' didn't stand a chance. This, however, didn't reassure her and it did even less to calm her down. So, when the first rays of dawn appeared at the horizon she sought the calm and quiet of Athena's shrine. Gabrielle silently knelt in front of the altar, imploring every god willing to listen to bring Xena back, alive and unharmed. Running out of unspoken words, she turned around and found Xena's mother sitting in a corner, her face and front bathed in tears.

The sensitive young woman sat down next to her and put her arm around the slightly taller woman's shoulder. Cyrene reacted to the touch and pulled her other hand between her own, obviously seeking additional comfort. Candelrops passed, the sun already touched the top of the wooden statue, and still none of them spoke.

Some time later, Gabrielle finally couldn't stand the silence any longer. "Tell me." She said almost imploringly.

"Today I will lose my daughter to Hades."

The moment the words left her mouth she knew she shouldn't have said them. "You disowned her, more than once."

"Not in my heart."

The answer was completely without the aggressiveness Gabrielle had come to associate with the older woman. She slightly turned and found Cyrene's hazel eyes, so completely different from her lover's. "She promised to come back to me."

"She will die on the battle field, just outside these walls. If she goes out there and fights Ares' army she will die."

Gabrielle was silent. This was what she had been afraid of all along but still she refused to give in to her fears: Xena wouldn't want her to. She had to be strong but couldn't keep her voice from trembling. "How do you know?"

"I had a dream, last night. I came here to ask for answers but Athena doesn't speak to me." The older woman said with despair. "She can't let her die." In a surprisingly fast and fluid movement she pushed herself to her feet. She made two steps towards the centre of the sanctuary and raised her face to the ceiling. "You can't let her die, Goddess. It's your duty to protect her. I will never forgive you, if you don't. I will no longer believe in you." Then she turned and left the room

without another glance to her flabbergasted public.

Gabrielle was still sitting on the ground, trying to make head and tail out of this scene but couldn't. She hadn't been the only witness. Theano sat down next to her, instinctively knowing that her old friend had a lot of conflicting emotions to deal with and now more than anything else needed to be alone. The confused blonde, however, didn't. "Do you think her insane threatening a god?"

"I don't know what to think, Theano. What does she expect to achieve with her words? The gods never answered my prayers outright but they brought me to where I was supposed to be to be found by the other half of my soul. -- I don't want Xena to die."

The older Amazon was thoughtfully silent for a moment. She closed her eyes for a moment, cast a short glance towards the statue of the goddess, and said.

"I'll tell you a story even Xena doesn't know." This got her a surprised look. "There once was the daughter of an innkeeper in a trading town named Amphipolis. She was the only child, a younger brother having died a few days after his birth, joining their mother already waiting in the Elysian Fields. In her sixth summer a fever killed almost half of the inhabitants of the village, especially elders and young children. She also fell ill but survived. To thank the Goddess her father dedicated her life to Athena, the patron goddess of Amphipolis. She was to be a priestess.

"Every day, she went to the temple and studied under the guidance of the head priestess. She eagerly learned everything Athena invented, except for one thing. She refused to learn the Art of War. She was punished for her refusal but stayed firm to her beliefs. With her first blood she had a vision of Athena and began to study the healing arts on her own, guided by an old healer living reclusively in the forest nearby. She spent her youth learning to be a priestess and a healer and in the evenings she served at the inn.

"Her initiation was to be at her twentieth birthday. It was only a few moons to this much anticipated day when her eyes fell on one of the customers of the inn, a tall warrior with long black hair and striking blue eyes. She fell in love. She didn't have any experience with men or even with compliments given to her. In the village everyone respected and treated her as a future priestess. The warrior, the village knew him under the name of Atrius; he stayed at the inn and helped to organise a militia. She more than once skipped her duties to stand at the edge of the training ground and watch him; the same way you love observing Xena.

"They got closer every day. What had started out as mutual attraction soon became more. Cyrene was torn between her duty to the goddess and the village and her deep love and passion for the warrior who purchased a strip of land with a small hut. She sought answer in prayer and Athena officially released her from her vows of chastity. She even sent a new priestess to take her place and the head priestess assured the village elders that Cyrene still held the goddess' favour.

"For a few moons, they happily lived together. But then Atrius had to leave, returning to his duties as a warrior. He came back as often as he could but shortly after Xena was born he disappeared never to return. She returned to the village and slowly took over the management of

the inn. When asked about her warrior she answered that Athena had told her that he had to go away to let her children grow up as happily and as protected as possible. They didn't ask any further.

"Cyrene continued to pray to Athena and taught her children a lot of the things she had learned serving the goddess. She never wavered in her faith, not during the incident with the smith, not when Xena took up the sword to defend her village, not when her youngest son was killed, not when her daughter became a warlord or the Conqueror, not when Xena had one of her childhood friends crucified for trying to kill her, not when she had to give up the inn and live in Corinth. This is the first time."

Gabrielle looked at the Amazon with wide eyes. "She really loves Xena."

"Yes, she does, little one. But she never would admit to it. They both are too damn stubborn." Before the young woman was able to find an answer, the great horn of the Amazons sounded, calling everyone to take their places and get ready to fight.

Terreis was in charge of the defence of the eastern half of the rampart, the side not protected by the highly trapped streets of the outer part of the village where the bigger part of their army was currently taking up their hiding places. As an element of surprise Calliope's archers were positioned on the rooftops to possibly quickly repel the first wave of assault.

Xena had been convinced that their enemy then would try to directly attack the fortress with his remaining horses while at the same time a second wave would once again go for the outer village. Strategically it would have been sounder to wait for the reinforcement and the siege engines but, as the former Conqueror had patiently explained to the war council, in fights like this it was important to break the spirit of the besieged as quickly as possible and to keep up a steady stream of attacks to make sure that the soldiers behind the fortified walls didn't get any rest.

The sun was well over its midday point when her words became reality, at the same time far off in the north where the mountain tops were only dimly visible a thick column of smoke was slowly rising towards the sky.

Having insisted on taking an active part in the defence effort, Gabrielle was standing next to the Amazon princess who to her annoyance still was forced to wear tightly wrapped bandages. The young blonde held her staff and was ready to carry Terreis' orders to the other end of walkway if need arose.

The first charge had cost their enemy heavily but it soon became obvious that none of the victims had any kind of special protection. Luckily, the archers first had tried to take them out the conventional way, aiming for the throat and the heart. They were simple foot soldiers, sent in to test their defences.

Everyone knew the battle was only just beginning. The tension on the ramparts grew. It was only a question of time. The sound of galloping horses announced their coming, a single straight line as long as the fortress was wide. The Centaur archers were readying their bows and crossbows. Standing at the lower part of the defensive wall under the wooden walkway, they were taking aim through slim embrasures, eye to eye with the attacking riders. Before they got into range the enemy's line quickly parted and revealed foot soldiers, also marching in a straight line, unhurriedly.

The former Amazon ordered Gabrielle and Ephiny, her other runner, to make sure that the sidelines were specially protected. The first two rows of foot soldiers also parted shortly out of striking distance of the archers. Men armed with Roman shields appeared, forming a protective line, hard to penetrate. The other soldiers closed ranks behind them. The riders stayed back. Terreis sent Ephiny to the outer village, giving a short report to Kaleipus and Queen Melosa, recommending that they kept their attention where it was. This display of strength and cunning probably was nothing but an elaborate diversion.

She was only half right. About eighty paces from the wall the shield bearers turned sideways and retreated. The foot soldiers began a running attack, not even flinching when a Centaur's arrow felled one of their companions. They were reduced to half their original number before they were close enough to throw their heavy javelins thus presenting more of their only lightly armed bodies as a target. Everyone not mortally wounded tried to get back on his feet, some advanced on their knees, others dragged themselves forward using their hands only.

They didn't make a sound, no battle cry and no cry of pain. It was weird and spooky and didn't make any sense. It was completely against any battle strategy Terreis had ever heard of, and if there was one thing she had learned from the former Conqueror it was that even bad battle strategists did everything for a reason.

Before she could think of any kind of answer, one of the heavy spears flew past her, only inches away from her right shoulder. Terreis stepped left and found herself face to face with another one. The instant she knew that it would bury itself right in her heart, a brown line traversed her peripheral vision, she heard wood hitting metal and felt something piercing her leg, felt it grazing her thighbone, and sank to the ground. She looked up.

Gabrielle stood in front of her, swirling her staff in complex patterns and warding off other threats. The young woman shouted for shields to be brought over from the other side and put in front of the fallen Amazon. She ordered the archers to concentrate on the spear throwers only and ducked behind the shield to care for Terreis.

The blonde knelt next to her and pressed both hands on the abundantly bleeding wound. One of the main arteries must have been severed, she was losing too much blood. Gabrielle yelled for a healer while improvising a tourniquet with her belt and a discarded arrow. The defenders on the walkway no longer concentrated on their enemies but their injured leader, the more seasoned among them knowing that her chances of survival were slim at best.

She saw Cyrene and Akyra hurrying up the steps when a hand touched her own. She turned her

head towards Terreis pain filled eyes. "You tried to save me." The still bleeding woman said haltingly.

"Don't speak. Try to save your strength." Gabrielle almost whispered.

"What you did only one Amazon would do for another Amazon." She felt Akyra kneeling next to her while Cyrene began to clean out the wound. "Venerable elder, be my witness. I, Terreis, daughter of Hippolyta, sister of Melosa, Queen of the Amazons, give my right of caste to Gabrielle. So be it." She continued with waning strength.

"So be it, in the name of Artemis. I will see that your decision will be reported to Queen Melosa, and now stay still. We're not ready to let you die just yet, little sprout. Close your eyes. Try to concentrate on your breathing, breathe, nice and slow, in, out, in, out, in, out. Nothing else is important. Listen to my voice. In, out, in, out, in, out, in, out, in, out. My voice and your breathing, there's nothing else. In, out...."

The silver haired Amazon continued with her soothing words for another two candledrops that to Gabrielle appeared like two big chunks of eternity. Finally, she nodded and the former innkeeper proceeded with a thorough examination of the injury. She took a knife out of her belt and carefully unwrapped the blade protected by a thin layer of silk. As she began to cut away parts of the bleeding flesh, Gabrielle's stomach started to rebel and she wanted to stop her.

"Trust me, Gabrielle. This has to be done. There was some kind of acid on the spear head, don't you smell it? It gets worse with water, I can't just clean it out. I have to cut away as much as I can or this wound will never properly heal."

Gabrielle swallowed the bile rising in her throat and nodded. Her world was reduced to the three women next to her. After what certainly was another eternity, Cyrene ordered her to open the tourniquet and to close it again shortly after. The amount of blood on the ground should have worried her but she was mesmerised by the older woman's precise and graceful movements, reminding her very much of her lover.

Suddenly a blow rocked the shields protecting them. The blonde woman looked up and saw a big, bearded man swinging a battle mace, aiming for Cyrene's head. She acted on instinct alone. Her right hand found another discarded arrow, she jumped up and almost flew towards him. He had both hands at the base of his weapon, his eyes firmly on his target, prematurely discarding the small woman as no threat to his heavy bulk. The tip of the arrow went right through his neck, driven in by the weight of Gabrielle's whole body, piercing the jugular vein and crushing his windpipe. They both fell to the ground, one with surprise in his eyes, the other one with a mixture of fear and determination.

Gabrielle scrambled back to her feet and looked around. About a dozen of their enemies already were on the walkways, locked in hand-to-hand combat with the defenders. They obviously had used the distraction of Terreis' injury to their advantage. She picked up the mace of the dead man, from the ground up it came almost to her hip. She shouldn't have been able to lift it up, much less swing it effectively -- but she did. She saw another one of the Amazons go down,

swirled around as if she still had her staff in her hands and smashed the spiked end of the weapon against the head of her opponent. For a moment she saw nothing but blood and grey chunks of ... something. The force of the blow caused her to lose her balance and she let go of the mace before toppling over the wall herself.

Next she picked up a javelin and used it as a staff as she had seen the Amazon Regent do it. Her blows became more forceful with every heartbeat, and at the same time she felt herself getting calmer. Her breathing slowed considerably. The blunt end of the weapon knocked one of the enemy soldiers unconscious, she felt someone coming from behind, heard the hiss of a sword, and thrust the weapon backwards. She heard the sickening sound of metal crushing bones, the cracking of ribs when she tried to clear the weapon. He was already dead when he hit the dirt outside of the fortress. The remaining two of their attackers were dispatched by three men of the village. She threw the spear with every ounce of energy she had left and it embedded itself only two paces from the leader of their enemy sitting regally on a white stallion.

She stared at him, his silver helmet gleaming in the sun, and turned her attention back to Terreis who now was lying on one of the shields ready to be carried to the infirmary. She was sleeping or unconscious, her face deadly pale.

"Will she live?" To Gabrielle her voice sounded as if it came from very far away but none of the others seemed to find anything amiss.

"All we can do is hope and pray. She is strong but she has lost a lot of blood..." The older woman suddenly fell silent. Her face was ashen white and her gaze was fixed on the enemy leader. She whispered. "Ares' helmet."

This time Gabrielle looked more thoroughly at the man. His helmet had a skull on top and a double pair of wings. "Ares' helmet?"

"So, Ares' Chosen will kill my daughter." Cyrene said tonelessly.

"What are you talking about?"

"It is said that the God of War gifts his Chosen with a special helmet, forged by Hephaestus himself. It is said that whoever wears it has the power to inspire the soldiers under his command and drive them forward no matter what, against the odds, against reason, against good sense -- as if they had no will of their own. They still have their strength and all their cunning but are unable to go against the will of the helmet's bearer."

"So, this is what happened today. Ares won't win. She will not be taken from me, not now, not ever." Gabrielle's voice not only spoke of determination, it was tinted with a hint of steel. Her usually friendly green eyes were as cold as ice. She looked fierce, that was the only word the older woman could think of. But she still managed to maintain an outer veneer of civility. She forced a smile that didn't reach her eyes. "You'd better go back to the infirmary. I'm sure they'll need you down there, Cyrene."

Just as Xena had predicted, for the following candlemarks they had to fight off random attacks, meant more to keep them busy and unbalanced than to do any harm. They came close to the walls but there was no other attempt to climb them.

The sun slowly was going down and Gabrielle was getting more nervous every passing candlemark. When Ephiny came with a new status report she made her decision. "Eph, my friend, please take my place here. I need a change of scenery."

Her words were as soft spoken as always but having come to know the young woman quiet well over the past moons, the curly haired Amazon felt that something wasn't right with her friend. She obviously needed someone to talk to but in the middle of a battle really wasn't the right time and place. She also knew about the right of caste, and following Amazon law she had to obey the younger woman's orders. "Yes, Princess Gabrielle."

"Princess ? I'm no princess. I'm not even an Amazon."

"You're wrong. You always were one of us in your heart but now everything has changed. Terreis gave you her right of caste. You're now Queen Melosa's heir -- at least until her daughters are old enough to be initiated into the tribe. When we return to the village, you'll take her place at Queen Melosa's side."

"Terreis will survive. There's no need to make any fuss about this now."

"It will not change what she did, Gabrielle. Nothing could."

"I don't understand, Ephiny."

"There are two things that never can be taken back in an Amazon's life: joining with your bond mate and giving away your right of caste."

"Eph, I know this is important but not now. I have to be out there. Xena needs me."

The blond Amazon didn't understand, not by a long shot, but she was well aware of the earnest in Gabrielle's voice, and though the unusual coldness of her eyes was confusing and somewhat scary she couldn't think of any reason to deny her request. So, she bowed her head and nodded but before she'd finished her formal bow the younger woman was gone.

Argo was running full out. The distance between Xena and her companions was steadily growing though they also moved as fast as their mounts would go.

They'd descended the other side of the pass and checked on the fallen enemies. Fortunately most of them already had been dead. They'd only found a few survivors -- and everyone of them had

been past saving. The next step had been to get rid of the bodies, and once again luck had been on their side. The barrels from the last wagon were undamaged. So, they'd used them and their contents of Greek fire to burn the gathered corpses in order to keep the scavengers away and avoid any threat of spreading diseases.

The bigger part of her mind had been detached from her bloody task but Xena had been surprised to find a tiny part of her conscience regretting their deaths, the necessity of their deaths. This had never happened before; she even remembered a time when combing through a battlefield had been one of the things she particularly enjoyed, putting to death the already doomed.

Xena shook herself forcibly back to reality. The sounds of battle now were easy to discern. Argo's legs were rhythmically eating up the ground, obeying the strange and conflicting impulses coming from her mistress, urged on by a feeling of dread she wasn't able to push in the back of her mind.

When the tall warrior soon after rode onto the battlefield, the fighting was in full swing. Centaurs and Amazons were trying to break the ranks of Hawk's riders but the men were disciplined and protected by the Ixion stone solution. Arrows that should have been fatal were dropping to the ground without doing any harm. Their heads were encased in helmets, making it extremely difficult to hit them in the eyes, even for the superior skills of Calliope's archers. Otherwise they were equally matched, the slightly higher number of defenders outbalanced by the magical protection and the force coming from Ares' helmet.

Xena came from the left and took them by surprise. Before they really knew what hit them, she had taken three heads off. She had to put all of her strength behind her blows to succeed but the allied forces regained their confidence by her example and attacked with renewed vigour -- but not without paying a high price. The archers intensified their offensive, aiming for the mouth instead of the eyes but the brunt of the fighting was on the sword and axe wielders. It was a slow and gruesome process, and for every two dead soldiers one of them at least got injured. Candlemarks passed.

The warrior woman cut a path through the dwindling lines of the enemy, taking a few hits herself but paying them no heed. Coming closer and closer to the centre she suddenly saw Gabrielle in the thick of the fighting, sitting on the back of a tall Centaur she was wielding a spear, with a feral smile on her face. Her field of vision narrowed, Xena forgot about the fight, overpowered by the need to grab her blond lover and take her away from the battlefield. She urged Argo on, thrusting her weapon almost negligently in the enemy's eyes or mouths.

Ten paces before she reached her goal, a battle maze slammed into her back, a second blow struck the base of her neck and she dropped on the ground. Argo was doing her best to protect her fallen mistress and soon had help from Gabrielle, Ephiny and Calliope's bond mate, Raneria.

Xena saw the ground coming closer and the next moment she found herself standing in the middle of a great hall, without her armour and weapons but still wearing her leather dress and bracers. She was surrounded by armed men, fallen enemies. They attacked as soon as they became aware of her presence. She started to defend herself, kicking a sword out of a hand ready to strike. Now, once again armed she tried to fight her way out of this hall but whenever the weapon sliced through one of her opponents, the wound immediately closed and he kept on fighting. She quickly understood that all she could do was to try and keep them at bay.

They made no sound, not even the swords hitting hers made a sound but Xena could hear her own breathing, faster than usual from the exertion but still regular and strong. Kicking one of them in the groin while taking a head off she tried to find out where she was. Part of her was convinced that she was dead and in Tartarus, damned to spent eternity fighting off enemies she had sent there herself. She could feel her heart beating in her chest and a dull ache where the mace had hit her. Another part, however, insisted that she was still alive and shouldn't be in this place and that she had to return to Gabrielle as soon as possible.

In her peripheral vision she saw a big man walking through the wall to her left as if it didn't exist. She couldn't see his face yet but when he touched the ghostly fighters they literally froze as if petrified. Snippets of a story she once had heard flipped through her mind: Hades, the hall of judgement where only the dead came whose fate wasn't decided yet, the soul being weighted against a feather. No, she was mixing things up, but Xena knew she should be in Tartarus, back on the cross, just like the last time. When the God of the underworld had reached her, she threw the weapon away and lowered herself to her right knee, ready to be judged.

"You shouldn't be here, Xena. Your time has not yet come. Stand up and let me look at you." She found herself eye to eye with the dark god. "No, you're not dead. You came close but no permanent harm was done. Why are you here?"

Xena didn't get the chance to tell him that she didn't know because Ares suddenly appeared in a cloud of red and blue light. "The maze should have broken her neck. She should be dead. She should be mine by now, mine to command. I claim her soul."

"My soul is mine and I'd rather rot in Tartarus for this eternity and the next than give it to you." Xena snarled and instinctively took a defensive stance.

Hades didn't pay her any attention. "Ares, you know that you have to base such a claim on solid ground. Your father is a great defender of mortal independence, even you should take his will into account."

"Xena is my Chosen. My darkness is in her blood. She is mine."

"I never have and I never will swear allegiance to you, Ares." Once again she was ignored.

"There is darkness in Xena, I won't deny you that but I also know that Xena is a special case. And even if she were not, even gods have to follow the law and every one of us is only entitled to one Chosen at a time. And your Chosen, Ares, is still out there trying to kill Artemis'

Amazons. He's wearing your helmet and his men will continue to fill my hall of justice as long as he holds them under the helmet's spell."

"I insist. Xena is mine, uncle."

"The council will have to decide, nephew -- and it has to be done now. Xena is losing her life force when she stays in my realm without being dead. Let's go."

Xena felt something akin to disorientation and suddenly found herself in a colonnaded temple with the columns touching the sky. There were a lot of comfortable looking armchairs in a half circle. The whole Pantheon was present, including Zeus himself but with the exception of Poseidon. Ares repeated his claim on Xena's soul and was met by a moment of stunned silence. The God of War sensed his chance.

"If no one contests my claim, I'll take her with me now." He put his hand on Xena's upper arm.

"I contest your right to Xena, little brother. I claim this mortal as my own." Athena said, stepping in front of Ares. "Xena's darkness is not yours, her darkness is due to me and me alone. I'm ready to fight for my claim on her. I'll even let you bind one of my hands on my back, just like last time." The Goddess of Wisdom moved as if to unsheathe her sword.

"Father, you can't let her do this. You know, I don't stand a chance."

"Oh, stop whining, little brother."

"Stop it, both of you. This is my soul you're talking about and I'm ready to fight for it." Xena yelled at the top of her lungs.

"Xena is right, father. The darkness in her soul could well be mine or yours or Hades'." Artemis joined the discussion, among others motivated by the desire to distract her brother from Athena's almost reckless choice of words. "We all have it and we all know that Xena is fighting it. Under Ares' influence all the progress she made would be annihilated. Let her fight for herself."

"Oh, Arty, get real. She's a mortal; she's a spirited fighter, I give you that but she's still a mortal. She doesn't stand a chance. Everything she knows, she learned from me. That's ridiculous."

"Don't be too sure of yourself, little brother. Don't forget you were not the only teacher she had." Athena countered.

"Quiet! I won't have you two bickering. This is far too serious a matter." The father of the gods bellowed, effectively silencing everyone in the big room. "Xena is under the protection of Gaia. She has a right to defend her soul and her future -- and I personally will make sure that it's a fair fight. Athena, do you maintain your claim?"

"Xena will be allowed to defend herself?" Zeus nodded. "No, father. I only made the claim to keep her out of Ares' clutches. I'm looking forward to seeing her do it herself."

"Ares, my son, this is your last chance. Do you also withdraw your claim?"

"Of course not. Xena is mine and when this ridiculous charade is over no one will ever come between me and her. I choose the sword as my weapon."

"So be it. Artemis, Athena, you'll come with us. I need witnesses. Brother would you also do me the honour?"

Once again Xena felt slightly disorientated and was standing in a very large room. It was richly decorated but also had a slightly dilapidated flair. With a quick glance she took in three ornate thrones sitting behind a large sacrificial altar with a set of manacles at both ends. At the other side two rows of flagpoles were horizontally embedded in the high wall, long strips of colourful fabric hanging down from them. "Where are we?"

"It used to be a temple of the Furies, Xena. They abandoned it because it's too far away from their mortal worshippers. It's perfect for what we need. Ares will not be able to use any of his godly powers, no fire bolts, no unexpected disappearances. It will even the odds." Zeus answered the tall warrior's question. "Let's get going,"

"I'll need my sword."

"Take mine!" Athena said, unsheathing her weapon and giving it to Xena. "I think you'll find it well balanced."

"Thank you, Goddess." Xena made a few practice swings. "Wow, it's perfect, as if it were my own." The raven head missed the tiny smile on the face of the equally dark haired goddess.

"Let's get this over with. I'm anxious to put the future Empress of the Known World to work. Defend yourself, Xena."

Ares drew his blade and tried to overpower her with heavy overhead blows. She blocked everyone of them but it put a lot of strain on her arm muscles, so she countered with short vicious jabs, taking advantage of his wide swings and breaking his defences almost too easily. He lost his striking rhythm, her right leg hit his left thigh but he held his ground and tried to take her feet out with an underhanded stroke. She jumped out of the way, redirecting her momentum to a few back flips that brought her under the first row of flag poles.

The warrior woman jumped upwards and propelled herself to the upper level. Ares followed quickly behind. Balancing themselves on the thin but obviously very sturdy metal bars of the poles, they ran at each other, their swords collided with a bang and for a short time they traded blows, neither of them giving ground. A round house kick of Xena found the god's chin, she then blocked his counter attack with her left arm. They once again concentrated on the swords.

Ares ducked under a swing, his left foot kicked her weapon out of her hand. Xena did a back somersault and caught the weapon neatly at the hilt. This time they didn't run, they just jumped at each other as if flying through the air. Their blades met in a shower of sparks, leaving their audience rather impressed. They did it again, without either of them giving in an inch. He ran towards her, reaching the other end of the flagpole row; before their weapons once again made contact, Xena was airborne, driving him back with powerful kicks to his chest.

The god fell but managed to grab one of the colourful banners and propelled himself back on top of the pole. Now, it was Ares turn to drive her backwards. Their swords clashed against each other, they traded kicks and blows. Xena's left backhanded him, at the same time his right foot kicked out. They both lost their balance and their swords but saved themselves from falling by grabbing one of the poles. Once again they searched contact.

Ares kicked the tall woman in the stomach, she answered with a combination of kicks to his thighs and chest. She then quickly closed both legs around his waist, her hands on his shoulders, and head-butted him with such might that Ares lost his hold on the poles both dropping to the lower row of flagpoles.

Xena landed on her back, close to her weapon. She turned around and picked it up; rising she repelled Ares by kicking backwards, sending him flying. He attacked once again. Xena anticipated his moves. The moment his right foot was about to hit the next flagpole she cut it through with a single stroke of Athena's sword. It hit the ground and the God of War only barely managed to maintain his balance.

She jumped back to the ground, deliberately turning her back to him. He followed, flying through the air with his weapon stretched out in front of him. Xena whirled around, the flat of her blade descended on his hand. His sword hit the ground and he landed in one of the thrones on the dais.

Before he could catch his breath, the tip of his own sword was at his throat. Her eyes were silvery cold with blood lust and she growled. "Yield!"

"You win, Xena."

"You withdraw your claim and will cease to interfere in my life?"

"You win, this time, warrior princess." He answered through clenched teeth.

"Wrong answer, leather boy." Xena put a tiny bit of pressure on the blade, drawing blood.

"Okay, okay. I withdraw my claim. Your soul is yours."

"And...."

"And I'll stop interfering in your life."

"Zeus, did you hear everything?"

"Everything I needed to, Xena. Ares, go back to your own temple. I don't want to see your meddling nose for the next fortnight." Ares disappeared without his usual flourish.

"I'll better go and make sure that he ends up where he's supposed to be." The God of the Underworld stated and disappeared.

"Artemis, Athena, you've got five candledrops. Xena needs to go back."

"Thank you, father. -- Xena, you did good. To end this battle you'll have to defeat their leader. He's a decent fighter and doesn't concern himself with fairness, especially when he's with his back to the wall. So, you better take care."

"Why did you try to help me, Athena?"

"Sorry, I can't tell you, at least not all of it. I did it because I think that you deserve a second chance. I saw the slow change in your soul from the moment LaoMa touched you with her wisdom and how you changed the way you did things after Solan was born. I also did it because I owe your mother."

"I don't pretend to understand what my mother, a simple innkeeper has to do with the Goddess of Wisdom but I suppose you won't answer this question either."

"One day the truth will be revealed, warrior." Artemis took over the conversation. "We'll send you back now but there's one thing you should know. It's about Gabrielle."

"She lost her blood innocence, I know, I saw her at the battlefield. I wanted to get her out of there when the mace hit me. I can only hope that I'll have the strength to help her through her blood lust." The tall warrior answered.

"One day she will be my Chosen, warrior. In order to help Gabrielle, when this day's fighting is over you'll be free of your own blood lust. Are you ready?" The Goddess of the Hunt asked.

"As ready as I'll ever be. Thank you, the both of you." Xena quietly said and closed her eyes.

The first thing Xena became aware of was the smell of blood close to her nostrils. She opened her eyes to a scene of carnage. An enemy soldier was only inches from her on the ground, blood pouring from his open mouth. She blinked. The tip of a javelin still stuck in his throat. Without moving she cautiously looked around, painfully aware of the dull ache at her neck and the bleeding punctures from the spikes of the mace at her back, just where her back armour plates ended. Her eyes found the end of Gabrielle's weapon, half of the tip was missing.

Extending her senses, she suddenly jumped on her feet and threw her chakram to intercept two crossbow bolts directed towards her lover and take out the man shooting them. The weapon easily sliced his throat. Gabrielle turned her head, there was a hint of relieve in her face but then she grimly returned to her own fighting. With the tall warrior's help the cluster of enemies surrounding them was quickly dispelled.

There still were a few pockets where the fighting was going on but for all intents and purposes the allied army had come out victorious. Xena almost gave the order to retreat behind the walls of the fortified village, there were not enough of them left to pose a serious threat but then she remembered Athena's words. 'To end this battle you have to defeat their leader.' And what she hadn't said Xena knew. 'Defeat him and Ares' protection will be withdrawn.'

She had no choice but to let the killing go on on both sides and whistle for Argo to take on the man still wearing Ares' helmet. The mare ran as if she knew where to go. She found him at the end of the battlefield as far away from the thick of the fighting as he could be without appearing to be a coward. He was locked in single combat with Phantes who had a hard time to block his thrusts.

"He's mine, Phantes. Get out of here and take Gabrielle with you. Knock her out if you have to." She said while already testing her enemy's strength.

Yes, he was a decent enough swordsman but his skills were no match for hers and he seemed to know it. After only a few strokes he directed his attack on Argo and suddenly found himself with his backside on the ground, thrown by the white stallion he had been riding on. The horse put a score of paces distance between them and waited. Xena dismounted Argo. "Go, girl, and show him where his friends are."

She then turned her attention to her still dumbfounded and motionlessly sitting opponent. "Get back on your feet or do you want to die like the coward you are?!"

His eyes still followed the retreating horses but the tension in his body told her that her words had done the trick. He jumped back to his feet and attacked without thinking. He was as tall as Xena and half again her weight with muscles rippling his bulky frame.

As Ares had done before he tried to overpower her with mighty strokes but this time she didn't bother to block them. She simply stepped out of the way, once, twice, three times, increasing the anger now burning in his eyes. Smiling at him all the time.

Hawk changed tactics, now trying to break through her defences by mirroring her own movements, waiting for his chance. Xena knew that she had to get the helmet off his head in order to free the fighters held by its spell, compelled to fight without a choice of their own. So, she gave him the opening he was waiting for. She felt the tip of his weapon drawing a line of fire at the inner side of her sword arm but used the moment of distraction to cut the leather strip holding the silvery helmet in place. It fell and disappeared before even hitting the ground. She elegantly danced out of reach and waited for his reaction.

A sane man would have counted his losses and tried to get away from her. All around him, the two or three score of his fighters still standing were throwing down their weapons and surrendering to the defenders, now that the spell was broken. "I don't need any god's protection to kill you, Conqueror."

Xena exuded an air of relaxed calmness, the tip of her sword pointing towards the ground, her other hand resting lightly on her hip. "You're welcome to try, Hawk." Her smile didn't reach her eyes.

Instead of another mindless barrage of blows he threw a knife at her and drew a Roman short sword he obviously had more experience with than the longer, heavier Greek weapon he had been using. "You will die. You will end up in front of me, on your knees, begging for mercy. Divide and conquer, and in the end I will conquer you." He panted while constantly attacking.

In the past Xena would have continued to play with him and enjoyed to beat the arrogance out of him before sending him to Hades -- but to her own surprise she didn't feel the slightest need to do so. All she wanted was to get this all over with. She jumped over his head and while he whirled around to face her she plunged her sword in his right ear. It went in at an angle, coming out at the other side just under his jaw, severing the jugular vein. His heart kept on pumping blood but his eyes already were vacant and lifeless when he hit the blood soaked earth.

Xena had a hard time freeing her weapon and cleaned it superficially on his clothing. Her mind already on the next order of business: gathering their injured, counting their losses, seeing to the basic needs of the surviving enemy, burning their dead and preparing the funeral fires for their own dead, organising a ceremony to purify the battle field from the blood, caring for the wounded, celebrating their victory... Her mind was reeling -- for all she really wanted to do was to take care of Gabrielle, her gentle lover, now in the grip of battle lust.

Fortunately, Kaleipus, Tyldus, Queen Melosa, and Regent Calliope were good, experienced battle leaders in their own right and already in the midst of organising everything when Xena arrived back at camp.

While washing up and gruffly letting Anara care for her puncture wounds and the still bleeding scratch at her arm she heard about Gabrielle's heroic defence of Terreis, the right of caste, and the younger woman's part in battle, how she had led them with her example as well as with her words until Xena herself gave the exhausted defenders the much needed second wind.

She also heard about the hard time they all had had at getting her away from the battlefield. That she couldn't stop killing when the enemy finally surrendered and really had to be knocked out, and that now she was locked up in their cabin with the door bolted from the outside.

"She almost took my head off when I grabbed her shoulder to lead her away. I'm damn lucky that I didn't get hit." Phantes concluded.

[Continued in part IV](#)

Author's comment to Chapter Nine:

The duel between Xena and Ares is based on the fight between these two as it takes place in "The Furies", at the beginning of season three. I changed the beginning and the end of the fight but otherwise tried to stay as close to the show as possible. I hope you liked it.

[romansilence Scrolls](#)

[Main Page](#)

~ Conqueror and Amazon: Echoes of Darkness

~

Part II

by romansilence

Disclaimers: [See Part 1](#)

Send any and all comments to: romansilence@yahoo.de

Chapter Ten: Aftermath -- revisited

Short of half a candlemark later, Xena was standing in front of the hut. The sun was almost down but there still was enough light to comfortably see. The tall woman, however, was holding a burning torch, anticipating the coming night and the probably already dim light inside of the hut. Solari and Ephiny were standing next to her. They had taken it upon themselves to close the door behind her and keep watch during the night should their help be needed. Xena found these security measures more than exaggerated but had resigned herself to the fact that an Amazon Princess needed a Royal Guard. She also was confident that they only would act when they heard the warrior's signal. She didn't know what to expect but she was sure that this night they wouldn't hear the hunting hawk's cry.

She opened the door, ready for anything, violence, screaming, a chair smashed on her head. But she wasn't prepared for what really greeted her: Gabrielle was slumped in the far corner of the hut, sobbing. Xena stuck the torch in one of the holders and hurried around the bed. She knelt next to Gabrielle, ready to comfort her and take her in her arms.

"Don't touch me!"

Xena looked at the devastated blonde; her mind was running a league a heartbeat. She was well aware of the fact that whatever she said or did would set the pace for their future. Simply staying away from her and waiting for it to run its course; taking over and drowning her blood lust in affection; forcing the younger woman to give in to her own demands; throwing her on the bed and restraining her until it was over.

None of these options was really convincing; so, Xena acted on her heart's desire. She sat down next to her. Candles passed in silence. Waves of energy emanated from the younger woman but even this close to her Xena was unable to determine if they were due to hurt or anger or desperation or simply the need to kill. There still was no reaction. Her heart was bleeding.

Without giving the impression of moving she had Gabrielle on her lap. She held both of her legs with one arm and had a hand around her wrists. The younger woman tried to free herself but Xena held on tight, all the time whispering reassurances and terms of endearment. Gabrielle still was struggling. She was pleading with Xena to let her go.

"I love you, Gab. I love you too much to let you go. Stay with me. I need you. You're the air that I breathe. You're the ground I walk on. Stay with me. Don't let this feeling win. Please."

Xena's half whispered, half breathed words finally were effective. "I'll hurt you, Xe."

"I love you, Gabrielle. I can stand it. Trust me. Do what you need to do. I'm yours."

The blonde still was cradled in the warrior's arms, tears running down her face -- and something akin to triumph in her eyes. Xena was puzzled, and even her abundant experiences with battle lust and bloodthirsty soldiers hadn't prepared her for a situation like this. How could someone possibly be dominating and at the same time be begging for attention?

Xena fell silent, letting the tears of her lover run their course. This was something entirely new to her, and it was hard to resist the temptation of simply taking over. She shuddered at the thought of what would have happened had she herself also been in the grab of battle lust and sent a silent 'thank you' to the two goddesses. Finally Gabrielle's tears subsided. She squirmed in Xena's arms, breaking the warrior's hold on her wrists with a sudden pull. She knelt in front of her still seated lover.

"I'll hurt you." This time her voice held no desperation, it was more a statement of facts.

"I love you, Gabrielle, and I'll do whatever it takes to help you to get through this. I know it's frightening; just do what your heart and your body need you to do. I'll be with you, all the way."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, my love."

Based on her own experiences, Xena was sure that she would be dominated by her smaller lover

like she had been two nights prior. Considering the state she was obviously in the warrior also expected to be treated rather roughly. And at first it seemed as if she had been right.

Gabrielle ordered Xena to strip and wait for her on the bed, on her hands and knees. A blindfold was fastened around her head. Relying on her hearing only, the tall woman pictured in her mind's eye what Gabrielle was doing. She heard fabric falling to the floor and boots hitting the ground. The hiss of another torch catching fire. A fire was lit in the fire place. She smelled candles to the left and the right of her head. Rummaging in their saddle bags.

She was prepared when the mattress gave way behind her. She knew Gabrielle was getting ready to penetrate her. The thought alone made her wet, to her utter surprise. She felt no need whatsoever to take over. Then there was the tip of the ivory phallus at her entrance. She consciously tried to relax her thigh and back muscles to offer better access. Her juices lubricated the toy. The blonde's hand were on her hips. The tip of the phallus touched her clitoris and at the same time Gabrielle's breasts were touching her back.

"Who do you belong to?" The voice was much deeper than usual.

"I belong to you, Gabrielle."

A menacing growl close to her right ear was all the warning she got. One hand left her hip and tightly squeezed her nipple. The movement wasn't intended to caress or arouse but to hurt -- and hurt it did, to the point that she couldn't keep from groaning. This seemed to fuel the younger woman's passion. The second hand found the other nipple, adding her whole weight to Xena's back; squeezing and twisting, another groan. The hands were then closing around both globes, kneading them, replacing pain with pleasure.

"Who do you belong to, warrior?"

"I belong to you, mistress." She supposed that this was what Gabrielle wanted to hear but, strangely, it also was what she wanted to say.

"Yes, you're mine." The voice was even deeper now, with a sultry quality she never had heard before in her lover, increasing her excitement.

The newly proclaimed princess began to systematically lubricate the phallus. Xena knew what she was about to do and tried to relax further. The tip now was touching her sphincter, the hands once again gripping her hips, preparing to enter where no one ever had.

A tiny part of her had to admit that she was nervous and even afraid but the desire to help her lover predominated. Gabrielle was pressing down on her, she still tried to relax. But it wasn't any good. She unconsciously tensed.

Gabrielle reacted instantly. She scooted back to the foot rest, ready to curl up into a ball, a sound similar to the hauling of a wounded wolf coming from her throat. Xena turned quickly around and once again scooped the younger woman on her lap. She gently rocked her, waiting for the

wailing to subside.

"Talk to me, my beloved." She whispered.

"I love you. I don't want to hurt you. I don't want to rape you. Please, don't make me."

"Follow your heart, my love." For a moment Xena was at a loss what her lover was talking about -- then she understood. "Follow your heart. Do what you need to do, not what you think you're expected to do. This night is for you -- and for you alone. I'm yours, Gabrielle."

There was a long period of silence. Xena concentrated on stroking her lover's hair and holding her tight. "What did you think about when they closed the door behind you?"

"You really heard that the door was closed from behind?"

"When you're a slave, you quickly learn to keep track of your surroundings. What did you think?"

"I don't know. I didn't know what to expect. I tried to anticipate what could happen but I wasn't prepared for your tears. -- No, that's not entirely true. I expected you to show violence, in one way or another. I expected you to act like most warriors do under similar circumstances. But now thinking more clearly I know it was a mistake. In fact, everyone has a different method to cope with the effects of battle lust. Meleager used to chop wood and Palemon shies away from the company of others. I should have given you more credit, my love."

"So, I don't have to..." Her eyes indicated the phallus still attached to her. "to rape you?"

"No, baby. Only if you really want to but I'd really appreciate it if you could first use your fingers to enlarge the opening. It would make things much easier for me." She answered with an attempt at humour. "This night is for you."

"Please take it off of me." The tall woman complied and threw the toy to the ground. "I don't want to hurt you but I want to control everything you do, every move you make, every breath you take. I want you to kiss me, every tiny part of my skin but don't touch my centre, my nipples or my mouth. Don't use your tongue, just your lips. -- And I don't want you to come without permission."

It progressed agonisingly slow and Xena was halfway through before she understood what the younger woman really needed. It should have been evident from the beginning. Gabrielle was a bard; her voice was her weapon of choice. So, Xena continued to pleasure her lover, finishing the first pass and starting all over when ordered to, this time using her tongue to her lover's benefit. Before being allowed to concentrate on the younger woman's breasts and nether region, Gabrielle had already reached two forceful climaxes.

At first the tall woman had a hard time to hold her own release off. Gabrielle was so beautiful, writhing in ecstasy but still in control, exhausting the restless energy of battle lust by gently

dominating the other woman with her voice. The more Xena kept her mind on her lover the less she thought of her own need, like she had done at the beginning of their relationship. This, however, was different. It was more intense, more fulfilling. It simply was right.

The torches had long burned out and the last embers in the fire place were slowly dying when a sleepy voice said. "Please take me in your arms, just hold me." Xena changed position, putting Gabrielle's head on her shoulder and securing her in her arms. "I'll make it up to you, Xe."

"I love you, Gabrielle. Sleep well."

Xena woke to an inquisitive tongue sneaking in her ear, tracing the outline of the auricle and following her jaw line just to her chin. Mischievous green eyes looked up to her.

"Are you still mine, my warrior?"

"Always, Gabrielle, al..." A gentle kiss sealed her lips.

"It's my turn to give you pleasure. Grab the headrest, I don't want your hands to be in my way."

Xena's groan was cut short by another kiss and a tongue demanding entrance. Yesterday's arousal was back in force and she surrendered to the delicious torture she was sure was yet to come. Gabrielle easily read her body's signals and changed tactics. Her tongue left the mouth and quickly descended in a direct line to her lover's centre. She flicked the engorged clit and whispered just loud enough for Xena to hear. "Come for me, my love."

"Gabrielle!!!!" The shout of release echoed in the small room. Gabrielle continued her sucking and licking, quickly bringing her to the edge of another climax. She slowed her movements as if to gently bring her down, and entered the wet centre with two fingers, hitting a spot only she ever had been able to find and sending Xena over once again. Strong muscles were closing around her fingers and hand.

Her free hand went down to the other woman's feet, activating a pressure point at the ball of her right foot. Xena's hips jerked from the bed at the waves of energy suddenly coursing through her body, right to her centre, her heart running a mile a minute. Never before had she experienced an orgasm this forceful and breathtaking, leaving her panting. Xena's body shock with residual energy; Gabrielle undid the pressure point while still caressing her nether lips and clitoris. This time her movements were meant to calm down rather than to arouse.

A few candledrops later she licked her way back to the top, giving still erect nipples a gentle kiss, and snuggled back in her customary spot at Xena's shoulder. "Thank you for indulging my whims, my warrior."

Xena wasn't yet able to speak, so she simply turned her head and kissed the blonde head. When no other reaction was forthcoming Gabrielle asked. "Are you all right, my love? You can let go

of the bars if you want to, you know?"

The taller woman slightly turned around, facing her lover and taking her gently in her arms. "I didn't even think about it." She said with a lopsided grin that took years off her face. "It was incredible, Gabrielle, thank you. You can take control in our bedroom whenever you want. This and what you did a couple of nights ago... I never before felt so loved, so fulfilled, so safe. I love you."

A few heartbeats later, Morpheus claimed them both, the last days' extreme physical and mental demands finally taking their toll. The door was opened two candlemarks after dawn to the two Amazon warrior's bringing a well filled breakfast tray.

"Time to get up, sleepyheads. There's a lot of work to do. Your mother and Anara need help at the infirmary. The scouts should be back in about two candlemarks and the Centaurs want a council session to decide on the prisoners."

"Take it easy, Solari. We'll be there in a about a candlemark. The prisoners are securely locked away and the council session can wait 'til we have news from the scouts."

Anara, Cyrene, the Centaur healer, and Akyra made for a very efficient team when Xena and Gabrielle entered the overflowing infirmary one and a half candlemark later. The better part of the patients had enough sense to let them simply do their job but a few were complaining, with raised voices. None of her men but some from the village, two of Queen Melosa's Amazons, three belonging to Regent Calliope, a couple of Centaurs, and Terreis.

Xena's hunting hawk's cry got their attention. "Shut up, all of you. You're here because you were wounded. The healers will let you go as soon as they think that you are able to resume light duty. A soldier's duty is not only to fight, it's also to do everything he or she can to get well again. Injured, wounded or ill you become a reliability to your comrades and companions. You're here because it's your duty to be here, so by the Gods, don't be stupid and obey the healers! Did I make myself clear?"

Murmurs and nods were the only answers but the noise level in the room had dropped considerably. Xena knelt next to Terreis' cot. "How do you feel?"

"I'm fine. My leg is fine. I want to get out of here. I have children to care about and the scouts to run." The younger woman said with a pout.

"I was told you treated her, mother. How is she?"

"A mule head with not enough sense the Gods gave a hedgehog." Xena's left eyebrow arched towards her hairline. "It seems she had someone holding their hands over her. The wound is slowly closing and there's no sign of infection but we can't be absolutely sure just yet. There's still a risk. I was told that you're an accomplished healer yourself. Have a look, it's time to

change the bandages anyway."

And so she did. "Thank you, mother, you very possibly saved her life. -- You really were damned lucky, Terry. I know you are anxious to get out of here but your children are taken care of and Solari is in charge of the scouts. Your duty now is to heal.

"You not only lost a lot of blood but also flesh and muscles due to the acid on the spear head. In order to get your strength in this leg back, you have a long road of recovery before you. So, please, don't make it more difficult than it has to be. Besides, you're supposed to be an example for your fellow Amazons, Princess."

"All right, General, you win." Terreis answered, still pouting. "I heard you gave all of them a scare when you got knocked off your horse yesterday."

"A mace. Hit me pretty hard. I guess I was out for a little while but Gabrielle and the others kept me safe. When I finally came to it was almost over, all that was left to do was to take care of their leader. I did. End of story."

"There really is no doubt who's the storyteller, my warrior." Gabrielle said with an indulgent smile while trying to keep the sensation at bay that her stubborn lover had something to hide. "I recall a one-woman-thunder-storm cutting a path through the enemy line, going down, and then fighting off a man half again as big as she is with an ease as if he were a first time apprentice. Give me a few days to speak with the warriors and craftsmen that were with her at dragon's pass and you'll get the whole story, Princess Terreis."

"You're the Princess now, Gabrielle. I gave my right of caste to you and there only can be one heir to the throne at a time. It can't be given back, so, I fear, you're stuck with the job." The injured woman answered.

"You're not dead. Of course it can be given back. This is too great a responsibility."

"Gabrielle, lets go for a walk. There's a lot we have to talk about, better do it now than later." Queen Melosa interrupted the young woman's protests. "Xena, please come with us."

They walked to the river in silence. "Terreis is right, you know. The right of caste can only be given away in a life-or-dead-situation -- and it can't be given back. Terreis only will be a princess in name from now on. For every Amazon in our camp and soon for the entire Amazon nation you are my heir. They will be glad that I once again have someone to follow me. It will give the nation more stability.

"Terreis was always very direct in her dealings with others but we now live in a time when the destiny of the Amazon nation is as much in the hands of diplomats, of talkers than in the hands of warriors. And you, Gabrielle, are a bit of both. Amazon law gives me the right to challenge my sisters choice by challenging you. But I'm not stupid enough to entertain such ideas, aside

from the fact that Xena certainly would name herself your champion and kick my ass.

"Terreis' choice was wise. I'm convinced that you will be good for the nation. A lot of my younger sisters already seek your advice on a personal level. It will be easy for them to also obey your orders, and the children simply adore you.

"There's another point: I had some time to reacquaint myself with my younger sister and though she always will be an Amazon at heart, her life now is with the Centaurs, with Phantes and her son and her daughters. Now, that we know she is alive she will visit once and again but that's it."

"Her daughters should be your heirs, Queen Melosa. I'm not even an Amazon."

"When they are old enough, after their initiation into the tribe, they have the right to claim their mother's place in the tribe -- and I have no doubt that they won't have to fight you to get it. But an Amazon only becomes a real member of the Nation after her second apprenticeship, usually around her eighteenth summer. And it's totally up to them, they, one of them or both could choose not to contest you or your reign."

"I'm not an Amazon, Queen Melosa. No apprenticeships, no weapons' training, no initiation. I'm not an Amazon." Gabrielle proclaimed forcefully.

"You are an Amazon, Princess Gabrielle, always have been and always will be. -- It's your turn, Xena." The Queen said and walked away.

Gabrielle looked at her lover with wide eyes and judging from the set of her jaw ready to explode. Not able to think of a diplomatic way to tell her lover, Xena decided to stick to the blunt truth. "You are an Amazon, Gabrielle, by birth. The mark you have at your thigh, it's not a birth mark. It's a branding, the mark of Amazon royalty. There are only two ways to get it. When you take the Queen's mask or are officially named heir to the throne. It then is done in a big ceremony during the coronation. But it is also given to every female child born to the Queen of the Amazons, just a few days after the birth during the naming ceremony. You are an Amazon princess, not just now, you always were."

Silence settled between them and Gabrielle's body language told the warrior enough to know that her revelations didn't sit well with her. She contemplated saying more but when she opened her mouth, the younger woman's face tensed even more and she prudently swallowed her words, waiting for her to process the information.

"Did we go to the Amazons so you could get rid of me, Xena? These last moons, were they a lie?"

Xena was shocked beyond speech by Gabrielle's imputations.

"Answer. I have to know and I won't bother you any longer with my presence." She turned to go.

"Please, don't go. I love you, Gabrielle. I don't want to get rid of you and I never wanted to. I

love you. I can't imagine living without you." The blonde had not turned back yet. "We went to the Amazons to clear up the mess with my frontier fort having been attacked allegedly by them. I knew it would take at least two moons to make the journey, get to the truth of the matter, and come back to Corinth and I didn't want to be without you this long. That's why I wanted you at my side. I also wanted you to get to know your people but I never intended to leave you with them. You're far too precious to me, my love. I can't imagine my life without you."

Gabrielle finally turned around. Tears were running down her face. Xena opened her arms and two steps later closed them around her distraught lover. Part of Xena was convinced that her insecurities were some sort of strange after-effect of the blood lust; part of her was saddened that her partner still didn't fully believe in the strength of their love, no, in her love. "Please believe me. I love you." She whispered repeatedly.

It took a long time but finally she felt the younger woman relaxing in her embrace. She let herself sink to the ground, still cradling her. Gabrielle's right hand slowly began to stroke her back and she felt her own tension and stress pouring from her body. The other hand gently held her cheek and she found herself face to face with mesmerising green eyes.

"Why didn't you ever tell me?"

Xena struggled for a heartbeat with herself but then her love won out over her pride. "I could give you a lot of sensible reasons for not telling you. At the palace it simply wasn't important for your life. During the first few quarter moons with the Amazons, I thought that Queen Melosa would tell you after my death in order to make you stay. But these are nothing but pale excuses.

"The truth is: I didn't tell you because I was afraid of losing you. I was afraid that you no longer would need me if you knew, that you would find someone more worthy of your love amongst your Amazon sisters. I was terri..."

Gabrielle silenced her with a kiss, long and passionate, and leaving her breathless. "I think I understand, my love. But you won't get rid of me this easily. I would have followed you to Tartarus and beyond. I don't know why I was so insecure. Please forgive me for hurting you."

"There's nothing to forgive as long as we end up in each others arms." Xena answered and returned the searing kiss.

When they once again stopped to breathe, Xena saw one of her veterans in her peripheral vision, obviously uncomfortable with whatever task he had to accomplish. Gabrielle easily read the look in her eyes.

"Duty's calling?"

"Yes, my love. I'm sorry. He looks as if he were standing barefooted on glowing embers."

"Then you should end his pains by talking to him, my big bad warrior." Gabrielle said with a chuckle but made no attempt to leave Xena's arms.

The seated warrior motioned for the man to come closer. "General, there is a problem with the enemy's dead. There are too many of them."

Xena was so surprised that she forgot to admonish the soldier for calling her 'general'. "Too many? Are you sure?"

"Yes, General. Too many. According to the scouts, at the beginning our opponent had about 500 to 520 men. The Centaur leader said that you killed one to one a half score while freeing the children. Close to 220 died during the first battle together with Dagnine. We have three scores of prisoners and another score of wounded in custody. All in all there should have been no more than 200 corpses at the battlefield. We're not finished with cleaning up the back walls of the fortification but the count is already up to 350."

Having lived through Xena's mercurial temper during the year after her victory over Rome, experience told the seasoned soldier that his general now would go and have a field day with the scouts for having neglected to tell them about reinforcements this substantial. He really didn't want to be in their skin then. But before she had the chance to say anything, Gabrielle asked. "How many did we lose?"

"Surprisingly few. With the fatalities from the first battle, all in all 63 dead and 156 wounded. About half of them are still in the infirmary. We were lucky."

"Uriah, I want a full report ready for the council as soon as you and the funeral detail have finished. The council session will be held as soon as the scouts are back. Tell Tyldus I want the perimeter watch extended beyond the first battlefield, and have Palemon interrogate some of our prisoners. I want some answers. And Uriah, tell the Amazon guards protecting Princess Gabrielle that we don't want to be disturbed until the scouts are back."

"Yes, General." This time she arched an eyebrow at him. "May I speak freely?" She simply nodded. "It's good to have you back, Xena."

"Thank you, my friend." The man bowed slightly.

"What was he talking about, Xena?"

The tall woman sighed but with a smile. "Uriah is with me since I went to conquer Corinth. He was the leader of a village militia. My army helped them to get rid of a petty warlord pestering the whole region. He joined my army as a simply foot soldier but he was one of the first I promoted to the First Order, together with Palemon and Meleager. He knows me very well, and after the Roman Campaign I wasn't easy to live with. I lost my temper at the drop of a stalk of straw and it's only thanks to you that I once again became more level headed, my love."

"Would you really have taken the scouts' heads for not telling you about the enemy's reinforcements?"

"I would have been tempted to but I wouldn't have done it. My scouts are good, very good, the same goes for the Amazons. So, there must be a reason why they didn't send word. I'll wait what they'll have to tell. But it's true, I would have made their lives miserable, regardless of the reason. So, you see, I need you to keep me balanced."

"I think you largely overestimate my powers, my love."

"Oh no, I don't." Xena lowly growled close to the younger woman's ear.

"Oh yes, you do! But I don't want to argue. Take me to the bathing area. I want to give you a nice, long, thorough sponge bath."

"What would you think of a nice, hot, mineral bath? There's a hot spring not far from here."

Though Xena felt slightly guilty for leaving all the heavy work to the others, she was reluctant to let Gabrielle out of her eyes. The younger woman's insecurities were still in the back of her mind and seemed to somehow have infected her. She just felt the overwhelming need to touch her and hold her in her arms and stroke her hair. What better excuse to do all this than taking a bath?! And Gabrielle seemed to be fuelled by the same desire.

A couple of candlemarks later they were lying on a flat, sun soaked stone at the edge of a pool. Xena's hand was idly retracing the scar at Gabrielle's shoulder, remnant from the spear head that had almost taken her life about a season ago. Out of nowhere, tears were streaming down her cheeks and she whispered.

"I never want to lose you."

"I'll always be with you, Xena, my love. You always tell me that I am your heart and your soul but you also are my heart and my soul. I belong to you. Please stop crying. I love you."

Xena smiled through her silent tears and instinctively snuggled closer to her lover, burying her head at Gabrielle's shoulder in a reversal of their usual position.

"Yesterday, I was so afraid of losing you. I saw your eyes while you were fighting, sitting on the back of this Centaur with nothing to protect you but this spear and your courage. I saw your eyes and I was afraid that my sweet and gentle bard was gone forever but in the night you came back to me and I never want to lose you again." She finally said, her voice only barely above a whisper.

"I'll always come back to you, my love, even if it means crossing all of the world, Tartarus, and the Elysian Fields to do so. I can't live without you. There's nothing to be afraid of." The blonde answered also in a whisper.

Xena's lips kissed the side of her left breast, and oblivious to the fact that they were out in the

open and about a half dozen Amazon guards were hidden at a distance they made love. Slow and gentle, and once again not only their bodies fit perfectly but also their minds joined. They could feel the other's love like their own, binding them together with a thick rope made of simmering light, connecting their souls irrevocably.

The feeling had been so intense that they were left in silent wonder for quarter candlemarks afterwards.

"I love you, my warrior." Gabrielle finally found her voice, once again nestled in her usual spot at Xena's left shoulder.

"I love you, my bard." Xena answered. She fell silent for a couple of heartbeats and then continued to speak. "I had a weird dream while I was unconscious, yesterday."

Of course the younger woman wanted to know all about it and so Xena told her about finding herself in Hades' hall of justice and Ares' claiming her soul, about Athena and Artemis trying to help her and her fight with the God of War, about what Athena had said of owing her mother and Artemis of Gabrielle one day becoming her Chosen.

"Perhaps you should tell your mother about this dream. If it was a dream."

"Gabrielle, be sensible. I'm only mortal. I wouldn't stand a chance against the God of War."

"I'm not so sure about this, my love. I always knew that you're the best there is. And you're a great fighter." The blonde said with an enigmatic smile and twinkling green eyes, deliberately making light of something that should have given her reason to wonder about her lover, at least - because part of her was more than certain that it hadn't been a dream.

"Gabrielle, this is nothing to joke about." Xena tried to remain serious but her lover's facial expression was too tempting and when the blonde's stomach suddenly made its presence known she couldn't help but laugh. She turned her head towards the sun. "Come on, love, it's three candlemarks after noon. Time to feed the monster."

The day passed without any incident but also without any sign of the scouts. Solari proposed to send another group after them but Xena decided to wait 'til the next morning. As it turned out they didn't have to wait this long. One or two candlemark after midnight Xena was roused from sleep by insistent knocking at their door.

"Two of the scouts are coming in. The council is assembling as we speak."

"I'm on my way, Duinos." Xena yelled through the still closed door.

"Queen Melosa insists that the Princess takes part, too."

"We'll be there."

Gabrielle needed a few candledrops to find her wits but they arrived at the same time as the two totally exhausted scouts. The council room was full and everyone was asking questions at the same time. Once again Xena used the hunting hawk's cry to get everyone's attention. "First of all, do you need immediate medical attention?"

"No, Xena. It's nothing serious. We were lucky." Silea answered.

"Okay. Then let's cut straight to the bone. The new army, how big is it?"

"One hundred and fifty foot soldiers and five officers on horse back. They're on their way here and will reach the first battlefield tomorrow early afternoon. They have Roman weapons but are not very well trained. I saw them marching. I presume that they know the basics but once their formation is broken they won't easily be able to regroup." The young Amazon answered.

The council was shocked into silence, having been convinced that the war already had been won. Xena saw no other choice than to once again take charge. "Tyldus, Queen Melosa, I want every able bodied soldier ready to march out at mid-morning. We'll confront them at the first battlefield. Make sure to bring the catapult. This and the archers should be enough to break their formation. There still are a few candlemarks left until dawn, try to get some sleep." The determined tone of the voice didn't leave any room for discussions.

Xena turned her attention back to the two young women. "And now, tell me what happened. As far as I remember I told you to return to the village, get some sleep and help with the defense, didn't I?"

"Yes, General." Silea tried to stand at attention but failed miserably due to a couple of banged up ribs.

"It was my fault, General Xena. I was too restless to sleep and volunteered to take over for one of the scouts. Silea offered to go with me. We found three of the scouts dead and followed the trail of four horses, rapidly moving away from the encampment of the enemy. We found this other army, stole some horses and hurried here."

"You did good, both of you. I leave it to your commanding officers to deal with your disobedience. Now, go to the infirmary and get treated. You are off duty for the next two days."

"There's more, Xena. We saw slaves at their camp, female slaves, about twenty of them, tethered to the ground with manacles and chains like some animal. I think that some of them are Amazons." Silea's words were met with stunned silence.

"Silea, Carani, I revoke my earlier order. I want you to choose thirty of your Amazon sisters and ride out at first light. You will lead the rescue party. Make sure that all the guards are taken care of before you enter the camp. Take enough horses. And now go and get some rest. You'll need it."

"Xena, I'll go with them." Raneria said.

"Permission granted, weapons' master." The young women and Regent Calliope's bondmate left the room and all eyes returned to tall warrior.

"Xena, how did you know that there would be another army?" Gabrielle asked the question everyone else was wondering about.

"When Uriah told me that there were more dead bodies than there should have been, it was only logical to expect a third army, held back to take over the moping up after the others were victorious. Plus it was standard procedure with the Roman army. Attack from two sides and then bring in fresh troops when the enemy is already totally exhausted. It was one of Caesar's specialties to always send two waves of reinforcements. I feared something like this would happen since I saw their leader wielding a Roman short sword and heard one of his men at the pass mention the name of Mars. He also used one of Caesar's most beloved sayings: Divide and conquer."

Neither Tyldus nor Queen Melosa said out loud what Xena knew to be the truth. The quest for the Ixion stone, Dagnine's self centered madness, the planned destruction of the Centaur nation, everything had been nothing but a first step in destroying the one person this Hawk and his followers held responsible for the fall of Rome and the death of Caesar, Xena, the Conqueror. But she herself knew that she was responsible for the death of 63 good men and women, it was her fault just as if she had murdered them with her own sword.

The tall warrior knew that she had to get these thoughts out of her head in order to effectively lead the rest of their army against the enemy but it was no good. Not even the peacefully sleeping form of Gabrielle in her arms brought the solace necessary. Only in the first candlemarks of dawn she fell asleep to another strange dream that let her change her battle strategy.

The next morning, instead of giving Gabrielle a kiss and leaving her behind Xena mounted Argo and extended her right arm towards the surprised blonde, lifting her easily behind her in the saddle. "I want you at my side, my love." She whispered while protectively cradling the younger woman's small hands snugged around her waist in one of her own.

Her party consisted of Queen Melosa, Regent Calliope, Tyldus, Kaleipus, and about seven scores of fighters, quite a few of them having just recently left the infirmary. There also was a wagon with the catapult on it and another one filled with healing supplies driven by Xena's mother.

It had been quite an argument between the two of them earlier, an argument the daughter ultimately lost when Cyrene categorically refused to stay behind lest Xena bodily forced her to. So, the Commander of the allied forces grumpily assigned three Amazon guards under Theano's command for her protection, a protection not received without complaints from the older woman.

They reached the battlefield shortly after midday and had just enough time to take their positions and get ready when they were informed of the enemy's approach.

The foot soldiers were the first to come into view, advancing at a steady pace. They held their shields in front of them and over their heads, thus presenting a classical turtle formation; their commanding officers on horseback right behind them. Xena felt the anticipation on both sides like waves of energy but she also could sense fear and desperation coming from the enemy. A few hand signals told Lattenis and his men to ready the catapult and two bird calls let the Amazons and other archers get their bows ready.

Xena dismounted Argo, told the others to stay behind, and slowly walked towards the advancing enemy as if she were out for a stroll through the woods; intimidation the order of the day. About sixty paces from the edge of the forest she stopped and surprisingly the impressive heap of gleaming metal also came to a halt. She signalled for the catapult and two heartbeats later a very big stone embedded itself inches away from the front row of enemy soldiers. The men instinctively jerked back, stumbling over the feet of the men behind them, thus creating big gaps in their protective shield.

"Archers show yourself!" To the left and the right of the men, arrow heads and crossbow bolts became visible. "The day before yesterday one of your leaders died on the battlefield -- together with 421 of your comrades. The army at the other side of Dragon Head's Pass was completely destroyed before even getting the chance to fight. We don't want to add your bodies to the pile of corpses. Throw away your weapons and surrender! Walk away from your leaders hiding behind your backs, leaders who don't have the courage the gods gave a baby rabbit."

Queen Melosa and the others chose this moment to leave the protection of the forest. They soon were standing next to Xena. "I am Melosa, Queen of the Greek Amazons. Our nation is proud and free," she said, pushing back her mask, all the while wondering why they didn't attack and why their leaders didn't interfere. "When challenged we fight back as one, cut one of us and we all bleed, cut one of us and we all will exact revenge. Amazons are a sisterhood and we stand here with our brothers, the Centaurs to defend our lives and our freedom."

"Walk away from this fight and surrender! There is no glory in getting slaughtered. When this is all over you are free to go where ever you want." Kaleipus added. He made for an impressive and fierce sight with his big sword easily resting against his shoulder like a toy and one eye hidden behind the leather protection.

Silence settled on the field, then a low murmur of voices came from the tattered turtle formation. One of the shields to Xena's left dropped to the ground, followed by a Roman short sword. The shield next to it also hit the ground, and the next, and the next. Soon the men were standing there, defenceless. Having expected Romans, even Xena was surprised at the strange mixture of Greek, Egyptian, Briton, and Norse faces presented to her. Suddenly she knew why it had been so easy to talk them out of fighting: they were slaves and now, with the influence of Ares' helmet gone they had taken the first chance to get their freedom back. That's also why the five men on horseback hadn't done anything to hinder them; they no longer had the means to keep them in

line.

Xena told them to go to the left side and quietly sit down. Then she turned her attention towards the riders. She somersaulted over the pile of weapons and shields, the expression on her face reminiscent of a predator stalking its prey. "How should we play this, boys? One after the other or all at once?"

As if her arrogant question had been an attack signal of sorts all five of them spurred their mounts and tried to run her to the ground. Xena's battle cry seemed to fill the field while she jumped at them and kicked two of her opponents out of their saddles. She touched the ground, bounced back in a flip and landed behind a third rider. One of her arms immobilised his shoulders, with the other she broke his neck. Falling down his foot got caught in the stirrup, the fourth horse stumbled trying to avoid this suddenly appearing obstacle and threw his rider.

Only one of them got past her and headed directly for Queen Melosa. He launched himself out of the saddle, a long, thin dagger at the ready. Before even Xena or anyone else could react the dark haired woman was pushed out of the way, landing ungently on the bare ground. The blade embedded itself in the palm of Eponin's left hand, exactly where only moments before the Queen's heart had been. Too enraged to think of her own weapons, the Amazon put all her power in a right hook.

Her opponent whose face was still hidden behind the front shield of his helmet sank to the ground. The weapons' master had to suppress a cry of pain when she drew the dagger out of her hand and pounced on the enemy. There was nothing left of the usually stoic and calm woman; her lips were drawn back in a snarl; her eyes were cold as ice.

The tip of the blade pointed at her opponent's heart. Her hand came down like a smith's hammer on an anvil. There was the sound of metal meeting metal; the weapon was redirected and pierched the other's shoulder, breaking the blade in the process. The rest of the dagger slipped towards the throat, cutting through the leather strap holding the helmet in place.

Eponin's eyes were fixed on the rapid throbbing of the jugular vein, blind for everything else. The only sound she was able to hear was the roaring of her blood in her ears. The flick of her wrist would have been enough, and she was ready to obey this call of darkness.

Suddenly she was pushed to the ground and on her back, the broken dagger still in her hand, the other one bleeding profusely. She looked into Queen Melosa's face without recognising her.

The strong leader of the Amazons needed all her strength to keep the other woman down. She bent forward and whispered in the weapons' master's ear. "Come back to me, my love. I need you, my Eponin."

"Melosa? Mel..., are you all right? The soldier, I have to kill him."

"Everything's all right. Turn your head, my love. Look at her."

"Her? A woman tried to kill you?"

"Yes, but you took good care of me. She's out for the count and will stand trial for what she did. Come with me. Your hand needs some attention."

Meanwhile Xena was standing alone against three opponents; she had a smile on her face. Two of them were attacking in concert while the third one held back obviously waiting for an opening. She could feel the battle lust rising in her blood and this time she really didn't want to give in to it. She sped up the movement of her weapon, making it impossible for the average fighter to even see the blade. One highly arched swing cut the throat of her first opponent and, descending, slashed through the chest of the second.

At the end of the arc the warrior woman seemed to freeze for a heartbeat, following with her peripheral vision how the corpses sank to the ground. The last one rushed to this opportunity, exploiting what from his point of view was an awkward and slightly off-balance position. He attacked from behind. Xena, however, having anticipated his move, bent her hips and upper body out of the way, thrust her blade backwards and pierced his heart, hearing the satisfying sound of metal penetrating metal and the unforgettable crunching and squishing of blood and bones.

She didn't even turn around to make sure that he really was dead. Instead, she walked back to the treeline from where a very anxious Amazon princess came running. Her sword hit the ground and she buried herself in her lover's arms; effectively chasing away the last temptation to let the blood lust win.

Chapter Eleven: Tentative First Steps

Melosa and Eponin left the battlefield as soon as Eponin's hand had been cleaned and bandaged. Cyrene wanted to keep her in the infirmary under observation for signs of infection but one look into the Amazon warrior's eyes made her reconsider. Tyldus and Regent Calliope saw to the preparations for the funeral pyres planned for the next evening while Solari and Phantes were responsible for the safe return of the army. Xena, Kaleipus, and Gabrielle in her still unfamiliar role as Amazon princess spoke to the disarmed slaves turned soldiers, trying to decide what to do with them.

They learned that Hawk and his younger brother who just had ended his life at the business end of Xena's sword had only recently purchased most of them. The young Roman nobles wanted to take revenge for the destruction of the Roman Empire by the Conqueror and for the death of Caesar. The Ixion stone solution should have made them invincible but they hadn't counted on the accuracy of the Amazon archers and the power of a mace wielded by a Centaur defending his home.

Only the riders with Dagnine's army had been regular soldiers. The army now buried under Xena's artificially created stone avalanche had almost exclusively consisted of mercenaries. So, the better part of the dead from the big battle next to the Centaur village the other day had been slaves, driven to fight by the promise of freedom and the influence of Ares' helmet.

The survivors offered to see to the proper burial of their comrades and the other enemy soldiers. Most of them only had one wish: to return to their homeland as soon as possible. Kaleipus offered to give them enough provisions for at least a part of their journey and they gratefully accepted. They also vowed that they never again would raise their weapons against the Centaurs or Amazons.

Before any more details could be dealt with, Xena was called to the infirmary wagon where Cyrene was trying to treat the woman taken down by Eponin. She already had lost a lot of blood and still refused to stay still. "Why don't you just knock her out, mother?"

"The weapons' master wants her conscious."

"Eponin wasn't in her right mind. She was in the grip of battle lust; you saw her eyes, you should know. Let me get out of this bloody armour and I'll help." The tall woman quickly stripped out of her armour and battle dress, leaving her in a simple shift that surprisingly only enhanced her natural beauty. She washed the dirt and grime from her arms and face and entered the wagon. A short pinch and the woman sank in a deep sleep.

Cyrene insisted that Xena took over the treatment with the excuse of her having more experience with battle wounds. In truth she wanted to watch her daughter at work. She had been at once appalled and fascinated by the cool efficiency and economy of movement she had used to deal with her opponents, now she wanted to know if Xena made prove of the same efficiency when saving people instead of killing them.

She cleaned away the blood and pulled the blade out. It came out easily enough but the tip was also broken and still embedded in the shoulder blade. "Do you have tweezers?"

"Of course but none that are long enough for what I think you are trying to do, Xena."

The warrior stuck her head out of the wagon and whistled. Argo immediately was at her side and Xena took her medical pouch out of her saddlebag. With the help of her own instruments she removed the rest of the weapon, surprised to find it free from poison or acid. A bandage was put in place and she checked for other wounds, stripping the woman off her leathers in the process.

What she found made even her gasp in horror: there wasn't an inch of her upper body not covered with scars and welts still oozing blood with tiny bits of leather threatening to give her an infection. Only the woman's face was unmarred and she was young, too young to have already suffered such abuse.

She called for an Amazon runner to find out if the rescue party was already on its way and gave order to send another group of Amazons and a few female healers to help them.

Xena continued her inspection with the lower part of her body and not only found signs of repeated rape but also a phallus held in her vagina with chains and a steel belt around her waist. The belt had been forged on her and the chains were fastened with tiny padlocks. Opening the padlocks was easy, getting the phallus out proved to be more of a challenge. When she finally succeeded she held in her hands a wickedly ridged instrument of torture, guaranteed to cause great pain with every step and every breath she took.

The blue-eyed woman's breathing was even but every muscle in her body seemed ready to explode. "If I had known, they wouldn't have died this quickly." She whispered and continued to stare at the infernal thing.

Not even in her darkest times she would have been capable of this kind of cruelty.

Xena suddenly jumped out of the wagon, snatched her sword from the pile with her armour, and went back to the battlefield. She stood over the body of her former enemies. She looked at them with pure hatred in her eyes; her sword held high, ready to draw and quarter the corpses.

"Xena, don't!" It was Gabrielle's voice.

The weapon began to tremble in her hand and fell to the ground. She sank to her knees, tremors shocking her whole body. Finally, her stomach also rebelled and she vomited. She felt Gabrielle's arm around her shoulders, a soft piece of fabric wiping her face, comforting words whispered in her ear.

"It's over now. They will ever again hurt no one. It's over, come back to me."

"You know?"

"The men told us. They said that she was forced to attack the Queen. They threatened to kill the other women. She had no choice. They also said that she... she was Hawk's favourite victim. -- I'm glad that he's dead; he deserves to suffer in Tartarus. Come, we'll keep her company. She shouldn't be alone when she wakes up."

Theano was driving the wagon with Cyrene at her side and Argo and her own mount following behind. Xena and Gabrielle were sitting next to her when the woman's eyes slowly fluttered open. "Are you Celesta?"

"No."

"So, I failed. I wanted to die."

"Not this time, my friend. You will survive. You were hit in the shoulder. Your body will heal and you will learn how to be free again. The Amazons will help you."

"The Amazon Queen? Is she all right?"

"Yes," Gabrielle answered. "You didn't even touch her."

"That's good. Tell her that I'll stand trial for my crime. I didn't want to kill her..."

"We know that you had no choice. The men told us. Your friends should be free by now. We sent a rescue party to the camp to make sure that no harm comes to them. They will arrive at the village some time after sunset." Xena continued. "What's your name?"

"I don't know; I don't remember my past. My sisters call me Lioness but I don't feel very brave at the moment. Is it true that they are all dead?"

"Yes, it's true. And I think that you are very brave to survive what you did and still care about your companions." Xena said softly. "Your oppressors are dead and I'm sure Hades will make them pay for their crimes. Try to get some sleep. We'll let you know as soon as your sisters are with us. Sleep, you're safe now."

"Sleep? No, I'd rather not."

"As you wish but I'll give you a painkiller. You'll heal faster if you don't have to fight the pain. What do you want to talk about?"

"Hawk, how did he die? He was invulnerable. He had one of the men shoot at him with a crossbow. He didn't even get a scratch. I saw it with my own eyes."

"I fought him. My sword pierced his ear. He was dead before his body hit the ground. I wish I could have..."

"Xena, don't. Don't do this to yourself. Don't lower yourself to his level, please. -- Hades will make him suffer in Tartarus. Torturing him wouldn't have changed what he did, my love. Don't lower yourself to their level." Gabrielle held the tall warrior's face in her hands and gently kissed her on the forehead. "It's over; no one will ever again be hurt by him."

Xena smiled tentatively. "You always know what to say, Gabrielle. Thank you, my love. -- I'm sorry, Lioness."

"It's all right. I know the feeling. Before I was purchased by Hawk and his brother, I was the property of a group of Romans using me as a Gladiator."

"But I outlawed Gladiator fights. They're just not fair." Xena answered slightly irritated.

"It doesn't keep the Romans from still enjoying them. Now, they just do it in private at their rural estates. As I said, when I still was a Gladiator, every day and every night I dreamed of making them all suffer for what they did to me and what they forced me to do. I wanted to pay them back for every fist I felt on my body, for every bruise, every lashmark. I wanted to treat them like they treated us. When I came in Hawk's household about three seasons ago, this changed. I learned

that there is a big difference between revenge and justice. I learned that I would become like them if I'd give in to his desire. I had a good teacher."

"Tell us about her." Gabrielle demanded softly.

A smile transformed the still young woman's face, her pale grey eyes were smiling and her voice took on a dreamy tone. "She is the most beautiful woman I ever met, inside and out. When she smiles the sun comes up, even in the middle of the night. There is no hatred in her heart, even though she has every reason to, being a slave since she was a child. The goodness of her soul shines through her eyes. She taught me that hate only leads to more hate, that violence creates more violence, and that one can't change the past..."

"You can only try to learn and live with it." Gabrielle completed the phrase. "One day one of my former masters, a merchant, met with a Roman noble at his house. I met a young woman there. I never knew her name but she had big brown eyes and light blonde hair, like in a field of wheat on a summerday. She has a branding on her right breast, a rose."

"You were a slave?"

"Yes, less than a season's cycle ago, Xena freed me and saved my life. It's a long story, and I love to tell it, later. It's her, isn't it?" Gabrielle insisted.

"Yes, the description fits. She is the only reason I'm still alive. Whenever I wasn't preparing or recovering from a fight, Hawk did with me what he called 'playing'. Sometimes I lost my spirit and was tempted to let my opponents win. It was her smile, her words, her soul that kept me going. She gave me the courage and the strength not to give up and let him win." She answered stifling a yawn. "I don't want to sleep. Why did you do this? I don't want to dream."

"There will be no bad dreams, Lioness, I promise. You will sleep but you will not dream. The herbs I gave you will see to it. You can't have them on a regular basis, one tends to get dependent on them but for now it's important that you get as much rest as possible -- and tomorrow morning we'll try and get this iron band off your waist. Now close your eyes and rest."

For the rest of the day Gabrielle was in a rather pensive mood and refused to leave the young warrior's side. Xena knew that the best way to deal with her younger lover now was to let her be until she was ready to talk about it. So, when they arrived at the village they stayed and helped out at the infirmary as best as they could -- with more than seven scores wounded in more than one room it also was sorely needed.

The tall warrior also agreed to spend the night at the infirmary after Kaleipus had assured her that everything was in good hands, despite Queen Melosa's continued absence. They slept on a cot next to the injured woman, with Gabrielle securely nestled in Xena's protective embrace.

It was still in the middle of the night when Xena's warrior instincts snapped alive. Two shadows

were just passing the threshold to the large room. She quickly recognised the Amazon scout Silea, in the company of a tall blond woman. She gave no indication that she was awake because she wanted to see what happened.

There was a scented candle next to the woman's head to deepen the effects of the sleeping potion but also shedding some light on her face. The blonde stranger knelt next to the bed, at her throat a small band of the same metal as the other woman's waistband. Slender fingers searched the pulse point at Lioness' neck, and she breathed a sigh of relief. The newcomer turned her head and found pale blue eyes observing her.

"She's sleeping?"

"Yes. I gave her a potion to ward off bad dreams. It will wear off before the sun comes up. Stay with her. I'm sure she'll need you before long."

"Are you a healer?"

"Sometimes. Hold her. I have a feeling that your touch will be better than any potion, much better."

"How would you know?"

Xena smiled and cast a quick glance towards Gabrielle. "Because she keeps my dark dreams at bay." Surprisingly the younger woman only nodded and cautiously snuggled next to the sleeping warrior.

The next morning, with the first rays of dawn, before Xena had a chance to have a good look at the young woman, she was called away to attend a council session with the Centaur elders. The better part of the former slaves was already on their way back to their homes and families. About a fifth of them had asked to be allowed to stay for some time for they had no families to return to and now were at a loss what to do with their newfound freedom. The elders had to approve the request and were rather uneasy about it.

So, this was to be one of the central subjects of the council meeting -- together with the still unsolved question of what to do with the prisoners. Most of them were mercenaries and thus likely to continue their killing career in the name of whomever was ready to pay their price. Xena was well aware that there only were a limited number of options: they could escort them to the border and make it very clear that they were not welcome to come back. They could have them stand trial for their crimes against the Centaur and the Amazon nation. They could kill them without a trial.

Xena wasn't happy with any of these options because they all came with a price she wasn't sure her friends were ready to pay but she tried to give a well-balanced opinion, emphasising the risks involved. They already were talking for more than three candelmarks and the tall warrior's

patience, honed in long sessions with her own council and long campaigns, was running low.

Luckily, she was called away to assist the Amazon blacksmith Tanalata in removing the metal bands all the recently freed women were wearing around their neck. Lioness was the only one of them whose sign of slavery was locked around her waist. The metal had proved to be too hard to be cut through. The only way the smith saw was to try and heat it up to make it more supple and manageable but this inevitably would further injure the badly abused women. So it was out of question. The women also didn't seem to have any information about the kind of metal used for their collars, that's why Xena decided to have a talk with the only warrior of the group. She might have had another perspective.

The ravenhead entered the infirmary and her eyes fell on the young woman now sitting next to Lioness. Quietly coming closer she for the first time had a chance to have a good look at her. She stopped in mid-step and blinked. It simply wasn't possible, after all these years but the resemblance was too great to simply be a coincidence. However, it would have to wait. There were other things to see to first.

She was still a body length from the cot when the blonde woman turned her head. She jumped from her seat, ran towards her and attacked her with her bare hands. Xena easily avoided being hit by her flailing arms but it took her a few moments to understand what she was shouting.

"You killed them, you killed them all. You destroyed my village, my life. You're a murderer. I don't care what else they tell about you; you're a killer, nothing else."

The former Conqueror somehow managed to immobilise her by simply holding her by her upper arms. She sought her eyes and finally got her to fall silent, meanwhile Gabrielle and Cyrene had a hard time to keep her injured lover in bed. She was peripherally aware being the centre of attention in the whole infirmary but focussed her attention on the blonde whose identity no longer was an enigma to her.

Finally she spoke. "You are right, I am a murderer and a killer but I didn't kill your family, Callisto. Follow me, there's someone I want you to meet."

Surprisingly the young woman followed Xena like a docile pet. She found Cassandra where she expected her to be, at the training grounds, in the middle of some sword drills. As soon as the former slave saw the tall, well built, evenly muscled warrior she stopped dead in her tracks. "It's a dream," she whispered, "it has to be a dream. My family is dead, they burned at Cirra with the rest of the village."

At the same time the blonde at the sparring field also froze and her Amazon partner only barely avoided cutting her head off. They looked at each other, disbelief written over both their faces. Finally, Cassandra sheathed her sword and took a step towards her; heartbeats later they were in each other's arms. Xena stayed a few minutes while they alternated between crushing the other in their arms and intently studying the other's face. She knew that it would take time but now both

of them really could begin to heal some of the wounds of the past.

She returned to the infirmary and was greeted by a very agitated and worried Lioness. She was pelted with questions. "Where is she? Is everything all right? How did you know her name? I was the only one in the household who knew it! Did you know her before she was captured?"

"I know her sister and her mother, Lioness. I didn't know her be..."

"But they are dead. They burned at Cirra. -- So it's true that you destroyed her village." It wasn't really a question.

Xena caught the warning expression on Gabrielle's face and took a calming breath before answering. "No, I didn't destroy Cirra. A warlord with the name of Krykus burnt it down but I held myself responsible then and I still do. Cirra was under my protection but I wasn't fast enough to stop him and his men before most of the harm was done. There only were a few survivors and we took care of them as best as we could. When Arleia and Cassy told me about Callisto it was more than two seasons later and there was no sign to be found but when I saw her today I immediately knew who she was. There's a great resemblance between the sisters. Do you know what happened to her?"

Lioness had almost instantly calmed down and answered. "Only the bare facts. She rarely speaks of her past. She said that she had been hiding in the barn but when she heard a commotion outside she ran away. She ran to a clearing in the nearby forest and fell asleep. The sun was going down when she left the protection of the trees and saw the burning remains of the village. She once again ran and was soon captured by slavers. One of her first owners told her that Cirra had been burned down by the Conqueror. I'm sure she will understand as soon as she gets to know the truth."

"Why do you trust her word? There's nothing to prove that she's telling you the truth." Cyrene suddenly asked.

"Her eyes. There's mourning and guilt in her eyes. If she were the murderer Cally believes her to be, there would be none of these emotions." The former slave answered without hesitation.

Xena couldn't help the slight blush flushing her dark skin but recovered quickly. "Don't bother, Lioness. My mother has no reason whatsoever to believe anything but bad things about me. I never gave her a reason to." She quickly changed the subject. "What do you know about the metal used to forge your waist restraints and the others' collars?"

"Not much. One day a rather large shipment was in the courtyard. Hawk had a smithy build. It was something new. It created much more heat. One of the male slaves was forced to forge his and his brother's armour and killed afterwards. Another replaced the leather slave collars with the metal bands. The ends were still red hot when they were put on and a few of my sisters died from the burnings. Do you know a way to get rid of them?"

"Not yet but with what you just told me, we now have something to experiment on. We still have

their armours. It's only a question of time. I'll go and tell our smiths. They will find a way."

A few candlemarks later Xena was at the training grounds doing some solitary swords drills. She tried to keep her mind off a multitude of things: the elders still discussing the fate of the prisoners; the problem with the metal bands; the reunion of Cassandra and Callisto; the necessity of talking with her mother, but foremost the still introspective mood of her lover.

She easily managed to ignore her changing public of casual onlookers but it still had been awkward at first. After about one and a half candlemark, however, she was satisfied with the fluidity of her movements. Now would be a good time to work on more complicated moves but it shouldn't be. Tanalata was standing at the edge of the sparring field, impatiently waiting to be acknowledged. They still hadn't found out how to cut through the metal but there was one thing they didn't understand.

The Amazon smith led Xena to the smithy. She showed her the breast armours of Hawk and his brother; one of them without even a scratch, the other with a hole where the heart would have been.

"We tried every weapon, from a dagger to a spear but nothing can penetrate this metal. Take this and try yourself." The broad shouldered woman said.

Xena took the sword but even she was unable to make a dent in it. She tried again but it didn't work. She put the weapon away and unsuccessfully tried with her chakram. Then she unsheathed her own sword. This time it worked, now Hawk's armour also had a hole. She then tried to cut the breastplate and her blade sliced through the hard metal as if it were a piece of old parchment.

The final stages of her duel with Ares flashed through her mind's eye, the moment when Athena's sword had cut through the sturdy flagpole. She still was sure that it had been nothing but a dream but nonetheless Xena began to examine the weapon as if seeing it for the first time and a puzzled expression was soon replaced by a smile.

"I suppose we now have the means to get these blasted collars off. Send someone to tell the women. Tell them to come to the infirmary."

After all the trouble they had had to find a solution, taking the metal bands off was rather anticlimatic. It all went smoothly and only one of the women got a minor scratch from Xena's blade. When Lioness' waistband was taken care of, only Callisto was left with a collar. The tall warrior finally found her and Cassandra in the storage area of the barn.

Resentment was still oozing from the former slave and the helplessness projected by her sister cut through her heart. Callisto simply refused to be touched by the former Conqueror, so Xena gave her sword to Cassandra to cut through the collar.

It was simple enough, and even someone not experienced with the use of bladed weapons could have done it but it didn't work. She even cut her sister's skin. It wasn't deep but needed medical attention.

At the infirmary Lioness convinced her lover to let Xena have a try and once again the weapon sliced through the material as if it were no more than a stalk of grass. Cassandra's pride as a warrior was picked and she wanted to have another go.

"Let it be, Cassy. The collars are off, everything else is not important."

"Do you want to tell me that I'm too inept to do it, Xena?"

"Cassandra, you should know better." Gabrielle's slightly reprimanding voice came from behind. "If this was what Xena wanted to say she would have done so. I'm sure it has nothing to do with your skill as a warrior. Xena killed their abusers. It's only logical that she should be the one to get rid of these signs of slavery, don't you think?"

"I'm sorry, Xena. I apologise."

"No need, Cassy. I think your sister wants to introduce someone to you."

The dark haired warrior left the infirmary and headed straight for the shrine of Athena. She lowered herself on her left knee and laid the sword on the ground in front of the wooden statue of the goddess, next to one of metal bands. She closed her eyes for a moment, looked up, and began to speak.

"Athena, Goddess of Wisdom, hear my prayer. At the dawn of the world your breath gave soul and spirit to us mortals, your ingenuity kept us from dying from cold or hunger, you gave us the means to defend our freedom and the heart to long for peace, hear my prayer."

There was a long moment of silence.

"Great Goddess, I usually don't use the prayers my mother taught me and after all the crimes I committed I certainly don't deserve to use them now. But I want to thank you with all my heart for allowing me to do this, to set these women free. -- I know these are only words." She once again fell silent and closed her eyes. "Goddess hear my prayer. "

"Great Goddess, make me a channel of your peace, where there is hatred let there be love, where there is insult let there be pardon, where there is doubt let there be confidence, where there is darkness let there be light, where there is sadness let there be joy.

"Great Goddess, grant that I may not so much seek to be comforted as to give comfort, not so much to be understood as to understand, not so much to be loved as to love; for it is in giving that we receive, it is in pardoning that we are pardoned, it is in living that we decide about our

fate and our lives to come."

Her eyes slowly opened and found the vivid, lifelike eyes of the statue. "This is the first prayer I ever learned from my mother. Before it always was meant for Gaia but this time it was directed to the both of you. I hope I didn't offend you."

Her gaze fell on the sword. "I now give your sword back to you. I think it did what it was supposed to do. A weapon as powerful as this one shouldn't be in the hands of a mortal, a mortal like me. Please, take it back, Athena."

A golden light emanated from the statue, slowly envelopping the altar, Xena, and finally the whole shrine. The metal band and the sword disappeared; a heartbeat later, another sword was lying in front of the tall warrior and she heard a now familiar voice in her head. "You did good, warrior child!" The light disappeared suddenly and Xena was so dumbfounded, it took her a few heartbeats to regain her usual awareness of her surroundings.

Only when she left the room she saw her public. "Do you have time to talk, Xena?"

"Yes, mother. The funeral rites will start at sunset, I'll have to be back by then. Where do you want to go?" She asked.

"Wherever you feel comfortable, daughter."

"Do you mind a little ride? There's a hillock a few candle-drops from here." The older woman just nodded. They rode in silence. Why she chose Borias' memorial stone to talk with her mother, she didn't know for sure but it somehow felt right -- and getting to know Gabrielle had taught her to listen to her feelings. She also remembered a long talk with her blonde lover about honesty and hurt feelings; and she owed her mother.

"What do you want to know, mother?"

"When you brought me to Corinth, was it to have me under your control or did you do it to keep me safe?"

Xena didn't answer immediately. She first helped her mother to make herself comfortable to the left of Borias' memorial stone. She had an internal debate with herself, considering to which extent she wanted to be honest to her mother. She sat down next to the older woman.

"Caesar had the bad habit to exploit whatever he considered a weakness of his enemies. He tried to get his hands on you and Toris more than once. Amphipolis no longer was safe. I had to make it impossible for him to get to you." Xena answered in a quiet voice. "I'm sorry that I didn't have the courage to tell you the truth then but I suppose you wouldn't have believed me."

Cyrene cast a surprised look at her daughter but had to acknowledge. "Probably not." She fell

silent and then asked. "Why did you fight the Romans?"

"They were a threat to Greece. Caesar needed our resources, our silver and our soldiers to take revenge on the Britons. Boudica really had picked his pride by throwing his legions off her island. He may even have found out that I was behind some of her stratagems. He thought we would be easy pickings. I let him believe that our efforts were concentrated on our naval defences."

"Why did you fight the Romans?"

"They threatened our coast, disturbed the trade and took slaves whenever they could. They had to be stopped but I suppose you want to know if I also had a personal reason, don't you?"

The older woman just nodded.

"I wanted Caesar dead; that much is true. I wanted him dead but I wouldn't have started a war just to do this."

"So, it's true that he had you crucified?" Cyrene asked.

"Yes, it's true. He was kind enough to also break my legs." Xena answered, sarcasm still tinting her voice. "A friend set me free and payed with her life. She was killed by his soldiers. -- I was in a dark place before but after this I began to embrace the darkness."

"You lost yourself."

"That's how I see it now but then I thought that I finally had found my destiny." Xena said with resignation in her voice. "I killed for the sake of killing. It was then that I really became what I initially had set out to fight."

"I was told that you changed, even before taking Corinth."

The tall woman smiled and blue eyes found the brown orbs of her mother. "Not really. It's true that I felt some sort of change when I left the Centaurs and led my army towards the south but I don't think that I can pinpoint the exact moment. The most obvious thing was that killing no longer gave me the satisfaction and joy I had known before. I still wanted to rule Greece and some day the whole world but I also began to question the way to reach my goal."

Xena was speaking almost to herself, well aware that her mother no longer was her only public.

"Why did you just pray to Athena? Even as a child you refused to come to her temple with me."

"Even as a child," Xena quietly answered, "I wanted to be free from the influence of the gods but they just didn't leave me alone. Some of them just wanted to help, others wanted to rule my life. I couldn't deny their presence any longer. One night, just before the decisive battle against Caesar's army, I had a dream."

"I saw my life through the eyes of a stranger. I saw myself as kind and generous and brave and loving and loved. There was no trace of the egotistical killer I knew myself to be."

An almost inaudible gasp came from behind the tall tree on top of the hillock.

"The next day, I began to pray to Gaia. It just felt like the right thing to do and Gaia is one of the few gods who never had interfered in my life." She cast a quick glance at her mother and then said. "Why don't the two of you come out of there and join us?"

Embarrassed giggles were her only answer but soon Gabrielle and Solan joined them on the sunsoaked grass.

"Mother, you already know Gabrielle. May I introduce Solan. Solan, this is Cyrene, your grandmother."

"Awesome, I always wanted to have a grandmother. May I call you Gran?"

"You have a son? And you never told me!" Cyrene protested.

"I did wha...." Xena was silenced by Solan's hand on her thigh.

"She did what she had to do to keep me safe, from herself and from her enemies. She left me with the Centaurs when I still was a baby. I would have been a target, a weakness she couldn't afford and still can't."

"Do you really believe all this nonsense." The older woman retorted, suddenly angry.

"Mother, don't take it out on Solan. It's me you have a bone to pick with. I did what needed to be done to keep him safe and to make sure that he was surrounded by love and tender care while growing up. The person I was then was not fit to raise a child. My darkness would have swallowed him, sooner or later."

"Xena!"

"Gabrielle, please, be realistic. You read the chronicles of my early conquests. You should know better. It took a lot of time for the light to take even a tiny hold on my soul; and I want you to never underestimate your role in all of this. Before you I was lost. Your love opened the door to my heart and to my soul. If I'll ever have a chance to become the woman I dreamed about it will be because of you. However, I can't deny my past, it wouldn't be fair to all the people I hurt."

Gabrielle searched the security of her taller companion's arms and smiled shyly at her lover.

"Xena," the boy said, "my uncle told me that I shouldn't call you 'mum'. He said that it's still too dangerous, and after what this horrible man, this Dagnine, tried to do, I really understand. But when we're alone or with friends, just like now, will you be my mother then?"

The dark haired woman was speechless; not even in her most adventurous dreams she'd expected that the boy really wanted her to be his mother. "Yes, Solan, if you really want to. I would be honoured but I'd rather thought you would be angry with me. You have every right to be, you know?" She answered.

"Perhaps some day I will be but for now, I'm happy that you're here. You saved my life, to me, that's prove enough for me that I'm still very important for you. You could have send me away with the others but you trusted in my abilities, you took care of me and got me out of harm's way. You trusted me, you sang to me -- and I always knew that my mother would come to me in a song." He answered with a shy smile.

Xena pulled him closer with tears in her eyes, now holding both blondes in her arms and whispered. "Thank you, my son."

They all were seated facing the setting sun, a couple of candledrops later Cyrene said. "You gave me a lot to think about, Xena, and you too, my grandson. The sun is going down. We should head back to the village."

Xena wasn't too happy about the part she would have to play during the funeral rites -- not because she would have to be there as Queen Melosa's slave, not because she had agreed to sing the funeral dirge together with Ephiny.

It was because she still held herself responsible for all the senseless dead during this war. Without her interference none of this would have happened; if only she had stayed at the palace in Corinth, minding her own business and keeping an eye on her council, none of this would have happened.

So, when they finally arrived at their hut after the pyres had burned down, she still was quiet and gloomy. She also got another chance to experience just how well her younger lover knew to read her.

"Don't do this to yourself, Xena. None of it was your fault."

"Wasn't it? The Roman empire was defeated, Caesar was killed -- all because of me. If I had found another way to deal with them, they wouldn't have attacked, neither the Centaurs nor the Amazons."

"Please, my love, try to be reasonable. I heard what you told your mother. Was it true?"

The tall woman cautiously nodded.

"So, the Romans were a threat?"

Another nod.

"It was a question of defeating them or being defeated? A question of acting or being forced to react."

Another nod.

"How many of our countrymen would have died then or under Roman rule? Do you really think the Romans would have left the Centaurs or the Amazons alone? They never respected the traditions and cultures of the people they conquered. -- I know it's hard to see friends die, my love, but sometimes we don't have a choice."

Xena looked at the earnest face of her lover and a shy smile slowly crept on her face, very reminiscent of her son. "How did you get so wise, my love?"

"By worrying about you, my big dumb warrior!"

For the second time this day she was speechless and let her body speak for her. She took the smaller woman in her arms and let the overwhelming sense of their connection seep through her soul. It felt so right, so perfect, like stepping under a waterfall on a hot summer day. She felt at home and once again she acted on instinct alone.

She slipped to her knees, her arms still closed firmly around Gabrielle's waist. She tightened her grip and felt the younger woman's hands kneading her shoulders and easing away a tension she hadn't been aware of. It just was the right thing to do and Xena let this feeling wash over her like a gentle sunwarmed wave.

Gabrielle finally bent down and whispered. "Let's go to bed, my love."

This night, there were no games of dominance or submission. Just two women in love sharing their bodies and souls. This night, there was not one guiding the other. Just two hearts beating in the same rhythm.

Chapter Twelve: The Third Whipping

The next couple of days were spent caring for the wounded, and luckily none of them died. Xena had another few conversations with her mother and a short one with Callisto who still wasn't sure if she should believe all the things she'd heard about the former Conqueror.

Lioness was able to leave the infirmary just in time for the victory celebration but insisted on officially declaring her submission to Amazon law for having attacked the Queen before taking part in the festivities. Even the most severely injured of the Amazons would be able to travel in another two days; and so they would be back at the village with only another day or two to spare

before the last part of Xena's punishment was scheduled to take place.

Kaleipus and a few other dignitaries would accompany them, as well as Regent Calliope and her fighters.

Solan had done quiet a bit of sneaky manoeuvring to be allowed to also come with them. After Kaleipus' blunt refusal, he got Terreis to speak for him who because of her thigh wound wouldn't be able to visit the village. He also got Cyrene to speak on his behalf. On the one hand Xena was glad to have him around a little longer, she felt the need to finally get to know her son; on the other hand she was worried how he would take her whipping.

So, she spent some time trying to explain it to him. Surprisingly, this conversation went a long way to help her understand her own actions a lot better. She understood that she gave herself up to the Amazons not only to assure the well-being of her soldiers and of Gabrielle, not only to pay for her crimes against the Northern Amazons, not only to get out of her boring life as a ruler, not only to begin a new life.

She also had done it to become once again a part of the Amazon community, to feel one with them as she had when still a child.

The day before they arrived at the village, at a small campfire, she told him about this time of her eleventh summer. She told him how at home she had felt living with the Amazons, for once she hadn't been the only girl good at running and fighting but she still had been a lot faster and stronger than most of her age-mates. She had spent long evenings, tucked away in a convenient tree, and listening to the Amazons telling stories of their hunts, their wars, their traditions, their laws, soaking it all up like a dried sponge. For the first time in her life she had held a sword and received her first lesson, surprising everyone with the almost instinctive skill she displayed, everyone with the exception of Theano.

There only had been one aspect of Amazon life she had felt utterly uncomfortable with and avoided as best as she could, Amazon spirituality.

She liked to listen to the stories but didn't want anything to do with religious ritual and ceremonies. Now, for the first time she ruefully acknowledged at least to herself what had made her this cautious and suspicious. What Castritius, the smith, had done to her and her family had made her doubt the benevolence and the power of the gods -- and if she was really honest, the feeling of having been abandoned by the gods never had left her. But slowly transformed itself in resentment, especially when some of them began to actively interfere in her life.

Xena was snapped out of her musings. "Gran told me that she was an innkeeper when you were a child. You were not born as an Amazon, so why did you live with them?" The boy asked.

"I had some trouble with one of the adults at my village and my mother thought it best for me to be away for a while." Xena simply answered.

Perceptive blue eyes found her own. "That's not the whole truth, isn't it?"

"No," she said with a resigned smile, fighting with herself. She was well aware that her story was not something one should tell her ten-year-old son but she felt the need to be honest, "it isn't. -- It was a very long time ago. The winter had been very hard; the harvest had almost completely failed. There were no customers for the inn and finally my mother didn't have enough to get us through, my brothers, and me. She went to the local blacksmith who always had surplus of all kind. She borrowed from him and gave it back during the spring and summer.

"Even after all our debts were paid, he insisted that we now owed him. He constantly passed by, invited himself to our evening meals and generally acted as if he were our father. My older brother was in the next village, as an apprentice to the local tavernkeeper. He... Let's just say that he wasn't nice. He steadily became more demanding but one day he went too far. He attacked me at his smithy and I defended myself. That's why I had to leave."

"He raped you? But you only were a child."

"What do you know about rape?" She asked completely surprised.

"I have an Amazon as a teacher and I was raised by the Centaurs. Centaur children very early learn about the differences between the sexes and the responsibilities both of them have. We learn that we have to respect each other." He fell silent for a heartbeat. "Respect. I'm sorry, I shouldn't have asked."

"It's been a long time ago, Solan. He can't hurt me any longer. Nor any other woman."

"Did you kill him?"

Xena once again was tempted to lie but she took a deep breath and answered. "Yes, I did. I didn't intend to. He tore at the front of my dress. It was shortly after the midday meal and he already smelled of strong liquor. He just had taken a metal bar out of the fire," Xena suddenly felt Gabrielle's familiar breathing in her neck and leand back, "I grabbed it and rammed it through his chest. He first stumbled backwards and then fell to the ground. I felt empty looking at him."

Xena looked at the ground, away from her two companions, and she suddenly felt the boy crawling closer and searching contact with her while she still was securely cradled in Gabrielle's arms. Solan snuggled up next to her. "Are you all right, mum?"

She blinked a few times. "Yes, thank you. The Amazons helped me to heal some of the wounds he inflicted and gave me back my sense of self. I'll always owe them."

"So, it's good that you now pay your debt." He answered with a child's simple sense of justice.

"Yes, my son. But I'd rather not have you at the temple. It's not easy to take and it will be hard to witness."

Unfortunately for Xena, her son was as stubborn as she was and she gave in. However, he had to

promise to stay with his grandmother and to leave without protest whenever the older woman told him to go because she thought it became too much for him. He reluctantly agreed when he saw a warning glimmer in his mother's eyes, instinctively assuming that he only could push her this hard and not one step further.

Queen Melosa and Xena just had left the bathing area where the tall warrior had been prepared for her night's vigil and the third punishment she had to endure to balance the scales with Amazon justice. Theano and Cyrene intercepted them just when they were about to enter the forest path to the temple.

"My Queen, please give us a few candledrops of your time. I know it's against the law but please let this mother speak to her daughter." The Amazon healer said kneeling in front of her superior.

"Xena, it's up to you." The Queen answered.

The dark haired woman nodded.

The Queen also answered with a curt nod. "Theano, my friend, you still owe me the story of how Xena became your second daughter." She said leading the Amazon lawyer away, choosing a detour towards the temple. She was curious about what had happened but the priestess in her also was sure that the older woman wouldn't tell her the whole truth, not now.

"Mother?"

"Daughter. -- In all the talks we had these passed days there is one thing I never said to you. At the beginning I was confused. I didn't want to believe what everyone told me about you. And I also didn't have the courage to. I still don't understand why you did most of the things you did or why you're doing this now. But I want you to know that I love you. When I was ashamed to be your mother, I loved you. Even when I denied that I ever had a daughter, I still loved you. That never changed and it never will."

"Thank you but what changed your mind, mother?"

"A lot of things, no, that's not the truth. A lot of people did, your soldiers, your friends, the Amazons, Theano, Gabrielle, Solan. My grandson, he really is a bright boy. You should be proud of him."

"I am, mother, but I don't have any right to be. When he was born I wasn't fit to be a mother. It was Kaleipus who raised him. He learned about love by people who loved him. Centaur traditions taught him respect and compassion. I had nothing to do with it." Xena said with sadness in her eyes.

Cyrene smiled back at her. "Xena, if nothing else, these words were prove enough for me that you no longer are the Conqueror. You've redeemed yourself, my daughter."

"Redemption... No, mother, I'm not worthy of redemption; that's out of the question. Tomorrow, I'll pay for the crimes I committed against the Amazon nation. But that's only the first step on a very long road." Reading the body language of her mother she added. "Being punished for my crimes, all of my crimes; I admit it was and still is a very tempting notion but I killed thousands but I only can die once. The Amazons and the Centaurs. They're something special, as you should know by now. I hurt you and I made a lot of mistakes but I also never stopped loving you. Thank you, mother. -- I have to go now."

Xena shared a heartfelt hug with her mother and somehow felt a lot lighter as if at least a part of the burden weighing down her heart had been lifted.

Queen Melosa and Theano found a comfortable bench in the back of the temple and the older woman began her tale. "From the first moment I saw her I knew that Xena was someone very special. She was really bright, never needing more than one try to get something right and always coming up with ideas to make it better. Even as a child she had a restless mind and great inner strength.

"I'm sorry. I'm starting to babble and it still doesn't explain why I made her my second daughter."

"No, it doesn't but I suppose you thought that she needed some sort of role model. Xena is a fighter to the core; so she needed someone who taught her the responsibilities coming with wearing a weapon." The Queen answered.

"To a certain extent, yes. At least that's how I tried to rationalise it in front of myself and towards her mother. The truth, however, isn't this straightforward. After I had stopped this fight between Xena and the better part of the older children, she collapsed. Cyrene dressed her wound but she had to be down at the inn and so I sat at her bedside.

"Just before dawn, I fell asleep and I had a dream, a vision of sorts. I saw Xena, looking just like she does now, sitting at the right of a tall Roman and calmly ordering the death of a pregnant woman. Her eyes were not only cold but dead. It was as if she were unable to feel, no hate, no love, no hope, no joy, no sorrow. She just existed."

"You decided to save her from herself." Melosa quietly commented.

"When I woke up and studied her peaceful features I decided that I wouldn't let her go down this path alone. Even when she was at her worst, I always saw the heart she so desperately was ignoring. I wasn't always successful but when I look at her now, I think it was worth the effort."

Queen Melosa had the distinct feeling that there still was a lot more to tell about the Amazon lawyer's decision to take Xena as her second daughter but as a priestess she also knew that some

things had to come at their own time and now obviously was neither the time nor the place.

When Queen Melosa called Xena out to the entrance area of the temple, early the next morning, the tall warrior had spent a remarkably uneventful night in front of the altar. Melosa had arrived only a few candle-drops after she had knelt down but they hadn't spoken. For some time she tried to figure out what Theano could have answered to the Queen's question because this was one of the rare topics the older Amazon always had refused to discuss with her. Her mind, however, calmed down surprisingly fast and she began to meditate, for once without being haunted by memories or visions of any kind.

"I am Melosa, priestess of Artemis, I am Melosa, queen of the Amazon nation by right of birth and mutual consent. I greet all of you, Amazons and guests, who have come here to witness justice satisfied."

Xena felt strangely relaxed when leaving the temple; though part of her was well aware that she should be terrified or at least worried about what was to come. Not only would she receive seventy instead of fifty strokes with the whip but this time not only Amazons would be present but also her son and her mother, representatives of her soldiers and the Centaurs. She also knew that Anara had a litter waiting just at the edge of the clearing and the rational part of her mind also doubted that she would be able to make it back to the village on her own feet after this many strokes.

"Xena of Amphipolis, you were found guilty of sacrilegious behaviour in three cases. Today you will face the last part of your punishment. For killing Queen Cyane of the Northern Amazons on sacred ground you will receive seventy strokes with a single tail whip. Are you ready to submit to Amazon justice?"

"Yes, Queen Melosa, I do. I choose Theano as my assistant."

"Do you accept the culprit's choice, Theano?"

"Yes, Queen Melosa, I do."

"Weapons' master, do your duty."

Eponin grimly nodded and handed the Amazon lawyer a pair of fur-lined wrist cuffs. She climbed the steps and fastened the cuffs around the taller woman's wrists. Xena turned around and knelt between the two pillars on the stony ground. Sturdy leather thongs were fastened at the D-rings of the cuffs and wrought tightly around each pillar stretching Xena's arms but not as tightly as the first time to keep her back muscles from cramping. The leather straps holding her top were unlaced and a great white towel tied around her waist. As before Eponin apologised to her friend for doing her duty, as before Xena answered her that she was grateful that it was a

friend doing it, and no one else.

Theano gave the signal to begin. The first stroke hit Xena's back and she almost jumped at the sudden pain, more intense than ever before. She consciously calmed her breathing and relaxed the muscles in her back. The next impact was much more manageable and she soon realised that Eponin was trying to create an even rhythm, making it easier for her to control her body's reactions.

"Fifteen."

There was a side effect. She had lost count of the number of strokes, the pain had let her lose her awareness of her surroundings and to a certain degree also her sense of self. This wasn't supposed to happen; so, she sought Theano's eyes and the older woman called for a stop.

"Please, tell Eponin to change the rhythm, nothing regular. It has to be unpredictable, otherwise I get lost." The older woman just nodded, understanding her second daughter's need to control at least a tiny part of this ordeal. The weapons' master also seemed to understand and adapted her style.

"Twenty-one."

"Twenty-seven."

Theano called another halt and brought a waterskin to the ravenhead's lips, reminding her to relax her muscles as much as possible.

"Thirty-five."

Xena was surprised that she still was able to feel where the blows were marking her back. Every single one of them reverberated through her whole body but if asked she would have been able to pinpoint exactly where the tip of the whip hit her back. It was a strange sensation she intended to explore to keep her mind off the pain. It seemed to work.

"Forty-six."

She could feel that the moment when her mental exercises no longer would work was getting closer. She also knew that then she would no longer be able to hold back her cries of pain. She then would have to make a decision: giving herself up to the pain or concentrating on keeping her mind in the here-and-now.

In her time as a warlord she had seen a number of people who needed physical pain, lots of pain to feel alive or to reach their climax. During the last whipping she had begun to understand them. She had been so close, not close to sexual fulfillment but close to oblivion -- and she didn't want this to happen ever again.

"Fifty-three."

This time Theano knew what her charge wanted before she told her. She asked Eponin to allow more time between the strokes to give Xena the chance to regain her bearing every time. It worked. It seemed as if her Amazon friend sensed exactly how much time she needed to get herself back under control. Instead shouting out the almost unbearable pain, Xena only grunted.

"Sixty-two."

"Sixty-six."

It became harder and harder to stay focused on the world around her. Xena closed her eyes to concentrate on the sounds: the birds, the rustling of leaves in the wind, someone, no, Gabrielle crying. This time the stroke came too fast, immediately followed by the next. Obviously Eponin had decided to get it over with.

"Sixty-nine."

"Seventy."

More than only a couple of heartbeats went by before the kneeling warrior realised that the whipping had stopped. Her naturally exceptionally good hearing now was amplified. She not only heard the birds and the wind and Gabrielle's sobs. She also heard the voice of her son, quietly whispering to her lover. 'Don't worry!' He said. 'Everything will be all right. She's my mum, she'll make it.'

The absurd burst of irrational pride these words triggered brought Xena back to reality. She looked up and found the older Amazon's concerned eyes. Somehow she managed a tiny smile and nodded.

Her right hand was the first to be released from the cuffs. She needed a moment to adjust her balance. Then the other arm was freed from its bondage and despite her best efforts she tumbled forward, only to gently land in Theano's arms.

"Take it easy, little one. One step after the other. Catch your breath; let your heartbeat slow down. That's it. Take your time, little one."

Xena closed her eyes, only for a heartbeat, but she could feel the assembly of Amazons, Centaurs, and Humans holding their collective breath. She focused her attention on her feet and legs and slowly got up. She couldn't help but swaying a bit but everyone respected her need to do it on her own. The tall warrior finally regained her equilibrium and headed for the interior of the temple.

She stood in front of the altar, only vaguely aware of the multitude of eyes following her every movement. The towel still was wrapped around her hips but couldn't hinder at least some drops of blood tainting the ground. She finally got down on her knees and instead of just thanking the Goddess for allowing her to atone for her crimes, this time she also gave thanks to Artemis and

Athena for helping her win this war and for giving her the chance to start a new life. It was hard to get back on her feet but using the energy she usually only could access while fighting gave her the strength to do it. She closed her eyes for another heartbeat of thanks, and slowly turned around.

She faced a small ocean of anxious faces. She walked towards the columns she just had been bound between, stilling feeling kind of wobbly. Suddenly the hairs at her neck were standing straight up but without the nauseous feeling she usually associated with Ares. Still, there was a god close by.

A column of blue light began to form next to her, and though Xena never would admit it to anybody except to Gabrielle, she was relieved to see the column change to a solid body: the body of Artemis.

Kneeling in front of a statue was one thing, kneeling in front of a real god was quite another. However, she surprised herself by reflexively trying to get down on her right knee. Two hands closing around her shoulders stopped her. At the same moment she felt some sort of tingling sensation sweep through her body. The collar around her neck fell to the ground just in front of her feet and the pain was gone.

"You are forgiven, warrior child." The Goddess said, her melodious voice reaching even the outer edges of the big square. "From this day on, Xena of Amphipolis, you are one of my own, an Amazon warrior with all rights and duties. You will fight for the Nation and the Nation will fight for you." A hand touched her left shoulder blade. "From now on there will be no scars marring your back but I leave the symbol of my chosen people in the centre of a coiled whip as a reminder that Amazon justice has been satisfied. Begin your new life with the Amazon nation untainted from the past. My blessing is with you and your love." The last words didn't carry beyond Xena's hearing and the Goddess was gone without any flourish.

Xena quickly descended the steps and engulfed her lover in a much needed hug, completely oblivious to the multitude of voices coming from all sides, shouting. "Hail, Xena, Amazon warrior."

THE END

Author's comment to Chapter Eleven:

For those who didn't get it immediately: Xena's prayer was initially written by Saint Francis. I changed a few words to make it better fit with the story. It's one of my favourite prayers, next to the Lord's Prayer and the 23rd Psalm, and I didn't mean to offend anyone's sensibilities. If I did I apologise.

Author's ramblings:

There still are a lot of questions left open, I know. It may take another year but I'll write a sequel -- at the moment there are two story lines occasionally running through my mind. The only question left is: Which one will I write first. The first one sends Xena and Gabrielle to Chin, the second has them dealing with Alti and the spiritual powers of the Northern Amazons. It's up to you, dear readers. Let me know what you'd like to read. I'm open for suggestions -- and there still is the question if Xena should be restored to her role as leader of Greece and Rome. I know what I'd like but I also would like you to have some influence. I don't know where my imagination will lead me in the end but it would be helpful to have some pointers.

So, even if usually you don't feed the bards, do it now. The story and I depend upon it. Send your comments to: romansilence@yahoo.de

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