

~ The Undaunted Heart ~

by Aurelia

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AUTHOR'S NOTE: While this may be classed as a Conqueror story the timeline takes place before Xena is in that position. Here she is a soldier and the leader of her army, on her mission to unite Greece under her leadership. It could rightfully be called a PRE-Conqueror story.

This is a sequel to "The Most Dangerous Game of All" and the link is here:
http://xenafiction.net/scrolls/aurelia_tmdgoa.html

THANKS: Thanks to my beta Heather for giving it the once over and giving me the benefit of her experience.

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Or join me at my Yahoo Group http://groups.yahoo.com/group/aurelia_fan/.

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It had been a long and arduous trek across Greece, one that her army had been keen to finish. Xena could feel the unrest even from the lofty heights of her steed, Wraith, but she had somewhere to go and a need to get there.

She was nearly within striking distance of her objective and her men were now making camp to await her further orders. There was still a few days' march to go but they were short on supplies. Scavenging parties were out to replenish supplies while she was doing some investigating of her own. She wasn't sure why she felt the need to follow her second-in-command as he disappeared in the nearby forest but her little voice of reason told her to. She had taken to the trees in order to get closer to the conversation, and now she was glad she did.

"Tell me again why we're going to this Gods-forsaken piece of Greek soil?"

"General Arkanis, My Lord does not confide in me."

"Maltus, you are her aide. You, of all people, should know what she is thinking."

"I do not presume to know what the Conqueror is thinking, General. She keeps her own counsel."

"Dismissed." Xena knew that Maltus could be very diplomatic when there was something he didn't want to answer, and the fact that the general waved off the lieutenant absently told her he

had also given up trying to get anything out of him.

She was ready to rip her general's heart out for describing her home as nothing but a 'Godsforesaken piece of Greek soil'. Funny, she never thought of it as the back end of Greece. That didn't happen until she had left it and found out what the rest of Greece thought.

Xena moved carefully, her muscles screaming in protest at being forced to crouch in a tree for so long. She didn't normally eavesdrop on her generals but today her senses told her to do so.

Her pot-bellied second-in-command just stood there as if waiting for something... someone. For several minutes he loitered, idly scuffing the dirt with one muddy boot.

The Conqueror was stuck. Any movement from her would alert her general to her presence. She bit her lip as the pain intensified, slowly eroding away her concentration. As a diversion she studied the man below. Slightly shorter than she was, he seemed to make up in bulk what was missing in height. The expansive waistline told her he didn't deny himself the luxury of food. In fact, he seemed to have thrived on a vast array of gourmet delicacies. His hair was long and stringy and in much need of a wash, as was his beard, which looked like it had been used to strain whatever went into his mouth. A scar bisected one eyebrow, giving him a rakish look but not for the better. Calling him plain would have been a compliment.

"Are you alone?"

The huskiness of the voice told her who the new visitor was. After all she gave it to him, damaging his voice box in their last encounter.

"Yes." The word was spoken by someone who knew this person well... and not as an enemy.

"What's the news?"

"She's going home. Only the Gods know why."

"Strange."

Xena couldn't see him because he stood in the shadows but the menace she could feel. Oh yes, he oozed danger. This was a turn of events that she hadn't expected. They had been on the march for months and she would have thought that her men would have been delighted for a respite, even if it was only for a short while.

"This is foolish. All she has gained she will lose by not pressing her advantage. Athens is ripe for the taking. Now she is giving them precious time to prepare for her." Arkanis spoke with utter conviction. Her general was not wavering on where he stood on the matter.

"Now the advantage will be ours."

"I agree."

So they have an alliance. Knowing the husky-voiced visitor as she did, the alliance would last only as long as it benefited him. Her general lost a point in her estimation of him because he should have known that if he was smart.

"For now, let her be." The rustle in the undergrowth told her that he had left, the conversation ending abruptly. Little did her general know that he was in far greater danger with his new ally than he was with the Conqueror.

* * *

As soon as she reached camp Xena sought out the young lieutenant. Now she knew where her young aide stood and was someone to be trusted.

The young man walked beside her as she strolled across the meadow. "What can I do for you, my Lord?"

She smiled. He was so eager to please that he was nearly falling over himself. "I want you to find out who in this camp is loyal to me."

Maltus glanced over the valley at the vast array of tents. "All of them?" He visibly paled. "By name?" He was eager and he was loyal but sometimes his initiative was lacking.

"Yes, I want every single name by dark."

He turned away shaking.

"Come back here!" Xena sighed.

He was doing it to her again, driving her to distraction. If he wasn't so damned indispensable she would have run him through months ago.

"Use your brain!" Her finger jabbed at his temple. "I want you to keep your ears and eyes open, Maltus. I want to know who is loyal to me but I don't want them to know that **I** know."

Some days being the potential Conqueror of Greece was just a pain in the ass. "Observe, Maltus. See who talks to whom, especially to General Arkanis." Maltus paled even further. "Is something wrong, Maltus? Do you have something to tell me?" Now she would know the extent of his loyalty.

"I... errr...."

"Come on lad. Spit it out." She gentled her voice, trying to encourage him to speak his mind.

"He approached me earlier today, my Lord."

"What about?" It was hard to feign ignorance when she knew everything already.

"He wanted to know why we were going to Amphipolis."

"I hope you told him it's none of his business."

"I would not presume to tell...."

"Never mind." Maltus would make a damned fine politician. He could say everything about nothing. But he had told her what she had hoped to hear. "Alright, about your business. Keep your eyes and ears open. I want to know what my army... and my generals... are doing. Do you understand?"

"Perfectly, my Lord." He smiled confidently. At last he understood.

Xena watched him trot off to do her bidding. What had started out as merely a visit to her home village was now turning out to be something more deadly. Did she want to take this problem to the people of Amphipolis or should she just turn around and get as far away as possible? She knew that would be the prudent thing to do but something was drawing her home. Something that she couldn't ignore.

* * *

Progress had been slow towards Amphipolis, moving an army that steadily grew with every day. Finally, they were within a couple of miles of the outskirts of her home, camped in a large open meadow a short distance from the main road.

The army set about establishing a camp, each soldier aware of his particular duty involved in doing so. While the tents slowly rose Xena herself spent her time tending to Wraith, stripping him down and brushing him until his coat shone like the noonday sun. She fetched his oats and water before leaving him to his evening meal. While it was not necessary for her to do anything Wraith was the exception, but these days there just didn't seem to be the time to indulge herself in this one little chore.

She found a large rock on the edge of the meadow and she sat on it, sipping on a flask of water as the camp came together. Cursorily she looked over the sight before her and she was content with the progress. Her men had done this so often that she could have easily left them to their work and gone to visit her mother. But she also had the urge to see someone who had been noticeably absent in her life.

Despite her concern about a possible betrayal Raven had been occupying a considerable portion of her thoughts. That morning under a leather hide they made love in the forest... a forest... one of many forests she had seen in her lifetime. *Another time... another place...* she had said. *When?* Her mind called. *How much longer must I wait?* She had tasted paradise and now wanted to reside there. Was this what was driving her home? The sudden impulse to find her roots was a strange one indeed.

She was so close to home but it was late in the day and she resisted the urge to call on her mother

until tomorrow. Things were unresolved between them and a reunion could end up an all-out war, a war that she was going into alone. There would be no witnesses.

After the evening meal she sat outside her tent absorbing the warmth of the blazing fire. Staring deep into its depths, Xena sipped her port absently. Her mind was in turmoil, occupied with all the factors influencing her life... her enemies, her allies, her mother and Raven... and they were all vying for attention in her crowded brain.

The warrior threw the dregs of her port onto the crackling fire, listening to them succumb to the flames with a hiss and a pop. She clicked her tongue angrily. Greece beckoned and she was wasting time on a visit that was probably not going to be welcomed. Her enemies were right. As the Conqueror stood, she gazed at the blanket of stars above her, glittering like prized jewels in a far-off dark sea. Troubled she walked somberly back to her tent, barely acknowledging the words of greeting from her men.

* * *

Xena sat on Wraith outside her mother's inn vainly trying to gather up the courage to dismount. It wasn't that she was terrified of her. No, she would never admit to that, but her mother had a way of making her feel less than she was. To Cyrene, Xena was her daughter and not the Conqueror of Greece. The warrior chuckled. Of course she would, just as Xena thought of Cyrene as her mother and not some mindless peasant. Still, they had not separated on the best of terms.

Come on, Xena. Get your ass off this horse... It took more effort than she thought possible to lift her leg over Wraith and slide to the ground. Right at that moment she wanted to be facing an army of the Horde rather than one short, dumpy woman.

Mustering as much confidence as she could she pushed open the door and moved inside, content to rest against the wall until she became accustomed to the dim light. It was much as she remembered it all those years ago. Gnarled tabletops were scattered everywhere surrounded by equally rough hewn chairs. There was a sparse spattering of customers, either having a late breakfast or hoping for an early lunch.

Her arrival drew the looks of the diners. Some were curious, some circumspect and a few were fearful. She smiled. One day she would tell Arkanis that Amphipolis wasn't as primitive as everyone thought. They had heard of her here, not only as Cyrene's daughter but as their potential conqueror.

Xena pushed off from the wall and strode across the room to a secluded table in the corner where she could view the whole room. Lazily she leaned back in the rough chair, her back touching the wall in comfort. Finally the diners returned to their meals, relieved that the warrior was content to just sit and wait.

It took several moments before a woman emerged from the kitchen, wiping her damp hands on an available piece of cloth. The new customer was spotted and she made her way in between the maze of tables to finally stop herself in front of the warrior. "What do you want?" But the

question held anger rather than inquiry.

"Hello, mother," Xena murmured. "How's business?"

"You came all this way to ask me that?" Aged blue eyes narrowed at her daughter. "Fine, no thanks to you."

"You're going to blame me for bad business as well?" It was like she had never left.

"Just get to the point, Xena."

"Can't I come home and say hello?"

"What do you want?"

"I don't know. I really don't know."

Cyrene saw the confusion written on that young face. She sat in the seat opposite her daughter and leaned on the tabletop to study the wild child who had grown into the most powerful woman in Greece.

"I just felt a need to come home." Xena's broad shoulders shrugged in visual confirmation of her indecision.

The older woman's lips pursed in aggravation. Silently she stood, glaring down at her leather-clad daughter. "Have you eaten?" Cyrene knew she hadn't, even before her daughter answered.

"No, I..." Before she could finish her sentence her mother had already walked away. "... haven't... eaten..." If one of her cooks did that he would have been spitted and roasted on an open fire. Her mother was getting away with everything.

A wooden mug hit the table with a thud, the ale sloshing over the side onto the wood. Xena instinctively jumped at the sound, her hand swiftly reaching for her sword.

"My, my, Conqueror, we are jumpy." The voice was soft and inviting... and very familiar. At their last meeting the woman had barely said a word but she would know the melody that tugged at her heart strings.

The warrior's neck cracked noisily as she looked up with a start. "You..." It took a second or two before her mind posed the question. "Why are you here?"

"I..." But Gabrielle didn't get to finish her sentence because Cyrene approached with a bowl of steaming porridge.

"Picking on young women now, Xena?"

"Can't we have a decent conversation, mother?" Now she was getting annoyed. She thought she was being civil and her mother was being a... well, a child shouldn't think that of her mother. "I would prefer water if you don't mind, miss." Xena played the game.

"Melaina."

"Melaina, this is my daughter, Xena." Cyrene's words were dismissive, as if she wanted to forget the warrior was ever there.

"Melaina?" Xena was confused. Raven had yet another name? Which one was the real one?

"Xena? THE Xena?" Gabrielle looked suitably afraid.

"One in the same," Xena growled, allowing her forceful personality to emerge for a moment.

"I... I..."

"Go about your work, girl." The older woman watched the girl leave. "Was that really necessary? It's hard keeping the hired help as it is without you scaring them off."

"What is your problem, mother? I come here to say hello and you snap at me!"

"You know very well what the problem is! I don't want you here!"

"What's done is done, mother. I can't change the past."

"You may not be able to change it, daughter, but you can certainly atone for it. My two sons are lying out there in the cold ground because of you!"

"Sit down!" The innkeeper stood there defiantly. "Now, mother! Don't make me do something stupid in front of your customers... and your neighbors. Small town gossip would have this conversation all over the countryside by this afternoon."

Grumpily, the older woman complied, not happy with losing this particular battle.

"What do you want from me?" Xena's insides were tied up in knots. This was what she had hidden from all these years but now she just wanted it all over. Now was the time for resolution and, hopefully, absolution.

"I want you to go away, Xena. Every time you turn up something nasty happens."

"You may blame me for Lyceus' and Toris's deaths, Mother, but you know damned well..."

"Don't you speak like that to me, daughter!"

Xena couldn't help but smile. At least her mother had disowned her just quite yet.

"What's so funny, eh? This is serious..."

"I was smiling at the fact that you called me 'daughter'. I'm still part of the family..."

"...for now." Cyrene stared at the warrior, anger and indignation sparking in the depths of her eyes.

"Look, mother. I'm sorry, I truly am, but I can't change the past. It was a mistake to make known my roots, I know that now. How was I to know that my enemies would seek out my family? You know how much Lyceus meant to me. I could not let his death go unavenged."

Cyrene studied her daughter as she revealed what was in her heart. Xena had never strung so many words together before. Was she repentant or just appeasing an old woman who wanted to hear an apology?

"I miss them both still, Mother."

"Eat up your porridge. It's getting cold." Cyrene said grumpily. She smiled as Xena obediently lifted the spoon and dipped it in the oats. It was just like the olden days when her young hellion would rein in her wild streak to obey her mother. Before her daughter could see it Cyrene stood and walked back to the kitchen, leaving Xena more confused than ever.

So what did the conversation accomplish? Xena wasn't sure. On the plus side at least they were talking to each other. On the other hand, though, the talk didn't progress much past 'hello'. Why was she doing this to herself? Greece awaited her and she was wasting precious time and energy trying to mend an emotional bridge that could collapse at any moment.

Xena continued to eat the oatmeal, remembering the familiar taste and texture of a breakfast she had consumed every morning up to the day she had left. Since that day that particular meal of the day never quite lived up to her expectations.

The warrior watched the small blonde wend her way through the mass of tables towards her, carrying a mug and pitcher as she had requested. She took the time to study the woman approaching her, appreciating the gentle sway of the curves that were calling to her. What an amazing coincidence. The only worry she had about that fact was that she didn't believe in coincidences.

"Your water, Conqueror."

"Thank you... what was your name again?"

"Melaina."

"Ahh yes, Melaina. Interesting name... Melaina."

"It was the one I was born with, ma'am."

"Ma'am? I have never been a ma'am and probably never will be." A dark, elegant eyebrow rose in mock surprise. "And what are you doing in this place, *Melaina*?"

"Working, ma'am." Gabrielle continued to tease the brunette, fearlessly baiting her.

"Working? You mean... *working*?" Xena felt a cold shiver run down her spine. Her voice dropped to a whisper. "Anyone I know?"

Gabrielle didn't answer but she couldn't stop her eyes shifting to the swinging door to the kitchen.

Xena followed the assassin's vision to see who she was looking at. "Her?" Vibrant green eyes stared back at her, silently answering her question. "You **do** know that I will stop you."

"I didn't know who she was..."

Xena had to strain to hear the words spoken so softly. "And now?"

"Now?"

"Hey, girl!" A burly customer had decided he had waited long enough for the serving girl to talk to the menacing warrior seated in the corner.

"Coming, sir!" Gabrielle knew her time was up. Her eyes returned to the seated woman. "Later..."

"Wait..." Xena needed to make herself clear. "Do nothing. We need to talk."

The blonde said nothing but nodded before returning to her duties.

Cyrene was right. When she returned home bad things happened.

* * *

As much as she wanted to seek out the assassin Xena knew she had been away from her army way too long. Her absence would only encourage Arkanis to plot and plan. It also gave Maltus time to gather his information for her without her presence interfering in the intelligence gathering. No, she just hoped her trust in Gabrielle not to act until they had talked was well founded.

"My Lord!" The urgency in Maltus's voice told her she had been away longer than he had been comfortable with.

"What did you find out?" Xena didn't wait for Maltus's reply, instead striding towards the empty expanse of field that had been assigned for training.

"Well..." The young lieutenant trotted after his superior, trying to keep up with the long strides of the Conqueror. "Well... my Lord!"

"What names have you for me?"

"As you suspected, my Lord. General Arkanis convened a meeting with your senior staff in your absence."

"All of them, Maltus?" Xena had hoped that some of her senior advisors were loyal. It appeared not.

"Yes, my Lord, but General Graxion and his Captains left the meeting immediately."

"How was he, Maltus?"

"Very angry, my Lord. Whatever had been said, he was not happy."

"I am sure he was, Maltus. Well..." At least her first General still remained loyal. Graxion had been one of the first men to join her cause back in the olden days when battles were for glory and booty, not for the conquering that now ruled her life. But the others... that made up a substantial part of her army.

"Anyone else?" Xena sincerely hoped so.

The young man signaled to a bull of a man waiting nearby. "This is Brachius, my Lord. He wishes to speak to you."

The large soldier dropped to one knee in front of his leader. "My Lord," he whispered almost reverently.

"And what is it that you want of me..."

"Brachius, my Lord."

...Brachius."

"My Lord, it is what I can do for you. My men and I pledge our allegiance to you personally, to defend you to our dying breaths."

"That is very noble, Brachius, but how can I trust you when there are others that I cannot?"

"My Lord, the men are talking."

"So, what do they say?" He looked up at her uncertainly, wondering if speaking the truth would mean losing his life. But she needed to know. "You can speak without fear, soldier." Her lips

curved up slightly, not quite enough for a smile but giving the air of acceptance.

"Rumors are spreading that there is some discontent amongst your generals, my Lord."

"Really? Did you hear of such a thing, Maltus?"

"No, my Lord."

"So what did they say to make you seek me out, Brachius?" Now here was a man who had some initiative... and courage. A foot soldier approaching her of his own accord was unheard of.

Dark brown eyes flitted to Maltus for some sort of confirmation.

"Are you talking to Maltus or me, *Brachius*?" Xena emphasized the soldier's name, letting him know that she now knew who he was.

"You, my Lord. I... I..."

"Then spit it out man!"

"I'm trying to find a way of telling you without losing my head, my Lord."

Xena could see his muscles tense as if waiting for the deadly blow. "You're in luck, Brachius. It seems I'm in a good mood. Now, get on with it before my mood changes."

"Word is that you are running away, my Lord." Anxiously he watched the Conqueror's face tighten. "I don't believe that for one minute." He tried to make amends for the bad news.

"Well, to allay your fears I'm not running away, just visiting my home town. We will return to battle in due course." Xena turned her conversation to her lieutenant. "You know, Maltus, I would have thought that my army would have been grateful for a little rest. It seems I'm wrong. If they're so eager for battle then organize field training for tomorrow... **all** of tomorrow, from sunup to sundown. Full battle armor."

"As you wish, my Lord."

"I do wish. Maybe that will settle the rumors once and for all." Inwardly she smiled as the large man slumped. "Don't worry, Brachius, I won't tell them it was you." The look of horror on his face brought a laugh bubbling up to the surface. "Now, leave me."

Maltus waited for the older man to move, but found himself waved off by Xena. "Oh, Brachius, a moment..." Reluctantly, the slim young man left, much like a puppy being scolded, his eyes constantly seeking approval from the Conqueror.

"My Lord, is there something I can do for you?" The question was an often used one, ingratiating the petitioner into her good graces. But this man gave her the impression that he actually meant

it.

"Maybe there is..."

* * *

Gabrielle felt the eyes on her all evening. Dark, cool eyes studying her every move. Her instincts told her that the owner of those eyes was not dangerous, at least to her, and seemed to be waiting for something... or someone. Boldly, she approached the large man seated in the far corner watching her. "What can I get you, sir?"

"Another ale thank you, wench."

Gabrielle tried not to let her grinding teeth make too much noise. Wench. The last person who called her a wench ended up dead. "Right you are, sir." She could feel those same eyes scorching a path over her ass as she walked away. Maybe she could stumble and dump the drink in his lap.

As she topped up the empty mug, the young woman thought about what had happened earlier in the day. So the Conqueror had arrived. What were the odds of that happening? Too high to count as far as she was concerned. There were other forces at work here and she didn't like it one bit.

Just as Gabrielle was about to carry through with her mental threat, the bear of a man spoke. "The Conqueror sent me." His voice was deep and the words came out as a mere rumble within his chest. The ale sloshed over the rim of the mug as Gabrielle tried to regain control of it.

"Really?" She wasn't going to fall for that one. "I hear that every day."

"She told me you wouldn't believe me." He chuckled. It seemed she was right. "She said to say 'Another day, another time. The game continues.'" The serving girl reacted to what he had said. "Known the Conqueror long, girl?"

"That's none of your business, soldier." Gabrielle didn't like her personal affairs being bantered about.

"I meant no disrespect, girl. I have the greatest admiration for the Conqueror."

"But not for me it seems."

"I didn't say that." Brachius couldn't help but smile at the girl's feistiness. She was a good match for his hot-headed leader, not that he would ever voice that out loud.

"What does she want?" At this time of night Gabrielle suspected what it was. Ever since their meeting in the forest she had wondered when they would cross paths again. The Conqueror had found a part of her that she had thought long dead. She still had to decide whether that was a good thing or not.

"I thought that would have been obvious, little one."

A pale eyebrow rose at the familiarity shown by the soldier. "Not to you, I'm not." She just knew she was going to regret it but she had to ask. "Where?"

"She can't come here."

"I figured as much since you're here."

"There are... things... happening at the camp and she cannot leave. I am here to escort you to her tent."

Not that she believed it for one moment but how could she refuse the offer if it were true? "The inn doesn't close for a while yet."

"I don't mind. I'm not returning without you."

"And if I don't want to go?"

"I won't force you, girl. I'm not a complete barbarian." Large, slightly crooked teeth winked at Gabrielle as he granted her a smile.

"But make it water from now on. I'm sure my Lord would not appreciate you returning drunk."

"Aye, lass." Brachius was trying to prove his worth. Returning drunk was not an option.

Brachius sat nursing his water as he watched the woman who had the favor of the Conqueror. His curiosity studied many scenarios that would lead the two of them to meet. He made a silent wager or two on which one was correct, but by the girl's reaction he was never going to find out if he was right or not.

She appeared confident in what she was doing but he could see the lines of anger when an errant hand would slap her backside or grab her around the waist. He smiled as a drink landed unceremoniously in an inebriated patron's lap moments after he tried to steal a kiss. Suddenly he realized that he was nearly a recipient of an ale bath earlier in the night, the Conqueror's name the only thing that stopped her from dumping the contents of his mug onto his clothes.

Slowly the inn emptied as midnight approached. Inwardly Brachius smiled. It seemed the Conqueror was not going to get much sleep this night.

* * *

Xena's eyes shifted towards the rustle of cloth. Standing in the doorway of her tent was the source of her dilemma. "What took you so long?"

"What was I going to tell Cyrene? Sorry, I have to leave early. I have a rendezvous with your daughter?"

The Conqueror studied the young woman. She looked so different from their last encounter. Dressed in peasant clothes, the image wasn't as enticing as the hunting outfit but that didn't stop her hunger.

"So..." Gabrielle sauntered towards the tall woman. "... What did you summon me for?"

"It's going to be like that, is it?"

"Like what... *Conqueror*?"

"We have precious little time and you want to play word games?" Xena took a step towards her quarry, trying to shorten the amount of time she'd have to wait.

"But word games are what you are so good at, *Conqueror*."

"Do you have to call me that?" Xena's voice became agitated. She didn't want this to be some sort of business arrangement, and using her title made it seem like just that.

"But it's your name..."

"It's not my name and you know it!"

Gabrielle closed the gap quickly, resting her hand gently on the shaking arm. "Xena." That was all she said but it had an immediate effect, calming the raging soul under her fingertips.

"Sorry. Things have been a little..."

"Stressful?"

"Amongst other things. I just thought tonight we could..." Xena hesitated. Did her little assassin want this? When she had sent Brachius she had expected him to return with Gabrielle with no fuss.

"You have to ask?" Gabrielle smiled. It would be nice to put aside Raven for a while and just be herself, however it had been so long since she had done that she felt she didn't know who she was anymore. Could she just let herself go? She had walked into the lion's den and could so easily be eaten if she let her guard down. Could she rely on the Conqu... Xena to protect her? It took a great leap of faith on her part to mutter the next word. "Come..."

"We have to talk..." A callused finger came up to stop her.

"Later."

"But..."

"Later." The finger that had been resting on Xena's lips rose to rest on her smooth cheek.

"Come...", Gabrielle whispered.

How could the Conqueror argue? This was what she wanted all along. For the moment she put her problems aside and set about fulfilling her one desire.

The young assassin looked around the tent with some surprise.

"What?"

"I expected... more, Conqueror. This is a soldier's tent. Well... a little more than a soldier but still not the opulence your enemies would lead me to believe."

Xena closed the distance until she was breathing in the assassin's exhalations. "Do you have to keep calling me that?"

"You don't like being the Conqueror? You can solve that."

"Firstly, I'm not the Conqueror..... yet. Secondly, you calling me that doesn't put us on an even footing." The dark warrior could see the question in the dark emerald depths barely illuminated by the brazier fire. "I want you to come to me because of **me**..." She stopped for a moment. "What **is** your name? Gabrielle or Melaina? Or is what we have all a sham?"

"Only you have my real name, Xena. You... and my mother." Gabrielle smiled wickedly. "Do you feel special now?"

"What I wanted to say is that we love each other equally and not have you in a submissive role just because I'm the Conqueror."

"But you just said you **weren't** the Conqueror." The grin grew wider. Gabrielle understood what Xena was trying to say but that didn't lessen the enjoyment of driving the woman to distraction. "You can't have it both ways."

"Why... you... you..." Xena made a lunge for the sprightly young woman, grabbing at thin air as Gabrielle danced out of reach. "Shhhhhh....." When the blonde stopped, she wrapped her arms around her.

"What did you say that for?"

"There are guards outside. We have to be quiet."

"That might be difficult, Xena. If I remember rightly you were quite noisy. **Everyone** is going to know what's going on in your tent tonight."

"And I probably won't care at the time, but for now let's not alert my men."

"As you wish..."

Xena held her breath for the word. She thought she knew the young woman well enough to know that she would push her patience to the limit. But there was nothing but silence. Just as she lowered her lips to the inviting skin pulsing in time to Gabrielle's heartbeat, it happened...

"...Conqueror."

Xena stopped a mere breath from contact. The growl from her chest was met with a gentle chuckle. "You just can't help yourself, can you?"

"You are just too easy, Xena."

"If it were anyone else, Gabrielle, they'd be breathing their last on the ground by now."

"Ahh, but that would spoil your pleasure, My Lord."

"Speaking of pleasure, no more talking." Xena's lips traveled the last inch to the waiting neck, gently latching onto the soft skin. She had dreamed of this, discovering everything about the woman who had delayed her plans for the conquest of Greece.

Her lips blazed a moist trail down the available neck to a clothed shoulder. Without thinking, Xena's hand rose to brush away the offending material. She nipped the skin and muscle underneath firmly, enough to draw a harsh intake of breath from her lover. Busy hands continued to pull at the peasant dress until the cloth hung limply at Gabrielle's waist.

Xena pulled back for a moment to refresh her memory but realized that what she had remembered paled in the presence of the real thing. The woman was simply stunning and appealed to something so basic in her that she did not even begin to understand it. Maybe she was not meant to but to just accept it as a gift from the gods. It had to be Aphrodite because she knew Ares wouldn't do her any favors.

Her eyes rose to see the hunger there, a need to possess and be possessed. The young woman understood.

Xena's lips swooped down on her waiting victim, capturing and plundering the sweet fruit that was those curvaceous lips. It was not tender or sweet contact, but it was borne of desperation and want. Her tongue found entrance and tasted the young woman's hidden treasures. It had been too long and Xena's eagerness was beginning to overwhelm her own senses. There was so much to discover and so little time to explore.

Xena drew her willing bedmate down onto the spread skins, her lips never once leaving their feast. She settled over the young woman and continued to taste, nipping and laving whatever took her fancy. Agonized moans were ripped from Gabrielle but were tempered with a need to keep quiet. Strong hands buried themselves into her dark mane and dug into her scalp as she worried at a nipple.

A deep throaty chuckle escaped Gabrielle's lips as teeth latched onto her. "Hungry, my Lord?" she muttered.

"Hmmm..." Her tongue rasped over the sensitive skin, sharpening nerve endings until the blonde was ready to scream. While her little assassin still reeled from the tingling of her nipple, Xena's lips moved downward, her hands blazing a path as they swept away the remaining cloth. Her tongue swiftly found its new target and one that she had dreamt of night after night since their last meeting. This was who Gabrielle was...her wellspring, her life force, her pleasure and her soul. This was where Xena felt their connection the most.

She wasted no more time in foreplay. Time was against them and her need was great. Negligently she threw away the remnants of the dress sitting around Gabrielle's feet, finally releasing the piece of perfection that was her lover.

"So beautiful." The words tumbled from her mouth reverently, drawing a sweet smile from her little assassin. She spoke no more as she ravaged the willing body beneath her. Agile hands slid over moist flesh in search of eager completion, and she reveled in the uninhibited response of Gabrielle.

No one had ever made her feel this way. Gabrielle was soaring and free. She had finally found what it meant to be truly loved. Her body trembled as Xena nurtured and comforted her, the sweet ache finally subsiding to a slow swell washing over her.

Xena nuzzled a vacant ear as she watched Gabrielle bathe in her afterglow. This was what was special, her need to give pleasure far outshone her need to receive it...and it was breathtaking.

"Now..." Gabrielle rolled her lover over, planting tiny kisses slowly down the soft skin underneath her. "Where were we?"

Later they lay together entwined and spent, each lost in their own thoughts.

Xena breathlessly asked, "What are you doing here?"

"Now?" They had just made beautiful love and the woman wanted to talk business?

"No time later. I can rest while you talk."

Gabrielle smiled. This was probably how the woman conquered half of Greece, her mind moving two steps ahead of what she was already doing.

"Someone...wanted..." she gulped for air, "...your mother dead. Well, I didn't know she was your...mother." Gabrielle paused. She felt dizzy after muttering so many words.

"Why you?" Blazing green eyes stared at Xena. "Alright, you are the best."

"That's better..." Gabrielle knew she should be insulted at such a question. "I need a drink."

Xena didn't want to leave the cozy nest they were snuggled in but did so anyway because Gabrielle asked...or, more to the point, told her. "Wine?"

The reclining woman thought for a moment. "No, water will be fine." The amount she felt a need to drink would make her drunk.

Xena dunked a mug into the bucket near the door, sloshing water over the rim and onto the dusty floor. She took her fill before dipping it again. She was eager to have a name but waited until she gave Gabrielle her drink. It was a name for her ears only.

"Who hired you?" She dropped to the furs and settled herself on her side facing the blonde. Negligently she leaned her jaw on a balled fist.

"I don't know."

"What do you mean you don't know?"

"Just as I said, I don't know. I never meet my employer face to face. It's safer that way."

"Then how did you get here?" Damn that was not the answer she wanted. She suspected who it was but she wanted to hear it from the luscious lips calling to her. Since she usually denied herself nothing she answered that call, licking the moistness sitting there from the drink.

"I...errr...", Gabrielle stumbled. She wished the Conqueror would stop kissing her for just a moment so she could think.

"Lost for words, little one?" Xena grinned. It pleased her immensely that she could have such an effect on the woman.

Gabrielle pulled away and stared at the dark beauty. "Little one? Did you just call me little one?"

"I sure did. You're little compared to me," Xena's hand swept down her body to illustrate the point.

"You know, I've killed men for less."

"But I'm not a man."

"You don't say? Was that what was missing? Fancy that."

"Gabrielle, get back to the story will you?"

"What was the question again?"

"How did you know to come here?"

"The instructions from him told me so. He told me to get to Amphipolis as quickly as possible. He was in some hurry."

"So it seems..." Xena answered absently. "Only my generals knew where I was heading."

"Well, that narrows it down."

Gabrielle could feel something was not right with her lover. It was an instinct borne from survival, and she suspected Xena had it too. The woman wouldn't have gotten this far without it.

"But what is the point of trying to kill your mother when you would be here to prevent it? It would certainly make my job harder."

"Don't underestimate yourself, Gabrielle. If I didn't know who you were you would have gotten away with it. No, whoever hired you wanted me here when it happened. They wanted to make sure I felt every agonizing moment of it." Xena's thoughts momentarily slipped back to the meeting in the forest with a certain general of hers.

"So, what do I do? This has put me in a very difficult position."

"What about me? I have every chance of losing my mother. I know we don't exactly get on but I would take her death *very* personally."

"First there was you and now your mother. My reputation is going to be mud, Xena."

The Conqueror knew it would be foolish to ruin a certain assassin's reputation because she would never know when she would need that reputation in the future. "Then kill her, Gabrielle."

"Do...what?" Normally Gabrielle would have no qualms about her quarry but this was an exception. She did like the old woman even before she found out who she was.

"As you said, your reputation is at stake. We can't ruin that." She knew her lover was looking at her like she had lost her mind, but she needed to qualify the statement. "You kill her...without witnesses...silently...and without a body."

"Oh?"

"Think you can handle it?" Xena's fingers walked up the available skin, her libido once again flaring into life.

Gabrielle shoved the Conqueror until the woman was on her back. She straddled the prone body, her green eyes blazing indignantly. "Of course I can handle it!"

Xena's sexy smile was her undoing. Gabrielle tossed away the empty mug and attacked her, lust and desire mixing with her anger and running potently through her veins. It was wild and unfettered, culminating in a harsh cry of completion.

The rustle outside the tent drew Xena's attention.

"Errr...my Lord? Is...ahh...everything alright?" It was Brachius's tremulous bass voice.

"Everything is fine. We were just getting a little...enthusiastic." *Didn't the man ever sleep?* He was certainly taking his duties very seriously.

"Aye, my Lord. Dawn is approaching."

"Very well." Xena turned her attention to the sweaty woman lying on the skins breathing heavily. "It looks like we've run out of time."

"So I have to go back to work at the inn to get some rest? I don't know if I can keep this up every night, Xena."

"And I will have to keep my wits about me. Trust no one."

"I never do." She smiled, running her finger down the lean plane of Xena's face.

"Then I suppose I will wait to hear the news of my mother's demise." She was putting a lot of faith in the young woman, but she felt that it was justified. "Listen only to Brachius or me, do you hear?"

"Why should I do that?" Gabrielle grinned impishly.

"No! Listen to me. This is serious. Any messages from me will come through Brachius. If he is unable to come then his messenger will use the password. I want you to take care and keep well hidden if something happens."

The grave nature of the words and the deep resonance of Xena's voice told her more than she wanted to know. Danger was part of her profession but this foreboded something more. Gabrielle was on her own and responsible for another life.

* * *

Despite her rigid regime Xena slept in. Normally rising with the sun the Conqueror knew she would draw whispered comments about her lapse in routine but she didn't care. Last night had been a godsend, giving her a few hours of respite from her worries and acting as a balm to her soul. As she lay in her bed her thoughts turned to her now absent bedmate.

This was a huge gamble on her part but Xena's instincts kept telling her that Gabrielle could be trusted. Trust an assassin? That was like trusting a viper not to bite. But there was something about the woman...she couldn't put her finger on it, but looking into those green eyes had

showed her everything. Yes...she was right about this one.

On the other hand, doubt and suspicion flowed through the army like molasses, sticking to everyone and making identification difficult. How many could she count on if the need arose? Too few, she suspected. Many of her men were in it for the glory and the booty and she was delivering neither right now.

The day wore on slowly and Xena didn't return to the inn. Facing her mother with little sleep was not a good option and would probably result in another fight. Either that or her sword would be swift in separating her mother's head from her shoulders, and she knew Gabrielle would have something to say about that. No, family visits were for days when she was well rested and in a good mood.

She heard the sound of metal on metal and went to the practice field to observe her men. The sun blazed down furiously and a number of them were sweating profusely as they fought in full battle armor. She felt sorry for them, but only for a moment. This was life and the armor was vital in protecting them during battle, so the more they wore it the easier it would be when the time came to fight. Of course, they grumbled because it was heavy and it chafed but she was unrepentant. If she had to drag each and every one of them through today then she would do it.

Finally Xena joined her men on the practice field, bleeding off her frustration on those unlucky to be thrown into the fray. She was tired. No sleep from the night before was playing havoc with her timing but she was stubborn enough to stay until the last man retired. But it cost her. Boldly she strode back towards her tent, held upright only by her refusal to drop. She was intercepted by her aide as she walked back to her tent.

"My Lord!" Maltus approached her at a trot.

It couldn't be news about her mother. It was too soon. She tried to relax and appear unconcerned. "Yes?"

The young man kept up his fast pace in an effort to keep up with the Conqueror, who strode through the camp with authority. "The men..." he started to pant.

Xena stopped abruptly, watching Maltus jog past her. "The men...what?"

"I...I..."

"Slow down, Maltus. Start again."

"I'm afraid I was unable to ascertain exact numbers of those who would support you."

Xena suspected as much. Knowing the young man as she did, he was probably not very subtle about asking. "No idea at all?"

"They all said aye, my Lord."

"But they could be lying just to keep their heads. And that's it?"

"Yes, my Lord. I'm afraid I failed you." He winced as if expecting the blade to fall.

"What about Graxion?"

"He and his men have closed ranks, my Lord. They were keeping their own counsel."

"Probably a wise move," she mumbled. "Alright, leave me."

"My Lord?" Her young lieutenant was hesitant to move.

"Leave me. Go!" Her impatience tinged her words. She wanted time alone to think. It was probably not a good idea with a tired mind but circumstance was not her friend this time.

* * *

Gabrielle was tired and cranky. Damn the woman! She had barely arrived back at the inn at dawn before Cyrene stirred. Her life had suddenly got complicated since she met the Conqueror. She was still trying to decide if that was a good thing or a bad thing. Did the chance to love and be loved balance out the chaos that followed the woman around? Yes, damn it, it did...

Bleary-eyed she accepted her bowl of porridge from the woman she was supposed to kill.

"Didn't sleep too well, dear?" Cyrene's voice was filled with concern.

"No. I didn't get much sleep."

"Something bothering you? Can I help?"

Don't make this any harder for me, Cyrene. "No. I just had a lot on my mind." Gabrielle was not used to having to make excuses for herself. Her life was her own and her decisions only affected herself, but sometimes her job just stank.

"Do you want to go upstairs and rest? I can manage until noon. You can take the late shift."

"Are you trying to get rid of me, Cyrene?" she asked jokingly.

"Now why would I do that?" she replied innocently.

"Do you think I'm going to slap somebody?"

"I don't want you killing my patrons, Melaina."

Gabrielle stopped her eating, a drop of porridge hanging precariously off her bottom lip, wondering if she had been found out.

Cyrene chuckled. "I don't mean you would *actually* kill them, you silly child. But I know you don't like all the pinching and prodding that some of the men are prone to."

Gabrielle's jaw began to work, chewing up the food in her mouth and swallowing hard. If Cyrene was anything like her daughter then the old woman was a smart one indeed. The original plan she had for Cyrene's abduction now needed some major re-working.

She absently finished her breakfast then climbed the stairs to her bedroom, trying to figure out how to spirit away Cyrene with a minimum amount of fuss and a maximum amount of destruction. If Xena wanted a show then she would give it to her...

* * *

By the time the stars emerged that night Xena's nerves were worn down to an inch from her exploding. How long was it going to take? All this waiting was...unnerving. Normally she was a patient woman but this was not war and she was gambling with two lives that she didn't want to lose.

As she sat by the fire sipping her port and contemplating the next few days, her reverie was interrupted by an increasingly familiar presence.

"My Lord?" Brachius's deep voice was instantly recognized.

She stood without a word, moving away from the orange hues of the firelight into the darkness. "Yes?" she murmured quietly.

"Do you wish me to...to...?" How could he ask the delicate question?

"Not tonight, Brachius. We're both tired." ...*and Gabrielle has work to do...*

"As you wish, my Lord." He was about to leave when a hand touched his arm in the darkness.

"From now on it would not be wise to openly seek me out, Brachius."

"But...why, my Lord" Should you not-"

"No! Hear me out. You will be of no help to me if your allegiance is known to my enemies." She wanted to say more but it was enough to force her loyal supporter to withdraw. "This is something that I have to do alone."

Brachius's protests sat on his tongue but he honored the request. "Aye, my Lord." Reluctantly he left, feeling that he had led his leader down.

Xena moved back into the firelight a little saddened. This wasn't exactly what she had planned for a simple visit to her home town...

* * *

The moon had settled just above the tree line, casting an eerie glow through the forest and bringing the tree branches to life. Large, spindly-fingered creatures strode across the landscape like mock puppets as the lunar light moved the final distance to its resting place.

It was still dark in Cyrene's bedroom but a shuffling of feet outside her door caused her to stir. A faint orange stripe touched the floor from a candle outside. It began to move away, the sound of someone descending the stairs slowly fading with distance.

Despite her better judgment, the older woman rose to follow. She scrambled around in the dark for her footwear, slipping them on quickly and quietly. Cyrene placed her ear against the door and heard a faint clatter of pots in the kitchen.

Slowly the door opened, a tiny squeak giving away its movement. Cyrene winced and waited for some response from down below. When the back door opened and closed she threw the bedroom door open and hurried down the stairs. She looked around the darkened kitchen, trying to see if anything was missing. Someone was here... in **her** kitchen! No one invaded her kitchen unless she gave them permission.

Grabbing the large knife she knew was on the bench, she opened the back door. The odor that hung in the air was familiar and unpleasant. It was the smell of burning flesh. She stepped out the door and headed towards the far-off orange glow, her steps barely lit by the fading moonlight.

Sounds of the night surrounded her. Tree frogs plaintively croaked out their love songs to their invisible mates, while the odd hoot from a barn owl warned its next meal that it was still awake and hungry. Whatever was out there had not disturbed them.

A loud crackle from the small pyre drew the old woman towards the fire. It was the middle of the night...or at least the end of it... and someone was burning something. She gazed at the flickering flame licking the remains that were now nothing more than bones. So her intruder was getting rid of something he didn't want known in the light of day. But the bones looked like some sort of animal. If she had to guess, maybe it was a small pig, so why the cloak of secrecy?

The faint shifting of air was felt too late. Something descended quickly to crack her over the head, instantly felling Cyrene in one blow. Before the pain could be felt the woman had passed into blessed oblivion.

* * *

"Oh, by the Gods!"

The frantic cry woke up the inn, sending everyone into panicked mobility.

Gabrielle awoke to the banging of doors and loud voices. She rubbed the sleep from her eyes, trying to get her bearings. There was a rap on her door.

"Melaina? Are you in there?" There was an edge to the voice.

"I'm here. What's going on?"

"It...!" The anguished female voice cried in despair. "It's...it's...Cyrene! She..." The words crumbled as tears replaced them.

Gabrielle was up out of bed in an instant, flinging open the door to a weeping Elpis. The young girl was in deep distress and shaking. The young assassin hesitated, not used to having to comfort those left behind. She was usually long gone before the deed had even been discovered.

"What's wrong with Cyrene?" She looked around. "Did she have an accident?"

"No..." Elpis just couldn't say any more, instead pointing her finger towards the innkeeper's room.

Gabrielle clicked her tongue in annoyance. "I can see I'm not going to get anything out of you," she muttered, approaching the crowded entrance to Cyrene's room. "What's going on?" She pushed through the assembled crowd until she stood at the portal. "Where's... Oh...my...sweet...Aphrodite!"

The room was empty, eerily empty. The bed was in disarray but that wasn't what had caught the attention of those present. It was the blood, liberally splattered over the torn sheets and leaving twin tracks leading out the door.

Gabrielle turned around and pushed through the immobile throng. "Will you all move out of here! There is no room." She followed the blood trail as it descended the stairs, continuing through the kitchen to the back door. The kitchen started to fill up with people as they followed her.

"Look! It looks like she was dragged out of the house." She opened the door and saw the blood lead off towards a smoking pile about a hundred feet from the inn.

Suddenly Gabrielle's comments became redundant as she was pushed aside by concerned staff, all eager to find out what happened to their employer. Considering the circumstances she allowed them their momentary lapse of judgment, but if they ever tried that again they were dead.

As she caught up to the crowd she came face to face with what seemed to be a pyre, smashed bones nestled in the still warm ashes. In Elpis's hand was a half-burnt slipper... Cyrene's slipper. A torn piece of cloth that Gabrielle knew was from the old woman's nightgown lay nearby, scorched by the flames.

"Do you think that's her?" Acacius was one of Cyrene's early regulars.

"It looks like it," Hilarion replied. The young man helped with the heavier jobs around the inn

and was usually paid with food for his brothers and sisters.

Nnooo.." Elpis shed a new round of tears, clutching the slipper to her chest.

"Who would do this?"

"Well, her daughter was in here the day before yesterday."

"Don't be stupid, man!" Gabrielle couldn't help herself. Without thought she was defending the Conqueror. "If she wanted her dead she would just do it."

"And you're an expert on the Conqueror now, are you girl?"

Gabrielle could feel herself reaching for a knife that wasn't there. "No. It's just common sense. She can do whatever she wants. Why hide it?"

"Because this is her home town and she doesn't want people thinking that she killed her own mother." Suddenly Acacius had taken over the conversation. "People don't take kindly to that kind of crime."

"Oh, and you've never considered the same thing of your mother-in-law, Acacius?"

"That's different, Hilarion. The old cow deserves it."

"So, what do we do now?"

"Xena needs to be told." Gabrielle offered.

"Are you mad? The deliverer of that message will not live to finish telling her the news."

"Don't look at me..." Acacius was eager to be somewhere else.

"What about us?" All Elpis could see was her imminent unemployment.

"It's not up to us to make that decision, girl."

"Then tell Xena." Gabrielle tried to get someone to make a decision but it looked increasingly likely that she would be the one. "Alright," she sighed, "I'll do it." She looked around at the relieved faces. "Hilarion, would you escort me?"

"Can't... can't you do it alone?" He could see his family missing their breadwinner.

"You want me to travel alone on the road towards an army full of men?" It really didn't worry her in the least but they didn't know that.

"Yeah, Hilarion, escort the girl."

"What about you, Acacius? Why don't you do it?"

"I have to go to work," he mumbled, slowly backing away to make his escape.

"Ignore the coward, Hilarion. I'm sure the Conqueror will appreciate that you did not abandon me to travel alone."

"She will?" He eyed her suspiciously.

"I believe she appreciates acts of generosity." The young man was still not convinced. "Come on. Let's get this over with." Gabrielle suspected that on their return the inn would be abandoned, none prepared to stay to feel the wrath of the Conqueror.

* * *

"My Lord," Gabrielle began, bowing low to ingratiate herself with the warlord. The trip had been most painful with Hilarion dragging his feet all the way.

"Who are you?" Xena asked menacingly.

"Melaina, my Lord. We met in your mother's inn the other day." Gabrielle could smell the fear emanating from her protector standing behind her.

"Ah yes, the serving girl. What do you want?"

"May I speak to you alone, my Lord?"

"You can't tell me here in front of my men?"

"I could, my Lord, but it is best for your ears only." Gabrielle gently motioned towards the leader's tent. When Xena moved, Gabrielle turned to the young man about to wet his pants. "You can wait out here if you want."

"Thank you, thank you," he muttered, the relief in his voice almost taking form.

Maltus followed his mistress into the command tent and took his place at her side.

Gabrielle once again bowed, bestowing all her humility in the action. "My Lord..."

"Now, what is so important that you have to talk to me alone?"

Gabrielle's eyes shifted to the young man at Xena's side.

"He can be trusted. Now speak, girl." Xena was getting impatient for whatever news the girl had brought from her mother.

"I'm sorry, my Lord, but I bring grave news." Gabrielle held her breath for the reaction.

"What?" Xena's face hardened. "Is it...?"

"I am sorry to inform you that it seems your mother has been murdered."

"My mother... murder... wait, it seems? You're not sure?"

"There is no body, my Lord, but the signs are clear."

"If this is some sort of joke- "

"My Lord, I would never do something so presumptuous..."

"Mother..." Xena mumbled absently. Moving to a nearby chair she slumped into it. "Damn." She lowered her head into her waiting hands, hiding herself from the outside world for a moment to digest all that was said.

"My Lord..." Maltus was at a loss for words. The Conqueror's mother was dead and she was grieving.

"I... I've got to go. See that the men continue war games on the field until my return. Prepare my horse."

"My Lord." Maltus bowed reverently and left the tent.

"What happened?" Xena asked quietly. The news had affected her more than she thought possible. Despite their differences the thought of her mother dead meant something.

"No one knows, my Lord. We woke up this morning to find her disheveled bed empty and bloody and the remains of a pyre outside in the yard."

"How do they know it's my mother?"

"There was a burnt slipper and a piece of cloth from her nightgown in the ashes, my Lord. Maybe it would be better to see for yourself."

"Very well, come with me." Xena had already reached for her cloak and was half way out the door.

Gabrielle scampered out after her, trying not to tread on the woman's heels. She observed the Conqueror's demeanor change, now one of anger and aggression. Poor Hilarion was grabbed by his shirt, forcibly lifted off the ground and shook like a rag doll.

Xena pulled the young man to her face and growled, "If I find out who did this..." She threw the

man down onto the dirt like some discarded apple core, instantly dismissing him as Wraith approached.

* * *

The trip had been slow to Amphipolis. Wraith stamped energetically in response to his mistress's mood. Xena wanted to gallop off and leave her personal guard behind in the dust, but then what would be the point of going with a personal guard in the first place? Then there were the two peasants from the village. She was really not up to endless advice from her generals about the recklessness of going off alone.

She looked over her shoulder at the puffing throng behind her. Despite her best efforts to rein in her impatience her guards were still jogging behind her. Melaina was barely out of breath but the young man escorting her was wheezing and puffing like he had run a hundred leagues. Despite his impressive physique he was woefully out of shape.

Finally, just as her patience had reached an end, the familiar building came into view. Xena allowed Wraith his head and he broke into a trot and then a canter until his rider pulled him up abruptly. She was off her mount in the blink of an eye, tying him off before striding confidently through the front door of her mother's inn.

She could feel the fear as she entered the large room. The moment had arrived for them all and they feared for their very lives. They had every right to be. Hers was a reputation borne from acting on every threat she ever made. Her eyes scanned the room, finally zeroing in on the staff trying to escape out the door to the kitchen.

"Where do you think you are going?"

There were panicked whimpers as the Conqueror found them. Elpis started to cry, fearing an end to her young life.

"My... my... my Lord." The village Elder, Nicodemus, tried to gather his courage to answer fearlessly, dismally failing as the words tumbled to the ground like crumbs.

"What happened here?"

"We... we're not sure, my Lord." Nicodemus stood there, his body stiff as a board. "It seems that your..."

"Get on with it, man!"

"My Lord, I assume you already know because you wouldn't be here otherwise."

"Then show me." Xena covered the length of the inn in a dozen or so long strides, placing herself in front of the village Elder. "Are you still here?"

"Elpis?" Nicodemus called for the barmaid. She whimpered at the mention of her name. "Show

the Conqueror Cyrene's room."

Xena knew very well where her mother's room was and pushed the girl aside, taking the staircase two steps at a time. She stood at the doorway and surveyed the carnage inside. Her lips pursed and her brow furrowed as she studied the room. She turned and came down the stairs. "Show me the pyre."

Elpis trotted beside Xena, trying to keep up with the taller woman. "Over there, my Lord." She pointed at the smoky ruins a way from the inn and scurried out of the way as Xena strode across the courtyard. She let the woman be at the pyre, content to be out of range should the Conqueror feel the need to lash out.

Xena looked at the remnants of the fire, taking in the shattered bone sitting in the middle of the ashes. Her eyes scanned the surrounding area and found a small piece of cloth that she assumed was her mother's nightgown. Gabrielle was good... very good.

She took a moment to consider the possibility of this actually happening and found herself mourning the loss. Despite their disagreements in the past, Cyrene was and always would be her mother. This was the woman who bore her, who nurtured her and who loved her. How could she feel any less for her?

Xena lowered herself to one knee, resting her forearm across her armored thigh. Her head bent as she said a prayer to the Gods. It was probably not the prayer that Elpis would assume she was making but it was a prayer nonetheless, looking for a favorable outcome over the next few days.

As she stayed kneeling on the ground she felt a presence behind her. She glanced over her shoulder to find Gabrielle standing there. "Where is she?" she muttered so that no one else would hear.

"The crypt," came the whispered reply. "My Lord," Gabrielle said louder, "I am so sorry for your loss."

Xena rose sluggishly, as if her mother's death had taken its toll on her. "If I find whoever did this," she growled to the sky, "they will suffer a slow and painful death." She turned and walked back towards the inn, her face a mask of anger and pain. "Get out of my way!" she yelled at Elpin, sending the girl scurrying for the barn weeping as she ran.

Her personal guard had urged her to return to camp but she had no intention of doing what they asked, finally reaching a point of ordering them back to the army without her. A couple of them refused, remaining at their posts despite the threat of decapitation.

Xena sat in the corner of the inn drinking ale steadily. She snarled, she snapped and she yelled as her mug was filled up time and again. Since no one wanted to get near her Gabrielle took up the task of serving her. But Xena didn't have to worry about getting drunk because Gabrielle was watching her back and filling her mug with water instead.

Finally enough time had passed for drinking and she staggered out of the inn towards the family crypt, glancing angrily over her shoulder at the two men, destined to decorate her tent poles, as they followed her at a respectful distance. Those that watched mourned the Conqueror's loss and kept well clear while she took her anguish to the once place that was hers.

Xena stepped into the coolness of the underground crypt, feeling a shiver as she was reunited with her lost family. She moved to one of the stone coffins and ran a finger over the carved stone. "Lyceus," she murmured. It had been way too long since she had been here and she missed them. Both of her brothers lay here and one day she had hoped to join them. Now? She would probably be lucky to have any grave at all. Her head on a pike would be a grand prize for whoever defeated her.

"Mother?" Xena called quietly. The silence was as cold as the atmosphere. "Are you here?" Xena felt fear spike through her. Had something happened? She searched the crypt, looking in every recess there was.

Cyrene was still on the ground when she found her. "Owww. What happened?"

"Are you okay?"

"What am I doing here?"

"Melaina brought you here."

"Why, by the Gods, would she do that?" Cyrene tried to rise but her head hurt.

Xena crouched down and helped her mother to stand. "Because I asked her to."

"You asked her to hit me?" Cyrene looked astonishingly at her. "What did I do to deserve that? I know we had a disagree-"

"It's more complicated than that, mother. It was necessary for you to appear you were killed."

"Someone wanted to kill me?"

"Yes, and to protect you from becoming another resident in here we killed you first."

"But you didn't."

"I know, but it had to look like we did."

"We? Why is Melaina involved in all of this?"

"She was sent by me to protect you." Xena struggled for an explanation without giving Gabrielle away. "As far as the rest of the village is concerned, Melaina is just a simple village girl."

"But she's more than that, or so it seems."

"All you need to know, Mother, is that you can trust her. Her job is to protect you."

"And how long do I have to stay here?"

"I don't know. As long as it takes."

"You mean I have to sleep in here? It gets damned cold."

"It's better than dead, Mother! Damn it! Just do as I ask, alright?" Xena drew in a ragged breath.

"Why is it every time we meet we fight? Can't we have one conversation like normal people?"

"Normal people fight every day, Xena."

"Mother, please!"

"Fine. Now what?" Cyrene said grumpily.

"I have to return but Melaina will come with some things for you. Just don't give her any grief, alright?"

"You mean like I do you."

"Yeah," Xena gave her mother a peck on the cheek before heading to the crypt entrance, "something like that."

As soon as she stepped out into the sunlight her persona as a grieving daughter dropped into place. Her guard had been lounging against a nearby tree and now rose to take up their duty of office. "Come on," she slurred, "let's go home."

Xena walked slowly and carefully towards Wraith, ever so slightly faltering as she tried to get into the saddle. Once her guard was settled she addressed the townspeople. "I'll be back." Her gaze dropped momentarily to Gabrielle before she turned Wraith and headed off down the road out of town at a fast walk.

Wraith pranced energetically, expressing his opinion on the slow pace back to the camp. Xena thumped the thick cords of his neck muscles. "It won't be long now, boy," she murmured. She had given her adversary every opportunity to take the initiative and the most likely spot for an ambush was a hundred feet away.

"My Lord," one of the two guards galloped up from behind to meet her.

"Are you still here?" She tried to sound annoyed but a part of her wished they had left with their fellow guards. She was not one to waste manpower if it could be avoided, and she suspected they could be collateral damage in her capture. "Can't you just leave me alone?"

"I'm sorry, my Lord, but my job is to protect you."

Xena swallowed the lump in her throat. Losing loyal soldiers who would face her wrath rather than abandon their posts was even worse. It was totally unacceptable. Wraith slowed, throwing his head back in caution. "Yeah, I know." Before she was even aware of it Xena's hand swept up into the air and snatched the projectile out of the air. Lying in her palm was a dart, its point dipped in a greasy substance that she knew only too well. The gentle whistle of a second, then a third, dart filled her hearing and she was hard pressed to stop her instincts from reacting.

As the missiles buried in her neck she felt the first twinges from the sleep-tipped darts. "Get out of here!" she yelled to her guard, hoping that this time they would listen to her. "I'm done for and you are of no use to me now." Her muscles relaxed and she slipped from her lofty perch, landing on the dusty road with a thud.

Her vision blurred as the drug took hold, and she watched helplessly as her two faithful retainers fought valiantly against a vastly outnumbered enemy. She struggled against it, trying to get her lax muscles to obey her, but even with her own considerable willpower this was one battle that she was losing rapidly. Her last image was of two large feet standing inches away from her face. "Get her on the horse and let's go." The words slowly faded away to nothing as she lost consciousness.

* * *

Xena had no idea how long she had been passed out but it seemed that Kyros was in a hurry for revenge. As she regained awareness she found that she had been strapped to a makeshift cross, her wrists and ankles bound tightly to the wood. The frame creaked as she tried her bonds, but the signs were not good. There was virtually no give in them and it would take considerable time and effort on her part to loosen them with no promise of escape, not that her body was in any shape to offer resistance. Her body was still under the influence of the residual effect of the powerful drug so for the moment she was a passive participant of the proceedings.

She looked up as the murmur amongst the gathered crowd subsided. "Well, well, well, I should have known." It didn't take much guessing on her part as to who her captor would be.

"Finally. Sloppy, Xena... very sloppy. Letting your guard down like that."

They both knew that it wasn't so much inattention by Xena but the death of her mother that led to the opportunity to capture the wild woman. Kyros was trying to demean her in front of her troops so she let him have his moment of victory.

"So you were the coward who arranged my mother's death." The words were like poison as they spat out of her mouth. Xena couldn't help but look around at those watching to gauge their reaction. Their faces were as easily read as if they had put their hands up to pledge their allegiance. "So, you got me. Now what?" Xena wasn't stupid. She knew what would be coming for her.

"Now you pay."

"I'm sorry. I don't have any gold coin on me right at the moment..." A meaty fist slammed into her jaw and she saw stars. A familiar copper taste filled her mouth but she paid it no mind.

"Can't do it yourself, Kyros? Have to resort to hiring real men to do your work?" Her comment earned her another punch, this time to her stomach. Spread eagled the way she was left her open to the full force of the attack.

"Keep smart-mouthing me, Xena, and it'll only get worse for you." But Kyros didn't mind. This was what he had intended for his mortal enemy all along. She was going to pay... for everything.

"Quit playing games, Kyros. We both know what you want to do." Xena had tried to prepare herself for this. It was a test of her courage and her leadership, she knew that, so weakness was not an option.

"Are you so eager for pain, Xena?" Kyros was nearly salivating at the thought. He had waited so long for this moment that he wanted to prolong it for as long as possible. He wanted to take her apart, one piece at a time.

"Not really, no, but we both know that's where it's going to lead." Her chin lifted defiantly. "Are we going to have an audience?" Her eyes met those closest to her. She sure hoped so. If she knew Kyros at all, he would want to break her in front of her men. She would be half-way cross the river Styx before she let that happen.

He eyed her warily, trying to figure out her game. "You betrayed your army, Xena, coming to this backwater when you should be taking Athens. Your men are fighters not wet nurses." He nodded to the henchmen standing next to the captured woman, physically subduing her until they had turned her around to face the cross. The bonds were tied as tightly as they had been before, stretching her back taut.

The rip of cloth signaled what she knew was going to be just the beginning. Xena didn't dare look. Her other senses sharpened as a momentary silence crossed the expanse of the courtyard. The gentle whoosh of air being shifted seemed at odds with the final result. The lash blazed across her back, laying down a fiery path from one armpit to the other.

Her eyes, blazing with an inner fire, found her enemy. She defiantly showed him no pain, allowing the tide to wash past her senses. Xena kept her eyes fixed on Kyros as the lash struck again and again, using the hate she had for this man to dampen the increasing level of pain. She could feel a trickle of warmth slowly winding its way down her slick back.

Out of the corner of her eye she found Brachius, who had made his way to the front of the soldiers gathered around to watch her punishment. With every strike he flinched, as if taking the pain on himself. She spared a moment to meet his eyes. A silent conversation seemed to take place, ending with a minute nod from him and his withdrawal back through the pack.

The weight of expectation was heavy on her but she would not budge. The pain was doubling with every lash and she was struggling to find an empty compartment in her mind to put it. It was already full with the lashes she had already taken.

The sun was setting low in the sky, touching the scene in an eerie blood-red glow. The Conqueror's back was afire with red, the sun's rays adding to the crimson patchwork already there.

Suddenly the whip stopped, drawing her attention back to Kyros. If he was waiting for her to beg then he was in for a long wait. She lifted her head high and just smiled. No words. No pleas. Just a gentle smile.

"Baahhh," Kyros spat out. "Take her down!"

"Is that all you've got?" She had expected something more inventive and vicious than just a simple whipping.

"No, but tomorrow is another day..." He laughed as he turned his back and walked away.

Her bonds were being loosened. Xena was confused but said nothing, instead pushing away the two men sent to help her. Slowly, she drew herself to her full height and walked towards her tent unbroken, steadfastly refusing to pull up her torn shift.

She could hear the murmurs of her men, able to pick out the odd comment or two. While their reaction seemed favorable she did not have their full support. But she was not in a position to take advantage of the sway of her men. Kyros was in charge... for now.

Xena slumped onto a small keg inside the tent and dropped her head. Her back was on fire and throbbing endlessly. The tent flap shifted and the healer entered. Her face must have held the question because he answered her.

"Kyros wants me to see to your back."

"But why? I thought he would be happy to see me die from it."

"It seems, my L..., errr, that he wants you well enough for tomorrow's session." The healer thought it was barbaric but he was not going to argue with the new leader.

"Figures..." she murmured, ducking her head and waiting while the healer prepared something with his mortar and pestle, grinding up various herbs into a paste. A hiss sat in her throat as the poultice was applied covering what she felt was her entire back. This was one of those times when it was prudent not to have eyes in the back of her head.

"Here..." He handed over a bowl of milky liquid.

"What's this? Poison?" She eyed him suspiciously.

"My Lord..." he hesitated as if muttering the word would bring Kyros running to strike him down, "...it will help with the pain."

"How accommodating of him..." Xena couldn't figure out what Kyros's game was.

"He doesn't know, my Lord, and I would appreciate it if you wouldn't tell him."

Her lips turned up slightly. So she had one ally. "My, my, insurrection," she mumbled.

"He specifically told me not to give you anything, my Lord. It appears he wanted you in pain and awake all night."

"We can't have that..." She looked at him for a name. "Your name?"

"Jantius, my Lord."

"Thank you, Jantius. Your kindness will not be forgotten."

"There is something in there to help you sleep, my Lord."

"Thank you."

* * *

Brachius moved with purpose towards Amphipolis. The scene had left his stomach churning. He didn't want any part of that man's army but he sure as Hades wouldn't abandon the Conqueror either. Although she had said nothing he knew exactly what she wanted him to do.

His arrival at the inn caused a stir. The young woman in the Conqueror's favor rushed over for news. It was as if she already knew. Maybe it was his own agitation that she was reading.

"What would you like to order?" Gabrielle wanted to know what he had to say but she didn't want to attract any attention.

"Just an ale, wench." Brachius could play the game.

It seemed only mere seconds before the young woman was standing before him, the mug wet from its hurried preparation.

"There you go, sir. Enjoy." Gabrielle's voice dropped to a whisper. "What happened?" She was expecting the worst.

"The Conqueror is in trouble, girl," he murmured quietly. "She's been captured and her army taken over by Kyros." He watched her reaction. "You know Kyros, girl?"

"Only what I've heard from gossip." No, she had heard more... a lot more. He was a crazy son-

of-a-bitch on a good day. Since Xena kicked him in the throat his mind had slipped even more towards the crazy side. If her lover was in his hands then she wouldn't be alive long, probably long enough to watch him hold her still-beating heart.

"I think the Conqueror wanted me to warn you to get out now before he turns his attention here."

"Then you should talk to the village Elder, not me."

"But he doesn't hold the Conqueror's heart now, does he?" Her blush confirmed his suspicions. "Ahhh, girl, it's good to see that the Conqueror has finally found someone."

"If you say so, Brachius was it?"

"Aye, girl." He took a healthy swig of the ale, trying to wash away the metallic tang that had hung in the air at the whipping. "I wouldn't waste time getting out of here."

"Why? What did he do?" She was fearful that she may already be too late.

"He... he whipped her, girl. It was not pretty."

"Is she alright?"

"She's alive, if that's what you mean. She wouldn't let him take her down like that."

There was pride on those words and Gabrielle could see that he worshipped Xena. She felt a tinge of jealousy and it was something new to her. She wanted *all* of Xena's attention. Was this love or just plain possessiveness?

"Inform the Elder. He's sitting over at the last table over there." She pointed towards the far end of the room.

As she began to move away, he asked, "What are you going to do?"

"Take back what's mine..." she growled.

* * *

Gabrielle approached the crypt with some trepidation. Would Cyrene forgive her? There was no time to argue the point but she had to see the woman first. Xena would want her to make sure that her mother was alright.

She approached the hidden entrance after some false starts. The moon was half-hidden behind cloud and made the path difficult to find. There was a faint light inside, from a torch she surmised. At least Cyrene had stayed put.

"Cyrene..." She murmured quietly. There was no answer but a low shuffling could be heard. "Cyrene, it's me, Melaina." Gabrielle walked slowly into the underground burial chamber,

looking left and right in case the woman was going to hit her over the head. "Xena sent me." She hoped the magic word of her daughter's name would bring her out.

As if reading her mind, Cyrene meekly peeked around from an alcove in the far corner. When she was satisfied that the girl was who she said she was, she emerged. "Where is she?"

"Firstly, here..." Gabrielle handed over a basket with food and drink in it. The blanket over her shoulder was added to the offering. "Sorry I can't bring you more."

"How long do I have to stay in here?"

"Things have become... complicated, Cyrene."

"And how are you involved in all of this? Why not send Elpis or Hilarion?"

"Because to make it believable that you had died no one could know."

"But **you** know."

"Yes, I do. I know your daughter, Cyrene." Gabrielle didn't want to say any more. It would invite questions that she was not ready to answer. "She asked me to look after you."

"And how....?"

"Look, it's important that you stay hidden. Xena is in trouble."

"Then I should go-"

"No! Her life depends on you remaining dead." The confused look on the woman asked for a qualification. "I know, I know. It doesn't make much sense but everyone has to believe that you are dead."

"And for how long?" Cyrene was impatient to get back to her inn.

"I don't know, Cyrene. I'm working on it." What could she tell her? "Look, I have to go... Please, for her, stay hidden. If someone comes in here, don't approach them... hide."

"But... but..."

"I have to go..."

"Where are you going?"

"To bring your daughter home."

* * *

There was a coolness touching the fire on her back, slowly drawing away the heat that resided there. "Just relax." It was a voice that spoke right to her heart.

"Gabrielle?" Her eyes remained closed as gentle fingers caressed her arm. The wet cloth was gingerly removed and dipped into a bucket of cold water and replaced on her scarred back. "Hmmm..." The herbal potion that she had drunk earlier in the night had taken the edge off her pain, leaving her hovering on a plane where she was barely cognizant of her surroundings.

Her bloodshot eyes tried to focus on the figure reclining next to her but she was surrounded by a shifting aura. Xena concentrated on the woman next to her, imagining the soft skin under her lips, pulsing in time to her heartbeat. Her fingers flexed in response to her vision and were eager to feed her senses. Now if she could only reach what she desired the most.

* * *

Gabrielle donned her hunting gear, moving easily along the beaten road towards her quarry. She slipped in and out of the nocturnal shadows, her senses on alert for anything out of the ordinary. Her mind was focused on one thing and it was a place she didn't want to be. Her success as an assassin came from being detached, unemotional... cold. She was far from that at the moment, her insides churning at the thought of Xena's predicament.

The night sky slowly changed to an orange hue from the many fires of the camp. She slipped on her hood and gloves, applying her concentration to becoming who she knew she had to be. Xena needed a fighter not a lover.

Silently, she skirted around the perimeter of the encampment, studying the outlay. The guards were placed at regular intervals around the outskirts of the camped army. But Xena's tent was another matter. The guard had been doubled, facing not only inwards but outwards as well, as if expecting some sort of rescue. They were right, but probably not from one slightly-built woman.

Gabrielle circled around to the bushes behind Xena's tent to survey her options. On each corner was a guard, all eagerly surveying their allotted piece of land. She drew in a deep breath trying to calm herself. This caring stuff was playing havoc with her analytical mind.

She pushed the thought back and looked for a possible solution to her problem. Gabrielle withdrew back into the forest and found what she was looking for. She smiled. Always go with the simple plans.

* * *

"What was that?"

"What was what?"

"Don't you hear that?"

"Stop being so jittery, Philon. It's nothing."

"But I heard something." A scratching sound broke the night. "See? I told you. There it is again." With some trepidation Philon called out. "Who's out there?" There was nothing but silence.

"Did you honestly expect them to answer? You idiot!" Thales had no objection to doing guard duty with the young man but he was finding out quickly that the boy was stupid.

"I...errr..." A nearby bush rustled. "What... what are we going to do?" He nervously gripped his spear. "Are we going to die?"

"Only if you open your mouth again..." Thales muttered.

"So, what do we do?"

"You go and look and I'll stand guard."

"No! You go!"

"I'm older. You go." When the young man shook his head vigorously, he relented. "Alright, we'll both go and look."

Cautiously they approached the edge of the encampment, poking the bushes with their spears.

"See? Nothing." Just as Thales was about to scold his cohort the bushes again rustled, this time a few feet away from them. "Go check it out."

"**You** go check it out!" Philon responded.

The conversation seemed to be never ending and Thales wanted to get back to his guarding. "This is ridiculous." He reached down and moved the bush aside, not surprised to see a cute fuzzy rabbit scratching its ear, blissfully unaware of how close he was to becoming the next meal.

"See?" Thales turned his attention to his fellow guard. "You can be such a coward sometimes..."

* * *

Raven stood inside the tent watching the Conqueror shifting under a light cloth. It was breaking her heart to see what damage had been inflicted on her. Despite the green paste liberally covering her back it didn't hide the red slashes. She moved quickly to her lover's side. There was very little time to make an escape.

"Hey, Xena." As she reached to touch Xena's arm a gentle smile crossed the Conqueror's lips. "That better be because of me..."

The woman didn't respond at first, seemingly floating in a drug-induced haze. Considering the

punishment she endured it was probably for the best.

"Gab...?" Xena tried to pull herself out of her stupor. "Gab..? Are you..." A fawn hood crossed her groggy vision and it seemed to be vaguely familiar.

A gloved hand reached up and pulled the hood off, revealing a mop of unruly blonde hair. "I've come to rescue you."

"My hero..." Xena was babbling. She tried really hard to concentrate and cut through the haze that enveloped her mind. She had something to tell her but it was elusive.

"Are you able to stand?" Gabrielle's eyes constantly scanned the tent for danger. She could help the Conqueror so far. If the woman couldn't move herself then the rescue was bound to fail. "Come on, Xena. Get that butt of yours moving."

It got an expected smile but the vacant look in those sapphire eyes did not bode well.

"Damn...." What was she going to do? Time was of the essence.

"Mal... tus." Xena's mouth wouldn't work the way she wanted it to. "Gr..aaa...xxxx..ion". It took more effort than she thought possible to get the name out.

"Maltus. Graxion. Got that. Now come on, we have to get you out of here." But Xena was a dead weight, heavily drugged and unable to move. She may as well have been manacled to the tent pole.

Gabrielle knew her time was up when she heard the commotion outside. She smiled at the thought of those bats she caught escaping from the sack and flying haphazardly through the corral of horses.

Kyros's first priority would be to check on his prisoner so she was forced to leave empty handed. "I'll be back." She placed a kiss on the raven hair, hoping that she could affect a rescue before it was too late.

Gabrielle donned her hood and circled the encampment, moving as a shadow in the night. She found who she was looking for on the far side of the field. "Pssttt..." It was hard to attract the attention of someone when trying to remain invisible to everyone else.

Her luck was holding as the hulking soldier looked up and found her visage in the undergrowth.

"Be back..." Brachius stood up and made a show of adjusting his trousers. He wandered over to the bush in question and went through the motions of relieving himself. "Sorry, girl."

"I tried to rescue Xena. She's in a bad way."

"I told you that, girl." He studied the leather suit she wore, which raised more questions than

answers. "So now what?"

"She said two names. Maltus and Graxion." Gabrielle concentrated her vision on Brachius's face so she didn't have to look elsewhere.

"Maltus is the Conqueror's aide and Graxion is one of her generals," he whispered to the bushes.

"Hey! What's taking you so long?"

"Hold your horses! I'll be there in a minute!" He turned his attention back to the girl. "Be quick."

"Maybe they are the two she trusts. Find Maltus and have him approach Graxion." She sighed heavily. "We are running out of time."

"Aye, girl. Tomorrow is another day of..."

"Of what?"

"I can't say, girl."

"Can't, or won't say?"

"Both. He's not finished with her."

Those words nearly sent her back to carry Xena out herself, even if it killed her. "Then we will have to get her out tomorrow night. She won't last much longer."

"I know, girl."

"Please... Gabrielle." She had come to like to gentle giant who was pledging his life to her lover. He was smart, sensitive and strong, a good combination for a potential husband. Not that she was in the market for one.

"Leave it to me, Gabrielle. There's nothing you can do for now."

"Hurry...", she whispered. Without another word Gabrielle left Brachius to finish his business.

The walk back to the inn was long and lonely. She had never felt so impotent in her life as she did now and she didn't like it. As one who had to always rely on her guile and courage Gabrielle didn't take defeat easily. But there was more at stake than just her pride here. There was someone who was becoming more precious to her than she wanted. Xena was now her weak link and it scared her.

* * *

The potion had run its course and the grogginess was slowly subsiding. Had she dreamed about a visit from Gabrielle or did it happen? She was not sure. Her mind was wrapped in a sack.

The rustle of the tent flap drew her eyes over her shoulder. "What do you want?"

"It didn't have to end this way, Xena."

"Yes it did, Arkanis. You betrayed me, general, and that's unforgivable."

"But Kyros will get us back on track to Athens."

"You know, general, I gave you too much credit for being smart. My rule is 'know your enemies but know your friends more'."

"Now, we know you can sway armies with your rhetoric, Xena, but the general here is committed to our course." Kyros had slipped in behind his co-conspirator.

"**Our** course? You mean **your** course." Xena vainly tried to follow the conversation, trying to put aside the fuzziness slowing her down.

"They are one in the same." Kyros smiled as if laughing at his own private joke. "General, some breakfast first I think." He watched the portly soldier waddle out the door.

"Why don't you just kill him and be done with it."

"He may still have his use, Xena." But they both knew better. Any sudden executions on his part could be met by rebellion. He had the army's fighting arm but not its heart. "You get some rest. You're going to need it."

So he was going to make her wait.

* * *

Brachius wasted no time beginning his search for the young lieutenant first thing that morning. He kept his inquiry unhurried and calm, fearing any sudden panic would alert their leader to his presence. The odd subtle question here and there finally led him to where he was standing. He was looking straight at Maltus, and that was the good part, but there was a bad part to his discovery. The young man had a collar around his throat and a chain bound to a huge metal spike hammered into the ground.

"Come to spit on me?" The man sounded tired and broken.

"No, lad. Unless you've done something to deserve it."

"You sound just like the Conqueror."

"I'll take that as a compliment, Maltus." The large man kept the guards in his peripheral vision, waiting for them to lose interest in his presence. He gave the lad a ladle of water, allowing him to take his fill. "So lad," he lowered his voice for the lieutenant's ears only, "it seems that our Lord

is in need of help."

"Are you trying to trick me?"

"Lad, I think it's a little late for that. Kyros already knows where your allegiance lies. However, he doesn't know where mine lies and I'd like to keep it that way."

"So, what do you want?"

"She has mentioned two names. Maltus and....," he hesitated dramatically, "...Graxion."

"He is my Lord's general."

"I know that, boy!" Brachius's brows knitted together in anger. "But how do we...I approach him? It seems my Lord feels he is the one we seek."

"He is mistrusting everyone at present, soldier."

Brachius had to laugh. So this was the Conqueror's constant worry. Suddenly he felt very sorry for the woman.

"So what do we do? He will not allow a mere soldier to approach him, let alone believe what he has to say."

Maltus thought for a moment, shifting in the dirt and disturbing his chains. "You could always tell him...'know your enemies but know your friends better'."

"Thank you. Now don't go anywhere, lad." Brachius left Maltus scowling at him.

* * *

"Sir, there's a soldier here who wishes to speak to you."

"Send him away." Graxion was in no mood for trivial issues.

"Sir, he says it's urgent."

"I have more important things on my mind-"

"General... please!" Brachius burst in through the tent opening, prepared to plead his case.

Graxion's guards made a lunge for the intruder but the general held up his hand. "Do you think it so important, soldier, that you would risk your life?"

"I do, general. Please, I must speak to you...alone."

"Alone? That will not be possible." He could see the desperation in those eyes. "Alright, but my aide stays."

The guards left the tent, warily eyeing the soldier who had so boldly gotten past their defenses.

"Well? You have managed to get my undivided attention. But be warned, it had better be important or you will be on permanent guard duty."

"Sir, I come to you about my Lord..."

"Do not speak of that aloud, soldier. These tent walls have ears."

"But..."

"Let us go for a walk..."

"But, sir, if we do that then they will know that I approached you. I think my Lord wanted me to remain anonymous."

The general nodded his head towards the door and his aide exited. His hand rose to stop Brachius speaking until his aide returned and confirmed that they were alone. "Speak."

"We have to do something about my Lord Conqueror."

"And why should we do that?" The general was suspicious of an unknown soldier coming to speak of such matters. "You could be a spy for Kyros here to test my allegiance."

"Know your enemies but know your friends better."

"Where did you hear that!" A large fist grabbed a handful of Brachius's tunic, pulling him swiftly to within inches of an angry face. "Tell me!"

"Sir, Maltus suggested the words to prove my loyalty. He was unable to come himself so I deliver the message."

"I know of Maltus's circumstances, soldier. That proves nothing."

"Someone visited my Lord during the night and reported on her condition."

"And how is she?" But the question held some distance, as if expressing mild interest in the subject.

"About as well as can be expected, sir. She had been drugged to ease her pain. She managed to utter two words to her visitor. Maltus and Graxion."

"They could have been words of warning, soldier. What makes you think I am interested in the woman's welfare?"

"Because I am not blind, general." The first buried in his clothing tightened further. "Please, sir, I do not mean any disrespect. I have been watching this camp and you have been distancing yourself from those who support Kyros." The fist let go and he backed away. "I think you are a man of integrity, sir, one that would not abandon my Lord to such barbaric torture."

"And why is it so important to you that we rescue Xena?"

"This army needs a leader, general, one that can unite this country under one rule."

"And Kyros is no friend of yours, soldier?"

"No, sir, he is not." The general's eyes bored into him, divining for the truth. "His army destroyed my village a while back. Men, women, children, they were less than nothing to him. My..." his voice quavered as he remembered, "...wife and child were amongst his victims. No, sir, he is not my leader."

"And yet you do the same in this army. You are just like him-"

"I am **nothing** like him!" The ferocity of the words made the guards come running into the tent with swords drawn. "My Lord does not slaughter helpless women and children."

"She used to, soldier. In her wilder days she **was** Kyros."

"I have heard the stories but do you believe she is capable of that now?" Brachius knew he was being bold in asking such a question but he seemed to be the only one defending his mistress.

"Now?" Graxion should have dismissed the man but he was pleased that someone had finally had the courage to speak out. "No, soldier, she is certainly more benevolent these days..." a gentle smile touched his rough features, "...and worthy of being Conqueror."

Brachius let out the breath he had been holding. The general had been playing a subtle game of hiding his loyalty and he had been risking his own life by playing his hand. "We need a leader, general. We need someone to guide us to take back what is ours."

"You want me to declare war on Kyros?" The thought had already crossed his mind but it was a dangerous thought that he had kept to himself.

Brachius hesitated. Whichever way he looked at it that was precisely what he was suggesting. "Well, sir, that is what we have your for, to make those decisions and plans. But the longer we do nothing the stronger his hold will be."

"Agreed. Go back to your unit and stay prepared."

"When will we know it's time?"

"Believe me you will **know** when it's time."

"Please forgive my impudence, sir. I would never-"

"I should thank you... What is your name?"

"Brachius, general."

"If you ever talk to me like that again, Brachius, your head will be outside my tent on a pike! Understood?" The look of fear answered his question. He smiled. "Now get out of here!" The soldier backed away nervously. "Oh, by the way, thank you, Brachius, for giving this old man a kick in the pants. And if you ever repeat anything said here I will string you up by your thumbs."

* * *

It had been a hell of a night. Sleep had eluded her since she arrived back at the inn. Gabrielle's mind was in turmoil. Xena, Cyrene, the villagers and the army were all in there vying for attention. She looked for that calm place within her and finally fell into a troubled sleep. Tomorrow was another day and another headache.

* * *

By the time she awoke the next morning the sun had been up for an hour. There was a mad clattering outside and feet running up and down the staircase. Whatever was going on it was happening at great speed.

Gabrielle threw open the door, standing there in her night shift and observing the chaos in person. "What is going on?" She asked that same question a number of times without so much as a mutter in response. Her hand flew out and grasped Elpis as she girl tried to run by her. "What... is... going... on?"

"We have to get out of here. The Elder made an announcement this morning. Xena's army is coming to wipe us out."

"Xena? Whatever gave you the idea that it's Xena's army?" How did the truth get distorted so quickly?

"It's the only army here, silly. And it's on its way to get us." Elpis shook her arm free and took off down the staircase.

Gabrielle sighed. This village was crazy, and it certainly explained a lot about Xena. She closed the door and got dressed as quickly as she was able. Someone needed to stop this madness before they were all killed.

* * *

"Hurry! We don't have much time left!" Herion, the town Elder, yelled as hard as his aged voice

would allow.

"What's going on?" Gabrielle strode towards the town courtyard, observing the mayhem going on around her.

"Xena's army is coming..."

"Tell me something I don't know..." She shook her head. "It's Kyros, not Xena, who is leading this army, Herion."

"Xena's army is Xena's army."

"But you're blaming her for something that she isn't responsible for."

"It's too late now, girl. We have to leave." He waved around the assembled throng. "Head towards Potadeia."

"No, don't do that."

"It's not your decision, girl."

"No listen, traveling on the road to Potadeia will be the first place they will look when they come to find this town deserted. Your best survival will be to scatter into the forest. Look for hiding places a league or two away. Keep out of sight and keep the groups small."

"What about our possessions?" An elderly woman huddled a sack to her chest.

"Possessions can be replaced. Your lives cannot." Gabrielle was getting angry now. "If you value your possessions over your lives then let's hope they bury you alongside whatever you hold so dear." She turned on her heel and went back to the inn. "Of all the stupid..." she muttered. If the villagers wanted to throw their lives away then so be it. She only hoped that she could save one stubborn mother of a formidable woman who had captured her imagination.

* * *

An hour later Gabrielle stood outside the crypt where Cyrene had been hidden, carrying a supply of provisions for her to last a few days. As much as she wanted to protect the old woman, she knew that Xena needed her help more.

"Cyrene? It's me, Melaina." Gabrielle stepped slowly into the cavern, allowing her eyesight to adjust to the darkened chamber. "Cyrene?" The woman wouldn't be so foolish to leave now, would she? Gabrielle then remembered who her daughter was and thought, *yes she would*.

"It's about time. What's going on?" Cyrene, who had worked every day for most of her life, was bored out of her brain.

"Things have gotten complicated."

"That's what you said last time. Tell me something different."

Did the woman deserve the truth? "Xena has fallen to Kyros."

"You mean..." Cyrene visibly paled in the muted light, "...dead?"

"No, but she may wish she was if I don't save her."

"You?" Cyrene looked the young woman up and down, wondering if she had been struck down by the Furies. "And who are you? Artemis? I don't think so." She tried to move past the blonde but her progress was stopped by a strong hand. Cyrene tugged hard to break the grip but it wouldn't budge. There was a steely strength in the woman hidden under the guise of a youthful innocent face.

"Yes, me. I said that I would bring her back and I will." Grass-green eyes bore into the older woman's, her determination showing in every speck that resided there. "You're just going to have to trust me."

"What exactly is going on between you two?" Cyrene's eyes narrowed, as if the action would make the situation all the more clearer.

"She and I met elsewhere..." It was proving difficult to say the words. What could she say to her lover's mother? It was uncomfortable to say the least.

"Hmmm, I see..."

"Do you?" It was Gabrielle's turn to wither under the constant stare of Xena's mother.

"You would risk everything for someone you met? I don't think so. I can see it in your eyes, Melaina."

"Well then, would you please do as I say so I don't have to worry about you too?"

The older woman sighed. "What do you want me to do?"

"We better move you from here. If Kyros sweeps through here he just may find this place."

Gabrielle helped Cyrene gather what little possessions she had and escorted her out of the crypt. She guided her through the forest for a good length of time, looking for a suitable hiding place. A low, overhanging rock looked inviting and she poked inside with a stick to stir any wildlife residing in it.

"You want me to stay in there?"

Gabrielle could sense an argument coming by the inflection in the voice. "Would you rather me

take you back to the inn to die?"

"Of course not-"

"I don't have time for this, Cyrene. It may be a little uncomfortable but it should be safe, as long as you keep quiet."

"I beg your pardon! Are you saying that I'm loud?" To prove the blonde's point Cyrene's voice rose in volume. There was no reply but a knowing look made her suitably humbled. "Fine," she muttered tightly.

"I'm not saying that you have to live in it, Cyrene. It's just a safe haven for the next few days. One way or the other Kyros's army should have moved on. Amphipolis is that way..." Gabrielle raised a finger and pointed in the direction they had just come from.

"So how will I know it's safe?"

"You don't." Gabrielle handed over the supplies she had been carrying. "This should keep you comfortable. Now I have to go."

"Wait!"

"What?"

"You tell that daughter of mine that she's a lucky woman."

Gabrielle could feel the blush begin at her feet, traveling rapidly up her torso to her face. The embarrassment robbed her of her speech, leaving her to just nod in response.

She moved swiftly through the forest with a confidence borne of long years of living off the land. Gabrielle spared a moment to look over her shoulder at Cyrene standing there watching her leave. She lifted her hand and received a wave of goodbye in return. She felt guilty about leaving the woman alone but she had no choice. Cyrene coming with her was not an option.

* * *

Xena walked unaided into the middle of the circle of watchers. Her back throbbed constantly and stung with the contact of fresh linen but she paid it no mind. Restlessly she prowled around the edge like an angry panther, waiting for Kyros to make his move.

The warlord seethed as he watched the woman walk around waiting, appearing to not even notice the liberal wounds on her back. He nodded to the eight men gathered on the side, gleefully observing them move into the cleared space with clubs shifting restlessly in their hands.

Xena stared at her tormenter, raising an elegant eyebrow in amusement. "Do I at least get a weapon?" she asked casually, not that she expected to get one.

"Now why would I do that? After all the whole point is to break you." Kyros stared in disbelief at the audacity of the woman.

"So here, in front of your men, you will not even allow me chance to defend myself? Do you think so little of them that you will leave me unarmed?" She smiled. "Or is it you think too much of me?"

The barb hit home. That was exactly what Kyros thought. If she had a weapon she had a chance. He ignored the cries for a weapon and signaled his men to rush her.

Xena ducked and weaved as heavy wood flew in all directions, mainly trying to aim for her damaged back. At one point she was forced to roll on the ground and her wounds screamed in protest. Pain lanced through her to settle in her eyes, a red wash pulsing in time to her heartbeat. Pain had been her friend many times during her turbulent lifetime so Xena used that ache to focus herself to find the fighter within herself that she knew she was meant to be.

Balancing on the balls of her feet, Xena centered herself. Her eyes never left the weapons shifting in eager hands, looking for an opportunity to wrestle one off whoever had a moment of distraction. If Kyros thought her lashing from yesterday was going to slow her down he had another thing coming.

They forced her to back up until she was hard against the crowd. Hands on her back made her jump, the pain an almost auditory stab to her brain. Her brow wrinkled with the discomfort and the men saw their chance. As they rushed her she took a step forward before launching herself over the top, lazily flipping before landing on her feet. She yelled at the top of her lungs, feeling the fire that came from her fighting skill.

Before they had a chance to turn, Xena was on one of them, taking him down like a lioness after her prey. Her fingers found his neck, prodding swiftly and accurately to stop him in his tracks. Long, strong fingers wrapped around the club, feeling its warmth and strength for the first time.

Xena stopped in her tracks for a moment as the other fighters watched their cohort on the ground struggling to find a breath. She allowed the fear to grow and multiply within them as they watched him slowly die. Her eyes slipped to the man twitching in his death throes knowing that the others now had a healthy respect for her, uneven unarmed.

A chuckle grew in the Conqueror's throat until it was a full laugh as she stalked her quarry, the weapon securely gripped in her knowledgeable hand. Xena's confidence eagerly absorbed the fear bleeding off them, feeding the fire in her belly. While they still outnumbered her seven to one the scales had now tipped and they were in serious danger of dying. *Oh yes, be afraid, be very afraid.*

She knew only too well that it took one moment of loss of self-confidence and the battle was lost. It was only the possible threat of retaliation from Kyros that kept them in the fight at all.

Before her attackers had a chance to circle her, Xena launched an attack of her own, using every part of her body to great effect. While her club blocked one blow her foot struck out to collect one soldier in the chest, sending him crashing to the dirt. Her fist connected with a wrist then a jaw removing another fighter from the contest.

Slowly she whittled down the number of fighters, punching, kicking and somersaulting her way out of danger, until there were only two left. Her hands now held two clubs, which she twirled in a show of manual dexterity. Xena wanted to make sure these two men knew exactly who they were facing. No one was going to take her down like some stag in the woods. Not this day.

* * *

Graxion had approached the punishment with great anger. He was so tempted to take the fight to Kyros and was ready to do so. When he saw what the usurper had in mind he stopped himself from acting, instead waiting to see what the Conqueror did in response. The fight progressed as he knew it would and a smile spread across his face. He would not interfere for now. The men needed to see this, to see why Xena had earned the name the Conqueror. It was like watching an artisan at work, plying her craft knowledgeably and carefully to make something of great beauty.

Brachius had remained back in the crowd. He had wanted to remain as inconspicuous as possible before the battle began. He had worshipped the Conqueror before but seeing her fight against such odds he was mesmerized. Her athletic body was on full display in the flimsy shift she wore but every movement of muscle and bone only accentuated the strength and agility that she possessed. His eyes shifted to the right and then to the left and he could see that those around him were impressed also. The Conqueror had the crowd in the palm of her capable hand. If Kyros had expected to humiliate Xena, that didn't happen. In fact, all it did was strengthen her hold on her army.

Brachius was already in motion when a lone soldier jumped out of the crowd and ran towards the Conqueror with a knife in his hand. Before he could break through the line an arrow pierced his wrist, forcing him to drop the weapon.

Immediately all eyes looked towards the bushes, trying to find out who the lone bowman was. But Xena knew, even without looking at the shaft she knew. Her guardian assassin was out there somewhere watching her back.

Brachius chuckled. So the little wench had a hidden talent. He had to remind himself not to make her mad in the future.

With renewed vigor Xena launched herself into another attack, finishing the fight in a matter of heartbeats. She turned her attention to Kyros. "Even with cheating, Kyros, you were never good enough."

"But good enough to have your army, Xena."

"Not for long, Kyros." She approached him, the club still in her hand, and stared straight into his eyes. "This is **my** army."

"And do you think you can take it back?"

"Oh, I don't think, Kyros, I **know**." She looked back over her shoulder at Graxion and gave him a wink.

The moment of inattention nearly cost her. Kyros took the opportunity to attack her, drawing his own dagger and striking like a viper. But she had expected as much and her body had already shifted even as the knife was being unsheathed. Her skin tingled as the blade lightly slid over her abdomen, cutting through the material and grazing her body.

"You've got to do better than that."

"I will," he sneered. With a flick of his index finger a wall of fighters headed in her direction. "Take her down!" All his plans for her humiliation took flight as he ordered his army to attack. His blood was boiling because she wouldn't break. The woman was so damned stubborn that she was thwarting him at every turn.

Xena backed away to give herself space. The sheer number of men facing her was daunting but if she was going to die then she was going to make damned sure that a lot of them came with her. She pushed that thought to the back of her mind because that was not going to happen. She would not let it happen. She **was** the Conqueror and her destiny was written in the stars. Besides, there was her little assassin out there somewhere waiting for her and she was **not** going to disappoint her.

Just as the wall of men were about to engage her a cry echoed on the wind.

"To arms!"

Suddenly the empty circle was full of men battling one another in a struggle for domination, not that she didn't welcome it.

Graxion looked about. "Who said that?" But he knew. One lone soldier had taken it upon himself to yell a call to arms, and when he found him he would be severely punished. But not now. Brachius had echoed what he himself was about to do, as he signaled his own men to join the fray.

The general drew his sword and waded into the mass of bodies pushing, shoving and swinging. Slowly he forced his way through to stand beside his leader.

"What took you so long?" Xena grinned triumphantly.

"Good to see you're still alive, my Lord."

"Did you expect anything less?"

Graxion laughed. "No, my Lord." And it was true. Xena seemed to have the blessing of the Gods as far as survival was concerned. He had no doubt that it would take someone far greater than Kyros to take the Conqueror down.

The general was not surprised to see Brachius on the other side of Xena. The man had taken it upon himself to be the woman's personal bodyguard. "Brachius?"

"Yes, sir."

"I want a word..." Graxion ducked as a blade swept overhead. His own sword plunged into flesh, sliding along bone and muscle to bury deep into his adversary's chest. "...a word with you when this is finished." He growled out the words to let the soldier know he was in deep trouble.

"Aye, general," Brachius said matter-of-factly. He knew he had crossed boundaries but he was unrepentant. The Conqueror's life was at stake and saving her was all that mattered. His dagger swept forward, slicing across an uncovered arm. His lips parted into a victorious smile as there was a yelp from his opponent. The cry was only momentary as his sword slid through the man's defenses and into his abdomen.

Xena was in her element. Close hand-to-hand fighting to her was the ultimate battle, where combatants had to rely not only on strength and skill but also agility, guile and a certain element of luck. It was that unknown element that sent her pulse racing. The life and death risk between two fighters.

It was at this moment that she was locked in such a tussle with Kyros's second in command, her wrist held firmly while she, in turn, held the man's knife hand at bay. Despite the cries of battle and anguish there was another sound that her hearing focused on. It was a gentle whistle and then a thwack as an arrow hit home. A falling body pressed against her back and she was hard pressed to keep her feet. She smiled, allowing her adversary to think that she had the upper hand. But it was the archer that she had the smile for, the woman who had taken it upon herself to guard the Conqueror's back.

Xena's smile widened. Her mind was in two places but she seemed content to have it that way. Despite her injuries, she would not change a thing that happened. While it was defining the loyalty of her soldiers, more importantly was Gabrielle. Her actions were like nirvana to her soul. Gabrielle cared for her, really cared for her. It was a realization that made her heart soar.

She allowed her resistance to disappear, sending her opponent stumbling forward and fall past her. Her hand released the armed hand and followed through until she connected with his skull. The lean man had little distance to reach the ground as his fall had carried him almost there. A sweaty hilt came down on his head, sending him to oblivion.

Xena stepped over the fallen soldier towards her next opponent, slowing working her way towards the one she really wanted.

Kyros had managed to keep his distance, throwing man after man in her path in the hope that one

of them would get lucky. Just when it looked like he would succeed an arrow materialized in the man's back, front, arm, neck or leg. Whoever this archer was had a keen eye and a steady hand. He had only wished he had known who he was sooner so that he could have bribed him to kill the Conqueror.

A stab of pain touched his ear and instinctively he reached for its source. The last thing he had expected was to find his fingers covered in blood. Without thought he touched his ear again, as if the second touch would have a different result from the first. Kyros's eyes narrowed as he tried to find the culprit. A wet gurgle from behind him drew his attention to a young soldier gasped desperately for a breath that was slowly trickling away along with the blood from his neck. The arrow had embedded itself in his carotid artery and it was only a matter of moments before his life blood had emptied onto the dusty ground.

Xena smiled. Smart girl. Gabrielle earned herself a hot bath for that one. A dart of pain drew her from her musing, returning it to the young man trying to end her life. There was precious little room to move so it was more jabbing and twisting than full swings and acrobatics. But Xena knew one thing that this young fighter didn't. She grew up wrestling with her brothers and their friends. She had learned very quickly how to fell an opponent and it was almost too easy to use it now. But Kyros was withdrawing and she needed to move quickly.

She knew she had him when his face grew pale, his brow heavily beaded with sweat. His mouth curved into a round 'O' and his eyes rolled up into his head. Her finger rested on his forehead, gently giving him a nudge. He toppled like a tree in the forest, in one single motion and stiff as a board.

His pain was quickly forgotten as the Conqueror stepped over him. The small amount of room gave her leverage to swing and hack, driving herself through the human wall between her and her nemesis. On her shoulders were Graxion and Brachius, using their size to great effect to punch a hole through Kyros's supporters' defenses. Xena's men flooded into the break, whittling away the numbers that opposed them.

Xena leapt over another downed soldier, moving her one leap closer to Kryos. The whizzing of arrows could no longer be heard. She was in no position to see what was happening, instead focusing her skills on the last soldier valiantly trying to stop her.

The Conqueror moved like water, ebbing and flowing around the hard steel until she swept over her enemy like a tide, swallowing him whole.

"Still think it's a good idea, Arkanis?"

The man stood before her in full battle armor, and despite his size he presented a modicum of skill. He didn't say the words but just grunted.

"That's what I thought..." Her lopsided grin was a warning to her enemies that they were in trouble, serious trouble.

"My Lord, he is mine!" Graxion stepped up to her side, his bloody sword pointed at the expansive chest.

"Take him," she growled. Xena wanted to make Arkanis pay but she was after a bigger fish. She stepped around her former general and closed in on who she really wanted to fight... Kyros. There were no more arrows and now it was time for her to answer the critics of her leadership. It was time for Kyros to die.

"Kyros!" Xena's voice rose above the din, paralyzing her opponent in place. "Turn around, you coward!" Her bloody sword rose and pointed him out. He stood there but refused to turn around. "Can you only win your battles when someone takes your place?"

The scarred leader turned around to face his foe. "What? No witty comment, Xena?" he sneered.

She knew she had an annoying habit of making light of a dire situation. She had won last time because she incapacitated him with that kick to the throat. She knew he would be more circumspect this time.

Kyros looked into those astonishing eyes, blazing with a fury that turned the blue into glittering jewels. This was no time for jocularity but one for sobriety. One of them was not going to walk away.

"Stay back!" Brachius waved his sword at the soldiers behind Kyros. "This is their fight!" He used every inch of his size and power to enforce the threat.

"You only won last time because you were lucky, Xena. I won't let it happen again." Kyros's words were full of bravado but the intonation told another story.

Xena just smiled. He may have thought he knew everything about her but he was sadly mistaken. One cardinal rule was to never show your enemy everything. The only time she would allow that would be as she plunged her sword into his chest. Only in death did her opponent know it all.

Kyros lunged at her in an opening parry but she simply batted it away. It was not a death stroke by any means but one to test her. "Come on, Kyros, what are you waiting for?" She lifted her arms from her sides, as if inviting him to have the first swipe. He did nothing and she didn't move. "Scared?" she taunted, taking a step towards him with her arms still outstretched.

Kyros's gaze moved from one side to the other, watching the soldiers' reactions to her foolish brag.

"That's it, isn't it? Scared like a little girl being chased by the local rooster."

The spattering of laughter sent him forward with a rush. His yell came out broken and harsh as his voice box tried to utter what he felt.

Xena drew in a deep breath and allowed the taunts and jeering to flow over her. She was tired

and her back stung like Hades so she was in no mood for the verbal poking and prodding of Kyros's supporters around them.

He circled her endlessly, waiting for her first move. If he thought she would charge straight at him, he didn't know her very well. With a light step she launched herself into a lazy flip over the top of him, landing effortlessly on the other side. Her sword came up behind her head as he swung downwards in the hope of catching her off guard. Many had tried that ploy and one had yet to succeed.

Xena thrust and parried, pushing Kyros back towards the fighting behind them. He was defending her competently but not pressing any advantage she presented to him. Time and again she came close to disarming him but at the last second he slipped from her grasp.

What was his game? He was prolonging the fight for some reason, neither attacking when she gave him an opening nor escaping if he had the chance. Why would he try to keep her busy? Xena's eyes widened once she realized the ruse and broke away from the fight.

"Graxion!" she yelled over the mêlée.

"My Lord!" he replied as he wore Arkanis down.

"Call the men to break off! It's a trap!"

"Where?" Xena saw her general try to get his bearings.

Kyros pressed forward and re-engaged Xena. "It's too late, Xena. My army will be upon you before you know it," he snarled.

"Don't go claiming victory just quite yet, you pig!" The ram's horn sounded and the rattling of armor and weapons was nearly deafening to her ears. With a surge of adrenaline, Xena moved past Kyros's defenses and thrust forward, her sword finding flesh. A familiar rush sped through her as her sword continued forward, sliding along muscle, sinew and bone, only stopping when the hilt hit his skin. She brought her face up close to his own and whispered, "You have no idea what I am, Kyros."

"Buuuu," he wheezed, blood painting his lips.

"Say hello to Hades for me, you bastard!"

Kyros wheezed a few more times, sending a fine mist of blood over his opponent. Finally, his legs gave way and his weakening body slid off her sword. Even as he lay on the ground breathing his last breath he had been forgotten. Xena was already in motion towards her general, the hilt of her sword coming down on Arkanis's head and sending him into oblivion.

"Stop the fighting!" she yelled. "Stop the fighting!" The clang of metal slowly died down as one after another did as he was asked. "Kyros is dead. Surrender now and I may let you live!" She

hadn't even considered the question yet but if it would end the violence quickly she would use it.

"General!"

"Aye, my Lord."

"Secure the prisoners quickly."

"Aye. What about the others."

She knew who he meant. The traitors. She had a special reward for them. "They will lead our army into battle, General. They have earned that right." Xena spoke loudly and clearly for all to hear.

"But my Lord..."

"See to it."

"Aye, my Lord."

"Graxion. A moment." She waited for her trusted general to deliver his orders.

A moment later he was walking with her. "But my Lord, why? What's to stop them turning and joining Kyros's army? They know they have no future here."

"Because Kyros's army won't know who they are. They are enemy soldiers and will be the first to fall." Xena smiled as the large man chuckled. "Now to business. Kyros's main army will be upon us soon. Set up the defenses there," she pointed to the far side of the meadow where the main road sat. The road acted as a bottleneck before fanning out into the meadow. "We don't want to jam them along the road because they can fan out into the forest. Allow them to come into the meadow but not too far to allow them to circle around behind us."

"Aye, my Lord."

"Set up archers in the trees at the entrance. They're to let the army through then attack from the rear once the battle has commenced. It's important that they're not seen, do I make myself clear?"

"Aye."

"We have the element of surprise here so let's not waste it." Xena looked at the mass of bodies littering the ground. "Send out scouts to find out where Kyros's army is. And while we have some time, get our brave soldiers who will lead at the front to start digging some trenches to bury the dead. Put a guard on them. Let's clean up this mess."

"My Lord." Graxion turned to walk away.

Xena looked into the nearby forest wondering if Gabrielle was still there. In a way she was pleased that she still had her guardian angel but her heart wanted her lover to be far, far away somewhere safe and warm.

"Graxion!" she called out.

"My Lord?"

"Can you get one of your men to gather up any arrows that are not ours?"

"Aye," Graxion gave her a curious look.

"Just indulge me, please." She received an almost benevolent smile from her general.

"Aye, my Lord. As you wish."

Xena bent her considerable intelligence to planning the battle to come unaware of how much time had passed. A young soldier came up to her bearing the unmarked arrows as she had requested. "Thank you," she muttered absently before waving him away. She looked at the arrows and lovingly ran a finger down one of the shafts. Gabrielle had held this not long ago. Was this the one that had saved her life? She gazed at the nearby forest wondering where the young assassin was. Was she watching right now? She hoped so and gave a wistful smile at the bushes.

Xena moved to where a number of quivers were assembled for the coming fight and picked up two of them filled with arrows. She wandered off towards the nearby forest, well aware of the curious stares she was getting by doing so. There was a faint movement behind her. "Stay!" she called to her guard. "I won't go far."

Xena stepped into the undergrowth and moved in until she couldn't see the camp. She stood for a moment before laying down the arrows at the base of a tree. She stood and scanned the nearby area. "Thank you," she said firmly, and when no answer came she turned and made her way back through the bushes.

"You're welcome."

Xena barely heard the reply as she emerged onto the meadow but the two words were a balm to her soul. Gabrielle was still with her. She could now go into this battle with renewed confidence because the one person she could trust to guard her back was with her.

* * *

"Scout ho!"

Xena's head rose as she scanned the meadow for the return of her scouts. Two figures ran towards her, breathing heavily when they arrived at the camp.

"What's the news?" she asked absently, her attention turning back to the rough map of the local terrain.

"An advance party is approaching, my Lord."

"How long?"

"Two, maybe three hours, my Lord."

Xena looked up at the sun. Was there enough time in the day? "And how many?"

"Maybe thirty."

Xena paced back and forth as she bent her intelligence to the possible scenarios. She waved off her men. "Dismissed." She leaned on the makeshift table to look over the map once more when she stopped. "Wait! Didn't three of you go out?"

"Aye, my Lord," the older one said. "The last scout has continued on to the main force."

"Good. Very good." She inwardly smiled as the two men stood a little taller at the compliment. "Go and eat."

"Aye, my Lord," the two men said in unison before turning on their heels and trotting off to find food.

"Foolish," she murmured before chuckling at their antics.

"It's not foolish, my Lord," Graxion commented. "They take your word very seriously. If you praise them they will respond."

"So I see. Now, back to this." Her eyes poured over the black scratch marks on the parchment. "We mustn't let the advance guard get back to the main army." She finger rested on the point of entry to the meadow. "They've got to come down this way, whether they're coming to the meadow or going to Amphipolis. It's the only road to this area so they'll take it."

"They'll know it's a trap even before they reach us."

"Ahh, not if it doesn't look like we're ready for them. As far as they are concerned Kyros is in control." As she said it Xena's plan became crystal clear. She laughed out loud, drawing a curious look from her general.

"It something wrong, my Lord?"

"No, but I have a plan. Are those bodies buried yet?"

* * *

Xena watched the approach of the advance party from her place on the whipping post. Several of her men sauntered about dressed in Kyros's uniforms, acting like they were in control. So far the ruse seemed to be working, with the group of soldiers relaxed and unaware of what was in store.

"Steady..." she said quietly as her men moved restlessly. They were as keen for the fight as she was, eagerly awaiting the call to attack. She saw subtle movements at the edge of the forest as her men prepared to move in from the rear.

"Wait.... Wait..." The enemy came closer and closer as she held her men in check. It was a fine line between too far and too close and she needed to judge it right, so when they were a scant two hundred yards from the camp she moved. "Now!" she yelled, following the call to arms with a war cry.

Xena felt the fire in her veins. It was potent and rich and stirred the embers of her soul. She never tired of the feeling. Despite everything she had told her mother Xena knew this was who she was destined to be.

As her cry echoed across the expanse of ground, Xena watched as her men ran towards the enemy, coming at the party from the front and behind. She had wanted to join in but her participation was not an issue. Graxion had successfully argued that she was needed for the bigger battle to come and to risk injury in such a small scuffle as this was unwarranted. But that didn't stop the urge that had forced her to take a step or two towards the battle before she consciously held herself in place.

So she stood at the edge of the camp, sword in hand, having to be an observer of the fight, if it could have been called that. The battle was effectively over even before it began as her sheer force of numbers overwhelmed the advance guard quickly and with little injury or loss of life.

As she waited, Graxion approached with the leader of the group. "My Lord," he stated, bowing deeply at the waist.

"Not what you were expecting?" Xena directed the question at the prisoner.

"It doesn't matter. We will crush you." The soldier impudently replied. He was not some young naïve lad but a seasoned fighter by the looks of him.

"That might be difficult without Kyros."

"You lie!" he countered.

"Brachius!"

"My Lord?" The brawny man had been hovering in the background, awaiting his orders.

Xena spared a glance at her hovering mother hen. She was going to have to do something about

Brachius's obsession with her preservation. "Bring me Kyros."

"As you wish, my Lord." He bowed and departed to carry out her order.

Xena stood there with her arms crossed, idly observing her enemy. He tried not to look at her directly, but after several moments he did so and she left him squirming under her intense gaze. "You know, you could save us all a lot of time by giving me the information I want."

The soldier's head came up and he looked at her defiantly.

"How far behind is the army and how many?"

The soldier said nothing. Brachius carried the limp form of Kyros towards Xena. She watched the prisoner's reaction as his eyes widened and his mouth fell open, but still he said nothing.

"How many soldiers?" she asked again, this time more firmly.

He looked at her directly again, this time with a little more fear but his lips remained sealed.

"All right, you had your chance. Graxion?"

"My Lord?"

"Let's see how he feels after a few body parts are missing. Start with his hands and then his feet."

"Aye, my Lord." The general signaled for two soldiers to grab the prisoner and they dragged him off towards the whipping post. The logs of wood still stood there, a constant reminder of Xena's endurance and of the army approaching them.

Three... two... one... Xena mentally counted down and just as she reached zero the soldier relented. She let a smile come to her lips. To be able to understand human nature was one of her strengths and it was something that she took very seriously.

"Please!..... errr...." he stammered, as if not knowing what to call her.

She waited for him to address her, taking great pleasure in his discomfort.

"My Lord!"

To hear those words coming out of his mouth was worth a lash or two. "Yes?"

"They are two days behind us. The main force is around five hundred."

"Fine. Take him away." *Five hundred?* That was impressive. Xena's mind was already thinking of possible scenarios. Five hundred against her army of around six hundred meant the fight was

fairly evenly weighed. What would make the difference would be what she could come up with as a plan.

* * *

"All right. Does everyone understand?" Xena looked at her generals as they gathered around the makeshift table. "Davos, take your men into the forest. The main force will engage them from the front while the archers attack from the rear. Once we have fully engaged the enemy call off the archers and move your men in. The archers are to defend the rear and stop any escaping enemy." She waited for his eyes to meet hers. "You are not to be discovered while Kyros's forces are moving through the forest to the field. Is that clear?"

"Understood, my Lord."

"Now, go!" She waved him off in dismissal. He had taken a few steps when she stopped him. She took those few steps and spoke low and firmly. "There is a lone bowman in the forest dressed in a hunting outfit and wearing a hood. He is our ally and friend. He is *not* to be approached or harmed in any way. Make that perfectly clear to your men because whoever disobeys this will answer to me... *personally*." Xena let the last word drip with deadly intent. She only wished she could have sent Gabrielle from the battlefield because it was going to be very dangerous indeed in those woods. After Davos had left her presence she turned around and went back to the map and her generals.

The past two days had been busy, filled with burial duty, preparing defenses and planning a surprise or two. She had gone to the forest herself to study the lay of the land. There was little undergrowth near the road so her archers and foot soldiers would have a clear view of any of the enemy spreading out in the forest. It was better than she had hoped.

Jantius had spent time with her at night tending to her back. While most were healing well on their own there was one or two nasty lash marks that had required a stitch or two. Once or twice she had ordered him to take them out because they irritated her but he refused to give in. Despite his obvious disobedience Xena couldn't fault his dedication to his craft. If he could stand up to her then he now had the job as her personal physician. If he knew what she had in store for him maybe he would have done what she had asked.

Back at the table the rest of her generals awaited her command. "Silas, prepare our 'volunteers' for their moment of glory. Give them each a sword."

"Why, my Lord?"

"At least with a sword they may be prepared to fight. If we sent them unarmed they will just try to flee."

"Wouldn't they do that anyway?"

"They may, but they would know that I would hunt them down. At least with a fighting chance of engaging the enemy they may try to regain their loyalty. Either way, they are dead men."

"What about Arkanis?" Graxion posed.

"Ahh, yes, I have something special in mind for him." Before she had a chance to elaborate the sound of a whoosh filled the air a split second before an arrow pierced the map on the table.

The generals drew their swords and circled their leader, looking for the source of the attack. Xena took one look at the shaft and knew who and what it was.

"Stand down," she said to her agitated generals. "It's a message."

"Is it one of those...?"

"Yes, general. It's our friend in the forest. It seems Kyros's army is near. Everyone to their places." The meeting broke up and the participants left to carry out their assigned tasks.

"Graxion, one moment." Xena waited for her trusted new second-in-command to step up to her. "Regarding Arkanis, I have a job for you..."

* * *

Kyros's forces had begun to flow onto the paddock, steadily spreading out across the open ground. Xena moved amongst her men offering words of encouragement and a promise of success. Realistically she knew it was a promise she couldn't make but for the sake of a little white lie it gave her men confidence knowing their leader would bring them victory.

Xena found Wraith hidden behind the main tent. He was saddled and prancing impatiently. "Soon, my friend," she said soothingly, her hand caressing the muscled neck of her mount. Wraith settled under Xena's calm attention, his large head nuzzling her armored shoulder. "I'm sorry, boy. I've been a little bit busy lately. After this is all over we'll go for a long gallop, how about that?"

"My Lord," Maltus interrupted.

"Ahh, there you are. I wondered where you had gotten to."

"I was being tended to by the healer, my Lord."

It was hard to tell where Maltus had been injured as he was in full armor. "Are you fit for battle?"

"Aye, my Lord." But as Xena walked back towards her assembled forces, Maltus limped along beside her.

"Maltus," Xena stopped in mid step.

"Please, my Lord. I'm ready to fight." He looked at his leader pleadingly.

She didn't want to go into the fight with an injured aide but what could she do? For some reason she didn't want to hurt his feelings, which was a strange thought. Maybe it was the look in his eyes that appealed to her. "I have a special assignment for you..."

Xena watched as Maltus left her, making his way into the bushy undergrowth to carry out her order. He was an enthusiastic and competent soldier but with his injury he would be a liability. She would rather let him think that he was carrying out some secret mission for her than she was removing him from danger because of his wounds. She only hoped that Gabrielle would forgive her.

The opposing army had now formed lines on the field and was steadily moving closer to her camp. There was no sign from them that anything was untoward, approaching as if Kyros was in control. And she allowed them to come. A small number of her soldiers continued to move about dressed in disguise, one or two waving at the force coming steadily towards them.

Xena joined her army behind the campsite, signaling them to prepare for battle. "Graxion!" she called quietly. "Send out Arkanis."

"Aye, my Lord." He signaled to his second who slapped the horse Arkanis was sitting on. The stallion pranced for a moment before galloping off, heading directly to the wall of leather and metal in front of it.

"My Lord, why are we doing this?"

"Didn't you listen to what I said?"

"Well, you said the 'what' and the 'when' but not the 'why'."

"Why? Just wait a moment." She observed the interaction as Arkanis's horse pulled up in front of, who she assumed, was Kyros's second-in-command. There was an exchange of words before the general's bonds were cut and he turned the horse around to face her.

"That's why. Arkanis was more deeply involved than we knew. If Kyros's second was aware of Arkanis's loyalty then obviously he was committed to Kyros's rule."

"And now they know we're here." Graxion commented.

"Yes, but they are in one group and ready for the trap." She moved to Wraith and jumped up into the stirrup, throwing her leg over the saddle in one smooth motion. "Men! To war!" She let out her battle cry and kicked her mount in the side. He thundered out from behind the tent and galloped towards the front of her troops.

The men assembled quickly and were already in motion when she arrived. The front row of men were pushed from behind by her army. They reluctantly ran forward in the direction of their impending deaths, brandishing the weapons that would decide their fates.

There was still a hundred yards until the two armies met when Arkanis fell from his horse, an arrow buried in his neck. Xena looked around for the archer roughly in the direction it had traveled from. She couldn't see but she knew. It was probably a fitting death for him even though she would have come up with a more original way for him to die. At least he wouldn't escape her clutches now.

The yelling of her men as they ran was nearly deafening and it stirred her blood. Soon she would be in that place where only blood, anger and strength mattered. It was a crimson haze that engulfed her and she welcomed it. Far-off cries joined the cacophony of sound surrounding her. The rear guard had now moved in and they had their enemy between them.

The air was full of screams of pain and death, jostling of bodies surrounding Wraith like a blanket. He bristled at the close contact and shifted, his hooves making contact with anyone close enough to get hurt.

Xena urged her mount on. She wanted Kyros's second and she wanted nothing less. Her sword swung down from its lofty height, separating arm from body, hand from sword and head from neck. The familiar copper tang sat on the back of her tongue and acted as an aphrodisiac, stirring the embers into a raging fire.

Wraith used his size and strength to push through the mêlée, biting and kicking as he went as swords and spears tried to bring him down. While his battle armor protected most of his available skin he was still vulnerable and received a gash or two from a wild swing of a sword or spear.

Xena glanced up and observed fighters trying to escape back to the road, moments before they were cut down by arrows. The enemy was dissipating as their numbers were rapidly dwindling under the onslaught. She let out a yell and moments later the air was filled with a heat that sucked the air dry. Smoke spread across the battlefield like a cloak but not heavy enough to cloud the battle itself. The fires either side of Kyros's army kept them enclosed and ready for slaughter.

"On!" she yelled. Time was against them as the fires would only burn for a short while before going out. It was meant as a shock tactic rather than any actual damage, after all her own men were in the midst of it all as well.

Wraith stamped the ground as the smell of smoke hit his nostrils and Xena was hard pressed to control him. Her thighs tightened around him as she urged him forward. Her target was so close that she could almost reach him with the tip of her outstretched sword. "Come on, boy. Nearly there." Xena was tempted to curse at him but she had never done so in the past and would not start now.

Her mount surged forward as if someone had slapped him on the rump. She looked over her shoulder and saw Brachius standing there momentarily before he turned to rejoin the fight. But it was enough for Wraith to push forward those last few feet and make contact.

Xena's sword was already in motion as she booted a foot soldier out of the way. Its advance was halted by her adversary's sword, which left them at an impasse. Kyros's second snarled as he tried to press her backwards, but Xena held him in place. Her opponent raised his other hand and grabbed her wrist, trying to use some leverage to dismount her. Clamping her legs tightly around Wraith Xena's second hand rose to join the tussle. The horses circled around one another in a tight arc, their riders locked together in deadly battle.

There was pushing and shoving as each tried to unseat the other but neither refused to relent. Xena managed to put some slack between them and used the momentary lapse to release the pressure of her legs on her mount and bring one foot up to kick her opponent in the chest.

Then everything seemed to happen in slow motion. She was about to flip off the back of her horse when there was a familiar creak barely heard over the din of battle that caught her attention. As she glanced over her shoulder an arrow left a crossbow and headed directly for her. Before she had a chance to react Brachius threw himself into the path of the projectile and took the bolt in the shoulder.

The force of the shot sent him to the ground. "Go, my Lord!" He waved frantically with his good arm then rose to continue the fight, focusing his first attack on the archer preparing to fire again.

Xena used her powerful legs to spring out of the saddle and into the air to land next to her fallen adversary. He rolled out of the way and onto his feet in one smooth motion, already prepared to continue the fight.

There was precious little space to move, with horses jostling and men pushing, but what space she had she would use wisely. She heard Brachius behind her, his grunting and an occasional groan of pain telling her he was guarding her back.

"Ready to give up?" she taunted her enemy.

"I don't think so."

"Kyros is already dead, you know." She didn't really know what sort of reaction the news would get but she told him anyway.

"And that's supposed to scare me?"

"That elevates you to the leader of this army." She grinned wickedly at him. "I kill the leaders."

Her opponent fought competently but he was not in her league. She toyed with him, enjoying his panicked movements as he tried to keep her sword at bay, but she soon tired of the play and just wanted the battle to be over. Her bloodlust had been quenched and was in search of the cure. Would Gabrielle be up to it? Her thoughts went back to a few nights ago when they had reunited and the hellion that was in her arms. She had no doubt that Gabrielle could more than adequately handle whatever she had in mind.

Xena fainted to the right, waiting for her adversary to commit to his defense, then quickly reversed her move and thrust her sword forward. He stared at her, his brow creasing in surprise. "Say hello to Kryos for me." He smiled for a second before the life drained out of his eyes and he crumpled to the ground, Hades already claiming his soul as he inhaled his last breath.

She lost herself in the fight for a while, jabbing and hacking her way through the remnants of Kyros's army. Brachius was still on his feet, the bolt still embedded in his shoulder, but his body didn't stand as tall as it had. "Brachius?"

"Aye, my Lord!" he called as he blocked a mace aimed for his head.

"Go and see the healer when you've finished."

"But, my Lord..."

"Now, Brachius!"

"Aye, my Lord!" His fist shot out and pounded into his opponent's face followed by his sword, which buried in the soldier's chest. Reluctantly he left the field, looking very much like a scolded child.

Xena laughed at his crestfallen look, knowing very well she would have done the same thing in his boots. She surveyed the battlefield and saw that her forces had the enemy well under control. Some had already surrendered and were being rounded up while there was a pocket or two of resistance that was quickly being overrun.

Graxion was still standing, his bloody sword hovering over his latest victim dispatched to Hades. He looked up and searched for her, a smile crossing his serious features at a battle well won.

She nodded at him and he walked over to her. "My Lord." He looked like a man who had been given a Soltice present. He had superficial cuts across his upper arm and his brow and a fine spray of blood spread across his chest, but otherwise he seemed intact.

"Reminds you of the old days, my friend?"

"Aye, my..." he stopped, looking at his leader, "...Xena. Very much so."

"And we felt twenty years old all over again."

"You maybe, my Lord, but right now I feel every day of my forty years."

"Then you need to rest while your men mop up the stragglers."

"I am quite capable of doing that, my Lord." He almost sounded indignant.

"But what's the point of being in charge, Graxion, if you can't use your men to do the heavy work, eh?"

"But, my Lord..."

"Relax man! Let's both agree that you are capable of the work but choose not to do it when you have men to do it for you. All right?" Would she be this defensive when she was his age? More to the point, would she ever reach his age?

"If you say so, my Lord."

She had thought she understood her general but maybe there was more at play here. But now was not the time. That sort of heavy thinking was for a dark, lonely night when she wanted to get her mind off the empty space beside her in bed. For now she settled on male pride and the thought of getting old.

"All right, my friend. You go and supervise the mopping up. I'll await your report on the battle."

Maltus sauntered across the small distance to the camp and signaled Xena of his return. Now would come the long boring part about his 'mission' in the forest. She walked towards her tent, stopping just short of her destination and changing direction. Xena looked around guiltily as she made her way to the forest and found Graxion watching her. His body shook from what she assumed was laughter and she turned away before she reacted.

"Looks like I'm not fooling anyone today," she said absently to herself.

"Looks like it."

Xena took a deep breath and let it out. Gabrielle was safe. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, except for the shadow you stuck me with." Gabrielle stepped out from behind a tree and reached up and pulled off her hood.

Xena looked at the mop of blond hair sitting haphazardly on top of Gabrielle's head. Her heart fluttered as she gazed at the beautiful face before her. "Sorry about that. He wasn't fit for the battle so I had to send him somewhere."

"Xena, I nearly shot him twice. He's not very good at hiding himself."

"But he has a good heart."

"Is this compassion I hear from the Conqueror?" Gabrielle grinned at the abashed Xena.

"Hmmm. I must be getting old." Xena grinned back. She stepped forward, trying to shorten the distance between them. "It's good to see you." Why was she wasting time with small talk?

"You too," Gabrielle replied.

"My Lord!"

The call made Xena turn towards the camp. "A moment!" she yelled back. "Now, about tonight..." She turned her attention back to the one person she wanted to talk with but found the area empty. Gabrielle had gone.

She returned to her tent disappointed. Soon her thoughts had to be put aside as the business of cleaning up the area began. Kyros's army was defeated, suffering losses of about four hundred of his five hundred-strong force. She herself lost around one hundred in the encounter, with another hundred injured badly enough to stop any travel for a few days. All but one of the traitors in the first row of the attack were killed in action, which left her with the dilemma of deciding the fate of the last remaining man.

Xena found Graxion and together they visited the healer's tent, which was packed to overflowing. She had a word with her men, praising their courage and tenacity, and in return she received a rousing cheer. It always amazed her what a few words from her mouth could do for morale. They found Brachius sitting against a tent pole, his good arm supporting the elbow of his bad arm.

"So, there you are. Graxion, I think we need to settle the problem of this man's disobedience."

"I agree, my Lord."

She glared down at the soldier, giving him her best threatening stare. "Brachius, for disobeying the orders of both myself and General Graxion you will be sentenced to..." She left him hanging for a moment, watching a wary expression cross his face. "...being Captain of my personal guard. Since you seem so intent on saving my life I think it would be foolish to waste you out there in the army. Wouldn't you agree, General?"

"Absolutely, my Lord."

"But... but..." Brachius stuttered.

"Of course your silence comes with that post, Captain." She gave him a wink before leaving him floundering in her wake.

Xena and her general stood outside the healer's tent watching the sun sitting low over the battlefield. Little work had begun to bury the dead so it was a task for tomorrow. But there was one more duty she needed to attend to before she would allow herself to sleep. Wraith was being attended to, his injuries being sewn up carefully. She was about to saddle another horse when he whinnied, as if warning her that only he would carry her. Xena walked over to him and rubbed his nose. "Jealous, huh? Do you feel up to a little trip to Amphipolis?"

* * *

This time Xena didn't complain about the guard riding behind her. Her mind was on other things. She was checking up on her mother, or so she was trying to convince herself, but she suspected that she was also hoping to intercept Gabrielle before she disappeared from her life again.

It was still light but it wouldn't remain that way for long. The last few days had taken their toll and Xena would be glad to sleep without worry, or at least with the help of Jantius's sleeping potion while her back was still healing. This visit was just to allay her fears about the safety of her mother and the community in general.

Wraith pulled up at the inn's entrance, waiting for his mistress to dismount. She sat there for a moment just staring. He shook his coat, sending a ripple across his skin and bringing Xena out of her introspection.

"Sorry, boy," she murmured as her hand slapped down on his neck. She swung her leg over the pommel and slid off his back effortlessly. It was quiet. Deathly quiet. Almost hesitantly she pushed on the front door of the inn and entered.

'Hello? Mother?' Xena strained to hear any sign of movement or speech. She moved further into the establishment and called again. "Mother? Are you home?"

"No thanks to you, Xena!" Cyrene pushed through the door leading to the kitchen, wiping her hands on the ever-present rag hanging from her waist. It was as if nothing had happened. Her mother was a creature of habit and she was now habitually going through the motions of preparing dinner.

"Everything all right?"

"Melaina made sure of that. Nice girl, by the way." Cyrene smiled mischievously.

"So, ah, where is she?" Xena tried to sound mildly interested as she glanced around the room but she fooled no one.

"Before you tear the place apart, she's gone."

"Gone?" Xena tried to think of what she had done that had sent Gabrielle running for the hills. Maybe she needed to have a word with Maltus.

"She still likes you, daughter."

"I don't know-" Xena sputtered.

"Denial doesn't suit you, Xena. She told me to tell you 'another time, another place'. I don't really want to know what that means do I?"

"Errr.... no."

"So can I get you some dinner?"

"Sure, that would be nice."

It had been quite a while since she had had one of Cyrene's warming dinners and a lot of fond memories came flooding back as she ate. It became even more special when her mother sat down opposite her with her own bowl of stew. At first the only sound that passed between them was the scraping of spoon on bowl and chewing of meat.

"I heard you got hurt," Cyrene said curtly.

"Yes, but I'm fine now." She wasn't really completely healed but saying anything else would just cause an argument, and she just wasn't up to being lectured by her mother on taking care of herself.

After that the conversation got a little easier, both women able to find common ground in the past. Maybe that broken bridge was being re-built after all.

* * *

Xena exited her tent to watch the sun rise. Last night's meal had gone on longer than she had anticipated, leaving her and her men to sleep at the inn overnight. But sleep didn't come easy. Her back was stinging like Hades and, perhaps more importantly, Gabrielle was gone. She was still feeling the after effects of the fight and she was in the mood for a little company. Instead she was left to battle her demons in her childhood bed alone.

As soon as it was light enough to see Xena departed, leaving her mother with a hug and a kiss. While their relationship was not perfect it was better than she could have hoped for under the circumstances. She reached the camp just as the sun made its appearance for the day.

Xena stood on a small rise overlooking the meadow, wondering where Gabrielle was sleeping. Was she close by or had she already put some distance between them? When would she see her again? She took out her sword and swiped at the long grass near her feet in frustration. Just as she got to know her little assassin she disappeared, leaving Xena to anxiously await their next meeting. Xena could see the irony of it all. It seemed that the Conqueror was at the beck and call of another.

Graxion stepped out of his tent glad that it was now all over. He saw the Conqueror a short way off on a small rise overlooking the field of battle. Xena stood there unbowed by the recent events, her body standing tall and proud as her leaned on her drawn sword. The sun's rays painted her profile in a fiery glow, adding to her already mythical reputation. A young soldier came up to him nervously. "Yes?"

"Cleaning up has begun, Sir."

"Good."

The young man watched the Conqueror apprehensively. "Why did she do that?"

"Do what, son?"

"Put herself through that. Why?"

"Let me ask you something. Did you choose to follow her when Kyros was looking for support?"

"I followed her, aye."

"And now?"

"To Hades and back, sir."

"Kyros wanted to break her, lad. To prove to her men that she was a mere female and nothing more. But this was her gauntlet of leadership. She had to prove to you all that she was worthy of leading you into battle and, more importantly, that she was worthy to be called Conqueror."

"Didn't she know what was going to happen?" The lad then realized to whom he was talking to.
"Sorry, Sir."

"Lad, let me tell you something. Our Lord is one of the smartest military tacticians I know. She knew what was going to happen. But for her there were more important things at stake. You joined her army on her reputation did you not soldier?" The man nodded.

"Well, now you have seen how she had earned that reputation. Remember yesterday, lad, because when she becomes the Conqueror you can rightfully claim to have been there on that fateful day when her army witnessed her uncompromising spirit and her undaunted heart."

THE END.