

~ As Long As Earth Endures ~

by Bracer

Way too long disclaimer - blame Lunacy:

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Violence: As better authors than I have pointed out, it's what Xena does. Yes, it gets graphic at times. If you're really squeamish, maybe you should read something else.

Sex: Oh yes. This is a story about two women in love (even if it takes them a while to figure it out), and I surprised myself by making that kind of explicit too. If you're under 18, come back when you're older. If this offends you, come back when you've grown up. And as always, if it's illegal to read this where you live, please move, whether you finally end up reading this or not. I should probably mention there's some het-sex in there as well, although rest assured none of it involves our beloved couple.

Sexual Violence\Abuse: At one point, this is talked about. In this case there are no graphic descriptions at all, but one of the characters didn't have a very pleasant time growing up, and for various reasons it was necessary for her to tell her story. I hope I worked it out in the end, but if you're sensitive, you might not want to read this. Sorry.

Xenaverse Timeline: This is set just after the second season, pre-The Furies. Yeah, I've been working on this thing a while - almost a year.

Length: You know, sometimes you start out to write a nice little short story and you wind up with a full-on novel. I apologize to anyone who had to go to the expense of a new ream of paper to print this. I guess I go on sometimes.

Further information can be found in "Author's Notes." Avoid bending, exposure to magnetic fields, or immersion in benzene. Comments and constructive criticism can be sent to bracer99@mindspring.com.

Oh yeah, the story:

Prolog

The darkly armored warrior carefully examined the rough surface of the road, letting his vision widen its focus, reading the tracks. The route east of Troy was fairly well traveled and it wasn't easy picking out the ones he was looking for, but he was very good at it, and the years had taught him patience.

Ah, there they are, he thought, smugly satisfied, finding the right sign. One traveler leading a horse, the other lighter, smaller, walking with a staff. Just touches in the dust really. Good enough if you knew how to look. *Stand back, take everything in.* The details were just part of the larger picture. *Feel it through. Never fails.* His quarry would tell how they traveled by the marks they left. *The Earth knows they've been here. Listen to her story.*

Leading his own horse rather than riding so he could keep the tracks in sight, he continued following. *They stopped to eat here, then had a bit of trouble there - six other people, farmers most likely, being threatened by someone armed, but he was ... drunk, didn't pose any real threat. They talked. It was tense, but everyone went their way without a fight.*

The warrior shifted in his armor, then backtracked and continued on, one step at a time. Patiently. The same way he had for over a week.

Towards mid-morning, he reached a point where the tracks led off the road and headed into the forest, moving south. *Good, he smiled inwardly. That'll make their trail easier to spot. Have to be getting close now. A day, maybe less.*

He gave a wicked grin. *I'm going to surprise you, Xena, Warrior Princess. Hades take me if I don't.*

Chapter One

Gabrielle lay on her back, eyes closed, feeling the warmth of the sun on her body. It was, for once, a lazy day, something she'd had little of in better than two years of traveling with Xena. Yet there were the occasional times when her companion would deem it fit to take a day off - even if the stoic warrior never quite admitted that's what it was. It was always a surprise, and always in some beautiful, secluded spot.

Like this one. They had arrived at a sparsely wooded glen which sloped down to a lazy, clear brook. It was genuinely lovely, but the best part, the part that nearly made Gabrielle gasp in delight when she saw it, was the close carpet of tiny, lavender and blue wildflowers which covered the ground. "Xena!" the bard had gushed, almost beside herself with the storybook charm of the place. "Well, how about that," Xena had smiled slightly. "Got lucky I guess ... Hey!" the warrior had grunted, startled when her young companion suddenly hugged her.

"It's wonderful," the bard said warmly. "You're wonderful."

Xena suppressed a smile but was inwardly pleased at her companion's joy. She owed this young woman so much. *Just my sanity, and my life, she thought, maybe my soul.* The warrior inside who had spent a lifetime trying not to care now found herself trying to find little things that would make the bard happy. She knew she had been cold in the last couple of months, hadn't been as open as Gabrielle had gotten used to, and there were good reasons for that. Still, some part of her just hoped that bringing the young bard here would help make up for it.

"C'mon," Xena had said, allowing the contact to linger, if only briefly, before gently pushing the bard away. "Let's set up camp. I've got some leather and tack work to do, so you just, I dunno, go do something somewhere," she teased, rewarded with a warm smile in return.

A short while later, while Xena had slipped into a shift and sat back against a tree to oil and repair her leathers and armor, Gabrielle had found a patch of sunshine and taken out her scrolls. Yet the bard found it difficult to concentrate in the warm mid-afternoon glow, surrounded by the delicate scent of flowers, and quickly gave up. Now she lay back amongst the sweet blossoms, not sleeping exactly, but letting her mind drift. She stretched lazily, thinking of Perdicus. There was still a lingering sadness there, and she guessed it would never go away, but the sheer devastation she'd felt after Callisto killed him had faded with time. Xena had helped more than the bard would ever let the woman know. The often silent warrior could offer few words of comfort, but when tears had come at sudden, unexpected moments, she never failed wrap Gabrielle in her strong arms, holding her until they passed.

And as Gabrielle had put her sorrow behind her, she'd come to realize her grief had been as much out of guilt at having put him in harm's way as out of loss. Perdicus had been a good man. She had loved him and they might have been happy together, yet in hindsight, she'd let what was little more than a crush and her compassion for his pain and failing sway her - it was not the smartest thing she'd ever done, and it had gotten him killed.

Certainly her grief at his death had been nothing compared to what she'd felt when Xena ... died. This memory was still painful enough to give her nightmares, and she pushed it away quickly.

Xena had a strength and wisdom Gabrielle knew she could never touch. The warrior's heart was so strong she wouldn't even let her own dark past break her, a past that caused a hurt so deep it made Gabrielle's own heart ache whenever Xena let it slip, which lately had been often.

Xena had been distant since their encounter with the Horde a few months ago, even unreadable at times. Yet the warrior had seemed calmer in these last weeks, more approachable. The bard hoped today was a sign she was ready to close that distance again. *I can be patient for you Xena. I always have, and I always will. I'll be here when you're ready.*

For now though, her young body resting on the warm, soft ground, the bard turned her thoughts back to Perdicus. Even if she hadn't loved him as deeply as she once thought, they had shared a single night together. He had been her first, and so far her only, and that would always be a part of her, impossible to forget. She sighed. Especially at times like this. The sheer sensuality of lying in this wonderful glen - the warmth of the sun, the subtle perfume of the flowers, the gentle whispering of the brook - was growing on her. She remembered his touch on her body, the feel of his skin against hers, the smell of his sweat. If she let her thoughts float, she could still almost feel him against her. Moving gently. Moving together. Moving faster...

Oooh, careful Gabrielle, *she cautioned herself*. Don't get too carried away. *This was how it always began. Unconsciously, one hand grazed over the bare skin of her belly.*

Perdicus had been very sweet, very attentive, but even after they had made love a second time it still felt like something was missing. There had been a kind of heat, tenderness, but so little ... passion. That was it: Passion.

Sometimes, when she hovered on the edge of sleep in her bedroll, the young bard would think of her wedding night, and her imaginative mind would soon drift to thoughts of what other things they might have done, then to what other ... lovers might do. Too often lately, she would fall asleep hot, dreaming of warm skin being pressed to hers, of bodies entwined in the dark.

Her hand was now caressing the taught muscles of her abs in earnest, and her nipples had grown hard under the green fabric of her top, although as lost as she was in her indistinct fantasies, she was barely aware of these things.

Many times she'd been tempted by such thoughts to entice some villager into her bed, but had never done it. Then, several months ago she'd come to understand why.

She had another memory, one which she only called on in the dark of the night when she could no longer resist letting her fingers slip lower, touching the very center of herself, the image of being in a gray but strangely beautiful limbo, of blue eyes meeting hers, of lips, impossibly soft and strong, covering her own.

Lost in a sea of flowers and warmth, she let the name silently drift past her open lips into the

afternoon breeze. Xena...

Xena watched the young woman laying down only ten feet away, had been watching her for some time. Gabrielle looked so lovely, her pale form surrounded by the soft blooms around her, that as soon as her eyes had closed Xena had stopped her leather work and simply gazed. Gabrielle was like music on a rainy day, finding places in the ex-warlord's withered soul that had no joy left and filling them with hope the storm might pass. Even as shaken and unsure as the warrior had been in the last few months, Gabrielle was always there, her anchor in the light.

Xena sighed, turning back to her leatherwork. The warrior had little use for gods, had insulted enough of them in her day to think they would abandon her, if not be completely hostile. *Like most of the human race.* Yet something had blessed her with this precious gift, a path to redemption, an innocent to guide her out of Tartarus, a...

Uh, hang on ... What's this? The warrior was broken out of her reverie as she realized the bard was slowly, sensuously writhing on the flowered carpet of the glen.

Xena's eyebrow arched slowly, then she stifled a chuckle as she rolled her eyes and smiled. *Well, so much for poetry. Dumb warrior,* she thought, reminded that as wondrous as her companion was, the bard was, in some ways at least, still very much a young woman.

Hmm, this is interesting. Hormones running a little high lately, eh bard? She started to chuckle again, then was stopped by the sight. Through sheer will she tore her gaze away, looking up at the branches above. She swallowed.

Maybe coming here wasn't such a good idea, she thought. *I really should get her around people more. She needs company. She should find herself a nice ... well, someone nice, who can make her feel good, let her explore the gifts nature gives every woman. Because I can't do that. I know that now.*

Xena made herself still. *Gabrielle,* she pleaded silently. *You're so sure, and so strong. By the gods you're amazing, but except for that night with Perdicus you're missing something important. Your passion is growing, and you're not doing anything about it except let it drive you crazy - don't think I don't know how often you've been pleasuring yourself after you think I'm asleep. Sex can be wonderful Gabrielle, but like everything in life you have to decide how much it means to you. I didn't have that choice but you do. Don't make the same mistakes I did.*

Xena knew she could just slip away. Gabrielle would never even notice her leaving. It would have been easy for the ex-warlord even if her young companion wasn't so distracted. She looked at Gabrielle, seeing again the flush in her skin, heard her delicate breathing...

Careful Xena. The warrior took a few deliberate breaths. *Maybe it's time for a talk.* She sighed, knowing that words seldom came easy to her. *Just have to wing it.*

Xena cleared her throat. "I can leave you alone if you'd like."

Gabrielle's eyes flew open as she felt her whole body blush, her head snapping around to face the warrior. She glanced up at those strong blue eyes, took in the cocked eyebrow, then sat up quickly, hugging her knees, her embarrassment so obvious she wanted to die. "Gods! I just ... um ... I mean, I was just..."

"It's all right Gabrielle," Xena chuckled nonchalantly, turning back to her leathers. "You're not the first woman who ever had a fantasy. You certainly won't be the last."

Gabrielle took a deliberate deep breath, then settled over onto her stomach and began self-consciously adjusting her clothes. Still feeling her blush, she did her best to counter what the warrior had said, not even sure why she felt compelled to do so. She took another breath, then began to explain, "I was just thinking about Perdicus..."

"Aw damn," Xena said quickly, wishing she hadn't teased the young bard. *I'm really not good at this mothering thing.* "I should've kept quiet. I didn't think."

"No, please don't be sorry," Gabrielle said, just as quickly. Although she was still embarrassed, the older woman's matter-of-fact attitude and ease about it was calming her. Besides, the Warrior Princess wasn't exactly known for her willingness to talk. Sex and relationships were subjects that almost never came up, even though the young bard was as curious about these as she was everything else. *Especially lately.* So, she drew up her courage and pressed on. "I just ... I think about when we were together sometimes. He was the first ... I mean, the first I ever made love with."

Xena let out a long sigh. "Like I said, I was rude. I should have left you alone." She found a rough spot on the leather, spread a little oil on it and began smoothing it down.

Without really thinking, Gabrielle had to ask. "Who did you lose your virginity to?"

The warrior cocked an eye at her. "I don't think you want to know."

Sometimes, you just have to pry, Gabrielle thought, curiosity getting the better of her. "Oh, come on ... tell me. Some cute Amphipolitan kid must have been pretty surprised! Let me guess - Petracles?"

Xena rolled her eyes and snorted. "I wish!"

Or at least that's what she wanted to have happened. Instead, she gripped her leathers tightly. "I wish," she nearly growled. She stared downward.

Now it was Gabrielle's turn to be sorry. "It's OK Xena," she soothed, shifting around to face the warrior directly, moving closer. She realized this must be a sore spot, and her first instinct, as it always was with her troubled companion, was to try and work it through. "It's OK to talk about it, if you want ... if it would help..." *I know you won't, but it's always worth a try.*

Xena pulled herself back together. Maybe it was as good a way as any to get this particular talk started. *At least I can tell her what not to do. Where to begin?*

Xena made herself speak. "Fact is, growing up in Amphipolis there wasn't anybody who interested me." She shrugged. "The thing was I could beat anyone at anything if I worked at it long enough. That was my secret - even if I wasn't good at something right away, I'd just practice until I was."

Xena thought for a moment, then continued. "One thing I never had trouble with was boys. I learned early that all I had to do was stand a certain way, look at them a certain way. Boys would do what I wanted, and I couldn't ever respect them because of that. Not that I wasn't curious, I just wasn't attracted to anyone - not until Petracles anyway, and with him, well..."

Xena paused, searching for words. "Our relationship was more a competition than anything else. We'd flirt, draw back, make promises ... break them. We'd get each other excited and then back off. We got close a few times, but the truth is we never did sleep together, not once." She sighed. "Looking back I know I was at least as manipulative as he was, and when I got him to propose it was ... I thought of it as a victory. Of

course, he thought it was the other way around." She gave a dry snort, then grew serious again. "Then Cortese came, and the wars. He ... left not long after. Soon Amphipolis and everything else were just memories." She laid her leathers out on her lap.

Gabrielle just sat and listened. It was rare that the warrior would relate anything about her past, but when she did, the bard knew well enough to not interrupt. Xena would work through it in her own way, or she wouldn't. Gabrielle simply hoped it would help somehow.

"His name was Bulutus," Xena said quietly. She was amazed she could remember it. "After I started an army I found I could still use the way men were attracted to me, and I used it like I did everything else. I did what I needed to. He was good looking I guess, and a good fighter. Flirting with him it was even sort of fun. Then one day, in front of everyone, he called my bluff, and I wasn't about to back down." She gave a wry chuckle. "By then I even thought I wanted it. The truth was I'd simply let my own lust stew for too long. It ... clouded my judgement."

Gabrielle fit this into what she already knew. *Gods, she would've been about the same age I was when I left Poteidaia.* The thought struck her again just how different the two of them really were. "So what happened?"

The warrior shrugged. "I don't remember it much," she said flatly, hoping the bard wouldn't press for details. "We were both pretty drunk - guess that's why it happened in the first place. He wasn't ... too impressed though. That I do remember."

Gabrielle could never decide if she should treasure these moments or hate them, because she knew the warrior never felt comfortable revealing herself. As curious as Gabrielle was about Xena's past, the bard knew she was one of the few people Xena ever talked to about it, and she honestly tried to never abuse the privilege. This was especially true since so much of Xena's past was obviously painful, and however much the young woman thought it would help Xena work through it, she never liked watching her companion in pain, new or remembered. "So how'd it go with the two of you?" she asked, gently.

Xena went back to polishing. "A day later while raiding a village, I slit his throat," she said simply. The warrior couldn't help but look up at the young woman's pale green eyes. They were wide open in disbelief.

Xena shrugged again, realizing she did so automatically, hating it. "I'd planned on it, even before. Whatever his looks, he was no leader and I needed his half of the army. So I took it." She stared at the leather in her hands. "When I'm honest with myself, I know that's why I let him bed me - he wouldn't be alive long to tell stories."

Gabrielle said, quietly, "You're not like that Xena, not anymore." She shifted closer. "And you know I believe you never really were. It's in the past now. Let it go."

But is that really true Gabrielle? Is it? Without you around, I could forget that so easily. Sometimes, I forget it anyway. The ex-warlord smiled grimly and tried to make herself brighten. She'd started by wanting to help Gabrielle. Now Gabrielle was trying to help her. Xena found she didn't even mind it much - however painful it was sometimes, it never failed to touch her heart. *Keep going.*

"Yeah, well," Xena went back to polishing, "after that I knew I had a lot to learn. I learned it."

"How?" Gabrielle asked automatically.

Xena looked the bard straight in the eye. "I practiced. A lot."

"Oh," Gabrielle said, the words sinking in. Then she had a thought. "With who?" The bard rested her head on her hand eagerly, thinking this story might be getting good after all.

It wasn't to be. "Everyone." The warrior shrugged again. "Anyone."

For once, Gabrielle was speechless.

"Well," the warrior laughed dryly, "at least it was a nice way to relax after morning drills."

"So you ... liked it?"

"Well, not much at first," Xena admitted. "For a while I thought of it as just that: Practice. But I had my pick of who I commanded," she paused, "and the captives we took, and before long, yes. I liked it. I was ... pretty high-strung. I took what pleasure I wanted and didn't think much beyond what would happen day to day."

"Didn't you worry about, um, getting pregnant?"

Xena snorted again, then became more serious. *She needs to know this.* "There are ways to avoid that, Gabrielle." She smiled at her young companion. "The right herbs before or after usually do the trick. And, with all the drilling and exercise I do, I don't cycle too regularly either." She paused again. *Now that I think of it, that would almost explain Solan...*

She brought herself back to the discussion at hand. "Anyway, forget the warnings your mother gave you. As long as you're careful you don't have to worry about it. Not that much anyway."

"That's ... interesting," Gabrielle thought a minute. "Was it, um, fun? Having all those lovers?"

Xena pondered the question. She had to balance what she felt then with what she knew now. "At the time, yes," she said slowly, "but it didn't mean much. I liked having sex, a lot, but I never ... felt anything about anyone I slept with. Not most of them anyway, and when I did, more often than not ... well, it led to trouble."

The warrior sighed, shook her head slightly. "Besides which, men have a habit of wanting to be in control. They kind of expect you to just surrender at some point. Many of them only think about their own pleasure." She chuckled to herself. "You can guess I'd have a problem with that."

Gabrielle thought about this for a moment. "I can see that. Perdicus tried to be um, giving, I guess, but he did sort of tell me what to do. Of course, I didn't know very much either. I figured he was just trying to be, well, helpful."

"He probably was." Xena poured more oil on the rag she was using. *Gods, this is more talking than I usually do in a whole week. Hope she appreciates this ... some day.* "Look, Gabrielle, don't let what happened to me ... My experience is very different from yours. I taught myself to use sex like a weapon, just part of my arsenal. I enjoyed it like I would a well-fought battle, and you don't meet many nice people in a warlord's line of work." She smiled. "Gabrielle, some men can be very nice. Sex is a wonderful thing if you find the right person. It isn't something to be afraid of, or ashamed of enjoying, and love is the most wonderful thing of all. It took me ... too long to realize that."

Xena took a deep breath. She knew what she had to say next, but it took all her effort to say it. She was surprised when her voice sounded wise and factual, but she couldn't look at Gabrielle as she spoke. "But you know, you should find that out for yourself. You deserve a lover. You should stop letting me drag you all over

the known world, take some time to just ... love someone. Learn about the joy your body can bring you, on your own terms, while you're young and things are simpler. You shouldn't just let your passion burn inside you Gabrielle - it can break out and make you do things for the wrong reasons. Like mine did."

They were both quiet for a moment. Gabrielle looked down, realizing she'd come very close to blurting out, "But I *do* love someone!" Yet hearing about Xena's experiences made her painfully aware again she herself was only a once-removed virgin. She wouldn't embarrass her warrior that way.

But she had to change the subject somehow, get Xena away from once again gently suggesting she leave for her own sake - something, she noted sadly, that hadn't happened in a long time. Then she thought of another question she was dying to ask. This was one of the most intimate conversations the two of them had ever shared, and she figured it was now or never. *Better make this good...*

Gabrielle looked up, summoning her storytelling skills to sound only casually curious. "So what about sleeping with women?"

Uh oh. The warrior raised an eyebrow. "And what would you know about it?"

"Um, not much," Gabrielle replied as nonchalantly as possible. "That's why I'm asking you. I mean, in Poteidaia I knew Gretchen and Sara. They made boots, told wonderful stories by the fire at the inn every night, and were so much in love. I am a bard, so I've read most of Sappho's work - she's only the greatest poet and lyricist of our time you know. I'm also Queen of the Amazons, remember. I know what men are like - well, one man anyway - so I wonder about women ... sometimes." She settled with her head on her hand, waiting. *OK, that sounded plausible. It's even the truth ... mostly.*

Xena raised her eyebrow another notch, then chuckled. "Fair enough."

"So," Gabrielle said impatiently. "What about women?"

Xena sobered quickly. This was a minefield she'd been quietly hoping to skirt around. But she had started this, so she made herself calm, went back to polishing. "Sure, I've had women too. Not as ... often as men."

The bard was suddenly excited. Xena was no longer working through painful memories - she was simply embarrassed. The stoic warrior hid it well, but by now Gabrielle knew when she'd hit a nerve. It didn't happen often, and she pressed her advantage. "And? What's it like?"

The older woman saw how Gabrielle had pinned her. She knew she should be annoyed, but this was skimming too close to home, and she couldn't afford to let it show. She made herself calm down even further, forced herself to think. *Stay calm, Xena. Just give her the facts.* "They're different from men..."

Gabrielle shifted impatiently and cut her off. "Well I can *guess* that much! How are they different?"

Knowing a challenge when she heard one, Xena deliberately fixed her eyes on Gabrielle's. "All right, if you want to know..."

Then suddenly, Xena stopped. She looked away, closed her eyes and raised her head.

Gabrielle instantly knew the expression. Though irritated at the interruption, she dropped the conversation without a thought. "Where?" she whispered.

"Thirty paces out. Just one. Moving quiet." The warrior paused, eyes still closed. A slow smile crept across Xena's face as her eyebrow rose. "Hmm ... you're not bad..."

In an instant the warrior was on her feet, chakram in one hand, lightly tossing Gabrielle her staff with the other. The bard shifted to her knees and caught it easily.

"But I'm better," Xena said to no one in particular, eyes flashing. "Stay here. Keep quiet," she whispered to Gabrielle, then disappeared into the surrounding brush without disturbing so much as a leaf.

Gabrielle stood, holding her staff at the ready, listening to the quiet forest around her. Xena hadn't seemed too concerned so neither was she, but her curiosity was killing her. She calmed herself, trying to use her ears the way Xena had taught her.

Nothing. Not a sound. For a long moment, there was only the slightest rustling of the afternoon breeze.

Then Gabrielle heard the unmistakable whine of the chakram and a loud, surprised shout came from where it rebounded off a tree. A split instant later, the lethal spinning ring came flying out of the brushline at waist height, a darkly armored figure tumbling sideways down the slope to stay under it.

"CHEE-YAAH!" Xena leapt back into the clearing, spinning and twisting just as the chakram ricocheted off another tree within the glen. She caught it easily in mid-air, landing lightly on her feet between Gabrielle and the stranger, the ring raised high, ready for another toss at the man as he came out of his own tumble into an upright, defensive stance.

The sight of the graying hair and beard caused both women to relax and cry out, almost simultaneously, "Meleager!"

Seeing he was no longer in immediate danger, the aging warrior fell back into his usual, confident slouch. He gave a chastened grin, hooking his thumbs into the front of his belt. "Uh, hi ladies. How are ... things?"

"Meleager," Xena rolled her eyes, "what are you doing sneaking up on us like that? You should know better."

"Yeah well, that," he bounced on his feet, putting some swagger into his voice, drummed his fingers at his waist. "I just figured, you know, warrior to warrior..."

Xena raised an eyebrow. "You're lucky I didn't take your head off." She shook her head, but smiled as she sat back down against the tree.

"Aw Hades!" Meleager rubbed his chin, embarrassed. "All right, I guess that was kinda stupid. But I just ... Aw Hades!" he repeated.

Gabrielle smiled as she walked over and gave the bearded warrior a hug. "Well, it's good to see you."

Meleager returned the embrace. "Good to see you too, kid."

Gabrielle pulled away slightly and looked up at her childhood hero. "You look good," she said, then looked closer. "Actually, you look better than good." It was true. The aging warrior was trimmer than when she'd seen him last, and she could feel his muscles were tighter. There was also a strange twinkle in his eye.

He smiled. "Quit drinkin'."

Xena raised an eyebrow. "You? Quit drinking?" She noticed Meleager still had Gabrielle in his arms, and it bothered her that it bothered her.

"Xena!" The bard shot her a look. The warrior rolled her eyes, then went back to working on her armor.

"C'mon Meleager," Gabrielle said, "ignore the Warrior Cynic." She took him by the hand and led him to a sunny spot. "I think it's wonderful you've decided turn your life around."

"Oh yeah," Meleager grunted as he sat down next to her. "It's all turned around all right."

The bard furrowed her brows. "What's wrong?"

He looked at his hands. "Well, like I said, I quit drinking, about six months ago. After you, you know, saved my life and all, it just seemed to be a good idea. It was ... great. I started working out again, my skills started coming back. Pretty soon I was taking little jobs here and there." He noticed Gabrielle looking at him, then waved his hand dismissively. "Got back into the whole, you know, 'helping people out' thing."

A snort from Xena earned her another sharp glance from Gabrielle. "And?" Xena prompted, her smile managing to be sweet and insulting at the same time.

"Yeah, well," Meleager continued. "About a month ago I came across some slavers kidnapping this group of women, so ah, of course I rescued them." The dry swagger was back in his voice, but he seemed to be picking his words carefully. "Turns out they were all, um, priestesses and acolytes, and naturally they were all extremely ... grateful, so I thought it would be a good idea for me to stick around and, you know, protect them in their travels."

"What god do they follow?" Gabrielle asked, her bardic curiosity aroused.

"A um, Sumerian Earth goddess..."

Xena looked up at this. "Wait a minute," she broke in, ice-blue eyes twinkling. "This is *too* perfect. Let me guess: Inanna?"

Meleager shot her a look of surprise. "Uh ... oh. Hades ... yeah." Meleager admitted. He tried to shrug it off, but he looked like a boy caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

Xena folded her arms over her chest and fixed Meleager with a leering grin that slowly gave way to a serious fit of chuckles. Gabrielle looked from one warrior to the other, puzzled and stunned - even if it was Meleager's expense, Xena almost never laughed out loud like this.

The bard desperately searched her memory for the familiar name. *Inanna? Sumerian Earth goddess ... Oh yeah! Ancient cult. Surprised it still exists actually ... come on, think Gabrielle! OK, her followers had a festival once a year to celebrate the spring and the fertility of the Earth, and they...*

Then it came to her. "Meleager?" She crossed her arms and gave him a chastening look. "Oh, *Meleager!*"

Xena shook her head, still giggling. "The great Meleager the Mighty is traveling with a cult of Sacred Whores."

"Hey!" Meleager responded with perfect seriousness, standing indignantly. "It's not like that! They do a lot of good work - fine work! It's important putting people in touch with the Goddess!"

Xena stared at him, lips tightly shut. She nodded soberly.

Meleager turned to Gabrielle. "I mean, you'd be surprised how ... *spiritual* I am these days."

Then Gabrielle lost it, shaking so hard with laughter she almost tumbled down the slope. At that, Xena gave

up trying to hold it in, masking her own laughter by grabbing a linen towel and heading towards the brook.

Meleager just looked back and forth helplessly at two women, finally throwing up his hands. "Heathens!"

* * *

Xena had returned, a short string of fish in hand. Gabrielle was tending the fire, prompting Meleager to finish the story of how he'd won the battle of Cydonia. "Well, " he said, his usual boastfulness nowhere to be found, "we really owed everything to the Cretan militia. If they hadn't held off the Turks, gave us time to regroup, we'd have all been dead. Everyone in Greece still owes them a lot. Too many of them died giving us time to get away."

"I know. I've heard the story. They were selfless and brave," Gabrielle said softly. "But you carried the day."

"Yeah, but that was a couple of days later..."

Xena sat across from them and began cleaning the fish. In spite of the way she constantly teased Meleager, she liked him. He had his weaknesses - his drinking, the ease with which he would lie to get out of trouble - but she too had heard the stories of Meleager the Mighty while growing up. He was a strong warrior, had done a lot of good in his day. He may have fallen into his cups as the years went by, but lots of older, battle-weary soldiers needed solace. Some found it in drink, some took lovers who were much too young for them - *careful Xena*. She pushed that thought away.

At least he'd never given in to the darkness the way she had. There was something to admire in that, something Xena knew all too well. What was more, he even seemed to have dealt with his weaknesses since they'd met last.

Watching him with Gabrielle, Xena was struck by a thought: The bard had done this for him. Gabrielle had told her about the time he'd helped save Poteidaia. To hear the bard tell it, it was all Meleager's doing, yet knowing what she knew of the man and reading between the lines, then remembering how Gabrielle had literally traded her life for his when they'd met last, it was clear the young woman had urged another burned-out warrior towards redemption.

The thought both thrilled and frightened her. Gabrielle had so much goodness in her heart, was always ready to help nurture that goodness in others. Did Gabrielle only stay with her because this ex-warlord needed more help than most? Was she taking advantage of her young friend by keeping her near? Were there others, even more deserving, whom the bard would happily try to heal?

Xena sighed. Thoughts like these were short of madness, but they had some merit. She knew Gabrielle loved her and would bristle at these sort of suggestions - when she was being honest, the warrior knew Gabrielle was probably *in* love with her, which used to be a heartening thought, but lately had been just one more source of self-recrimination. Still, whatever might be going on between them, life on the road wasn't fair to her young friend. *We really should be around people more*, she mused again. *Gabrielle needs them, and they need her. She's done more for me than I deserve. If only she weren't so wonderful...*

"Xena!" the bard exclaimed, crossing the camp. "You're too quiet sometimes, you know? I didn't even see you there. Here," she said affectionately, "I'll do these." She knelt down and awkwardly picked up the remaining two whole fish, giggling as the slippery perch eluded her grasp, making Xena break into a warm smile. Then their eyes met for a moment. They locked.

Meleager noticed the long gaze and suddenly felt distinctly uncomfortable. Not knowing what else to do, he

did what he always did when he felt that way. "Ahhh," he teased loudly, "you know, it does my old heart good to have women cooking for me for a change. Hey! Now, stop it!" he yelped, suddenly pelted by a twin volley of expertly thrown fish and innards. "Hades! Come on, I was *kidding*!"

* * *

They finished the meal just as darkness was falling, and with an eager invitation from Gabrielle, Meleager had retrieved his horse, a magnificent, black Arabian stallion, and joined the camp. Xena tried not to let her irritation show. She had, after all, just decided that her young friend needed company besides herself.

"Gods Meleager," the bard gasped. "Where'd you find that horse? He's ... huge. What's his, um, name?" Gabrielle had never been comfortable around horses - it had taken her the better part of a year to get used to Argo, and even riding double with Xena had been a hurdle for a time.

Meleager chuckled. "Gift from an old friend. Name's Melampus."

Gabrielle shook her head. "I'd have named him 'Colossus' or something."

The aging warrior laughed as he set his saddle on the ground. "Yeah well, guess I called him that because he always seems to understand what I'm saying." He patted the horse's flank. "Doncha' Mel?" The stallion whinnied softly and nodded its head. "There, see? He loves me." That got a loud snort. Meleager rolled his eyes and shrugged. "Well, he puts up with me anyway. About the best I can hope for these days."

"So," Xena asked as they settled around the fire, "are you finally going to tell us why you're here?"

"Oh that, well," he began sheepishly. "Aw damn. I know I'm the last person who should be asking this, because I owe you both so much already. But, well, I need your help."

"What's the trouble?" Gabrielle asked. Just like that. Xena almost smiled. Gabrielle would never refuse a friend in need.

"Well, like I said, I've been traveling with Lilith and her followers for about a month now," he began.

"Who?" Gabrielle asked, puzzled.

"Lilith. She's the um, High Priestess." He looked at her for a moment. "Why? You know her?"

Gabrielle shook her head. "No, but I'm pretty sure the original High Priestess of Inanna was called Lilith. Is that a traditional title or something?"

"Not that I know of," Meleager frowned.

"Oh well," Gabrielle shrugged. "Guess it doesn't matter. Go on."

Meleager looked like he was about to say something, then shook his head. "Anyway, they're headed for upper Macedonia. There's a place there they want to settle down and make a temple. I've been trying to keep them out of trouble, but they keep, um ... well, basically everywhere we go they keep on, um..."

"Offering services?" Xena suggested.

"*Religious* services," Meleager insisted. "You know, they have some very ... touching ceremonies."

"Oh, *touching*. Good choice of words I'm sure," Xena countered, trying to keep from laughing again.

"Xena!" Gabrielle hissed.

"Oh all right!" Meleager gave up. "They can't stop preaching about the power of Inanna, and *among other things*," he said righteously, "that means inviting everyone to, well ... *commune* with the Goddess. Through them."

Xena raised her eyebrow even higher than it already was. He turned to Gabrielle for help, noting how the bard at least seemed genuinely interested. "They still even consider themselves virgins, you know, since their ah, supplicants are actually doing ... it ... with the Goddess and not them. They celebrate the pleasure it brings, both for those who come to worship and for themselves."

He looked down, a little embarrassed. "I don't know how to explain it exactly, but it's more than just great sex. I mean, I *have* had plenty of that after all," he added with his usual bluster, then turned serious again. "But with Lilith, it really does give you this ... feeling of being connected to, well ... everything." He shot a look back at the Warrior Princess. "And it *is* quite touching!"

Xena sighed. "All right, I can see how guarding a group of sexually eager women could be a problem."

"No kidding," Meleager groaned. "Every slaver and his brother is coming out of the woodwork. I've done OK, but I've also been lucky. Slavers are usually small bands, not well organized, but they're starting to group together. Actually, I think they're kind of pissed off at me. I can't do it alone anymore."

"So why not hire some mercenaries?" Gabrielle asked. "Certainly you must have friends from the old days..." She stopped as both warriors looked at her like she was stupid. "What?" she said, annoyed.

"Because mercenaries aren't exactly known for respecting women, Gabrielle," Xena said simply, her tactical mind settling over this unique situation. "They'd get distracted and couldn't do their job. Not unless you could hire a lot of them," she grinned, "work them in shifts. But that brings its own problems. Unless you could trust every single one of them - not likely - there'd be at least one who'd sell you out." She turned towards Meleager. "Actually, I'm wondering how you've managed it alone."

"Well, you know," Meleager responded, a little boastfully, "I've got that 'warrior code' thing and all..." Xena shot him a look. "OK," he admitted. "I'm not as young as I used to be..."

Xena couldn't resist. "Having trouble, um..." She waved her hand. "Keeping up?" she offered.

"Of course not!" he shot back. The swagger returned to his voice. "It just means I have a certain *perspective* about these things."

Xena rolled her eyes. Meleager growled, then sighed. "Look, can we stop this? I'll try to be honest if you'll just, I dunno, quit being so damn smug!"

Xena relented. "All right Meleager," she said, sighing. She really was being unfair. Men were so easy to tease this way. He was a good man at heart, and really didn't deserve it. "You're among friends here. I accept your truce."

"Thanks," he said simply. "Fact is, I mean, Lilith ... I've never met anyone like her. If..." He looked away for a moment. "Never mind. The important thing is that I have to get her followers to wherever they're going in Macedonia, and I couldn't think of anyone else who could help."

"Because we're women," Gabrielle said, almost a question.

"Yeah," Meleager gave a pained expression, "but I should've known that wouldn't matter much. They, um, took to the Amazons as well as anyone else..."

"Uh, Meleager - the Amazons?" Xena prompted.

"Well, that's the only place I could think of to take them, where they'd be safe and, you know, stay out of trouble," he replied.

"Meleager," Gabrielle was both exasperated and curious. "How'd you do that?"

"Well, the Amazons kind of owe me," he said simply. He really seemed to be telling the truth, without his usual hedging and embellishments. "I helped them out a couple of times, years back, and they're not the sort who forget. I really hated calling that particular favor in, but what else was I gonna do?"

Gabrielle realized there had to be a big story behind this. It was extremely rare the Amazons allowed themselves to fall into anyone's debt, much less a man. Still, she let it drop for now.

Meleager continued. "I brought Lilith and the rest there, figured it was the best place to leave them while I found you two." He gave a long, groaning sigh. "But, of course, women need the Goddess as much as men. More, from..." He stopped. "From what I can tell. Should have expected that I guess ... well anyway, at least they're safe for now."

He looked at Xena. "I know you have at least *some* influence with the Amazons. I have permission to travel on the territories, but it's going to take more than the three of us to get Lilith to Macedonia safely. I need some Amazon warriors to come with us, and I'm out of favors. Their Queen seems to be away somewhere, but I think between you and me and Lilith we can convince the acting regent, Ephiny, to help us out."

Gabrielle spoke up. "I don't think you'll have any problem with the Amazons Meleager," she said, pausing for dramatic effect. "*I'm* their Queen."

Meleager's head spun around, his eyes stared wide. "Say that again?"

"I'm the Queen of the Amazons," she said, unsuccessfully hiding the pride she felt.

Meleager rubbed his temples as if in pain, then sighed. "You know, I shouldn't even believe that. So why doesn't it surprise me?"

Gabrielle just smiled. "You're forgetting who I travel with. Anything can happen around Xena."

Oh no bard, Xena thought. It's the other way. Anything can happen around you.

* * *

Meleager woke to the sound of a strangled cry. He immediately rose, quick and quiet, instinctively alert, boot dagger pulled from under the bedroll and angled back along his forearm. He scanned the area, looking for trouble from the direction of the scream. There, in the pale moonlight, he made out Gabrielle kneeling over where Xena lay. He was concerned that Xena might have been harmed somehow, but that feeling was tempered by Gabrielle keeping still. Puzzled, he silently crept a little closer.

After a noiseless step or two, he froze in place. He could just make out the bard softly humming what he

recognized as a love ballad in between soothing words. Although Gabrielle had her back to him, he could tell she was gently stroking Xena's hair and face, and could sense the woman warrior's tense body gradually relax.

A short time later, when Xena seemed to be resting quietly again, Gabrielle leaned forward. Meleager couldn't tell from where he stood, but was almost certain the bard was gently kissing the warrior. Silently, he timed his footsteps to match Gabrielle's movements as she backed away from the now peacefully sleeping woman.

He managed to be seated on his bedroll as Gabrielle reached hers, although he had no chance to pretend to be asleep before the young woman turned to look at him.

"Nightmare?" he said simply.

"Yeah," Gabrielle whispered wearily, a little embarrassed. "They almost went away for a while, but after we fought the Horde..." Her voice trailed off.

Meleager nodded. "It's OK kid," he said softly. "I get 'em too. Used to be pretty bad."

He looked down for a moment. *Gods Gabrielle - the Horde? What keeps you from getting nightmares?* Then, suddenly, he thought he knew the answer.

When he looked back up, Gabrielle was staring straight ahead, hugging her knees. The young woman's concern was something you could almost feel in the air. Meleager reached out a callused hand and touched the edge of her bedroll. "She's lucky, you know, to have you. Me ... I just started drinking myself to sleep every night. Next thing I knew I'd lost a few years."

There was a moment of silence. Then Gabrielle said quietly, "Listen, Meleager, don't say anything about this to Xena in the morning. It's not the sort of thing she wants people to know. She probably won't remember it anyway. I'd just as soon she didn't."

"No problem kid. I understand," he smiled warmly. "Are you gonna be OK?"

She nodded. "Yeah. I'll stay up a bit longer, make sure she's really all right. You go back to sleep though. No sense in all of us being zombies tomorrow."

"OK. Will do," he replied, smiling at her again as he lay down. "You know," he said softly, "she really is a very lucky woman, Gabrielle. And you're ... you're a very special one."

The bard rested her forehead on her knees, then turned towards him with a smile. "Thanks Meleager."

The aging warrior closed his eyes as he settled back. *No. Thank you kid. Thank you for Xena and me both.*

* * *

Gabrielle was startled awake the next morning by the sound of clashing steel. She lifted her head in bleary alarm, then heard the voices and realized it was Xena and Meleager sparring. "Great," she snorted, then rolled back over. They'd be at it for hours.

Sure enough, Gabrielle had time to finish her nap, stoke the fire, and get breakfast going before the two of them took a break and returned to the camp. Meleager threw himself down with a loud groan. He looked

completely exhausted. Xena hardly seemed winded, but Gabrielle knew the warrior would never let it show even if she were about to collapse. *Wait a minute ... Ha!* There it was, the slight, telltale rush of breath as Xena sat down. The bard smiled. *His skills really must be coming back.*

She picked up two waterskins, handing one to Meleager, who was closer. As he took it gratefully, the bard noticed he sported an ugly-looking bruise along the right side of his jaw. "By Artemis Meleager! Are you OK?"

"Yeah," he grimaced as she touched it lightly.

"Xena..." Gabrielle began.

"He nicked me," the warrior shrugged.

"I *said* I was sorry," Meleager grunted.

Gabrielle crossed to Xena and gave her the second waterskin. "Let me see," the bard said quietly.

"Gabrielle, it's nothing. Hardly a scratch." When the bard didn't move, Xena rolled her eyes and extended her right arm. It took a second to find, but a small cut showed just above where her wrist bracer ended. For once the warrior wasn't exaggerating. It really was hardly a scratch.

"You clobbered him for *that*?" the younger woman asked in a voice full of reproach. She seemed both angry and puzzled.

Xena looked away. Her gut instinct was to just shrug and say nothing. Instead, she found herself being honest, hating the thought of Gabrielle being angry with her for any reason. "He surprised me," she admitted finally. "I did it without thinking."

"It's all right Gabrielle," Meleager insisted from the other side of the fire. "It happens. Really it was my fault. I kinda got wrapped up in what we were doing and got careless." He looked at his hands. "I haven't had a workout like that in a long time. It feels ... good to be active again, to have my body just *do* things the way it used to..." Then, barely a whisper, "Almost like it used to."

He shook his head, then his swagger came back. "Surprised you, huh, Warrior Princess?" He raised his own eyebrow. "Well, fancy that."

"The only surprise was that you asked me to spar the first place. Want to go again?" Xena challenged.

Meleager smiled, rubbing his jaw. "Well, maybe tomorrow. I'm uh, not as young as I used to be."

The bard looked from one to the other, then finally gave an exasperated shrug. "Warriors!" she huffed. "Come on. Let's eat. We've got work to do if you two are finished fooling around."

A short while later they broke camp and headed down the road to Amazon territory, the two warriors simply leading their mounts and walking on either side of Gabrielle. For her part, the bard couldn't stop asking questions about Inanna's followers - and, Xena noted uncomfortably, Gabrielle seemed especially interested in talking about how they invited the Amazons to worship.

However, it was almost worth it to watch Meleager the Mighty struggle to explain it to his supposedly innocent young friend. "Well," Meleager swallowed. "You see, one of their core beliefs is the idea that, um, women should enjoy the, ah ... physical ... pleasures ... as much as men do."

"Well," Gabrielle said loudly, deliberately turning towards him, "*that* sounds familiar." She didn't have to look to know Xena was glaring at her, and from the expression on Meleager's face as he glanced over her shoulder, it must have been a doozy. Gabrielle smiled sweetly. "So?"

"Uh, yeah," he said slowly. "Well, anyway, they also believe that everyone should have a chance to reach the Goddess, and I mean everyone. I've never seen them turn anyone away. Rich or poor, young or old - well, I mean, not *too* young anyway - they're all welcome to the Goddess. Actually, they believe every woman is already in touch with Inanna, the priestesses just have a special bond, since they've dedicated their um, bodies to her and all. Mostly it's men who need help, and women can get especially ... uh, *close*, through them. And I swear," he said, his voice drifting off, "when you see the way their worshippers look afterwards, you believe it."

"Makes quite a show I'll bet," Xena interrupted dryly.

"It's not like I watch, Xena," he said, without a hint of defensiveness. "I wouldn't presume." That earned him a surprised arched eyebrow. "Look, I keep telling you it's a beautiful thing, and you keep making jokes. You'll see for yourself in a day or so. Let's drop it 'til then."

With this he turned and wordlessly kept walking, leaving two slightly stunned women staring at his back. Xena and Gabrielle exchanged a long look. Finally Xena shook her head. "I guess he was serious about becoming spiritual."

"I guess so," Gabrielle replied.

* * *

Stophacles looked out through the front flaps of his tent. The camp was larger than he could ever remember it being, and it was likely to get larger still. *Why can't things just be simple anymore?* he asked himself, then spat on the ground in disgust.

"Still angry?" Klytus asked.

"Damn right! Those bitches are costing me money, Klytus."

"Forget about the cost. Think of the reward."

"To Tartarus with that!" Stophacles spat again. "If I wanted to spend money to make money I'd have been a merchant! Slavers don't buy things, they take them! Life should be simple, and this is getting complicated, all over a bunch of worthless whores."

"A bunch of exceptionally well-trained whores," Klytus corrected, reclining back on his pallet and guzzling another mug of ale. "Which hardly makes them worthless. Just keep thinking about that quarter million dinars."

"Yeah," Stophacles said with irritation, taking his own seat and pouring himself another mug. "A quarter million, before expenses, and split how many ways now? Is it three or four? I'm losing track."

"Five," Klytus replied. "You, me, the two mercenary captains, and that smith, Brack."

Stophacles groaned, "Right, Brack. I still think we shouldn't have cut him in for an equal share."

"Had us by the short hairs pal." Klytus reached for the pitcher. "We're out of front money and he's the only one who could get us that many cages and sets of chains in time. Besides, your share will still be more than

you'd make in five summers. Maybe we can retire somewhere quiet and just stiff the smith."

"Yeah," Stophacles grunted, thinking that wasn't a bad idea. "But this still smells of a bad deal. If Xerxes is giving us a quarter million, how much do you think he'll make out of it?"

"Trying to think as little as possible," Klytus replied, hefting his mug. "Those whores will likely have an Amazon escort. We need all the help we can get."

"Well if they don't I'm gonna look mighty stupid. Damn Meleager to Tartarus!" Stophacles spat again. "I don't know how he managed it, but I swear I'll see him roasting over a slow fire before this is over!"

"Let that thought keep you warm partner," Klytus yawned. "Let it keep you warm."

Chapter Two

A day later, Xena, Gabrielle and Meleager reached the Thermodon river and turned south, finally arriving at the outer perimeter of Amazon territory. Within minutes, they heard the greeting bird call from the surrounding trees. Both Meleager and Gabrielle raised their hands to their mouths to give the return signal, then Meleager just chuckled and rubbed his jaw. "Sorry," he smiled. "Please, my Queen."

Within moments of them raising their hands above their heads in the symbol of peace, three Amazons had dropped from the trees, including Solari. All three fell to one knee before the bard, Solari lowering her head with a smile. "Queen Gabrielle, welcome home." She rose. "Xena, good to see you as always. Meleager, welcome back - I think," she said with the hint of a smile, which quickly disappeared, "but I will remind you, Meleager, of the conditions with which you travel our lands."

"Way ahead of you," Meleager replied as he finished unbuckling his sword belt. With some deliberation of movement, he handed it over to the nearest Amazon, then carefully withdrew his two boot daggers and gave them up as well.

"And?" Solari said, raising an eyebrow.

"Huh? Aw Hades, hang on..." He slipped his hand inside a pocket in his armor and produced a trio of hand-sized, metal X-shapes, the points of which looked sharp and deadly. Solari's further gaze produced an exaggerated groan, and Meleager slipped a pair of small push daggers from under the back of his belt.

Solari stared at him a moment longer, and he rolled his eyes and drew a thin loop of garrote wire out of his sleeve. Finally, while muttering under his breath, he unbuckled his shoulder and breastplates, handing over his body armor as well. "And that's it," he said testily, crossing his arms. "Tarendel said I could keep my pants on!"

"Actually," Solari smiled again, "she said you *should* keep your pants on, if I remember it right. However, I'll keep to the spirit, if not the letter of the law." She stepped between Meleager and Gabrielle, twining an arm around the bard's and gripping Meleager's ear between the fingers of her other hand. "Come on, we'll escort you to the city."

"Ow! Hades!" he groaned. "Come on Solari, give me a break here..."

"Oh no," Solari teased. "I have to warn you, oh Meleager the Mighty, not every Amazon will be happy you're back. Some of us now wish you'd never asked for our help in safekeeping those priestesses of yours," her eyes twinkled at Gabrielle, "the rest don't want you taking them away."

Stifled laughter came from the raven-haired warrior behind them. "This just gets better and better."

Solari refused to give any further explanation of the current state of Amazonia, so Gabrielle made do with catching up on other important events and gossip. Things had gotten somewhat brittle between the Amazon nation and their closest neighbor to the south, the city-state of Anza. "How bad is it?" Gabrielle asked.

"Well, it's not exactly good, but it hasn't gotten serious yet either," Solari replied. "I don't know all the details - something to do with a stretch of land we haven't used in a while, so Anza wants it, but there are a couple of other things that could use the Queen's official decision. Ephiny's pretty glad you're here..." The Amazon let out a strange chuckle. "Well, for lots of reasons."

As they rounded the last bend in the road, the wooden battlements of the main city came into view. Nestled against them, just to one side of the main gates was what appeared to be a second, smaller city of tents and wagons.

Xena's eyes narrowed at the sight. "Meleager," her voice rumbled in her throat, "just how many women are in this cult?"

"Oh, I dunno exactly," he fumbled. "There's Lilith, of course, and her twenty-four priestesses, they each have an acolyte. Um, support personnel - cooks and the like." He saw the annoyed expression on the woman warrior's face, and his head dropped a little lower along with his voice. "Some servants, a few scribes, and a handful of, well, hangers-on. That's it. I think."

"How many?" It wasn't really a question.

"I guess it's around a hundred..."

Xena closed her eyes. She'd figured on protecting a small band of women, not a traveling village. "This just gets better and better."

"Look, I know it's a problem," Meleager explained, his usual bluster gone. "One more time, I'm sorry to drag you into this, but it's not as bad as it sounds."

"Oh really?" Xena wondered what other little details Meleager had conveniently left out.

"Yes, really," he insisted. "They've also got their own force of guards - not many, only twenty-five, but they're good, and the Amazons agreed to train them while they're here. Besides that, almost all Lilith's followers know at least some basic self-defense. They can keep cool in a crisis."

Solari spoke up. "I can vouch for the guards Xena. They aren't exactly Amazons, but then, who is?"

"Well," Xena replied slowly, "that's something at least." She shook her head, thinking. Tactically, this was going to be a difficult journey, no way around it. Still, she realized that so far Meleager had done just about everything she herself would have in the same situation. *How do we keep getting into these things?*

"Come on," Meleager said, "I'll take you to meet Lilith ... Ow! Stop *doing* that!"

Solari had gripped his ear again. "Oh no," she insisted. "Ephiny made it very clear I was to bring all of you directly to her, first thing."

As they approached the gates, Xena and Gabrielle were struck by the sight, sound, and even the smell of the small tent village. There didn't seem to be much activity at all, just a few women clothed in simple, if brilliantly

white gowns moving from tent to tent. A chorus of voices, singing sweetly in a language Gabrielle didn't recognize seemed to come from everywhere, and the same breeze that brought the music also carried the scent of strangely delicate perfumes and incense.

"What's going on?" Gabrielle asked.

Solari looked up, indicating the sun. "It's mid-day," she explained. "When the sun is at its height, they begin their dedication ceremony. In an hour or so services will begin." She gave an odd smile. "Or at least they will for the lucky few who get permission to go. Ephiny's had to make some pretty strict rules about that." She laughed. "Come on..."

Xena noticed Gabrielle just standing in place, swaying slightly, looking toward the tents. She laid a hand gently on the bard's shoulder. "Are you all right?"

Gabrielle looked over at the warrior, an unreadable expression on her face. Their eyes met for a long moment, and the strawberry blonde began to smile. Then Gabrielle abruptly blinked and looked away, blushing. "Sorry," she stammered. "That song is just, kind of ... haunting." She looked back up at Xena. "Don't you feel it?"

Xena listened. The rhythm was slow, with high voices carrying the main chorus while lower ones worked in a counterpoint underneath, a rich combination of tonal hues. *Well, it is very ... pretty.* One of Xena's many skills, if one she rarely let herself use, was her fine singing voice. Yet now she found herself almost humming along with the music, picking out the notes, finding the place where her own range could add to it.

Almost, but not quite. She shook it off. "Yes, it's nice," the warrior said flatly. "Come on."

They turned to see Solari standing with her arms crossed, a smug grin on her face. "Don't worry folks," the Amazon quipped, "it hits everyone like that the first few days. They've got quite a repertoire. For a while we even thought there was something besides incense in that incense. It's one reason they're now camped outside and not inside the walls."

They made their way through the Amazon city, finally reaching the council house. Ephiny was there to greet them as they approached the door. She took Gabrielle's arms in her own. "My Queen," she said, "good to have you with us again."

"Thank you Ephiny," the bard smiled, "and you know 'Gabrielle' will do just fine. Especially for you."

"Yes ... Gabrielle," the regent smiled back. She extended her hand to the woman warrior. "Xena, it's good to see you too, as always."

The two clasped forearms. "Ephiny."

The Amazon finally turned to the only man who could be found for miles. "And Meleager." She crossed her arms. "Why didn't you just plant a few random explosives around before you left? It would have been easier to handle."

He groaned. "Ephiny, I..."

She cut him off with a wave of her hand. "We'll talk about it in a moment." She gestured to one of her attendants. "Sula, see to it their horses are stabled. Bring the Queen's, and Xena's belongings to the royal hut. Meleager's you can send to Lilith - he'll be staying outside the walls. And," she glanced at Gabrielle, "have

food sent to my chambers. We'll be meeting there, since he isn't allowed in the council room. . ."

She turned to Gabrielle again with a knowing smile. "I assume you're hungry?"

The bard felt her stomach groan. "Artemis' bow, I hate being that predictable. Thank you Ephiny. So tell me what's been going on here for the last, what, couple of weeks?"

The regent led them around to her own room and sat down wearily at the table. "Well, some of it's been good, some of it's been outright disruptive." She shot Meleager an accusing look, and the aging warrior found something really interesting in the surface of the table to pick at.

"What's happened?" Gabrielle asked again. "And please don't blame Meleager. He just did what he thought was best."

Ephiny shrugged with resignation. "I suppose. Well," she began, "at first no one gave the cult much thought, but a few went over to see what they were about and . . . basically they came back and spent the rest of the day wandering around in a daze with these big . . . *smiles* on their faces." She gave an exasperated grunt. "Well, to keep it short, let's just say that a couple of days later, it seemed like half the city was walking around that way. Attendance at drills dropped off, and all kinds of work was just being ignored."

"That bad?" Gabrielle asked, all concerned.

Ephiny sighed. "Well, not really," she admitted. "Actually, it turns out the ones who go to worship aren't the problem. They snap out of it when they need to. The real trouble started when women began arguing about who would get to go next, showing up for the queue earlier and earlier, waiting in line longer. We've had women from all over the territories make their way here. Even the courtesy lodges are full, and that's never happened before, not in times of peace anyway. It got worse when the priestesses had to start turning women away - some of them didn't take it well." Noting her Queen's concern, Ephiny leaned forward, assuring, "It's all right. Nothing too serious. In fact incidents have been few, considering, but it's put a definite crimp in our usual, disciplined way of life."

"Yeah, they'll do that," Meleager said absently. "Sorry. I'll, uh, try and keep quiet."

Ephiny continued. "However, the most serious problem is that some of the Amazons began to get worried we were offending Artemis by um, worshipping this Inanna."

"Any sign of that?" Gabrielle asked.

"No, not so far," Ephiny replied. She crooked her head. "In fact, when I met with Lilith to discuss the problems they were causing and brought it up, she said she'd talked to Artemis and told me that she wasn't jealous."

"Weird." Gabrielle's brows furrowed. She looked at Ephiny. "You believe her?"

The regent looked thoughtful. "Yes. Yes I do," she said finally. "Lilith definitely has some kind of divine connection. I believe her, but that hasn't stopped the fear among some of the Amazons. If we're not careful, it could get violent."

"Gods," Gabrielle gasped. "That's not good. A holy war among the Amazons would get out of control fast."

"It's OK," Ephiny continued, reaching across the table to soothe the bard's tightening hands. "The last several days haven't been that bad. We had their tents moved outside the walls a week ago, and I gave some orders

that limited the number who could attend the afternoon ceremonies."

"Why not just stop it?" Xena broke in, flatly.

Ephiny looked at her for a moment, as if noticing the warrior's presence for the first time, then tucked a stray lock of hair behind her ear and looked away. "Because in spite of everything, they've done a lot of good," she replied honestly. "I've seen battle-weary soldiers, withdrawn in grief, suddenly begin talking again. Couples who quarreled and split up have been reunited. Women crippled through fighting or disease have lost their self pity. And although a few have been strongly against it, in general everyone just seems to be, I don't know, happier, closer together."

Meleager was smiling. He turned to Xena smugly. "Told you." The warrior just set her jaw and glared at him.

"Yeah, well," Ephiny sighed again, turning back to Gabrielle. "Nevertheless my Queen, I think it's best they move on, and soon."

"Me too," Gabrielle said. "Which brings up the next point. Meleager says that several groups of slavers are banding together. It's clear Lilith and her followers are going to need more protection on their journey than just her guards and the three of us. I believe, for obvious reasons, that Amazons would be the best suited for this. Since the journey is long - Macedonia - I won't make it an order for anyone to go, but..."

Ephiny politely held up a hand, smiling and nodding gently. "I know. We've already discussed this in council. I ... We just wanted to hear what you had to say before we made any official decision." She smiled. "Looks like you came to the same conclusion, although maybe not for the same reason."

"How so?" Gabrielle cocked her head.

Ephiny smiled again warmly, once again covering Gabrielle's hands with her own. "I know Meleager and Xena are friends of yours, so I figured you'd want to go with them. The journey's going to be dangerous, and we aren't about to risk our Queen if we can help it. When I pointed this out, the council vote was unanimous."

"Thank you Ephiny," Gabrielle replied, just as warm. "I can always count on you, can't I?" Not so much a question as a statement.

"Always, Gabrielle, always," the regent replied, giving the bard's hands another squeeze, continuing to smile. She looked down briefly, then her voice was all business again, although she never let go of her Queen's smaller hands. "But asking for volunteers isn't the best way. Too many would simply want to go along for the, um, fun of it. However, I've already begun carefully - and discreetly - selecting women to go with you."

"How many?" Xena broke in, rudely.

"What I can spare," Ephiny seemed irritated by the abrupt intrusion. "How many do you think you'll need?"

"Can't say," the warrior replied evenly. "I'll have to see how good Lilith's guards are."

Meleager leaned in uncomfortably. "Um, 'scuse me here, but I've, ah, seen the guards in action. I figure maybe thirty or forty Amazons would do. More than that and we'd need even more support and provisions and it'd just slow us down. We'll need about half archers and half soldiers, plus a few good scouts..." He looked at the three pairs of eyes staring at him. "You know, if ... possible," he stammered.

Ephiny looked at him blankly for a moment, then shrugged with a half grin. "Actually, that's about what I figured." She looked back at her Queen. "It'll take another day or two."

"Thank you, Ephiny," Gabrielle said. "So, when can we meet Lilith?"

"In a while, if that's OK," the regent replied, giving Gabrielle's hands a final squeeze, then she stood and gestured to the two Amazons who entered with trays of meat, bread, and fruit. "Their ceremonies will be over in an hour or so, and I'll guess you all want to rest a bit and eat something." She leaned over and placed a hand on Gabrielle's shoulder. "Probably one of you more than others. Now, I'm sorry but I've got other things to attend to."

Ephiny leaned closer to Gabrielle, speaking softly. "But I'd like very much for you to join me in council after you've seen Lilith. I need to take advantage of my Queen while I can."

The bard gave her regent's hand a return squeeze. "It's always an honor to serve my people, Ephiny. I'll be there soon."

A few feet away, Xena was grinding her teeth and trying not to glare at the exchange. Meleager noticed the warrior's jaw tighten, but said nothing.

* * *

Towards mid-afternoon Xena and Gabrielle followed Meleager through the gates towards Lilith's tent. Meleager was required to be escorted at all times on Amazon land, but Ephiny agreed that the bard and warrior would do well enough, and that the rules could be bent. "I guess you can keep him out of trouble as well as anyone," the regent quipped.

"Count on it," Xena had replied.

As they made their way towards the large, central tent, Gabrielle looked around wide-eyed. "By the gods Xena," she began. "I don't know what I expected from a camp of Sacred Whores, but everything seems kind of, I don't know..."

"Normal," Xena finished for her. The warrior looked around. True, there was an odd undercurrent of sensuality about everything: The tents were made of softer materials than usual, with a few more decorative touches in faint colors, and the scent of understated perfumes and incense still hung in the air. Yet there was almost no overt eroticism. It was more like the camp of a large dance troupe than a traveling brothel district.

"Well," Meleager said jauntily, practically bouncing with every step, "I hate to be the one who said 'I told you so' and whatnot, but..."

"Stow it Meleager," Xena cut him off, but with some humor.

They came to the central hub of the village, an open area in front of what Xena assumed was Lilith's tent. It was surrounded closely by smaller, square tents, which flanked the door and continued, one next to the other, all the way around the visible sides of the larger one. Xena figured they ringed Lilith's tent completely. There was a small wooden altar just outside the door, and in front of this was a low, round table, set with an assortment of fruit. Three notably attractive women wearing brilliant white, sleeveless gowns were walking around, pouring wine for a group of perhaps ten Amazons, who were dressed in loose-fitting, thin, white robes, arranged on cushions around the table.

The sight made both Xena and Gabrielle pull up short. Never before had the warrior and bard seen Amazons acting quite like this. They were all smiling and laughing, with an air of total contentment and relaxation. They playfully fed each other grapes or embraced gently. One or two couples had simply reclined together, and

one woman was actually braiding another's hair with an absent smile.

The object of this attention waved at them and rose languidly with a girlish giggle. "Xena! Gabrielle! Oooh, it's sooo nice to see you!"

"Eponin?" Gabrielle said with a shock as the normally battle-hardened Amazon weapons master gave her a warm, lingering hug, hands caressing the small of the bard's back. "Uh, how ... are you?"

"Mmm, peachy..." The Amazon turned with open arms to Xena, who stood frozen and stiff as she received a similar embrace. Eponin stepped back and pouted, then giggled. "Oh Xena ... you're *such* a stick in the mud!"

"I'll stick where I am, thank you."

"Oh, be that way then," she pouted again. Then she let her head loll back, hugging herself. "Can't you feel it? The Earth? The *song*?" She raised her arms out from her sides, palms up, closing her eyes. "I'm going to enjoy this *beautiful* spring day ... the sun is sooo nice and warm..."

"Eee-pohhh-niin," her companion back at the table giggled. "Why not let Atla here finish your hair, hmmm? It's sooo soft..."

Xena threw up her hands. "Enough of this," she grunted. "Come on you two, let's go see Lilith."

"Uh, yeah," Gabrielle stammered. "Good plan." Meleager just laughed as he followed towards the tent.

One of the women who had been pouring wine, a slim blonde, stepped up to the three of them. Smiling, she said sweetly, "Ahhh, so you are Xena and Gabrielle. Welcome. Meleager, your return is pleasure for us all."

"Thank you Svetla," Meleager grinned. "Can you tell..." "Lilith that you're here?" Svetla finished with a warm smile. "Yes. She knows. Please, would you all follow me?"

She led them through the front flaps of the large tent into an antechamber of sorts. It was lit by sunlight filtered through an expanse of sheer white silk which made up the ceiling, giving the whole room an almost ethereal glow. The floor was a soft woven carpet, scattered with cushions and a single chair against the far wall. The effect was both simple and elegant.

Svetla's arm swept the room. "It would be pleasure if you made yourselves comfortable. I'll bring Lilith."

"No need," a voice came through the cloth at the back of the room, "I am already here."

The voice was husky, yet exquisitely melodic at the same time, the words slow and liquid, flowing like honey. The flaps parted as if on their own, and a woman entered, moving with such an easy grace she appeared to glide rather than walk. Gabrielle stared. Lilith was medium height, with dark hair cascading in rolling waves to her shoulders. She was dressed in a simple, loose, sleeveless gown of white, which set off deeply tanned, smooth skin, a silver cord at the waist just bringing out the supple curve of her hips. Her oval face was utterly ageless - high cheekbones and the playful smile which parted her lips were almost girlish, yet her large, dark gray eyes carried wisdom and depth. She wore no makeup or jewelry at all, and Gabrielle noted it would have been wasted if she had.

Her exotic looks were striking, but the open, unselfconscious way she carried herself was more powerfully attractive still. The bard's literary mind noted that if Xena's presence commanded attention, Lilith's was casually inviting it.

"Ah Meleager," Lilith crooned, "Happy I am to have you with me again, my dear one." Her slim arms encircled his waist and rose up his back, pulling him close, not so much embracing him as melting into him. Her eyes closed and her smile widened as she rested her face against his chest. She purred through perfectly white, even teeth.

"Well," Xena said without a hint of irony, "I can see why he likes her."

A long moment later she released him, her hands running gently over his chest. Meleager was practically gasping. "It's ah, good to see you too."

She turned to the two women, looking from one to the other. "And you are Xena, and Gabrielle." For a spare instant as she looked at them, her dark brows furrowed, then she gave a warm smile, her head tilted to a coy angle as if she'd heard a joke no one else had. She flowed over to the spot in front of them. "I welcome you both with all my heart. I thank you for your willingness to help. We will need it. You are special souls, pleasure to be near, and I can see."

She lifted her arms and ran the backs of her hands lightly down the side of each woman's face. Gabrielle's eyes widened. A slow warmth spread out from deep in her chest, and she blushed deeply for no apparent reason. Then Lilith smoothly turned and moved towards the chair.

Gabrielle felt compelled to look at Xena, found her companion's blue eyes meeting her own. The warrior looked almost stunned, but there was a strange, slight smile on her face. Gabrielle thought she had never seen Xena look so beautiful, and felt her pulse quicken. The warmth was still inside her, and in it she recognized an echo of the desire she'd felt lying in the glen a few days before. She felt the overwhelming urge to wrap her arms around the tall woman, and thought that if Xena looked at her a moment longer, her knees would give out.

But mercifully, Xena blinked. Gabrielle made herself exhale slowly as she saw the raven haired warrior look after Lilith with an expression the bard saw on Xena's face only rarely: Curiosity.

"Come," Lilith said without turning around as she neared the chair, "we have many things to discuss. You are likely to have questions. I will answer as best I am able. May I offer you some wine, or anything else I may have before we begin?" She drifted into the seat and settled back into an easy recline.

Meleager took the cushion to her immediate right. "Nah," he said, "I'm OK."

Her knees still unaccountably weak, Gabrielle gratefully sat down on the large pillow to Lilith's left. "Actually, yes please. I'd like some water, or maybe some juice?"

Lilith smiled. "I can have you brought some sparkling cider. Would that please you?"

Gabrielle nodded, "Yes. Thank you."

"And you, Xena?"

"Just another chair, if it's no trouble." The warrior was still standing.

Lilith smiled and rose easily to her feet. "It would not be trouble. However, perhaps this would be as acceptable?" She sank smoothly to the cushion next to Gabrielle as she indicated the now vacant seat with a slight wave. Xena nodded and sat down.

Lilith turned her head towards Svetla, who stood by the front flaps of the tent. "Svetla, be kind and bring

cider for Gabrielle?"

"It will be pleasure for me," the blonde replied, smiling at the bard and backing out of the tent. "Thank you Lilith."

The High Priestess shifted around gracefully and lay her head across Meleager's lap as if it were the most natural thing in the known world, yet her eyes looked up at Xena. "We should begin. Time does not wait."

Unfazed, Xena leaned back a little. "First off, where in Macedonia are you headed?"

"It has no name," Lilith replied, "it is just a place. It is to the west on the northern border, a valley surrounded on all sides by high mountains. The nearest settlement is a day's ride to the east, and is called Kestell. The power of Inanna is very strong in this place. I do not know why. It is lush and green in the summer months, fruitful. Springs both hot and cold give it life."

"How do you know about it?" Gabrielle asked with some difficulty. Lilith's voice was terribly hypnotic.

"Many years ago it was where I first found the Goddess," came the songlike reply. "I wished to build a temple even then, but my life took a different path. Now that the following is strong again, it is where we should stay. It can keep us from the world when the time comes, and sustain us for the years ahead." Her expression was suddenly thoughtful.

"What do you mean?" Gabrielle asked.

"I have foreseen a time when the world will turn from the Goddess and nearly forget her, a time that is not far off." Lilith closed her eyes, as if from a painful vision. "So we must hide ourselves away and wait. In the fullness of time the world will find Her again, led by my true daughters, though it will be gradual in coming, unfair and often painful for them, and likely take millennia. Then we can embrace the world once more, and lead all in the song of the Earth, and the joy of true partnership."

Lilith opened her eyes. A single tear ran down her sculpted face, but she smiled again as Meleager stroked her hair. "I am sorry if this seems, what is your word? Melodramatic?" The Priestess laughed wistfully. "I cannot even say with certainty these things will pass. I am many things to many people, but I am no oracle. I know only what is happening in the world now, and have sown the seeds against where I believe it must lead. It is fast approaching the age of forbearance, and patience. We must love each other for a time, for no one else will."

"All right," Xena said slowly. "If it's surrounded by mountains, how do we reach the valley?"

Lilith's eyes turned down but her smile deepened, almost as if amused by the question. "There is a cave, a passage through the rock. It is well hidden, but wide enough for even a wagon to travel. In time, when our people are of sufficient number, it shall be sealed behind us."

"Not bad," the woman warrior said absently.

Just then, Svetla returned carrying a tray with short legs, on which rested four silver goblets and a jug. The blonde set the tray next to Gabrielle and poured the frothing cider into all four cups. She handed one to the young woman with a smile. "May my pleasure be yours."

"Um, thanks," the bard replied, a little uncertain.

Unbidden, Svetla passed a goblet to Lilith, who accepted it with a nod. Then the blonde backed towards the

tent flap at the back of the room, reaching behind her to open it. "Call on me if there is further need," she said happily. "This has been good for me." Then she left.

Gabrielle took a sip automatically as she watched the woman make her exit, then she took a larger swallow. "Wow. This is ... excellent," the bard enthused. "You should try some Xena."

When the armored woman gave her a chiding look, Gabrielle just picked up a goblet and held it out to her friend. "Oh, come on big warrior, live a little," she chided back. "It's really good."

"All right," Xena relented with a resigned grin. She took the goblet and wet her lips, then cocked her head and drank a bit more. "I'll be damned," she said simply, then silently raised the cup in Lilith's direction.

The Priestess positively beamed. "Your pleasure should truly be ours together," she said, her voice even sweeter, if that were possible. "Meleager, you must share as well." She passed her goblet up to him, then smiled and took the last cup from Gabrielle. All four raised their goblets and drank.

A few contented sounds later, Gabrielle settled back and asked the next question. "Ephiny tells me you spoke to Artemis. Is that true?"

Lilith raised herself up slightly, then sultrily leaned back against Meleager. "Yes. I know you are the Amazon Queen, and concerned for your people. I am once again sorry for the trouble we have caused. This land is so exclusively female, and I should have foreseen how powerful an effect we would have by inviting them to worship. It is unique in my memory, and quite wonderful."

The Priestess' fingers began idly running along Meleager's thigh. "Still, it is Artemis' domain, and I was happy to see her. It has been many years. I went to her temple the first night we were here. We spoke of times long past, and made love." She lay back and gazed up at Meleager with affection. "I am sorry again I had to leave you that night, my dear one. Had you not been so busy, I would have explained beforehand. As it was, I hope I made good the following night." She playfully scratched his chin.

"Aw," he chuckled, then leaned over and lightly kissed her forehead. "Like I said, you don't have to explain anything to this old man. Your life's complicated enough. I'm OK."

Closing her eyes, Lilith slithered up his chest until she could rest her head back against his shoulder, then gathered his hands in hers, crossing them around her waist. She hummed a slow melody and they moved in rhythm, her quiet music filling the room.

Gabrielle looked at Xena. It was all the young bard could do to keep from licking her lips. *Look at them*, she pleaded with her eyes. *Why can't we do that?*

For just a moment, Xena the warrior disappeared and the kind, loving woman underneath seemed to surface. The ice blue eyes softened, warmed, and Gabrielle was sure her heart skipped a beat. She had seen Xena look at her that way only once before - when their spirits had met in limbo, just before Xena had leaned in to kiss her. Something inside Gabrielle's stomach twitched, started to spread...

Then it passed as the blue eyes turned away. Xena the warrior settled back in her chair and casually asked, "So why isn't Artemis jealous?" Gabrielle let her head drop a little and stared at the carpet. She tried to breathe normally.

Lilith opened her eyes and looked from one deliberately self-controlled warrior to one barely self-contained bard and back. She settled her gaze on Xena with a sly smile. "The truth of things is plain to her," the Priestess

said. "We understand where we are with each other. She accepts this. Would that all could do so."

"Just quit the riddles," Xena said impatiently.

Lilith cocked her head and gave the barest of shrugs. She gently broke away from Meleager, flowing just far enough forward to touch the young bard's knees. "Gabrielle," she said softly, "Amazon Queen. Your goddess and mine are very different. It is your pleasure to be curious about such things. May I explain?"

The young woman blinked twice, then raised her head to meet Lilith's dark gray eyes, noticed they were set with tiny gold flecks. "Sorry," the bard stammered, "it's uh, been a long day." Gabrielle straightened a little.

The Priestess smiled warmly, then playfully lifted her goblet between her hands and held it to Gabrielle's lips. The bard sipped it, and Lilith gave a silvery laugh. "It is really good, is it not?"

Gabrielle couldn't help laughing back. "Yes it is. Thank you."

Lilith floated back against Meleager. She idly waved her hand back and forth as she spoke. "Inanna is not so much a goddess as you know them as she is a spirit, one so ancient and powerful that many have seen her, and she has gone by many names. Here in Greece you see her shadow in Gaia, and in truth I call her Inanna only because that is the name I heard first. Yet she is older still than any name given by mortals. She is the creative force of the universe, the power behind everything that grows and gives birth. She is not the sort who is called on for favors, yet her gifts are as infinite as her love, and as willingly shared. Her symbol is the Earth itself, which gives us all life. Even your gods on Olympus live only through her." She paused, smiling with a faraway look in her wide gray eyes. "Artemis knows this. She feels it as strongly as I. She has no need of jealousy, for Inanna is in her as well. Indeed, the Huntress is glad we are here, and wishes our stay were longer. Do you see?"

"I think so," Gabrielle replied. Her composure was back, but she didn't dare look at Xena in fear she'd lose it again.

"Well, that's nice," Xena spoke up, "but if you're going to get to Macedonia in one piece, I think it's best you quit the roadside worship for now."

"Yes, you are right," Lilith agreed with a resigned sigh. "I had hoped we could spread the knowledge of Inanna for a time longer before closing out the world. Yet for each son or daughter of the Earth we reach, there are tenfold more who do not understand, who see our worship of pleasure and life as something to serve only their own selfish whims. They see joy freely given as something to be taken, not as a chance to give of themselves. It is an evil perversity this, one that grows ever stronger, dimming the light between people, and breaks my heart."

"Well, anyway, thank you Lilith," Xena stood. "That takes care of one problem. We'll move faster that way too. Now, it's getting late, and I'd like to see these guards of yours."

The Priestess rose to her feet as easily as if she were levitating. "Please do so," she said. "The Guardians are with the Amazon instructors even now. Their pleasure is to learn such things."

Gabrielle and Meleager got up as well. After gulping down the last of the cider, the bard set her goblet on the tray. "And I should get back to the Amazon council," Gabrielle said. "Thank you Lilith. We'll try to make this journey a safe one."

Lilith gave her a warm smile. "I see the truth in you Gabrielle. May your desire bear fruit."

Meleager cleared his throat uncertainly. "Uh, I uh..."

Lilith placed a slim hand on his chest, looking up at him. "It would please me for you to stay, my dear one, if you can. Pleasure for us both."

Xena cocked her eyebrow. "It's all right Meleager," she said, suppressing a smile and stepping towards the front of the tent. "I think I can check the guards without you."

Gabrielle stifled her own laughter as she followed her friend. "Just don't forget to call for an escort when you leave." She stole a glance at him over her shoulder. "You will remember that, right?"

Meleager nodded. "Oh, sure," he said slowly. "I can, ah ... remember that."

Gabrielle thought he looked strangely like a rabbit in a snare. "Sure you want to stay?" she teased.

He gave the bard a helpless look over Lilith's shoulder. "It's too late for me," he said dryly, though his eyes twinkled. "Get out while you can. Save yourselves. I'll hold her off."

Lilith gave a silvery laugh and slipped her arms around him, pressing the side of her face into his chest. "Ahhh, my dear one. Again you are *not* being fair to me ... Oh, but you are such pleasure..."

The warrior and bard made their exit, grinning at each other. Once outside, Gabrielle broke into a fit of giggles. "He didn't seem as happy about that as I'd have thought."

"Well, he's not as young as he used to be," Xena smiled back. Her eyes met the bard's for a moment. The warrior's smile faded as she turned away and stepped around the altar in front of the tent. The table had been cleared, and there was no sign of the Amazons.

Xena leaned back against the altar, crossing her arms. She looked at the Amazon walls rising over the tents, lost in thought. *What happened in there?* she mused. For just a moment, she'd let her guard down and had been warmly flirting with Gabrielle, saw the same desire returned, let herself respond to it.

She shook it off. *A strange lapse that.* She remembered Solari's comment about drugs in the incense, and wondered about the cider. *Possible.* Yet her head felt clear, clearer than in days.

Gabrielle touched her arm. "Xena? What is it?"

The warrior felt her body pleasantly reaching for the touch, then fought to get it under control. She continued to look straight ahead, still thoughtful. "Gabrielle, you said the first Priestess of Inanna was also called Lilith?"

"Yes, that's right." The bard's hand still rested on her arm.

Xena ignored it. "What else do you know about Lilith and this cult?"

"A little," Gabrielle answered. "I've been trying to remember as much as I can over the last couple of days. There's a good story there actually, one from the Israelites, although I'm pretty sure they borrowed part of it from a Sumerian legend."

Xena finally looked at her friend. She let herself smile just a little. "Come on. You can tell me on the way."

Gabrielle brightened. "OK," she said happily. Xena had seemed far away for a moment, but now the warrior she knew was back. The bard made herself not think about the look they had shared earlier in the tent - *was*

that me or was it her? Or ... both of us together? Nah, let it go. Now is probably not the time. Over the years there had been so many moments of casual affection between them, never spoken of afterwards, that simply letting it slide was almost second nature to her now.

So the bard began her tale. "Many, many years ago, the one god of the Israelites made the heavens and the Earth and all the creatures on it in seven days..."

"Industrious little god, isn't he?"

"Xena!"

"Sorry," Xena grinned.

"Well, for his last creation he made a man and a woman from the clay of the Earth, and set them in a beautiful garden. Their names were Adam and Lilith. However, even though they were made for each other, they quarreled a great deal, especially over their responsibilities and labors. Lilith believed they should work together in all things, until they found out what they each did best, but Adam wanted to divide the work right away, taking the tasks for himself which he wanted, and leaving the rest for her."

As she always did, Gabrielle warmed to the story, picking the right words, finding the right rhythm. "So their quarrels grew worse and worse, finally spilling over that night when they first made love. Adam insisted she lie beneath him, and Lilith refused, saying, 'Weren't we created from the same clay of the Earth? Doesn't this make us equal? Isn't it as fitting that you lie beneath me?'"

"Tell him, girl." Xena grinned.

"Yeah," the bard laughed back. "So then Adam called on the one god and said, 'My lord, I obey you in all things. You are my lord and master, now give me dominion over this woman, that she might submit to me, and do as I say.'"

"Jerk."

"Sounds that way," Gabrielle smiled. "And when Lilith saw how both Adam and the one god were set against her, in a rage she flew through the air and out of the garden, until she reached the shore of the sea. There she found a host of demons living in a cave, and took them for her pleasure, and gave birth to all manner of strange creatures."

"All right, so she let off some steam," Xena joked. "What happened to Adam?"

"I'm getting to that," Gabrielle insisted gently. "Left alone in the garden, Adam called to the one god and said, 'This woman you made for me has fled, make me another.' And the one god put him to sleep, and fashioned a new woman from one of Adam's ribs, and called her Eve. The one god said to Eve, 'I have created you from this man. You are flesh of his flesh, and will obey him in all things.'"

Xena and Gabrielle passed through the gates, heading for the central square. "So," Xena said, looking up at the sky, "I guess he got what he wanted." *It's getting late*, she thought.

"Not quite," the bard went on, "because then the one god said to them -"

"I'm sorry, Gabrielle," Xena broke in gently. "You're telling this really well, but is there a short version of the rest of it? I want to hear it, but we have work to do."

The bard blushed. "Sorry Xena. I guess I go on sometimes."

"It's one of the things I like about you," the warrior smiled. "But less poetry, just for now?"

"OK," Gabrielle placed a hand on Xena's arm and continued walking. "Well, to make a long story short, eventually Adam and Eve disobeyed the one god, so he threw them out of the garden too. And it was Eve's fault if I remember it right - nice irony there."

Gabrielle paused for a moment, thinking there was some other detail she couldn't quite remember which made the irony even worse. It wouldn't come to her though, so she just went on. "Anyway, Lilith winds up traveling the Earth, taking pleasure with men by uh, I guess you'd say 'mounting' them, as they slept." She chuckled, blushing slightly. "Some versions of the story say she also feeds on human blood, like the Bacchae. Maybe she got it from the demons."

"So how does she fit with the cult of Inanna?" Xena asked.

"Well, like I said, part of this is based on a Sumerian story which is older, but to be honest I don't know that version as well." They had reached the council house, so Gabrielle turned and faced the warrior. "In that version there's more than one god, and after Lilith left the garden, she plagued the Earth with her demons, threatened to kill children - got really nasty. Then she was found by the Goddess, who sort of calmed her down and Lilith became the right hand of Inanna. She led their fertility rites in the springtime, and," the bard chuckled again, "in this version she still had a habit of taking men in their sleep."

Her tale finished, Gabrielle asked, "So, what do the stories have to do with this Lilith?"

"Don't know yet," the warrior replied, looking thoughtful. "But there's definitely something odd about her."

"Yeah, I noticed," the bard laughed. "I like her though. She seems very open and honest. I think we can trust her."

"Well," Xena replied with a half smile, "just remember Gabrielle, the best liars always seem honest. Also, Sacred or not, it's her job to be seductive, and she's awfully damn good at it. That's what worries me most - could easily be hiding something. To start with, not too many people go calling on a god just to chat about old times, much less go for a quick roll in the hay after."

"You have," Gabrielle pointed out.

Xena smiled, raised an eyebrow. "Exactly what I mean." She found herself grinning at the bard for no particular reason. "Go on, call me the Warrior Cynic."

"I just called you that a few days ago," Gabrielle smiled. "And besides, you've got a point." Gabrielle leaned a little closer to the warrior. "Well, I'll try not to let her charm me too much ... for a while anyway," she crinkled her nose playfully.

Xena lifted her eyebrow even further, but didn't comment. "I'm going to see about those guards."

"Do that," Gabrielle replied. "Amazon business for me I'm afraid. See you at dinner." Then she turned and headed into the council house.

The warrior watched as the young woman easily bounded up the steps. Her blue eyes took in the backs of the bard's thighs and the play of muscles there, the tight bunching of them through the short skirt.

Xena closed her eyes almost painfully. *Gotta have been something in that cider...*

* * *

Xena entered the training grounds. Several pairs of Amazons were scattered around, sparring and drilling, but what caught the warrior's attention immediately was a group of women arranged in a five by five rank near the back of the compound. They were dressed in identical outfits of pale, banded leather vests with thick shoulders and bracered gloves. Their legs were clad in tight leather pants with pads over the thigh and knee, ending in supple boots reinforced over the shin.

Each held a long wooden sword in both hands as they went through the precise motions of a drill Xena didn't recognize. It was quick, fluid, and, the warrior noted, seemed ideally suited to the way a woman would move. While the group was large, they nevertheless drilled in near-perfect unison.

They were being watched by Juna. This in itself spoke volumes - Amazons didn't train under Juna until their eighteenth year, when they were considered full soldiers, and then only if they showed talent. Xena walked over and stood beside the solidly built woman, who didn't even look at her.

"Xena," was all the acknowledgement she gave of the warrior's presence.

They watched the guards silently for a moment before Xena commented. "Nice drill Juna. Where'd you pick it up?"

"Not mine I'm afraid," came the reply. "It's theirs. This is how they always finish."

They watched a moment more. "They move well," Xena noted. "How are they in a fight?"

"Seen worse." This was as close as the short-cropped Amazon ever came to actual praise - when pressed, she described her own considerable skill as "not bad." She shrugged. "Need some strength work though. Too evasive for my taste."

With a twisting leap, a loud cry and a sharp, two-hand strike, the drill ended. The group slowly stood upright, then sank to their knees, sitting back on their heels. They placed their swords on the ground next them before their hands came to rest lightly on their thighs, then they closed their eyes. Again, all had moved as one. The woman to the farthest right of the front rank announced, "Our pleasure for Inanna."

"Our pleasure for Inanna," they all chanted. They rested for a measured moment, then bent forward, touching their hands and heads to the Earth. After this they casually got to their feet, the disciplined movement over, and began hugging each other.

Juna grunted, "And this part I could *absolutely* do without." She clapped her hands twice for attention and took a step forward. "OK ladies, OK! You weren't as awful today as yesterday, so tomorrow I'll try my best to see if you can learn some more kid stuff. Now go get lovey-dovey somewhere else!"

The woman who had led the chant gave the stocky Amazon a slight bow. She was of medium build with lovely, somewhat foreign features, her light brown hair held back by a leather headband. "We thank you again Juna. It is pleasure, and has been good for us."

"Yeah, yeah." The Amazon just rolled her eyes, then walked around her, waving to get the attention of one of the other guards, a younger, blonde woman who was nursing a bruise on her bicep. "Hey, Dew-lips!"

"Uh, I'm Dulith," the startled object of her attention said.

"Whatever, let me see that arm..."

The guard with the headband approached the tall warrior, smiling. "You are Xena. I'm happy we meet. We've heard of you."

"Oh?" Xena crossed her arms. "And you are?"

"Morgin," she answered. "First Guardian." She extended her hand and they clasped forearms, each noting the other's grip. "I hoped you'd arrive earlier, so that you might see more and teach us. We have much to learn if we are to serve in the days ahead, and the years to come."

"You were doing all right," Xena said with a wry smile. "Who taught you that drill?"

"The one who teaches us all - Lilith." Morgin rested her sword across her shoulders. "She taught me, and I in turn teach others, as best I can."

So Lilith knows combat too, huh? Xena thought, but kept her surprise from showing. "Are those practice blades about the same weight as your weapons?"

Morgin smiled and held the wooden sword out. "These aren't for practice. These are what we fight with, when we must fight. The first rule we learn is do no more harm than is required, and to defend before we attack."

Xena took the weapon, hefting it. Except for the fact it was made of wood, it resembled a katana, a kind of long sword Xena had seen from the East. It was slightly over a yard long, smooth, lightly lacquered and solid, with a decent weight. The single-edged blade was about an inch and a half at its widest, half an inch or so thick along the top. It tapered gracefully along its length, ending in a wedge-shaped tip. The warrior gripped it in both hands, as it was meant to be wielded, and swung it lightly, noting that while it had no sharp edges, in capable hands it could be deadly.

"It's excellent," Xena commented, passing it back.

"Thank you," Morgin replied. "Only once have I taken life with it. I hope I never need do so again." It was a simple statement, showing neither pride nor regret.

"I hope so too." Xena noted that Morgin seemed only a few summers younger than herself, but with an open sincerity and quiet strength that somehow reminded her a little of Gabrielle. A thin, old, somewhat ragged scar ran down one side of the guardian's face, and another, not as old, ran along the bare stretch of her upper arm. Together they indicated some long endured pain or tragedy, yet Morgin's eyes sparkled.

Xena took a step back. "Still, let's see an attack. Hit me. Unless you're too worn out from practice?"

Morgin cocked her head but gave a half grin. Recognizing the challenge, she settled into a graceful stance. "May this be pleasure for us both," she began, then lunged before the words even ended.

Xena smiled inwardly. She easily sidestepped it, but the strike was very quick and surprising, and would have caught a lesser opponent with painful results. She spun around, aiming a backhand at Morgin's ear. The wooden blade snapped back and caught her wrist bracer, deflecting the blow as the shorter woman pivoted around and swung at the side of Xena's knee. The warrior leaped it, flipping over to land on the other side of the guard and delivering a kick that Morgin rolled beneath, coming up in the same stance she had held originally.

"You're quick," Xena said evenly.

"So are you," Morgin replied.

Let's give her a scare. "All right, let's see what that little stick can do." Xena put a warrior's growl in her voice, drawing her own sword, more to see the other woman's reaction than anything else.

Morgin remained impassive, meeting Xena's eyes without moving, waiting. When it was clear the guardian wasn't going to attack first, Xena came at her with a series of simple lunges and feints, found them all blocked and countered. Grinning, the warrior picked up the pace. Morgin was surprisingly adept at staying away from blows and following up with return strikes. Xena quickly guessed the other woman wasn't putting much behind them, was trying different techniques, measuring Xena's reaction.

After a few more exchanges, Xena was nearly caught by a dizzying series of counterattacks, and began putting some real strength behind her own moves, eyes blazing. Morgin turned them aside, using no more force than needed, got her body out of the way, always answering with a strike or thrust, moving as fluidly as water and never quite in the expected direction. The smaller woman used the longer reach of her wooden sword well, and Xena spun and twisted, trying to draw Morgin into overextending her movements, smiling when that didn't work either.

Xena switched tactics, concentrating on driving attacks designed to wear the other woman down. Finally, tiring, Morgin fell for a double feint, countering to the wrong side and leaving herself open. Xena spun and slapped the flat of her blade across the back of the other woman's knees, sent her sprawling.

Morgin hit the ground hard, giving a loud grunt that abruptly gave way to an odd moan. Xena was momentarily worried she might have hurt the other woman, but then Morgin curled into a fluid roll and returned to her feet.

She came upright with her head thrown back, gasping in open, obvious delight. "Mmm Xeeena!" she cried, brown eyes twinkling, "you're sooo goood!" She smiled around a low, almost sensual laugh.

The warrior felt Juna leaning in behind her. "Better get used to it," the Amazon murmured. "They *all* do that."

* * *

Xena checked the dining hall, but was surprised to find Gabrielle wasn't there. She looked around, strangely relieved when she saw Ephiny seated at one of the tables.

"She took some scrolls to her hut," the regent replied when asked. "She didn't want to be disturbed." The blonde pursed her lips. "She did say I should tell you she was there."

"Thanks." Xena found a tray and gathered up some cheese and vegetables, along with two bowls of stew and a small loaf of warm bread. When the tray was as well-laden as it could get, she headed for the royal hut.

Inside, the young bard sat at the central table, intensely scrutinizing a small pile of scrolls and parchments, quill in hand. She looked up as the warrior entered. "Hey..." She brightened immediately. When her eyes settled on the tray, her smile grew even warmer. "Oh Xena, thank you. I didn't even realize what time it was."

Xena let herself smile back, just as warmly. "You're welcome." *What is with me today?* She set the tray down and took the chair next to Gabrielle, trying being more casual. It wasn't working. "So, what's so pressing that you of all people almost missed dinner?"

"Oh, the usual," Gabrielle chuckled as she absently tore off some bread and pointed at the scrolls. "A few finely worded little sub-paragraphs of treaties here, a couple of hereditary disputes there. I don't think Anza has much of a claim, but can see why they might think they do - it's all in the wording. We can work it out though, maybe swap some land..." The bard dropped her voice a little, pointing at the map in the center of the table. "See, I was looking over these old scouting reports, and I'm almost positive there are some rich iron deposits in this stretch of rocky hills, right here. I had a small party sent out, so by tomorrow I'll know for sure, but if it's true..."

"Then those hills are worth a lot more than a hunting ground the Amazons haven't used in a generation," Xena finished for her. The warrior grinned. "Not bad Gabrielle. Not bad at all..."

"Best thing is," the bard continued, "if you look at it the right way, claiming those hills would simply straighten the border on the other side of a bend in the river where the border is now..."

Xena cut off her companion by putting up a hand. "Gabrielle, you don't have to convince *me*."

The young Queen blushed lightly. "Sorry ... just kind of ... interesting." Gabrielle looked down at the table, then smiled again. "Thanks for bringing me dinner."

"Come on," the warrior urged, uncomfortable but trying not to let it show, "let's eat." The two women picked up their bowls.

"Mmm," Gabrielle said, "It's good here ... the stew, I mean."

Xena glanced at her companion. *She really does make a fine Queen ... got that regal thing down too, and doesn't even know it ... so beautiful...* The warrior shook it off. "Stew's all right then?" *Not as good as yours.* Xena blinked. "So what else did Ephiny pile on you?" The warrior couldn't help the curtness in her voice, hoped Gabrielle didn't notice.

"Well," the bard began, reaching for the bread and tearing off another piece, "I also have to draw up a formal Letter of Debt for Lilith which acknowledges how she owes one to the Amazons."

"That figures."

"Yeah, well." The bard popped some cheese in her mouth. "You know how they are about debts and honor. I'm trying to keep it simple."

"You? Simple?"

"Hey, be nice!" Gabrielle gave an exaggerated pout.

"All right, all right..." Xena smiled. "You'll work something out. I know how good you are with words."

"Really?"

"Yeah," Xena replied. "And I know you won't quit - you're also too stubborn." She chuckled.

"Me? Stubborn?" Gabrielle affected a hurt look.

"Like a mule ... but I mean that in a good way." *What is it with me today?*

Gabrielle sighed. "Well, I hope so." She pushed at one of the scrolls with her spoon. "I'll need it to figure out

who has the right to claim Errin's sword - *and* not leave anyone feeling hurt. This is what's really got me stumped. Amazon lineage can get *very* complicated."

"Do tell."

"Uh huh," the bard mumbled around a mouthful of bread. "Half these women were adopted, you know. Kinda random way to run things - historically speaking of course."

"Well, that would explain how a certain bard can just walk in and be Queen."

"Yup. Gotta keep track of everything like you wouldn't believe. Stray comments mean a lot. Mmm, any more of those olives? They're tasty."

"Here. Have mine."

"Xena ... You're too good to me."

"Do tell."

"Yup." They laughed together softly for a moment. "So," Gabrielle continued as she finished the last of the cheese, "how are the guards?"

"Better than I hoped, if a little unorthodox - militarily speaking of course."

"That's good."

"You know, I'm starting to think we might just make it to Macedonia alive after all."

"Well that's a relief. For a minute there I was worried you were just going to give up."

"Do tell."

"Yup."

Xena smiled. *I'd better get out of here before I do something we both regret*, she mused. *This kind of playful stuff can get out of hand*. "Well," she said, reaching for the shoulder buckle of her armor, "I'm going for a quick wash."

"Here Xena," Gabrielle said, standing and moving around behind the warrior's chair, "let me."

"Gabrielle, it's all right..."

"No, really," the bard insisted. "I've been in that chair so long my bottom's going numb."

Xena raised an eyebrow as the armor was placed carefully on the floor. "Well, I wouldn't want that."

"Do tell."

"Yup." Xena sighed quietly. *I'd really better get out of here*, the warrior thought with some determination. Then the thought flew out of her head along with her will as Gabrielle's hands settled on her shoulders.

The bard kneaded them slowly, working her fingers in, finding the knots, gently rubbing them down and loose. The tension there began to ease, and when it was gone, she carefully moved her hands to the warrior's upper

back, between the shoulder blades, where the bard knew it was always just a little stiff.

As she continued the easy, careful massage, the bard began to hum softly. The contact was as warm and sweet as Gabrielle remembered, and for the first time in a long time her companion let it happen. *Used to do this all the time, big warrior*, she thought sadly. *It was ... special. I always felt so close. I know you did too. Why don't you let me anymore?*

"Hmm?" Xena turned her head a little.

"Nothing," Gabrielle replied. She hummed for a while longer.

Xena let the bard's slim, strong fingers work her grateful, accepting muscles for as long as she could allow it to, feeling the warmth that flowed from the young woman's hands seeping into her warrior's body, settling everywhere. Knowing it should stop, needing it to go on. Let it continue a bit longer still.

Suddenly the warrior reached up and placed a careful hand on Gabrielle's. Xena exhaled slowly, willed herself to stay relaxed. *Too much ... Get out. Now.*

Summoning as much calm as she could, she whispered, "Thank you ... Gabrielle. I've ... got to wash up." The warrior rose more steadily than she felt and headed for the door, not daring to look around and risk losing herself in the green eyes she could feel on her back.

Gabrielle watched her leave, then leaned heavily on the table. Finally she sat back on her pallet against the wall and drew her knees up, hugging herself. She slowly rocked back and forth, keeping relaxed, staring without seeing.

* * *

Xena found the nearest bathing hut mercifully unoccupied and spent a good half hour scrubbing herself harder than necessary, ending the process by dunking her head into one of the cold buckets and holding it there until her breath ran out. Then she checked Argo, made sure the mare had plenty of grain and brushed her down for a while even though it was obvious the Amazon stablehands had already done it. "Night girl," she patted the horse, got a low nicker in return.

Then the warrior started wandering, mind deliberately blank. It was well after dark so the main gate was closed, but a side door was open and she slipped unseen past the sentries without even thinking about it. She idly crossed the plain to where it sloped down sharply about fifty yards from the walls, an earthworks for slowing attackers and leaving them easy pickings for Amazon arrows. She settled down on the edge of the slope and looked up at the stars.

The dark of the night was calling to her, inviting her to lose herself in its numbing depths. As a warlord, the night had been her time of peace, when she could be blind, embrace the cool quiet, forget herself. For nearly ten years she'd fled from the sun, using its light only as tool for training or conquest, spending her days off the battlefield in the dim depths of her tent whenever possible. The night had been hers alone.

When had the sun become her friend again? The answer was as joyous as it was painful to her now: When the sight and sound of her companion had made the light wonderful. The proof was in the deep bronze of her skin, plain for all to see.

Gods Xena, what are you doing? I thought you knew this was wrong. The darkness never really left you. It could come again any time. She'll be hurt. Maybe not today, maybe not summers from now, but

that day will come, and I couldn't bear it.

She stared at the night sky, finding every constellation she could name with an ease of long practice. When it was done, she started over.

The figure who glided up behind her was less than ten paces away before Xena even sensed it. She froze.

"No fear, warrior Xena," a honey-smooth voice drifted to her.

"Lilith," Xena grunted. She really didn't want company right now, and grew even angrier with herself for letting the Whore Priestess get so close. *Great. Now I'm really starting to lose it.* Lilith smoothly moved up beside her and extended an arm towards Xena's shoulder.

"Don't touch me!" Xena growled. She remembered the Priestess' hand on her face from earlier. *Sorcery there, I don't doubt. That would explain it. Should have guessed.* Whatever it was she couldn't risk any more.

"As you wish," Lilith replied simply. "May I sit?"

"Nothing in Amazon law to stop you," the warrior said bitterly.

The Priestess floated down beside her. There was a long stretch of total silence. Xena ignored the smaller woman, staring straight ahead.

Some time later, Xena caught herself rocking back and forth, and suddenly realized Lilith was humming a gentle melody. The sound had risen so gradually the warrior hadn't even noticed.

"Stop that!" she growled again. She swung around and gave the Priestess the full-on warlord glare she felt inside. "Why are you here?" she hissed.

Lilith's eyes met hers, evenly, with soft concern. "Your heart," she said gently. "It is like an open wound. I felt it as you passed our camp."

"That so?" *Sorcery? No question.* "Well it's my heart. I'll handle it."

Their eyes stayed locked for a moment longer, neither changing expression. Finally Lilith looked away. "As it pleases you to believe. I am sorry to have interfered." The Priestess didn't even seem to move, but suddenly didn't seem to be sitting as close. Xena took a breath, realizing she hadn't done so for several seconds.

Lilith gazed at the trees in the distance. "Ephiny believes we can leave here two days hence," the Priestess said simply. "When morning comes I will make an offering in the temple of Artemis. The Huntress has promised me a sign, and I will then invite her priestesses to our ceremony. If all goes well, it will soothe those who still fear that our presence here angers her."

"Good idea," Xena replied curtly, though not as openly hostile. "How soon after dawn can you be ready to leave the day after?"

"Perhaps half a day, not more," Lilith answered. "I have pondered this, and it is good. To set out at mid-day is to reach the Amazon border at nightfall. We can stay one last night within its protection, and have a full day to travel after we leave it."

"Yeah, that works," Xena agreed. *A tactician too. Swell.* "How long to break camp that morning?"

Lilith smiled. "While we travel we will live out of the wagons as much as we can and raise only what tents we need. In this way it requires only an hour, rarely more, to pack and make ready each dawn. Is this good for you?"

"I guess it'll do." Xena allowed herself a tight smile in return. Discussing strategy was taking her mind off Gabrielle for the moment, and she let herself relax a little. "I'll ask Ephiny to send out scouts in the morning. There's been plenty of time to set an ambush by now. With luck the slavers are eager and won't be far outside Amazon territory. If so, the scouts will spot it."

"Shall I have Morgin accompany them?"

"No. I want her with the rest of the Guardians drilling tomorrow. I need to know what their strengths and weaknesses are." She paused. "From what I've seen though, they're good fighters."

Lilith laughed. "As I have said, it is their pleasure, as it is yours. If they found no joy in such things, they would not do them. This joy makes them practice much, and practice brings them skill. So it is with all things, when each is allowed to choose their own way."

"Morgin told me you trained her."

"Yes, this is true," came the gentle reply. The Priestess looked down with a smile. "I am told I have many skills."

Xena raised an eyebrow, found herself smiling back. "All right. Fair enough. Where did you learn?"

There was a soft, pained sigh, followed by a pause. "In my youth," Lilith began slowly, "I was consumed for many years with much anger and vile selfishness. I killed and I took what I wished without thought or regard, caring only for my own whims." She shook her head. "I was ... not happy, and sought only to make others feel my own pain as greatly as did I."

Then Lilith gave a warm, sweet smile. "But after many years, long past when I wished my life would end, the Goddess reached out to me, and once again I found the love and joy of the Earth. I learned what I already knew: That what is taken does not last, but by giving I teach others to give in return, and that goes on as long as there is joy in the world, spanning from one generation to the next." She looked down, running her hand over the Earth. "There is ... peace in such things."

Xena gave a mirthless chuckle. "Sounds too good to be true."

Lilith laughed. "Ah Xena, you see the sadness, but in truth you speak of cold wisdom, for it is not an easy road. Too many see generosity as weakness, or as submission, or as a well to be plumbed until dry and forgotten. So first we must nurture that spirit which leads to the joy of equals sharing freely of themselves, each giving as they can, none taking more than is offered, and forbearing our mistakes and simple failings. Yet we must also guard against those who seek more and more merely for its own sake, who see the world as a toy and believe that strength is measured by the cowering of slaves, real and imagined."

Xena gave a long, weary sigh. "Sometimes the world is a rough place."

Lilith lowered herself back on her elbows. "Life is within us all Xena, and life is hope. There is evil. There is good. It is easy for one to think of evil as having less in its path, yet good is the simplest path for all to share together, and one cannot stand against all forever."

Xena looked up at the stars. *Damn her*, the warrior thought idly. *Now I actually feel better. Well, at least I don't feel good, but I still feel better, so damn her anyway.* She smiled to herself.

"You know," the warrior mused, "I knew a man once - Pythagorus. He was really stupid about a lot of things. Never did like him much, but he was a genius with numbers."

"I knew him as well," Lilith smiled, a smile Xena could practically feel. "And I agree. He fought against his own nature in strange ways, and could not admit when he was wrong."

The warrior nodded. "Yeah, well, he was showing me once why I needed three-on-one odds against a dug in defense, and he said something that made sense: 'Numbers don't lie'. I've never thought about good against evil that way, but I your math isn't bad. One against all is a pretty simple equation."

"Given time," Lilith nodded back, "it must win out. I see the truth in it. It is not - again, I must find your word - efficient? Not an efficient way, but it will happen. Of this I am sure."

Xena looked over at the white-robed Priestess. "For what it's worth I hope you're right. We'll need it to get you to this valley of yours."

Yet her warrior instincts couldn't help noticing that all the philosophy hardly answered her original question. *Gods Lilith, I don't know why you're not telling the whole truth, but listen up Priestess: You'd better turn out to be all right, because I think I'm starting to like you - and if you don't I'm gonna feel like an idiot.*

Xena stood. "Well, I'm turning in if I'm going to be leading drills all day tomorrow. Good luck with your offering."

Lilith remained seated. "I thank you Xena, this has been good for me," she replied, gazing up at the warrior, making eye contact a last time. "Send love to Gabrielle. She is a pure heart, and special beyond measure."

The Priestess turned back around to look at the trees in the distance. "And in your heart, warrior, remember always - your true feelings are not your true enemy."

Xena silently regarded the dark-haired Priestess for a moment. Then, without another word, she strode back to the Amazon city.

* * *

Back in the royal hut, Gabrielle had fallen asleep at the table, her strawberry blonde head surrounded by scrolls. Xena smiled warmly, then gently lifted the bard in her strong arms. Gabrielle stirred but didn't wake as the warrior carried her softly to her pallet.

She lay her friend down and tucked the blanket up to her chin, then moved a few locks of hair back out of the young woman's innocent, sleeping face.

So beautiful, my bard ... Gods, would that I were someone else. I wish ... I wish I could be. I'm sorry...

After a moment the warrior leaned in close, just to breathe in the smaller woman's clean scent, whispering softly, "Good night, Gabrielle."

Xena slowly rested back on her heels, watching for just a moment more. Then she rose and snuffed out the candles before heading for her own pallet a few steps away from her quietly sleeping companion.

Gabrielle woke the next morning to a knock on her door. "Hmmmnn? Jussa minnit..." she groaned sleepily. With some reluctance, she made herself sit up, then was startled to find she was on her own pallet. *How'd that happen?* she thought, confused for moment. *Last thing I remember I was working on the treaty...*

There was another knock. "Yeah! OK. I'm coming..." She crossed the room, shaking sleep out of her head as best she could and opened the door.

An Amazon in full battle dress was waiting. "I'm sorry to wake you my Queen, but this ... man wished to see you. Ephiny gave him permission," she said, as if hoping not to be blamed for it herself. She indicated behind her, where Gabrielle could see Meleager and another Amazon were standing.

"Yeah, that's OK," Gabrielle nodded, grinning. "Let him in. I'll be fine."

"Very well." The Amazon looked dubious. "We'll wait here. Call if you need us."

"Thank you, I'll be sure and do that." Gabrielle smiled as she took the bearded warrior's elbow and ushered him inside, closing the door behind him.

"Gods!" Meleager groaned as he settled into a chair. "Will I be glad to get out of here! You have no *idea* what it's like to be stared at everywhere you go."

"Actually, yes I do," Gabrielle grinned. "I travel with Xena, remember?"

"Yeah, but I don't think Xena gets slapped on the butt too often, or at least I figure she can do something about it." He gave an exasperated groan. "Amazons!"

Gabrielle laughed as she sat next to him, thinking about what was likely to happen to anyone who tried *that* with her warrior companion. Then she noticed the table bore a tray with fruit, bread and cheese, and a small note, neatly folded and sitting on top. Her heart beat a little faster as she eagerly picked up the slip of parchment and looked it over.

She instantly recognized Xena's simple, precise handwriting: *Drilling all day. Join me if you can get out of bed, oh Queen. You need it.* Gabrielle chuckled, then sighed. She folded the note carefully and set it aside, then reached for a slice of bread.

"What's that all about?" Meleager asked, picking out a wedge of cheese.

"Oh, just ... Xena," Gabrielle looked down as she smiled.

Meleager chewed thoughtfully for a moment, slowly scratching his beard. "Listen," he said finally, narrowing his eyes, "what is it between you two anyway? I never felt more like a third wheel in my life while we were traveling together."

"What do you mean?"

"You know. The laughing, the long looks, the way you ... help her through her nightmares." He paused. "If I didn't know better I'd *think* you were lovers."

Gabrielle blushed fiercely. "Oh Meleager, come on," she gave a laugh that was as forced as it sounded. "You know we're not."

"That's what I mean..." He sat back a little. "Why is that?"

"Oh hey!" Gabrielle said quickly. "A pomegranate! You know, I *love* these things!" She nearly knocked over her chair reaching for the fruit.

"Yeah," Meleager said slowly. "And I figure that's why Xena put it there too. So, what's going on?"

Gabrielle picked at the outer casing of the pomegranate, staring at it. "It's just ... Meleager ... you know," she said with difficulty. "Xena doesn't ... feel that way about ... me."

He grunted. "Oh yeah. Sure she doesn't. That explains why yesterday when Ephiny was coming on to you, Xena had her jaw set so tight it creaked."

"Meleager!" the bard began indignantly. "Ephiny was *not* coming on to me, and..."

He snorted humorlessly. "Like Tartarus she wasn't." He regarded the young woman for a moment, then shrugged and settled his elbow on the table. "Well ... OK. Maybe you missed it somehow. Tell you though, Xena sure didn't - Hades, I'm surprised her teeth didn't crack."

Gabrielle was silent for a moment, unsure of what to think or say. She new Xena cared about her a lot, but realized she'd never let herself try to see it as more than that. *Why should it be? However I feel about her, I'm still just a know-nothing village girl. I'm not heroic at all. Sure, we're close, but ... And I wouldn't even know what to do...*

"We're just ... not, Meleager," she said finally, trying hard to keep her voice even. "And that's ... all."

The graying warrior looked at her, took in how difficult this was for the young bard. "OK," he said gently, placing a hand on hers. "I know how it is sometimes." He gave a dry chuckle. "And Hades, I'm probably the worst person in the world to give advice about this kind of thing. After all," he chuckled softly, "you don't get to be my age and still be single without being really good at just blowing it. Sorry I brought it up."

"No, it's OK," Gabrielle sniffled lightly, raising her head. "She ... she knows how I feel. If she wants to, when she's ready, it'll happen." *Does she? Can it?*

The young woman smiled, squeezing his hand. "And hey, old man," she chuckled, "Lilith seems to like you just fine."

"Yeah well..." Now Meleager blushed. "She uh ... she likes *everybody* just fine."

"Maybe so," the bard laughed warmly, "but I haven't heard her call anyone else 'dear one'. And another thing: In case you didn't notice, she slept with a *god*, one of the good ones even, and then apologized, actually *apologized* about it - to you. How often do you think that happens?"

Meleager scratched his chin absently, pursed his lips. "Well, now that you mention it, I hadn't really thought about it that way..."

"Has she been, um, participating in their ceremonies lately - with anyone but you I mean?"

His head snapped up and he nodded vigorously, raising a finger. "Oh yeah! Now *that* she has been ... aw ... Hades..." He slumped over, looking confused. "Gods ... I think you're right. I mean, she *has*, but she always asked me if it was OK..."

Warriors! Gabrielle rolled her eyes. *Why are they so blind sometimes?* "Maybe next time you should say 'no'."

"Hhhurr!" he grumbled, then stood abruptly and began pacing, arms folded tightly across his chest. "I *can't*! I mean, it's her work! It's her *life*! She's High Priestess of Inanna!"

"And last I heard she had twenty-four other priestesses to help her out," Gabrielle replied. "Besides, didn't you even say they still consider themselves virgins, because it's really the Goddess having the sex? There's a big difference between having sex and being in love you know, and it sounds like she and her followers make that distinction better than most. Why don't you let her decide for herself next time?"

Meleager sat down hard on the edge of the nearest pallet. "Aw Hades!" he groaned, elbows on knees, running his fingers through his hair. "I just wouldn't be any good for her Gabrielle," he said miserably. "I'm just another old soldier gone to seed with a history of violence and alcohol abuse. She deserves better than that."

Warriors! "Meleager," the bard said as gently as possible, trying to contain her irritation, "you're forgetting that you've also done a lot of good, and whatever problems you've had you've risen above them and you're doing good again. You're strong and brave. Even I can see that. Lilith seems like a bright, sensitive person. If she's fallen for you, I think it's safe to say she loves you for who you are, sees the good as well as the bad, loves you for them both. Like I said, why don't you at least let her make up her own mind?"

He rubbed his temples hard, then sighed. "Well, OK. I'll ... think about it."

"Well, that's a start at least," Gabrielle said evenly. She finally broke open the pomegranate, then shifted to more innocuous subjects. "So, what brought you here this morning? You didn't wake me up just to talk about our relationships."

"Oh, yeah," Meleager stood up again. "Lilith is making an offering in Artemis' temple this morning. Ephiny thought you should be there. Aw Hades!" He thumped his fist against his forehead. "It's probably happening like, right now!"

He stood and quickly headed for the door. "Ephiny thought you should dress for the occasion - Amazon mask and so on. I've gotta get to the training grounds, but in the name of the Goddess, *hurry!*"

* * *

Clothed in her full Amazon garb, Gabrielle stood next to Ephiny, watching silently as Lilith solemnly placed a silver bowl of three apples on the altar of Artemis. The temple wasn't large, but now it was packed full, Amazons shoulder to shoulder, more than a few holding their breath in fear.

"Oh Artemis," Lilith intoned, "great Huntress who watches over the night, I humbly ask your blessing upon me and those who travel with me. Your favored ones, the Amazons, love you with purest devotion, and wish only to know they serve you by helping us. Inanna loves you, for she is the power of nature, whom you honor and protect. Accept this simple gift I offer. See into my heart and know the truth of the love I bear you, for it is yours, always."

Lilith bent on one knee, head down, arms raised out, waiting. There was a brief moment of silence, one so heavy it nearly had a sound of its own.

Then, a gentle breeze wafted through the temple, carrying the faintest echo of affectionate laughter. A light began to grow around the bowl on the altar, growing so bright no one could look at it directly. A falcon

suddenly flew out of the light, and there was a loud, collective gasp as the huge bird of prey soared over the heads of the assembled women and away through the front arch of the temple.

Then the light went out.

The bowl and apples were gone. In its place, a single, silver arrow lay on the altar. Lilith hadn't moved.

Her heart pounding, Gabrielle leaned closer to Ephiny and whispered quietly. "I'd ... Um ... I'd say that was a sign."

Ephiny nodded at her, eyes wide.

Lilith rose and gently lifted the arrow in both hands, raising it up, smiling. "Artemis, this day all my thanks are for you. This day all my love is for you. This day all my joy is for you. May your blessing keep us safe on our journey, for the road will be long. I praise your power and wisdom, oh Huntress, as I praise the strength of your Amazons."

She turned and crossed lightly to the Amazon High Priestess, Terisia. "Oh daughter of Artemis, her favored servant, this gift of the divine Huntress is meant for you and for all who are counted among the Amazons. Accept it as you accept the love of myself and my followers, for there is no greater joy than that of kinship among women."

The Amazon Priestess was clearly stunned, but reached out and took the arrow, her hands trembling. "Thank you Lilith," she said. "We can see our fears were groundless. You're truly among the blessed of Artemis. Accept our apologies. We'll remember this day and your time here always."

Lilith smiled warmly. "Love and devotion to the Huntress requires no apology. Come, I invite you to take part in our ceremony. Touch the joy of nature with your own body and spirit, that Inanna might guide you to the face of Artemis."

She slipped an arm around Terisia's, entwined their fingers together, and gracefully led her through the temple and down the steps. Still stunned, the rest of the assembled began slowly filing out after them.

Gabrielle turned to Ephiny. "You should join them," the bard urged.

"Gabrielle, you're the Queen," Ephiny smiled. "If anyone should go, it should be you." She paused, looking down. "We could go together..."

"No, that's OK." Gabrielle brushed her arm. "I'm leaving tomorrow, remember? I've got lots to do before then." She laughed. "Not the least of which is write down what just happened while it's still fresh in my mind."

Gabrielle caught Ephiny's eyes, and for a moment they looked at each other. The young woman took a breath. "Ephiny, I know how you ... feel about me, but ... well..."

The Amazon regent closed her eyes. "I know. Xena."

Why is it everyone can see this but me and a certain dumb warrior? Gabrielle mentally fumed. "Yeah," she said softly, looking away. *At least, I'm starting to hope so...*

"Yeah," Ephiny repeated, chuckling ruefully. "It's not like I don't understand. I had a thing for her too when I first met her - actually, I'm pretty sure half the village does." She chuckled again, a little more naturally this time, then grew sober. "But you..."

The regent took a slow, deliberate breath, released it. Then she looked up and gave her Queen and friend a warm smile, affectionately running a hand over Gabrielle's shoulder. "Well, listen - if that big woman ever lets you down, I'll still be here ... if you don't mind helping raise a centaur anyway." She laughed, and Gabrielle found their arms going around each other in a heartfelt embrace.

"Count on it," the bard answered.

* * *

Gabrielle threw herself into her work for the rest of the day, trying to use the carefully worded legal documents to take her mind off anything else. It worked - mostly - and by nightfall she thought she had sorted out both of the right of heredity disputes and had written three proposals for dealing with the treaty problems with Anza. She placed her seal on everything and set them aside to present to the council in the morning.

She was halfway through her second draft of the Letter of Debt between Lilith's followers and the Amazons when the door opened. Xena walked in, and Gabrielle's heart almost melted when she saw the warrior once again carried a tray loaded with food.

"Gabrielle, this is getting to be a habit," Xena said with mock sternness. "I may not know what the Fates have planned for me, but I'm pretty sure it isn't spending the rest of my life bringing you room service."

"Well, you never know," Gabrielle replied, fighting back a smile. "The Fates have a weird sense of humor sometimes."

Xena rolled her eyes. "Point taken. And I guess I could have it worse." She set the tray down. "Come on, let's eat. I've got a meeting in half an hour about strategy for the road."

Gabrielle hid her disappointment. However, thinking about it for a moment, she realized it was probably for the best. *And just what would I have said, exactly? 'Gee, thanks for dinner Xena. Oh, and by the way, I was kinda wondering if you love me the same way I love you? Sure, I know we're gonna be tied up protecting Lilith and the rest for the next couple of weeks and all, and can't do anything about it anyway, but hey, I just wanted to know.' Yeah right!*

"Hello, Gabrielle? You in there?" Xena snapped her fingers in front of the bard's eyes.

"Huh? Oh, sorry," Gabrielle shook her head. "What did you say?"

The warrior gave her a wry smile as she sat down. "I said I missed you at drills today."

"Yeah, well. Sorry," Gabrielle blushed a little and wrapped a slice of venison in some bread. With a nod she indicated the sealed scrolls on the table. "I've been kind of busy. Sorry I couldn't make it."

"Well, I think you were the only one," Xena said. "Half the city must've been out drilling. And Meleager - gods, I've never seen anyone push themselves that hard. He was still throwing javelins when I left."

Gabrielle chuckled. "I think he's trying to avoid Lilith for a while."

"Oh really?" Xena cocked her eyebrow. "And why's that?"

"He figured out she loves him."

Xena snorted. "Like anyone with half an eye couldn't see that. Typical."

Tell me about it. "Well, he's been a warrior for a long time," Gabrielle replied innocently, "I think his feelings scare him." *Oooh bad! Bad bard!*

Gabrielle took a moment to carefully push a few loose strands of meat back into the folded bread. It wasn't easy. Even if she deliberately didn't look to see it, she could feel Xena's steely gaze boring right through her.

Finally, the warrior spoke. "Do tell."

Yup.

Chapter Three

One by one, the tents of Lilith and her followers were taken down and carefully stowed in the wagons. Many hands made light work of it, since nearly a hundred Amazons came out to help. The atmosphere was a strange mix of joy and sadness, and the air was filled with long stretches of Amazon work songs, followed by equal, more restful spaces of gentle Sumerian melodies - each oddly complimenting the other.

When the horses were all hitched to the wagons and the last of the gear was secured, everyone slowly moved inside the city and gathered around the central square before the doors of the council house. In front of the assembled throng of hundreds of women - and one man - Ephiny and Gabrielle embraced Lilith warmly.

"Lilith," Ephiny announced, "the Amazon nation has been fortunate indeed to have known you and your followers. You'll always have a special place in our hearts, and we'll miss you. All of you will be welcome if the Fates ever allow you to return."

Lilith laughed sadly. "Oh Ephiny, return we cannot, for that is not our path. However," the Priestess turned to address the crowd, "five of our priestesses and their acolytes wish to stay, if you will accept them. Jocelyn, you and the rest may come forward." She motioned to a petite, dark-haired woman standing near the front of the crowd, who separated from the rest of the priestesses, followed by nine other women.

"Regent Ephiny, Queen Gabrielle," Jocelyn announced, "we've seen the devotion the Amazons feel towards Inanna, and it would be sad indeed if that devotion were to grow dim. It would be great pleasure if you allowed us to stay here, build a small temple, and keep alive the teachings of the Goddess."

Ephiny and Gabrielle shared a brief, knowing look. Lilith had sent word early that morning that some of her followers would be staying, and Gabrielle had reworked the Letter of Debt in anticipation. "Well," the bard began, "Petitions for citizenship have to be approved by the council." She turned to the half dozen village elders who stood in ranks behind her. "What does the council think?"

The stunned elders looked at each other for several moments, then Althena, the Council leader, spoke up. "The uh, Council has no objections."

Gabrielle turned back to the dark-haired priestess and the women with her. "Then as Queen I welcome you to the Amazon nation. May you and your descendants enrich our land and our people." A loud, sustained cheer broke out from the crowd as Jocelyn and the others walked over and hugged Ephiny, Gabrielle, and the rest of the Council in turn.

When things had calmed down a little, Lilith raised a hand. "Gabrielle, Ephiny and assembled Council, you should know also that five of my Guardians wish to join you as well, and serve their lives defending the Amazon Nation. Dulith?"

Five of the guards stepped forward, led by one of the younger women. Dulith spoke, "Amazons, your discipline and devotion to self-defense are a joy and pleasure to us. Although it pains us to leave our beloved Lilith, the Amazon way has stolen our hearts. We ask that you find us worthy to continue the training we've begun here, and help defend the Nation in its times of trouble."

Smiling, Gabrielle turned to the elders. "Sounds OK to me."

Athena didn't even look at the others, who were all nodding enthusiastically anyway. "Of course. They're fine warriors. They can probably teach *us* a few things."

"Then it's settled," Gabrielle agreed. "Pending official ceremony, welcome, fellow Amazons!"

There followed another round of hugs and applause, then Dulith stepped back. "Of course, we must serve and protect Lilith on the coming journey - that's a duty we cannot and will not abandon. However, when the journey is over and all are safe, we'll return with the warriors you send with us."

Gabrielle smiled. "I wouldn't expect anything less." Then she stepped back. "Lilith," she announced, holding up the Letter of Debt, "your obvious friendship towards the Amazon Nation, as shown by your followers' desire to remain and both help defend and enrich it, renders any Letter of Debt almost unnecessary, however..." She paused, just for dramatic effect. *Can't help it*, she thought, *not with an audience this big*. "You have enjoyed the protection and sustenance of Amazonia, and such a thing is not offered by us lightly. Therefore," she unrolled the small scroll, "from this day forward, you will always respond to any request of assistance in defending the Amazon Nation, sending whatever help you're able and is prudent given your own circumstances."

"This I agree to with all my heart," Lilith responded so everyone could hear her clearly. "I would have offered no less. It would be of the greatest pleasure for us. I hope only that you are never in such danger as to require our help."

Gabrielle smiled. "Us too. Which is why, as a token of our continuing friendship and your debt, we will also require that every year, on the day of summer Solstice, you will have delivered to us three of your finest apples, as an offering to Artemis and a tribute to the Nation."

"This also will be great pleasure," Lilith began. "However, as I have told you, there will come a time -"

"I'm *getting* to that," Gabrielle leaned in and whispered. "Trust me here." Lilith only smiled and straightened.

The Amazon Queen raised her voice again. "Let this offering continue as a symbol of gratitude from the followers of Inanna to the Amazon Nation until the day comes when you feel you must close yourselves off from the world. At that time, send a delegation of your people, and we will feast and celebrate our friendship once more. Then, years from now, according to your beliefs, when you feel it is safe to emerge, find us again, wherever we may be, that we might once more join together. This is a debt of untold years we ask, that we all keep alive our memory of this time together. Can we all agree?"

Lilith nodded. The council nodded. Gabrielle beamed. "Then as Queen of the Amazons," she announced, "and with the full voice of my people, I wish you luck with your journey. May you remain safe and well for all time."

There were more cheers. "I thank you, Queen Gabrielle," Lilith said, her voice somehow carrying over the growing din of the assembled women. "We thank you all, from deep in our sincere hearts. I give this land the blessing of the Earth."

Gabrielle took a brief half hour to clear up a few remaining details with the Council, then after the Council chamber was cleared, took a moment to quietly say goodbye to Ephiny. "Ephiny," she said affectionately, "you're the best." The bard looked down, suddenly feeling a little guilty. "I'm sorry you have to do all this by yourself. I wish I could be here more..."

The blonde regent shook her head, smiling. "Gabrielle, this isn't the first time in our history we've had an absent Queen. We'll be fine." She rolled her eyes, "And it wasn't like I didn't want to be in charge either." She looked thoughtful for a moment. "I wasn't born into royalty Gabrielle. I worked hard. I was a good soldier. I fought and scraped for every advantage ... sometimes I was completely ruthless when I wanted to get ahead."

Ephiny looked at the floor. "I remember being so angry when you were made a princess - didn't know then how ... how good you are."

The regent straightened. "I want you to know you're a fine Queen, Gabrielle, whether you know it or not. When you and Xena are ready to stop wandering, I pray to Artemis you'll settle here, and ... and..." Ephiny's brows furrowed. "She'd better appreciate you," she said sharply. Then more softly, she added, "And she'd better not get herself killed."

Gabrielle nodded, taking the Amazon's hand gently. "You really loved Phantes, didn't you?"

Ephiny stiffened, then sighed. "Yes," she answered quietly, then gasped, "Gods, I shouldn't have ... I didn't want to..."

Gabrielle held the hand tighter, brushed her other fingers along the forearm. "Love is a precious thing Ephiny. It might sneak up on us when we don't expect it sometimes, but never regret it. I'm so sorry you had such little time together, but the love you had was real, and wonderful, and you had a son together. Xenan is amazing - he's growing so fast, and he's so smart." The bard chuckled. "I saw how he was standing only a couple of hours after being born, and I hear he was talking just a couple of months later. The few moments we had together yesterday - It's strange, because he didn't seem to want to talk at first, but when he finally did, he almost managed to quote Socrates."

Gabrielle and Ephiny both laughed. It felt so good to talk about families, about personal things, and not the problems of the Nation for once. Then the young woman looked up and asked, "When did you know? I mean, that you and Phantes..."

Ephiny brushed her thumb over Gabrielle's hand. "Not long after I met him," she said, simply. "At first I was actually kind of disgusted with him. He just looked so helpless and scared - I thought he was pathetic." She chuckled. "But later I realized that was just because he was honest about his feelings, not because he was weak. He never hid anything ... I think that's what I loved about him most." The regent blinked, paused. "When I confronted him that first time, he told me the truth, and somehow he saw right through me when he did it, almost as if he knew the reasons behind my questions, even when I didn't yet." Ephiny shook her head, blushed lightly. "He could warm my heart just by walking into the room, and that ... doesn't happen very often..." Her voice drifted off.

Gabrielle looked thoughtful for a moment, then hesitantly began, "Ephiny, I'm sorry I can't return those feelings. Artemis knows, if it weren't for the way I feel about Xena, I really believe we could be happy together." She paused. "I do love you Ephiny, and I care about you more than anyone. You're the best, but don't ... don't pine for me. Promise? Find someone who can love you the way you deserve. I don't want you

to be alone."

Ephiny looked down at her with an odd half smile. She sighed, then shrugged. "Hey, listen my Queen, it's not like I don't get offers."

Gabrielle chuckled. "Oh really? Can't understand why." She stopped teasing. "I have so much to thank you for Ephiny ... more than you'll ever know." Once again they hugged each other tight.

As they slowly parted, Ephiny suddenly gripped Gabrielle's strawberry blonde head in her strong Amazon hands and covered the bard's mouth with a passionate kiss that lasted a long couple of seconds. Then Ephiny broke it off and strode out of the council house without looking back or speaking another word.

Gabrielle stood frozen in place, heart racing, fighting for breath. She gently placed a finger on her still tingling lips. *Merciful Artemis! Ephiny?* she thought, head spinning. *Is that what it's like? Maybe I'd better think about this again - if Xena ever did that I couldn't possibly survive ...I'd catch fire or explode or burst open or shake into little tiny pieces or...*

* * *

Gabrielle hurried out to the slowly organizing caravan to look for Xena. She found the warrior sitting on the ground by the lead wagons in a small circle with Meleager, Solari - who would command the Amazons on the journey - and Elena, the Amazon's eldest scout. As the bard approached, she began to pick out the conversation.

"...they'll just whittle us down that way," Solari pleaded.

"No, because they won't get the chance," Xena said. "I know it's a risk, but it's a small one."

"What's going on?" Gabrielle asked.

"It looks like we're walking into an ambush," Solari replied spitefully. "Without bothering to warn anyone."

"Solari," Meleager groaned, "we've been over this."

"You're all dead wrong!" Solari spat. "Sisters will be killed!"

"Uh, excuse me," Gabrielle broke in, thumping her staff on the ground. "I asked, 'What's going on?'"

Xena turned to the scout and prompted, "Elena?"

The older Amazon sighed, then turned to her Queen. "While scouting ahead, we found a band of about thirty-five slavers - it looks like two groups joined together - already laid in ambush less than half a day's ride along the western road." She paused. "We infiltrated their camp as best we could, and it doesn't seem like they know how many soldiers will be traveling with you, but -"

Solari cut her off. "But the best thing to do would be to swing north and avoid them -"

"But..." Meleager broke in, then went quiet with a look from Xena.

"*But* nothing!" Solari insisted. "Our defenses are better than we might hope, *but* they're still pretty slim considering. *But* we should head north, keep away from trouble, then head west. *But* if we let these tiny bands attack us, we'll just lose soldiers. Maybe just one or two each time, *but* it'll add up. Before long, we

won't have enough left to defend us if we really get hit hard. *But* even if it's just a test, someone's bound to get killed. It's *stupid!*" she added finally.

"So," Gabrielle said slowly, "I take it there's another opinion?"

Xena nodded to Meleager. "Well," he began, "thing is, we're pretty boxed in as far as the route goes. Crossing into Thrace at Byzantium is about the only way - we could go northeast around the Black Sea, but it'd take weeks longer and we'd have a Tartarus of a time getting through the mountains. Everything's OK really, since we're pretty confident about both the Guardians and the Amazons. Trouble is we, ah, don't really know how well they'll work together. We've got to know whether they can handle themselves, and," he paused. "Most of all we need to know whether our traveling plan works. So a, um, small band of the enemy would -"

"Be a good test of our defenses," Gabrielle finished. She thought for a moment, looking at Xena. There had to be more. "So, what else?"

Xena just met her gaze without expression before turning to Elena again. "Tell her."

"OK," Elena set her jaw. "Here's the real problem. Everywhere our scouts went they came across other scouts. We avoided being seen by the enemy very well," she said with a note of simple pride, "but these men were set up at all points of the compass, and they had messengers ready with fast horse. Worse, although they wore two different insignia, they were mixed groups, and neither matched the clothing of the slavers to the west, which means..." Her voice trailed off.

"Which means we're facing someone with the resources to find us anywhere we go," Xena said simply. "That many scouts means an army. It just makes it that much more important we test our defenses."

Gabrielle closed her eyes. *I've got the deciding vote don't I? Can I knowingly send everyone into a situation where someone will possibly, even probably be killed?*

After a long moment, the young Amazon Queen asked, "Can we stay here longer, train together some more?"

Solari turned away with a disgusted grunt. Xena and Meleager looked at each other briefly.

"No," Xena said, with just a hint of sadness under the strength only Gabrielle probably caught. "If they're that organized, giving them more time would only make the risk worse."

"Can we warn the others?" the bard Queen asked, knowing the answer.

"No," Xena answered in the same tone. "If our strategy doesn't work, we need to know now, when it's still possible to retreat to safety."

Gabrielle's eyes narrowed. "So it's a matter of strategy then?"

Xena's voice seemed far away. "Strategy against time," she answered. Then more slowly, she added, "And against lives. Maybe a few now against many later."

Gabrielle inhaled deliberately. *The greatest good for the greatest number ... Gods, sometimes I really hate being Queen...*

Then a thought struck her. "Wait a minute," she said with some excitement. "Do the Guardians have any trained scouts?"

"Yes, they do," Elena answered.

Gabrielle nodded. "Good. Were any of them with you when you found the slavers to the west?"

Elena smiled. "No, they weren't. None of the Guardians were. They were here, training."

"Then fine," Gabrielle said, pleased with herself. "We'll send them ahead in the morning, instead of Amazon scouts. It'll be a good idea to test them as well, and see how quickly we can form a strategy based on what they find." She turned to Xena. "Wouldn't that be a fairer test anyway? Hopefully it'll be closer to what would happen for real. If we're all doing our jobs, we shouldn't just blunder into a complete ambush in the first place, right?"

The warrior looked away for a moment, but let a thin smile slip out. "Fair enough."

"I'm sorry Solari," Gabrielle turned, "but they're right. It's a risk, but if the system - the whole system - works, then it should be a small one. We'll leave in two hours, as planned, and no one will warn anyone."

Solari stood. "The Queen has spoken," she said, but seemed much less distraught than before. "I'd better grab my stuff." She strode off, Elena following.

Meleager stood as well. "You made the right decision Gabrielle. That was ... well, that was great. Now, I gotta run too. See you in a couple of ticks." He patted her shoulder and left.

Gabrielle leaned her forehead on her staff and gave a long, heavy sigh.

"So," came Xena's voice from behind her, "when did you become a tactician as well as a bard, fighter, and Queen?"

Gabrielle gave a dry laugh, turned to look up at the warrior, who was smiling with something very close to open pride. "Oh, I dunno," the bard smiled back warmly. "I guess you're rubbing off on me more and more every day."

Xena looked suddenly wistful. "Yeah, well, don't take that too far. You were very close to siding with me completely and risking a lot more lives. But you found a way." The warrior put a hand on Gabrielle's shoulder. "Meleager is right - what you just did was incredible. I love ... I love it when you surprise me like that."

Gabrielle just let herself look into Xena's pale blue eyes, then placed her hand over the warrior's and gave it a light squeeze. *By Artemis*, the young woman thought. *I hope so Xena ... I hope so much...*

* * *

The moving village of Inanna left the main Amazon city a short time later. They were accompanied by nearly twice their allotted force of soldiers, some traveling casually, just there to watch over the wagons until they reached the border. The rest, the ones who would continue on for the journey, walked or rode in their assigned positions while Xena, Meleager, and Morgin spent the rest of the day circling the whole group as it moved, checking for possible gaps or things that might need changing. At appointed times, they would form together along with Solari at the front or rear of the column to discuss what they thought.

Just before sunset they came short of reaching the border. "Pull up," Xena commanded over her shoulder. "Time to camp."

"I'll get the watches set up," Meleager announced, turning his horse. "Morgin?" The First Guardian nodded

and pulled alongside him wordlessly as they rode off.

Gabrielle and Solari walked up to Xena. "Hey," Gabrielle smiled.

"Hey yourself," the warrior smiled back.

"I rode with Lilith part of the way," the bard said. "She wants to see you once you've finished checking on the camp."

"Anything in particular?" Xena asked.

"She wants to have some kind of celebration tonight," Gabrielle answered. "She figures it'll be the last chance before we get wherever we're going. Wants to know if it's OK, I guess."

"Yeah, I'll talk to her," the warrior said, turning Argo. "I'd get a few stories ready if I were you, oh bard," she grinned over her shoulder as she cantered off. "This might be your last audience for a while, and I know how you *love* an audience..."

Solari watched the warrior ride away. "She always tease you like that?"

"Yeah, pretty much," Gabrielle admitted, smiling after the receding form.

The Amazon looked thoughtful for a moment. "You know, if I didn't know better -"

"Don't *even* say it!" Gabrielle cut her off.

* * *

That night, there was dancing around the fire, a lot of song, and Gabrielle told a number of stories, after which Lilith did a special dedication under the moon in honor of Artemis. The Priestess led the ceremony in front of the altar, which had been placed before her tent, ringed again by twelve smaller tents, the only ones that had been set up in the camp.

Earlier, Xena had been adamant about keeping things simple and cutting them off as early as possible. "Lilith, the last thing we need is a bunch of hung over travelers who haven't gotten much sleep."

"This I know as the truth," the Priestess had replied with a gentle smile. "But once we are beyond the Amazon border, there will be no more chance to worship until we reach our valley. I assure you," Lilith had touched the warrior's arm softly, "my followers know ... ah, that phrase ... 'Know the drill'? We can still be ready to leave within an hour of dawn. I will end things promptly this night, and have made this plain to all. We will be ready come the sun. Fear not, Xena. It is a farewell gift to the Amazons, and to ourselves. Please see the truth in it."

"Yeah, all right," the warrior had relented. "Can't see any harm."

After Gabrielle had finished the last of her stories and basked in the applause - *Xena's right, I love an audience*, she admitted to herself - the bard had found Xena at the edge of the clearing and sat down beside her to watch the ceremony. The bard had a scroll and quill at the ready. "I should probably write this down," she quipped. "It's an ancient ceremony, after all."

"Good plan," Xena nodded with amusement, then set to sharpening her sword, although she watched along with the intent young scholar beside her.

Lilith led her followers in a song, a sensuous rhythm that had everyone swaying in unison for a long, lingering time, joining all who were assembled with a common voice. The effect was mesmerizing. Even Xena seemed affected by it, as the warrior ceased her sharpening, rationalizing that she didn't want to interrupt - in fact, in would have taken serious effort to tear her eyes away.

When the song was over, the priestesses rose and chanted:

"Behold the three-formed Goddess; She who is ever three - maid, mother, and crone. Yet is she ever one; She in all women, and they all in her. Look on these three, who are one, with a fearless love, That you too, may be whole."

"Behold," Lilith took a step forward from the altar, holding her arms out before her. "I am Inanna, the Goddess of Earth, the power of Creation."

"The power of Creation," came the chant.

"I am pleasure, and love, and wisdom."

"Pleasure, Love, Wisdom."

Lilith raised her arms, then intoned:

"My furrow, The Boat of Heaven, Is full of eagerness like the young moon. My untilled land lies fallow. As for me, Inanna, Who will plow my fertile soil? Who will plow my high field? Who will plow my wet ground?"

The other priestesses stood and each took an Amazon by the arm. The supplicants were clothed in simple white robes, and all seemed to have been recently bathed, freshly scrubbed skin glowing in the firelight. Priestesses and Amazons arranged themselves in a semi-circle around Lilith, then they all responded:

"Goddess, I will plow your fertile soil. I will plow your high field. I will plow your wet ground."

Lilith answered:

"Then come to me now, My one love, Dearest of my heart!

Our pleasure for the Earth, Our love for the Earth. All become one, Joined with the body of the Goddess. Hold me and love me, Inanna, who brings forth life."

"Inanna, who brings forth life!" the other priestesses answered.

The priestesses each led their Amazon around to one of the smaller tents and ushered her inside. Lilith stood for a moment in front of the altar, then gestured towards Meleager, who walked up and embraced her. The two of them entered the central tent, and for a time the camp was strangely quiet.

"Gods," Gabrielle breathed, "That's uh, that's some ceremony..."

"Have to admit," Xena answered, "I'm starting to understand why they call them 'Sacred'." The warrior sighed. "C'mon," she urged, "we should get some sleep."

"Yeah," Gabrielle replied, feeling oddly sullen, not able to put her finger on why. "Guess so."

The bard followed Xena to a spot just downhill from one of the watch points. After they'd unpacked their

bedrolls, Xena sat on a log and began the process of taking off her armor. The bard moved to help.

"Gabrielle..." the warrior began to protest.

"Ah Xena, come on," the bard chided. "I used to do this all the time ... it's not like I don't know how."

"Whatever," the warrior replied, allowing Gabrielle to undo the hooks and clasps, then set the brasswork aside. "Thanks," Xena said, carefully - too carefully for the bard not to notice the way the warrior was holding back.

Once again, Gabrielle set her hands to work over the warrior's muscles, knotted from a day in the saddle. Feeling Xena gradually loosen and relax made Gabrielle feel warm and wanted.

And yet, once again, when the warrior seemed to enjoy it just enough, she started to pull away. "Night Gabrielle..." Xena stood, took a few steps up the hill.

"Xena, please," the bard cried out. *I can't live like this anymore.* She searched for words. "Please, don't go. I'm not ... dangerous or anything."

The warrior stopped. Without turning around, she said, "I dunno about that. You can kick around the best of them by now. Don't need my help much anymore."

"Xena, I'll always need your help," Gabrielle answered. "I'm ... I'm just a village girl, after all. I don't know a lot when it comes down to it. You're the world to me. My world. I ... need you. Please stay. Talk to me at least. After tonight we might not get much chance to ... be together."

"Yeah," Xena sighed, turning. "Look..." She paused. "Gabrielle, I know for a while we haven't been as ... close as we used to be."

"Yeah, I've noticed," the smaller woman tried to smile. "You were so open, so..." The bard found herself carefully struggling for words. "So relaxed after you ... After we found the ambrosia and brought you back. You were playful, even - gods Xena, I never expected, never hoped to see you just laugh and make jokes. It was ... It was wonderful." Gabrielle looked at the ground. "Then we met the Horde," she looked away, uncertain. "And things just ... changed. You haven't been the same since then."

Gabrielle caught Xena's eyes. "Please. What happened?"

Xena looked into the bard's face, saw it full of sincerity and concern, an expression that always moved her warrior's heart. "Gabrielle," she began with difficulty, "the Horde ... It was the purest kind of evil I'd ever known." The warrior looked up at the sky. "Even in my darkest days as a warlord, I could still use them to frighten the troops." She smiled wryly. "I'd threaten to chain them to the ground for the Horde to find if they disobeyed. It was ... comforting, in way. No matter what I did, there was always something worse."

The warrior swallowed. "When we ... when *I* met them again, I just let everything dark inside come out. I didn't even think about it really. No matter how much I thought I've changed, it was ... It was easy."

The red-gold blonde took a step forward and touched the warrior's arm lightly. "It was a hard time Xena," Gabrielle soothed. "It frightened me too. I was as confused as you were."

The warrior gave a cold laugh and pulled away. "Oh yeah, we were both *so* confused! You tried to help, I just did my level best to slaughter them all. I thought I was doing it because I had to, but really ... now I know I did it just because I *could*. An army at my back, an enemy I could destroy without mercy - I slipped

into the darkness like a well-worn boot. I was *enjoying* it!"

"Xena," Gabrielle insisted, "we talked about it then. You really did do only what you thought you had to. No, listen!" She cut the warrior off, then said quietly. "Let it go Xena. Just look at what you're doing to yourself now. Do you think if you really were that evil it would bother you like this?"

Xena closed her eyes. "You don't know what I really am, Gabrielle. Who knows when it might happen again? Next time..."

"Xena," Gabrielle said gently. "The only way you could ever hurt me is by shutting me out. It tears me apart to see you hate yourself this way." She paused, took a step closer. "When I think about what you've been through, how hard it must be for you..."

"Stop," the warrior turned away. "Don't you see? You're the last person who should be carrying that kind of weight. You've never hurt a soul. You should be off somewhere, telling your stories, making people happy, loving life..."

"Xena," Gabrielle broke in quietly. "I *do* love my life. With you. If I didn't want to be with you, more than anything else, I wouldn't be." She chuckled softly, resting a hand on the warrior's shoulder. "Gods know you've given me enough chances to leave. I know you. I see the good in you, and I don't expect the worst ten years of your life to disappear overnight. We'll work through it, like we always have ... Together."

The bard paused. She knew how her companion never felt comfortable hearing things said out loud. She did it anyway. "I love you Xena," Gabrielle said, softly, slowly. "Nothing you do, or have done, will ever change that."

Xena finally turned her head to look at the bard with an almost painful expression, but her eyebrow was raised playfully. "Guess I'm stuck with you then, huh?"

Feeling oddly exhausted, Gabrielle pressed her forehead against the other woman's solid shoulder. "You'd better believe it. I've worked for it too hard."

Xena ran her hand softly through the bard's hair. "Stubborn like a mule," she chided gently, rewarded by Gabrielle's arms going around her in a fierce hug.

The warrior returned the embrace for a long moment. Then she sighed, exhaling with effort. "All right," she said, gathering herself. "Look, I'm sorry, but I have to check the watch posts. No, it's all right," she insisted as Gabrielle started to protest. "It's just my job. Someone has to. Solari's on her own watch now. Morgin's taking last watch, so hopefully she's asleep, and Meleager, well," she laughed, "I think he's busy. It'll take an hour or so, so turn in, get some sleep yourself. I mean that. We've got a long day tomorrow."

"Yeah," Gabrielle sniffled, but smiled. "Guess so."

* * *

Of course, sleep was completely impossible for the young bard. Instead she lit a torch, resting her back against a tree as she took out her quill and scroll. Trouble was, that didn't really work either. Her mind wandered too easily, and almost every other line had to be crossed out and rewritten. It seemed like a lot of time passed, and still Xena hadn't returned.

Gabrielle was no closer to sleep than when she'd begun, and her frustration grew with the warrior's continuing

refusal to come back. Then a soft voice came from beside her. "Why are you not sleeping, young Gabrielle?"

The bard should have jumped at the sound, yet the gentle ease of the words simply caused her to turn her head. "Oh, hi Lilith. What are you doing here?"

Crouching only a foot or so away, the Priestess smiled warmly. "Meleager has fallen asleep, as many men are wont to do. In truth he has a warrior's stamina, but I demand too much of him I fear." She laughed softly. "Perhaps I should have stayed, yet I am restless with thoughts of the journey continuing when dawn returns. I decided to wander. I found you. You are restless as well?"

"Yeah," Gabrielle sighed. "A little. I had a talk with Xena earlier. We worked out a few things, or at least I hope we did. She had to check on the guards, so I've been, well, waiting for her to come back. I think things were OK, but she's ... she's hard to figure out sometimes."

"This I can see," Lilith agreed, sitting down. "Her heart is set against itself, and lacks the trust of her own feelings. She has endured much sadness, and blames herself." The Priestess looked down. "It is a hardship I know well, for I too was once forced on a path I did not choose, and rather than understand that it was something I could not control, I chose to believe it was my nature to be so. It is an odd, perverse kind of pride to believe this, to think oneself so immune to the whims of fate that you would choose to follow darkness rather than accept that at times, your life is beyond your control or understanding."

"Lilith," Gabrielle soothed, "sometimes things just happen."

"Ah, Gabrielle," the Priestess laughed, flowing around the bard in a warm embrace. "You spread such goodness. You give of yourself even when there is no such need."

Lilith eased away, then brushed her hand along Gabrielle's face. "I am long since past the time when I require healing, young one," she assured. "I show what I feel from one moment to the next because it is right for me to do so. Open honesty is best for me, I have found. If I appear sad, or troubled, or amused, worry not, for I am a creature of circumstance. I live only for the here and now, because I must. Things which strike me more deeply, I will make plain."

Lilith looked away again, smiling even wider. "... whenever it is prudent, given my own circumstance." She laughed lightly. "You have a simple gift of words Gabrielle. It has been some time since I knew one who had such a grasp of tales in this way."

Gabrielle blushed. She loved an audience, but when one person - especially someone she knew - complimented her, she was never quite sure how to deal with it. "I try my best," she stammered.

"You do well," Lilith replied, touching her gently. The Priestess sighed. "And with Xena. I have seen what is in each of you. She is strong, yet dwells too much on what she has done, and not enough on who she is. It is rare I meet one who sees herself so blindly, yet is so true to her nature at the same time. She is like a puzzle box, one layer yielding truth only to reveal further contradiction."

Lilith cupped Gabrielle's face in her slim hand, a gesture at once so intimate, yet so casual, the bard felt enraptured and calm all at once. "And beside her, you too are bounded in layers: Strong and innocent, curious and wise, impatient and understanding. How is this?"

Gabrielle shrugged, not knowing how to respond. "Xena is ... well, she's who she is," the bard answered honestly. "I help her when I can. Me? I just got lucky. I followed a hero and we became, well," she paused. "We became very close. Why is that so hard to understand?"

Lilith shook her head slowly. "Because two such as you do not happen, Gabrielle, not together. One so open and yet so wise, one so troubled and yet so strong. Each of you knows herself so intimately, yet it is the other you know best, and still there is much you do not see. It is ... most unusual."

Gabrielle laughed. "Well, that's Xena. 'Unusual' is putting it mildly."

Lilith cocked her head, settling back. "I can see you following a hero, for you are a restless soul, with a depthless need of knowing of the world. When did you first see her for herself?"

"What do you mean? When did I see she was troubled ... her dark side?" the bard asked.

"That as well," Lilith replied, laying back and smiling. "You are a teller of tales. Tell me."

Gabrielle thought for a moment, then tucked her legs under herself, sitting cross-legged in front of the tree. While she was usually eager to tell stories about Xena, some of them only brought back memories she would just as soon forget. "Actually," she said, hesitating just a little, "I don't think I've ever told this one before."

"Then I am honored to be the first to hear it," Lilith laughed affectionately. "Yet I believe it needs telling. May my pleasure be yours."

"OK," Gabrielle couldn't help smiling. "Let me see now..." The bard paused for a moment, then took a breath and began her tale. "Once there was this village girl, who was rescued by a great hero, and decided to follow her. What the girl didn't know at first was that this hero had a dark past, one that haunted her, and left her troubled..."

The village was called Forsina. It wasn't very large really, as villages go. It rested quietly in a small valley, nestled against the base of a steep cliff where a river spilled forth. While the valley had proven very fertile, Forsina's main source of wealth was silver, discovered in the same cave that produced the river, then painstakingly refined and wrought into jewelry and other items.

By common assent, the find had been kept secret. The village's wares were sold anonymously in small lots at large cities many days' ride away, and while this meant that no one in Forsina was ever wealthy, everyone was afforded a generous living. Moderate affluence and isolated geography conspired to lull the people into an easy peace. They ate well, everyone had their share of comfort and more, and they were happy. Within a dozen summers crimes were rare - who needed to covet what could be had after a month of trading?

It took almost two generations before their secret was discovered, by a raider named Obportus. A group of his men caught two travelers, laden with glittering trinkets, and slowly roasted them alive until they gave up their village.

Gabrielle had been doggedly keeping up with Xena for a little less than a month. The two had shared several exciting adventures - well, to be honest, Gabrielle had witnessed what she had thought were a couple of exciting adventures. Then one night a drunken conversation at the table next to them in a small, especially nasty tavern caused the warrior to stiffen. Gabrielle never heard exactly what was said, but whatever it was the very air around Xena seemed to grow dark.

The young woman had watched her strong hero grow hard and cold in a way she'd never seen before. The ice blue eyes had glanced around, then seemed to relax, and a slow smile spread across the warrior's face. She'd stopped talking, but even by then Gabrielle knew that with Xena, sometimes words just ... went away.

Gabrielle had simply concentrated on her half-cooked, half-raw venison. As bad as it was, it was the first

meal she'd been able to eat at a table in a week. Then the three drunken, heavily armored men had risen noisily to leave. Xena's eyes settled with irritation on Gabrielle. "Stay right here," the warrior had said, not even waiting for the confused young woman to nod before following the three men out the door.

Gabrielle self-consciously, methodically attacked her meal, ignoring everything that might, or might not have been going on around her. She didn't feel very comfortable in this kind of place, and wondered why Xena had decided to find a table inside when they'd passed it. Still, she waited for the warrior's return.

She actually didn't have to wait long. Xena was back in her seat only minutes later. The armored woman picked up her barely touched mug of port and leaned back in her chair, easy and relaxed, not saying a word. Gabrielle had tried to be as casual, finishing as much of her meal as she deemed edible before sitting back herself. "So," she said, trying not to sound eager. "What happened?"

"Don't worry about it," Xena replied, barely looking at her. "Get some dessert if you want. We need sleep tonight though. We have to be out by first light."

"Where to?" Gabrielle asked immediately.

Those eyes fastened on her. "Northeast," the warrior replied evenly. "About a day's ride." Then Xena had cocked an eyebrow in amusement. "All right, let's say a day and a half, assuming you still don't want to ride."

Of all the questions she could have asked, Gabrielle made herself ask only one. "You said we should hurry. Do I really have time for dessert?"

To her surprise, the warrior chuckled. "We have time. The morning will be fine, as long as you can get up early." Xena raised an eyebrow, then downed the last of her port. "Stay here, I'll see what passes for dessert in this place." With that she stood, idly snatching another mug of the drink off the end of the bar as she passed, switching it with her empty in a blur of motion behind her back so quick and silent no one noticed except the strawberry blonde who watched her every move.

By the time the two of them had reached the village of Forsina, Gabrielle had managed to prod Xena into explaining that Obportus had been a minor lieutenant in her army. "What's he like?" Gabrielle had asked.

"Stupid."

"So how'd he become a Lieutenant?"

"Because I thought I knew how to control him. He was also creative about causing pain. That was useful, at one time," Xena said flatly. "Later I kicked him out for getting carried away - hurt someone he shouldn't have, in ways that ... weren't necessary. Seems he's been busy since. Can't keep many men with him, but enough to cause trouble around here."

"So we're going to stop him now, right?" Gabrielle asked.

"Yeah. Looks that way." Xena had looked down at her with casual amusement, but just for a moment, even then, Gabrielle had known the warrior wasn't as calm as she seemed.

Once they had reached the village, a combination of Xena's steely remarks and Gabrielle's dramatic embellishments convinced the wary inhabitants they were in grave danger. Xena had then begun instructing them how to set up defenses: Covered pits, and walls of sharpened stakes at the perimeter for a start. When the warrior discovered that archery was a respected pastime in the village, she soon had everyone who had

ever held a bow in their hands practicing - at hastily thrown together, human-looking targets, raised to horseback level. She gently cursed everyone who missed, but skillfully encouraged all who hit their mark.

"Come on you people!" Xena yelled, not angry, just making herself heard, letting her strength carry in her voice. "Your lives depend on this. You've got to make every arrow count!"

From her place helping build the defenses, Gabrielle was amazed by how the warrior took charge, instilling courage, or at least a measure of confidence in every archer under her command. Such a natural leader, the young, budding bard thought.

By nightfall, all the villagers who were able to join the defenders were at their posts, and Gabrielle had seen to it the rest were ready at the infirmary and the bucket brigade. Gabrielle had been through a few small skirmishes but this was her first actual battle, although from what she knew of Xena's ease in combat, the young woman had every confidence they would repel the attackers. The raiders were a small group, yet there were scores of villagers ready to fight them, all thanks to the warrior princess.

Then, through the early morning fog, horsemen thundered towards the village. Frightened by the way the ground shook at their approach, the villagers began to back away. Xena, astride Argo, simply leaned her head down and listened to the sound. "Not a problem," she said, concentrating. "Maybe thirty ... no heavy horse. The defenses will hold."

As more and more defenders scuttled away, Gabrielle began to wander up and down the lines, trying her best to calm everyone. She had some success at first, but as the thundering hoofbeats grew louder and the fog began to lift, exposing the solid line of mounted raiders, nearly every villager broke and ran for the safety of their homes.

When the attackers were within twenty yards of the perimeter, Gabrielle shouted at her warrior companion. "Xena!"

Xena seemed to come awake. She looked scornfully at the fleeing villagers. "Figures," was all she said as she kicked Argo forward.

Together the horse and rider leapt over the massive wall of stakes, the warrior using the added momentum to spring off the saddle into the very center of the enemy line, bringing down at least a half-dozen riders and several horses, causing the entire force to pull up short. A whirling flash of steel erupted, followed by Xena's high, singing battle cry and the screams of wounded men. The raiders moved to counter the disruption in their ranks.

Gabrielle kicked at the few remaining defenders. "Shoot!" She screamed. "Aim at the ones toward the outside!"

The young woman was almost beside herself. She'd seen Xena easily best a dozen men, but to her eyes this was an *army*. She found herself praying to any god who would listen, hoping the warrior she'd been following would survive. She also quickly realized that if someone didn't come back and help, the village was lost.

"Come on you monkey's asses!" she screamed at the village, hurling at them the worst curses her bard's mind could think of. "Fight for your lives! Your homes! What in the name of Hephaestus are you waiting for?"

Hephaestus, the patient forge, was the patron deity of Forsina. How this screaming young girl knew their god the villagers didn't understand, but they couldn't ignore the name, and slowly returned to the lines.

In some triumph, Gabrielle jumped up on the makeshift battlements, worriedly looking out onto the field of battle. What she saw stopped her breath.

Xena stood amidst a very large pile of bodies, laughing as Obportus' remaining troops began to run away. With a quick forward flip she was down off the mountain of the fallen and was running after the breakers, still laughing, pursuing them, closing the distance, easily catching up.

The warrior plunged off the hill at the end of the clearing, disappearing around a stand of trees. The rest was silence.

Gabrielle and the villagers had continued to stare out at the plain. Abandoned horses slowly wandered around the field, nibbling at the grass. Then the bard snapped herself out of it. Forsina was apparently safe. "C'mon," the young woman urged those around her. "We should bury the dead."

It was sunset when the warrior returned, her triumphant silhouette strangely radiant with the sun behind her, swinging her sword easily. Gabrielle's heart soared at Xena's return, until the black haired ex-warlord ceased to be an outline against the sun. The bard gasped.

The warrior was grinning a predatory smile, blue eyes flashing, her face and body covered in blood. She lifted her left hand, her dripping prize held high, smiling. Triumphant.

"Obportus won't bug you again," she said, the raider's head staring, sightless, out into the growing darkness, his hair twisted in the warrior's grip.

The villagers dropped what they were doing, gathering around Xena in a loose circle, everyone staring at her in horror. Struggling against her own nausea, Gabrielle had rushed up to the warrior princess, fighting to make eye contact. "Let it go," she said calmly. "Xena, drop it ... Please?"

Xena had finally shifted her eyes to rest on Gabrielle's, and what the warrior saw there caused her bloodstained face to suddenly become puzzled, then grow dark with realization.

"Oh gods," the warrior breathed. She looked down at herself, then her gaze scattered around, seeing fear everywhere - fear and repulsion directed at the warrior who had once been their savior. Finally she settled her eyes back to Gabrielle.

For the briefest of moments, Gabrielle saw Xena's eyes become those of an animal caught in a trap ... hesitant, wounded, pleading. The slightest blink and she would have missed it.

Then the iron behind the eyes had closed down once more. "I'm going to wash up," Xena had said, tossing the head aside and walking away towards the river. "About the bodies," she called over her shoulder, her voice strong. "Bury them as you find them, with all their possessions. If anyone is caught stealing, *I* will deal with them."

Gabrielle had run after her. "Xena! Are you ... all right?"

"I'm *fine*," Xena had hissed over her shoulder. Then, more gently, added, "It's not my blood."

The next day they left the valley before sunup, moving very fast, not even saying goodbye. It was all Gabrielle could do to keep the warrior in sight, but she didn't complain, just kept up as she was getting used to doing. Towards evening, Xena found a clearing and began a fire.

"I thought we weren't supposed to," Gabrielle had said, puzzled, remembering some advice the warrior had

given her once. "If any of Obportus' men are still around, can't they spot us by the fire?"

Xena looked up, raising an eyebrow, but there was no humor in the warrior's face. "No," she said simply. "There aren't any left." She fed a few more sticks into the growing blaze.

"But ... " Gabrielle began, then suddenly understood, and turned in quiet shock to retrieve the food in the saddlebags.

They ate in relative silence. Gabrielle tried several times to start a conversation, but Xena kept her replies too short and to the point for any dialog to grow. Finally, Gabrielle said, "Hey, listen! I haven't told you the one about how Perseus saved Andromeda yet. Well, as it happened, her father, Cepheus ..."

"Perseus was a self-centered little weasel," Xena cut her off wearily, laying back on her bedroll. "And you wouldn't have liked him."

"But this story is really good," Gabrielle insisted. "It's so *romantic*. I've been working on it and ... "

Xena stopped her with a tired glance. "Sorry bard," she said, her expression all wry amusement, but her eyes still as hard as they had been all day. "I'm really not in the mood. But you must be pretty worn out too. I know I ran you ragged today."

The bard had started to protest, but Xena shushed her. "Gabrielle!" Then more gently. "Please, just go to sleep?"

Shivering a bit, as much due to the chill from her companion as the night air, Gabrielle lay down. Disappointed as she was however, the moment her head hit the pack she used as a pillow she realized Xena was right about how ragged she felt. Within minutes, Morpheus had descended on her exhausted body.

Then in the night came a low, gurgling scream. Gabrielle didn't even stir at first, then started, wide awake as something moved off to her right. She immediately scrambled up on all fours, crouching low. The shout came again, and even by the low light of the barely glowing embers of the campfire, she realized Xena was sitting up, her sword held out protectively, groaning and thrashing.

Gabrielle waited until the sword stopped moving. She crawled across to the other side of the fire. "Xena?" she said in a soothing voice. "It's just me. Gabrielle..."

"Gabrielle?" The warrior still seemed tense, confused.

"It's just a dream," Gabrielle soothed. "It's OK..."

"Gabrielle..." With that, the warrior came fully awake, but stayed where she was.

Without thinking, the girl placed a small hand on the warrior's shoulder. Xena tensed at the touch, then seemed to relax, if only a little. "Gabrielle..."

A long moment passed in the dark. Finally, Xena said, "I'm all right." She shrugged. "Go back to sleep."

The small hand didn't move, didn't move for a very long time. When Xena sagged forward unexpectedly, Gabrielle leaned forward as well. The touch on the warrior's shoulder never left.

Then through the darkness the girl heard her own voice, full of the compassion that ached from deep inside her. "It ... hurts you. Blood ... on your hands..."

The tiniest of shudders ran through the warrior's body. She masked them by sitting up straight again, but Gabrielle had felt it.

"I lost it yesterday," Xena said matter-of-factly, a moment later. "You shouldn't have had to see that." There was a long pause, neither woman moving. "Go back to sleep," Xena repeated.

After a time Gabrielle had let the hand on the warrior's shoulder retreat. "Please Xena," Gabrielle said softly, edging back to her own bedroll. "Please ... sleep well."

The concern in her voice made the warrior lift her head, if slightly. Later, the young bard convinced herself Xena's whispered reply was just the wind in the trees.

"The gods' blessing on you, Gabrielle."

Her story ended, Gabrielle stared at the ground in front of her, avoiding Lilith's eyes. *Gods*, she thought, *now I can sleep. I can't remember when I was this tired.*

Lilith was silent for a time, then she spoke, saying quietly, "And when did you know you were in love?"

The bard gave a choking laugh, blinking back tears. "You don't ask for much, do you?"

A slim hand rested on hers, and a sudden peace filled her. "I am sorry, Gabrielle," Lilith soothed gently. "We will speak of this no more."

"Nah, it's OK," Gabrielle replied, wiping her eyes and smiling. "It's just..." she sighed. "It's just something I feel so stupid about, is all." She looked around at nothing in particular, then back at the Priestess. "Xena had to die before I understood."

Lilith stared. "This is ... I am confused." For the first time since Gabrielle had met her, the Priestess seemed at a loss for words.

Gabrielle chuckled, then gave an exhausted sigh. "It's a long story, and I'm too tired to tell it right." She looked up at Lilith. "The *short* version," she chuckled again, self-consciously, "is that we were saving some women and children from a cult, and Xena was hit by a log trap. I tried to get her to a healer, but ... I couldn't make it in time and..." The young woman closed her eyes, let out a slow breath. "And she died."

The bard looked up at the stars, making herself continue to explain. "Anyway, she fought it. Somehow she found a way to reach me from the other side, and helped me and some friends find some ambrosia so we could bring her back."

The bard laughed in spite of herself. "That's a bad way to tell it, I know, but it's basically what happened." She looked back at the ground. "I hate myself sometimes for being as stupid as I was. I mean, I'd always cared for her, looked up to her. Gods, she's ... she's heroic and smart and *so* beautiful. She's the best friend I ever had, but it wasn't until ... when she was gone, when I thought I'd lost her forever ... that I knew..." Gabrielle shifted, went quiet.

Lilith studied the younger woman for a moment with a mixture of awe and, the bard thought, longing. Finally Lilith spoke. "I could not know it was this way. No tale has ever touched me so." The Priestess flowed towards Gabrielle, pulling her close, her full lips brushing lightly against the bard's before moving up to press against the young woman's forehead. Lilith lowered her face until it was almost touching Gabrielle's. "To defeat death with love ... No, it is too beautiful."

The Priestess pulled away slightly, openly gazing into Gabrielle's face as she ran the backs of her hands through the younger woman's hair and down across her shoulders. "Ah, would that I had met you sooner Gabrielle ... would that I had met your warrior. But no," she smiled ruefully, "that is wrong. I am thinking only of selfishness." She ran her hand idly over the ground. "Oh Inanna, what fools these mortals be..."

When the bard could look up again, Lilith was standing. "For now, Gabrielle, I bid you rest, and an easy sleep," she smiled. "Trust that your love is strong, and shines for all to see - of this you should have no fear. I wish only life, and joy, and love for you. Until morning, farewell."

"Good night Lilith," the bard said as the Priestess left.

Though still disappointed Xena hadn't come back yet, Gabrielle felt utterly exhausted. She snuffed out the torch and lay back on her bedroll, falling into a deep sleep almost as soon as she lay her head down.

The next day dawned bright and clear - or at least it would very shortly. The sun hadn't quite come up when the bard awoke, Xena gently nudging her. "C'mon sleepyhead," the warrior said with mock sternness, "we've got a long, dangerous day ahead of us."

"S'okay," Gabrielle mumbled, "I'm up..." As the young woman opened her eyes and half sat up however, the sight that greeted her made her heart jump enough to bring her fully awake: Xena was lying only a foot or so away, and their bedrolls were once again side by side - something that hadn't happened in months.

Chapter Four

Gabrielle was nervous as the caravan left Amazon territory that morning. Out of the huge group of women - and one man - who began the journey, she was among the small handful that knew that danger lay ahead. Morgin and her two best scouts rode out just before sunup, and true to her word, Lilith and the rest of her followers were ready less than an hour later. Gabrielle politely declined Lilith's invitation to ride in the Priestess' wagon, preferring to walk along with Solari.

It was mid-morning when Vana, one of the two scouts, came galloping back down the road. Xena signaled the caravan to a halt.

"Slavers!" Vana called breathlessly as she approached, pulling her mount to a halt in front of Xena and Meleager.

"Where? How many?" Xena asked.

"An hour's ride west, in ambush along the road ... at least thirty," Vana replied, catching her breath. "Morgin and Treya sent me back while they remained to scout further. Morgin will return as soon as more is known. Treya will stay, and note if there is any change."

"Do the slavers know we're coming?" Xena asked.

"It's possible," Vana said, smiling, "but we found and took down two of their own scouts. One is dead, having fought Morgin - she didn't have a choice. The other is a prisoner, and she will bring him with her. It was felt he would only slow me down, and that you should know of this as quickly as possible."

"All right. Good work," Xena commented. "Find Solari, tell her and Lilith, and put the watch commanders on alert - I want everyone in position immediately. Then come back for a debriefing."

Vana nodded and spurred her horse back through the caravan. Meleager turned to Xena with a half smile "I

guess it starts, huh?" he chuckled.

"Looks that way," Xena replied.

"I'll check the deployment," Meleager turned his horse. "And Xena," he said, making sure he caught her eye, "I just want you to know, thank you. I really owe you one." He extended his arm.

Xena raised an eyebrow, but smiled. "You should wait until this is over to thank me," she said with a note of dry amusement. "Doing it now is just asking for bad luck. Still, you're welcome." She clasped his forearm and they gripped firmly for a brief moment.

"And you're right, Meleager the Mighty, you owe me *big* time." She flashed her eyes at him, then gave his horse a slap on its flank and sent him on his way.

* * *

The slaver scout told everything he knew with no trouble at all. Surrounded by an armed force that was much larger than he'd ever dreamed, he clearly feared for his life, which surprised no one - slavers and those who traveled with them were usually monstrous cowards at heart. Between what he told them and what Morgin could confirm, the situation wasn't good. A large tree had been felled across the road, and the slavers were waiting in ambush.

"We *could* just let him go back to his, um, companions," Gabrielle mused out loud. "Maybe when they know what they're up against, they'll just leave us alone. We outnumber them by a lot. Even if you only count soldiers, it's more than two to one."

"Maybe," Xena replied, "but I don't want to count on it."

"Yeah," Meleager agreed. "And they might come back with help, or figure some other way to trick or trap us."

"I would," Xena said simply.

Meleager scratched his beard. "Frontal assault is out, I guess."

"Damn right," Solari insisted. "Too risky."

"The log is the most serious problem," Morgin offered. "Were it not for that, we could almost certainly keep moving and weather the attack. They aren't many..."

As the discussion continued, Gabrielle motioned to Xena. The warrior rose and joined her, slightly away from the rest. "Xena," Gabrielle began. "You could take these guys - at the very least, you and Meleager, maybe take Morgin or Solari and a couple of others for diversion. Run them off..."

Xena smiled thinly, shaking her head. "You're right, I probably could, but the journey's too long. I don't want this whole camp depending on me, not this early anyway. Something could happen in a day, or a week, and I might not be there anymore."

"Xena..." the bard began.

"It's all right Gabrielle," the warrior quietly reassured her, "It's not like I'm writing myself off. Just being practical. You were the one who said we had to find out if the whole system works, remember?"

"Yes, but..." The bard's words trailed off. Gabrielle didn't know whether to be hurt or not by the comment, but her frustration was clear. Xena never ran from a fight.

"Look," Xena sighed, but smiled warmly, "I'll do whatever it takes to keep everyone safe. You know that. But this is just the first obstacle. One way or the other, there isn't much danger, not really. I'll give advice, play my part in the plan, but we all need to work together, all right?"

"Yeah," Gabrielle answered thoughtfully, "and a shared victory will help keep everyone's morale up too. I'm sorry."

"Don't be," Xena said, giving the bard's shoulder a squeeze. "You're just being concerned. Don't ever lose that - I count on it."

"Deal," Gabrielle smiled back.

* * *

Penthus was getting impatient. Worse, when he thought about it, he realized he was also getting worried.

"So?" Darmus asked spitefully. "What now, oh great leader?"

Penthus just glared at him. The uneasy peace between them had been sorely tested by the waiting game they'd been forced to play, and even their mutual hatred for Meleager and those damned whore guards had been barely enough to keep the two of them together for the last week or so. Then, last night, judging by the bonfire they'd spotted, it seemed he'd guessed right about the road the whores' caravan was taking out of Amazon territory. That had shut up Darmus at least.

They'd felled the tree Penthus had so carefully chosen - in Zeus' name, what else had he had to occupy his time? - and the caravan should have pulled up and been stopped by mid-morning. A couple of volleys of flaming arrows later, and their men would have been able to keep the guards at bay long enough to haul off at least a few wagons in the confusion. Then they'd have enough flesh for trade to make the whole thing profitable.

It had seemed like a good plan, but then his scouts that morning hadn't returned. Then the men he'd sent after the scouts hadn't returned. Darmus - damn his eyes - had insisted on sending out a few more, and they hadn't come back either. Now their mild numerical superiority over the guards had dwindled to nothing, and it looked like they didn't even have surprise on their side anymore.

"They know we're here. They're picking us off one at a time," Penthus said.

"Duhhh," Darmus rolled his eyes, spiteful as ever. It was the last thing he ever did in his short, selfish life.

Without looking, Penthus whipped his sword from his scabbard and decapitated his testy ally with a single, powerful sidearm stroke. "Don't piss me off," he said simply.

As the twitching body fell to the ground, Penthus continued looking thoughtfully down the road. *All right*, he said to himself, *the plan can still work. They should have stopped for the tree, but now they've stopped themselves. No big deal.*

"Mount up!" he called out to his men - all of them were his now. "I want two groups! We're heading east. Fan out from the road, and *try* to stay quiet!"

Shortly before mid-day, Treya returned to the caravan, bringing news of the slavers' imminent arrival, but by then everything was already in place. The Guardians had been divided into two squads and posted in the woods on either side of the road well ahead of the caravan, while Amazon archers, sheltered in the first row of wagons, covered the road.

The mounted slavers approached through the woods, planning on surrounding the caravan. It wasn't a bad idea, but moving through the trees and brush of the forest effectively sacrificed whatever advantage their horses gave them. The Guardians let themselves be seen, then pulled back - falling into neat lines which put them between the enemy and the caravan. The slavers pursued them eagerly, only to be fallen on by Amazons hidden further within the woods and in the trees.

Surrounded and outnumbered, the group to the south offered only token resistance. Xena quickly dispatched their nominal lieutenant by tossing him against a tree trunk like one would swat a mosquito. A single ice-blue glare later and all their fight was gone. They surrendered quietly.

The group to the north, however, had their leader with them, and his blind rage spurred them to action. Heedless of the Guardians barring his way, Penthus had simply charged the line, galloping towards the wagons as fast as his horse could move through the trees, his men following. While many were knocked from their mounts by sharply wielded wooden swords, at least a half-dozen broke through.

From her place in her wagon, Lilith rose to her feet. Crouching next to her, Gabrielle watched from behind the cover of the wagon's side planking. Although Lilith had seemed amused by the idea she needed a personal bodyguard, both Xena and Meleager had insisted - Meleager out of concern for the Priestess, and Xena, truthfully, so Gabrielle would have something to do that would keep her as far from the main battle as possible. Now it looked like the battle was coming to her anyway.

"Hey, Lilith," Gabrielle said, tugging at the Priestess' robe - the bard couldn't believe how calm Lilith seemed. "Don't you think you should *keep down*?"

Meleager galloped after the leader and his men. "Penthus!" he shouted. "Come on you bastard! Hey, *bottom-feeder*! It's me you want!"

That brought the slaver up short, his eyes blazing with hate. He turned to his few remaining men. "No prisoners," he hissed, waving an arm in the general direction of the caravan. "Just kill!" Then he spun around, screaming as he charged toward Meleager.

His men continued on, and the first one who broke through the treeline was immediately pincushioned with Amazon arrows. The rest dropped from their horses, pulling out their own bows and crossbows and taking cover behind the trees.

Meleager and Penthus charged each other, their swords ringing out, clashing as they passed. Penthus pulled up and began to turn, but Meleager didn't bother. He drew Melampus up short and leaped back out of the saddle, twisting around as he did, catching Penthus in a flying body tackle and taking him to the ground. In moments they were both on their feet, Penthus in a low crouch, growling. "I'm gonna bleed you *slow*!"

Meleager stood with his sword out, but settled into a casual slouch. "Aw come on Penthus, you can't still be angry about that broken nose? That was *years* ago."

Xena was just beginning to supervise tying up the captured men to the south when she heard shouts coming

from the other side of the road. "Gods, now what?" she grunted, sprinting towards the noise.

A crossbow bolt thunked solidly into the side of the wagon. "Lilith!" Gabrielle hissed insistently, a little frustrated. "You *really* need to keep down!" She rose to her own feet, reaching out to grab the Priestess by the shoulders and force her under cover, when Lilith's hand struck within a few inches of her face, faster than the bard could see it move. Clenched in Lilith's delicate fingers was another bolt.

The Priestess gave a sly grin. "Perhaps *you* should take cover young one," she said coyly, pressing Gabrielle back down to a sitting position. "I truly need no protecting." Then Lilith's gray eyes darted to the side and in an instant she was airborne, diving headlong over the bard. She connected with the wagon driver, knocking her from her seat as both women tumbled over the front end of the wagon and out of Gabrielle's line of sight.

Penthus did exactly what Meleager hoped he would: Charged forward, screaming with anger, his sword making a sloppy arc that Meleager easily countered. The graying warrior landed a solid kick to the slaver's knee as the bigger man went past, hearing a satisfying crunch as the joint was pushed in a direction nature never intended it to go. Howling in pain, the slaver hopped a couple of yards on his remaining good leg, then turned back to face Meleager again, cold fury in his eyes.

"Aw c'mon Penthus," Meleager drawled, "don't you think you should just kinda, you know, cut your losses here?"

The slaver drew a dagger and threw it at the aging warrior, who easily batted it aside with his sword. "Guess not," he shrugged as Penthus came at him with another bouncing charge.

Xena ran down the road, sensing the position of the snipers in the treeline. Two were down, but two more were left. With no conscious thought, just instinct and skill, she let fly with the chakram into the woods, angling it off two trees and one sniper's helmet before it buried itself in the chest of the other. Hearing the sounds of battle continuing from deeper in the woods, she drew her sword and charged into the trees.

Gabrielle scrambled out of the wagon. Lilith was on her side, back arched severely as she listened to the driver's chest for a heartbeat. "Is she..." Gabrielle began.

The Priestess turned to look at the bard with a strange, tight smile. "No," she half gasped. "She is unharmed, merely knocked senseless. Thank the Goddess I was able to reach her in time."

"Lilith, you're hurt," Gabrielle observed, taking the Priestess by the arm and helping her sit up, scanning for signs of injury. "What in the name of Artemis made you do that?"

Lilith looked down, closing her eyes, an unreadable expression on her face. Then with a deep sigh she gave a shrug and looked back up with that same tight smile. "Simple, young one. So she would not be struck by this." With that, Lilith half turned and let Gabrielle see the crossbow bolt lodged deep between her shoulder blades.

Xena reached the battle just in time to end it. Having been knocked from their horses, the few slavers with any will to fight weren't in any shape to be effective, and were easily overpowered. Xena was well pleased with the actions of her troops, none of whom were even scratched. She had passed by where Meleager was fighting the leader, but he hadn't seemed in need of help. Still, after making sure the Guardians and Amazons had the situation under control, she jogged back in that direction - *no sense in leaving anything to chance*.

She found Meleager standing with his arms crossed, watching as the slaver dragged himself across the ground, still growling and swinging his sword despite his two obviously broken legs. Xena sheathed her own

sword, "Having fun?" she asked Meleager.

He gave a disgusted grunt. "No, not at all." He caught the slaver's weak swing with the sole of his boot and stepped on the blade, pinning it to the ground. "Lights out, bottom-feeder," he snapped before knocking Penthus out cold.

"Gods Lilith!" Gabrielle gasped. "OK, don't move! I'll get Xena, she'll know what..."

"No, young one," Lilith said quietly, waving her hand. "Do not be troubled. I am in no danger. I am, however, in ... uhhh!" she groaned, then unaccountably chuckled. "I am in some pain. Please, help me to stand..."

Wide eyed and totally beyond understanding, the bard took the slim hand in her own and pulled the Priestess to her feet. Lilith swayed a little but miraculously stayed upright. She gently stroked the side of Gabrielle's face, smiling warmly, and for no reason the bard could fathom she felt her panic subside.

"I wish you to know, young Gabrielle, I have seen into your heart, and trust it with all of my own. Please, have courage." With that, Lilith closed her eyes tightly and slammed herself back against the side of the wagon, driving the bolt all the way through her torso and out the other side.

Gabrielle was simply too shocked and scared for the scream inside to escape. Instead, she stared, mute, as Lilith's legs buckled slightly. The Priestess made a feeble attempt at reaching for the bolt which now protruded from just under her left collarbone. She looked up at the bard, smiling weakly. "Gabrielle," she gasped, "could you be kind and pull ... pull this..."

Numb, the young woman watched as her own hands reached out and gripped the shaft, then with two short tugs, managed to pull it free. "Ahhh," Lilith sighed. "Better."

Gabrielle instantly pushed her fingers over the wound, looking around for something to make a bandage with. "It's OK Lilith, we'll get help..."

"Young one," Lilith said softly, her usual warm smile back again, covering the bard's hands with her own. "There is no need. Truly. Look." She gently pried Gabrielle's fingers away, and the bard saw that under the small amount of blood, the wound had already closed. She watched, dumbfounded as the small mark it left behind faded before her eyes.

She looked up into Lilith's amused face. "Gods," the bard breathed, "you're ... you're..."

"Yes, I am," the Priestess said simply, running her hand over the young woman's brow and down her cheek. She cocked her head at a coy angle. "It is, I think, time for us to talk. We shall do so tonight, after we are camped. For now there is much to do, and you should find your warrior. I have little doubt she will wish to know you are safe and unharmed."

"Yeah, Xena," Gabrielle babbled. "Oh gods, *Xena*! She needs to know this ... and Meleager! Does he know? He does *know*. Right?"

Lilith shook her head. "No young one, he does not know, and he should not for a time longer. I will make things plain tonight, after we make camp. Bring Xena as well, as I believe she already has her suspicions, and there is no further point in keeping this from her. For now, however, please respect my wishes and tell no one else. Do you see?"

"Yeah, I see, I guess," Gabrielle said slowly, rubbing her temple, still trying to take it all in.

"Amazon Queen," Lilith said affectionately, but as if talking to a small child, "go now. Find your warrior."

* * *

"Yeah, that fits," Xena said slowly. "Explains a lot."

Gabrielle gave a half grin. "She said you suspected."

"I did, sort of," Xena looked thoughtful. "Question now is, what else has she kept from us? More to the point, what else *will* she keep from us?"

"Well, we can ask her tonight," the bard said cheerfully. "Personally, I've got a million questions."

"You would," the warrior playfully raised an eyebrow. "Personally, I've got a bunch of prisoners to deal with. Let's see now - executing them would be easiest..."

"Xena!"

That prompted the warrior into real smile. Xena rolled her eyes unconvincingly. "All right, so we'll graciously spare their lives. Let's find Meleager and Solari, see what we can work out."

In the end it was decided to leave the captured slavers at Nimos, a good-sized village not far off. It was slightly out of the way, but the caravan could reach it before nightfall, and if Penthus and his men had been working in the area for any length of time, the villagers would be happy to get their hands on them.

Xena, Meleager and the Amazons had begun stringing the captives into rope trains when Lilith and several of her priestesses approached and stopped them. "Dear one, warrior Xena, it is my wish that they should ride in the wagons, with us."

The two warriors just stared at her, puzzled. "Uh, Lilith," Meleager began, "I don't think that's such a good idea. What in Hades' name for?"

"To reclaim their spirits," Lilith smiled. "We will lead them to the face of Inanna, perhaps then on the road to redemption."

Xena crossed her arms. "Lilith, these men are dangerous..."

"Yes, they are," Lilith said simply, "and they will continue to be so unless they are shown another path. I well know we may not reach them all. It is possible we will not reach any, yet as sons of the Earth they must be given the chance."

Meleager stared at her in disbelief. "Lilith, these men would have kidnapped you, sold you into slavery, gods know what else, and you're just going to ... well, I mean, I think you're going to..."

"Yes, we are," she laid a hand on Meleager's arm. "Dear one, you have done a hero's work this day, as have you, Xena, and all who protect us. It is time now for I and the priestesses to do our work, that work you fought to protect. Can you see?"

The aging warrior stared at the smaller woman for a time, then, slowly, he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close. "Gods," he sighed heavily into her hair. "Yeah ... I guess ... I guess I do..." They held each other for a long moment, Xena just watching, pursing her lips thoughtfully.

"Again, dear one," Lilith said softly, brushing her lips over his neck and shoulder, "I ask if you wish for me not to give myself..."

"Nah," Meleager replied, squeezing her tight again before letting her go. "Just ... just do what you think is right." He patted her shoulder. "I gotta check a few things," he announced, then walked off without looking back.

Xena gave a sharp sigh and shrugged. "All right," she said flatly, "do what you want. I'll put guards around each wagon. If any of these men give you even a *hint* of trouble, have someone call out. Use the word 'flying' - that'll be the signal. Understand?"

"Yes, Xena. This I will make plain to us all."

"And one last thing," the warrior said, letting the seriousness be heard in her tone. "These men stay tied - tight. No exceptions."

"I would not expect less," Lilith replied. "Forgiveness and love we graciously extend, but this does not imply any measure of stupidity. Many times have we dealt with ones such as these, and know full well the risk it entails. Besides," she gave the warrior a playful smile, "it will make things somewhat more ... interesting, will it not?"

Xena couldn't help a short laugh. She caught herself and rolled her eyes. "I've heard immortals are a jaded bunch. Now I know it's true."

Lilith laughed honestly - a wonderful, musical sound. "Ah, Xena," she sighed, running a hand down the warrior's arm, "you know not the half of it. Yet ones such as you make eternity bearable, you and Meleager ... you and your bard..." She looked and caught Xena's eyes. "Of this, we must talk."

"Maybe," the warrior grunted, then turned and went back to have the prisoners untied from the trains.

* * *

Xena had looked on, both amused and impatient as the bound slavers were given a nominal washing before being split into groups and loaded into the back of several wagons. After that, the journey to Nimos was relatively uneventful, unless one counted the chanting of the priestesses, punctuated occasionally by loud, often emotional shouts from the captive men. As for what went on inside the wagons, none could tell - except, perhaps, the Guardians riding alongside who doubtless could hear everything. The boxy, canvas wagon covers which had been removed as a precaution against flaming arrows had been replaced.

Xena and Meleager rode together at the head of the column, but neither said much, and it suited them both. As they reached the outskirts of Nimos, Xena signaled a halt, then motioned to Morgin. "Tell Lilith we've arrived. Whatever they're doing has to stop, now," she said, not missing the way Meleager stiffened slightly. "The Amazons can get the prisoners together. Meleager and I will ride ahead and let the villagers know what we've got."

"Xena," Meleager spoke finally, "it's probably not a bad idea to ask permission if we can stay here too. I mean, an armed camp outside your village can be a little, uh, distressing."

Why didn't I think of that? Xena asked herself. Simple, dumb warrior, last time you rode with an armed camp, you never needed to ask - they accepted it or they paid the price.

Xena shook it off. "Yeah, you're right. Go on Morgin." She waved the guardian off. "Come on, Meleager."

"Hey! Xena?" Gabrielle chimed in, hopping down out of the wagon she'd been riding in.

The warrior suppressed a smile. "Wanna come along, I gather?"

Gabrielle chuckled. "Want to? I'd better - or do you think a pair of heavily armed and mounted warriors seems like a friendly envoy? Besides, this close to the territories they're bound to be used to dealing with Amazons. I'll just flash my royal seal and they'll know they can trust us. Probably not a bad idea to bargain for supplies while we're here too."

Xena and Meleager exchanged a brief, stoically amused look. "All right my little flasher," Xena sighed. "Mount up." She reached down and helped the bard into the saddle behind her, then nudged Argo towards Nimos, Meleager chuckling beside them.

The village leader and his constable never had a chance. By the time the sun was just starting to set, the persuasive bard had not only convinced them to allow the caravan to camp near the river, but had also exacted a substantial bounty on the captured slavers, then negotiated the dinars for foodstuffs and other supplies.

"Gods," Meleager grunted from his horse, watching the hopelessly confused expressions on the faces of the two villagers, who mostly nodded while getting few words in themselves. He leaned towards Xena. "She always get her way like that?"

Xena gave him a wry grin. "Why do think I don't talk around her much? Arguing with her is like falling into a bear trap." The smile warmed on the warrior's face. "She could talk her way out of Charon's boat - all he'd have to do is open his mouth to disagree."

"Xena, you are a braver woman than I even gave you credit for," Meleager drawled. "Glad she travels with you and not me."

"Yeah, me too," Xena said softly, then realized she spoke out loud. "C'mon, let's go," she said quickly, turning Argo. "Oh *Queen*?" she shouted, managing to sound both reverent and playful at the same time.

"Yes?" Gabrielle said over her shoulder, clearly annoyed by the interruption.

"We, your humble captains, shall fetch the prisoners, all right?"

At that, Gabrielle smiled, then hid it quickly. "Good," the bard said soberly, "and bring back a wagon..." She paused, looking the village leader straight in the eye. "No, make that *two* wagons..."

Both warriors managed to keep silent until they were out of earshot, then laughed for a solid minute. As they neared the column, however, Xena noticed Meleager's mood drop again. By the time they reached the prisoners he was practically glaring at the bound men.

A bit jealous aren't you, Meleager the Mighty? Xena sighed to herself. *Well, you could have told her 'no'.* "Meleager," Xena called out. "Hey, Meleager!"

"Yeah, what?" he replied, snapping himself out of it.

"I'll take the prisoners. You set up camp, send out the scouts. Then take first watch, all right?"

"Yeah," he said slowly. "OK."

"And Meleager," Xena began, hardly believing she was saying it, "use the time to think a little, huh? She does love you, you know." *Whoa! What was that for, Warrior Matchmaker?*

He relaxed, gave an embarrassed grin. "Yeah, sorry." He caught her eye, then scratched his beard. "But, you know, I could say the same to you." He tensed slightly, almost as if expecting to get a dagger in the face.

Xena narrowed her eyes. *Blocked and counterattacked. That's what I get for butting in.* "Yeah, well, we've got work to do." She turned Argo. "Solari!" she called out, "let's get those men on their feet..."

The short trip to the village was odd. Many of the slavers showed the usual surliness of prisoners being taken to justice, but perhaps half were strangely meek and subdued. A few even seemed to be quietly weeping. It was a look Xena recognized from her own face - a dark soul that had been shown just how dark it was, and had come to regret it.

Gods Lilith, the warrior thought, *I don't know what powers you have, but keep them away from me.* She suppressed a shudder and kept riding.

The trip back, however, was much better. "Chickens?" Standing beside Argo, Xena raised an eyebrow as the small cages were stowed in one of the wagons.

"Yeah, well," Gabrielle seemed a little embarrassed. "I know they'll need some grain and looking after, but we'll all get tired of salted meat, and I figured a few eggs wouldn't be a bad thing in the meantime..."

"Bartered for the grain though too, huh?" The warrior was just playing with her now, found herself kind of enjoying it.

"Well, they have lots of it, dried beans too. Good harvest last year ... What?" the suddenly exasperated bard asked.

"Nothing," Xena said evenly, hiding a warm smile. "Just that you managed to trade two dozen worthless slavers for enough food to keep us all going for at least half a week ... *and* you don't seem a bit proud of it." The warrior absently brushed Argo's mane. "Most folks I know would be boasting by now."

Gabrielle bounced on her toes and thumped her staff lightly on the ground. "I'll boast when we get where we're going. Besides," the bard replied, "I wasn't the one who intimidated fifteen or twenty armed men into giving up without a fight - before noon."

Xena turned and took a step so she stood closer to the smaller woman. They were surrounded by random villagers and several Amazons, but as it always seemed to happen, at that moment there were just the two of them.

Xena looked warmly into the bard's green eyes. "And I wasn't the one who convinced a town to feed eight score people before sunset, Gabrielle."

"Xena, I couldn't have protected those people."

The warrior smiled. "Don't know about that. It was your plan that kept them from walking into an ambush." Xena gently placed her hand on Gabrielle's shoulder. "We have different gifts, don't we?"

The bard grinned. "You know, I think I like that."

"Me too."

A heartbeat later they were both mounted in Argo's saddle, cantering down the road, the strawberry blonde in front laughing at something the warrior spoke in her ear as they rode away.

"Methinks I were lucky," the village elder said to Solari.

"Oh?" the Amazon replied, noting the way he looked at her, thinking he wasn't too bad looking himself.

"Lucky how?"

He leaned in and whispered conspiratorially, winking, "If I'd known the Queen were joined to the Warrior Princess, I might've bargained less harshly."

Solari suddenly realized he was much less intelligent than he seemed. "That's lame, old man," she said proudly, folding her arms, "our Queen is the best negotiator on both sides of the Mediterranean. For what it's worth, you got taken in your 'bargain' - supplies for eight score people for some lousy slavers? Come on!"

She shrugged away and turned back for one last taunt, seeing again that he really wasn't bad looking at all ... in a mature, older guy sort of way. "And they aren't joined, old man - you wouldn't have had a bargaining chip to stand on." *Always leave 'em guessing.*

Solari hurried after her sister Amazons, then slowed, thinking. *Why is that anyway? When I asked about them, Gabrielle shot that thought down pretty quick. Damn, too quick. Weird. By Artemis, why aren't they?*

* * *

The space inside Lilith's wagon was somewhat confining, and Gabrielle knew Xena was uncomfortable in close quarters, yet the warrior stretched herself out and seemed at ease, picking up her goblet of cider and taking a brief sip. "So," the warrior began, characteristically not wasting words, "I hear you drink human blood."

Lilith gave a musical chuckle. "This I have heard of myself as well." The Priestess eyed Xena with a sly smile. "Of course, I also recall hearing the same of a certain Warrior Princess..."

Xena raised an eyebrow, then smiled wryly. "All right, fair enough. So, why are you immortal?"

"Luck," Lilith shrugged, smiling, reclining onto her side. "At times I am unsure whether it was good luck or bad, yet I cannot fail to see the irony in it." She turned to Gabrielle. "Young bard, I think you know my story, yes?"

"About how you left the garden? I think so. Was that how it happened?" Gabrielle seemed breathless, and was the only one of the three of them sitting up, cross-legged, leaning slightly forward with her own goblet clutched in her hands, forgotten. The young woman had met gods, yet an immortal, someone who had been there at the creation, this was something *big*.

"I know not the way you may have heard it, my story being told many times," Lilith smiled, "yet I think you have the bold strokes of it. In truth, as far as why I still live, it is because having been betrayed by both my companion and my maker, having left the garden, I was not there to receive the one god's curse of mortality when Adam and Eve disobeyed him. Therefore I live on, never to age, and nothing can stop this body, which requires neither food nor sleep nor warmth." She sighed, though she still smiled. "Many times, however, have

I thought they were the lucky ones, to know the peace of death."

Lilith closed her eyes. "I am, I think, the oldest who lives upon this Earth, as old at least as the Titans, who are long since imprisoned - I cannot say for sure, for I only learned of them later. I know only that Inanna, the power of creation, was there before the one god who made me, as I believe was even the Earth itself. Knowing of her, indeed, working through her, he made me first as the one who could give birth and carry the seed of life..."

Lilith exhaled slowly as tears rolled down her face, though her voice remained steady. "A gift I foolishly destroyed in my anger, killing my womb with the issue of demons, caring only that the children of Adam and Eve should suffer for their father's pride."

The bard was spellbound by Lilith's words, absently reaching for the warrior's hand beside her. The callused warmth gripped her own hand gently as the Priestess continued.

"Adam ... Ah, I remember still, watching as the one god formed him from the clay, Adam who has long since returned to it. I think of him still as a fool, vain and shallow - yet I could have loved him, if only he had not been so consumed with his own self-importance." The Priestess looked up, shrugged. "Perhaps the one god instilled him with this, to guard against feeling inferior for having been created last of all things, or perhaps it was some other feeling which simply became malformed. Thousands of years have I pondered it, and still it makes no sense. In the end he failed me, casting me out with his depthless vanity." She shook her head. "And so I am blessed, and cursed with life unending, as long as Earth endures, watching as the sons of Adam continue their self-important ways, and the daughters of Eve continue to indulge it, watching as they turn from this god to that, forgetting the power of creation that began gods and mortals all."

Lilith then gave a knowing, conspiratorial smile. "Yet it is Inanna who will triumph in the end, and I am her doorway back into the world."

"How so?" Xena asked.

"For many years, both during my time of darkness and since, I traveled the world, wandering aimlessly and everywhere, taking my pleasures as I found them..."

"Mounting men in their sleep," Xena said, then raised an eyebrow. "Well, that's what Gabrielle told me."

"Xena!" The bard slapped the warrior's knee as she blushed. Turning back to the Priestess, Gabrielle gave an embarrassed shrug. "That's, um, the story I heard anyway."

Lilith grinned, but there was a strange gravity behind it. "This is probably because it is true, young one. During my dark years if seduction failed, then yes, I would take them as they slept, any who caught my eye. They would remember me as a dream, nothing more. Women would think of it as only that, a dream, yet in the morning the men would have other evidence, finding their seed spilled on them - for no reason I could ever comprehend, some found this disturbing." She gave a musical chuckle. "Ah, but when I found the love of the Goddess, I ceased to do such things, for pleasure must be freely given if it is to be shared."

Lilith stared upward, as if looking past the roof of the wagon. "Yet all those I have laid with, they became ... changed, somehow. If I returned years later and found they had borne children, these children were always different. The men were giving and tolerant, the women intelligent and self-reliant. These are not like the sons and daughters of Adam and Eve, and looking upon them I realized ... I knew..."

The immortal lowered her gaze, looking from Gabrielle to Xena, her eyes once again brimming with tears

above a strange smile. "They are, somehow, *mine*. Not as the issue of my womb, long since dead within me, but the children of my heart, and this has passed to their children in turn, one generation to the next. It has not always bred true, but I have watched it spread, and grow, and they teach others by example. It was, I think, a gift from Inanna, she who stayed by me even as I was abandoned by other gods, even as I let my hate turn me from them. Always she was there for me, I realized in time. And in time, our children will lead the world back to her, to live together as one with the Earth, in peace, and wisdom, and togetherness."

Lilith reached out and gently touched the bard and warrior. "And you, Xena, and you, Gabrielle, I see into you, and know that you are both my daughters true, as surely as if I had given you life. You are my joy."

Gabrielle beamed at Lilith, turned to look at Xena, saw the warrior looking oddly thoughtful. After a pause, Xena sat up slightly. "Let's talk about this 'seeing into' us thing. How is that? You said you weren't an oracle."

Lilith looked at her with an odd half grin, wiping her eyes absently. "Indeed, I am not," she sniffled, smiling, "but after living among people for a few thousand years, one becomes very good at judging their moods and character. It is hard to describe, but I have come to feel it as a kind of vibration. It is not a gift I alone possess, and I have met others who can feel it as well. Indeed, through teaching the priestesses I believe that given time and study anyone can feel what is in others to some degree, although," she chuckled, "I confess I have had more time than most. If the emotion is strong I can even sense it from a distance, or feel things so clearly it is much like reading one's thoughts."

"Can you vibrate back?" Xena asked, an edge of suspicion in her voice. "*Cause* someone to feel a certain way?"

Lilith gave a coy smile. "Ah, Xena, if you ... I am sorry. To answer your question, no - I can never *cause* a person's feelings, nor would I do so if I had such power. However, in truth, I have learned how to reach out, to nurture and release feelings that are already there, perhaps hidden, or push them away so other things can be felt more clearly. Calm someone who is lost in panic or fear, for example. Often it requires a touch, or an embrace, but again, when it is strong I need only be close. Indeed, it is how our ceremony works - with the help and focus of the other priestesses I feel the love and pleasure in those around me, then reach out to them and together we push it higher still, until the spirits of all who worship soar to a place where they can feel only joy, hear the love and harmony of the Earth, and there, perhaps, to find themselves as well."

The Priestess closed her eyes, and her voice dropped low. "Oh, and how I remember ... in Sumer of times long past, when Akkad was at its height, in the spring the whole city would be there to celebrate the fertility of the Earth. The King would come to me in the center of the temple, and I would reach out and feel the pleasure of hundreds of coupled lovers ... so many, none could resist the song, and even the stoniest of hearts could be opened to the love of the Goddess. Every pleased moment I felt as my own, and I would return it to them a hundred fold, higher and higher, until we were all joined to the Goddess as one, flowing together in ecstasy and boundless communion with love and the song of life..."

Lilith opened her eyes and laughed, blushing lightly for the first time either had seen. "It is," she giggled, "as you say, 'good work if get can get it', yes?"

Gabrielle suddenly remembered to close her mouth, realized it had been hanging open for quite a while. She noticed Xena looking at her with a half grin and felt herself blush. The bard tried a nonchalant shrug as she turned back to Priestess. "Uh, well, I guess there are some advantages to being immortal after all."

"A few," Lilith replied wistfully. "A very few. I think I would trade them all, however, for one last great love, and the peace of death. Yet I have accepted this will not happen, and have learned, in a word, to live with

living."

Gabrielle pursed her lips. "Do you love Meleager?"

"Yes," The Priestess replied, "he is a dear one. He is noble at heart, yet flawed in just the right ways, simple and human. His are weaknesses I find most charming, and he makes me laugh at odd times, something that few can do. He struggles to accept his own feelings and mine but," she grinned, "I can afford patience. I believe in time he will - indeed, I think it is not far off."

"But you don't want him to know that you're, um, who you are until then, right?" the bard asked simply.

"You speak the truth, young one," Lilith replied. "It complicates things, I have found. I do not hide my immortality, exactly, but nor do I announce it. Too many would seek me out only for that reason, not to listen to the message I bring them as a Priestess of Inanna, or to my feelings as a friend or lover."

"Fair enough," Xena said, sitting up, "but speaking of Meleager, he'll be getting off watch soon, and some of us *do* need sleep." The warrior gave Gabrielle a playful nudge.

The bard chuckled and nudged back. "One last question though, for now," Gabrielle said, turning back to Lilith, "who else knows - in this camp anyway? Don't want to give anything away."

The immortal smiled. "Morgin, and the priestesses of course, though not their acolytes. That is all."

The warrior raised an eyebrow. "You do manage to keep pretty quiet."

Lilith laughed. "You overestimate my gifts, warrior Xena. It is not, after all, the sort of thing that comes up in casual conversation - 'Lovely sunrise, and by the way, are you an immortal?' I think not."

They all chuckled. "C'mon bard," Xena said, hauling Gabrielle to her feet. "You'll have the whole trip to ask the rest of your million questions. Right now, you need your rest."

"Good night Lilith," the bard said as they opened the flaps and hopped out of the wagon.

"Sleep in peace, young Gabrielle. And you, Xena," the immortal called after them.

"So, can we trust her now?" the bard asked playfully once they were well away from Lilith's wagon.

"Let's just say I trust her more than I did," Xena replied around a wry grin. *But I don't like the idea of someone who can play with my emotions, whether they're mine to start with or not.* The warrior furrowed her brows, looking thoughtful.

"Dinar for your thoughts?" Gabrielle broke in.

"Hmm? Oh, sorry," Xena shrugged. "It's been a long day," she smiled, "and for me it's not over yet. I have to relieve Meleager, take my watch. Good night Gabrielle ... Gabrielle, is something wrong?"

The bard made herself smile. "Nah, go on. I'll, uh, I'll keep your bedroll warm. See you in the morning." She turned and strode towards their spot in the camp. *Oh no, proud warrior, nothing's wrong. Nothing at all. Just that after spending a nice day feeling closer to you than I have in ages, you're going to end it by wandering off. Business as usual for the short sidekick.*

Laying down, Gabrielle sighed. *No, that's not fair either. She's got a hundred people to take care of right*

now. What's between us will have to wait. We've had a million looks and words and little touches and sometimes more and never talked about them, and now is not the most practical time to start.

"But I swear Xena," the bard said out loud as she closed her eyes, "when this trip is over, we're going to find some nice, safe, isolated spot *and have one monster of a talk.*"

* * *

Stophacles stomped his foot, paced back and forth, remembered to spit in disgust. "Not good," he said simply. Then louder, "Not good!"

"Not a problem either," Klytus reassured him. "In fact, I think it's worked out fine."

"And just how in Tartarus do you figure that?" Stophacles was still livid with anger from realizing that the scouts - all of them - had simply stopped sending regular reports. No one in his much-too-large camp had received as much as a note in three days.

Klytus shrugged. "First, if they've eliminated the scouts it can only mean one thing - they're finally on the move..."

"Tell me something I *can't* guess," Stophacles spat back, then spat again for real.

Klytus sighed, decided that mid-morning was as good a time as any to start drinking, and grabbed his mug. "Second," he continued patiently, "losing their scouts has made Race and Pollux angry -"

"Oh gods," Stophacles groaned, covering his eyes. "That's the last thing we need - they'll both want more money."

"Nah, took care of that," Klytus reassured his partner, dumping the dregs of last night's ale onto the ground, then stepping towards the cask. "Had a chat with 'em this morning. I humbly report that I got them to quit hating *us* and got them focused back on Meleager and those whores he rides with."

"You're a wonder Klytus," Stophacles replied. "I don't know what I'd do without you."

"Same here," Klytus smiled, dipping his mug and filling it. "Still, it was pretty easy - there are very few mercenary captains who have any love for Amazons. Losing twenty of their best scouts just made 'em hate the Amazon Nation even more."

"Not bad," Stophacles mused, turning it over in his mind how he might use that later.

"Yeah well, like I said it, was easy," Klytus replied. He took a swallow of ale, reminding himself he'd have to send for a couple more casks soon. "Anyway, we're on to plan Beta - your plan from the start, by the way."

"Should have been plan Alpha. It was easier to begin with," Stophacles said smugly. "A caravan that large and unusual can't move anywhere without being noticed, and they pretty much have to cross at Byzantium. Just keep sending small groups of men to hang out in taverns across eastern Thrace - they'll turn up news sooner or later."

"Yeah well, time is money," Klytus sighed, settling back into his chair and taking another swig.

"No problem," Stophacles chuckled. "We shouldn't have all these hired troops around and just leave 'em doing sword drills and bugging each other. Tomorrow we'll send out a raiding party or two, have 'em bring

back some flesh. Sirrus will be in a buying mood this time of year, and he's only a day or so west. A little spending money will make everyone happier."

"Stoph, pour yourself an ale," Klytus said, raising his mug. "I knew there was a reason I keep you around."

Stophacles chuckled again, filling his own mug. "Not the only reason, I hope."

Klytus took another swallow, watching his muscled partner over the rim of his mug. "So tell me," he said finally, "is this objection to buggery just among the hired help, or in general?"

"Well," Stophacles replied, settling into his own chair next to Klytus and licking his lips, "rank does have its privileges."

* * *

The next few days were great as far as Gabrielle was concerned, in spite of everything. During the time they traveled to Byzantium the caravan only came across one other band of slavers, a small one which the scouts spotted well before the main group was anywhere near them. Xena, Meleager and a few others snuck into their camp in the night and captured them easily.

There was little other trouble, and Gabrielle spent most of her time riding with Lilith. True, there was a period every day after the noon meal when the immortal and her priestesses would close themselves up inside a wagon for an hour or so to meditate, and during this time Gabrielle walked with Solari, since Xena was often too busy.

The rest of the day Gabrielle was glued to her seat in the wagon across from the vastly ancient Lilith, a bit in awe, just letting the immortal talk and studiously writing everything down. Hearing so much history from someone who'd been there was an amazing experience for the ever-curious young bard. Lilith was patient, full of humor, and could recall almost every sensory detail, no matter how insignificant.

There were the odd times and places Lilith didn't seem to want to talk about, but this wasn't anything new for Gabrielle. Skirting around a rough subject was second nature to someone who traveled with Xena, and the bard was adept at letting certain things drop and asking about something else.

Knowing that Lilith could sense her every emotion made Gabrielle extremely self-conscious at first, but soon it just made things much easier - no matter what sort of offhand comment she made, she never had to backtrack and explain herself. *It's a lot like talking to Xena*, the bard thought. *Xena just knows me so well I can say almost anything, and most of the time she knows just how I meant it, no matter how stupidly I say it.*

And in fact, her daily history lessons with Lilith paled next to what Gabrielle began to feel happening with Xena, despite the little time they could spend together. True, the warrior was busy safeguarding the caravan along with Meleager, Morgin, and Solari. It was also clear that, ultimately, everyone looked to the ex-warlord to keep them safe, a burden Xena accepted without a shrug.

Yet Gabrielle knew her companion well enough to sense that inside, Xena wasn't as calm as she seemed. The warrior had a lot of weight on her shoulders, and Gabrielle quickly determined that somehow, she would create a space where Xena could relax.

The day after the attack by Penthus and his men, Gabrielle had told a couple of stories to the women gathered around Lilith's tent, then excused herself while Xena was still out checking the perimeter. By the time

the warrior returned to the spot where the two of them were to bed down for the night, Gabrielle had laid out their bedrolls, had a mug of soothing herb tea ready along with a couple of pastries saved from the evening meal, and a large bucket of warm water set near the small fire.

"And what's all this for?" Xena asked, raising an eyebrow as she stepped into the firelight.

"For you," Gabrielle replied simply. "Come on big warrior, have a seat, sip your tea, and let's get you out of that armor."

Xena gave a wry smile but accepted the mug and sat where Gabrielle indicated. "And how do I rate this kind of pampering?"

"Just think of it as payback for all the room service," the bard said warmly as she undid the clasps and buckles. Xena snorted but made no other comment as she dutifully sipped her tea while her armor and boots were patiently removed.

"Come on," Gabrielle insisted, "leathers too."

"Say again?"

"Well, you don't want them wet do you?" the bard teased. "You need a wash, oh Xena, Warrior Stinkweed - I couldn't possibly get any sleep otherwise."

"Well if it bothers you that much, I could always bed down with Argo," Xena replied reasonably.

"Just help me out here," Gabrielle chided with mock sternness as she tugged on the shoulder straps. With a sigh, Xena raised her arms and with a little wiggling, the leathers and breeches were soon carefully laid beside the armor.

Gabrielle mentally steeled herself for what came next. "Now, stand up." She dipped a square of linen in the warm water by the fire and squeezed it out over the warrior's body several times until Xena was thoroughly wetted down, then carefully averted her eyes while she handed Xena the soap and waited until the tall ... *and gods, incredibly beautiful* ... woman had lathered herself. Finally Gabrielle lifted the bucket and rinsed the warrior off.

There, see? That was easy enough, the bard noted as she towed Xena dry, to the warrior's wry amusement. *Just ignore the fact she's completely naked and be calm and businesslike. Not as if you haven't seen it before. No problem.*

Gabrielle had a single weak moment as she knelt and dried the backs of Xena's thighs, when her eyes, level with the warrior's solid buttocks, were diverted by a tensing ripple of muscle. Without conscious thought, the bard ran the linen over Xena's backside again, even though it was already scrubbed.

Then she quickly caught herself and nonchalantly continued down the warrior's legs. The process complete, she helped Xena into a dry shift.

"Sit," Gabrielle said simply, leading Xena to her bedroll. Then the bard began methodically massaging out the day's tension.

"Mmm," Xena yawned minutes later, settling over onto her stomach, "I could get used to this."

"Good," Gabrielle replied, continuing to work. "Then you won't mind it again tomorrow."

"Hmm?"

"You're to report for compulsory unwinding this same time every night until we get to Macedonia," Gabrielle said matter-of-factly. "You have to take care of everyone else from sunrise to sunset - and a watch in between, I might add - so for an hour before bedtime, I'll take care of *you*."

"Gabrielle..." Xena began, started to rise.

"No arguments Xena," Gabrielle insisted, gently pushing her companion back down. "You can do that stoic warrior thing with everyone else, but I know better. It's a simple fact that you'll be more alert if you're rested and refreshed. I don't seem to have any other responsibilities on this trip, so I'll assume *you're* my responsibility ... Period."

Xena gave a low chuckle. "Stubborn like a mule," the warrior said quietly. "Sides, kinda always wondered ... what it'd be like t'have ... Amazon attendant..." she mumbled. Moments later, she was fast asleep.

Gabrielle smiled, knowing there were few people the warrior trusted enough to relax and drift off with that way. She gently caressed Xena's back for a few moments longer, then pulled a blanket over the sleeping woman, took off her own boots, and lay down beside her. She ran her hand over the raven hair for a moment. "Pleasant dreams, Xena," she whispered.

* * *

The next morning, the warrior arose feeling better than she could ever remember feeling while pulling duty. *Admit it Xena*, the warrior chuckled to herself, stretching pleasantly under the pre-dawn sky, *she had a point. Didn't even realize how tense I've been. Gods, if I had an attendant like her in my army I could've conquered all of Greece by the time I was twenty.* The idea sobered her a little, but she quickly pushed it aside. *I guess the only thing I'm happier about than that I didn't have one then is that I do now.*

Then she paused again. *Gods, I really am happy. How'd that happen? I'm in the middle of an armed camp, on a fool's errand to guard the most tempting target in the Known World, probably in worse danger than I can even guess, and I still feel great just to be alive. Makes no sense.* She regarded the small woman at her feet, noting again how pretty Gabrielle was as she slept. *Then again...*

The warrior sighed, looked up at the pale sky. "I need a run," she said out loud, then stretched for a moment and took off at an easy jog in the direction of the road.

By the time Xena had returned from her brief exercises and some light drills, Gabrielle was sitting up and rubbing her face. The warrior smiled. "Morning, sleepyhead."

The bard stared at her with bleary green eyes. "Lemme guess - you've just spent the last hour lifting boulders or something, and now you've come back to scold me for being merely human and needing my sleep, right?"

"Something like that," Xena replied, still smiling. "But I guess I can hold off on the scolding part." She stretched a little. "Actually, I really do feel good..." She looked to her companion. "Thank you, Gabrielle."

The bard grinned, felt herself blush a little. "Well, I'm glad. And you're welcome." An impish look crossed her face. "So um, how just how good *do* you feel?"

Xena raised an eyebrow. "Good enough to toss you out of that bedroll if you can't get out yourself."

"Couldn't hold off the scolding part for long, could you?"

"Gabrielle..."

"OK, OK ... I'm up - see?"

From then on, each night during what Xena jokingly referred to as "Gabrielle's Ritual", the bard felt the closeness between them growing again. It was, the young woman thought, a nice side effect. *Makes me wish I'd thought of this sooner*, the bard mused. *Like two years ago*.

A couple of nights later, after the warrior's rubdown, Xena stayed awake long enough to lie back next to Gabrielle, just so they could look for patterns in the stars together. It was a game they had played many times, but somehow hadn't in a while. The bard also noted that Xena had settled on taking first watch. It meant that Gabrielle had to stay awake for an extra couple of hours before Xena returned for The Ritual, but it also - the bard couldn't help notice - meant they could drift off to sleep together, and wake together in the morning.

Gabrielle soon found the hours during the day talking with the ancient and wise Lilith oddly unimportant compared to these precious moments with Xena. In fact, while riding in the wagon each day she often found her attention wandering with thoughts of the warrior. *C'mon here bard*, Gabrielle reprimanded herself, *you've got someone who's been around since the world was created sitting right in front of you, ready to tell you almost anything you want to know, and all you can think about is getting back to Xena*.

But she had to admit to herself it was true. Questions, answers, history, philosophy - nothing meant anything until Xena rode by, made some comment, then rode away again. When the caravan stopped for the mid-day meal, Gabrielle always made sure she had it ready for the warrior, so they could eat together and talk about inconsequential things, or not say anything at all.

They were back to the way they'd always been, circumstances aside. Actually, even better. And it was wonderful.

She should have known it wouldn't last.

The night before they reached the Bosphorus, Xena was lying comfortably on her stomach while Gabrielle knelt at her side, working her small, strong hands over the warrior's back. Knowing that tomorrow's crossing of the strait would be one of the roughest parts of the journey, Xena seemed a little more tense than usual and the bard took special care, finding every knot and sore spot. She chatted away quietly as she did, just rambling on about what she had talked about with Lilith earlier, not even really paying attention to what she said.

"She and Meleager are in some kind of holding pattern," the bard went on. "She says he's gotten comfortable with how close they are, but can't quite bring himself to admit it. I told her about that talk I had with him while we were with the Amazons - remember the one I told you about?" *Though Artemis knows I only told you half of it...*

"Mmm-hmm," Xena agreed. The warrior was dangling on the edge of sleep, and her temptation to simply give in was fighting with her desire to stay awake so the two of them could lie close and drift off together. When that had become important to her Xena couldn't say, but it had, and she'd accepted it before she even consciously noticed it.

"Anyway," Gabrielle went on, her voice like an anchor keeping Xena within the realm of the conscious, "Lilith thanked me for my help. Then I ... well, I couldn't help telling her how nice it was spending this time together

with you every night, how much, you know, closer and more relaxed you've been. She kind of laughed and said she was glad she could help me too. You know, I don't think immortals are as aloof from the rest of us as they're made out to be."

It took a moment for the implications of Gabrielle's words to sink in, but suddenly the warrior was wide awake. "What did you say?"

The bard felt Xena's back go rigid, was suddenly confused. "I, uh, said I don't think she's as aloof..."

"No," Xena replied, raising and half turning her head, "before that."

"She said, um, she said she was glad she could help me too, I guess." Gabrielle wondered how she'd managed to say something wrong. "What's the matter Xena?"

Xena rested her chin on her crossed arms. *Wrong? That Whore Priestess has been pushing you and me closer since day one, that's what's wrong! And I let you spend all that time in her wagon, knowing how Lilith can manipulate someone's emotions. Dumb!* The warrior closed her eyes, mind racing. *All right, I don't know why she'd do that, but she's an immortal and who knows why she might do anything?*

Then some other part of Xena broke in. *Hold on now. Admit it's also possible Lilith has had nothing to do with how Gabrielle has been treating you, and even if Lilith has, Gabrielle might not even know it. Take this slow, or you'll hurt Gabrielle, and whatever is going on that's a risk I won't take.*

It took only a split second for this to flash through Xena's mind. "Nothing," the warrior replied, forcing herself to relax. "I guess it's nothing."

But Gabrielle felt the change, and felt her heart plummet at the same time. *Oh Artemis, no!* she screamed inside. *What did I do? When am I going to learn to keep my mouth shut!*

"Heh, that's good," the bard said weakly, "thought I'd upset you for a moment there." She went back to working her companion's muscled back, but the feeling was gone.

* * *

Xena arose as soon as she was certain Gabrielle was asleep, donning her leathers, armor and weapons as usual, but instead of moving towards the central watch post, she headed directly for Lilith's tent. *No point in being subtle*, the warrior figured, spitefully. *The state I'm in, she's bound to feel I'm coming.*

Xena pushed past the flaps of the tent, found Lilith reclined on her cushions. There were a few scrolls spread out around the Priestess, but the immortal faced forward, arms crossed. "So," Lilith said evenly, "you are angry with me, I can see."

"Yeah, you can *see* all right," Xena spat. "But it's what you can *do* that interests me. Tell me what you've been doing to me and Gabrielle. No poetry, no philosophy. The truth ... Now!" she growled.

Lilith gave a half smile. "I am, I think, tempted to ask what you plan to do if I do not care to answer, or how you will insure I do not lie?"

Without warning, Xena launched herself at the Priestess, automatically jabbing forward to cut off the flow of blood to Lilith's brain - a silly thing to do to an immortal, but it would probably immobilize the smaller woman if nothing else.

In a blur Xena found herself on her back, Lilith lying beside her, the Priestess' arms and legs twisted and locked through her own in a hold the warrior recognized, but which surprised her. It was a hold of last resort, since although it didn't require much strength, any attempt to escape would leave them both with broken bones if it succeeded. Then it quickly dawned on Xena that Lilith would recover in moments, but she'd be helpless. For an immortal, this hold was perfect.

Dumb, the warrior scolded herself, *she's had thousands of years to practice, probably forgotten more moves than I've ever heard of and she can't even get tired. A frontal assault was an idiot's game.* Xena made herself relax. "All right Lilith," she said evenly, "you've made your point. Now what?"

Lilith leaned in and affectionately whispered into Xena's ear. "How about I tell the truth, brave one? Would that be acceptable?"

Although it wasn't easy, given the hold, Xena managed to turn her head to face the Priestess. "Like you said, how do I know I can trust you?"

Lilith laughed. "Very well. I offer you a deal, warrior - I will release you and make no further struggle. Pummel me if you so choose. I will not stop you. But know this - if you do not, then I will tell you the truth, bare and plain, and hide nothing. All this I swear before Inanna, may she reject me forever if I lie."

Lilith tilted her head forward until their faces were almost touching, her voice just above a whisper. "However, brave warrior, perhaps more important than whether I will give the truth, is whether you are ready to hear it."

Xena found herself pausing for a moment. "Ready when you are," she said flatly.

"So be it," Lilith answered.

The Priestess carefully extricated herself and pulled away until she lay on her side, head propped on her hand with a seductive glint her eye. "Now, shall we begin the beating? Might I send for ropes? Or perhaps you would prefer leather thongs?"

Xena sat up, rubbing her wrist, the thought occurring to her that Lilith might actually be serious. The warrior wasn't amused. "Maybe later," she sneered.

Lilith cocked her head. "Then I take it you have questions. Ask."

Xena tried to get her glare back. "That first day we met, you pushed Gabrielle and I to ... you made us get closer. Why?"

Without losing eye contact, Lilith went from playful to sober in a single instant. "That I apologize for, Xena," she replied. "Indeed, it shames me, for I did so to help fulfill a bargain -"

"What!" Xena narrowed her eyes. "A *bargain*? With who?" she demanded.

Lilith shook her head. "As I said, I apologize. I have told you of my first night among the Amazons, when I spoke with Artemis -"

"Artemis? So she's behind it!" the warrior stood, clenching her fists, eyes darting around as if she expected Artemis to appear any moment. *When will all you blasted Olympians leave me alone!*

"Xena," Lilith sighed, not moving. "Mortals have little time, and this will go much more quickly if you let go of your anger and listen. Do you see?"

Xena shot her a look. "Well why don't you just 'reach out' and calm me down?"

Lilith rolled onto her back, one arm behind her head, sighing as she stared at the ceiling. "This I could do, but it would serve nothing. I say again - you overestimate my gifts. One such as you would shake it off in mere heartbeats. You came to me for the truth, and I have sworn truth before Inanna. Hear it or leave. To one such as I, to whom this memory will be as that of a moment's breath, it matters not."

Xena thought about it, then made herself calm. "All right," she said finally. "Go on."

The Priestess turned to look at Xena for a moment, then inhaled slowly. "As you are aware Xena, as Queen of the Amazons, Gabrielle is the favored of Artemis. I should also tell you that I believe, although I do not know with certainty, that your bard was somehow her chosen even before Terreis gave her the Right of Caste - indeed, it is possible this is why it happened. I tell you this only because I have sworn to hide nothing. In itself it does not matter. What is important is that, as her favored, Artemis is bound by the laws of Olympus to listen to Gabrielle's prayers, and must in time respond to what she prays for."

"Gabrielle?" Xena blinked in confusion. "What could she pray for?"

"You," Lilith responded simply. "Always for you. She prays for your safety every time you enter battle. Every night she prays you will sleep in peace, and every day she prays you will let go of your guilt. She prays you will find happiness. She prays her love is strong enough for you both, that should she die, you will not return to darkness. And, at times, she prays that you will some day love her in return, though not often, as this is all she ever asks for herself."

Xena was stunned. *By the gods Gabrielle, I knew you loved me, but I had no idea ... No, damn me to Tartarus, yes I did*, the warrior growled at herself, *it's as plain as the sun. It's there in every look and gesture and breath she takes. And how many times have days passed without me even smiling back?* "But..." Xena struggled, "she has to know I ... love her..."

"As you choose to believe," Lilith replied. "Yet Gabrielle has never been as sure as that. So Artemis offered a bargain: She would allow her Amazons to protect my followers on our journey, if I would do what I could to see that her chosen would be happy, by seeing you be happy, and by finding the love Gabrielle has so long wished for. I agreed, on condition that I saw what the Huntress saw."

Xena set her jaw and focused on Lilith again. "And what was that?"

Lilith smiled, shifted around. "When you entered my tent that day, even without using my gifts the bond between you was so strong, so plain, I thought Artemis had given me something for nothing. I admit as well that my joy at being reunited with my dear one filled me with love, such that I wished only to share it. And so, that one time, I reached out to you both and released what you felt for one another. It shames me now, but in truth it was so easy, I did not see the wrong in it."

"Oh, and why think it's *wrong*? It's what you *do*, isn't it?" Xena asked, trying to make her suspicion rise.

"Ah Xena," Lilith breathed. "You have a heart that is heavy and guarded in a way so close to my own I did not at first see it for what it was. And Gabrielle - her very openness to those around her hides her depth from them." The Priestess shook her head slowly, then looked up again. "Xena, immortal I am, but I am also very human. I can make mistakes. Only when I saw into you and spoke to you later that night, and did the same with Gabrielle nights after, did I realize the love you both so carefully reach for is one I have seen only rarely, and experienced much less. To push you together might, in truth, make you happy - indeed it would, I am sure, spare you no little pain - but it would rob you both of so much more. You must, in a word, find each

other, and by your own path, for as this happens you will each heal and grow - together. You can fill each other's hearts and souls in ways you have barely begun to see, Xena, and for two such as yourselves, the journey is as important as the destination."

"Spare me your romantic notions," Xena replied, more spitefully than she felt. "In all that time Gabrielle's been spending with you, don't pretend you haven't been pushing her. How long does this 'reaching out' thing last?"

"Xena, I pretend nothing," Lilith smiled gently. "I tell you, in perfect honesty, I can affect someone only as long as they allow it - as I said, you would shrug it off in a single breath if you wished to feel otherwise. As for what has passed between me and Gabrielle, we have done naught but talk."

"Oh no, Gabrielle said you were glad to *help*!"

"Yes warrior, and help her I have," Lilith replied softly. "As we have talked, often we talk of you. She loves you so greatly, yet she fears she will make some mistake, perhaps push you away. There have been few she could turn to for advice on such things, and in this I have counseled her as I am able, and am happy to have done so. Yet I swear before Inanna I have done no more than this, nor will I, not for gods nor mortals. Anything Gabrielle has done or said, she has done for her own reasons, and no other."

Then Lilith gave a wry smile. "This is true also of any feelings you have had in return, and whatever these may be, I am not the one to blame. That responsibility lies in your heart warrior, and yours alone. If it is truth you seek, brave one, I suggest you look there."

Xena suddenly felt dizzy. The immortal's words drove through her like a naked blade. *Is that what I'm doing? Trying to find some excuse to avoid how Gabrielle makes me feel? Why would ... I feel ... anything ... Oh gods...* "Why are you telling me this?"

Lilith's smile warmed. "Because you asked."

"And I'm supposed to just believe you?" The warrior's eyes narrowed.

Lilith met them evenly, open and calm. "Yes."

Xena searched the Priestess' face for a moment, found she couldn't hold her gaze. The warrior adjusted her bracers absently, avoiding Lilith's eyes. "I have to go stand watch now. Thanks for ... not breaking my arm."

"There is no need to thank me, Xena," Lilith said as the warrior opened the flap of the tent, the Priestesses' voice following as she left. "The greatest truth is that I have said little you did not already know."

Xena walked slowly to where Argo was tethered. "C'mon girl," she patted the mare's nose. "Let's find Meleager, huh? Give that stallion of his a rest? What do you say? You like Melampus, don't you?" Argo whinnied softly.

Xena took the reins in her hand and strode off in the general direction of the central post.

It was going to be a long night.

* * *

"Gabrielle? Gabrielle ... C'mon bard, wake up..."

Gabrielle stirred, mumbled, started to turn back over. With another insistent nudge she groggily lifted her

head. "Uhh ... yeah OK, cuhmmmin..." One bleary eye opened, took in the color of the sky, then rolled back around and fixed an accusing glance on the warrior. "Bit early, innit?"

"Yeah, it is," Xena smiled lightly, clad only in her leathers as she knelt beside the bard, "but we're crossing the Bosphorus today and things are going to be rough enough. I don't want them any rougher, so I had something I wanted to say."

"Whoa ... waitaminnit," Gabrielle struggled up until she was propped back on her elbows, shook her head to clear it. "Let me see if I get this ... You got me up early so we could *talk*?"

Xena's smile widened but she gave a nonchalant shrug. "Yeah..." Her smile tightened, stayed firm. "I guess I did."

"Hang on, I gotta make sure I'm awake for this." The bard sat up fully, rubbed her eyes and brushed her hair back, then settled her totally conscious gaze on the warrior. "OK, what is it?"

Xena looked down for a moment, took a breath. "Gabrielle," she began, "I want you to know that the past few nights have been ... very special..."

Gods no! Gabrielle screamed inside. *Here's where she tells me it has to stop...*

"...which is why I'm sorry for tensing up on you last night. It didn't really have anything to do with you. Not really. Not at all." The warrior exhaled and shook her head slightly. "It was my problem, not yours." Then Xena straightened and smiled. "You can pamper me any time."

The bard blinked. "That's ... it?" *Merciful Artemis ... did she just apologize?*

For a moment the warrior looked thoughtful, then just raised her eyebrow. "Yeah..." She shrugged again. "I guess that's it."

Gabrielle nodded, smiling slightly, though she still looked confused. "Well ... OK. I'll um, I'll keep doing it then - pamper you, I mean."

Xena laughed once, which sounded both amused and relieved. Then the warrior tentatively ran her hand through Gabrielle's hair and gently cupped the back of the bard's head. "Good," Xena nodded, smiling but oddly uncertain, pale blue eyes staring into green. "That's good. 'Cause ... I think I need it."

Xena's words and the warmth her eyes made Gabrielle's heart do strange things inside her chest - like it didn't know whether to speed up or stop entirely. *I can't be awake*, the bard thought. *Because I just thought I heard Xena say she needed me. Nope, not awake. Still asleep. Gonna open my eyes now any second.*

Gabrielle closed her eyes. "Pinch me."

"Say again?"

"I have to be dreaming this," the bard said in perfect seriousness. "Convince me I'm awake. Pinch me."

"Hmm ... I've a better idea - sleepyhead," came the sly reply.

A moment later, Gabrielle found herself being tossed out of her bedroll - and straight up in the air. Her eyes flew open wide as Xena caught her, then, laughing, tossed her up again. In spite of herself, the bard squealed in surprise and delight.

When Gabrielle was safely back on the ground, the warrior settled her hands on the smaller woman's shoulders, her thumbs tracing tingling circles in the smooth skin. "Convinced?"

Xena's smile was brighter and warmer than the morning sky.

Her heart pounding, Gabrielle laughed around the knot that suddenly formed in her throat. Her vision blurred as her eyes brimmed with tears. "Xena?" she managed to gasp, blinking.

The warrior's incredible blue eyes were also brimming over, and a single drop ran down Xena's cheek as she nodded, still smiling. She leaned closer and whispered, simply, "Yes."

Gabrielle's arms flew around her warrior, gripping her as if life depended on it, feeling the warmth that flowed from Xena's strong arms as they folded around her in return. "Gods," Gabrielle sobbed into the embrace, "I love you Xena ... love you so much..."

"Gabrielle," Xena breathed, pressing her face into Gabrielle's hair, "I am so ... sorry ... for so many things." She shut her eyes, the scent and feel of the woman pressed against her and the strength of their emotions threatening to overwhelm her. Xena pulled her bard tight and let them. "I love you Gabrielle ... I am so *in* love with you. Never, ever doubt how much..."

They held each other close. How long it lasted, neither could say, nor did they care. The warm bond of love between them, shared at last, was all that mattered.

Chapter Five

"I've decided I'm cursed. That's got to be the explanation," Gabrielle said matter-of-factly. Lightning crackled overhead, and wind-swept rain rattled the tent around them with a fresh assault, as if to underscore the bard's words.

Lying naked on her stomach, Xena tried to turn her head to look at her companion, then, wincing, thought better of it. "Gabrielle," Xena sighed, softly, "what in Tartarus is that supposed to mean?"

"Gods, Xena." The bard tried to hide her frustration, but found she wasn't being very successful. Instead she concentrated on smoothing more salve across the warrior's heavily bruised back, then adjusted the bindings around Xena's lower ribs, making sure they were snug but not too tight. "It's just that for, I dunno, I guess half a year now, I've been imagining what our first night together would be like -"

"Funny," Xena broke in, "I thought we'd been together for more than two years..."

"Xena!" Gabrielle rolled her eyes. "You know what I mean!" she blushed, giving the warrior a playful poke.

"Arhrrrgh!" Xena hissed, gritting her teeth.

"Oh gods! Xena I'm sorry!"

"No, no," the warrior couldn't help laughing. "Don't worry about it ... just don't do it again, all right?"

Gabrielle reached over and picked up a small wooden bowl. "Here, Xena," she said apologetically, "have a little more - on me." She gave a strained chuckle as she carefully tilted the herb mixture up for the warrior to sip.

"Thank you Gabrielle," Xena said warmly after taking a swallow. "But no more herbs, all right? I *do* want to

wake up in the morning."

The bard set the bowl aside, then found herself staring at it. *This stuff should really be hot, but it's pouring rain and we can't even make...* She stifled a sob.

"Gabrielle, please, what's wrong?" Xena asked quietly - this time turning to face her companion no matter how it felt.

"Oh, Xena," the bard lay down on her stomach and gently pressed her face into the shoulder of the woman she loved for a moment, then propped her head up on her hand, running the other restlessly through the warrior's hair. "It's just ... I pictured a nice big bed in a warm inn somewhere, maybe a still clearing under the stars. We'd have a nice, you know ... a romantic little fire going..." The bard groaned. "Gods, Xena, I *always* pictured a fire." Her whole body shook with disappointment. "I mean, it's not *fair*! This morning everything seemed so perfect, like anything was possible..."

Xena managed to roll over without wincing, keeping contact with the bard as she did. She wrapped her arms around the smaller woman and pulled her close, cradling the strawberry blonde head against her shoulder, just enjoying the fact that she could. "It's all right, Gabrielle. Everything's all right," she soothed. "Besides, this isn't so bad," the warrior smiled, "I'm here. You're here. We're even warm and dry - well, sort of. Can't think of anywhere else I'd rather be."

"Ah Xena," Gabrielle chuckled, sniffled. "My Warrior Optimist - how'd that happen?"

Xena gathered her bard in an affectionate squeeze. "Well, it's easy, really. You just keep thinking, 'OK so far', and remember that no matter how bad things are, it could always be worse."

It was an offhand comment, just a joke, but Gabrielle shivered. *Yeah. Could've been a lot worse. You could be dead.*

* * *

They had held each other that morning until the sounds from the camp around them made them look up. Giggling and a little embarrassed, Gabrielle gazed up at her warrior. *My warrior*, she thought, *I guess I can really think that now. Like the sound of it.* "Guess we should get our stuff ready to go, huh?"

Xena smiled. "Yeah, we've got a Tartarus of a day ahead." She sighed ruefully. "Sorry my timing isn't better. Didn't really plan on things going like that."

"Nah, don't apologize," Gabrielle replied, giving Xena another squeeze. "We can talk later. We've got our whole lives to work this out ... We do, right?"

The warrior suddenly felt like she was standing at the edge of a very high cliff. Then in her mind, something fell into place. *Never thought about forever before. Then again, I never had a reason to.* "Yeah," Xena hugged her partner again. "We do."

Gabrielle shivered with joy hearing this. "So," she said, "if we have to wait a few more days until we're by ourselves again, it's no big deal. Besides, it'll give me some time to think, get things straight in my head. I'm kinda new at this."

You and me both, Xena thought, holding Gabrielle a moment longer. Having finally admitted to herself that she could, the warrior felt oddly reluctant to let go. Finally, she gave her bard one last squeeze and pulled

away. "Come on," she grinned. "We've got a camp to protect, bad guys to fight with ... all that stuff."

They packed their belongings, which took slightly longer than usual since every time they glanced at each other they couldn't help letting their gaze linger. *Gotta get a grip*, Xena chided herself, *lives depend on me here and I'm acting like a schoolgirl*.

Finally, they joined the caravan and resumed the journey west. Gabrielle was beside herself as she jumped up into Lilit's wagon. The Priestess immediately gave her a warm hug. "Congratulations, young one. I am so happy for you."

"Guess it shows, huh?" the bard grinned.

"This is true enough," Lilit smiled back. "Indeed, I was with Morgin watching the sun rise, and even from the rear watch post could I feel it. I confess Morgin seemed very confused when I suddenly felt the need to embrace her. It was, I think, quite a surprise."

Gabrielle blushed. "You're telling me."

At the head of the column, Meleager was droning on. "...so the only dangerous part is the actual crossing." The graying warrior turned in his saddle a bit to face Xena, found her staring down the road with a half smile on her face. "Hey!" he said, then louder, waving, "Yo, Warrior Princess!"

Xena turned to look at him, the same half smile still firmly in place. "What?"

"Have you been listening to a word I said?"

She raised an eyebrow, then faced forward again. "No, and I didn't need to either. We talked about all of this yesterday, remember?"

Meleager grunted, but noted the lack of malice in her voice, and realized she had enough of a point to not be too insulted. As they rode through the morning, he glanced over at her from time to time, but she never lost that half grin and faraway look in her eyes.

Finally he couldn't stand it any more. He waved his hand at her again, getting her attention. "Hey, uh, Xena? Are you, you know, OK?"

"What makes you think something's wrong?" she asked back, still even-toned, still grinning.

Meleager cleared his throat. "Xena, we've been riding together for what, almost a week now? I've seen you ride angry, I've seen you ride cautiously, but I have never, *ever* seen you ride while grinning from ear to ear. To be perfectly honest, it's kinda frightening."

Xena shrugged. "Guess it's just a nice day."

Meleager gave the sky a dubious glance. "Oh, yeah," he drawled, "I can see that - from the way that storm is building it's bound to be a doozy, but then, crossing the Bosphorus with a score of wagons even in clear weather ranks a nine and a half on the Labors of Hercules scale. Aw, Hades, yeah ... that really does cheer me *right* up. Wow, what a great day!"

She smirked. "Guess it depends on how you look at it." Still smiling, she shook her head and faced forward. "Don't worry Meleager, I'm sober as the Oracle and sane as Aristophanes. Whatever happens, I'm ready for it. In fact, today I feel like I could take on the Titans buck naked with a wooden spoon."

Meleager felt his jaw drop so far he was vaguely surprised it didn't bounce off his saddle horn. He shook it off, tried to collect himself. "Well, I'm, ah, glad you're in ... top form."

"You don't know the half of it."

The Hellespont, narrowest point on the Bosphorus strait, was just about a third of a mile across, and Byzantium rose from its western shore. The city had grown rich off the commerce that had to cross the strait and the shipping that had to pass through it, and did both by means of its ferry. The ferry ran on a very long loop of chain that spanned the strait and was kept moving continually by means of two ten-foot-diameter, horizontal drive wheels, one on either shore, turned by teams of sturdy draft horses. This kept one line moving east and one line moving west, all day long and sometimes into the night. The ferry boats weren't wide but were long enough for dozens of passengers, plenty of livestock, or a couple of wagons, and were equipped with a lever for gripping or releasing the chain as it moved, to slow or stop the boat as needed. When a ferry boat reached one shore, it was transferred to the other line and sent back. A dozen or so could be moving at any time - the only limitation was the number of horses that could fit around the drive wheels to handle the weight.

As it crossed the strait, the chain passed over a series of rafts anchored in a line about twenty yards apart, which kept the chain from sinking into the water and putting too much strain on the drive wheels. It also, not coincidentally, blocked ships from passing, which is why a chain was used - any sailor with a blade could snap a rope, a lesson that had been learned the hard way.

For a price, guards stationed on the rafts would use the built-in winch to lower the chain in its grooves far enough under the water for the ship to pass over. The bigger the ship, the more rafts had to be involved to produce the required slack, and the more spectacular the fee.

As a transportation system it wasn't terribly fast but it was unusually reliable, moving goods and people across the strait regardless of wind or tide, and even in mildly rough weather. It also required scores of men to run, constant maintenance, dozens of fresh horses every hour, and made such an awful racket anyone who could possibly afford it lived as far away from the docks as possible.

It also made so much money King Androphus was thinking about building another one.

The skies hadn't started to rain yet by the time the caravan reached the hill overlooking East Byzantium, but the pitch-dark clouds that stretched from horizon to horizon left little doubt it would, and soon. This left them with a difficult decision: Start sending wagons across and risk leaving some stranded on the eastern shore if the weather grew bad enough to close the ferry, or set up camp and wait for the storm to pass, which meant they could all be stuck here for days. Either way, "here" wasn't the ideal place to be stuck.

East Byzantium had grown rapidly after the ferry was built, and in all the wrong ways. If Byzantium was the jewel of the Aegean, East Byzantium had become the compost pit. The main street was still decent enough, and for travelers who needed a room to wait for the morning ferry it was pleasant enough.

Beyond that first row of inns however, it went rapidly downhill. The men who worked the ferry did so in shifts: Three days on the west side, three days on the east, with one day off. Most had made their homes on the other side of the Bosphorus, and like anywhere full of working men with steady wages and nothing to do at night - not to mention being safely separated from their wives - East Byzantium was filled with rough taverns, gambling dens, brothels, and businesses that catered to any other vice you could name.

Staying outside East Byzantium would mean doubling the watches. Slavers wouldn't be the problem, given the weather would be bad. But once the locals found out there was a caravan of whores - Sacred though they

might be - camped on their doorstep, there would be no end of trouble, regardless of the weather.

"Send the wagons over," Xena said finally. "Save the soldiers for last. That way anyone who's stuck here will be well protected. The ones who make it across can get rooms in Byzantium. Androphus is a greedy bastard and his people aren't crazy about him, but he was one of Alexander's generals. This place may have gone to Tartarus, but he keeps his own city safe enough."

"Makes sense," Meleager agreed. "Better than leaving everyone here." He gave a wicked grin. "This place - ahhh, Xena, I could tell you *stories*..."

"Could tell you a few myself," Xena chuckled wryly. "All right, priestesses and acolytes first. Morgin, put a couple of Guardians on each boat - you all know each other, can tell if something's wrong. Just have them keep an eye on things when they get to the other side. We'll meet by the city gates."

"This will be done," the guardian nodded.

"Solari, the Amazons go last - if anyone has to be stuck here, you can take care of yourselves."

"No problem," Solari agreed. "Besides," she added, peering down the hill, "it might be kind of fun."

"When will you and I cross?" Gabrielle asked.

Xena thought for a moment. "With the Amazons," she said finally. "I want to spend as little personal time in Byzantium as possible."

"How come?" Gabrielle asked. "If it's safe..."

"Let's just say anyone who rode with Alexander won't like having me around." The warrior grinned, taking hold of Argo's saddle horn and mounting up. "Bloodied their noses once - tarnished that 'invincible' image. Most of 'em still carry a grudge. Come on, let's move."

A light, misting rain had started to fall by the time they reached the ferry station. *If the real stuff just holds off for another hour*, Xena thought, *we'll be over the hump*. Although she hadn't thought about it much until now, she realized she was growing eager to get this journey over, to be back on the road - just her and Gabrielle. *Have to watch that*, she cautioned herself, *haste makes mistakes*.

Xena let Lilith barter for their passage. They were the Priestess' dinars after all, and the immortal seemed to have an inexhaustible supply - which had proven handy during the almost constant bartering for supplies the caravan was forced to do at every village and town it passed through.

The warrior watched from the corner of her eye as Lilith talked with the ferry master, noting the way she laughed occasionally, then would casually brush the man's arm. The man smiled and nodded, waving expansively at the contraption he was in charge of. Finally he accepted a small bag of coins along with a hug, then dropped the bag into his money chest without even counting it.

"Got a good deal, I suppose?" Xena observed wryly as Meleager boosted Lilith into her wagon.

"A very good deal," Lilith laughed. "He was a *most* reasonable man." She looked down at the aging warrior. "Dear one, I shall see you on the other side."

"See you soon," he replied. "It'd, ah, be kinda lonely sleeping without you." They kissed lightly, if warmly, then he signaled for the wagon to move aboard.

The wind rose a bit as time passed, but the rain stayed light. Xena found a spot on the platform over the main drive wheel. It took a moment of stern intimidation to be let up there, but it was the only place she could get to that was high enough to keep one eye on the ferries.

The other eye she kept on Gabrielle. They'd passed this way a few times before, but this was the first time the ever-curious bard had a chance to get a really good look. The young woman seemed fascinated by the system. Xena couldn't help smiling as she watched Gabrielle chatting with the workers. *Gods she's cute when she's curious - so serious about everything.*

Xena sighed and looked out over the Bosphorus. A small trireme had been passed over the chain, and a larger square sail was approaching from the north, moving quickly with the growing southern wind. She turned her attention back to the bard, who had apparently satisfied herself about the ferry for now, and was headed back towards Xena.

"So, what do you think?" the warrior asked with a smile.

"What?" Gabrielle shouted from the foot of the ladder. The guards began to approach the young woman, then looked up as the warrior stamped her foot hard enough to be heard over the rattling chain - which wasn't any small accomplishment.

With another stern glare at the guards from Xena, Gabrielle was waved on. The bard quickly ascended the ladder. "Sorry," Gabrielle half shouted, "what did you say?"

Xena pulled the bard close, then closer still, until she could cover the young woman's ear. "Just wanted to know what you thought ... about the ferry," the warrior said.

Gabrielle shivered a little at being held, at having Xena's words blown over her ear. "It's incredible," the bard quickly replied, only as loud as she had to and be sure she was heard over the clanking din. "Do you know how many horses it takes to keep this thing going all day? Marvelous engineering," she said, not quite as matter-of-factly as she tried to.

"I'll bet. Takes a lot of planning to make something this loud," Xena grinned.

"Maybe," Gabrielle crinkled her nose playfully, "but it beats a long, wet walk."

Xena laughed and wrapped an arm around the smaller woman's shoulders. *Gods, it feels good to just be able to do that.* The warrior smiled to herself, then looked back over the strait. The square sail was close enough now that Xena could just make out the main deck.

The warrior went stiff. *Cages. Empty cages. Gods!* The men gathered on deck were all heavily armed.

Gabrielle felt her partner go tense. "Xena, what's wrong?"

"Trouble," the warrior hissed. *Real trouble.* Find the Amazons. Tell them to keep everyone moving." She pulled away and stood on the edge of the platform.

"What are you going to do?" Gabrielle asked.

"Figure a way out of this! Just go!" To her relief, the bard simply headed for the ladder and hopped down.

Xena scanned around, searching for some way to intercept the rapidly approaching square sail, finding nothing. Swimming against the current would take too long, and with the steady cross wind no boat could

make it in time either - even if she could find one to commandeer.

She clenched her teeth in angry frustration. Only a few hundred yards separated her from where she needed to be - a distance she could've run in half a minute. *A long wet run*, she mentally snorted.

Her head snapped up. The thought was crazy. *Don't think. Move.*

Xena flipped down off the platform, landing in front of the ferry master. She lifted the stocky man by the front of his shirt and glared into his eyes. "Keep that chain moving," she hissed. "Keep it moving no matter what, or I swear I'll come back and rip your spine out! Got it?" She got a wide-eyed nod in return.

Xena dropped him and ran full-tilt down the loading dock, then put everything she had into a spinning leap off the end. "CHEEE-YAHH!"

The added height of the dock let her get almost as far as the first support raft. She came down with both feet on the moving chain and bounced off it, fighting for balance. She came down again, steadier, and ran along it for the three steps it took to reach the raft. The moving chain was as thick as her arm but covered in grease and partly submerged in the water - her boots could barely find purchase. *Don't think. Move.*

Another leap and she was halfway to the next raft and running along the chain. As long as she kept moving her momentum carried her through minor slips and she could use the brief second crossing each raft to get her balance back.

Xena ignored the incredulous men stationed on the rafts, ignored the shouts coming from the ferries she passed, ignored the sounds of battle coming from the square sail, which had just reached the ferry line. She ignored everything but the bouncing, rattling chain under her and the rhythm of the water.

Xena was nearly there when she heard the arrows coming. She caught one and dodged the rest but the unexpected movement upset her tenuous balance and she skidded off into the water. She managed to grab the chain with one hand and her head broke the surface just as the pull of the chain slammed her into the side of the next raft.

Unprepared for the impact, she was momentarily off guard as the chain caught on her armored shoulder and she was dragged out of the water onto the raft. The shoulder pulled free a second later but that left her trapped in the guide groove, the heavy chain rattling over her chest.

"*Nhaauurrgg!*" It was like being pounded by a hundred hammers all at once. One arm was pinned beneath her and there was no way to get enough leverage to lift the chain off. She raised her head, howling with anger, searching for anything that might help, her jarring vision barely making out the winch that raised and lowered the guide. In a rage she kicked at it.

That knocked loose the release and instantly she was pulled underwater. The added buoyancy was enough to let her free herself, and she twisted out from under the chain, rolling on top of it and grabbing hold, pulling herself hand-over-hand back to the surface.

Her body was screaming at her. Her armor had taken the bulk of the punishment but she had no doubt she was injured. How bad she couldn't tell, and couldn't take time to care. *Don't think. Move.*

She broke the surface and pulled hard on the chain, launching herself out of the water and landing on the final raft. She took a quick glance at the ferry. Next to the far wagon Morgin and Dulith were fighting a pitched battle against eight men. They fought well, but the narrow boat left them little room to move.

Around the nearest wagon, six other slavers were trying to shackle a group of priestesses - with varying degrees of success. The white-robed women took every opportunity to kick and gouge their would-be captors, and seemed to know just where it would hurt the most.

"Good girls," Xena muttered. She took a deep breath and launched herself into the ferry, screaming her battle cry.

She landed with a loud thump and gave a nasty grin she didn't really feel. "This a private cruise or can anyone jump in?"

Two men came at her and she sidestepped one, backfisting him and sending him over the side. She spun and kicked the second in the gut, then landed a vicious chop across his throat that put him straight down on the deck. She drew her sword and leaped at the other four, making efficient work of it, not even trying to be subtle. She couldn't afford to - the pain in her chest made her feel like throwing up.

More men started to hop down into the ferry from the deck of the square sail. *Gotta get this thing moving, get it away from here.* The drive lever was near the front of the boat. Xena hurled her chakram at the side of the far wagon. It rebounded off the planking, shredded the throat of Morgin's nearest opponent, tripped the lever, and bounced solidly off the helmet of the last man to jump from the square sail.

Xena flipped sideways as she caught it, making sure she was in mid-air when the lever grabbed the chain and the ferry took a sudden lurch forward. This made her the only one who kept any semblance of balance and she took full advantage of it, laughing in spite of her pain as she landed among the momentarily helpless men who were fighting the Guardians, kicking, spinning and slashing, sword in her right hand, chakram in her left.

Morgin quickly got to her feet and thrust her wooden sword hard into the midsection of her remaining enemy, then spun and cracked him equally hard across the side of the head. She grinned at Xena, saluted her silently, and leaped towards the last few slavers.

The guardian had help, as at that moment Meleager vaulted up onto the deck and immediately joined in. Xena raised an eyebrow but decided she could ask about it later. She grabbed Dulith as the smaller blonde rushed towards the fight. "Dulith, wait. I think they can handle it. Go check everyone else - see if anyone's injured."

Then Xena had a thought, scanning around. "And where's Lilith?"

Dulith furrowed her brows. "I'm not ... Goddess!" she cried. "I believe she climbed aboard the slave ship!"

Xena shut her eyes tight. *Curse you Priestess - what'd you go and do a damn fool thing like that for?* She took a deep breath, not liking the way it felt. "All right Dulith, stay here and help." The warrior gave her a smile and a quick wink. "I'll be right back."

Xena jogged around the small battle, checking to make sure Morgin and Meleager had things well in hand, then flipped off the stern. She covered the growing distance to the raft easily, but the landing sent a jolt through her upper body. Ignoring it, she jumped up and caught hold of the rail of the square sail, then hauled herself over.

She expected trouble. She got a shock.

The deck of the ship was strewn with bodies. Twenty or thirty. Slavers, sailors. Some in armor, some not. Soft, pained groans came from everywhere, and there were weak attempts at movement in places.

Otherwise, it was still and quiet.

Lilith sat in the middle of it all, turned partly away and leaning back against the mast, her arms clasped tight around one drawn up knee. She turned her head slowly and gave the warrior a smile, but her eyes were so dead they seemed almost black.

Warrior and immortal looked at each other for a time, the wind whistling in the rigging, flapping in the lowered sail.

"Hello Xena," Lilith said finally, a disturbing, quietly manic edge in her voice. "I am sorry you have - how do you say it? 'Missed the party'?" She laughed.

It wasn't a pretty sound.

The warrior cautiously moved towards the Priestess, stepping over the unconscious forms around her. "Lilith," Xena said softly, "are you -"

"Injured?" The immortal laughed again.

Xena liked the sound even less than the last one.

"I was going to ask if you were all right - and I didn't mean injured." She took a step closer.

Lilith regarded the warrior for a moment, then leaned her head back, closing her eyes. The rain had picked up, and the Priestess let it fall on her face.

"I am fine, Xena," she said wearily. The mania seemed to have passed. "I am fine." She sighed.

After a moment Lilith opened her eyes and looked around. Her voice was slow, quiet, and infinitely sad. "I am fine, Xena. It is ... this *world* that is not fine. It is these selfish, unthinking sons of Adam, who know only how to take, and who will not listen to the Earth around them ... can listen only to violence, and hate, and pain. *That* is what is not fine."

Lilith gazed up at the taller woman, bitterly swallowing a sob as she hugged herself. "I grow weary of it, Xena. I am so very, very tired ... I do everything I can ... I must believe it will help ... yet every day I fear that it will never, ever be enough."

"I know, Lilith," the warrior said gently. "I know. I haven't even lived for one millennia, and I feel it too." She chuckled mirthlessly. "Especially since I started out just making things worse."

The Priestess gave a rueful smile. "That would make two of us."

Xena held out her hand. "Come on. There's a lot of people here depending on you to show them a better way." Then the warrior added, smirking, "And if it's all the same to you, I'm hurt, and tired, and I really want to get out of this rain."

Lilith laughed again, and it sounded much warmer this time. "Ah, Xena," she said, a twinkle in her eye as she took the warrior's hand and let herself be hauled to her feet, "Gabrielle is very lucky to have found you first."

"*Hades!*" came a shout from behind them. "What in the name of the Goddess *happened* here?"

Meleager stood at the bow, looking over the deck, his mouth open, eyes wide.

The two women looked at each other and chuckled. "A party, Meleager," Xena replied. "One *Tartarus* of a party. Glad you could make it."

"Dear one..." Lilith crooned, nimbly crossing the littered deck and wrapping her arms around him.

"Heyyy..." Meleager mumbled softly, holding her close.

Xena winced, and not just from the throbbing in her chest and back. She looked out over the water. Gabrielle was probably still on land and wouldn't be along for a while. *Probably worried sick ... No, that's no good ... Admit it - you want to feel her arms around you, let her words soothe you, feel her warmth. Gods Xena, you just admitted you loved her this morning. I can't believe I need her this much.*

Crossing the deck was more painful than Xena hoped. She did a quick mental inventory. *Ribs ... several are definitely cracked. She twisted experimentally, took another breath. Yeah, one broken ... low ... lungs are fine though. Head feels all right - that's good. She prodded her abdomen gently. Little early to tell if there's anything internal, but I don't think so. Damn - nasty bruise on the back of my thigh ... riding's gonna be fun for a few days...*

With a stout kick Xena dropped the anchor line and they used it to clamber down to the raft, then hailed the next ferry. His arm around Lilith, Meleager glanced at the warrior, taking in the slight gray tinge on her face. "Sorry I couldn't get here faster, Xena." He chuckled self-consciously. "I uh, couldn't quite manage that 'running over the chain' thing - had to settle for pulling myself hand-over-hand..."

"It's all right, Meleager," Xena gave him a tight grin. "Better late than never."

They rode on to Byzantium in relative silence. After sitting down for only a few minutes Xena began to feel herself stiffen up, so she chose instead to pace the cramped deck, her mind never straying far from thoughts of her bard's loving embrace. As they landed, Meleager and Lilith climbed into one of the wagons, Meleager giving a loud groan as he settled back, the Priestess hovering over him.

Xena thought about climbing in after them, then figured it was better to keep her body moving until she could get the healing kit from Argo's saddlebags. *And Gabrielle will be along soon.* "See you two by the gate," she announced. "I'll find Morgin and make sure the scouts are away." As the wagon trundled off, the warrior rolled her head around, noting how her neck was going sore as well. *Great. Well, I guess it could always be worse.*

Then it got worse.

"Xena, the Warrior Princess," came a deep voice from the crowd. "I should've guessed you'd be behind all this trouble."

"Androphus," Xena sighed. She put on her best sarcastic smile and turned to face the tall, imposing figure, noting the dozen guards around him. "Long time no see. How's the leg?"

"Better," he said, eyes narrowing. "The last few years it only hurts on rainy days." As if on cue, thunder rolled overhead.

"I'm in no mood to spar with you Androphus," she replied, putting an edge of menace behind it. "I'm just passing through. See you around." She turned to leave.

"You're not going anywhere," Androphus casually raised his voice. "You're under arrest for interfering with

the ferry. That's a hanging offense in Byzantium, I'm happy to say."

Xena laughed, turning back to him. "If I'd wanted to interfere with your precious ferry it'd be in a million pieces by now. I was attacked while riding it. I defended myself. End of story."

"That will be for the judge to decide - too bad I'm the judge. Guards, arrest this woman and take her to a very deep dungeon..."

"*You'll do no such thing!*" A familiar voice shouted. "What manner of ungrateful, flea-bitten, *wharf rat* would stoop to arresting the one who just pulled his fat out of the fire?"

Androphus went red with anger as he spun to watch the crowd part for one very indignant bard. He snarled, "Who *dares* insult me like that in my own city? I am King Androphus of Byzantium and you will address me as *royalty* you snotty bitch, or I'll have you *flogged!*"

Before the words were even out of his mouth some thirty heavily armed women broke through the crowd as well, falling into rank and file behind the diminutive strawberry blonde who purposefully strode to within a couple of feet of the tall king, defiantly crossing her arms as she glared him straight in the eye. "I am Gabrielle, Queen of the Amazons by Terreis' Right of Caste, and I will *address* you as I see fit. This woman is an ally of the Amazon nation and I will *not* see her insulted as a common criminal!"

Xena didn't know whether to be angry at Gabrielle, frightened for her, or simply burst out laughing. Instead, she just folded her arms and watched. *All right, my bard, let's see you get us out of this one.*

Androphus was proud, but he was no fool - he was outnumbered at the moment and he knew it. "State your case," he grumbled.

Gabrielle turned to face the crowd. "Citizens of Byzantium, hear me!" she began. "I, Queen Gabrielle and my caravan have traveled here from the Amazon nation because we heard the fabled Byzantium ferry was the safest passage across the Hellespont."

Nice one - hit him right in his pride. Xena smiled to herself.

"Imagine our shock when we were brazenly attacked by pirates within earshot of this very place. And did the great King Androphus lift a finger to help? To his shame he did not!"

"My harbor patrols are the finest in Greece," the King said loudly, quite calm.

"Is that so?" Gabrielle shot back. "Then look, great King - the pirates' ship is even now still anchored by the line. Your toll takers at that raft - citizens of Byzantium, need I add - are missing. Where is your harbor patrol? Hiding from the rain?"

There was some laughter from the crowd, mixed in with a growing murmur of discontent.

"There was no need to dispatch them," Androphus replied. "We have the pirate right here!" he said smugly, pointing at Xena.

"Androphus, you're a fool," Gabrielle shot back, her voice dripping with condescension. "This woman is my general. It was she who fought off the pirates, and was forced to do so all but single-handed because you failed to help!"

"Are you out of your mind?" Androphus asked, still smug. "This is Xena, Warrior Princess, Destroyer of

Nations! Who else would launch such a 'brazen' attack?" This got a few words of agreement from the mob.

"Androphus, I say again - you are a fool. That's the pathetic response of a wounded pride," Gabrielle folded her arms, speaking as if talking to a small child. "If she were the leader of those pirates, why is she here, calmly walking on the shore? Certainly, she could have easily sailed away by now - you have no ships on the water to stop her."

This got another big laugh, but Gabrielle wasn't finished. "I should also point out, Androphus, that by insisting on her guilt in the face of my testimony you're coming perilously close to calling the Queen of the Amazons a liar, and our vengeance for this kind of insult is well known. I'm willing to forego what you've said so far because you're obviously a little slow, but judging by the so-called 'security' I've seen here, I suggest you don't push my anger any further. Now, go back to your palace and count your coins."

Androphus turned purple with rage, but the cheering crowd was clearly against him, and he had too few guards to make an issue out of it otherwise. "Very well," he spat. "Take your 'general' and go. You have one half hour to get out of my city or I'll come back in force and arrest every last one of you for ... *something*!" He spun and limped angrily back in the direction of the palace gates, his men hustling to follow.

Trying to maintain her regal bearing, Gabrielle quickly walked to where Xena stood, but once she was near the warrior all pretense dissolved. "Gods Xena!" she gasped, running her hands down the other woman's arms. "Are you OK? I saw you get run over by the chain ... I was so scared..."

Xena couldn't have wiped the grin off her face if she tried. She gripped Gabrielle's shoulders just tight enough to know she was really there and said softly, "Yeah. I'm all right now ... boss." She laughed, trying not to wince. "So when did I become your general?"

Gabrielle rolled her eyes. "Best I could come up with - I figured 'this woman is my girlfriend' wouldn't have exactly the um, authoritative ring to it I was looking for."

"Fair enough," Xena chuckled. She pushed a wet lock of hair back behind the bard's ear. "Thank you Gabrielle. That could've gotten ugly. You did good."

The smaller woman looked down, blushing. "Any time," she mumbled, then looked back up with an impish grin. "Besides, in the 'get us out of tough spots' category, I think you're still ahead by roughly a thousand."

Xena smiled and gave her bard's shoulder an affectionate squeeze. "C'mon, we'd better get out of here. Where's Argo?"

"Just over there, by the docks," Gabrielle replied, pulling away, looking out over the strait. "So where in Tartarus *are* those harbor patrols anyway?"

Xena shook her head as she walked towards the mare, hiding the effort it took to simply put one foot in front of the other. "Paid off if they're lucky. Dead if they aren't. Maybe they really were just scared of the rain," she smiled. "Who knows? Doesn't matter. We've crossed. Come on."

They met up with the rest of the caravan by the gates. The original plan had been to camp just outside the city walls, but in light of Androphus' mood it was decided to push on. However, within an hour the rain had become a torrential downpour and it was clear they had to stop. Xena supervised the set-up from astride Argo - the warrior's body hurt all over and she didn't trust her ability to stand.

When the warrior had finished her duties as best she was able, she trotted back to the center of the camp and

saw Gabrielle waving at her from one of the tents. "Xena, here!" the bard shouted. "This one's ours!"

Xena nodded wearily and stopped Argo in the nominal shelter at the side of the square tent. Bracing herself, she slid out of the saddle. The bard chose that moment to hurry around to help out, and found her warrior hanging heavily on the saddle horn to keep from collapsing.

"Merciful Artemis!" Gabrielle gasped. "Xena you're *hurt*! C'mon, lean on me here .. lean on me ... Here we go ..."

She got the warrior inside and laid back on the bedrolls. "Oh gods, Xena! How bad is it?"

Xena caught the bard's wrist and smiled affectionately. "It's not that bad Gabrielle - really. A few cracked ribs ... maybe one broken ... some other lumps and bumps. Mostly I'm just stiff and a little cold." She held the smaller woman's hand in her own, rubbing it affectionately. "Go get the saddlebags and healing kit. A good night's sleep and a warm blanket and I'll be fine."

Gabrielle ran her hand slowly over the Warrior's breastplate, seeing how battered it was for the first time. "Gods Xena," she said quietly, "look at your armor ... you could have been torn in half..."

Xena smiled and covered the bard's hands again. "That's why I wear it, Gabrielle." She idly caressed the smaller woman's thigh. "Go on. Get the kit. I promise I'll be here when you get back ... boss." She chuckled.

Gabrielle sniffled and nodded, then hurried outside. By the time she reached Argo she couldn't hold back the tears anymore. She stood in the rain for a long minute, pressing her face against the cold, wet leather of the saddle, sobbing uncontrollably.

Finally she forced herself under control and slipped off the saddlebags, then thought a moment and removed Argo's saddle as well, grunting with the effort of lifting and setting it over a nearby tree branch. Picking up the saddlebags, she spent a few seconds wiping off her face before she pulled back the tent flap and ducked inside.

* * *

"Gabrielle? Are you all right?" Xena shook her slightly. The bard had been staring off into space for minutes. "C'mon bard - I'm the one who just swallowed half a bag of pain herbs."

Gabrielle started. "Yeah ... I'm OK. It's just been a ... Well, it's been a really long day. You're right though - it could be worse."

Xena settled back a bit. "Ah ... Gabrielle," she sighed, pulling her bard closer, until they were lying side by side, looking into each other's eyes. She sketched a finger lightly over Gabrielle's forehead, her nose, her cheeks. "Tell you what," she whispered, shuffling closer, "lie back a little..."

Gabrielle gathered herself with more sudden determination than she ever imagined she could muster. "No, Xena..." She pulled away. "Come on - you're hurt. This isn't right..." The bard propped herself up. "Please, don't make this ... any harder than it is." She reached out to stroke her warrior's raven hair. "We've waited this long, we can wait a little longer, OK?"

Xena took a breath, then smiled. "Yeah," she said simply. "Always looking out for me, huh?"

Gabrielle rolled her eyes, then nodded seriously. "Yeah. Always."

Xena relaxed onto her back again, pulling the smaller woman close. "Well, I'm sorry tonight couldn't have been more ... special."

Gabrielle smiled and pressed her cheek against Xena's warm shoulder, kissing it lightly, noting the uncomfortably close, soft swell of Xena's breast. "It's ... OK. You're right - we're together, that's what matters. It wasn't like you planned on getting hurt. Did I ever tell you how much of a hero you are?"

"I think you've worked it in a few times." Xena gave a dreamy smile, the herbs obviously taking effect. She held Gabrielle tight for a moment, kissed her forehead lightly, then let her go. "Come on then - I'm drifting off as it is. Let's get some sleep."

The bard rose somewhat reluctantly, then fumbled around in their bags until she uncovered a shift. Xena chuckled. "Don't bother," the warrior said gently, settling back and closing her eyes, "It's a luxury I'd have to move too much to put on."

The smaller woman nodded and covered the warrior with a blanket. Earlier, the bard had slipped out of her own wet clothes and into a shift, but in her haste to tend to Xena she hadn't bothered to dry off first and now it was damp and clammy. She sighed and pulled it over her head, then carefully toweled herself with the last dry square of linen they had left. When she was finished Gabrielle suddenly realized she didn't have another shift to put on. I could slip into Xena's... She glanced over her partner for a thoughtful second. The warrior seemed fast asleep already.

Still naked, Gabrielle got her own blanket and lay down beside the other woman, deliberately not looking at her as she blew out the small lamp. "Good night, Xena," she said softly, settling onto her side, facing away from the warrior.

After a moment, she heard Xena's dreamy-quiet voice. "Gabrielle?"

"Hmm?"

"Come closer."

The bard rolled over. Shifted a little.

"C'mon," Xena said softly, her words slurring a little. "Under the blanket with me. It'll be ... warmer." She chuckled softly.

"Xena, you're hurt..."

Another soft laugh. "Didn't mean climb on top of me. I just want to ... know you're really there."

Gabrielle slid under the other blanket, felt the warrior's strong arm go around her and gently pull her closer until she lay with her head pillowed on Xena's shoulder. "Is this OK?" the bard asked, feeling a little breathless.

"Perfect." The warrior sleepily kissed the top of her head, then settled back. "Night, Gabrielle."

"Good night, Xena."

The bard just lay there for ... well, she couldn't tell how long, listening to Xena's slow, steady breathing. Very little of their bodies were actually touching, but Gabrielle could feel every single inch, burning warm against her skin. She tried to relax, just drift off. Couldn't. Suddenly she trembled.

"Hmm?" The warrior stirred. "Y'all right?"

"Sorry Xena," the bard sniffed. "I just ... can't sleep."

Xena stroked her hair. "Ahh ... Gabrielle," she said softly. The warrior spoke from a half-conscious doze. "Jus' try and relax ... listen to my voice ... let yourself go ... breathe ... easy ... one breath at a time ... we're warm, dry ... together ... hear the rain on the roof? ... it's slowed now ... the wind is calm ... gentle ... just a little patter ... hardly even a sound ... soothing..."

Her voice went on for a little while longer, saying anything and nothing. Within minutes, they were comfortably warm and asleep in each other's arms.

Chapter Six

Xena gazed down at her sleeping partner. Thanks to a slightly too high dose of herbs, the warrior couldn't remember exactly how they had wound up naked together sharing a bedroll, but she had to admit it was a pleasant way to wake up. Gabrielle was nestled very nicely against her, the bard's head on her shoulder with a hand resting across her belly, their hips and thighs touching lightly. *Oh yes, very nice. Could get used to this.* Her smile widened. *Gods, I just hope I have plenty of chances...*

The rain had stopped in the night, and the sun was just getting ready to rise. In the dim light Xena took her time taking in every detail of Gabrielle's sleeping face. *By the gods you're beautiful.* The warrior chuckled to herself, remembering when Gabrielle had said those words to her while the bard had been drugged with henbane. How long ago? *Seems like a thousand years.*

So much had changed since then. The warrior's heart warmed at the memory of Gabrielle standing toe to toe with Androphus and not giving an inch - no matter her bard barely came up to the level of his chest. The little girl who had followed her from some nameless village and needed constant rescuing had grown before her eyes into a strong, confident young woman - a woman who could beat the stuffing out of a platoon of raiders, argue a god out of his boots, and still have the energy left to hold a room spellbound with her tales at the end of the day.

And in that time she had also managed to grow around one ex-warlord's stony heart. "I love you Gabrielle," she said, quietly, just to hear herself say the words. She looked at the pleasantly sleeping face once again, stroking it gently. "And by the gods, you are beautiful."

The smaller woman began to stir, then slightly opened her eyes. Her face broke into a dreamy grin. "Mmm, hi..."

"Morning," Xena replied, smiling back. "Sleep all right?"

"Yeah..." The bard closed her eyes again and nuzzled her head against Xena's shoulder. "Slept wonderful..."

"Me too."

Gabrielle snorted sleepily. "You would ... you were kinda doped up..."

The warrior smiled. "So, did you take advantage of me in my drugged condition?"

The bard shook her head, her red-gold hair inadvertently brushing across Xena's breast. "Nahh ... course

not..."

Xena's smile broadened wickedly. "Then how come we're both naked?"

Gabrielle's head snapped up. "Oh gods - we are aren't we?" She sat abruptly, uncovering them both. "Um, well, see, here's what happened -"

"Xena! You'd better come hear this!" Meleager called out as he poked his head inside the tent.

He blinked. "Uhhh ... aw Hades." Then he was gone.

"Hrrr, yah ... well!" he blustered loudly from outside the tent. "I'm uh ... I was just passing by somebody's tent here on my way over to where uh, the horses are tethered I guess ... Got something *real* important to say to Xena and ... Wow, I um, I just hope she happens on by in a couple of minutes or so ... Oh yeah ... Just headin' *straight* there..." he babbled as he walked away.

Gabrielle turned bright, absolute, beet red from head to toe just before she groaned and pulled the blankets completely over herself and curled into a tight ball. Xena pressed her hands over her face and tried desperately to hold back the screaming fit of giggles that threatened to burst out any moment - if not for the bard's sake, then for the sake of her own tender ribs.

Finally Xena got herself under control, then sat up and ran her hand over the fur-covered bundle beside her. "Come on my little nymph," she teased. "Looks like the real world needs us again."

"I'm not going anywhere," came the muffled response. "I'm staying right here until I sink into the ground!"

"Gabrielle..." Xena smiled warmly and embraced the lump as best she could. "All right, stay there until that cute blush of yours wears off. But we do have to get going sometime - we still have a job to do. Remember all that talk about the greater good?"

"That counts for being poisoned - not embarrassed to death!" The bard groaned.

"All right," Xena said, giving her a last squeeze and moving towards her leathers, "but I'm getting up."

Gabrielle gave another muffled groan and didn't move or speak further as Xena quickly and efficiently donned her leathers, armor and boots, turning to the lump as she made her way out. "Stay there as long as you want," she teased, pausing before the front flaps, "but try to get up before they pack the tent with you in it, all right?" There was a slight shifting and another groan from under the fur as Gabrielle nodded slightly. Xena grinned, then said quietly, "And as far as I'm concerned you have nothing to be embarrassed about - you're beautiful ... and I love every inch of you."

With that, the bard's pale - though still blushing - face poked out from beneath the furs, bearing a wide, if sheepish, grin. "Meet you for breakfast then?"

"Deal," the warrior replied, smiling at her love one last time before stepping outside. She briefly checked on Argo, noting how her saddle had been carefully set over a nearby tree branch. Still smiling, she moved it to a patch of sunshine to dry, then gave the horse an affectionate pat on the neck. "Always looking out for us, isn't she girl?" Argo nickered in agreement.

Xena found her way to where the rest of the horses had been tethered. Meleager was giving Melampus a nominal brushing. "Morning," he said without looking at her, obviously trying to suppress a grin. "Guess your injuries aren't *that* bad ... I uh, saw the, you know, bandages."

Xena casually leaned back against a tree. "I'll be fine," she said, "and next time, try knocking first."

Meleager's head dropped as he blushed. "Sorry about that. Didn't think ... Guess after all the grinning you were doing yesterday, should have put two and two together." He turned to her, smiling. "I'm happy for you though - both of you. Gabrielle ... she's pretty special."

"Yes," Xena replied evenly, unable to suppress a slight smile, "she is." She pulled away from the tree. "Now," she said with a more serious note, "what's so important you had to roust me out of bed?"

"Oh, yeah, that," he replied, tucking the brush into his saddlebag, "a couple of the scouts came back about a half-hour ago - with a prisoner. Come on, it's easier if they tell you..."

The camp was full of activity as they walked. Many more tents than usual had been set up because of the rain, and were all being taken down and stowed. Soon the two of them reached the spot where a pair of clearly exhausted Amazon scouts were seated on the end of one of the wagons. A couple of Lilith's followers had just brought them each a steaming mug of tea, which they gratefully accepted. On the ground was a bound, armored man, who snored fitfully.

"Tanith, Adrea," Xena nodded to the scouts. "What's the story?"

Tanith gulped down a swallow of tea and took a breath. "Well, we scouted ahead until nightfall, then started looking for shelter from the storm - came across a small inn and decided to stay there. There were no rooms left, so we just took a seat in the tavern, got some food. That was when Adrea noticed the men at one of the tables..."

"They wore the insignia of the scouts we came across outside Amazonia," Adrea finished, "the ones with messengers. The three of them were pretty drunk, and kept babbling about 'whores' and making jokes - didn't take long before it was clear they were talking about Lilith and the rest. Innkeeper said they'd been asking every traveler who came in if they'd seen our caravan. The two of us, um ... well, we enticed them outside, then knocked them out."

Tanith spoke. "We questioned them a little, but they were drunk and angry and we didn't get much out of them except that they're part of a large force."

"How large?" Xena asked.

"They wouldn't tell us," Adrea answered. "It pretty much slipped out by accident. After that they clammed up. That was when we decided to bring this one back, right away - he seemed in charge. We rode all night."

"And the other two?" Xena asked.

Tanith gave a grim half smile. "We hid the bodies well off the trail. My call. Couldn't bring all three and couldn't risk letting any of them go." She sighed, shrugged. "It was quick."

Xena just nodded. "All right. Good work. Get some rest. Now, let's get him awake and see what he

* * *

"I could borrow a horse," Gabrielle tried to sound reasonable.

"Gabrielle, please." Xena smiled, but knew it was half out of reflex. She adjusted a buckle on Argo's saddle. "We both know you hate riding and I need to move fast - in fact I'd rather go alone. I'm only letting Morgin come because sending two doubles the odds one of us will make it back."

The look of shocked concern on the bard's face made Xena pause. She turned from Argo and faced the smaller woman. "Not that I think it's dangerous - it's just a scouting trip, nothing more. Even I don't plan taking on an army by myself."

"Then why can't the scouts go?" Gabrielle asked. "Isn't that their job?"

"Yes," Xena said simply, "but scouting reports are no substitute for seeing first-hand. This is serious, Gabrielle. I wouldn't go if I didn't think I had to."

The strawberry blonde stamped her foot in frustration. "OK, OK ... It's just ... I mean..." Her words sputtered off.

Xena smiled warmly and ran her hand over the bard's hair, then gave Gabrielle's shoulder an affectionate squeeze. "I know," she said gently, "and I don't want to be apart from you either. Like I said, my timing is awful. I'm sorry."

Gabrielle looked up at her warrior's face as she blinked back a tear. "I mean ... we haven't even gotten a chance to *kiss* yet..."

Xena grinned, pulled the smaller woman closer. "Well *that* I can fix..."

Gabrielle found it strangely hard to breathe as Xena's lips lowered towards her own. *This is happening ... this is real...* It was just like she remembered from limbo - those wonderful, intense blue eyes growing larger, filling her vision. She thought they were the most beautiful thing she had ever seen.

The warrior lowered herself until their lips were almost touching, pausing for just a moment. Gabrielle could feel Xena's light breath, smell the mix of leather, jasmine soap and something underneath that was just Xena, and it made her dizzy. Then the warrior gently covered Gabrielle's mouth with her own.

The lips were soft, so very, very soft, yet strong and warm ... so different from any others she had ever felt. Gabrielle parted her own slightly and suckled them, feeling an arm circle her waist while a hand cradled her head - which was good because just then Gabrielle didn't think she could support herself any longer. The kiss grew slowly from gentle to more insistent as their mouths caressed each other for a timeless moment, tongues just hinting at the edges. Gabrielle felt the love between them so clearly she thought her heart would burst.

Finally, the smaller woman broke away and pressed her face into the warrior's shoulder, her breathing ragged. She didn't move, panting lightly for a few moments, then gave a strange, gasping laugh. "Aw *gods* ...

I..." She raised her head, opened her eyes and looked around. "Mmm..." The young woman smiled, "Nope, not the Elysian Fields after all..."

"Say again?"

Gabrielle gave an embarrassed giggle. "Well, I just figured if you ever did that I'd cross over for sure. Imagined I'd shake apart or burst into flames ... stuff like that."

Xena lifted an eyebrow. "I see. Disappointed?"

"Nah. This is better," Gabrielle nuzzled against her warrior's neck.

Xena held her a little tighter. "Mmm ... how so?"

"Oh, simple..." Gabrielle looked up into those beautiful, pale blue eyes. "It means we can do it again..." The bard giggled. "Only, maybe without the armor next time?"

"Deal." Xena said, hugging her bard close. The warrior gave a slow, and very contented sigh.

Gabrielle's heart warmed at the sound, realizing she'd never really heard her companion do that before. The bard was suddenly thoughtful, looking up again into Xena's face. "Just make sure there is a next time, OK?" She brushed a hand across her warrior's cheek. "Come back to me Xena, in one piece ... promise?"

"I promise," Xena said softly, "two days, maybe three, no more. I'll catch up with you at Kesan - it's a nice, well defended city, and Meleager knows the councilor. You'll be there by nightfall. You'll be safe."

"Xena," the bard sighed, "for the next few days, *my* safety will be the last thing on my mind."

"I know," the warrior replied, giving Gabrielle one last squeeze. "See you as soon as I can."

Xena pulled away from her bard, then quickly turned and mounted Argo. She rode away without looking back, just so Gabrielle couldn't see the pained expression on her face. The kiss had left her feeling weak and oddly shaken in a way she hadn't felt in a very long time. Intended as a nice little gesture of love and affection, it had turned out nothing like she'd expected, affecting her more deeply than she thought possible. She didn't think Gabrielle could tell sense her reaction, but she could still feel the strawberry blonde's lips on her own, only now it burned like fire. *Can't believe I need her this much*, the warrior thought again.

Xena shook her head to clear it, scanning around for Morgin so they could get moving. *Get a grip on yourself warrior*, she thought sternly, focusing on what she had to do, this moment, and the practicalities at hand. *Yeah, love is wonderful but you've got other things to worry about right now. Get focused or you could get yourself killed.*

* * *

Xena and Morgin had ridden at a fast canter for most of the morning, pushing their mounts as hard as they dared. Just before mid-day, the guardian announced, "Xena, Dumuzi must slow down. He isn't as strong as Argo. Indeed," she laughed softly, "Argo is much like her mistress in that regard - I can think of few who are."

The warrior gave a playful raised eyebrow. "All right." She pointed with her head. "There's a stream a couple of miles from here - we'll stop and water the horses." They slowed to a brisk walk and continued on.

As they rode, however, Xena found herself becoming oddly restless. It took a while, but she finally put her finger on why: The silence. When Argo had been at full canter she hadn't noticed it, but now that the pace had slowed and there was nothing else to occupy her mind, it was deafening. She rolled her head around and tried to set aside her restlessness, then got annoyed it wasn't working. *Never noticed how Gabrielle talks all the time*, she thought. *No, that's not true - at first it drove me crazy. Guess I got used to it. When did I start to need it?*

"So tell me," Xena said, as conversationally as she could, "how did you meet Lilith?"

Morgin looked at her for a moment, as if surprised. "Perhaps," she said at length, "I should ask if you'd prefer the long version or the short one?"

Xena shrugged. "Got nothing but time until tomorrow. Go on as long as you want."

Morgin smiled. "I hoped you'd say that. I'm not a fine storyteller like Gabrielle, but this one I enjoy - even if it's hard to tell in places, it does have a happy ending."

Xena gave a half grin in return. "Sounds familiar. Go on."

Morgin looked forward and thought for a moment. "I don't know who my parents were. I don't know where I was born, or even when," she began. "This saddens me at times, but I've learned to live with it. I know only that I was sold into slavery when I was so young that it was all I knew, in a land far from here, in the city of Ubar, many weeks to the south and east. I've come to believe - perhaps hope is a better word - that I was orphaned or unlucky. I don't want to think of my parents as the sort who would sell so young a child."

Xena nodded. This was a story she'd heard before, too many times.

"Anyway," Morgin shook her head as they rode, "those first years weren't too bad. I was a kitchen girl - the house was a royal one, large and wealthy. The woman who ran the kitchen was Reyna. She was old and short and fat. Maybe my memory plays with me to think of her being as wide as she was tall, but I do remember her as *roughly* spherical." The guardian laughed. "Most of the other young ones were scared of her. I loved her. She had her domain, and she ruled it. I admired that, and I think she loved me too in her way. I scrubbed all the pots and pans, even the ones I didn't have to. She would hold me in her lap then, and while she scolded me for never making them shine quite enough, she would hug me. When we broke the rules we all felt the sting of her switch, but I alone was hugged, because I did my chores so well. I wanted so much to please her. It was ... a happy time."

The warrior rode on, looking straight ahead. *How many children have I sold off? I tried to spare them from death, but maybe death would have been more merciful. Gods Morgin, if that's the best you had...* Xena suppressed a shudder and kept listening.

"I must have caught someone's eye," Morgin went on, "because when, by my reckoning, I was twelve summers old, I was sold again to a whoremaster, to live in the largest brothel in the city. I was given to Chandra to be taught - a courtesan. I wasn't even allowed to say goodbye to Reyna. I cried for many days."

Morgin continued without a beat. "Chandra was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen. I was enchanted

by her, and the seeming power she had over..." The guardian laughed lightly. "Um, her 'clients'? At first I was too young to understand, I only knew that those who came to her chambers every night treated her like a goddess. During the day she taught me how to dress and walk, how to serve meals and pour wine, how to use makeup and play the lyre. Like Reyna, she was quick to punish me when I failed to please, yet she also showed me how to pleasure myself, something I hadn't tried before, and encouraged me to do it often. This I loved - indeed," she chuckled, "I suppose I still do. In truth, I know now she only did it to arouse my interest in physical pleasure, so later this would make me more willing to serve the desire of others, but it was a pleasure all the same, and mine alone."

Xena's jaw tightened. The ex-warlord was no stranger to brothels, but hadn't given much thought to how those who worked there had learned their trade. To hear of a land where it was as institutionalized as any other guild - with "apprentices" that young - sent chills down her spine.

The guardian went on. "In time she let me stay with her as she worked her clients, and I learned of the sexual arts by her example. Her lessons became more ... personal, and sometimes I was also given lessons from trusted others. I was blooming into womanhood then, my own desire growing, and since I was just a slave I didn't think it strange at first. In fact, I liked it, in part for the pleasure it brought me, but also because when pleasing others I felt some measure of control ... and I was the center of attention. I envied those who wielded power and wished something more for myself, but I had been made to serve for so long I actually hated myself when I rebelled, although in time that would change. Not many years later my virginity was bid on, and sold."

Xena took a sharp intake of breath. She had bought a virgin once. The girl was young - very young - and seemed scared, but had been very pretty. At first the warlord told herself she would be easier on the girl than any of the rough men who were also bidding, might even let her alone. But once the two of them were in her room, the girl had submitted so willingly...

The warrior almost fell out of the saddle. *She acted like property, so that's the way I treated her. Ravished her like wild animal, then all but forgot about it. Didn't think ... didn't care ... there was a person inside.*

Xena hadn't realized Argo had stopped moving until Morgin placed a hand on her arm. "Xena? Did I say something wrong?"

The warrior pulled away. "No," Xena shrugged, smiling nonchalantly around her pain. Her ribs had begun throbbing too. "Bruise on the back of my thigh. Go on."

Morgin nodded as if she understood. "Ride when you're able."

Xena took a firm hold on Argo's reigns and kicked the mare forward. "You wish," she shouted, loud but matter-of-fact. "Race you to the stream..."

* * *

Gabrielle and Solari walked on either side of Meleager at the head of the column, the caravan keeping a slow pace as it followed the coast. Kesan offered safety, but the relatively narrow isthmus of eastern Thrace had only two main roads - it was a box ready for a trap, and they waited for the regular reports of the scouts to tell them the way was free of any threat.

Just to keep the conversation going, Gabrielle asked, "So um, Meleager, how are things with you and Lilith?"

"Oh, fine," the aging warrior responded, voice even. "We're, you know, doing fine - she doesn't get on my case about not being able to be around her during the day and we, well, spend ... quality time at night. Everything's fine."

Gabrielle and Solari exchanged looks. The Amazon shook her head lightly, looking down the road. "So in other words the two of you aren't talking much, but you, oh Mighty one, are happy the two of you can make out like bunnies when you get off watch. A warrior's dream, that is."

"Hey!" Meleager began, "It's not like that! We've reached an understanding, that's all."

"Hey, no problem," Gabrielle deadpanned, "Understandings are good."

Meleager glared at her. "Well what about you, huh? Seem to have *your* relationship well in hand."

The bard blushed a deep crimson. "That's um, not the same thing."

"Oh?" the aging warrior pressed on. "Explain how?"

"Because we aren't..." Gabrielle stammered, "I mean, we haven't ... I mean, I'm sure we will, but..."

At this, Solari's eyebrows shot up. "Wait a minute! When did this happen?" she asked, with a hint of exasperation.

"Uh, it didn't," the bard continued to stammer, "I mean, it did, but we couldn't ... so we haven't..."

Gabrielle stopped walking and took a deep breath. She looked at the warrior and Amazon staring at her expectantly, then crossed her arms and stared right back. "Right now the most important thing is protecting this caravan," she stated. "Xena and I both accept that. Maybe it's not convenient, but that's the way it is. Clear?"

Solari and Meleager looked at each other, pieces of the puzzle falling together in both their minds. They nodded. The Amazon addressed her Queen. "Crystal clear."

"Good," Gabrielle said flatly. She extended her arm down the road. "Shall we continue?"

"Please," Meleager said, turning and hiding his grin.

Gabrielle reached for something else to talk about, then asked. "So, Meleager, what did you do to help the Amazons? Why did they owe you a favor?"

Meleager hemmed and hawed. "Oh that ... Wasn't much really."

"Oh Meleager, please," Solari chuckled. "You're the farthest thing from modest. Even I know this one - I was a just a girl then, but I *was* there, remember? Just tell the Queen."

"Yeah ... well, OK," the bearded warrior grinned. "Guess it was over twenty summers ago, when Melosa's

mother, Tarendel, was Queen. A warlord, Abraxus, invaded the territories, and well, the Amazons had just finished defending themselves from another invader a month or so before, so they were a little weak and couldn't just fight him off. They decided to hole up inside the walls and wait him out until help arrived from other settlements. Lucky enough, Abraxus was kind of full of himself - he started his attack before the heavy weapons could catch up to him. I found out about it and captured the big stuff before it even reached the territories. Part of the whole 'helping people out thing', you know?"

Solari rolled her eyes. "OK. Hadn't thought about it like that. The Amazons have always figured you just wanted to prove your worth so you could ask for gold. Maybe you did do it just to help out. Very noble."

Meleager took the ribbing and smiled. "Anyway, I had my troops bring the weapons into Amazon territory and attacked Abraxus' camp with them by surprise from behind - and boy, was he surprised..."

"That was brilliant!" Gabrielle beamed.

"Nah, actually, it was kind of dumb," Meleager reflected. "I barely had enough troops to man the weapons. When he realized what was happening, of course he turned and attacked us. Guess I was a little ... eager too. I mean, I'd been a warrior for years, but this was one of the first times I'd led troops in the field. I'd been on my own for a long time, and, well, leading an army ... that takes a different kind of mind set."

Meleager shook his head and grinned. "Anyway," he continued, "as it happened the Amazons took that moment to come out of the city and rout what was left of Abraxus' men."

"Of course we did," Solari huffed in pride. "It took advantage of the divided forces."

"Yeah well," Meleager rubbed his chin. "I just wish I could say I'd thought that far. I guess it worked out in the end though."

"Well, I think it was very brave," Gabrielle said proudly.

Meleager chuckled. "There's a fine line between being brave and being stupid, kid. I learned that lesson the hard way. Lost some good men that day." He looked at his hand, balled it into a fist.

Gabrielle watched him, thinking how much different he was from the cocksure, compulsive liar she'd known before. Sure, she'd always known there was a noble warrior underneath it all - he was her childhood hero, and she had a scroll full of stories to back it up - but hadn't realized just how much his drinking had stolen from him until now. *You really are a good man Meleager, whether you know it or not. Lilith has every right to call you a 'dear one'.*

Then he smiled again and turned back to Gabrielle. "Anyway, the irony is that Queen Tarendel was, you know, kind of touched I was willing to risk my troops to help them. It seems no man had ever done that before," he added with just a hint of boastfulness. "Between that and helping them rebuild, I earned their trust enough to mediate a couple of treaties, and finally, she gave me this..." He reached into his shirt and pulled out a medallion.

Gabrielle looked at it closely. Although the design was vastly different from her own, it had the same crystal in the center that marked it as Amazon. The inscription around the outer edge read, "By order of Queen Tarendel, the Amazon nation grants Meleager of Calydon safe passage."

"You must have really made an impression," Gabrielle said, voice full of admiration. "I thought they only did that once - for Hercules."

"Yeah, well, I guess I oughta point out who got theirs first," Meleager responded with a low drawl, bouncing a little as he slipped the medallion back inside his shirt. He leaned close to Gabrielle. "You know, I think Tarendel had a crush on me."

"Oh *please*!" Solari gagged.

Gabrielle rolled her eyes and chuckled too. *Maybe she did Meleager. Maybe she did...*

* * *

Morgin continued her story as the horses drank their fill. "Working in a brothel often leaves you with a lot of free time. I knew how to read, and began devouring every scroll I could lay my hands on. I read stories, history, some philosophy. Although I'd always known it was possible to be something more than a slave I hadn't really thought about much before then, and reading the stories of heroes and the works of great scholars awakened something in me. I began wishing something more for myself, to make my mark on the world, live a life that was mine, and not one that belonged to someone else."

The guardian took a moment to snatch a big horsefly out of the air that had been tormenting Dumuzi, then resumed. "A few years later I was sold to a nobleman named Irydus - although I use the term loosely. I had been punished before, but he was the first who seemed to enjoy doing so. I was whipped and beaten regularly, often for nothing at all, just because it amused him. Still, he didn't keep me for very long, nor did any I was sold to after him. I had begun to despise my lot as a slave. To be so maltreated only strengthened my resolve. Even before I left the brothel I began demanding some pleasure for myself, later I demanded that I be treated as a human being and not as an animal, or piece of furniture. I fought back no matter how badly they punished me. It might sound odd, but I found strength through my slavery - I realized they could do as they wished to my body, but never touch who I was inside."

Some part of Xena wished she'd never asked for Morgin's story. It didn't help that the guardian told it calmly, even with a hint of amusement, as if none of it mattered now - the ex-warlord felt her soul being wrenched with every word. She was hearing the consequences of her ruthless ways from one who'd been through it. True, Xena hadn't been personally responsible for Morgin's life, but she had been responsible for too many others with similar fates, and she listened with the determination of a penitent being scourged.

At that moment, Morgin paused. "Is that bruise still bothering you?" she asked, with genuine concern.

"Don't worry about it," the warrior shrugged. She opened the saddlebag and retrieved the jar of salve. "You were saying?"

Morgin shrugged. "Anyway, about that time - it was ten summers ago, I think I was seventeen - I began to plan, to look for a way out. One day I was left alone and unbound and I escaped through a kitchen window and ran from the house, and the city, and into the desert. It wasn't a *good* plan..." The guardian gave a wry chuckle, then dipped her fingers into the stream. "My reading was sadly deficient in some areas. I knew little of the lands around me, like exactly where the next city was. I didn't even bring more than a couple of skins of water. I wandered for days. I was careful with the water - I wasn't stupid - but I got hopelessly lost."

Both horses seemed to have satisfied their thirst, and with a brief look and a nod, the two women mounted up and rode on at a fast walk. "The desert was flat and lifeless," Morgin continued, "but at some point I noticed a mountain and headed for it, hoping to find shelter from the sun. As I got closer though, I saw a figure standing on an outcropping halfway up the cliff. It took hours for me to reach that mountain of bare rock, and it never moved, not once. At first I thought I was seeing things ... again."

Morgin urged her mount over a root, then flashed Xena a grin. "By then I was plagued with visions from the heat. Yet this one persisted and I was convinced it was real, probably something carved from the rock, since the color was the same. I was weak and tired, but it fascinated me, and I determined to climb there and see it more closely. A courtesan's life hadn't made me fit or strong, but I had nothing else to do, so I made myself try. It took a full day and the last of my water but I finally made it, my hands and knees scraped raw as I collapsed, exhausted at her feet. She wore a gown of white, which flapped lightly in the breeze, yet she was totally immobile and covered with a layer of fine, wind-blown sand - even her eyes. I couldn't understand why anyone would clothe a statue, or leave it in so desolate a place. It seemed to have been there for many years."

The guardian gave wry chuckle, shook her head. "I didn't know what to make of it, but my strength was failing, and I realized this was where I had come to die. I was saddened to think I was dying alone, with no one to know or care of my passing, never to make any difference in the world." Morgin slowed her horse. "I looked up at that face, so serene and beautiful yet hauntingly sad, and decided she had to be an idol of some kind. So I knelt before her and prayed..."

Morgin paused, Dumuzi coming to a full stop. Xena reigned Argo to a halt as well, watching the guardian as she inhaled slowly. Morgin looked up, her eyes searching the past. "I told her I had nothing to offer, nothing but myself, and that I wasn't worth much. Yet I promised if she gave me leave to stay with her for eternity in that place, treat me well and grant me peace, I would love and serve her forever in the next life."

Morgin looked at Xena, the guardian's eyes moist above her grin. "And as consciousness left me, I remember, as clearly as I see you now, what I thought would be the last thing I would ever behold ... she looked at me, and smiled."

* * *

"So, that's Kesan," Gabrielle observed as they rounded a stand of trees. The small city had grown next to where the river met the sea, and its walls were high and seemed well-maintained. By looks and reputation, Kesan was a quiet, restful place.

"Sure is," Meleager replied. "I led the defenses here once, Captain of the Guard." The aging warrior gave a half grin. "Well, OK, I was a lot younger then. Passed through there just a couple of months ago though, and Thesocles still runs things. We'll all sleep in beds tonight ... *and* you're welcome."

Solari snorted. "Find me a bath and a decent masseuse, oh Meleager the Mighty, and then I'll thank you. A simple bed in a city ain't much of an accomplishment - it's not like I don't have a few dinars on me. Gods, when I really need a bed, I can usually get one with a wink and a smile," she said playfully

Meleager rolled his eyes. "I'll see what I can do ... Uhhh, Amazons!"

Gabrielle giggled. "OK, OK - Meleager, it's your job to get everyone safe lodging, and make sure we can stay for a few days. Solari ... just try to keep the Amazons under control, OK? We've already got enough of

a reputation as tough drunks with a lech for the locals, and now here we are riding in with a caravan of, um, sexually eager priestesses. It's a good chance to unwind, but don't let it get out of hand, got that?"

"Your word is law, my Queen," Solari replied, feigning seriousness. "I'll pass that around."

"Just don't pass anything - or anyone - else around," Gabrielle replied, fighting back a blush. "And, I guess I should have a word with Lilith. C'mon, forward..."

* * *

Late in the night the warrior and the guardian sat across from each other around a small fire, their simple meal finished. "Do you wish me to continue?" Morgin asked. "I'm not that tired, but if you wish to sleep..."

Xena pulled out her whetstone and set about sharpening her sword. "Go ahead," she answered simply. Morgin's story had tweaked points of guilt inside Xena the ex-warlord had tried to forget were there, and a few she hadn't known were. *Still*, the warrior thought grimly, *I'll be damned if I stop listening now*.

"In truth, there isn't much more to tell," the guardian shrugged, then gave a smile. "However, since we have nothing but time..." She reached for her bedroll and resumed. "I awoke in a large, cool cave. I was confused for a bit - there were so many sensations, and I'd expected I wouldn't feel anything ever again. The cave was well lit by lamps. I was lying on a soft mat, covered by a sheet of quilted silk. I realized I had been bathed, my sunburned skin treated with a soothing, fragrant oil, and I smelled food cooking. It took me some time, but eventually I raised my head and saw her, the one from the cliff, seated, relaxed, smiling at my feet. She had the ruddy glow of smooth skin, not the rock I thought she had been earlier. I thought sure it was the idol come to life." She chuckled. "In a way, it was."

Morgin settled over onto her side, staring into the fire. "I asked her if I was dead, and her smile widened. She said, 'Do you wish to be?'" Morgin looked thoughtful for a moment. "I wasn't afraid, but I asked what she meant, and she said, 'To die is to be reborn. You offered to love and serve me in your next life. I tell you now that you are safe, and will soon be healthy. You have a choice as few ever do - go back to your old life as you see fit, or stay, and begin a new one.'"

Xena regarded the other woman for a moment. Morgin may have claimed to not be much of a storyteller, but she caught the cadence of Lilith's voice almost perfectly.

"I know I didn't really understand her," the guardian smiled, "but the choice ... well, that I understood. I felt such compassion and love flowing from this woman, such complete acceptance, I made my decision in a heartbeat. Although I was still very weak I knelt forward until I was bowing low in the most submissive posture I knew - one I had never willingly taken before, with anyone - and begged to let me serve her. It was both the hardest, and the easiest thing I've ever done."

Xena blinked. *'I could serve you...'* The warrior's own words from so long ago echoed in her mind. *Yeah, but I turned away*, she thought, saddened and spiteful towards herself, *went back to being just a slave - a slave to my anger, to my hatred...*

Morgin didn't seem to notice Xena's attention waver and continued. "She knelt next to me, embracing me warmly, holding me as I shook with sobs. When they passed I was too weak to move, and she gently lay me back on the mat, drawing the covers up. Wiping away my tears, she said, 'Those who would serve me do so

by serving others, and this through serving themselves. Your first step is to become healthy and strong. Then I will teach you of yourself.' She fed me some broth, and ... ahhh..."

Morgin gave a sudden laugh, cocking her head at the warrior with a playful smile. "I tell you true, Xena - years later Lilith confessed she'd made the broth from desert mice, since she didn't have any food of her own and they were all she could find."

The warrior smiled back. "Ah, that's not so bad." She tried to relax. "You don't want to hear some of the things I've had to eat."

Morgin rolled her eyes. "This I believe." Then she shook her head, staring into the fire. "Still," the guardian said softly, "it hardly mattered - she offered it with a care and devotion I'd never known before. I thought then it was the most wonderful thing I had ever tasted. I fell asleep in her arms."

Morgin sighed, then a moment later gave a yawn and rolled onto her back. "The rest is simpler. We spent a year in the desert, and she taught me so many things. She told you of her gifts, how she reads people, helps them feel?"

"Yeah," Xena nodded.

Morgin nodded back. "Learning from her was such pleasure. She filled me with the song of the Earth, showed me the pattern of all living things. It was wondrous, and I found my path with an ease that surprised me." She chuckled softly. "Though I confess it took time to separate the love I had for combat from my anger and desire for revenge."

Xena sighed. "Probably helped you were alone, with no ... distractions."

"True," Morgin replied. "Yet I had her love, and felt the love of the Earth so keenly. I think we could have lived in a crowded market and it wouldn't have mattered."

"Probably," Xena agreed ruefully. *If only I could say the same.* "Do you still love her?"

"More than anything," Morgin replied warmly. "Only the Earth brings me greater joy than her tiniest of smiles."

Xena paused. "But she's sleeping with Meleager..."

Morgin chuckled. "Yes, she is." The smaller woman shifted her head and looked at Xena. "And when I see the joy he brings her, I love him for it."

"I'd think you'd be..."

"Jealous?" Morgin smiled. "No. Lilith and I were lovers for a time, and I needed it then. It helped me heal, reclaim my self-worth, to learn that pleasure can be given in love, and not just taken. It's possible we will be again, but it simply became ... less important. I find pleasure in so many things now. I have her love always, and she will carry mine with her for eternity, but love takes many forms, and Lilith ... Ahhh, Xena, she shares them all."

The guardian stared at the stars, eyes heavy with sleep. "She's my teacher, and my guide. She gave me this life I have now, and in a way, I gave her hers - she stood on that rock for untold years before I woke her with

my simple plea, and every day she thanks me for that gift. She is my mother, and my sister. She is my greatest friend. Who shares her bed or mine doesn't matter. Do you see?"

Xena's mind drifted back over those in her own life who had loved her, and the fewer still she had loved in return. "I guess I don't know much about ... love," she replied.

Morgin smiled. "I think you do."

The warrior raised an eyebrow. "And I think we need to get some sleep."

The guardian yawned. "I think you're right." Morgin chuckled, then made sure her sword was within easy reach before settling back. "Thank you for listening, Xena."

"Yeah well, thanks for talking," the warrior responded automatically. Xena blinked again. Gabrielle used to end her stories with almost those exact words for most of the first year they had traveled together.

The warrior inhaled and stood. "I'll check around once more. Good night."

Morgin shifted her blanket. "Good night Xena."

The warrior slipped quietly out of the camp. She made a slow circle of the perimeter, lost in thought, until for some reason she settled on remembering the first meal Gabrielle had ever fixed for the two of them.

Was it the second, or third night we were together? It had been a busy day. Xena was grimy and spattered with blood, and after starting the fire and satisfying herself that the girl was making a decent camp, the warrior had wordlessly headed for the nearby brook.

The wash had taken longer than it should have as Xena worked to calm herself down. True, the fight hadn't been Gabrielle's fault, but if the girl hadn't tried to reason with the brigands, she wouldn't have gotten close enough for one of them to grab her, and *that* had complicated things.

Then as her anger had cooled a little, Xena noted that she hadn't exactly tried to hold the young bard back - partly from wry amusement at the girl's naivete, and, at least partly, to teach the girl a lesson when talking didn't do the trick and...

She got nabbed, the warrior finished her own thought.

This isn't working, Xena had reflected, and not for the first time. *I owe her. I know that. But she's nothing but trouble, she won't stop jabbering, and she's clouding my judgement. She's bound to get herself or both of us killed. Leave her at the next village and be done with it.*

When she'd returned to camp, Xena had been a little surprised to see the young girl look up, then sheepishly walk around the fire, hand her a bowl, and resume her original spot - for once, without talking. The warrior had accepted the meal without even looking at it, still pondering where the next village might be as she sat on a log, staring at the fire while she absently took a bite.

Her chewing had suddenly slowed. She'd looked in the bowl. Just lumps of meat and vegetables, a slice of bread - stuff from the saddle bags and leftovers from earlier. *Doesn't taste right.* "What's in this?" the warrior had asked, warily.

"You don't like it?" Gabrielle had asked back, all open-eyed disappointment.

Xena had chewed for a moment longer, warrior instincts checking - she'd later remember with guilt - for anything toxic. Finding nothing she could sense, she had chewed a little more, curious.

Like many things in her life, food wasn't something Xena thought about much - not for a very long time. Years of overindulgence had long since given way to grim, brute necessity. Slowly, one after another, she had withdrawn from every physical sensation, every human feeling, every connection to anything. If it didn't further her goals, she simply didn't care.

Sure, for certain practical reasons she kept up appearances. She slept with her soldiers or anyone else she had to, but it had little to do with her own desire, holding out the promise of her body as a reward, so her troops would fight harder, or to make an alliance, or to smooth any number of rough edges. She collected gold and precious trinkets not because of her own greed, but because it made whole kingdoms try to outdo each other when they begged for mercy, and gave greedy mercenaries a reason to join her.

Inside, she might as well have been dead for all the interest she had in anything that happened to her. Nothing had mattered but the conquest. Some days it seemed like that was all she had known for as long as she could remember - and then one day, even that hadn't mattered anymore.

Food had mattered least of all. It was a base concern. For years she'd made herself eat because her body didn't work otherwise, and that was that.

But on this night, sitting in front of a campfire miles from nowhere, she took another bite, and thought about it. It had, she realized, simply taken her a moment to recognize the spices for what they were. It had taken moment more before she recognized ... she enjoyed it.

She'd looked in the bowl again. *This can't be the stuff from the bags.* Yet it was. It had simply been prepared, not just cooked until it was fit to eat. Xena had rolled it around in her mouth, a long-dormant palate coming back into use. *And prepared well...*

Then she'd looked back at Gabrielle, saw the girl still standing there with the same saddened expression. Xena finally swallowed. "No," she began, "I mean, yes..." Annoyed, Xena had made herself quit stammering. "It's fine," she said simply.

When the girl's expression didn't change, the warrior felt herself cringing inside. *This is stupid. It's just food.* Then she heard herself say, "Actually, it's ... it's good."

Gabrielle had brightened. "Really?"

The warrior had raised an eyebrow. Something about the girl's smile was downright infectious. "Yeah, really," Xena assured her. She looked back at the bowl. "Thanks."

"Oh, you're welcome," Gabrielle had bubbled, before attacking her own portion. "I can cook for you every night if you want. I wouldn't mind at all - I mean, I'm used to cooking. Cooking is something I can do. You know, help pull my weight? If you really liked it?"

Xena had sighed, but gave an inward smile - her first in months. "All right. Deal."

And that was that - she's done it ever since, Xena reflected, leaning back against a tree, looking up at the moon. *Such a simple thing really. But then it seems like every day she shows me how my senses are good for something other than telling if there's danger around - not to mention a few other things, like trust, and patience ... and love. Leading me back from a world that's gray and meaningless, sharing her light.* She chuckled. *Guess I heard the way to warrior's heart was through her stomach. Who knew?*

She sighed. *Been away from you for a single day. By all the gods, miss you already -*

A sudden sharp crack of wood on bone and a loud cry snapped the warrior out of her reverie. "Hades," she hissed, running back towards the camp.

She arrived at the low fire in time to see Morgin make short work of a stocky, badly armored man. A second already lay sprawled on the ground.

The guardian smiled as the warrior broke into the camp. "Not to worry," Morgin announced, flushed but not even breathing hard. "Common thieves, I think. Heard them coming long before they got here."

The warrior just nodded, turning the nearest one over with her booted foot. "Good work," she said absently. *Yeah, just the usual thugs,* she noted. *So how come I didn't...*

Xena shut her eyes. *Simple, dumb warrior, because you were out pining at the moon instead of patrolling.* She turned to Morgin. "You all right?"

"Yes," the smaller woman replied. "Shall I check for others?"

Xena scanned the trees, listened. "No," she said finally. "There's no one else. It's just a couple of opportunists who saw the fire. Come on, let's tie 'em up. We'll haul them to the road, leave them there. They'll be out cold at least until morning."

The two thieves were trussed up in short order, and afterwards Xena made a careful, determined inspection of the surroundings before finally turning in. She lay down, balling up her fists under the bedroll with anger. *Better straighten up and ride right,* she yelled at herself. *It's not like this love thing hasn't gotten you in trouble before. Get your head together now warrior - before you wake up with it separated from your shoulders...*

Chapter Seven

Gabrielle stood on the highest tower of Castle Kesan, leaning lightly on her staff. Heights often bothered her, but not this morning. Dawn was just creeping over the horizon, and a steady breeze blew in from the sea. She smiled lightly, saying nothing. Even her normally quick imagination turned languidly in her mind, casually fitting words into poetic meter, but with no urgency.

Rest, my warrior...

Last night had been fun. Councilor Thesocles was a good natured and seemingly wise old man who had headed Kesan's triumvirate ruling body for as long as anyone could remember. He had gladly provided everyone in the caravan with rooms, either in the castle or spread through a couple of the city's inns - Solari

and the rest of the Amazons even got their hot baths and masseurs. There had been a feast in the castle's great hall, and over the course of the evening Gabrielle had eagerly related a number of tales, almost all of them about Xena since the warrior wasn't there to protest.

*Who shoulders the wisdom of the dark,
Her uneasy badge of courage.
Her strength and her home
For too long cast in shadow...*

The bard had enjoyed herself immensely. The food had been sumptuous and plentiful, the wine excellent, and the musicians talented. Safe and prosperous behind its stout, well-guarded walls, Kesan was the kind of city someone of moderate wealth would visit to relax in a spa, wander through fragrant gardens, or enjoy a play performed by some of the most talented troupes in Greece - which made the overwhelming applause Gabrielle had received even more special.

Ease, my warrior...

As she told her stories, Gabrielle would catch herself looking reflexively around the hall, searching for Xena, then smile inwardly at her force of habit. She had thought she would miss her warrior terribly, and she did, yet she also found a strange peace under it all. As usual she worried about Xena's safety, and wished her partner could have been with everyone else to enjoy the festivities, but the strange ache she usually felt when they were separated just ... wasn't there.

*Who endures the hatred of the wronged,
The burden of shattered lives.
Her pain now as theirs,
A price paid dear in sorrow...*

Gabrielle had wondered about this for a while. It hadn't worried her, exactly, but she had been puzzled. As the evening had gone on, the only bad feeling she had was a mild guilt over having such a good time while Xena was out on a forced ride looking after their safety. But even that was tempered by knowing that it was simply the way it had to be, and the warrior certainly would have wanted everyone to enjoy themselves. Gabrielle was able to put it aside entirely by thinking of ways she would make it up to Xena when the warrior came back, thoughts which even made her blush a few times. As the evening had continued, the bard realized she felt incredibly relaxed.

Peace, my warrior...

When the party had begun to die down, after the bard had performed what she made clear was her last story of the evening, it suddenly occurred to her why she felt so calm: Xena was coming back, and perhaps for the first time Gabrielle *knew* Xena was coming back. The lingering uncertainty that had gnawed at the young woman for over two years that someday Xena would disappear from her life forever, not through death or misfortune - although that would always be a real concern - but just because the warrior would choose to leave, that fear was gone. The simple knowledge that Xena loved her in return had lifted a weight that Gabrielle hadn't even consciously known was there. That night, she had slept better than she had in ages, awakening well before dawn.

*This journey was never yours alone.
Rest now, warrior, dearest love,*

*My heart beats in thee,
And yours shines pure in mine own.*

The sun was coming up, and if anyone had been there to see the young woman bathed in its rays, they would have been dazzled by the way it caught in the golden highlights of her hair, and in the soft green of her eyes as she turned from the sun to face north. "I love you Xena. Be safe."

* * *

"I count a hundred sixty," Morgin whispered solemnly.

"That's about right," the warrior replied, her face grim.

"This isn't good," the guardian said simply.

"No, it's not," Xena shot back, sharper than she knew she should have.

From their concealed vantage point on a low hill above the camp, the two women watched the throng of men below them for a time longer in silence. The army was clearly well equipped, and judging by the drills a number of them were engaged in under the afternoon sun, many of them were well trained.

Perhaps a third seemed to be common slavers, the rest were clearly hired muscle. Xena recognized one of the banners. *Pollux of Thera ... professional and ruthless.* The other mercenary flag she didn't know by sight, but she could guess. *Nanthes maybe, or Race. Both have joined up with Pollux at one time or another, and either is just as bad as he is.* No, she reflected, *this isn't good.*

"Come on," Xena said quietly, "let's circle around. I want a better look at the far side of the camp."

"What are we going to do?" Morgin asked calmly. It wasn't really a question.

The warrior set her jaw. Her eyes were like clear ice. "Figure a way out of this. That's why we're here."

It took them a good half-hour to find another spot where they could safely spy on the camp, evading patrols as they moved. Xena had to admit Morgin was good at it, and made a mental note to say so later. From the relative safety of the branches of a dense oak, the warrior let her tactician's eyes take in every detail.

"Well," Morgin observed wryly, "they're sparing no expense. I believe I'm flattered in a way."

Xena allowed herself a grim smile. This side of the camp housed a dozen low wagons, ten bearing large iron cages. The other two were loaded with neatly arranged rows of chains and manacles. Whoever was running this show clearly intended on taking the whole of Lilith's caravan prisoner - and likely whoever survived trying to protect them as well.

"Xena," Morgin spoke up quietly, her voice serious again, "they have captives."

"I know," the warrior replied evenly. Fifteen or twenty women, girls, and young boys were slumped miserably inside two of the cages.

The guardian leaned forward. "We have to -"

"We can't," Xena cut her off. "I'm sorry Morgin, but we can't. Even if we could get in and out without any trouble, they'd catch us in an hour. Our only advantage now is that we know where this army is ... and gods only know how long that'll last."

The smaller woman closed her eyes and rested back against the trunk of the tree, seemed lost in thought. Xena went back to studying the layout of the camp. *Gods, what she must think of me - abandoning someone to the same life she once had. But we can't. There's a whole army to track us ... although if we could steal those wagons it would make two less for the slavers to use...*

A grim smile slowly spread across the warrior's face. *Risky ... might not make a difference, but then it might make all the difference.* "All right Morgin, we'll help them -" Xena held up her hand to silence the other woman. "We'll help them as much as we can afford to. It'll be dark in a few hours. We'll sneak in and release them, get them outside the camp and away. But after that, they're on their own."

Morgin exhaled, pursed her lips, then nodded. "Yes," she said simply. "And then they should scatter. To remain together would be foolish - you're right, they'd be caught easily, and us with them. Besides," she said with a cold smile, "it'll distract the army, force them to send out troops."

"No. You've got it wrong," Xena replied evenly, meeting her gaze, "I *hope* they catch us - in fact I'm counting on it. Now, I have to ask you, First Guardian..." Xena narrowed her eyes until her expression was as cold and predatory as a shark. "Are you ready to kill?"

* * *

Stophacles shook his head, trying to clear it - the knocking on the frame of the tent was boring straight into his skull. "This'd better be good," he muttered, rising groggily. He pulled on his tunic, then kicked at the pallet until Klytus stirred into drunken wakefulness. "Get your pants on," he hissed spitefully, not waiting until his partner complied before he collapsed into the chair facing the front of the tent. "Enter!" he bellowed.

The sergeant looked both worried and grim. "Sir, the slaves have escaped," he reported.

"What!" Klytus shouted, stumbling back onto the pallet as he drunkenly attempted to pull up his breeches.

Stophacles ignored him. "How?" he asked, glaring at the soldier.

"They had help," the sergeant replied. "By how many we're not sure yet, but whoever it was they were good - all the guards on the western perimeter have been slaughtered, so have the men watching the cages. Never even had a chance to sound the alarm. None of them have been dead more than an hour, so they can't have gotten far. We've already organized two parties to go after them and doubled the guard."

"Two!" Klytus shouted again, still struggling.

While patiently waiting for the sergeant to finish his report, Stophacles gripped the arms of his chair tighter and tighter, making himself listen until his knuckles turned white. At Klytus' outburst, he stood so abruptly the chair tipped over behind him. "Good work," he growled. "Tell Pollux and Race we'll join them shortly."

The sergeant nodded and left quickly. Before the flaps of the tent had even closed, Stophacles had grabbed Klytus by the front of his shirt. He dragged the smaller man over to the water barrel and forcefully dunked his head in a couple of times, then hauled him up and slapped him across the face, finally backhanding him for good measure.

"I need that brain of yours, so sober up - now," he commanded, voice full of quiet ice. "And get your pants on."

* * *

Jogging behind the small group of freed captives, Xena kept up quiet words of encouragement to keep them moving as quickly as possible without making too much noise. They headed along the main road west until they reached a fork that branched north. There, the warrior pulled them up short.

"All right," she said, glancing around to catch them all by the eyes, making sure her words were understood while checking for signs of panic. "Everyone, keep heading north. In fifteen or twenty minutes you'll meet up with the other group at another crossroad - head west as fast as you can and don't stop for anything. You'll reach Gelp before morning. Got it?"

While the group mostly nodded, one older woman asked, "Aren't you coming?"

"No," Xena replied. "Those slavers will be along any time. I'll cover you, then follow. When you reach the other group, do whatever Morgin says. Now go!"

With some measure of relief, the warrior watched them turn and head up the road as quickly as the children could move. The plan was risky, but there was little choice. After freeing the captives, Xena and Morgin had broken them into two groups, with the most able-bodied following the guardian into the woods and heading directly north, then turning west. They would move slower through the woods, but the slavers who pursued them, who would likely be mounted and would have to follow the trail in the dark, would move slower still.

The warrior knew the pursuit that followed on the road would move quickly, giving her plenty of time to deal with them before joining Morgin. For the slavers, chasing down two groups meant they would either have to divide their search party or double the number they sent, and either way suited Xena just fine.

Here's where it gets nasty, she thought, then caught herself staring down the road with a predatory grin she hadn't used in a while. After a moment's reflection, she relaxed and let the dark smile grow back. Originally she'd planned on taking cover in the trees and springing an ambush. Instead, she stayed where she was, standing even-footed in the center of the road. *Let's have some fun.*

Less than a quarter of an hour later she heard the hoofbeats, then a party of fifteen men thundered around the last bend in the road, coming to a slow halt when they spied the armored woman who waited with folded arms. *Three by five rank*, she noted. *Nice neat lines. Very professional, very disciplined.* "I just want you to know," the warrior said, calmly but loud enough for all of them to hear, "if that camp of yours wasn't so big, you wouldn't all have to die. Sorry 'bout that." She smiled. It wasn't pretty.

The mounted men all responded differently - some laughed, some looked concerned, many just looked confused - but the momentary relaxation of their guard was all Xena needed. She hurled the chakram down

the right side of the rank, ricocheting it off a tree near the back of the file so it cut horizontally across the last row of mounted men. It sliced cleanly across all three necks before rebounding again and curving back to Xena's outstretched hand. The now dead men dropped from their horses, which milled around in confusion, momentarily blocking any retreat.

"CHEE-YAAAH!" The warrior sailed forward through the air, drawing her sword, spinning and slashing as she landed in the middle of the formation. That broke the soldiers' reverie and they drew their own weapons, turning their horses or dropping from their mounts entirely. The tight confusion of horses and riders let only two or three reach the warrior at a time, and Xena gave a chilling laugh as she cut them down. "Come on! That the best you got!"

The warrior grew strangely impatient waiting for the soldiers to come to her. During a moment's lull she flipped over the front rank, landing behind the leader on his horse, slitting his throat and kicking the mount forward as he dropped, then launching herself out of the saddle as one of the remaining men hurled a javelin in her direction. She landed square on his chest, knocking him over and driving her blade through his ribcage as they hit the ground. Sensing movement behind her, she yanked it free and stabbed backwards under her arm, catching the charging soldier in the gut before he could bring his own blade down on her head.

The one man left alive jumped back on his horse and spurred it along the road. "No you *don't*!" Xena snarled, slipping out her boot dagger and hurling it after him with deadly speed, pinning him between the shoulder blades. She wiped her sword off on one of the bodies, sheathed it, then walked over and retrieved the dagger.

One of the men groaned as she passed. "Stay dead," she hissed, stamping hard on his throat. She surveyed the scene briefly, grimly satisfied there were no further signs of life. "Now," she smiled, mounting up on one of the horses, "let's find Morgin."

A quarter-hour later the guardian slipped out of the covering trees as Xena approached the northern crossroads. "I saw them all safely off," Morgin said. "They moved well. None were injured."

"Good," Xena responded simply, giving the horse a solid slap and sending it on its way. "Wait right where you were. The slavers should be along any moment."

"Will you take cover as well?" the guardian began. "An ambush..."

"No," Xena cut her off. "I'll wait here, draw them all out onto the road. You watch the rear - take care of any that stay in the woods. If none do, then move out and flank them."

Morgin smiled. "This will be done."

As the guardian headed for the trees, Xena called after her. "And Morgin - no prisoners, no survivors. Understand?"

"This must be?" the smaller woman asked.

"Yes, it 'must be'," the warrior replied coldly. "If you can't handle it, then knock them out - I'll finish them off."

"I'll do as I must," Morgin said evenly, then disappeared into the woods.

It didn't take long for the soldiers to arrive. As they broke through the trees onto the moonlit road, Xena stood relaxed and motionless. "Your friends on the road south of here weren't much trouble," the warrior taunted. "I guess you won't be either."

"That so?" the leader chuckled, motioning his men to surround the warrior. "Why don't you just tell us where those slaves are off to? I might let you live for a while."

Xena glanced at the circle of horsemen around her, eyes narrowing as her grin widened. "Wish I could offer you the same." In an instant she was airborne, flipping and twisting onto the back of the horse behind her, then wrenching the soldier's head to the side, hearing the satisfying snap of his neck.

As the warrior lashed out and kicked the sword from the grip of the soldier to her right, Morgin dropped out of the trees onto the leader, dragging him to the ground. In an instant the guardian was on her feet over the man, driving the wedge-shaped tip of her sword down hard into his throat, crushing his windpipe.

The melee didn't last long, as the soldiers were evenly divided between those who tried to flee and those who tried to fight. The tight circle of horses made both options difficult, and the two women took easy advantage of the momentary confusion, leaping and rolling, striking out at whoever was close.

Xena glanced up to see Morgin spinning around to land a solid kick in the gut of a soldier who had managed to grab her sword. With a loud "oomph" he released the weapon, but as Morgin twisted and struck him hard across the side of his neck, breaking it neatly, she failed to see the mercenary behind her raise his weapon. Xena instantly hurled the chakram, burying it deep in Morgin's unnoticed opponent. The warrior's momentary distraction was rewarded with a stout kick in the midsection.

Pain bloomed in Xena's already cracked ribs. She instinctively backhanded her opponent, then brought her sword around, slicing him cleanly through the middle. Only one soldier remained, a huge brute of a man who charged Morgin, apparently hoping to intimidate her and drive her down. With the hilt of her sword gripped in one hand and the blade in the other, the guardian flipped over his head as he passed, clotheslining him across the throat with the blade, using her weight and the leverage of her upper back as she dropped down behind him to crush his larynx. With a choking gasp, he collapsed in a heap.

"Nice move," Xena commented dryly, ignoring her own throbbing chest.

"I don't use it often," Morgin replied without a hint of irony. "Shall we leave now, or do you wish to go back and slaughter a few more?"

"It's not about slaughter," the warrior said evenly. "It's about lowering the odds ... and sending a message."

Morgin looked around at the dead and mortally wounded soldiers around them. "Then let's hope they understand it. Messages such as these are unpleasant."

"Yes," Xena said simply. "They are."

* * *

Pollux leaned back against one of the wagons, his arms folded across his heavily muscled chest as he looked over the dozen bodies arranged in a neat row on the ground in front him. These were his men mostly - good

men - along with a few of Race's and two of Stophacles'. His anger was burning somewhere inside, but he kept it just low enough to keep him warm. Right now, he needed to concentrate on what these dead men could tell him.

"The cuts are deep and precise ... quick, silent kills," Race observed, crouching on the ground while letting the lamplight play over the wounds. "Only one or two even have bruises. Never knew what hit them. Whoever did this was one of the best."

"Meleager?" the big man asked.

"Maybe," Race shrugged. "He'd be on the short list, especially if he's crawled out of that bottle he's been in, but the boot prints we found weren't big enough, too narrow - most likely a woman."

Pollux nodded thoughtfully. "Then it could have been an Amazon ... they're damn good at sneaking in through the woods."

"Let's hope so," Race replied, looking up. "If it wasn't, I can only think of one or two others. Neither is good news."

Pollux just grunted. "What about Skulkas, on the end?" he asked, indicating the one man who wasn't bleeding.

"Something thin-edged but dull and heavy across the throat. Stopped him from breathing," Race replied. "If the description Stophacles gave us is accurate, I'd say it could've been done by one of those whore guards, but I can't be sure. Could've been a lot of things."

"Fits too neatly though," Pollux said simply.

"Yeah," Race agreed. "We've got to assume they know we're here."

Pollux nodded again. "Heptus!" he called to his lieutenant standing nearby. "Get everyone up. Field fortifications - I want moat and stockade around the perimeter, by morning if possible. Then break camp. I want us ready to move out on a moment's notice."

The man saluted and hurried away. Pollux glanced at the stars. "The search parties should be back soon," he observed. "Get the feeling they won't be though, at least not all of them."

"Me too," Race agreed, standing. "That could mean over forty casualties for the night - a quarter of our total force, *gone*." He balled his fist and slammed it into the side of the wagon, then seemed to instantly calm down. He shrugged. "At least the search parties were all the slavers' men. I'll have my scouts keep an eye out for carrion birds in the morning. That'll be soon enough."

"Agreed," Pollux sighed. "This was a good deal Race. Fifty thousand apiece is worth the wrath of the Amazons - I've got scores to settle with them anyway. Meleager's head will make a fine trophy, and I admit I liked the idea of an army of whores to play with all the way to the coast. I was ready for battle losses, but losing our best scouts, then this ... This pisses me off. I'm starting to not care if we make a single dinar. I want *blood*," he growled.

Race waved to his men nearby to move the bodies. "Well, don't give up our paycheck just yet. When we find

the dead slavers tomorrow we'll have a better idea of who did it. You want odds?"

"I don't gamble," Pollux replied coldly. "Now, let's go have a chat with our slaver buddies."

* * *

Gabrielle couldn't remember the last time she'd been this excited. It was mid-afternoon when she learned of her warrior's arrival in Kesan, and she hurried to prepare their room, a part of her regretting now that she'd refused more expansive quarters in the castle. Still, the inn was fairly well accommodated. She started by requesting water for the bath at the end of the hall and a nice mix of available delicacies and more staple foods - given that her warrior had arrived slightly ahead of schedule, the bard had no doubt Xena would be tired and hungry.

The young woman had briefly flirted with the idea of wearing something provocative, then opted against it. *I'll just let things happen*, she decided. *She'll likely be exhausted - throwing myself at her wouldn't exactly be fair*, she chuckled to herself. *Now let's see, where'd I put those scented oils I bought...*

Her thoughts were stopped short by the armored woman who opened the door. "Xena!" Gabrielle shouted warmly, crossing the two or three steps to her warrior and wrapping her arms around the taller woman.

The warrior returned the embrace stiffly. "Hi ... Gabrielle. Good to, to see you. Sorry ... I can't stay ... Have to move out right away."

"Xena, what's wrong?" the bard asked, pulling back and looking up with deep concern. The emotionless expression on the other woman's face chilled her.

"An army, Gabrielle," Xena replied flatly. "A slaver army - professional mercenaries, real trouble. The Amazons are getting ready, most of the Guardians. I just stopped in because I ... promised I'd come back. See you." The warrior began to pull away.

"Xena wait! Stop, please?" The bard deliberately held on, searching her companion's face, noting the dark hollows under her eyes - and sensing the darkness behind them. "Xena, you look ... you look so tired," Gabrielle said, trying to sound calm, reasonable. "I've got a bath ready, end of the hall, food coming too. It'll take a while for everyone else to get ready, so please, stay?"

For a brief moment, the iron in Xena's eyes held, then it softened. "All right," the warrior responded, brushing past Gabrielle and settling in a chair. The bard moved behind her, automatically reaching for the shoulder clasp on the armor, only to have a callused hand brush her away. "No time for that," Xena said flatly. "You said there was food?"

"Coming, soon," Gabrielle replied, inhaling slowly to hide her sinking heart. "So what's the plan?"

Xena looked at her. "You can't come, Gabrielle. We're badly outnumbered. That means it's got to get ... ugly. I don't want you there."

"OK," the bard nodded slowly, easing herself down in the chair next to the warrior. "So what happened?"

The warrior shook her head. "You don't want to -"

"Xena," Gabrielle cut her off, putting a note of authority in her voice. "You're not going to leave me here without telling me what you're up against. I deserve that much. If nothing else, you're taking the Amazons - my people. That makes it my doubly my business ... and, I might add, gives me the right to go if I choose."

The bard leaned across and took the other woman's hands in her own, then said softly, "But I'd rather you just kept your promise Xena - you're here, but you haven't come back to me. Where are you Xena? Please, what's going on?"

Xena's eyes narrowed, then closed. When they opened again, they were looking somewhere far away. "All right," the warrior began, an edge of weariness in her voice. "We found the army..."

With Xena's characteristic economy of words, the events of the past few days didn't take long to tell, nor did the bold strokes of Xena's plan to deal with the situation. Gabrielle listened thoughtfully without interrupting, even though it was clear the warrior was hiding ... something. The tension that probably only the bard would have noticed couldn't have been just because they were all in serious danger - that had happened more times than Gabrielle liked to think about, but Xena always took it in stride, always rose to the challenge, enjoyed doing it.

The food arrived as the warrior finished talking. Gabrielle just nodded at the innkeeper and gave him a smile that probably looked as pasted on as it felt, then thanked him as he left. As the door closed she reached out and picked something off the tray without really looking at it.

"Forty," Gabrielle said finally around a strained laugh. "Well, I have to say Xena, that's a lot, even for you..."

"Gabrielle..." the warrior began.

"No ... Xena, it's OK," the bard waved her down. "You had your reasons, and I'll trust they were good reasons. It's done." She took a bite, found it was a sweet, cake-like thing. "Hmm, this is good. You should eat something. I think hunger has sapped your brain."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Xena replied curtly.

Easy bard ... she's not herself. Go easy until you find out what's really wrong. "Sorry," Gabrielle replied quickly, "it's just that you're overlooking a few things."

"Like what?" the warrior responded, letting her irritation show as she snatched a piece of chicken off the tray.

"Like the whole 'working together thing'," Gabrielle answered as calmly as possible. "I mean, we *are* traveling with at least one other experienced warrior, an Amazon general, and an immortal. Maybe you should, um, ease off on the lone warrior routine. Even if ... If you don't feel like listening to me, why not at least see what they can come up with?"

Gabrielle made herself reach over to the tray for another cake, trying hard not to look at whatever expression might be on the warrior's face. She chewed deliberately for a moment. When the silence stretched out longer than she could bear, she finally stole a quick glance.

Xena was looking at her with a studied, neutral expression on her face, eyes still narrowed, but the bard could practically see the warrior's mind turning this over. Finally, Xena settled back in the chair. She gave a half grin,

but there still wasn't much warmth in it. "You're right," the warrior said slowly, "I am ignoring some ... important resources."

Gabrielle swallowed hard. Something still wasn't right, but she decided not to press this small victory too far. *What really happened out there Xena? Why can't you just be here with me?* The bard sighed. "OK. You ... finish eating. I'll round up Meleager, Solari and Lilith. There's a private dining room downstairs - see you there?"

"Soon," Xena replied, finally taking a bite. She shut her eyes tight as the bard walked around her, then the warrior's free hand reached out almost on its own and brushed the smaller woman's arm. "Thank you Gabrielle," she said slowly. "I shouldn't have snapped at you ... We rode all night to get here."

The bard briefly covered the warrior's hand with her own. "It's all right Xena," she said, trying to sound cheerful, but there was no mistaking the edge of sadness underneath. "Just ... take your time. An extra half hour won't matter much, OK?"

Xena gave the hand a slight squeeze. "All right. See you then."

The moment the door closed behind her companion, Xena dropped her food and hugged her arms around her injured ribs. *I'd better re-wrap these, now, before it gets worse.* Then she shut her eyes tight, knowing that the pain she felt wasn't just from a few cracked bones. *Gods Gabrielle, what am I going to do? I can't keep focused when I'm away, and I can't even be civil to you when I'm near. What's wrong with us ... with me?*

Outside the door, Gabrielle nearly collapsed against the wall. She was torn between going on with her errand and just storming back into the room and screaming at Xena until the warrior opened up. Finally she brushed at her eyes and stood up straight, squaring her shoulders. *Stay on the job, she hissed to herself, I'm Queen of the Amazons, and sworn to protect Lilith's followers. Get on with it.*

* * *

Lilith smiled. "This is indeed a problem," the Priestess said, but without much gravity, as if it hardly mattered at all.

The others around the table - Xena, Gabrielle, Meleager, Solari, and Morgin - all looked at her as if she wasn't quite sane. "Lilith," Xena began, her irritation rising again, "let me go over this one more time - these are professional mercenaries. They outnumber us..."

"I am sorry Xena," the Priestess cut her off gently, "but in this you are not entirely correct. They are a group of slavers who have *hired* mercenaries - a large force yes, but their motive is simple profit. You yourself believe they can be driven off by ... how did you say? 'Taking away their reason for being here'? I believe we can take this a step further, perhaps be more direct, and thus avoid some loss of life - even if it would be mostly theirs as you believe. Do you see?"

Meleager shook his head. "Uh, I'm sorry, but I don't get it."

Lilith smiled again. "Morgin, be kind and fetch the small chest from my room - you know the one, I believe."

The guardian wearily smiled back and nodded, rising from her chair. "Of course Lilith," she said, making her exit.

The Priestess leaned forward slightly. "Warrior Xena, please understand, I believe your plan is a good one, given what you believe you have at your disposal."

The warrior shrugged. "It's simple guerilla tactics, nothing fancy - hit and run, whittle them down. Think you've got a better idea?"

"Perhaps," the Priestess replied. "Yet I do think we should rely on yours as a method of last resort, perhaps even use a combination of plans. If this is, as you believe, the most serious threat to our journey, it would be foolish indeed not to use everything in our arsenal. Ah, Morgin ... you return. Thank you."

The guardian carried a small, but obviously somewhat heavy chest. "You're very welcome Lilith. It was pleasure," she said, smiling as she set it in the middle of the table. Then she moved around and resumed her seat.

The chest was perhaps a foot wide, slightly more than half that high and deep. Although ornately crafted and quite pretty, it was made of solid iron, and bore three stout, locking clasps across the front, each with a differently-shaped keyhole.

Lilith rose from her chair and ran her hand lightly over the top on the chest. "Note how strong it seems, how impregnable," she began, breaking into a warm smile, her voice almost musical as she spoke. She turned it so the front faced Xena, Meleager and Solari across the table. "The locks cannot be picked, the iron is tempered and stronger than even the stoutest of a blacksmith's tools. It was once thrown over a cliff, and remained intact on the rocks below. Yet I tell you that once its secret is known, it can be easily overcome, and so it is with many things."

The Priestess' slim fingers began pushing and twisting along the back of the chest in an intricate pattern. Only in the quiet of the room could anyone make out the almost inaudible clicks coming from inside the box. The lid abruptly popped open along the back, the heavy clasps in front, now obviously fake, forming the hinges as it swung up and forward. "And, against the selfish sons of Adam, I put in your hands what is, perhaps, the ultimate weapon."

"Gods," Gabrielle gasped. The chest was filled almost to overflowing with the most perfectly clear diamonds the bard had ever seen.

* * *

Xena was now annoyed and tense as she rode. This was actually an improvement from earlier. *I was wrong - working together is no way to run a war.*

The warrior had needed the Amazons for her plan to work, and had decided to bring half the Guardians as well - she needed the numbers. The rest had to stay with Lilith's followers so that if things went badly, they could look after the caravan in Kesan and arrange another escort. Lilith coming along hadn't been part of Xena's original idea, but the warrior was well aware the immortal was in little danger, and her ability to influence people would serve the new plan well.

That meant Meleager insisted on coming too. Xena had hoped he'd stay behind, since he could be instrumental in putting together a new escort if things went wrong, but in the end the warrior had relented.

Then Gabrielle insisted on coming, and made it clear she would accompany her Amazons and assist the negotiations. That resulted in the two of them having a bitter argument. *Actually, the same argument we always have*, the warrior silently fumed.

Yet under her anger was an edge of guilt - Xena knew she was souring the love they'd so recently admitted, but she didn't have time to deal with that right now and the main reason she didn't want Gabrielle around was so she wouldn't have to be constantly reminded of it. *Doesn't she understand how much I've got on my mind already? How can I concentrate on what's important when I have to worry about saying the wrong thing around her too? She's not being fair to either of us.*

So the warrior rode in silence at the head of the column, speaking only when the scouts brought their regular reports. She concentrated on tactics, turning the plan over and over in her mind, looking for any flaw or weakness.

That, and ignoring the pain that jarred her ribs every time Argo took a step.

* * *

"The only good thing is that for once I'm certain it's nothing I've done," Gabrielle finished sadly.

She and Lilith were walking together behind the wagon, which was heavily laid with large, oblong skins filled with lamp oil and almost pure alcohol. For a few moments they watched the liquid bobbling of the skins as the wagon bounced along.

Finally Lilith spoke. "This is a truth you must hold to, young one. This, and the truth that she loves you still, as greatly now as before, perhaps more so."

"Can you feel that?" Gabrielle asked.

Lilith smiled. "I do not have to. I know it as sure as the sun will rise tomorrow. She has said you should never doubt how much she loves you, and you should trust her in this, as you trust in your own feelings. This depth of love you share is new to you, yes?"

"Gods," the bard gasped, blinking back a tear, "you have no idea - I thought I was in love before once, but this ... I mean, I've been holding it back for so long, if I think about it too much I feel like it'll drive me crazy. Kind of scary, you know?"

Lilith's smile widened as she nodded. "Yes, young one, I know. So I ask you now, if it can be frightening for one such as you, who is so open, how much deeper do you believe it must run for one such as Xena, who taught herself to feel nothing for so long?"

Gabrielle thought for a moment. "But that doesn't make sense," she began, "I mean, sure, she hides her feelings a lot, and I tease her about it, but Xena's never been afraid of anything..."

"Except, perhaps, herself," the immortal said simply. "Know this young one, every time one surrenders to

love, it is different. Xena may have loved before, yet this is as new for her as it is for you. The only remedy I can offer is that of simple patience, and trust. When you become saddened to think how far you may have yet to go, think again on how far you have come already." Lilith stopped, gave the bard a warm hug. "Ah, Gabrielle. Would that your path was an easier one for you both, yet it is the path you share together."

"Yeah," Gabrielle sniffled, "and I wouldn't trade it for anything. I just wish ... Aw Gods..." She broke away, although kept up a slight contact as they continued walking. "I just wish we had a moment alone to really talk, but here we are, walking into a war zone. Xena's right - our timing is awful."

"Ah, Gabrielle," Lilith chuckled, "if there is one thing I have learned in all my years, it is that the present has a terrible habit of becoming the past, and all too quickly. I have found the things we most regret are the things which we do not do, or put off because we always believed we had the time. True, one can make mistakes, but if we are wise we learn from them. Never regret the present, Gabrielle, nor forget the past, for they make up who we are, and shape who we will become."

* * *

The column reached the slaver's camp by nightfall the following day, stopping only briefly a couple of times to rest without sleeping and to water the horses. It was a difficult journey and everyone was tired, but time was of the essence. It was a relief when they arrived and found the slavers were still there.

The camp had, however, been fortified. A solid wall of five-foot-high wooden stakes had been erected around the entire perimeter with a five-foot-wide moat around it, and the forest had been cleared by a good ten feet out from that. "Been busy since you left," Meleager observed wryly.

"Looks that way," Xena agreed, scanning the camp. "Moat and stockade. Very professional - and very predictable."

"Yeah," Meleager replied, "and kinda dumb ... keeps them all boxed in." He turned to face Xena. "OK, when do you want me to start the attack?"

Xena looked up at the sky. "In a few hours. Give me time to get around. I'll take Solari with me as a runner - she's good at moving through the trees. Wait for her."

Meleager nodded, extending his hand. "Good luck Xena - don't take any chances I wouldn't."

She grasped his forearm. "And don't you take any chances I *would* - no casualties, remember? Fall back at the first sign of trouble."

"Oh yeah, nooo problem," he chuckled.

The two made their way back to the main force as quickly and quietly as possible. The Amazons were all tending to their weapons, while the dozen Guardians had just about finished tying two skins of oil each to their backs. It was a fair amount of weight to have to carry, but there wasn't much choice. Xena knelt to throw a quick loop of rope around her own pack when she felt a hand on her shoulder.

"Hey," Gabrielle said quietly.

The warrior stiffened slightly, then made herself relax and shook her head. As she rose and turned around, her half smile was almost genuine. "Hey yourself."

The bard looked up at her companion, her young face a mixture of affection and concern. "Listen, Xena," she began gently, "I'm not sure what's bugging you, but we can work it out later. Right now, just know I love you, OK? Please be careful."

Xena sighed, pulling the young woman into a gentle embrace. *Gods, I can't believe I need her this much.* "I love you too, Gabrielle. Please ... please believe that. And I will be careful. If everything goes right I'll be back before dawn. Stay close to Solari and Meleager, and take care of yourself, all right?"

"I will ... all of it," Gabrielle replied, breaking away. The young woman looked up at the warrior for a moment, an unreadable expression on her face. "Come back to me, Xena..." she said quietly, brushing past and heading towards the Amazons.

Xena closed her eyes, took a deep breath. *She never lets go, does she?* The warrior exhaled. *Gods bless her for that ...* Then she straightened and shouldered her pack, walking in the opposite direction. "Come on Morgin, let's move..."

It took the better part of an hour for Xena and the Guardians to swing wide around the slaver camp and quietly approach it from the north, where the wagons were being kept. The warrior clasped arms with Solari briefly and the Amazon took off to rejoin to the main force, then Xena led her small band as close to the edge of the forest as she dared. *Now, we wait,* she thought, then studiously tried to find something to keep her from thinking about anything else - like Gabrielle.

Seeing Morgin blink rapidly and shake her head as if to clear it, Xena waved at the guardian and motioned her over. "Here," the warrior said quietly, handing her small pouch of dried, oddly-shaped leaves, "pass these around. Anyone who feels like they're dozing off, chew a couple - can't say they taste good, but they'll keep you alert."

Morgin gave a wry grin. "So that's your secret."

Xena rolled her eyes. "No, in my case it's pure mean stubbornness - Morpheus and I don't get along."

"This I believe," Morgin chuckled, popping a leaf in her mouth. "Ugh, you weren't joking about the taste."

"Yeah, and you'll probably have a headache in the morning too ... sorry," Xena grinned, hoping it seemed like genuine, playful banter.

The guardian gave her a look of exaggerated disgust. "Xena, if that's all I have to worry about in the morning, it will be great pleasure," she said before shuffling off to pass the bag around.

Me too, the warrior thought ruefully. *Come on Solari, move that Amazon butt of yours...*

It was less than an hour, but after spending most of the time pushing away thoughts of Gabrielle, to Xena it seemed like an eternity. Then her reverie was broken by a loud series of shouts coming from the far side of the slavers' camp, followed quickly by a wall of flame enveloping the stockade's front gate.

"Showtime," Xena called to the Guardians. "Everyone get ready - wait for my signal."

The warrior grinned as a few of the rear sentries left their posts. She reached for her boot daggers, watching carefully as the growing sounds of distress from the front of the camp drew more soldiers off. *Come on, be good little boys ... go see what the noise is all about...*

Stophacles charged out of his tent just in time to see Race jogging by with a half-dozen men. "What's going on?" the slaver yelled.

Race shot him a disgusted look. "We're under attack you idiot! Get your worthless ass to the wall - take the west flank. This frontal assault is likely a diversion!"

Then why are you heading right for it? Stophacles thought spitefully as the mercenary ran off. "You, you and you," the slaver shouted, turning quickly to his men, "round up as many as you can and join us, the rest of you, come on!"

Meleager and Solari both grunted loudly, pressed together shoulder to shoulder, putting all their combined weight on the arm of the small, roughly constructed catapult until it was low enough that the Amazon could push the release pin in place. "Got it," Solari announced with a gasp, then gave the aging warrior a wry grin. "Was it good for you too?"

Meleager returned the expression. "Oh yeah, you know it," he winked.

"Uh, Meleager, do you mind?" Gabrielle broke in, crouching with her back to the low wooden barrier that shielded them from slaver arrows. She held out an oil-filled skin in both hands. "This thing kinda stinks."

The graying warrior chuckled. "Sorry kid." He took the skin from her and dropped it into the shallow trough lashed crossways at the end of the arm. The catapult was one of the least impressive war machines he'd ever seen or used, but it didn't have to throw anything very far and worked well enough. "Now," he said, picking up the torch, "let's see if we can actually clear the gate this time ... ready?"

"You betcha," Solari answered, grabbing the release line. Meleager soon had the skin ablaze, and the Amazon waited until it was nearly ready to split open under the heat, then yanked the line. The flaming ball sailed over the barrier, out over the cleared area in front of the camp, and over the stockade. A huge sheet of fire erupted from within the slavers' camp where it landed. "Yes!" Solari shouted with undisguised glee, raising her arm and pulling her fist down.

"Hey, cool," Gabrielle said, peeking over the barrier, "I think you hit something important - nice shooting."

Meleager looked over as well, then gave Solari a quick thumbs-up and another wink. He scanned the stockade, making sure the steady hail of arrows from the Amazon archers in the treeline was still keeping the men inside effectively pinned. It was, but he noted the sheer number of soldiers that were massing, and knew it wouldn't last much longer. "Come on," he said, turning back to Solari, "we've got time for maybe one more. Gabrielle, get your staff, help me shift this thing - next one should be a little to the left, then we gotta cut and run."

Pollux stomped his foot in raw anger as the second fire bomb exploded, igniting their rack of crossbows - expensive crossbows. Men who were burned or hit with distinctively Amazon arrows were being dragged and carried away from the front of the stockade. His own archers were trying desperately to shoot back, but they were few in number and had no discernable target to aim for in the dark woods - except maybe the spot

where the bombs were coming from, and shooting there didn't seem to have any effect. Still, the men had good cover within the stockade, and if this could be ended quickly casualties wouldn't be that severe. "This *can't* be it," he shouted at Race, "they're up to something!"

"I know," Race shouted back, "but we can't just sit here and take this either! Don't seem like many of them. We've gotta run 'em off before it gets worse!"

"Agreed!" Pollux looked around. "Gather as many of those worthless slaver troops as you can find," he said simply. "Get them ready for a big rush out through the gate. I'll take my men to the east wall - we'll try and flank around." He turned back to Race. "You stay here, fight the fire, keep alert!"

"Don't go chasing 'em far," Race warned. "It's too damn dark and those Amazon bitches know how to move in the woods."

"Don't worry," Pollux replied bitterly, drawing his sword. "I won't take any more risks than I have to. Damn that idiot Klytus! We should have moved out at first light!"

"We'll deal with them later," Race said coldly, then extended his hand. "Good luck." They clasped forearms.

Xena stole a look over the stockade, but aside from the two dead sentries, she couldn't immediately spot anyone else between herself and the wagons. She waved at the Guardians crouched against the wooden wall. "Go!" she hissed.

The dozen leather-clad women clambered as silently as possible over the stockade, then wasted no time moving forward, dispersing themselves through the wagons. Xena hastily retrieved her daggers from the bodies of the sentries, then jogged into the camp until she was ducked beside the farthest row of wagons. She had hoped to find tents still up so she could set fire to a few of them as well, but the camp was mostly broken down, with no structures within easy reach. She glanced back - the Guardians were splashing the oil and alcohol over the all-too-wooden wagons. *Just hope it's enough*, Xena thought to herself. *Come on girls, hurry...*

The warrior looked back into the camp. A large group of soldiers was moving towards the eastern wall, and her clear blue eyes recognized the leader who ran with them. *Pollux ... All right, let's see what kind of mayhem I can stir up and keep you occupied.* Dropping back, she found Morgin. "Done?" she asked.

The guardian nodded. "Nearly - another few moments."

"Good," the warrior replied. "Slip out the way we came in, but swing around west - *west*, got it? Keep moving. I'll join you as soon as I can."

"This will be done," Morgin saluted, then hurried off.

Xena divided her attention between the activity in the camp and making sure the Guardians made it safely over the wall. She used the time to creep forward to the nearest camp fire, then was suddenly distracted as a third bomb hit the front of the camp. The blaze revealed the number of soldiers gathered near the gate, thrown in sharp silhouette by the fire. *Give 'em a reason to stay put, warrior. Time to move.*

Grabbing a burning log, Xena ran back to the wagons, lighting them up as quickly as she could. Fed by the oil, the fire spread with frightening speed, and in moments all twelve of them were burning fiercely. Taking

hold of the ropes tied around the skins she had brought with her, she set the skins ablaze. With a few back and forth swings, she got enough momentum to spin her whole body around, giving the skins a hammer throw directly into the center of the camp where the supplies had been stockpiled, instantly covering them in flames.

Drawing her sword, the warrior strode purposefully away from the roaring wagons, standing proud in the middle of the destruction she had caused. "CHEEE-YAAAH!" *As if I needed that to get their attention.*

Klytus and Stophacles both turned to the sound of the battle cry. "Nooo!" Klytus screamed. "Not the *wagons!*" He grabbed the nearest man by the collar, practically threw him in the direction of the rear of the camp. "Move your asses! *Do something!*" he screamed again, taking off at a dead run.

Pollux took in the dark-haired form standing even-footed in front of the inferno that enveloped the wagons. "Xena," he hissed. "Guess I should have taken that bet."

Heptus turned to his commander and asked. "What do we do?"

Pollux spared a glance at the front of the camp, saw two more men felled by the constant rain of Amazon arrows. "We stick to the plan," he growled at his lieutenant. "She's alone. I doubt she'd take us all on, and unless you throw yourself at her she can't do much more damage than she already has. If those idiots want to save their precious wagons, let *them* tangle with the Lion of Amphipolis. The Amazons are the immediate threat." He waved over at Race, signaling for the slavers to begin their charge.

Meleager watched the huge gout of flame erupt from the wagons at the back of the camp, followed almost immediately by the supplies going up as well. "That's our cue," he smiled. "Solari, spread the word - two more shots apiece, then move out, fast." The Amazon nodded and ducked into the woods, sending out the bird call that signaled retreat.

Gabrielle stole a last glance over the barrier. "Xena!" she shouted. "Meleager, what's she *doing?*"

The aging warrior scanned the camp, saw the armored woman standing in front of the blazing wagons. "Causing a diversion," he said simply, noting the soldiers massed near the front gates. *And it's not working.* He reached out and shook the bard by the shoulder. "Gabrielle, Xena can take care of herself - Hades, you know that better than I do!"

"But Meleager..." the bard began. Just then, a huge group of armed men began swarming out of the stockade.

"Gabrielle! We gotta go *now!*"

Stophacles had also recognized the raven-haired warrior, but being older and slower, he lagged too far behind both Klytus and most of his men to stop them. He tried shouting, but Klytus either didn't hear or chose to ignore him.

Xena smiled at the approaching men. *Only a dozen or so ... damn. I'd hoped for more.* The one in the lead raised his sword as he approached, but the warrior lashed out with a straight-legged kick to his midsection that stopped him cold. She spun and slashed him across the throat, then drove her sword back the other direction into the man next to him.

Stophacles pulled up short at the sight of Klytus going down, the heavy arterial spray standing out in an almost

slow-motion silhouette against the blaze of the wagons. "Damn you Klytus," he whispered. "I thought you were smarter." He stood his ground, watching with bland interest as the Warrior Princess cut through the rest of his men.

Race watched the progress of the two-dozen slaver troops rushing out through the still-burning gate, and was hardly surprised when only a couple were felled by arrows before they reached the treeline. *Bitches are pulling out already*, he noted to himself. *Really were just after the wagons. Smart.* Then the road in front of the slavers erupted in flame as well, cutting off their charge. Squinting through the fire, Race made out the gray-haired figure laughing on the other side. *Meleager*, he mentally snorted. On the eastern wall, Pollux and his men were vaulting over and charging for the woods. *Ares*, Race prayed idly, *I know you've got no love for the Amazons. Aid Pollux in driving them down and catching that pathetic excuse for a warrior.*

Race turned to look back at the wagons, seeing the dead men there and the armored woman standing over them. *And that would be Xena - guess Pollux was right. How do a bunch of whores rate this kind of muscle? We should double our fee.* He sighed and waved to his own troops. "Come on," he shouted, "move up - slow. Don't take chances. Try and surround her, but keep your distance ... and find some archers."

Xena was hardly even winded by the brief fight, but her injured ribs hadn't enjoyed it much. She noted the large group of soldiers approaching, and the armored man standing a few yards away who didn't seem inclined to get any closer. She stole a glance at the burning wagons. *Another minute and they'll be useless*, she thought grimly. *Stay put.*

The warrior turned back to the armored man. "And you are?" she asked with a feral smile.

"Stophacles," he replied, then nodded towards one of the bodies at her feet. "That was my partner, Klytus. You're Xena." He spat on the ground.

The warrior narrowed her eyes above the dangerous grin. "If you know me then you know that nothing can stop me from hitting you, night after night, until you go away ... or you're all dead." She let her bloodlust rise enough to show, then laughed.

Gods, she really is good, Stophacles thought, trying not to let her see the shudder that ran through him. "Can't really give up I'm afraid," he said as evenly as possible. "I've got debts, obligations..."

His words were cut off as the warrior spun away in a series of moves almost too quick to follow. When she was still again, she held an arrow in each hand. "Your funeral," she laughed, then without looking flung one of the arrows at the rank of approaching mercenaries with a quick backhand. Race abruptly dropped to his knees, screaming, the arrow lodged in his eye.

She laughed again, twirling the second arrow idly between her fingers, her openly predatory expression nearly freezing the slaver's blood in his veins, as sure as it stopped the oncoming soldiers dead in their tracks. Just then one of the wagons collapsed, sending a huge geyser of sparks into the night sky which reflected, blazing, in the clear ice of her eyes.

"Well boys, it's been fun," she snarled. "See you soon." With that, she back flipped over the front row of wagons, directly into the inferno, and was gone.

* * *

Dawn had almost come. Gabrielle was pacing back and forth, gesturing occasionally to no one in particular, giving every sign of having a conversation with someone who wasn't there. Meleager, reclined against a tree with Lilith curled up against him, pulled the Priestess a little closer. "She looks worried," he said simply.

Lilith chuckled. "Dear one, you have many talents, yet I believe I must add 'understatement' to the list." Gabrielle, along with Meleager, Solari and the Amazons had met Lilith at the rendezvous point hours before, and the Guardians had joined them less than an hour after that. Now the sun was getting ready to rise, and Xena had yet to arrive.

Meleager sighed. "Aw Hades, maybe she wouldn't be so upset if Tanith hadn't been killed," he wondered aloud, glancing briefly at the still form, covered with a bedroll on the far side of the clearing. Solari and several other Amazons were seated in a loose cluster around Adrea, not far from the body - the two scouts had been close friends since childhood. He looked back at the pacing bard. "Still, we should say something to her ... I mean, before she wears a trench in the ground." He chuckled mirthlessly.

Just then, Gabrielle stopped on her own, looking up at the first pale streaks of sunlight pushing at the sky. "I'm going for a wash," she announced, and strode off in the general direction of the creek, pausing briefly to offer a few quiet words to Adrea as she passed.

Meleager started to rise as well, but Lilith pulled him back down. "Leave her be, dear one," she sighed. "If she wished any counsel, I have little doubt she would ask."

"Yeah," Meleager sighed again, "guess so." *Come on Xena, get back here ... quit worrying the poor girl.*

Some time passed, the sky growing brighter. Meleager finally couldn't take sitting still any longer. He scratched his chin, then pulled Lilith into a brief hug. "I'm gonna go check the watch posts," he said simply, rising to his feet. "Be back in a bit."

"Sorry Meleager - don't need a search party," a familiar voice announced.

The aging warrior almost jumped out of his boots. He spun around, coming face to face with the armored woman, who stood with her arms folded and a wry smile. "Hades Xena!" he cried, "don't *do* that! Where in blazes have you been?"

"Playing cat-and-mercenaries most of the night, keeping them off our trail," she replied, raising an eyebrow. "Everyone make it back?"

He shook his head sadly, then inclined it across the clearing. "One ... one casualty -"

Xena's head snapped up, eyes flying wide, her gaze scattering around wildly. "Where's Gabrielle?" Then louder, taking a step forward, *"Where is Gabrielle!"*

Meleager placed a careful hand on the warrior's shoulder, met the ice-cold glare he got in return evenly. *Gods, is she on a knife's edge right now or what?* "She's fine, Xena - not even a scratch, I promise. She's down at the creek ... She's worried about you, you know."

Xena exhaled carefully, closing her eyes, making a visible effort to relax. She finally nodded slightly. "Sorry Meleager ... So who..."

"Tanith," he said simply. "Stupid, bad luck - caught an arrow in the back as we pulled out, right through the heart. Nothing anyone could do. A few others were hurt, but nothing serious. Guess we got away clean, all things considered." He regarded the armored woman for a moment, covered in dark smudges of soot and blood. "You OK though? You look like Tartarus."

Xena just sighed. "I'm not injured..." She closed her eyes again, then straightened with effort and shrugged.

The aging warrior nodded, then smiled. "Think I know what would help. Come on, I'll take you to Gabrielle..."

"I can find her on my own," the warrior said, giving him a tight smile. She looked down at Lilith. "Get your diamonds Priestess," she quipped. "Time you did something useful."

Lilith grinned back, floating up to her feet. "It will be great pleasure."

The warrior turned back to Meleager. "Get ready. We're moving out as soon as I get back - if we have to negotiate, it's best we do it before they get over their shock and start getting angry."

Meleager nodded. "Yes sir!" he teased, giving a snappy salute.

Xena rolled her eyes, then headed towards the creek, pausing briefly to offer a few words to Adrea as she passed. "Well," Meleager chuckled, "I know one warrior who could use a nap." He sighed, smiling. "I swear though, in spite of everything, they really do make a cute couple."

Lilith slid an arm around his waist. "Let us hope so, dear one ... Let us hope so."

Xena approached the creek silently, without even consciously trying to. Her heart was pounding in her chest as she rounded a tree and paused for a moment. Gabrielle was seated facing the water, knees drawn up tight, turned just enough in the warrior's direction she could make out the look of grim concern on the young woman's face.

Xena closed her eyes, willing her heart to slow down. Just seeing her bard, safe and unharmed, brought up so many feelings at once Xena had to call on what little reserves she had left to control them. The warrior had spent the night skirmishing with Pollux and his men, and it had gotten vicious. For a time, she had simply given herself over to her bloodlust, and although she'd carefully taken time to push it down before returning to the camp, it still hummed within her. Between that and going almost three days without sleep she was running on pure adrenaline, keyed up tight, and her emotions were far too close to the surface. Part of her wanted to hold her young partner close and burst into tears - another part wanted nothing more than to throw her to the ground and ravish her until she screamed.

This is too risky, Xena thought, almost taking a step back. Then she looked at Gabrielle again, the pale rays of dawn glinting off the red-gold hair and the tears which rolled down the bard's face, and stopped herself. *No*, she growled. *No more running. Not from her ... not from me ... Not from us. For all of a half second you thought she was dead and it almost killed you too. You love her, you need her, and it's time you let her know - tomorrow she might just be gone for real, and so could you.*

Xena exhaled slowly, then opened her eyes. *You are who you are, warrior*, she grimly reminded herself. *And it's not going to get any easier - without her least of all. Deal with it. For her sake if not yours ...*

She deserves it. The thought focused her, and holding the love and concern radiating from her bard like a lifeline, she began to warm inside.

Finally, as the warrior took a step forward, she realized she was smiling. "Hey," she said quietly.

Gabrielle turned her head very slowly, looking up. A small tear dropped from her shining green eyes. "Gods Xena," she breathed.

In a moment, the young woman was on her feet, arms surrounding her warrior. Xena gave in and held her partner close, once again surrounded by her scent, feeling her warmth. Gabrielle shifted slightly, and their lips joined in an easy, gentle kiss. Tears welled up in Xena's eyes and she let them fall, losing herself in the sweet caress of the bard's mouth on her own, the tension within her evaporating with every loving moment.

Finally, Gabrielle gently broke away, cupping her warrior's face, their heads still touching lightly as she brushed her thumbs under the brimming blue eyes. "Welcome back Xena," the bard whispered.

"Good to be back," Xena chuckled lightly. She sniffled. "It's been ... a rough few days, Gabrielle ... I..."

"It's OK Xena," her bard said softly. "You're here, with me. That's what's important. We'll talk about it when you're ready."

Xena pulled the smaller woman close again, burying her face in red-gold hair, feeling the warm weight against her body. "You'll have to be ... patient with me, Gabrielle," she sighed. "I'm kind of new at this. Constant danger and ... love ... I don't know if they go well together." She chuckled, felt tears forming again.

Gabrielle lifted her head, looking into her warrior's face. "We'll find a way, Xena. I promise. Hold onto me when you need to - I'm not going anywhere." Her thumbs once again traced under those blue eyes as she noted the deep, exhausted hollows there. The bard sniffled again and smiled. "But right now, you should get some rest - you look like Tartarus. How long has it been since you slept?"

Xena chuckled again. "Seems like forever ... but I'm not letting you go in there alone. Come on..."

"Xena," Gabrielle cut her off. "Yes you are. Things will go easier if you're not there - we talked this through, remember?"

"Gabrielle, if something goes wrong..."

"If something goes wrong, I want you in top form to rescue me," the bard chided. "Or at least as close to top form as you can get in the next couple of hours. Eat something, then sleep. Got it?"

"Yes ... boss," the warrior teased back, then pulled her bard close one last time. "Promise me something though, all right?"

"Anything," the smaller woman breathed.

"Come back to me Gabrielle..."

They held each other in silence for a moment, then the bard shifted and looked directly into Xena's blue eyes. "Always, my warrior ... always..."

* * *

Stophacles sat on a barrel resting his chin in his hand, looking at the burned out wrecks of the wagons. *Ah Klytus*, he thought, *what am I gonna do now?* The cages were mostly intact, but had warped under the heat, and in any case the wagons under them were a total loss. Worse, the chains and manacles which had been stored so neatly had been partially fused together and were, for the most part, useless. Twenty-two men had died in the attack and two dozen more were wounded, with an fair number of those not expected to last much longer.

Pollux had come back in a short time earlier, and was none too happy. He'd not only failed to track the Amazons but had lost nearly two-thirds of the men he'd taken with him. Stophacles hadn't bothered to ask how - it didn't really matter. Race had gotten his eye bandaged, and now he was livid with rage. He and Pollux had shut themselves up inside a tent and were still in the middle of a shouting match. Stophacles idly hoped they'd kill each other. *Solve a lot of problems*, he mused, then began to turn his thoughts to ways he could silently disappear from the face of the Earth.

He was broken out of his increasingly depressed reverie by his one remaining sergeant. "Sir," the man said, not even bothering to salute, "the whores have sent, uh, an envoy."

Stophacles turned a bleary eye towards him. "Say that again?"

"The whores, they've sent a, well - they want to talk to whoever is in charge," the sergeant stammered. "Four women, at least two are Amazons, under a flag of truce ... They say they're here to save our lives, whatever that means."

Stophacles scratched his ear. "Any of the mercenaries know they're here?"

"Can't say," the sergeant shrugged.

Stophacles sighed. "OK, have the ... envoy brought to my tent. Don't bother to tell Pollux and Race." *Probably find out soon enough anyway - let's see what this is about first.*

"Yes sir," the sergeant nodded, then walked off.

Stophacles hopped off the barrel, opened it and splashed some water on his face. Since he'd elected to stay out of the action last night, he was relatively free of grime and soot. He sighed, looking at his reflection in the water. *Ah Klytus, what am I gonna do?*

Yet, when he entered the tent followed by his sergeant, he almost laughed when he saw the women seated at the table. *What's this slip of a girl doing here?* he chuckled to himself. *And if I'm not mistaken, that's gotta be the lead whore ... this might not go so bad after all.* Still, he also recognized that the Amazon soldier and the whore guardian who stood behind them were armed, and the four of them seemed all business.

He put on his game face and sat down. "I'm Stophacles. I lead this camp. What in Tartarus do you have to say?"

The young woman narrowed her eyes. "I'm Gabrielle, Queen of the Amazons by Terreis' Right of Caste. This is Lilith, High Priestess of Inanna - and given the circumstances you *might* be more courteous."

"Charmed, I am sure," the Priestess smiled, leaning over the table to offer her hand.

Stophacles took it automatically. "Sorry," he said abruptly, suddenly feeling the need to apologize as the Priestess' eyes caught his own. "I had a rough night." He sat back, blinking. "So what *is* your business here?"

"Saving your life," Gabrielle said, coldly, and with no hint of actual concern that the slaver could make out. "I'm giving you this chance to give up trying to enslave Lilith and her followers. They are under my protection, as I'm sure you're aware by now. You've lost your cages, and with them the means to take anyone anywhere against their will - disperse your forces and leave."

"Like I told Xena last night, I can't," Stophacles replied, trying to sound calm, even bored. *She may be small, but sure as Helios rises, she's an Amazon.* "I have debts to the mercenaries I've hired, and obligations to the parties I was hired by. I've lost the wagons, but I'll deliver those whores if it means tying up every last one of them with their own clothing and taking them on a forced march."

Gabrielle laughed. "Good luck. Counting the scouts you stupidly surrounded Amazonia with, you began with a force of nearly two hundred. Now you're down to not even half that while we've suffered no losses at all. Lilith's followers are in a safe place, protected where you can't reach them, and my soldiers - who include Meleager the Mighty and Xena, Destroyer of Nations - can harass you as we please. Just look at the numbers, Stophacles. You're in a no-win situation here. Give up and go home while you can."

"And what's to stop me from just taking you and the whore both hostage?" he spat back. "Hades, I should just kill you both on the spot..."

"Because you'd spend the rest of your days running from Amazon justice," Gabrielle cut in. "If we don't return within the hour, my soldiers will send word to Amazonia, then hunt down every single one of you like the dogs you are. Every. Single. One," she said icily, spacing out the last three words and tapping the table for emphasis. "If you know anything about Amazon honor, you know they *would* find you, no matter how long it took or how deep a hole you crawl in. You'd gain nothing, and lose what little you still have left."

Stophacles gripped the arms of his chair, his color rising. He was on the brink of getting up and leaving when the Priestess leaned forward onto the table with an odd smile. Stophacles felt his gaze drawn irresistibly to the cleavage he was suddenly presented with.

"Perhaps," the Priestess said, in the smoothest tones the slaver had ever heard in his life, "I can offer some small solution." She slid a hand into the folds of her gown under her breasts and produced a small cloth bag. "If money is your greatest concern - your 'debts and obligations' as you put it - this may help." While the Amazon Queen glared at her, Lilith opened the bag, spilling a half dozen diamonds out on the table.

Stophacles' eyebrows shot up as he instantly quit looking at the woman's bust line and fastened on the gems. "Uhhh ... hmmm..." he muttered, trying to seem businesslike. "Let's see what we have here..." He picked one up and held it to the light. It was at least as big as the end of his thumb and as clear as he'd ever seen. *Hoo, that's a beauty,* he noted, his heart picking up a bit. *Could get ten, maybe fifteen thousand for it easy...*

He coughed. "Sorry, not enough," he said as nonchalantly as he could, "I'd need at least three times that just

to pay off the mercenaries - they didn't come cheap and they're pretty pissed off by now..."

"You're lucky to get that!" Gabrielle hissed, standing. "Come on Lilith - another day and the reinforcements arrive. Then I'll come back and *erase* his sorry ass and it won't cost you a dinar..."

"Amazon Queen," the Priestess said gently, "please ... I wish only no further loss of life. Stophacles," she smiled, turning back to the slaver, "I would give all I have to be left in peace, and to save you and your men from this Amazon's wrath." She reached out and covered his hands with her own. "Please, I have exactly six more gems such as these. It is all I have, but I will give it gladly. Be kind and spare me?"

Sounds like a good deal, Stophacles thought to himself. *Zeus, it's better than I could have hoped for ... and gods, what incredible eyes - she wouldn't lie to me now, would she?* He blinked again, sitting back and glancing at Gabrielle. "How do I know I can trust you?"

"You don't," the Queen snorted.

"Because I have no reason to lie," Lilith crooned. "There is a fork in the road to the west. I will leave the gems in a bag under a rock on the southern side of the road. Wait half a day, then retrieve them at your leisure. If they are not there, you may resume whatever plan you think best. Is this acceptable?"

Stophacles nodded slowly. "Guess it'll do." He swept the diamonds back into the bag and tucked it into his gauntlet. "Consider it a deal," he said rising. "You're free to go."

That earned him a last icy glare from the Amazon Queen. "Let's move Solari," she grunted. "The smell of this place is making me heave."

The slaver accompanied them to the newly-repaired front gate, then waved to Lilith as the four women walked off through the woods. *Stophacles, this has been your lucky day after all.*

* * *

As soon as they were safely out of earshot of the slaver camp, Gabrielle started giggling almost uncontrollably. "*Oh, be kind and spare me*'," she mocked. "Puh-leeze! Laying it on pretty thick weren't you?"

Lilith chuckled. "And what was that phrase? 'Erase his sorry ass'? Colorful, young one, I will give you that."

Gabrielle rolled her eyes. "Well, everything I learned about intimidation, I learned from Xena. Guess it works..." She sobered a little. "So, did he buy it?"

Lilith nodded thoughtfully. "I believe so. His greed was plain, as was his fear at the mention of further attack. There was some deception there, well hidden, but not, I think, directed at us."

Solari gave a loud snort. "He's probably going to try and pull something on the mercenaries."

Gabrielle sighed, nodding. "Let's hope ... Agh!"

"What is it, young one?" Lilith asked.

The bard shook her head. "I was going to say let's hope he can deal with them better than he dealt with us, but that's stupid isn't it?" She pursed her lips. "I should hope they squabble like children and kill each other off ... that's an awful thing to think though, right?"

The Priestess smiled and snaked an arm around Gabrielle's waist as they continued walking. "I think the best course here, Gabrielle, is to think nothing," she suggested. "We have done what we can to protect ourselves. They will do as they will, and who is to say what that will be? The best we can hope is that they will leave us in peace, even as we guard against the possibility they will not."

Gabrielle shrugged. "I guess."

Solari snorted again. "Well, if it's all the same to you, *I'm* going to hope they slaughter each other." She chuckled. "If nothing else, it'd give me time to enjoy one last massage before we leave Kesan."

The bard shot her a look of playful annoyance. "Solari, you are incorrigible."

The Amazon laughed. "I take it as it comes, my Queen ... I take it as it comes..."

* * *

Just before mid-day, Stophacles was in his tent, celebrating with his second mug of ale when Pollux and Race burst through the front flaps. "My men tell me," Pollux growled, "that you had a visit from the Amazon Queen and whoever is leading that gang of whores."

"Yes, and..." the slaver began to reply.

"So why didn't you come get us?" Race hissed, looking even more intimidating than usual with a rude, blood-stained bandage over his missing eye.

Stophacles made himself breathe evenly. *Don't give an inch, but take this one really, really slow.*

"Because you two were ... occupied. I was under the impression that breaking in during that argument would be bad for my health. In any case, this is still my operation. What business is it if yours?"

"If you sell us out, slaver," Pollux said, voice low with menace, "that would *make* it our business."

Stophacles sighed. "In fact, quite the opposite." He set his mug down, did a little math in his head, then hoped he was right about trusting the Priestess. "I've decided," he announced, "that this is no longer a profit-making exercise. I'm shutting it down. We can all move on."

The two mercenaries looked at each other briefly. "You'd better have something more than that," Race growled. "We've lost a lot of men..."

"So have I!" Stophacles spat. "And no thanks to you two, I might add. I hired you because you said you could handle Meleager and the Amazons. Now I've lost men, equipment, my partner, and probably my reputation. It's a *wash!*"

"Centaur crap!" Pollux shot back. "You never told us about Xena! Gods, if I'd known that woman was

leading an army again..."

"An unfortunate development I couldn't have foreseen," Stophacles said simply, sitting back and folding his arms. "If I had, I wouldn't be here either. I'm just thankful she didn't come to 'negotiate' herself - likely I wouldn't be speaking to you now."

"If she had, I would have cut her heart out!" Race scowled. "Bitch took my eye!"

Pollux put a hand on his partner's shoulder. "What, exactly, did they negotiate?"

"Nothing," Stophacles shrugged. "Their Queen simply pointed out our losses were staggering and theirs were nonexistent. They also mentioned the whores were holed up somewhere safe, and they had reinforcements coming. Considering we've lost the wagons and have no means of transporting that many slaves - and given you two can't seem to protect me - I gave in."

"You miserable coward!" Race spat.

Stophacles shrugged again. "I'm a businessman, not a soldier. I'm cutting my losses. It's over," he said simply, then gave an exaggerated sigh. "Here..." He reached into his gauntlet and pulled out the bag, then tossed it towards Pollux. "Take these and the extra horses. Consider us paid in full. Now get out of my tent. I've got a lot of drinking to do ... and send in my sergeant."

The two mercenaries looked over the diamonds, then looked at each other. "OK Stophacles," Pollux said coldly, "we leave at dawn. But if I ever see you again, you are a dead man."

The slaver dismissed them with a wave of his hand as he hefted his mug again. "You and half of Greece," he muttered.

Outside the tent, Race turned to his partner. "What do you think?"

"Assuming he told us roughly the truth?" Pollux replied. "Doesn't make sense. If you were the Warrior Princess, or even an Amazon Queen and had reinforcements coming, why drop in and tell that to your enemy? They've already worn us down, why not step in for the kill?"

"Hmmm..." Race mused. "Holed up someplace safe' ... Where could that be?"

"Have to be somewhere close - a day, day and a half's ride at most," Pollux said thoughtfully. "Gotta be a walled city. I don't think there are any caves large enough nearby."

"I think Meleager was captain of the guard at Kesan once," Race offered. "If you rode without stopping, that's about a day and a half south."

"Then that's it." Pollux scanned the sky. "Unfortunately, that's one iron egg we won't crack, not with the number of men we have left."

"Agreed," Race replied, resisting the urge to scratch at his empty eye socket. "We should head west in the morning. With luck we can cut them off when they start moving again. What do we do with the whores?"

Pollux pursed his lips thoughtfully, then shrugged. "Who cares? We're soldiers, not slavers - killing unarmed

women doesn't bring any glory. I say we have some fun and then just leave 'em." He chuckled coldly, then resumed his usual snarl. "Slaughtering an Amazon army led by Xena and Meleager," he grinned, "now *that's* an accomplishment. We don't have the slavers and their stupid wagons to slow us down anymore, and with the extra horses we can move fast and strike hard. That's a victory we can be proud of ... I'm not about to lose *my* reputation."

"Agreed."

Stophacles sipped his ale until the sergeant arrived. It suddenly occurred to the slaver he couldn't remember the man's name, and wasn't even sure he'd ever learned it. *Oh well ...* "Sergeant, come here," he said, standing and motioning the man over.

"Yes sir?" the soldier responded wearily.

"Do you, um, remember where that whore said she'd leave the diamonds?" Stophacles took a step closer. *Hmmm ... he's kind of young ... must be one of Klytus'.*

The sergeant grinned. "Of course sir - western road, under a rock south of the fork. Why? Did you forget?"

"Nah," Stophacles chuckled, moving closer and placing a hand on the younger man's shoulder. "Just checking to see if you did. You've ... you've been a pretty good man, son."

"Thank you sir," he replied, still smiling.

"I just wanted to say ... sorry." With that, the slaver clamped his left hand over the sergeant's mouth while his right drove a dagger up under the young man's sternum. The sergeant collapsed backward and Stophacles followed, keeping his hand firmly in place while he swiveled the knife around. The young man kicked and shuddered a few times, then went still.

The slaver knelt back with a sigh. "Sorry, but you're just not part of my retirement plan." He withdrew his dagger, wiped it off, then threw a bedroll over the body. In minutes he had changed out of his armor and into less conspicuous peasant clothes. He took one last swig of ale, a final look around his tent, then shouldered the small pack he'd made up earlier. With that, he slipped out the back of the tent, his mind once again turning to ways he could disappear off the face of the Earth.

Chapter Eight

The bard sat astride Argo, in front for once, actually holding the reins while Xena sat behind. The warrior had one hand on Gabrielle's shoulder while the other held on around the smaller woman's bare midriff. "Finally," Gabrielle sighed, barely staying conscious as the walls came into view, "Kesan."

As it had turned out, of course, Xena had quite deliberately disobeyed the bard's orders that the warrior get some sleep. The negotiating party had run into the tall, armored woman within a few hundred yards of the slaver's camp, where she and Meleager had been anxiously keeping an eye on things. At first Gabrielle had been angry, then threw up her hands. "Warriors! What else could I expect?" she had said with exaggerated exasperation.

The raiding party had broken camp quickly and headed back for the city at an only slightly less demanding

pace than they had left it. They were far too tired to put up much resistance if the slavers and mercenaries decided to renege on the deal, and the sooner they could reach the safety of Kesan, the better, so they pushed on.

Everyone had taken turns sleeping as best they could in the now empty wagon. While Meleager had dozed, Lilith had surreptitiously switched clothing with Morgin and taken over all the scouting duty, since the immortal needed no rest whatsoever - a duty she assumed with an odd mix of gravity and undisguised glee. Gabrielle watched this with a bard's eye. *Immortals ... who can figure 'em?* she mentally snorted, too tired to reach any other conclusion.

Then Gabrielle had discovered that Xena somehow managed to sleep in the saddle. "Let me guess," the bard chided after waking the warrior the first time she noticed, "one of your many skills?"

"Oh yeah," her warrior had replied with an exhausted smile. That was when Gabrielle had suggested a slightly different riding arrangement so Xena could sleep a little more soundly. The bard hadn't been much less tired herself, but the sensation of her warrior pressed so tight against her, not to mention partially wrapped around her, was enough to keep her fully alert - even if it did put some strain on her meager riding skills.

Likely have that armor imprinted on my back for a week, she had mused, *but by Artemis, it's worth it.*

For her part, Xena had allowed the bard to climb up in front because - in a rare moment of extreme self-honesty - the warrior realized that if her loyal mount kept moving, she was likely to fall out of the saddle. With her arms around her bard however, the hours seemed to glide by on a lazy current of warmth.

Every so often Gabrielle would caress the forearm which held her waist, or in Xena's more awake, upright moments, lean her strawberry-blond head back against the warrior's shoulder. It was simple, physical closeness, and within it, the terrible darkness Xena had been immersed in for the last several days seemed far, far away. *Always comes back to this, doesn't it?* The warrior thought. *I feel like I'm slipping over the edge for good, and she always brings me back. Doesn't even know she's doing it. Gods, I can't believe I need her this much ... can't believe she gives herself to me this much.*

Just past mid-day the band of thoroughly exhausted soldiers (plus one immortal - and the body of one all-too-mortal Amazon scout) reached the inn. They were immediately surrounded by the remaining Guardians and the rest of Lilith's followers, and after a brief minute of cheers and congratulations, many found themselves practically carried to their rooms.

Xena took a moment to make sure Argo was being looked after, while Gabrielle addressed the Amazons. "Tomorrow afternoon," the bard said solemnly, "we'll have a pyre for Tanith - full honors, as she deserves. Her ashes will be returned to the Amazon nation as a hero should. Artemis bless our sister and guide her to the peace of Eternity."

"To Eternity," the Amazons intoned, Adrea finally breaking down into shuddering sobs. A number of Amazons immediately surrounded her, holding her and offering words of comfort.

Gabrielle began to step forward, but Solari put a hand on the bard's arm. "It's OK, my Queen," she said gently. "I'll look after her. You look after Xena ... She's been going for what? At least five days now? And you not much less. Look after each other, you both deserve it - although why I'm the last to find out about these things..." She let her voice trail off with a smile.

"Thank you Solari," Gabrielle smiled back, too tired to even blush. "See you tomorrow."

The bard took the stairs as quickly as she could - which, in truth, wasn't very fast. Having been awake for the better part of three days she was bone-weary as she could ever remember being, and her limbs were starting to refuse to work right. Eventually she reached the top of the stairs and entered their room, finding Xena sitting on one of the chairs, fumbling with the shoulder strap of her armor. Without a word Gabrielle took over, although with only slightly better success.

"Thanks ... I think," the warrior chuckled. It took much longer than usual, but before long Xena's armor, leathers and breeches were piled in a rough heap on the floor.

Gabrielle knelt in front of the warrior, running her hands over the bandages around Xena's ribs. "Should ... should probably re-wrap these..." she muttered, having trouble focusing as her eyelids drooped.

"Nah," Xena grunted, idly running a hand down Gabrielle's face. "They've held up 'til now. They can hold up a little longer. Sleep..."

"Yeah," Gabrielle mumbled, slowly standing and holding out her arm. "C'mon..."

Together they shuffled towards the bed, although who exactly was supporting the other was impossible to tell. They fell across it, a tangle of limbs, and for a moment they both just lay there.

"Boots," the warrior mumbled.

"Huhmmm?" Gabrielle snorted.

Xena laughed. "We're both still wearin' boots..."

"Right, right..." the bard grunted, practically falling to the floor. She fell over a couple more times, but finally managed to remove the warrior's offending footwear. Xena hauled the bard back up onto the bed, then with a little fumbling, got the laces of Gabrielle's boots loose enough to yank them off.

They lay there for a moment more, then Xena raised her head with a dreamy smile. "Heyyy..." she grumbled, "You got clothes on ... I'm naked ... gorgeous when you're naked..."

Eyes still closed, Gabrielle smiled, stretched her arms above her head. "Gofr'it..."

Although by now her hands didn't seem to work any better than her partner's, Xena somehow managed to get the laces of the bard's top undone, then the belt of her skirt. Fortunately, Gabrielle was still conscious enough to lift her body at the right moments for Xena to work the garments off. One after the other, the bard's top, skirt, and finally, breeches were flung clean across the room.

"Better..." The warrior mumbled, pulling her bard over on top of her until Gabrielle was curled up nicely right where they both liked it, red-gold head pillowed on Xena's shoulder, one leg up over Xena's hip.

"Blankits?" Gabrielle mumbled.

"Tartarus with 'em..." Xena grunted.

In an instant, both warrior and bard were in a deep sleep that would last almost twenty-four hours.

* * *

Xena awoke with a start, heart pounding, her still-dreaming mind chasing some barely remembered phantom - something ringed with blood and fire. Two things instantly calmed her: The sunlight that streamed through the open window was one, although, she had to admit, that was secondary.

The warm weight of Gabrielle covered her like a blanket for her shivering soul, and the warrior gratefully closed her eyes again. It was so good, so right, nestled together like this, that Xena simply wished it would never end. Within her gentle bard's embrace, she felt loved, connected, and so ... so...

Admit it. Safe. Xena sighed, then chuckled to herself. *The Destroyer of Nations...* But it was true. Gabrielle made her feel many things, but the one that affected her deepest was that within the love her bard offered so freely, she felt safe. Safe from her own dark past. Safe from the hatred and mistrust her past insured would follow her to the end of her days. Safe from her own anger. Safe from her own self-conjured demons.

She held the sleeping woman in her arms a little tighter. *Gabrielle...* For years Xena the warlord had fought to prove she was outside the rest of humanity. The warlord could never be touched, had proven time and again she could take anything the world threw at her and laugh at it.

Until one day a simple village girl, a trusting, patient, and infinitely understanding young soul had found the chinks in the armor, cheerfully let herself inside, and against all odds, decided she liked what she saw. And every day, in ways both important and inconsequential, she had drawn the warlord out and shown her that it was all right to just be human, after all. *Aw, come on Xena ... enough of this. She's easy on the eyes too. That doesn't hurt either.*

Yet even with her eyes still closed, the warrior reveled in the warm feeling of bare skin on bare skin, in the trust and caring that surrounded the simple act of drifting off together, naked and close. *Like I said, I could sure get used to waking up this way ... could do without the nightmares though.*

Xena sighed. The warrior couldn't remember the last time she'd been forced awake by something from her past haunting her sleep. *Why'd it have to happen now?* Then she gave a wry mental snort. *Simple, dumb warrior - you've been killing people for the last week. What did you expect?*

She opened her eyes again and looked down at Gabrielle's open, sleeping face, wondering for the millionth time why such a gentle, innocent soul would choose to share her life, and her heart, with a woman who had laid waste to whole nations. *And who still gets a thrill from killing,* the warrior ruefully acknowledged. *Wasn't like you were lying when you said it was fun.*

Xena was broken out of her self-recrimination as the young woman laying over her slowly began to stir, then raised her strawberry-blond head slightly and broke into a dreamy, wonderful smile. "Mornin'..." she mumbled.

The warrior chuckled. "Afternoon is more like it."

"Whatever..." Gabrielle replied sleepily.

With the bard's face against her shoulder, the warrior could feel Gabrielle's smile spreading just before the young woman kissed the side of Xena's breast - which, the taller woman noted in all fairness, was the closest thing to her lips. *Handy, or deliberate?* Xena tried to decide.

The bard's smile grew wider as Gabrielle said softly, "I like waking up like this though ... whatever time it is. You're a nice pillow." Then she snuggled closer, if that was possible, her hand idly running over Xena's rippled stomach, the smooth curve of her hip.

"Mmm..." the warrior purred. "I was just thinking the same thing..." Gabrielle's slow caress was beginning to warm her in other ways that didn't exactly have to do with her soul. She could still feel the tingling hint of where the young woman's lips had pressed into her breast, and noted how with their legs twined together Gabrielle's sex was just touching her own thigh, wiry hair and warm, intimate flesh barely tickling, definitely tantalizing. *I wonder if she knows what she's doing to me? Probably not*, Xena mused, trying to ignore her rising desire.

"Ribs still bothering you?" Gabrielle asked, running her fingers over the bandages ... and somehow managing to run feather-light across the underside of Xena's breasts at the same time.

The warrior squirmed a bit, then tried to mask it as an experimental stretch. *The ribs ... oh yeah ... hardly notice 'em ... no problem there...* "Uh, no, not really. Just the one that was broken, and it feels fine. I feel fine ... guess I just needed to lie still for a while."

"So they're healing OK then?" The bard continued caressing the almost loose strips of cloth - the tips of her thumb and forefinger still just brushing within a spare inch of slowly hardening nipples.

"Yeah ... healing fine." *Then again, maybe she does know what she's doing ... Either way, I'm in trouble.* Xena caught the young woman's roving hand and gave it a light squeeze. "So, are you, um ... hungry?"

The bard raised her head, green eyes meeting blue. "Oh yeah," Gabrielle replied, with just the hint of an impish smile. In an instant she smothered Xena's mouth with her own, giving her warrior a quick, if hard and very wet kiss, then slid off the bed. "But maybe we should get some food first." *Oooh bad! Bad bard!*

Gabrielle took two steps across the room. *Oh gods, where in Tartarus are my clothes!* the small woman thought in desperation, realizing she hadn't thought this thing through very well.

Sure enough, a spare second later strong arms gripped her around the waist, lifting her off the floor as she squealed. Before she even knew what was happening, she was being spun and jostled, then hurled through the air, landing with a loud "Ooomph!" back on the bed. Before Gabrielle could even take in what was happening, Xena had covered her entire body, pinning the smaller woman to the mattress. It seemed like not a inch of her bare flesh wasn't covered by the tantalizingly warm skin of her warrior.

Xena's face was hovering just inches from Gabrielle's, fixing the bard with a look that could only be described as lovingly predatory. "I should take you over my knee and give you a good spanking," she growled playfully, "teach you a lesson about teasing high-strung warriors."

"Promises, promises," Gabrielle gasped, looking as defiant as she possibly could. "Any other lessons you got in mind?"

Xena raised a genuinely surprised eyebrow. "Oh yeah," she growled again, pressing her mouth hungrily back down over Gabrielle's. Their lips crushed against each other almost painfully, and when the young bard parted hers, Xena pushed her tongue between them, running it sensually across Gabrielle's front teeth, then all around inside the young woman's willing mouth briefly before pulling away with a wet, sucking sound.

Then Xena was sitting on the edge of the bed, inhaling lightly before saying, with surprising calm, "But maybe we should get some food first."

Gabrielle pressed her fists into her forehead and gave a loud groan. "Ahhh gods! Guess I deserved that..."

"Nah," Xena chuckled, reaching down and gently stroking her bard's taught belly, "but maybe we should think about getting up, at least for a little while -"

"Merciful Artemis!" Gabrielle gasped, sitting upright. "Tanith's funeral! Ahhh, you're right. What was I thinking?"

Xena blinked. The warrior's main thought had been about a nice, sensual bath, maybe a brief talk to work through any anxiety her young, soon-to-be lover might have about, well, her first time with another woman - *'cause we never did get to talk about that* - then straight back to bed. Any other obligations had been miles away.

Gods, what was I thinking? Xena shook her head, then mentally shrugged, imposing some measure of control over her growing desire. Finally, she smiled and stood, holding out her hand. "Come on, oh Queen," she said, with a husky edge she couldn't help, "let's go. I'll make it up to you later."

"Reeeally?" Gabrielle replied, her tone just as sultry.

"Oh yeah," the warrior practically growled, hauling the smaller woman to her feet.

The bath which followed was something of a sweet torture for both of them.

* * *

Although Gabrielle had asked Thesocles if they could use the area outside Kesan's cemetery for the funeral, he graciously insisted it take place in one of the city's gardens. There was a short discussion among the Amazons about this, and eventually it was decided to build the pyre within Kesan's least-cultivated area, where the trees were old and tall. Dressed out in her full Amazon garb, Gabrielle gave a short benediction, and together the Amazons and the five Guardians who wished to be Amazons sang the last rites for their sister, lost in battle.

Gabrielle stood next to Xena as the flames were lit. Seeing the tightly controlled expression on her warrior's face, the bard leaned over. "Hey," she said quietly, "You OK?"

Xena gave a wry half smile. "I'm all right. Just can't shake the feeling this won't be the only funeral on this trip."

"Something you're not telling the rest of us?" the bard asked.

The warrior stared at the pyre. "I don't think Pollux is just going to walk away," she said gravely. "We hurt him, and he's a professional. He won't take it lying down, and Race will likely follow him. They'll want revenge..." Xena paused. "That's how I would've felt anyway. I don't think this is over yet." *Plus you took an eye ... That probably wasn't smart. Now it's personal.*

Gabrielle thought for a moment. "So why did you let Lilith pay them off?"

Xena shrugged. "It got rid of the slavers. She was right, they just wanted money. Stophacles and his men are gone. That ... wasn't ideal, but it worked. Now it's just wounded mercenaries. By the numbers we're about even, maybe even have the advantage - and I know how mercenaries think."

Gabrielle slid her arm around Xena's waist. "We should have a meeting about this."

The warrior put an arm around her bard's shoulders and pulled her close. "Yes we should, but tomorrow ... late. We're all still pretty tired. Another day or two here won't make any difference in the end. Let them rest."

The young Amazon Queen turned away, solemnly watching the pyre, but keeping her arm in place. "So then, any plans for the next couple of days?" she asked innocently.

"A few," the warrior replied evenly.

"Such as?"

"Have to get this armor repaired, first off," Xena said matter-of-factly. "Look at it ... the breastplate is a wreck. Argo's tack is looking pretty bad too..."

"OK. I give," Gabrielle said, pouting. "Xena, do any of your plans actually include me?"

The warrior tried to raise an eyebrow, then gave in and just smiled. "Actually, I think most of them. Is that all right?"

Gabrielle pressed the side of her head against Xena's shoulder. "Merciful Artemis ... Xena, you have no idea how 'all right'. I've been wishing for this for so long..."

"Gods Gabrielle," the warrior breathed back. "You're ... you're all I think about..."

Solari cleared her throat. "Queen Gabrielle?"

"Of course," the bard replied, breaking away from her warrior and pulling herself up regally before stepping forward. "Sister Amazons, Tanith was a scout and warrior to whom we all owe a great debt..."

Gabrielle recounted Tanith's deeds, not shying away from the scout's killing of the two slavers a few days earlier, casting it in light of the woman's concern for the caravan she was charged with protecting. With the bard's skill, Tanith's heroism would be remembered by the Amazon nation, worthy of a place in their history.

Her speech finished, Gabrielle returned to sit next to Xena, warmly taking the warrior's hand in her own. At length, the pyre burned down, and the Amazons left two and three at a time towards the funeral tent, which housed food and wine in the Amazon tradition of making a party out of any occasion.

"Come on Warrior Stoic," Gabrielle urged, standing. "Eat drink and be merry, and all that stuff."

Xena raised her eyebrow. "Quit quoting the classics," the raven-haired woman warned.

"You could learn a lot from the classics," Gabrielle replied.

The warrior raised her eyebrow even further. "Didn't know you were that ... hedonistic."

Gabrielle sobered suddenly, looking thoughtful. "Xena, The Amazons are here because I asked them to be here. Now one of them is dead ... If we can give that death meaning -"

"Stop," the warrior replied, more forcefully than she intended, rising to her feet and taking Gabrielle's shoulders in her hands. "Don't you dare blame yourself. It was my plan -"

"Which I agreed to," Gabrielle insisted, cupping Xena's elbows. "And don't you dare blame yourself either. Blame the mercenaries, blame those damn slavers ... They're the ones responsible, not any of us. Tanith was killed protecting a belief, a way of life. She knew the risks and she volunteered anyway. If tomorrow it's me or you or Solari or Meleager, it's by the whim of the Fates. People fight, and sometimes they die, but it's *what* they fight for that counts, makes them heroes. Don't you *know* that by now?"

Xena smiled again. "Yeah," she said, "I guess I do ... You remind me of it often enough."

"Come on, warrior mine," Gabrielle smiled back warmly, turning to wrap an arm around Xena's waist. "Tanith would want us to celebrate that she lived, not dwell on our sorrow that she died. I prescribe a little song, a little dance ... and a lot of romance."

"Sounds like a good plan," the warrior replied, settling her arm over the bard's shoulders.

The tent itself was just a shelter for the tables of food, wine, and ale. Most of the group were gathered around a series of small fires, amusing themselves with conversation to begin with, then some of Lilith's followers began to play music, and a number of women started to dance. Adrea had begun the afternoon surrounded by a small group of Amazons, but at some point they all drifted away, leaving her alone with Dulith. The blonde guardian held the scout's head against her shoulder, and they talked quietly.

Gabrielle nudged Solari, nodding in the couple's direction. "When did that happen?"

"You got me," the Amazon replied, slowly shaking her head. "Rumor has it blondie there had a big, fat crush on Juna while they were in Amazonia. Juna didn't say much about it of course, but I'd bet my left tit it was mutual. Hope this doesn't mean trouble when we get back."

Gabrielle rolled her eyes. "Well, Juna wouldn't be the first strong, silent type to miss out because she was too stubborn to - Ow!" The bard swung around to fasten an accusing stare on Xena, who had both hands around a pheasant leg and was innocently munching.

The warrior raised an eyebrow. "Something bite you, oh bard of mine?"

Gabrielle narrowed her eyes, pursed her lips, then just shrugged with a light chuckle. "OK, I guess a few strong, silent types get lucky."

Xena licked her lips, then tossed the pheasant bone into the fire with a smile. "Hold that thought ... been a while since I got lucky."

Gabrielle turned five different shades of red in rapid succession. She opened her mouth briefly, then closed it and looked away with a stifled groan. Xena continued to smile warmly, shaking her head, then stood. "Come on my speechless bard," she said warmly, holding out her hand. "Dance with me."

"Oh, Xena, no," Gabrielle stammered. "You know I ... uh ... I mean, I was born with two feet but they're both left ones..."

"Hey," the warrior teased, "what happened to 'a little song, a little dance'?"

"That was ... poetic license," the bard replied, a note of desperation in her voice. "Besides, Solari and I have some, uh, gossip to catch up on."

"Actually," the Amazon said, standing and trying unsuccessfully to suppress a smile. "I gotta go. Have a date with the innkeeper's son."

"Solari!" Gabrielle practically shouted. "He can't be more than *seventeen*. Isn't he a little young?"

"Oh yeah," Solari grinned. "Big for his age though. Just the way I like 'em ... Don't always know what they're doing, but they can do it a *lot*." She winked.

Gabrielle buried her face in her hands and made a sound like a dying woman. Just then, one song ended and another began, this one much slower than the last. Xena grabbed the smaller woman's upper arm and hauled her bodily to her feet. "Gabrielle," the warrior said with mock sternness, "there comes a time when we have to face our fears. This is one of them." Then, more gently, she added, "Please?"

The bard finally looked into her warrior's eyes, caught the seriousness beneath the teasing. "This means a lot to you, doesn't it?" Gabrielle asked.

"Yeah," Xena admitted quietly. "It's not something I've ... had a chance to do very often. Not for a long time. And I want to, with you ... very much."

Gabrielle felt like she was melting. She touched the back of her hand to Xena's cheek. "How can I say no?"

Solari shook her head, but her grin was from ear to ear. "Take care you two. See you tomorrow."

Xena wrapped an arm around Gabrielle's shoulders, the bard snuggling close. "See you Solari," the warrior said, leading the smaller woman away. "And good luck."

The Amazon nodded. "You too," she mouthed silently, then strode off.

The area in front of the musicians was scattered with couples, mostly Amazons and Lilith's followers, although there seemed to be more than a few folk from Kesan, and Lilith herself was wrapped around Meleager at the edge of the crowd, the two of them slowly spiraling towards the center. The sun was just beginning to set, the trees throwing long shadows. Light from surrounding torches and campfires glowed around the dancers, soft and warm, and the delicate scent of incense hung in the air.

Xena smoothly led Gabrielle to a spot right in the middle of everything. The tall warrior lovingly embraced her bard, heedless who might look or care - noting, strangely, that no one really seemed to. With a surreptitious glance around, Xena smiled, then simply relaxed. With Gabrielle holding her, everything was right, and good, and wonderful ... why would it be anything else? *I love you Gabrielle.*

Together, they parted slightly, Xena settling her hands on the smaller woman's hips even as she felt Gabrielle's settle on her shoulders, fingers edging under the armor. The raven haired woman began carefully moving them both, slowly at first, in time with the sensual rhythm of the music. Gabrielle was a little self-conscious, but for all her insistence on her inability, she had little trouble following the simple steps, and soon gave herself over to the wonder of it all, pulling her warrior in, losing herself in the dance.

This is ... nice, Gabrielle thought. *Just the two of us ... moving ... together...Nice.*

A delicious warmth began spreading through Gabrielle, holding this woman she loved so close as they danced, running her hands slowly over her warrior's body, feeling callused hands running over her own. She recognized her growing arousal for what it was, but it was somehow different from what she was used to when she was alone, or even during her single night with Perdicas, lacking the urgency she usually associated with it. This desire was simple, slow, and sweet ... *like a warm stretch in the sun.*

Xena was breathing in her ear. "You know," the warrior purred, sending a tiny shiver through her small partner, "I really love you in that Amazon outfit..."

"Oh you do huh?" the bard breathed back, nuzzling her warrior's neck, then suckling along it gently.

"Uh-huh," Xena groaned, loving the gentle fire her bard's lips were igniting within her. It felt like falling. *Gods, I love you Gabrielle...* She leaned her head forward, flitting her tongue across the smaller woman's ear.

"Mmm..." Gabrielle felt lost, her power to put words into sentences slipping away. They moved together, to the music. Just her warrior and herself ... moving ... together ... *Nice ... Words into action. I do words, she does action ... Gods how I love her...how I want her...*

Gabrielle bit her lip. She looked up until she was sure she caught her warrior's eyes. "Make love to me Xena," she said, slightly breathless, melting again at the warm expression of love and desire, so clear on her warrior's exquisitely beautiful face. "I've wanted you ... for so long ... I love you Xena ... I want to make love to you..." She stopped herself from rambling, then tried to stifle the slight tremble that passed through her as she spoke. "Let's go, back to the inn..."

Xena's smile grew even warmer, if that were possible. She nodded, taking Gabrielle's hand in her own, lovingly kissing the inside of her bard's wrist. "I've made, um, other arrangements."

The bard looked into her warrior's eyes. "How's that?" she stumbled, her skin where the warrior had kissed it tingling, trembling. Her mind was having trouble with even the simplest of words.

Xena leaned her head down and kissed the smaller woman lightly on the lips. "Come on," she said, softly. "Let's go."

Hand in hand, the two women silently left the party, Xena leading them away from the town and towards the castle. There was an air of delicious tension between them, but also a strange sense of peace, an easy warmth they both felt just as clearly as their mutual desire, and although Gabrielle was curious about where they were

going, she felt no need to ask, or even say a word. They entered the castle through the main gates, crossed the courtyard, then the warrior led them through a side entrance where they climbed a series of steps, finally coming to a halt in front of a set of large, oak double doors.

With a sly grin, Xena scooped up Gabrielle so the smaller woman was curled up in her strong arms, then kicked out with one booted foot, flinging the doors wide. The bard giggled and pretended to swoon as her warrior carried her across the threshold.

"Well," Gabrielle said finally, looking around, still carried in Xena's arms, "it's definitely bigger than the room at the inn, but why?"

"More private," the warrior explained. Then she turned slightly, so the smaller woman was facing further in, and added, warmer, but with a slightly embarrassed edge, "And ... the inn had no rooms with a fire."

The bard noticed the nice little blaze which crackled in the large fireplace across from the bed, and felt like she was falling in love all over again. "Oh ... Xena..." she breathed, hugging her warrior close.

Never losing Gabrielle's embrace, Xena gently set her partner back on her feet, holding her close for a timeless moment, breathing in the scent of her hair, running her hands over Amazon leather and warm skin, trying to imprint every sensation in her memory. So many of Xena's experiences had been purely physical, driven mostly by lust. Lust she understood, knew how to control, but even that had rarely been her own. Giving in to the more intimately emotional side of things wasn't something that happened to her very often, and letting herself be that vulnerable was in many ways uncertain ground.

But with the young woman in her arms now, she would risk anything. "I love you Gabrielle," she whispered softly.

"I love you Xena," the bard answered, biting her lip to keep from crying.

For a time they simply held each other. Gabrielle felt so filled with so many different things it took her a moment to sort them, but as her heart stopped pounding and she began to feel slightly less overwhelmed, her desire began to grow again.

"Xena," she whispered at length, "could we, um, lose the armor?"

"Good plan," the taller woman chuckled. Blue eyes looked down into green. "Do you want to help, or..."

Gabrielle looked thoughtful. *That would be something familiar ... assuming I can keep my hands from trembling.* "Yeah, I would. Come on."

Taking her warrior's hand, the bard led her partner over to the furs and cushions in front of the fire, urging her to sit, then began removing the armor with practiced ease. *This was a good idea*, the young woman mused, feeling some of her anxiety lift. Her relative inexperience had been quietly preying at the corners of her mind ever since she'd found the courage to ask Xena to leave the party. Carefully casual talks with her Amazon sisters over the last few days and her own imagination gave her a general idea of how things might go - and she figured Xena would take the lead anyway - but she still harbored a tinge of fear that she might be a disappointment.

This was a big step - a really big step. Xena was so much more experienced, had even had a god or two that

she knew of. How could a village girl possibly compare?

But one look in Xena's eyes as she undid the clasps banished all her doubts. *By all the gods, she wants me too. Lilith was right - every time is like the first time. I love you Xena, love you more than life, and I'll do everything I can to show you I love you ... you deserve to be loved.*

Once the brasswork had been neatly set at the foot of the bed, Gabrielle paused briefly to slip the feathers and other ornaments from off her own Amazon garb, then stood and gathered the crystal flask of wine and pair of goblets from the table. Settling down next to her warrior, she poured the wine and offered one to the taller woman, then they snuggled close.

"So," Gabrielle began, still a little breathless, "what happens now?"

Xena looked thoughtful. "Do you want to ... talk about it?"

The bard pondered this for a moment, then looked into those incredible blue eyes. *Believe it or not, that's the last thing I want right now.* Her heart pounding in her ears, Gabrielle replied, "I'd rather you just kissed me."

Xena smiled and slid her arm around the smaller woman. The warrior took a sip of wine, then set her goblet aside and leaned forward, pressing her lips to Gabrielle's, letting the wine flow into her lover's mouth before gently slipping her tongue in after it, the strong tang of the wine mixing with the warm sweetness that was just Gabrielle.

The bard's hands ran through raven hair and she pulled Xena closer, pushing her tongue past the warrior's lips in a slow exploration of her own. She swallowed the wine, which went straight to her head and fueled her desire, sucking on her warrior's tongue, hardly believing anything could be so sensual. It seemed like her whole mouth was alive with tingling nerves she hadn't ever guessed were there, and her whole body responded - even the roots of her hair seemed to move.

With a last sliding contact, Xena slipped her tongue from her lover's mouth, sucking on the bard's lower lip. Gabrielle gasped and fell away, laying back on the cushions, breathless. The taller woman caught her own breath and smiled, licking away the drops of wine that had spilled down her lover's chin.

"Gods," Gabrielle gasped, "gotta watch what I ask for ... where did you learn that?"

"Mmm, I have -"

"Many skills ... yeah, yeah ... hoo..." The bard took a few moments, mostly spent remembering how to breathe properly as she caressed her warrior's face. As the blood rushing in her ears subsided, she broke into a grin. "Well, now, warrior mine," she purred, "I have a few skills too."

"Do tell."

"Yup," the bard growled. She raised herself up, pushing the other woman over onto her back, then lowered her lips to Xena's neck where it met her shoulder. She slowly nibbled along Xena's collarbone, pulling aside the shoulder strap of the warrior's leathers, caressing with her lips and tongue as she went, then began working back. The intimate contact she had dreamt of for so long was hers to enjoy, and the young woman reveled in it, fastening on Xena's throat, sucking hungrily before rasping her teeth across it, biting down gently

at the pulse point, feeling her warrior's heart thrumming under her lips.

Caught up in her own desire, she couldn't see but she could feel her lover respond. Hearing Xena moan as the warrior threw her head back to give better access made Gabrielle grow even bolder. Shifting slightly, with deliberate slowness Gabrielle ran lips, tongue and teeth across the exposed skin of her lover's breasts above the bodice, then pulled the leather down a tantalizing couple of inches, coming oh-so-close to giving the nipples the same treatment before once again sealing the warrior's mouth with her own. Tongues intertwined, caressed each other, were sucked on by soft lips.

Xena took Gabrielle's head in her hands and broke the kiss. That her young lover could be this hungrily passionate took the warrior by surprise. Every nerve and muscle in the black-haired, ex-warlord's body was thrumming with desire. It took no small amount of self-control to keep herself from flipping the smaller woman over on her back and ... *conquering her*.

That thought made Xena blink. *Go easy warrior*. She fought to breathe more evenly, then smiled. "A few skills indeed," she growled huskily.

Gabrielle's head was spinning, but she found she rather enjoyed the sensation. She could feel the pulsing heat growing out from her center, and suddenly felt like her Amazon outfit was much too confining. She stared into the pale blue eyes beneath her. "I could, um, always use a few lessons though," she said, gasping just a bit. The bard traced a finger along her lover's jaw before leaning in and following the same trail, gently, with her lips. *So beautiful*. "Teach me," she whispered into Xena's ear, honestly. "Show me what you want, Xena ... how to please you..."

Xena blinked again. It was the simple request of a young lover to her more experienced partner, had doubtless been said between couples since the dawn of time. But the ex-warlord had heard similar words before, from other partners, under very different circumstances. *Easy Xena ... this is Gabrielle. No one else. She's here because she loves you. No other reason. And you love her. Now ... love her*.

Exhaling slowly, Xena wrapped the young woman in her arms and gently rolled her onto her back, covering the smaller body with her own, kissing her warmly, trusting in the strength of the bond they shared - a trust she'd given so rarely, it felt strange, frightening, and wonderful all at the same time.

"One catch, my bard," Xena smiled. "Show me how to please you too."

Gabrielle nodded, taking the other woman's hand and kissing the palm before pressing it down over one of her breasts. She moaned quietly as the warrior gave it a firm but gentle squeeze. "Mmm ... let's get out of all this leather first," the bard pleaded. "Then I'll ... see what I can think of."

Xena hummed along her lover's neck, flicked her tongue across an earlobe. "Deal."

The warrior took her time removing Gabrielle's Amazon clothes, lovingly brushing her lips and tongue over every newly exposed expanse of skin. When her partner was finally completely undressed, she knelt back on her heels and took a moment to simply drink in the sight, seeing her as if for the first time, with the eyes of a lover. She felt her heat rising, taking in the wonderfully round breasts, the supple hips, the rippled abs and the light patch of hair between her bard's legs that was exactly the color of the hair that framed her wonderful face. Every inch of Gabrielle was taut, rounded muscle under pale, soft skin, just slightly flushed with desire. "By the gods," Xena breathed, lightly running her fingers down a sculpted arm, "you are so beautiful..." Gabrielle blushed slightly and smiled. "Hey, that's my line..." she said softly, tugging playfully at her warrior's

skirt. "Why not give me a chance to say it, huh?"

Xena smiled back, then stood, deftly pushing aside the shoulder straps of her leathers and letting them fall to the floor. As she stepped forward, Gabrielle rose up on her knees, wrapping her arms around Xena's waist, kissing the warrior's stomach again and again, earning a few soft sounds of pleasure as she caressed the small of her warrior's smooth back. Pulling away slightly, the bard took hold of Xena's breeches, hesitating just a moment before tugging them down, tossing them somewhere as she sat back and stared up at the bronzed goddess before her.

"By the gods..." Gabrielle breathed, as if in a daze, then caught herself and smiled around another blush. "It's still true. I could never say it enough." She took her warrior's hand, pulling the other woman back down onto the furs.

"Then I guess I'll have to find some way to stop you from talking," Xena grinned as she covered her lover's smaller body with her own, scraping their hardened nipples together. She stifled Gabrielle's response with a passionate kiss that went on and on as it moved down the bard's throat, teased her collarbone, captured her breasts.

Gabrielle ran her hands through her lover's dark hair, fighting the urge to knot her fingers in it as one of her nipples was sucked deep between soft lips, swirled over by a warm tongue for forever before it was sawed at lightly between teeth, drawing a moan. Then her warrior turned and lavished the same attention on the other breast.

The young woman had always thought her breasts were highly sensitive, and this was almost too much. She arched upward, feeling the sensation spread everywhere - she was so wet between her legs she thought she could feel it dripping, and realized with a thrill that Xena's warm sex grinding slowly against her thigh was just as slick with desire.

The young woman gasped and arched her body even harder as a finger brushed lightly across her swelling nether lips. *This is going to be fatal ... Elysian Fields, here I come...* "Mmm ... Xena does, um ... moaning count as talking?"

"Nah," her warrior grinned up at her. "In fact I want to hear that ... a lot of it..." she said, voice rumbling as she continued working her mouth down over the bard's taut abs, pausing briefly to dip a tongue playfully into her lover's navel before moving lower still.

"Good ... 'cause..." *What's she ... oh gods she's...* "Ohhh..."

Xena took her time, making slow, honest love to someone for one of the few times in her life, and it was everything she could have hoped for, and more. Xena thought she'd never had such a responsive lover, and delighted in every pleasure she could give her bard, both great and small, found herself pulled along into her own climax almost immediately every time with even the slightest of contact to her sensitive core, or even to her nipples, and once, just by a having an earlobe tenderly sucked into her bard's warm, wonderful mouth, which had never happened to her before.

This was love, shared and powerful. It thrummed inside Xena with every tiny whimper and loud moan Gabrielle made. This young woman who had touched her heart brought shivers now to her body with even the lightest touch.

Towards the end, Gabrielle seemed barely aware of her surroundings, and only Xena's iron will allowed her to keep some sense of sensibility. She held her precious lover close, so close, gently stroking the red-gold hair, whispering soothing words into the young woman's ear, bringing her down slowly until Gabrielle rewarded her with a warm, loving smile and snuggled against her. Finally, exhausted, their mutual passion spent, the two of them mumbled heartfelt whispers of love, embracing each other tightly and drifting off into a deep, contented slumber.

* * *

Xena was running, chasing something or being chased ... she didn't know which. Something was howling. It was herself. Blood was everywhere. Blood and screams.

Except for one spot. Just a dot. A bright place, growing larger, warmer. She moved for it, heard a voice. Music.

Xena opened her eyes. Gabrielle was leaning over her, stroking her face, humming a gentle song.

"Oh, you're awake," the bard said, a little startled. Then she smiled and bent in for a quick kiss. "Hey," she murmured quietly before laying back down and snuggling close, red-gold head pillowed on the warrior's shoulder, pulling the furs back over them.

Xena held the smaller woman. The fire had burned low. The moon had set. In the light of the dimly glowing embers, she could barely make out anything. *What ... happened?* "I was..." She paused. "I was having a nightmare."

Gabrielle stiffened for a moment, then just nodded. "I know," she said quietly. "Go back to sleep. It's OK."

Xena nodded back, closing her eyes. Then her brows furrowed. "What do you mean, 'I know'?" she asked quietly.

The bard caressed the line of her warrior's hip for a moment before answering. "I mean," she said slowly, "you've had them before. I figured you ... knew."

Xena considered this. "No, I didn't," she said simply, the thought disturbing her for some reason. "I had one when I woke this afternoon. I remember that." She thought for a moment more. "How often does it happen?"

Gabrielle raised her head, bit the inside of her lip. "Sometimes more often, sometimes less. Lately not much at all really." She shrugged, seemed embarrassed. "It ... scared me at first, then I ... well..." Her voice trailed off.

Blue eyes stared into green. "You've been working me through them," Xena said with quiet realization. She gently touched the younger woman's face, tracing her thumb lightly across the pale cheekbone. "You sing, or hum ... stroke my hair," she said, pulling at tiny fragments of consciousness, barely remembered. "That's what you were doing when I woke up, wasn't it?"

Green eyes regarded blue. "Yes," the bard spoke finally, then gave a rueful chuckle. "Guess I had a little trouble waking up in time - you did kinda wear me out."

Xena nodded absently. *And that's why the one this afternoon woke me - after days without sleep she was too knocked out to notice.* "How long have you been doing this?"

Gabrielle kissed her warrior's shoulder before uncertainly laying her head back down on it. "Pretty much since we started together, I guess ... You, um, remember saving that one village, the one with the silver mine?"

"Obportus and his raiders," Xena replied, the memory coming back all too quickly. "Yeah, I do." The taller woman gently extricated herself from her bard and sat up. "Gods Gabrielle - I could have taken your head off. What were you thinking? Why'd you do that?"

The bard sat up as well, placing her arm around Xena's tensing shoulders. "You needed it," she answered, simply, softly. With her free hand she stroked her lover's jawline, brushed her fingers slowly over the planes of Xena's face. The young bard's voice dropped to nearly a whisper. "I don't like seeing you in pain."

Xena caught her bard's hand in her own. "Gabrielle, in the last week I've killed ... what? Sixty, eighty men? I enjoyed killing them. Maybe I deserve a few nightmares."

Gabrielle looked away for a moment. "Maybe," she nodded. "At least I'm sure that's why you *have* been having them. Whether you deserve it ... I don't know. You say you enjoy the killing ... Gods," she turned back, making sure she caught her warrior's eyes again. "Xena, I'd be lying if I said there weren't things about you that frighten me. I don't always understand you, but, the simple truth is it *does* bother you ... it hurts you, somewhere deep inside, where only your dreams can reach. And that ... matters."

The bard rested her head on Xena's shoulder. She paused, then said quietly, "Years ago, I came to understand that it's the people who kill and *don't* have nightmares that are the real monsters."

Xena stared out the window. "Gabrielle, I've done ... so many horrible things."

"I know," Gabrielle agreed, simply. She gently twisted her hand so now she held the warrior's, then lifted it and pressed it against her face. "But I've seen you do extraordinary things, Xena. Wonderful things. Not a day goes by you don't do something that makes me so proud to know you, I think my heart will burst."

Xena looked down. "I've said it before Gabrielle - that darkness has never gone away. I don't know if it can ... Sometimes I don't even know if I want it to..."

"Shhh..." the smaller woman soothed, tears forming in her shining green eyes. "I'll let you in on a secret, my love: We are what we *do*. Not what others think, not even what we think of ourselves."

Gabrielle kissed the palm of the hand, let the kisses trail up the inside of her warrior's arm. "I could never love a monster, Xena ... a monster couldn't love me back."

Gabrielle pressed the hand to cup her breast, moved and straddled her warrior's muscled thighs. She took her warrior's face in her hands, looking deep into those pale blue orbs. "Love me, Xena. Hold me. Let me love you..." She brushed her lips over the eyes that closed in pain, gently pressed her warrior down onto her back. The bard kissed her warrior lovingly for a few moments before her mouth and hands began to roam, aimlessly at first, then more deliberately, tracing the curves and hollows of warm and hot, soft and firm.

"I love you Xena ... let me be a part of you ... like you are of me..."

With infinite gentleness, the young woman made love to her warrior, softly brushing aside the taller woman's attempts at giving anything back, whispering, "Let me love you Xena ... let me hold you..."

Fingers slid within the dark woman, a gentle intrusion that waited for a response, reaching for a rhythm driven only by Xena's own growing desire. Lips and tongue kept time, moving over her throat, her breasts. The warrior had felt pleasure in a thousand ways, but never with such devotion, such caring, such honest desire to love and have that love returned as openly. Beyond her body it reached into her heart, her soul, frightened her beyond measure, and yet was impossible to resist. Some part of the warrior fought against her release. To release meant surrender, and the warlord that still howled inside never surrendered.

But another part, that deep part of her that was still vulnerable and locked in everything that could hurt, that part of her couldn't hold back. Didn't want to. It ached with the desperate need to let go, to reach out and be held by something outside herself.

"Open to me Xena ... I'm yours ... give yourself to me ... I need you, so much ... come to me ... I'll hold you ... I love you ... I need you..." Simple words, sweet words, spoken by the voice that filled the warrior's dreams, that calmed her anger, that soothed her pain ... the voice that had called to her in Tartarus.

The voice she had followed back from the dead.

The rhythm built, surging powerfully, dangerous in its intensity, bringing tears to Xena's eyes as it slowly worked its way into every cell of her body and every dark corner of her soul, grew toward an inevitable peak...

And finally, shattered her strength. "*GGGG - Gabrielle!*" the warrior screamed.

It was like drowning in fire and ice. It was like shaking apart at the soul.

It was like dying and being reborn.

Xena sobbed openly, willingly folding herself into the embrace that surrounded her. "I'm here Xena," her lover soothed, stroking her hair. "I'm right here. I'll always be here. I love you Xena ... love you ... all of you..." The young bard simply held her warrior, rocking her back and forth.

In time, the shuddering sobs began to subside. The warrior was by turns embarrassed, touched, and grateful, and underneath it all was a deep current of simple love - emotions she had little experience with or use for in more years than she cared to remember, and realized she had only ever truly felt in the presence of the small woman who held her in her arms. Xena clung to her lover like an anchor, let the bond between them guide her back to herself, regaining strength enough to say, quietly, "I love you Gabrielle."

Finally, the two were able to sit up against the cushions, both staring into the embers of the long dead fire - Xena, for once, with her raven head cradled on Gabrielle's shoulder. The bard managed, somehow, with one arm still around her warrior and the other trembling, to pour a goblet of wine. She took a brief swallow, then passed it to Xena, who gratefully accepted it and downed the rest in a single gulp. They lay together for a while longer, the bard continuing to stroke Xena's hair, the warrior tracing back and forth along Gabrielle's thigh.

A time later, Gabrielle kissed the warrior's head and spoke softly. "Thank you Xena."

The warrior sniffled. "For what?"

"For everything. For the fire, for the wine. For letting me stay with you, even when I must be a real burden sometimes." Gabrielle sniffled lightly, stroked the raven hair. "And for loving me. And for ... letting me in like that." Gabrielle pressed her lips against the top of Xena's head again, let it linger. "I know that must have been ... hard."

Xena paused for a moment. "It was," she admitted. "It was also ... It was important."

Gabrielle chuckled in spite of herself. She held her warrior closer. "Gotta admit Xena, you really know how to talk to a girl."

The warrior raised an eyebrow, then sighed. "All right. How about 'intense'? How about 'wonderful'?" She paused, then said, slowly, "That's ... never happened before."

"Uh, Xena?" Gabrielle started, honestly puzzled for a moment. "I mean, even I've managed it a few times. Even if, you know, I was alone for most of them ... before tonight anyway..."

Xena snorted and slapped her bard's thigh playfully. "I don't mean *that*. I've had orgasms before, thank you." She shook her head, then took a breath. "I meant I've never ... let someone else be in control. Just ... gave in."

The warrior sat up, slipping an arm behind Gabrielle's head, gently touching her lover's face. "I've never trusted anyone like that, Gabrielle. I ... I need you to know that." She paused. "Seems like I've always held something back, but I can't with you ... and I knew ... that I couldn't, and that..." She shut her eyes, "I know I've been cold with you sometimes, I ... I think..."

Gabrielle gently placed her fingers over her warrior's lips. "Shhh ... It's OK Xena. I know." She ran her hand over her lover's jawline and smiled. "For the record, I was scared too. We've both done some dumb things. None of that matters now."

Xena smiled back. Leaning in, she kissed the smaller woman lightly. "I love you Gabrielle."

"I love you Xena," Gabrielle responded, raising her head and kissing her warrior back.

The kiss deepened, slowly grew more insistent. Their tongues sought each other, soon chased each other in a sensuous dance. Almost on its own, Xena's thigh slid between Gabrielle's, pressing against the surprising wetness there as the smaller woman moaned into her lover's mouth.

"Hmmm," the warrior teased, flexing her muscled leg, "Right now though, would it be all right if I gave something back?"

Gabrielle gasped. "Uh-huh," was all she could manage.

Xena rolled fully on top of her wonderful lover, nudging her thighs apart until the warrior had her hips between them, felt the soles of Gabrielle's feet pushing against her buttocks, pulling her in closer. Xena twisted her hips forward, pressing her mound onto Gabrielle's, was rewarded by a low moan which she stifled with another kiss before raising her lower body slightly, then slipping an arm between them.

Many, many exquisitely heated minutes later, as Gabrielle arched and shuddered against Xena's skillful lovemaking, the young woman deliberately stared into her lover's eyes, sharing her release.

Sharing her surrender.

* * *

The morning found them where they began the night before. The two of them curled up together under the furs in front of the now dormant fireplace. They awoke at nearly the same time, a quick glance in each other's eyes causing a fit of giggles neither could explain, followed by warm snuggling, then a light doze.

Later, somewhere in the corner of the room a bell tinkled quietly. Two pairs of eyes reluctantly opened, then fastened on each other - the green ones curious, the blue ones resigned.

"Told Thesocles to have someone ring us around mid-morning," the warrior explained. "Said if we didn't ring back to just not bother." The green eyes held their curiosity. Xena shrugged. "I thought breakfast, maybe a bath ... seemed a good idea at the time."

Gabrielle smiled. "Actually, yeah, I guess it is. I could um, use a little something to replenish my energy ... Gods know you pretty much sucked - Uh, that is, *sapped* me dry..."

Xena grinned, holding her bard closer as she raised her own leg slightly. "I dunno about that ... seems like you've still got a little moisture tucked away there..."

Startled at the contact, Gabrielle knew she should blush brighter than the dawn, but somehow all she did was groan and roll her eyes - along with her hips. "I'm saving that for later," she quipped, then kissed her warrior firmly on the lips before sitting up. "Come on - I could use breakfast and..." She sniffed experimentally. "A bath wouldn't be a bad thing either ... Although..." She sniffed again. "Hmm ... that's..."

The warrior raised an eyebrow. "What?"

Gabrielle shook her head. "Nothing."

Grinning, Xena looked away, then shrugged slightly and turned back. "Um, Gabrielle? You remember asking a while back about how it was different with other women?"

Now the young woman did blush. "Um, let me guess ... the way it smells the next morning is one of them?"

"You got it," the warrior nodded idly, unable to stop grinning if she tried. *Gods it's been a while*, Xena chuckled to herself, then stretched and gave an uncharacteristically happy sigh. *But even then it wasn't like this. It's never been like this. And the last time was...* Her brows furrowed. *Marcus. Of course, he was dead by then. Not his fault he wasn't in top form.* She chuckled bitterly. *Oh yeah, then I got pretty close with Ulysses - why'd I do that anyway?* The answer was quicker than she expected. *That's easy - after almost losing Gabrielle and nearly going blind you were on edge and crazy with wanting her, then wouldn't admit it and fastened on him because he was handy ... Hades, Palaemon was lucky Vidalis had the hots for him, or it could've been him. Plain dumb, that was. Any more mistakes in there? Oh yeah big warrior, plenty: What about big ol' dependable Hercules? Practically threw yourself at him, but in the end we both left each other hanging, didn't we? Served you right though, for treating nice*

little Iolaus like that. And while you're at it, why not go waaay back - can't ever forget about leaving Lao Ma high and dry, as they say...

"Xena?" a tiny, insistent voice called. "Xena, you OK?"

The warrior opened her eyes, met a sea of green she wished nothing more than to lose herself in. "I'm all right," she answered, reaching out to touch her lover's face. "I'm very all right ... now." She smiled. "Stuck in the past for a moment. Nothing new."

Gabrielle knelt down, smiling back. "Someone told me once to never forget the past but learn from it, and never regret the present, because together they shape who we become in the future." She ran her fingers through her warrior's hair, then gave a self-deprecating grin. "OK, so it sounded good at the time."

Xena chuckled. "Well, I sure as Helios can't forget my past." She pulled her lover into a tight embrace. "And I don't regret a moment of my present. Guess I just have to hope my future stays this good."

"It will Xena, if I have anything to do with it," Gabrielle assured, kissing her lightly. "Now come on, let's get some breakfast," she grinned wickedly. "Cause I do want some energy for later."

"And if I have anything to do with *that*," Xena grinned back, brushing her knuckle down her bard's nose playfully, "you'll need it. Go on - I think the bell rope is over in the corner."

Breakfast was quiet and surprisingly playful. They fed each other in between smiles and light caresses, neither feeling the need to say much at all. They followed the meal with a bath, gratefully lowering themselves into the steaming water of the room's sunken tub, scrubbing each other a little too carefully and sensually, which led to another round of kisses, which led to even more.

It was by turns careful and slow, then heated and rushed - Gabrielle's fierce passion once again surprising the warrior as the taller woman found herself being lifted up out of the bath and sprawled back on the tile, the strawberry blonde head dipping between her legs when the bard's need to taste her lover again simply wouldn't be denied. Xena bit her lip. *Gods she learns fast*, she thought wickedly, *but then her mouth and tongue are the tools of her profession ... Gods, what a bard...* was her last clear thought as she raised her hips, simply giving herself over to the young woman's loving attention, losing herself in the sheer pleasure and joy of it without a single care.

When Xena had recovered enough to slide back into the water and Gabrielle's arms, she then surprised herself by starting again, taking her time. Wrapped in each other, bard and warrior moved together towards an easy, mutual climax that left them both feeling satisfied, warm, and very, very loved.

"Hmm," Gabrielle quipped a short while later, seated in Xena's lap and examining their intertwined fingers, "I think maybe it's time we vacated this tub, my Warrior Raisin."

Xena raised an eyebrow, but glanced at their hands as well. "Yeah, good plan."

After toweling each other dry, Xena stoked the fire again, and they once more snuggled together on the furs. The warrior stared into the crackling flames, her arms around Gabrielle's shoulders with the bard reclined warmly against her chest. Xena rested her chin on the top of the strawberry blonde head, breathing in the wonderful scent of her lover's clean hair. "Are you ... happy, my bard?"

"Very," Gabrielle sighed. "I'm going to remember this moment, this room, the look in your eyes, for as long as I live. When I started traveling with you I thought I was the luckiest woman in the world. Now, I *know* I am." She turned her head around, kissed her warrior lightly. "And you, love? Are you happy?"

Xena watched the fire thoughtfully for a moment, then looked down into her lover's eyes. "Yes," she whispered, "I really am. I don't remember ever feeling this ... content."

"Well," Gabrielle said warmly, "I think you deserve a little contentment."

Xena smiled. "Ah Gabrielle, when I'm with you I can believe it too..." *Admit it Xena, you've fallen hard ... and you love every minute of it.* Their lips met once again, gentle kisses becoming more passionate as the warrior lowered her arms, caressing the soft swell of Gabrielle's breasts, loving the feel of the nipples growing hard against the palms of her hands.

Just then there was a knock at the door.

* * *

Solari tapped her foot, as much nervous as she was impatient. She'd found the room earlier, then had been stopped just at the brink of knocking by a series of loud moans from within, audible even through the heavy oak panels. *Gods you two, it's well into the afternoon here - give it a rest will ya?* She'd pattered around the courtyard for a while, then came back and listened *very* closely before finally rapping her knuckles against the wood. *Hope they've finished,* she chuckled to herself. *I'd hate to wind up gutted because I interrupted a certain Warrior Princess at the um, wrong moment.*

A spare minute later, the door opened and the Amazon was confronted by all six feet of said Warrior Princess, wrapped in a linen robe. "Yes?" Xena growled, cocking an eyebrow.

Solari held her ground. "Just making sure you're both still alive," she responded, suppressing a smile. "We were getting worried our Queen might cross over from exhaustion."

Xena gave up the pretense, genuinely surprising the Amazon by rolling her eyes and breaking into the closest thing to a dopey grin Solari had ever seen on the warrior's face. "Whatever," Xena glanced over her shoulder, then turned back to the Amazon and pushed the door fully open. "Come on in Solari," she said, walking back into the room and settling down at the table. "As you can see, your Queen is still among the living - though the gods only know how *I* managed..."

Gabrielle was tightening the sash of her own robe, blushing lightly at the last comment. "Hey Solari. What's up?"

"Well, in case you've both somehow forgotten," the Amazon began, "you did call for a meeting this afternoon about dealing with the remaining mercenaries."

"Oh, is it afternoon already?" Xena replied with perfect seriousness, popping a grape into her mouth.

"Yes it is," Solari shot back with mock sternness. "And we all had a big argument over who would come up here and fetch you - wound up flipping dinars over it actually."

"So," the warrior raised an eyebrow, "does this mean you lost, or won?"

Solari shrugged, pulling on every lesson on Amazon stoicism she had ever learned to keep from giggling. "Won, in point of fact." She glanced around the room, trying not to be too obvious about it, taking in the clothes scattered over the floor and the volume of water that had been splashed out of the tub. *Hera's tits! And she had the gall to call me incorrigible*, the Amazon mentally snorted, noting the undisturbed sheets. *From the look of things, they never even made it to the bed.*

Solari crossed her arms. "So, can we expect you in, say, half an hour or so?"

Xena smiled, nodded. "Yeah..." She glanced back at Gabrielle, who had walked up behind her chair and rested her hands on the warrior's shoulders. "Actually, I have to drop by the armorer and see about getting my breastplate fixed - it is a one-of-a-kind, after all."

Gabrielle gave an impish grin. "Yeah, well, so are what it protects."

That earned her a raised eyebrow and a wicked grin as Xena covered one of the bard's hands and squeezed it. "Wasn't much help, was it?" she practically purred. "Worst danger they've been in since..."

Solari cleared her throat, rolling her eyes, suppressing a grin. "Uh, excuse me, but we have a *job* to do here?"

Xena shrugged, then smiled and kissed Gabrielle's hand briefly. "Yeah, I guess we do." She turned back to the Amazon as the bard moved around the chair and seated herself in the warrior's lap.

"You go ahead Solari," Gabrielle urged. "We'll be along soon."

"A half hour," Solari warned, "or I come back here with the entire corps and we *drag* you down there - naked if we have to. Got it?"

"No problem," Gabrielle smiled back, settling an arm around the warrior's shoulders, waving with the other. "See you then."

The Amazon huffed and walked out, pointedly leaving the door open. As she headed down the corridor however, she distinctly heard her Queen give a loud, giggling yelp, followed by the door slamming shut.

Solari paused and stared at the ceiling, half seriously pondering whether thirty-five Amazon warriors would actually be enough to separate those two if it came down to it. *Probably*, she decided, *but casualties would be unacceptably high...* She mentally shrugged. "OK, they've got a half hour," she muttered, but grinned as she continued down the hall. "Guess what they do with it is their business."

By the time she reached the courtyard, she was laughing out loud. "I am truly sorry, my Queen," she said to herself in between belly laughs, "but after I get back to the Nation, you will *never* live this down."

Chapter Nine

The caravan left Kesan early the following morning. A smiling Thesocles and his entourage saw them off at the city gates, politely declining any payment or gifts. "Meleager served this city well," the old councilor explained. "Our defenses would never have been this secure without him. It's a debt we can never fully repay. Any

friends of his are friends of the city - especially such a ... charming group of holy women," he chuckled. "I bid you peace on your journey. Kesan welcomes any of you whenever you wish to return."

Xena couldn't help glancing at her bard. "Might just take you up on that sometime."

Thesocles grinned and winked up at the warrior. "I'll keep the room open for you - in fact, I invite you to spend every anniversary here. It would be an honor to host Amazon royalty."

Gabrielle blushed, but Xena just smiled. "Thanks," the warrior replied, "I'll keep it in mind."

"We'll both keep it in mind," the bard added. "Although we're not married," she cleared her throat, "yet." Xena rolled her eyes, smiled, looked away.

"Speaking of Amazons," Solari spoke up. "I have to admit, we've taken a shine to this place. Thank you Thesocles, for making us feel welcome - not many do."

The old man smiled. "Believe it or not, you've all been much less trouble than some - and I know Kero's son wouldn't mind having you back."

Solari laughed. "Found out about that, huh?"

Thesocles shrugged. "It pays to keep informed."

"Well," Solari grinned, "if - and I mean *if* - he's still unattached when I get a chance to pass by here again, tell him he'd better be ready, because..."

"Thanks Thes," Meleager broke in, smiling at his old ruler, squeezing his shoulder as they shook hands. "It felt damn good to stay here for a while - like old times."

"Actually," Thesocles shook his head, grinning, "it was much more peaceful than old times, as I recall them anyway."

Meleager chuckled. "Hey, speak for yourself."

Thesocles chuckled back. "Yes, yes, I heard about your daring raid - risking life and limb and all that." He leaned in, whispering, "Sobriety suits you, young man. Proud of you for getting back on the right track."

The aging warrior smirked. "Aw Thes, I think you're one of the few people in the Known World who could call me a young man. But thanks."

Thesocles nodded, smiling. He gestured with his head slightly, still whispering, "Listen, you and the High Priestess, you're an item?"

Meleager gave an embarrassed, "Yeah."

"You're a lucky man Meleager," the councilor assured. "Let her know that sometime, huh? You always were bad about that sort of thing." Then he stood straight again, announcing loudly, "An easy road to you Meleager, and to those who travel with you. May the gods favor you all. Take care."

The caravan resumed its journey west. The day before it had been agreed that the main danger from slavers was likely over. Crossing the Bosphorus had been the obvious part of the route, but after that no one outside the group knew where they were headed, which made further random ambushes improbable. And when word began to spread of what had happened to as large a force as Stophacles had put together, it would be even less likely.

The main threat now was a band of mercenaries who were no doubt bent on simply massacring them all. Still, there was nothing for it but to continue traveling as before, trusting the scouts to spot the enemy in time. The route had been altered slightly, taking a narrower road which kept them surrounded by dense forest, a terrain which favored Amazon training. It meant slower going, but would be somewhat safer.

Gabrielle was by turns distracted and frustrated. She and Xena had spent the better part of the last two days being constantly together, and much of that time spent making love. Yet far from helping to sate the passion which had grown inside her over the last couple of years, Gabrielle found it only made it worse. The things she and Xena had done together had fueled her imagination about other things they might try - some quite romantic, others downright naughty - and while she tried to stay focused, her mind was constantly wandering.

The worst thing, she realized, was there was no practical way to be with Xena as they traveled - the warrior was constantly riding off to check on various reports or to scout ahead herself. As the caravan halted for the noon meal, the two of them had managed to find a little time for themselves, but that was brief and not terribly private.

Gabrielle groaned. "Gods Xena, this isn't fair. All I want is to be with you..."

"I know," the warrior soothed, an arm draped around her bard's taught shoulders as they reclined together against a tree. "I feel the same way, but we have other things to think about right now."

"But it's so hard to..." Gabrielle groaned again. "I mean, it's like discovering a new continent or a third arm or something. Every time I see you I can't think of anything else ... merciful Artemis, even when I'm *don't* see you I can't think of anything else."

Xena smiled. "It's not exactly easy for me either." She kissed the top of the strawberry blonde head. "Look, three or four more days and we'll be in Lilith's valley, then we'll be by ourselves again. We'll take some time off somewhere, see if we can ... well, work some things out."

"Like what?" Gabrielle asked, with just a hint of apprehension.

"Like you, me, and this life we have together," Xena replied slowly. "Constant danger and love, remember?" She squeezed her bard a little tighter. "Look, now is not the time. Just know that I really do want to spend the rest of my life with you, and that means figuring out how to make that last as long as possible, for both of us, all right?"

Gabrielle looked thoughtful for a moment. "Yeah," she nodded, "I see what you mean."

The warrior stood, pulling her partner up with her. "Right now though, it's time to get this caravan moving. We'll be together tonight, all right? Keep Lilith company until then ... and try to talk about something other than me?"

The bard rolled her eyes. "OK, I'll try."

The warrior squeezed Gabrielle's shoulder. "That's my girl."

The bard took her warrior's hand and kissed it. "Bet your chakram I am."

Xena grinned, then leaned in and said quietly and suggestively. "And Gabrielle, listen - if it gets really bad, I want you to know it's all right with me if you grab one of the Amazons, or even one of the Guardians and, well..."

The bard's eyes narrowed, and she asked suspiciously, "Yes?"

"Get in some staff practice," the warrior answered, lightly kissing Gabrielle on the nose. "A good workout always does wonders for me when I'm ... tense."

The bard gave an exaggerated groan, then gave Xena a playful poke. "OK, OK ... I admit, you got me."

Xena broke into a warm smile and stroked her lover's hair. "I'd bet my chakram I do. Come on."

* * *

The sound of wood on wood reverberated through the small clearing. Gabrielle spun and swung the end of her staff at her opponent's legs, only to have her strike neatly blocked. She countered instantly, rotating the staff around and attacking from the other side, then found her own feet going out from under her before she could connect.

Landing on the soft grass with a loud grunt, Gabrielle just lay back. "By all the gods," she gasped, "I swear you're worse than Xena! Go easy on a simple village girl for a change, would ya?"

Lilith leaned on her own staff and smiled. "I believe it was you who said not to, young one."

Gabrielle raised her head. "That's because you said you hadn't used a staff in three hundred years. Augh," she groaned, laying her head back, "guess I should have expected it - 'never forget the past' and all."

The Priestess chuckled. "Actually, you have little to be ashamed of, Amazon Queen. Your technique is unconventional yet quite excellent. Perhaps in the future you should measure yourself against less ... demanding opponents?"

Gabrielle looked at the sky, grinning. "Yeah well, I get plenty of chances with them too, but there's only one person I really care about, um, besting."

Lilith smiled. "I believe in many ways you have already done so." The immortal looked thoughtful for a moment. "How are things between you, young one?"

The bard sat up, blushing lightly. "Better than I could've hoped for. Xena's been ... very giving." She looked away, her blush deepening. "I've only ever ... been with one other person, so I guess I don't have much to compare it to, but the things she does ... what we do together ... and she's so soft ... Uhhh, I get goosebumps, you know?"

Lilith smiled. "Pleasure given is pleasure shared, young Gabrielle. I have little doubt Xena feels the same. Any fears you have about not being adequate are quite groundless."

The bard blushed. "That did kind of worry me at first ... guess it still does, kind of. Does it show?"

The immortal chuckled and shook her head. "Not exactly, but it is a common concern, and one I know well. All the priestesses and their acolytes - who are mostly priestesses in training - feel this fear at some point."

"Anything I can, um, do?" Gabrielle asked uncertainly. The bard was well aware that the High Priestess was almost unnaturally casual about the most personal of topics, which sometimes helped but was just as often intimidating in its own way.

Lilith cocked her head. "I have scrolls you may consult, if you wish, on various sexual techniques, styles and approaches. However, I have little doubt your own imagination will serve you well in that regard." The immortal smiled, then seemed suddenly thoughtful. "In truth, I think you have no need of anything more than you already possess."

"What's that?"

"Love," Lilith replied, "and with this, openness, desire, and above all, trust. With these, no pleasure offered can ever fail to touch a lover's heart, or bring joy to their body. Only that which is taken or demanded in selfishness can hurt or repel. Indeed, this is true of all things between lovers, and not merely in the coupling of physical bodies, but in their spirits as well. With these feelings shared, all things are possible."

Thinking about what had passed between herself and Xena, especially the time her warrior had broken down in tears made Gabrielle pause. She stared straight ahead for a moment, a sober expression on her face. "You know, we're closer than we've ever been," she began slowly. "And ... making love is wonderful, but I know there are parts of her I ... I can't reach, and maybe never will." She sighed. "But I have to keep trying. I love her too much to do anything else."

Lilith nodded, sitting down next to the bard. "In my dark time, it took the unconditional love of the Goddess to heal me. In the ages since, I have at times spent untold years lost to despair, believing only there was no clear path, no way to steer the world from its own darkness." One hand began gently caressing the younger woman's back and shoulders. "And yet, always it is the love of another that has brought me back, showed me again why I must never lose hope." The Priestess caught Gabrielle's eyes with her own. "Be her Goddess, young one. She will heal, in time."

Gabrielle brushed her hair back. "Sometimes I wonder if I can be that strong. I'm no hero."

Lilith draped an arm across the bard's shoulders and pulled her close. "Ah but you are, Gabrielle," the immortal said softly. "You most certainly are. There is a depth to you I have rarely seen, a core of selflessness and wisdom that spreads such peace and joy to those you touch."

"Well, for someone so wise I can be awfully stupid." Gabrielle sighed. "You know how many times I've gotten us into trouble? How many times I've been in the wrong place, or said the wrong thing?" She blinked back a tear, turned to meet Lilith's eyes. "I was married once, did I tell you that? It was a really dumb thing to do, but I did it anyway, and it got him killed. And then I watched Xena die because I was too weak to get her to Niklio fast enough. I know it wasn't my fault she got hurt but that never makes me feel better - next time it

Lilith sighed. "Gabrielle, there are many kinds of heroes, and while some fight with force of arms, darkness is often fought best by those who never hold a weapon. Some counsel with words, others simply lead with the fullness of their hearts, and I tell you true that you are one of the most important. Trust in your heart and it will always be so." The immortal smiled. "And never confuse inexperience with a lack of wisdom, young one. True enough, you have much to learn on this path, yet so does Xena in her way, and so even do I in mine. A life, no matter how long, is never truly complete, for there is always something yet to be discovered."

Gabrielle sighed, but she smiled back. "Guess I should know better than to argue with you, huh?" She pressed her head against the immortal's shoulder. "Thank you Lilith. You're a good friend."

"As are you Gabrielle ... and that is a truly precious thing." She gave the bard's shoulders one last squeeze. "But now I think we should make haste to catch the caravan, yes?"

"Yeah," Gabrielle chuckled. "I've been sitting around too much the last week or so - want to jog?"

The Priestess stood, smiling. "As you wish."

* * *

The caravan had stopped for the night, and Xena, as usual, was taking first watch. Gabrielle hid her disappointment as the two of them parted for a few hours more, taking solace in her warrior's obvious disappointment as well - in fact, Xena's open feelings surprised and touched her.

"I just wish this were over," Xena sighed as they hugged each other a temporary goodbye.

The weight of her words was not lost on the bard. *Redemption*. "I'll be here Xena," Gabrielle assured her partner. "When you get back tonight, and forever, understand?"

The warrior smiled, looking into her companion's loving eyes. "You really have no idea how much that means to me, Gabrielle." Her smile grew rueful. "When I get back though, we should talk - it's nothing bad," she added quickly, "I'm not having second thoughts. It's not like that at all, but my life is ... complicated, and..."

"*Our* life is complicated," Gabrielle corrected her, chiding. "Now will you just kiss me and go do your job?"

Xena chuckled and shook her head. "Sure thing ... boss."

The kiss was quick but no less heartfelt, and with a final embrace, the warrior walked off through the trees. Gabrielle took a moment to collect herself. *Merciful Artemis*, she sighed, *I just hope I get used to that ... I can't go swooning every time we have to say goodbye for a couple of hours. Then again...*

Gabrielle made her way to the central fire, but found it strangely deserted except for Meleager and Svetla. "Hey Meleager," she waved. "Where um, is everyone?"

"Oh, hi Gabrielle," the aging warrior started. "They're all off doing some priestess thing or another. Have to anoint five new ones to replace the ones who stayed with the Amazons - twenty-four being twice the phases of the moon or some mystic thing like that. Lots of extra scrolls to dig out and memorize and whatnot. Started

while we were in Kesan. Xena's on watch?"

"Yeah," Gabrielle nodded, sitting herself down. "Hey, Svetla," she said, addressing the slim blonde, "are there any of those layered pastries left - you know, the honey and tahini ones?"

"Want something for your warrior when she gets back?" Svetla replied, winking.

Gabrielle blushed in spite of herself, then just nodded. The slim blonde was one of the camp's ... well, Gabrielle hesitated to call them "servants", but they helped with the cooking, cleaning, and other day-to-day tasks. As they traveled, Svetla had been one of Gabrielle's most faithful audience members as the bard told her nightly stories. Afterwards, when Gabrielle hadn't remembered to store something away or it had simply been inconvenient, she'd always been able to count on Svetla for the odd sweet leftovers. Gabrielle hadn't guessed the blonde had known who they were for.

Then again, it seems like everyone knew it before we did. "It's OK, Svetla..." she began, standing up, hating the thought of anyone doing something for her she could do herself.

"No, no," Svetla said with a wave of her hand. "Please, just make yourself comfortable. I'll be right back."

Gabrielle took a step forward. "Svetla..."

"Gabrielle, you are a Queen," she smiled back. "This is good for me ... Just let me enjoy it?"

Gabrielle couldn't help blushing a little more. "Go on." The bard resumed her place in front of the fire next to Meleager, and for a time, they both just stared into the flames.

Finally, the bard couldn't help talking. "Love is great, isn't it?"

"Yeah," Meleager replied without thinking. Then he blustered. "I guess ... I mean, I don't know much about it."

"Me neither," Gabrielle replied evenly. "But I do know one warrior who can fit it into her life - all the gods know it wasn't easy to get her to admit it, but she did. So what's holding you back?"

"Gabrielle..." he began.

"I mean, I'm just sort of curious," the bard continued, staring into the flames and ignoring his response. "What exactly is it you're waiting for? You know she loves you - you're even sleeping together. What were you planning on doing anyway? Get them to the valley and then ride off into the sunset?"

"Something like that," Meleager replied curtly. "I've got things to do, you know? The whole 'helping people out thing'? I spent too long looking at the world from inside a bottle - it's time I got back out there."

The bard looked up at the aging warrior. "Meleager," she said quietly, "how many years do you think you have left? Do you really want to spend them alone, then die somewhere on a battlefield with no one to care?"

He sighed, shrugged. "That's the path I chose Gabrielle. I knew what I was getting into - Hades, some days I'm surprised I lasted this long."

"Which is why you should maybe quit while you're ahead," the bard replied. "You've already done the world a lot of good Meleager. I heard the stories growing up. You were my hero, remember? Not a half god like Hercules, or showered with gifts from them like Jason. Just a man who put his life on the line for the greater good."

He blushed slightly. "Well, I never really thought about it like that."

"I think the world owes you one," Gabrielle smiled. "What's so bad about wanting to be happy?"

"Hades, Gabrielle," Meleager grunted, "it's just not that ... simple."

"Meleager," Gabrielle began, trying to keep her frustration from showing, "how is it complicated? She loves you, you love her. Just take her in your arms and say something like, 'I love you Lilith, and I want to spend the rest of my life with you.' It should be easy."

He shook his head. "Look Gabrielle, it's just ... Sooner or later I rub everyone the wrong way. I've never had a relationship that didn't end badly, no matter how good it started. So, after a while, I just, kind of ... quit trying. I don't want her to get hurt, or watch her ... grow to hate me. I'd rather just take what I can get and have a lot of fond memories to look back on, OK?"

Now we're getting somewhere. She put an arm around his shoulders. "Warriors! I'll never understand them," she chided, chuckling softly. "You'd rather charge single-handed into an army of barbarians than risk getting your heart broken. Listen up, Meleager the Mighty - Xena thought it was worth trying again, and most of her relationships ended with someone getting killed, or her almost being killed. For that matter, so have mine. If we can do it, you don't have much of an excuse."

Meleager pursed his lips and gave her an annoyed look. "You're not going to let this go, are you?"

"Let's just say I have a tough time seeing someone I care about miss a chance at being happy."

He grunted, then sighed, looking at his hands. "OK," he said quietly, nodding. "OK. Three days at most and we'll be in the valley. I'll uh ... I'll make up my mind by then."

Gabrielle rolled her eyes. "OK, good enough for now."

Meleager stood. "My watch is in a few ticks - got a few things to do before then. See you in the morning ... and Gabrielle?"

"Yes?" the bard replied, also standing.

He gave her a sheepish grin. "Thanks." He patted her shoulder and walked off.

Gabrielle sighed and shook her head, but she was smiling. *OK, first good deed for the night is done. Now, find Svetla, get some water on ... and wait for Xena.* She felt a pleasant shiver run through her body. *Hope I can keep it down...*

The "Ritual" went much like it usually did, the only difference being that it started with a nice kiss, and this time Gabrielle didn't hesitate to soap up her warrior herself - all over, taking her time with many of Xena's more sensitive spots. The attention wasn't lost on the tall woman, who seemed on the verge of losing herself to

Gabrielle's loving hands, when she suddenly reached down and gripped the bard's soapy wrist before her young lover could reach between her legs.

"That's enough Gabrielle," Xena gasped. "Please, just finish washing me, all right?"

"OK," the bard grinned. The rinsing completed, the toweling dry began, and once again, Xena had to gently dissuade her partner from getting too intimate about it. Mildly puzzled, Gabrielle was further put out when her warrior insisted on donning a shift before her rubdown. *I'm never gonna get a chance to use those scented oils*, the young woman mentally snorted.

Xena settled onto her stomach and tried to relax as her bard began the massage - noting, somewhat uncomfortably as Gabrielle straddled her buttocks, that the young woman didn't seem to have her breeches on under the short skirt. *Gods, what kind of ravenous beast have I let loose here?* Xena couldn't help smiling to herself. Still, her partner's loving hands worked to ease the tension in her body, and the little kisses that peppered her back every so often were a nice addition. The warrior decided to let it go.

Xena was nearly dozing when she felt Gabrielle drape herself over her back, nuzzling behind her ear. "Wanna turn over?" the bard purred, unmistakably grinding her hips against the warrior's muscled bottom.

Xena fought to still her quickening heartbeat. *OK*, she sighed, *time for a talk...* "Gabrielle," she began, "I don't think that would be such a good idea..."

"Oh but I do," the bard whispered huskily, licking at the warrior's ear. "I'll keep quiet ... I promise..."

Xena mentally groaned, then, steeling herself, she did turn over, gently pushing her bard off her in the process. "It's not the noise that's the problem..."

Gabrielle furrowed her brows. "Then what is the problem?" she asked, with just a note of worry. "Don't you ... want me?"

"Ahhh, Gabrielle," Xena sighed, her partner's small voice causing her chest to tighten, "you have no idea how much." Xena's entire life for more than two years had been one of maintaining a series of sometimes very delicate balances, and she was finding that admitting her love and becoming intimate with her bard had set some of those balances quite out of kilter. New ways of handling herself and their relationship would take time for both of them to work out, but whatever the emotional side things, there were also very real practical reasons for slowing down as well. *At least, just a little bit - for now anyway. We really are both new at this.*

The warrior pulled her bard into a gentle hug, inhaling deliberately, trying to find the right words. "I want you more than anything," Xena assured her lover warmly, then continued, more seriously, "but what do you think would happen if, say a half hour from now, Pollux and the mercenaries decided to ride through the camp? So we're here, mostly naked, locked around each other, too distracted to notice for a vital couple of moments..."

"Yeah, OK," Gabrielle groaned, "I get the point."

"I'm not sure you do," Xena replied gently. "It's not just here and now, protecting this camp." She paused. "Gabrielle, there are going to be lots of times and places it'll be ... safe enough to make love, and I promise we'll find them all," she chuckled, "but I've been thinking about all the times someone's tried to sneak up on

us, in the dark, at night, and I don't think it'll be ... practical sometimes. Maybe even most times. Understand?"

Gabrielle sighed, a grudging comprehension dawning on her. "Yeah, I do," she said sadly, "but I don't have to like it."

Xena held her closer. "Ah Gabrielle, please believe me. I don't either. If I could make love to you every single minute of every day, I would." The warrior sighed, then admitted, honestly, "Gods, sometimes the need to be with you is so strong I'd rather tear my teeth out than stay away."

"Oh Xena ... I feel that way too -"

"I know," Xena cut her off, as gently as possible. "And if I were anyone else, that would be a wonderful thing. But I'm not, and that's why this so ... necessary." She sighed. "There's almost no such thing as an old warlord..."

"But..." Gabrielle began.

"But I'm not a warlord anymore," Xena finished for her. "I know, and you're the one I have to thank for that." She kissed her bard's head lightly. "But that's what I was, and that's all that matters - there are too many bodies behind me. Too many people want to see me dead, and since I've found you, I'm not about to give them the chance. I want to live a long, long life, because..." The warrior faltered a moment, then looked up again. "Because whether or not I deserve it, I have a love..."

"*We* have a love," Gabrielle said softly, gently taking her warrior's hand in her own. "Ours. Together."

Xena looked into Gabrielle's eyes. "Yes, we do," she said quietly. "So please, understand - I just don't want either of us to die because we got careless. I ... need you too much the rest of the time too." The bard felt her heart melt again at her warrior's simple admission. Xena blinked. "We both have to outlive anyone who has reason enough to kill me, and there are so many..."

Gabrielle sighed, nodding. "You're right. It would be stupid for one of us to be killed or hurt because we were too wrapped up in ... being intimate to notice someone sneaking up on us. I couldn't live with that." She paused, kissed the hand gently. "I need you too," she said quietly.

Xena accepted this with a slight nod and warm caress, deeply touched by having her own words returned. "I know it's not fair to you," the warrior said ruefully, her voice just a warm whisper. "You've never hurt anyone. I'd give you a lifetime of pleasure if I could, and it's not just about being safe on the road. If I thought we could settle down somewhere, make a home..."

"You'd do it. For me," Gabrielle replied, the warm intimacy of their conversation filling her heart. Then she sighed. "But you're right. We can't do that. A ... a still target is easier to hit." She shrugged deliberately, looking away. "Besides, it's not just about us - it's all the good we do as we travel too. I know how important it is to you." She smiled. "It's one of the things I love about you."

Xena smiled back. "I had a good teacher."

Gabrielle held her lover closer, gave an exaggerated sigh. "Well, it would be awfully selfish to stop now just because we finally found each other." The young woman gazed again into those depthless blue eyes. "But

we'll have our home Xena, I promise. Some day, no matter what it takes, I swear I'll see you sleep easy and free. I swear it."

The taller woman started to protest, but Gabrielle silenced her with a fingertip to her warrior's lips. "But until then, we have to keep moving, and we have to stay on guard."

The warrior nodded, then chuckled mirthlessly. "Maybe if we could keep our heads when we made love..."

"Not a chance," Gabrielle insisted. "I want your undivided attention. If you have to even think about listening for anything but the way you make me moan, I'll feel cheated." Xena chuckled softly and shifted around to lay with her raven head on Gabrielle's shoulder. The bard thought that as much as she loved being in Xena's arms, she rather liked the feeling of Xena snuggling against her sometimes. "I guess I'll just have to learn to control myself," Gabrielle teased.

That earned a moment's honest laughter from her dark lover. She felt teeth clamp just painfully over her breast. "That'll be the day," Xena breathed. The warrior raised her head so her happy, blue eyes could gaze at her bard's face. "Besides, I think all that, um ... youthful enthusiasm makes you kind of cute."

"Ugh," Gabrielle rolled her eyes. "Please don't call me that. Call me small, call me young. Call me yours. I'm all those things. Call me my name - especially my name, because I love hearing you say it. But barmaids get called 'cute' - by the gods, rabbits, even bugs can be called cute. I hate that word."

"How often do I call you beautiful?" the warrior smiled.

"Oh, just often enough," the bard replied, blushing. "Any more often and it wouldn't be that special."

"Very well then, my small Gabrielle, my young Gabrielle..." with each new endearment, Xena was planting feather light kisses along the bard's neck. "...my loving Gabrielle, my strong Gabrielle, my brilliant Gabrielle, my beautiful Gabrielle, and above all *my* Gabrielle..." She ended by placing her last soft kiss on her lover's lips, then rested with their faces just touching. "Consider yourself anything but cute."

"Mmm, Xena," Gabrielle moaned. "If you were serious about keeping alert, I think you'd better stop now."

Her warrior chuckled again. "Good plan." She rose up and grabbed for the blankets, then the two of them snuggled together comfortably beneath them. "Good night, Gabrielle."

"Good night, my love."

* * *

Many miles to the north, Pollux was bent over a map. He and Race had lucked out somewhat a few days before: When Stophacles had disappeared, roughly half the men under his command had elected to join up with the mercenaries. The two of them had only allowed those who were uninjured and had horses to come along, but it had still swelled their ranks appreciably. If their estimates of the Amazon force were reasonably accurate, by the numbers they were nearly even, and even felt they had an advantage in that all the men were mounted and could move fast. Now they just had to figure a way to make that work, and soon - they'd been pushing everyone hard, and the troops were getting tired, but vengeance outweighed every other concern.

They would kill the Amazons, Xena, and Meleager, or die trying. That was that.

"OK," Pollux mused, staring down at the parchment, "we know they're still heading west, but they're not on either of the two main roads, so that leaves the Ipress road."

"Which makes sense," Race concurred. "It winds around a bit but it cuts through heavy woods - dense trees, lots of cover. If you're an Amazon, it's smart."

Pollux nodded. "That means we've been staying roughly parallel to their route, and likely we're ahead of them. So, do they turn north, or south?"

Race again resisted the urge to scratch at his empty eye socket. "Well, if they were heading south, they would have done it by now, turned off and followed the coast - lots of villages and cities to run to for protection, including..." He stuck the map with the point of his knife.

"Amphipolis," Pollux grunted, "home turf. But the runner says they haven't been spotted near there."

"Right," Race nodded. "Now, the Ipress doesn't cross many other roads, so if they are going to head north it'd have to be either here, at the Strymon river, or here, at the border of Macedonia."

"Perfect," Pollux smiled. "We can be at the Strymon by morning. We wait for a day, and if they don't show, we head for Macedonia, which is even better. Just across the border the road clears the woods onto an open plain that goes on for miles. We can camp there, then run 'em down when they come out of the trees. Easy pickings."

Race grinned. "With luck, we'd even have time to dig a few slit trenches. Then we draw 'em out and hobble what horses they do have. Like you said - easy pickings."

"Agreed." Pollux settled back, his hands behind his head. "Revenge, my friend, is sweet."

* * *

The next couple of days were slow and easy. Lilith's followers took to singing as they traveled - the Ipress road was practically unapproachable, and nearly uninhabited, so Xena couldn't see any advantage to keeping quiet. Besides, they were getting very close to their destination and everyone's spirits were high.

Gabrielle chalked it up to a combination of knowing she wouldn't have much more time with Lilith, their casual ease with any topic, and, in some ways, her own re-discovered passion and need to just know more about the physical side of love. In any case, her questions about Lilith's beliefs became increasingly detailed.

"I guess what I don't understand," the bard asked one afternoon, "is why anyone would want to be a priestess? I mean, don't get me wrong - whatever you want to do with your own body is your business. But where I come from, um, well..."

Lilith smiled. "Do you enjoy your pleasures with Xena, young one?"

Gabrielle blushed. "Um, of course, but, well, that's the point - I mean, I feel that way because it *is* with Xena."

The Priestess thought for a moment. "Imagine, then, feeling the same way about all the sons and daughters of the Earth as you do about Xena. What then?"

Gabrielle pondered this for a moment. "No, can't imagine it ... I don't think anyone else could make me feel that way. I love her - I mean, I *really* love her, with every part of me."

"Then you are indeed fortunate, young one," Lilith replied quietly. Then, smiling, she tried again. "The priestesses simply learn to cherish all life in the same way, to see every person as a part of the whole, and to open themselves to each according to their need. I do not pretend it is an easy path, no matter what some might feel - indeed," the Priestess chuckled, "I have known many a young woman who simply believes this to be a way of satisfying her own lust in the guise of serving some higher purpose."

Lilith sobered slightly. "I have never begrudged anyone their own pleasure - if one wishes to take a new lover every day, providing one is mindful of the consequences to oneself and others, and will own up to the responsibilities, that is in itself a remarkable thing. Yet, for our ceremony to work, one must love all, find what is desirable in all, give of oneself and not simply take. It is the celebration of life and love and pleasure, all at the same time."

Gabrielle tried to get her mind around it. "No, I'm sorry Lilith," she said finally, "but I couldn't do it. It sort of ... cheapens it to feel that way about everyone. Do you know the story of how people used to have two heads, and four legs?"

Lilith smiled. "And how we now all look for the other half of our soul? Yes, young one, I have heard it, and I understand the way you feel. It is a truly precious thing to find one's soulmate. I would that everyone could do so. As I said, being a priestess is not an easy path, and to give up this search for a time and embrace all equally is perhaps the greatest sacrifice they make. Yet the world is full of broken souls in need the Goddess, in need of healing of one kind or another, and to dedicate oneself to reaching these, to showing them love is possible and then giving them that love unconditionally, if only for a moment, this is what we strive for."

Gabrielle thought for a moment. "So what about Meleager?" she asked slowly. "I mean, you seem pretty ready to give up the ceremony for him."

"Only if he wishes me to," Lilith chuckled. "And in truth I know he does, and I will do so when he asks. As for the other priestesses, they are free to follow their own hearts and cease any time they wish, and at some point all do. Indeed, it is rare for one to serve more than a few years, and often I insist they ... retire? Yes, retire well before then. To be a vessel for the Goddess is a joyous calling for the spirit, yet one also has a responsibility to one's own body."

The bard blushed a little. "Um, yeah," she bit her lip, "that ... that makes sense. And I can't imagine it's fun all the time - too many sweaty, unwashed..." She let the thought drift off and shuddered.

Lilith laughed. "Why do think the ceremony begins with a ritual bathing, young one? I assure you, in this case there is nothing symbolic about it."

* * *

Xena and Solari eased their way through the trees, neither making so much as a whisper against the leaves. Just ahead, a small herd of deer grazed peacefully in a clearing. The warrior raised a hand, signaling Gabrielle

and the rest of the Amazons behind them to a halt. The relatively uninhabited Ipress road had offered the caravan safety, but the relative lack of villages or towns gave them few opportunities to barter for supplies. Food was starting to run low, and it was decided to stop for a day and do some hunting and foraging.

Solari tapped Xena on the shoulder. "We've got company," she whispered.

"I know," the warrior nodded back. Just over to their right, a pack of wolves was approaching the herd just as stealthily. *Why can't things ever be simple?* Xena mentally snorted.

Xena thought for a moment, balancing the risks of scaring off the wolves with the knowledge that letting them attack the herd would scatter the deer and leave her and the Amazons back at square one after an hour of tracking them. The warrior knew wolves as noble creatures, well-organized and mostly keeping to themselves, which is why their behavior now puzzled her a bit. They crept towards the herd steadily, apparently uncaring of the human hunters who were even slightly upwind. *They have to smell us, so they why aren't they avoiding us?* Shielding her eyes from the sun, Xena looked closer, taking in the protruding ribs. *Damn, that explains it - the whole pack is starving. About the only time they're really dangerous. All right, leave them be.*

"We back off," Xena whispered to Solari. "They need these deer more than we do."

The Amazon nodded. "I'll have the archers spread out. When the herd scatters, maybe they can..."

Solari was cut off by a loud shriek from the edge of the clearing, as the wolves' approach startled a huge, furred shape out of the brush. The skittish deer immediately began to flee, as the shape wheeled around to face the wolves. *A boar*, Xena noted in surprise. *A really big boar*. "Fall back!" she called out. "Stay clear!"

"Too late now," Solari shouted as the boar charged into the pack. Several wolves swarmed around it to attack, but in their hunger and confusion, several others turned on the Amazons.

Xena barely had time to draw her sword as a huge wolf leapt at her. The warrior dodged aside, landing a stout blow to the side of its head with the hilt as it went by. They quickly spun around to face each other, Xena holding her sword out, blue eyes locking on yellow as they both snarled, staring each other down. *Back off*, the warrior commanded. *I will hurt you if I have to. Back off...*

A moment later, the wolf warily circled around the tall warrior, never losing eye contact, then broke and charged off to help fight the boar. Xena let a feral smile slide across her face, glancing over the battle. Several of the wolves had been hurt, but the boar was definitely getting the worst of it. The warrior pulled herself away from the primal spectacle and turned back to the Amazons.

"Gabrielle!" Xena shouted in alarm. The bard was surrounded by a helpless and worried group of Amazons, all uncertain what to do as their Queen circled and battled with the one remaining wolf who had attacked them. Two other wolves lay dead nearby.

Both bard and wolf were moving too fast and unpredictably for anyone to help without fear of hurting, or at least distracting Gabrielle. The wolf would charge, the bard would knock it aside with swift blow of her staff, and the wolf would scramble around for another attack. Xena drew her chakram. "His eyes, Gabrielle!" she shouted. "Remember eye contact!"

For a brief instant the pair froze. Xena could see the tension in the bard's body relax almost imperceptibly,

and when the wolf charged again, Gabrielle unleashed a whirling series of blows to its head. The animal collapsed to the ground, one leg flailing weakly as it lapsed from consciousness.

Xena didn't even try to hide her smile as she quickly put away her chakram and ran over, gripping the bard's shoulder with one hand while the other ran through strawberry-blonde hair. "Can't I leave you alone for a minute?" she chided gently.

Idly caressing the warrior's side and hip, Gabrielle shook herself, then chuckled. "Nope. Every moment is a new adventure."

Xena smiled down at her love. "Well, so much for a quiet day in the woods."

One of the archers coughed quietly. "Um, my Queen?" She half drew her bow and gestured with it towards the still twitching wolf.

Gabrielle took a step back. "Put that away," she said sternly. "He fought well. Leave him alone."

The archer smiled. "Of course, my Queen. I'm sorry."

Xena rolled her eyes. "All right everyone, regroup," she announced. The warrior waved her hand towards the howling and squealing a dozen yards away. "Let's give this clearing a wide berth and see if we can't figure out where those deer ran off to. We've still got a lot of hungry mouths to feed."

As the group headed back around into the forest, Xena kept one arm draped lightly over Gabrielle's shoulders. "You know," the warrior began conversationally, "when the story gets back to the Amazons that their Queen fought a wolf - and won - they're going to be very proud."

"You think so?" the bard replied, teasing, but with an edge of seriousness underneath.

"Oh, I know so." Xena gave her an affectionate squeeze. "But they won't be half as proud as I am."

Gabrielle blushed lightly. "You don't know how much that means to me."

Xena just smiled. "Gabrielle, I'm always proud of you..." She sighed. "You said that not a day goes by I don't do something that amazes you. Well, I want you to know I could say the same about you. I know I don't very often, but..."

"It's all right Xena," Gabrielle said softly. "You may not say it, but you show it all the time." The bard smiled. "Hey, remember that time we broke into Troy?"

"How can I forget it?" Xena chuckled.

The bard chuckled back. "It kind of scared me a little when we did it, but afterwards, I was so ... happy you trusted me to handle myself. It was ... a special moment, you know?"

Xena grinned as she walked. "Yeah well ... Do you remember a couple of weeks before that, when that bunch of highwaymen ambushed us?"

"Ummm," Gabrielle thought for a moment, then blushed lightly. "Oh yeah, that..."

It was like any normal day: Up at dawn, a quick breakfast followed by an hour or so of drilling, then they packed up and headed out, moving south with no particular destination in mind. Except that right around mid-day, a group of about eight bandits had charged out of the forest on either side of the road. Xena, of course, had launched herself off Argo and instantly taken down two of them before she even drew her sword.

Gabrielle had watched, fascinated as she always was by the warrior's technique. Many fighters, the bard knew, had favorite moves and tricks which they used again and again, but the really interesting thing about Xena was that she never quite did things the same way twice. Xena was simply so good in combat she almost never felt truly threatened, and could improvise practically at will - reveled in doing so, in fact.

But on that day, while Gabrielle had studiously observed the way Xena dispatched multiple opponents, the bard was suddenly aware of two other bandits stealthily approaching from the rear. Without even really thinking about it - later, the bard would remember being frankly irritated at being distracted from watching Xena - she waited until they were in range, then lashed out first to her right, then her left, catching both men off guard by driving the ends of her staff hard into one solar plexus, then the other. With a quick pivot, she cracked them both across the temple, dropping them to the ground.

Then Gabrielle had gone back to watching as Xena finished off the rest. When one of the men behind her stirred and tried to rise, the bard simply leaned back without even looking, jamming the staff into his groin. After that, there were no further distractions.

When Xena had been satisfied none of her opponents would regain consciousness any time soon, she turned and checked on Gabrielle, then smiled as she sheathed her sword. "You all right?" the warrior had asked, grinning.

"Um, sure," Gabrielle had answered, a little confused. "Any reason I shouldn't be?"

"No," the warrior had replied, still grinning. "None at all. Come on..." With that, Xena had mounted Argo and they'd continued on their way.

Xena smiled at Gabrielle, letting the Amazons move a little farther ahead. "When I saw what you'd done, and that you were practically unaware of what you'd done, not even winded, well, between that and you smuggling my chakram and whip into that prison just a few days before, that was when I knew ... well, that was when I quit worrying so much. You'd be fine on your own."

Gabrielle gave a dry snort. "Like you haven't had to rescue me plenty since then."

"True," Xena chuckled, then shook her head and said simply, "but you've rescued me too..." she looked down, "in a lot of ways." Xena stopped walking and took her bard in her arms again, looking deep into those green eyes as she caressed the small of her partner's back. "You've..." The warrior struggled for words, which never came easily. "You taught me how to feel again, Gabrielle. Don't ever doubt, you're the best thing that ever happened to me."

The bard smiled. "And I could say the same to you." She raised herself up slightly and gave her warrior a firm kiss, then for a moment they just held each other.

Xena sighed, then pulled away. "Come on, let's not get all mushy in front of the Amazons - that'd shoot down both our reputations pretty quick."

The bard laughed. "Welll, I'm not so sure about that," she crinkled her nose, "depends on what kind of reputation you want. But OK..."

* * *

A day later the caravan reached the border of Macedonia and swung north. Everyone was feeling a spirit of jubilation - in a day and a half, two at the most, they would reach their valley and the long, arduous journey would be over. The forest opened into an wide plain as night fell, and they camped on the edge of the woods.

"Should be smooth going from here on," Meleager remarked to Xena as they set up the watches.

"Let's hope so," the warrior mused. "Open ground isn't the best terrain for the Amazons."

"True," he nodded, "but all the Guardians are mounted, and it's almost flat until we hit the foothills. No high grass, almost no scrub - no way anyone can sneak up on us, not any sizeable force anyway."

"It also gives us nowhere run to or hide," Xena said, then shrugged. "No way around it though. Just hope our luck holds. Make sure the scouts know to stay alert - with no cover they'll be easy to spot too."

"Hm, good point..."

A half mile away, a pair of runners, well hidden behind craftily constructed hunting blinds, noted the campfires at the forest's edge, then patiently waited for the scouts to pass them by. Remaining hidden until the moon had set, they slunk off into the darkness.

By morning, the mercenaries had finished setting up the last of their traps on and around the road where the grassland gently rose into the foothills, then took cover in the sparse woods there - it wouldn't do to be spotted while the caravan could still retreat to the other end of the plain. Their quarry would reach them just before sundown.

"Revenge," Pollux sighed again, "is sweet."

Chapter Ten

Something was wrong. Gabrielle didn't know what just yet, but when one of the Guardians knocked on Lilith's wagon and breathlessly informed them that Xena wanted to see them both, she knew it had to be serious. And when she and Lilith reached the front of the column and saw Meleager, Morgin and Solari, her stomach sank even further.

They gathered around Xena in a loose circle. "We've got some decisions to make," the warrior stated flatly, getting right to the point. "The mercenaries are here, a couple of miles up the road, waiting..."

"So we retreat," Morgin began, then was cut off by a pair of glaring, ice-blue eyes.

Xena exhaled slowly, then said patiently, "Wouldn't do any good. They're mounted. All of them. They've formed into battle lines, so they know we're coming. It's a safe bet they'd know if we tried to run. With the

wagons, we couldn't possibly move fast enough to get away." The warrior paused, letting what she'd said sink in. "Running isn't an option. It's that simple."

"So what *are* our options?" Gabrielle asked carefully. The bard had taken in the way Xena was standing, how every fiber of the warrior's being was on alert, coiled and ready to spring. This by itself made the bard understand just how serious the danger was, but she also knew that when Xena was this focused, you had to be very deliberate in how you said things.

The warrior turned to look at Gabrielle, saw how her bard was both steadfast and understanding, and was suddenly aware of her own iron hostility, barely held in check. *The battle hasn't started yet, Xena*, she sternly reminded herself. *Quit treating your allies like they're enemies*. "All right" she said absently, fighting for calm. "We don't have many choices. In fact, we really have only one: Stand and fight."

"She's right," Meleager agreed, nodding, his expression grim. "No way they don't know we're here. The only thing we can do is keep..." He glanced at Lilith. "We have to keep the non-combatants out of it."

Xena nodded back. "I have a plan," she said simply. "It's not much, I admit, but it gives us a chance." She looked around the circle. "I won't lie to you though - I expect heavy casualties, no matter how this turns out. Morgin, Lilith, will the Guardians stand?"

Lilith looked like she was about to say something, but Morgin spoke first. "Of course," the First Guardian answered with authority. "All of us have long since pledged to die in defense of the following. We're ready to do so now." Lilith lowered her head, but smiled.

Xena gave a dry chuckle. "I'd rather you make the mercenaries die in defending the following," she said without a hint of irony, then clapped Morgin on the shoulder. "but thanks." The warrior turned slightly. "Solari..."

The Amazon groaned. "Aw come *on* Xena. If you think for one second a single Amazon is going to back down from a fight, you deserve to be tied over an anthill." Solari turned and bowed deferentially to Gabrielle, then said knowingly, "Unless of course, my Queen thinks otherwise..."

"You kidding?" The Amazon Queen gave a graveside laugh. "I wouldn't even *try* to hold 'em back. They've been kinda edgy, frankly, and could use a good fight - just to work off their, um ... *tension* from guarding all these eager women," Gabrielle finished, nudging Solari with the hint of a blush.

"Damn right," Solari nudged her Queen back. "And Xena, let me tell you - frustrated Amazons are *nasty* enemies in battle."

The warrior shook her head. "All right, all right..." Xena quickly collected herself, growing serious again. "For what's it worth, we do have a slight numerical advantage - I'd put it at less than ten, but it's something. There's also a low hill to the west, and it's not much, but it's our best shot. We should form up the caravan behind it and put every soldier on top. We'll be in full view of the mercenaries, and we just have to hope they're more impatient than we are. I'm not about to charge into them..."

"Traps!" everyone around the warrior said, almost simultaneously. The circle began to giggle.

Xena rolled her eyes and nodded. "Yes: Traps. We let them come to us, not us to them."

Solari continued to chuckle as she said, "So we rain arrows down on them as they charge ... pepper their ranks ... *penetrate* them, oh, as best we can..." She laughed again. Everyone else laughed too.

"This is *serious*, people!" Xena growled.

Morgin nodded soberly, then said, "The way to stop men on horseback ... well, *real* men," she began, losing her own battle with herself and laughing again, leaning back and cupping her hands in front of her crotch. "You've gotta ... *thrust* at them, with big, *manly* spears ... show them how yours are *way* bigger than theirs..."

Xena made her disgust plain. "This is no game," she hissed.

Gabrielle threw an arm around her warrior. "Xena," she said quietly, "let them joke. Sometimes laughter is the only defense, you know?" The bard lowered her head and, although she still chuckled, let a seriousness into her words. "You know we're all focused on everyone's safety. You've seen how good everyone is - depended on it already a few times. We're all friends here..."

Friends... Xena cut her bard off with a raised hand and closed eyes. "You're right..." The warrior chastised herself. *This isn't your army Xena. These are your friends. Everyone here takes their responsibility seriously, even if they handle it differently than you do. They might want you to lead them, but you don't own them.* "You're right..." Xena took a deep breath. "Fine then, let's make preparations and move out. Morgin, since you seem to know so much about spears, make that your first priority. Gather up as many as we have, make sure they're all at least six feet long - longer, if possible."

"This will be done," Morgin smiled, then furrowed her brows. "However, I don't think we have many."

"I know," Xena nodded, thinking. Then a slow smile spread across her face. "We can tear the planks off the sides of the wagons," the warrior said slowly. "Rip them down lengthwise, then sharpen one end - ought to be able to get three or four out of each plank. They won't last long, but..."

"But neither will they have to." Morgin positively beamed. "We only have to stop a single charge. I'll see to it - we'll have dozens by the time we reach the hill. We can work as we move." She saluted and hurried off.

The warrior turned to Solari. "How's the arrow supply?"

The Amazon shrugged. "Considering we won't need any more after today, one way or the other? We've got plenty. Extra bows too, if any of the Guardians know how to use them."

"Good," Xena smirked. "Go pass 'em around."

"Yes, my General," Solari chuckled, saluting, then she smartly turned on her heel and headed towards the massing Amazons.

Meleager took Lilith's arm and turned her away slightly, leaning in to talk quietly. Xena took that as her cue to do the same with Gabrielle. Before the warrior could say a word, the bard had silenced her with a finger to Xena's lips.

"No chance," Gabrielle said gently, smiling. "I am not going to stay out of this battle. No way. I'll be right there, watching your back." Xena started to protest, but the strawberry blonde cut her off again. "And don't

worry - the Amazons can watch *my* back. You won't even have to think about me."

Xena pulled her bard into a tight embrace. "Not much chance of that, my love." They took a long moment to simply hold each other, letting the warmth of their bond surround them, comfort them.

Barely six feet away, Meleager and Lilith were doing the same. The aging warrior cleared his throat a little. "Um, Lilith, I uh ... just in case ... I mean..." He let out a long breath, then pulled away slightly and looked deep into the Priestess' gray eyes. "What I'm trying to say is ... I love you Lilith, and I want to spend the rest of my life with you."

The Priestess hugged him tight again, smiling against his chest. "I know, my dear one. I know. You have made me happy in my time, and I love you as well, for you have touched my heart. There is joy in your words, such pleasure in knowing your soul. Spend the rest of your life with me dear one, and I will love you forever."

"I love you Lilith," Meleager said quietly, as if re-affirming them to himself, then more strongly, "By all the gods, I love you Lilith." They kissed warmly.

Without breaking their own embrace, Xena and Gabrielle both took a moment to glance at the pair. "I think," the warrior mused, "these are the strangest battle preparations I've ever been involved in."

The bard chuckled and snuggled closer. "I'm not knocking it."

Xena reached up and cradled her love's head so she could look down into those wonderful eyes of green. "Me neither," she whispered, before covering Gabrielle's lips with her own.

The four of them rejoined the caravan just as it was moving out. Meleager went to help the Guardians with the spears, while Gabrielle decided it was a good time for the Queen to give some words of encouragement to the Amazons. This left Xena with Lilith.

The warrior pursed her lips. "Lilith," she began, "I have to ask this..."

The Priestess shook her head. "No Xena," she said quietly. "I am sorry, but I will not fight. I would not be of much use in any case, not for long. To be in the midst of battle, to feel the anger and pain around me, so strong..." She sighed sadly, looking at the ground, then looked up again. "No, I cannot."

Xena recalled the manic look in the immortal's eyes after she had subdued the crew of the slaver's ship, fully realizing now where it had come from, and why. "I understand," the warrior nodded soberly. "Stay behind the hill with everyone else. If the battle goes badly, move out and make a run for it - don't stop until you reach the valley, all right? No matter what else happens, I will *not* let the mercenaries take this caravan."

The warrior was startled by the Priestess suddenly surrounding her in a close embrace. "Ah, Xena," she sighed, gave a soft sob. "You and Gabrielle, and all who have fought so hard to protect us, endured so much so selflessly, you are the true joy of the Earth. I have known so few like you ... you will fill me hope for generations upon generations. I pray the Goddess your lives are long and happy."

Despite herself, Xena felt oddly touched by the immortal's words, let herself hug the smaller woman lightly. "Thank you Lilith. I ... I wouldn't have missed this for the world," she chuckled. "Now, I've got things to do, if you don't mind."

Lilith laughed softly and released the warrior, smiling as she wiped at her tearing eyes. "No, it is I who must thank you. No matter what happens this day, I will remember you all, always, with a special place in my heart."

"Take care Lilith," Xena smiled, then brushed past to find Argo.

Svetla walked up and placed a hand on Lilith's arm. "My Priestess," she said quietly, "we are witness to a miracle. These are the most noble of souls, to place themselves in such danger for our sake ... truly they were sent by Inanna."

"Yes they are," the immortal responded, her face growing serious, "and I will not stand idle and watch them perish from the Earth." She turned to the slim blonde. "Send word to the priestesses Svetla, and gather the faithful - we have preparations to make."

"What will we do?"

Lilith favored her with an oddly serious smile. "We shall do what has not been done for well over a thousand years. We must give of ourselves completely, Svetla, and if Inanna favors us we shall, at least in this small time and place, win over anger and hatred..."

* * *

Race was drumming his fingers on his saddle horn - a noise that bugged Pollux to no end. "Where are they?" Race asked. "They should have been here an hour ago." The drumming continued.

Pollux gritted his teeth and didn't bother to answer. All the men were keyed up and ready for battle after days of hard riding and laborious preparations, and this interminable waiting was only making everyone anxious and more than a little cranky. Blowing up at Race over something so inconsequential wouldn't help anything.

Finally, Heptus rode up with a scout. "Well?" Pollux snapped.

"Spotted 'em sir," Heptus replied, a bit out of breath, "on a low hill to the southwest."

Now it was Race's turn to snap at him. "And? What are they doing there?"

"Nothing, as near as I can tell. I think..."

"What in Tartarus is that supposed to mean?" Race cut him off. "*Nothing?*"

Pollux silenced his partner with a curt wave, staring at his lieutenant. "Just give the full report."

Heptus narrowed his eyes, then spoke in a deliberately calm, measured voice. "Like I said: The Amazons and those whose Guardians are set up on a low hill a mile or so southwest. The caravan seems to be hidden somewhere. They're just sitting on the hill. They're not moving. It doesn't look like they're going to move. End of report, *sir*."

"Great," Race snorted. "Fine, tell everyone to get ready - we're moving out."

"Are you really *that* stupid?" Pollux spat, finally losing his temper. "That's exactly what they want! We'd be Amazon pincushions before we even reached the hill!"

"So what do *you* want to do, oh great leader?" Race sneered back. "Sit here on our butts, waiting for the light to fade so they can slip away in the dark?"

"We need a plan..." Pollux began.

"To Tartarus with plans!" Race shot back. "All we've done is plan! I'm sick to death of plans! It's time we *act*!" He yanked on his reigns, turning the horse around to face the men as he drew his sword. "I say we attack, *now*! Ride at them hard and fast - who's with me? Kill them all!"

Pollux fumed silently through the cheers that thundered around him. *We're all gonna die*, he thought to himself. Then he sighed. *Yeah, like that won't happen sometime anyway*. With that he drew his own sword. "All right then!" he shouted. "Let's make this a battle even the gods will remember!"

Within seconds, fifty-two mounted, heavily armed men thundered at full gallop across the plain, toward the setting sun, and revenge.

* * *

Xena stood looking out over the plain, an odd mix of emotions inside her. There was the usual adrenaline-filled tingle in her limbs that she always felt before a battle, and she understood this - it was almost as familiar to her as breathing. Yet, standing on that hill, one hand lightly keeping contact with the warm, bare skin of Gabrielle's back, her bard's hand resting over her shoulder in turn, the warrior also felt a strange, almost sensual peace. To have such seemingly opposed feelings at once was confusing, focusing, and yet liberating at the same time.

She took a moment to gather her thoughts, then leaned in closer to her love. "Gabrielle," she began quietly, "if something should happen..."

"It won't," Gabrielle cut her off. "You won't let it, and neither will I. Look around Xena - we've faced much worse odds than this." The young woman chewed the inside of her lip, then just chuckled. "Do you believe in destiny?"

The warrior narrowed her eyes. "Actually no. I believe we control our own."

Gabrielle smiled. "Then there you go - are you going to let a few mercenaries come between us?"

Xena grinned back, gave a light chuckle in return. "Point taken." She kissed the smaller woman on the temple, then glanced around. Every archer was ready, everyone had a spear within easy reach, the troops seemed no more edgy than usual before a battle. *Victory isn't in question*, the warrior thought. *But how many casualties will there be? How many of these women will I mourn at day's end?*

The warrior sighed, then glanced over her shoulder towards the caravan.

The sight made her pause. "Meleager?" she frowned, clearly annoyed. "What are they doing? They should all be in the wagons."

Meleager turned to look, then frowned himself. "Beats me."

Every single one of Lilith's followers were gathered around the immortal, arms draped over each other's shoulders in a series of close, concentric circles. They swayed slightly, seemed to be chanting something.

Meleager shook his head. "I'll run down and -"

"*Here they come!*" Solari shouted. "Archers!"

"Damn you Priestess," Xena muttered, reaching for her own bow, deliberately taking time to notch an arrow and draw before she faced the enemy. The mercenaries were riding at full gallop, dangerously fast and well spread out - a less easy target for their arrows than she might have hoped.

Wait ... wait ... "Now!" the warrior howled, letting fly, notching and releasing another almost immediately as the Amazons did the same.

The arrows fell in lethal arcs. A number of mercenaries dropped as they or their horses were hit. Their ranks were thinned, but the rest thundered on, barely slowing - this was a suicide charge, and everyone on both sides knew it.

"Spears!" Xena commanded, dropping her bow and charging halfway down the hill, her own spear in hand, the Guardians and half the Amazons following while the rest continued to fire their bows as fast and as accurately as they could. Xena and those with her crouched and planted the butts of the spears firmly into the ground, then raised the points, forming a tight line. A few riders were able to skirt around, a number of others managed to pull up short, but the rest crashed the line with brutal force, sending horses and riders to the ground in bloody heaps.

Xena felt the impact as the spear shattered in her hands, and barely had time to roll aside as the horse she'd impaled flipped almost completely over. A spare second later she was on her feet, sword drawn, decapitating the rider as he groggily tried to rise.

The warrior glanced around, desperately searching for Gabrielle, then caught sight of her. The bard, Solari, and a couple of other Amazons battled against a half dozen men, but Xena quickly lost the strawberry blonde again as a still-mounted mercenary charged at the warrior. She flipped and hit him with both feet square in the chest, knocking him down, driving her sword through him as they hit the ground.

And then she heard ... *singing?*

For some reason, it stopped her dead in her tracks.

Xena rose to her feet and looked up the hill. Lilith and her followers were standing in a tight group, silhouetted against the setting sun, a swaying chorus framed by clouds that glowed with such a bright, golden light it was almost impossible to look at directly.

*"My one love has blossomed,
My one love has grown.
My one love is an orchid by the water.
My one love, the one my body loves best..."*

Xena shook her head, trying to clear it. There was a powerful current of sensuality carried on the song, not so much in the words as in the slow rhythm with which they were delivered. It was the same low and high combination they'd heard the first day they passed Lilith's camp, only magnified, carried through a hundred voices, warmly affectionate yet indisputably sexual. The feeling flowed down the hill in a palpable wave, washing over her, making her limbs tremble.

*"My well-stocked garden of the plain,
My barley growing high in its furrow,
My apple tree which bears fruit up to its crown,
My one love is an orchid by the water..."*

The pull of a hundred hearts was irresistible. Emotions on edge from battle were swayed easily to an equally strong feeling of joy edged with physical arousal, which began to seep into Xena's very core. Everyone else was gripped just as powerfully, and all around the warrior the fighting had slowed or stopped altogether. She saw Morgin and Dulith standing in a group with three mercenaries, the two women joined in song, the men swaying in place, occasionally trying to raise their weapons, only to lower them again in confusion.

*"My honeyed one, my honeyed one sweetens me always.
My one love, the honeyed one of the Goddess,
The one my body loves best,
Sweetens me always..."*

By now all the Guardians had joined the chorus in song, adding to the pull of the music, feeding the swirling sensations it carried. More than a few Amazons had joined in as well, and if they didn't know the words, they caught the rhythm, and lent their voices to the notes. Xena was losing herself to the overwhelming pull of the emotions surging within her and everyone around her, realizing she was feeling theirs almost as clearly as she did her own. It was all she could do to put one foot in front of the other, desperately trying to keep moving through the swaying crowd, using every ounce of concentration to stay focused on one thing: Finding Gabrielle.

*"My eager impetuous caresser of my body,
My caresser of soft thighs,
My one love, the one my body loves best,
My one love is an orchid by the water..."*

Lilith and her followers began walking down the hill as they sang, their brilliant white gowns drifting off their bodies as they moved. The very few combatants who had any will left to fight lost it at that moment - the sheer sight of so much smooth, feminine beauty, offered so freely, would have left an army speechless.

And it did. Two of them.

"Xena!" Gabrielle shouted, running over and throwing her arms around her warrior.

"Gabrielle..." Xena moaned. The flood within her became a raging torrent, the feel and the sound and the smell of her love surrounding her, deliciously warm and alive and loving and perfect in the way that only Gabrielle could be. The warrior's hands ran unconsciously over the bare skin of her bard's back, only her iron will keeping her from reaching lower and gripping Gabrielle's wonderfully firm bottom and pulling her in for a kiss that would certainly kill them both. She forced herself to pull back slightly, gasping, "We ... we have to

get out of here ... Lilith, she's..."

"No..." Gabrielle insisted, whispering. "No ... we have to stay ... please? We have to stay..."

Xena scooped up the smaller woman in her arms, trying to shake off the tingling sensation from wherever Gabrielle's bare skin touched her own. The warrior's arousal was growing dangerous in its intensity. With great difficulty she began walking in a straight line, ignoring the couples and small groups which were beginning to form and drift to the ground together around them. She had no idea where she was going, just followed her feet downhill. Anywhere just to get away.

"We ... have to get out of here Gabrielle," Xena stammered, "too powerful ... don't want to hurt you..." There was a lone boulder near the base of the hill and Xena headed for it, irrationally thinking that if they could just get behind it they could somehow shield themselves from Lilith's immeasurably amplified empathic powers.

Gabrielle gripped her warrior's head in her hands, deliberately bringing them to a halt and locking her deep green eyes to blue. "I won't break, Xena," she said huskily. "I *want* your passion. Take me..."

The smoldering look in her bard's eyes made Xena believe it. She covered the smaller woman's lips with her own, felt Gabrielle's hand gripping the back of her head almost painfully. Xena's entire world collapsed to the single point where her mouth and tongue joined with her bard's, the warrior nearly climaxing right then and there from the sheer loving sensuality of it.

The strength left Xena's arms, but Gabrielle landed easily on her feet, through some miracle or force of will never breaking the kiss. Now Xena did squeeze her bard's firm buttocks in her hands, making her small partner moan and press her body against her dark lover as they both shuddered. "Take me Xena," Gabrielle gasped.

With her last ounce of determination, Xena broke away and took one of the bard's hands in her own, pulling and half dragging her around the other side of the boulder. With another soul-searing kiss they collapsed to the ground, the raven-haired woman pushing the strawberry blonde onto her back. "I'm going to take you Gabrielle," she rumbled throatily, "take you places you've never been..." After plunging her tongue into Gabrielle's willing mouth again, she clutched the bard's green top in an iron grip. "No time for niceties," she growled, then tore the material away and seized on the soft, inviting flesh underneath.

Gabrielle moaned and raised her head, hungrily claiming her lover's mouth again, snapping a shoulder clasp in her haste and desperation to get Xena out of her armor.

At the start it was the fiercest lovemaking either woman had ever known. It was primal, fighting for advantage, each knowing the other's needs instinctively yet always goading the other on.

Then, slowly, after a time, the easy warmth of the love between them gentled the pace, if not the intensity as they each began responding only to the other's shuddering rhythms. Every sensation melted into the next until neither could be certain where one of them ended and the other began. It seemed as though the moans and cries which carried to them from everyone else fed their desire, pushed them higher still. Carried on an ocean of love and pleasure, they found a place where they were a single entity, one being bound together by joy.

And as the first rays of dawn painted the sky, they collapsed against one another, exhausted and senseless. It would be hours before either could stir.

* * *

Solari awoke groggily. She smiled, even though it felt like she had a bad hangover, except her head didn't hurt, and the mid-morning light didn't bother her eyes. Then her memory of the night before slowly came back to her, mostly in unconnected bits and pieces. *Merciful Artemis*, she mentally groaned, *that was ... that was amazing. Maybe I oughta think about staying with Lilith in that valley of hers...*

The next thing she was aware of was that a guy was under her, which wasn't altogether unpleasant. She always figured that some day she'd find the right girl to join with and settle down, but she still enjoyed herself when she could have a man. In fact, when a nice guy and her own unpredictable mood happened at the same time she rarely passed up the opportunity. *Actually, it's probably better this happened with a guy*, she reasoned, *if it'd been a woman, there would have been no reason to stop and it probably would have killed me*. Rolling a half-opened eye downward, she mentally snorted. *Although you didn't do too bad for yourself girl ... nice one actually.*

The sight of her reasonably well-endowed partner suddenly made her realize that she was naked too. Although for that matter, she noted, so was everyone else. The Amazon looked around, grinning wickedly. *Well here's something you don't see every day. Yah, definitely one to tell the granddaughters - although probably not until they're older.* The hillside was covered with scores of naked women, perhaps forty naked men, piled together mostly in twos and threes of random genders, although a few larger groups were scattered here and there.

Solari saw Adrea and Dulith tangled together and asleep a few yards away, and chuckled. *Sorry Juna, but I think those two are gonna be about inseparable after this.* *Actually*, her thoughts turned serious for a moment, *now that I think of it, this little group grope is likely to upset more than a few women back home. Orit over there has been joined for what, five summers? Oh well*, she mused, *maybe we'll get a few new pregnancies, so it wouldn't be all bad.*

By necessity, a nation entirely of women had to make a few concessions to procreative realities. Expectant mothers were revered by tradition, but also by tradition, how they got that way was never, ever questioned. Joined couples could decide things for themselves in whatever manner they were comfortable, but once it happened, that was that and discussion ended. Solari glanced around again. *Well, no help there - seems like most of us managed to find other women ... guess we'll just have to claim extenuating circumstances or something ... or just keep this quiet.* She mentally snorted. *Yeah, like that's gonna happen ... oh well, no sense worrying about it right now.*

In looking around, Solari slowly realized there were also roughly a dozen, fully clothed, very dead bodies lying in places as well.

Don't want to think about that just yet either. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, then brought her thoughts back to her own situation. *So, who is this guy anyway?* Then she turned her head to get a better look at who she'd wound up with as he stirred into wakefulness. "Aw, Hera's tits ... you're Pollux? The one who's been causing us all this trouble?"

"Yeah, that'd be me," he said sleepily, shaking his head and smiling. "Warrior for hire ... at least I think I used to be." He looked up at her. "I don't know your name ... sorry about that," he said softly, "but I'd guess you're an Amazon?"

"The feathers are always a dead give away," Solari chuckled, then glared down at him, just because she could. "I'm Solari, and I'm an Amazon General, and don't you ever forget it."

"Not likely," he gasped. "And I'm honored..." Then he groaned. "Aw, centaur crap! I'm supposed to hate Amazons!"

Solari impulsively gripped his half-hard - though still quite impressive - member in her hand. "Didn't hate me last night, did you?" She squeezed, felt him stiffen a bit more. "Or now..."

Pollux moaned loudly. "Uhhn, looks that way ... I guess I've got some, uh, adjustments to make."

Solari grinned seductively. "Didn't know these things were adjustable," she quipped. "Why not run down the list of features for me again, hmmm?" With that she straddled him fully and guided him inside her.

* * *

Xena awoke, smiling as she realized Gabrielle was once again lying on top of her. *Have I mentioned this is a really nice way to wake up?* Granted, she felt sore and scraped all over ... also, she couldn't help notice, her lover's fingers were still inside her, buried between her legs. *Guess she did win that last round,* the warrior thought idly. Still, despite the soreness she simply felt too loved, satisfied, and good to want to move.

On the other hand, she also realized she couldn't take the chance that everyone else would just feel the same. She held her lover a little tighter, then shook her gently. "Gabrielle?" she whispered, "C'mon love, wake up..."

Gabrielle stirred, pumping her fingers absently. Xena found herself responding, despite the pain it caused. *I knew you had stamina my bard, but I had no idea ... No way I'm riding today. Hades, I'll probably be walking bowlegged for a week.* She grinned. *If I remember it right, we both will...*

That thought made her pause. She glanced down at Gabrielle's body a little more carefully, found her fears confirmed. She took in the scratches on her bard's back, the handprints that still hadn't faded on her pale buttocks, the light bruising around the visible nipple, and cringed with guilt.

A guilt which was easily brushed aside by Gabrielle gifting her with twinkling, half-open eyes and a warm, loving smile. "Morning..." Then the bard realized where her hand was and blushed. "Um, sorry about ... uh, here..." She stammered as she carefully extricated her fingers, rewarded with a grateful sigh.

"No Gabrielle, I should be sorry," Xena said quietly. "Look at what I did to you..."

The bard cut her off. "Uh, excuse me? Xena, if anything you look *worse*." She started to silence the warrior's protest with a finger to her lips, then remembered where those fingers had just been and thought better of it. Instead, she settled over on her elbow, leaving their legs entangled as she fixed her lover with a sultry grin and licked her hand clean, enjoying the obvious flush of desire it provoked.

"Mmm, Xena, listen - I know last night was, um, strange, and I'm not saying I want to make love like that all the time," she grinned sheepishly, blushing. "But I love that you're so passionate Xena. It's one of the things I love about you most, and I also love you for being able to share my own passion so freely. You made me a very happy, very satisfied woman, warrior mine. I just hope, well, I hope I did the same," she finished, her blush deepening.

Gabrielle once again draped herself over her tall lover, head pillowed on Xena's breast, sighing as they embraced. "I love you Xena, so much," she said warmly. "Now, if we're finished with the self-recrimination thing, I think we're both due some serious cuddling," she chuckled, snuggling in.

Xena shut her eyes and bit her lip. *I really should know better by now, huh?* "I love you, Gabrielle." Blinking back a tear, she raised her head and kissed the red-gold hair. Then with a reluctant frown, she listened closely to what was happening on the other side of the boulder they were sheltered behind.

Satisfied there was nothing going on - *at least, not anything dangerous* - she held her love a little tighter and found herself relaxing again completely. *Yeah ... cuddle ... sounds good.* She sighed contentedly. "I want you to know, my bard, last night was the most wonderful, most honest love I've ever made in my life." She smiled warmly, caressing her love gently as she held her close. "You're the one my body loves best, Gabrielle ... and all the rest of me too."

* * *

When the sun was at its height, Xena gave Gabrielle a last kiss and finally, gently, extricated herself from her lover. She donned her leathers, then found Argo and dug around until she came up with Gabrielle's spare set of clothes. The bard's outfit from last night had been effectively shredded, and the warrior was a bit embarrassed.

Gabrielle laughed, tossing her destroyed green top away as a lost cause. "At least my boots and belt came through it OK. That buckle means a lot, you know?" Xena chuckled.

The two of them walked across the hill. The warrior had on her usual outfit, except for the swirling breast and back plates. The broken clasp was beyond a quick fix. *And if I ever needed proof Gabrielle is stronger than she looks...*

All two hundred people were standing or sitting in various states of undress, and a range of moods. Most were in pairs or small groups, talking quietly and laughing. What drew Xena's attention immediately was Race, backed by about ten fully armored men, arguing with Pollux.

Xena approached Solari, who stood watching the exchange, arms crossed. "Xena, my Queen," the Amazon nodded.

"What's going on?" Xena asked.

"Pollux has had a change of heart," Solari said. "Now he wants to ride with the caravan, help protect it, and live in Lilith's valley. So do most of the men actually, a few Amazons too." She looked down and chuckled. "Artemis forgive me," she muttered, "I almost decided to do the same..."

Pollux had his heavy leather pants on, but was naked from the waist up. "I don't care about that," he was saying loudly. "I've found a different path - no big deal. Hey, if you want to keep fighting and slaughtering people and get paid for it, then go ahead." He shrugged. "But know this: If you ever cross me Race, I'll drop you without a second thought," he said, matter-of-factly.

Race sneered. "So this is the great warrior Pollux? One good lay and he's tamed. You *disgust* me!"

Xena smirked. "This is just guy ... well, it's mercenary stuff." She shook her head. "Race will give up and leave soon enough. Solari, as quietly as possible gather some Amazons and Guardians. Arm yourselves and keep an eye on Race and his men. I don't think this will turn violent, but no sense taking chances. Just make sure they head out the opposite direction we do, all right?"

Solari chuckled. "No problem. I gather you're going to tackle the daunting task of getting everyone organized?"

Xena rolled her eyes. "Someone has to..." Then the warrior leaned in and asked seriously, "Do you believe Pollux?"

Solari leered and laughed. "Hey, who do you think is the reason he *likes* Amazons now?"

Gabrielle snorted. "Solari, you are incorrigible!"

The Amazon shifted to a smirk. "Like you, my Queen, are ever so chaste - I count at least ten hickeys between you ... don't even want to count the scratches and bites..."

Gabrielle blushed, tried to say something, then just turned away and followed a chuckling Xena. They found Lilith with Meleager at the top of the hill, Meleager seated with the immortal reclined against him. The couple were wrapped up in a large wool blanket and, apparently, nothing else. The immortal smiled as they approached. "Joy and love to you, Xena and Gabrielle," she purred. "Inanna has blessed us beyond measure. This day shall truly remain sacred among the faithful for all time."

"Good afternoon to you too," Xena grinned. "That was ... an interesting tactic Lilith. It seems the only casualties were mercenaries who died in the charge - well, and Gabrielle's outfit." She chuckled, then added, more seriously, "You took a big risk."

Lilith continued to smile. "No more than did any of you. It was ... let us say an act of faith. I believed in my Goddess, in the love she bears to all things, and in the love that lies within us all. I and those who follow me simply released it." She gave a silvery laugh. "And you Xena, and you Gabrielle, you fairly glow with it."

The warrior smiled and ran a hand through her bard's hair, was gifted with a warm smile and a light blush in return. "Yeah well," Xena sighed wistfully, "still, I think we've had enough afterglow for one day. We should get moving."

"Yeah," Meleager sighed back, "guess we should ... if I can find my clothes." He laughed lightly and wrapped his arms around Lilith, nuzzling her hair for a brief moment before he looked up at Xena. As if searching for something to say, he asked, "So, is Race going to be trouble?"

"Don't think so," the warrior answered. "I've got Solari looking after him just in case, but I'm pretty sure he'll just shout himself out and go away. My biggest concern is that he'll track us and find the valley."

Meleager scratched his chin. "Then defense will have to be a top priority once we get there ... put a couple of gates in the tunnel..." his voice drifted off. Then he shook his head. "Yeah, let's just get there first. C'mon Lilith, let's see if we can find something to wear."

The immortal laughed and playfully kissed his chin before rising smoothly to her feet, standing gloriously nude

under the bright noon sun. Xena raised an eyebrow, sweeping her with an appreciative glance. Gabrielle just stared.

Lilith winked at them, then looked down at Meleager. "The Earth gives us all we need, dear one, yet it does not grow clothing that I am aware of," she grinned slyly, then casually glided off down the hill towards the wagons, naked as the day she was formed.

* * *

"By all the gods," Gabrielle breathed. "It's incredible."

Xena settled an arm around her shoulders and nodded as they drank in the sight. Lilith's valley was as lush and green as the immortal had promised, filled with trees of a surprising variety and an expanse of flowing grassland, split by a slowly moving river whose source was a high waterfall tumbling down the cliffs in the distance, and which ended in a small lake. Some miles to their right, the warrior could make out the steaming plumes of hot springs. *The winters here would be pretty mild*, she mused idly. It was one of the most beautiful places Xena had ever beheld in all her travels.

Warrior and bard stood on the edge of a low drop off at the exit to the tunnel along with Meleager, Lilith, and a number of others, all of them momentarily speechless. Finally, it was Pollux who spoke first. "This ... this is," he began, voice choking with emotion, "this is the closest I'll ever get to seeing the Elysian Fields. I don't deserve to be this lucky ... I hope you can forgive me some day. Thank you for this chance ... thank you all."

Xena held Gabrielle a little tighter as she regarded him for a moment, noting the open emotion on the ex-mercenary's face. Tears were falling, and he seemed barely in control. *Been through a lot of life changes in a mighty short time, haven't you Pollux?* Xena thought. *Tartarus of a shock when it hits you, huh?*

The warrior shuddered lightly, and feeling it, Gabrielle gave her a reassuring squeeze. "Dinar for your thoughts?" the bard asked.

Xena looked down into those loving green eyes, filled with soft concern, and smiled warmly. "Just thinking that some paths to redemption are a lot easier than others, and that out of everyone here, I'm probably the luckiest one of all."

Gabrielle bit her lip and hugged her love close. "Sometimes Xena," she chuckled, sniffing, "you say the sweetest things."

Xena held her precious bard for a moment, pressing her face into the red-gold hair. "Yeah, well," she chuckled lightly, "don't go spreading that around." She sighed. "All right, enough mushy stuff. Time to get practical again."

Reluctantly, Xena let Gabrielle go, then turned and addressed everyone. "C'mon folks, you'll have the rest of your lives to enjoy the view, but we've only got a few hours of daylight left and we need a ramp so the wagons can get over this drop off - it won't just build itself."

Meleager sighed. "Yeah, you're right. The work here is just beginning - we've got a village to build, crops to plant, defenses to figure out. Not to mention we've got to recruit a few hundred more settlers, import all kinds of equipment we don't have yet but *will* need, about a million other things we probably haven't even *begun* to

guess at..."

Lilith laughed, wrapping an arm around his waist and pressing the side of her face against his shoulder, a single tear falling down a sculpted cheek as she looked out over her beloved home. "There will be time enough, my dear one. Now that we are here at last, there will be time enough. With Inanna's love and that of our hearts it shall be such pleasure living it through, all of us with the Goddess ... one precious day at a time."

Epilog

A few weeks later, Xena sat comfortably on the ground of a nice little isolated glen they'd happened across. They'd found it by following a small river for no reason, and now they were miles away from anywhere in particular. She was propped up against her saddle, dressed in a shift while mending a tear in Gabrielle's. The bard sat on the other side of their small campfire, intently scribbling away at a scroll.

The warrior bit through the end of the thread, tested the stitching to make sure it would hold, then folded the shift neatly and put it aside. She settled with her hands in her lap, watching her lover for a time, allowing herself the simple joy of being well-fed, warm, safe, and together.

They had spent some time with Lilith and her followers, both assisting with the construction and just wandering the valley by themselves, unwinding after the arduous journey. Xena smiled at the memory of the two nights they had spent camped by the hot springs. *I don't know where you got them from, my bard, but I think you got me hooked on scented oils.*

Saying goodbye had been difficult and a lot more emotional than Xena had expected. She owed the immortal a great deal for getting her to admit what was in her heart, and found she'd grown extremely fond of Morgin as well.

Xena chuckled lightly thinking of the First Guardian. Morgin had wound up in an odd relationship with both Pollux and Torin, one of the half-dozen Amazons who had decided to stay. The three of them had taken to drilling and sparring together, their vastly different military backgrounds giving them a lot to discuss and learn from each other. Soon they were rarely apart, sharing meals and work details, and then one day, things had just ... happened. Still, it seemed more than a few relationships involving multiple partners had been formed in the valley, and Morgin seemed happy, so Xena was happy for her.

After leaving, Xena and Gabrielle had journeyed with Solari and the Amazons until they reached the Ipress road, where they had parted ways. The Amazons spent a night in celebration, bidding a warm farewell to their Queen before swinging east and heading home the next morning, while warrior and bard had continued south with no specific destination in mind.

Now, here they were, a day later, improbably taking a day off. *Just a day. Not a bad thing, really.* Xena watched with affectionate amusement as Gabrielle silently - and not so silently - mouthed sentences, made random gestures, would scribble something down only to look disgusted and cross it out, then repeat the process, all in the course of putting their latest "epic adventure" down on parchment. *She's so beautiful when she's writing ... so serious about everything.*

Finally, Gabrielle sighed and gave a resigned shrug, carefully blotting off any excess ink before rolling up the scroll and tucking it back in its case. "So," Xena asked nonchalantly, "how'd it turn out?"

The bard set the case aside and crossed the camp, settling down next to Xena with a self-disgusted groan. "It's how it turned out that's the problem," she grunted, crossing her arms and staring at the fire. "We're talking about a story that basically ends with the biggest orgy in history, and that wouldn't exactly fly in a tavern full of farmers. I'd probably be stoned just for telling it."

Gabrielle cut herself off with another grunt, tightening her crossed arms even as she leaned against her warrior, who slid an arm around the bard's tense shoulders and let the smaller woman continue to rant as they watched the dancing flames. "Aw, just forget it," the bard sighed. "Even if I did get a chance to tell it, no one's ever going to believe it anyway - a bunch of women stop a battle by singing, and then over two hundred people make love, not war? Merciful Artemis, I was a part of it and *I* don't quite believe it. This one's getting sealed up, stowed away, and never taken out again."

Xena grinned, leaning in to nuzzle the bard's neck, then sucking an earlobe between her teeth. "Even if I ask really nice? I like how it turns out," she purred.

"Uh, well," Gabrielle stammered back, the tension in her body slowly easing, "I suppose on um, special occasions..."

"Mmm-hmm..." Xena continued to purr, running her lips and tongue in a relentless assault over the bard's ear.

"Ohhh ... Um, Xena?"

"Yesss?" the warrior hissed, with deliberate sensuality.

"Now would be special, right?"

"Mmm, very..." Xena whispered, moving her attention to the side of the bard's throat, feeling the thrumming pulse under her lips. "Do we need words to tell this story?" She slid a hand up under Gabrielle's top, slowly caressing the warm skin she found hidden there.

The bard moaned, turning to face the warrior, straddling her lap, wrapping her legs around Xena's hips. One callused hand still moved slowly under her top, while the other skillfully unfastened the bard's belt, then slipped down under the back of her skirt. "Nnnhh ... yeah we do..." Gabrielle chuckled breathlessly, "... but just the loud parts..." She began nibbling the taller woman's collarbone, then groaned when her lover once again captured her earlobe. "Oh, gods," she breathed, "I love you Xena..."

Small hands were tugging up the warrior's shift, fingers tracing light patterns over the warm, sensitive hollow of Xena's back, making the tall woman shiver. "And I love you Gabrielle," she whispered, just before sealing their mouths together. "For as long as Earth endures..."

END

Disclaimer: No immortals were harmed in the writing of this story. Lilith almost got a cold, but some nice hot tea fixed her right up.

Author's notes (a better term would be "Ego's notes". I guess I go on sometimes):

I realize that Lilith and Inanna are powerful figures in the lives of some modern women (maybe a few men

too), and I sincerely apologize to anyone who might have been offended by the way I characterized them here. I had no intention of ever making that aspect of the story particularly accurate, and don't pretend to know much about either beyond a general familiarity with the legends and a small amount of follow-up research. Although I based things loosely on myth and history, I pretty much made it up as I went along to suit my own evil purposes.

On the other hand, I decided to defer to Homer and Plutarch and place the main Amazon city in Themiscrya, on the Thermodon River south of the Black Sea (among other things, they're said to be the first to use iron weapons. How 'bout *that*?). This puts them pretty far afield from Greece as it's depicted in X:WP but it suited the story, since traveling by wagon from there to upper Macedonia would take at least a week or two, and leave a large caravan open to ambush as it crossed the Bosphorus and headed through eastern Thrace. There really isn't any other route you could take.

Oh, and there never was a chain ferry at Byzantium (modern Istanbul). I made that up. I have no clue if such a contraption would even really work, but once I got the idea for that scene I wasn't going to let a little thing like physics stop me - after all, Xena doesn't. However, for a time Byzantium *was* ruled by a series of Alexander's generals after his death.

In the "Things I can't take credit for" department, Lilith's ceremony isn't entirely my creation. The "three-formed Goddess" benediction was stolen outright from some Web site or another. I came across it one day while working on something else and I liked it enough to save it (I'm a terrible information pack rat), then months later as I was writing this it just worked so well I pasted it in pretty much as is. Trouble is, I can't for the life of me remember where it came from. I think it's Wiccan, but I'm not sure. If anyone can give me information on this, I'll duly credit the source.

The "who will plow my so-and-so" part of the ceremony, as well as the final hymn sung by Lilith and her followers are historical, adapted from the real Sumerian hymns and poems of Inanna, as translated in *Inanna: Queen of Heaven and Earth* by Diane Wolkstein and Samuel Noah Kramer (used entirely without permission, but I suppose you can't exactly copyright something that's 4,000 years old). I altered the original text a great deal, first to tone down the graphic language, edit out some things I'm sure seemed romantic to the Sumerians but would just make a modern audience laugh, and also make it gender neutral so it would fit the story better.

For example, and for anyone who cares, the translation originally read:

"My vulva, the horn,
The Boat of Heaven,
Is full of eagerness like the young moon.
My untilled land lies fallow.

As for me, Inanna,
Who will plow my vulva?
Who will plow my high field?
Who will plow my wet ground?

Great Lady, the King will plow your vulva.
I, Dumuzi the King, will plow your vulva.

Then plow my vulva, man of my heart!

Plow my vulva!"

Hmmm ... See what I mean?

Everything else about Lilith's ceremony I made up (and yes, Dumuzi - Inanna's lover - is the name I used for Morgin's horse. Honestly, I did it for no reason).

And you can thank Angelique for her pencil artwork "Cuddle2", which definitely inspired me (ahem) while writing that last scene.

Lastly, I know I ignored the entire third season. The Rift arc hadn't been resolved when I started this *way* back in December '97, so I ignored it, hoping I could fit it in later. I was maybe halfway through when I got very busy with other (read: Paying) jobs which took most of my free time and the bulk of my creative energy (plus I admit there were stretches when I simply got blocked or lazy), so I often couldn't do more than dabble at it for months.

As season three progressed however, and knowing how anal I am, it was clear if I wanted to stay current I would have to do a major revision (lotsa issues, you know?), which didn't really appeal to me. Plus, I liked it the way it was, especially Xena's interplay with a more innocent Gabrielle - who, I admit, I kind of miss. I did add some season three references here and there, all about Xena's past, and that was fun, although as a personal aside it was hard to keep writing sometimes knowing these two had some awful times ahead. Still, I think if and when I ever do a follow up story it'll be interesting to try my hand at figuring out how they got back together.

The worst problem with taking this long though, is that a number of things I thought were pretty clever have long since turned into Xenafiction cliches. But again, unless I was going to do a major rewrite, there was no avoiding it. Besides, I think a lot of what I came up with was still pretty clever. I hope you thought the same.

For anyone who's interested, I did deal with season three in "Two Souls", which I took some time out from this story to write (another reason this took so long). However, that was my own personal follow up to Sacrifice II, and I decided ahead of time to write it as if - in the right light and you squinted hard enough - it could be mistaken for an actual episode, so it's not an alt story. Still, even if you don't read much general fan fiction (hey, I don't either), if you've managed to read this far I think you'd like it anyway. The romance between Xena and Gabrielle is as obvious as I could make it while keeping their clothes on, and there's a lot of overlap in certain areas between it and this story (it's also a *lot* shorter). (And I apologize for the shameless plug.)

In the end, I figured if Hollywood can release *The Hunt for Red October*, with its submerged phallic symbolism years after the end of the Cold War, I can offer a more feminine counterpart: Consider this the Top Secret, pre-Rift, "story that never officially happened".

I sincerely thank every bard who's ever written Xena fan fiction. If all of you hadn't written such wonderful stories, I never would have been inspired to try.

"Thank you and good night."

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