

~ Destiny's Dominion ~

by Power Chakram

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Warning: This story contains many scenes of violence and some may be distressing. There is a reference to consensual rape (you'll have to read it and it's not graphic), and it's all to do with godly machinations.

Sex: Well there's nothing much in here, what there is, is strictly of the male/female variety and there's nothing graphic, so if that's what turns you on you're going to be bored. Caesar Warning: For any of you that really hate Julius Caesar, then you'll hate this story too ... you have been warned!

Length Warning: If you are looking for a quick read, don't start this story. It is far longer than anything that's been posted on the Xenaverse fanfic pages as far as I'm aware. I doubt that anyone would be able to read the whole thing in one sitting (that's not a challenge, by the way, just a personal observation). If you do attempt this, you'll find it full of your favourite characters and I've been told it moves at a good pace.

Chronology: Alright, this story falls somewhere between "Tsunami" and "Sacrifice I". There are too many references to episodes to mention them all, but the main ones are "When in Rome ..." which inspired the whole thing, "Destiny" and "The Bitter Suite".

Finally. This is my first effort at fanfic writing ... actually it's my first effort at any sort of story writing since I left school many, years ago. It started off as a short story and has ended up as a monster epic. I'd like to thank my very patient beta readers, Hermit (aka Bluesong of Whoosh synopsis fame), Scribe (who put the website together so you could read it) and a young friend of mine, Catherine, who encouraged with a lot of youthful enthusiasm.

If anyone one wants to send they're comments on my efforts, I'll be happy to read them and I'll try to reply as well, although I can guarantee that I won't respond to any flames that haven't got good reasons.

Thank you and enjoy!

Rome ~ The Prologue

Night hung like a cloak of midnight blue over the buildings that sprawled in every direction from his viewpoint. The pinpoint of torch-light and the hazy drift of firewood smoke wreathed the night scape with a myriad of flickering jewels and soft gauze. Alone at his window, Caesar could feel the vibrant life that pulsed through the city of Rome. There was an organic beat that his blood throbbed in rhythm with; Rome was part of him and he knew that beneath the civilized magnificence flowed a river of corrupt viciousness that suited his own temperament perfectly. Rome was him! He was Rome! It was his destiny to rule the City Empire, and through it the World!

He slammed his fist down onto the marble cill in a rare, if private, show of frustration. His plans had been progressing so well. Verchinex had fallen to him and the Gaul's execution should have sealed his grasp on the power that he knew was his by divine right. Pompey could have been relegated to a position of minor irritation, to be dealt with when the opportunity presented itself. It had all been going so well. His plans had been meticulously laid and executed. Every possible factor analysed and prepared for. Except

She had shown up.

In retrospect, he should have had her arrested as soon as she appeared. Her past actions provided more than enough justification on the legal requirements, (even if he'd really needed them); she had already been condemned for piracy and she had actively participated in the armed revolt in Britannia. Yet ... she fascinated him. The mixture of sensuality and barely constrained savagery made her so different from any woman he had ever known. The way she had strode into his palace, - *As if she had owned the place*, - he mused, - *without the slightest fear that I would act against her*, - had made him curious enough to play her game for a while. It had been a mistake! He hadn't needed a delighted Pompey to tell him that she had played him for a fool.

Looking back over the comedy of events he nearly laughed at himself. He'd been so certain that he was the one in control of the situation. All he knew of the woman had led him to make assumptions that had proven to be almost disastrously wrong. His last face to face meeting with her had been over ten years into the distant past and he had conducted his campaign to combat the woman, a woman barely more than a girl, he had then known. That had been his biggest mistake. In the intervening years, the girl had matured into a confident, sophisticated, very deadly, and highly talented adversary. The woman, she had become, had evolved far from the pirate he had known.

He almost allowed a smile to crease his rather petulant lips, a smile that would never touch his calculating brown eyes. He was aware that he was responsible for what Xena had become, so in a way he was the architect of his own failure on this particular occasion. She had manipulated his emotions and actions to perfection, and had planned just exactly how to push him to achieve her ends. It had been a campaign worthy of praise and, had it not been for the fact that Pompey had witnessed the whole sordid affair, knowing exactly what she had done, then he might well have offered her a private salutation.

As it stood, his main rival was well aware that not only was Verchinex very much alive and once again running rampant in Gaul, but that Crassus, the third member of the Triumvirate, had been executed in the barbarian's place. It was intolerable!

Now there were rumours spreading like wildfire through **his** city. He knew exactly where they originated. It was in Pompey's interest to spread the 'lies'. However, his own people were countering the rumours, with his personal brand of disinformation. For everyone who said that *'Verchinex had escaped and was back with his people,'* he had someone replying with, *'It's just another savage who's taken the name to cash in on Verchinex's reputation.'* For everyone who declared that *'It was Crassus who had been executed in the arena,'* he had someone reminding them that *'Crassus was reported dead in Syria.'* Things were balanced but not satisfactory.

He allowed his gaze to linger possessively on the night draped city before turning back to his desk with a purposeful stride. He would not allow the incident to inconvenience him. He'd find a way of taking care of Pompey, there would always be an opportunity to break the man's strength, to humble his arrogant pride, and dispose of him. All it required was patience and the resolve to seize any opportunity that presented itself.

Here in his private apartments, he had begun to draw the strands of his revenge together. A revenge reserved for a far more formidable opponent than Pompey would ever be. He kept his private documents here, rather than his more formal office, that way they were close enough for him to study no matter the hour of the night, for he slept but little in the huge comfortable bed that lay empty and neglected on the far side of the chamber.

His eyes ran over the scroll that lay open on his desk. Verchinex was once more proving to be the centre of resistance to Rome in Gaul. The XIVth Legion was taking losses, a situation that needed to be remedied before they added fuel to Pompey's rumours. In the meantime he'd free up some of the Auxiliaries from Britannia to bolster the XIVth's position. Though something of a more permanent nature need to be arranged before too long.

He stared, unseeing at the scroll, for some time as plans and possibilities juggled in his brain, his fertile intellect working on the problem. He slowly rolled the scroll up and placed it on a pile that lay on the left side of his neatly ordered desk. He drew another from the pile on the right side and broke the seal absentmindedly as he pursued his thoughts. He scanned the opening paragraph without really absorbing the content of the words, until a phrase caught his attention and he returned to the start of the scroll, now reading carefully. His eyes widened in frank disbelief at what was detailed there and, placing the scroll to one side, he reached for another to compare the content.

He tapped his chin speculatively, narrowing his dark, brown eyes as he absorbed the information. He felt an uncomfortable itch somewhere between his shoulder blades as he remembered the "assassination" attempt by Xena. He suppressed a shudder. His over confidence could easily have led to his death. Only her obvious determination to successfully complete her plan had allowed him to live. If she had really intended to kill him that night, then four legionaries would have had as much chance of stopping her as children would. He mentally filed the information

away for later use; Xena could now command her emotions when she had a greater goal to aim for.

The open scrolls on the desk, and several of the others, gave details of many of the fights that the Warrior Princess had been involved in. The latest one was a report that stated she had, single-handedly beaten off three hundred of Persia's crack cavalry scouts. Even allowing for exaggeration, the feat was impressive. Even if a mere tenth of the numbers had been involved, one woman beating thirty men was staggering. What gave the tale credence, though, was the many reports of other similar victories.

The debacle in the arena had given him some idea of her fighting skills. In hindsight it was obvious that she had been fighting a defensive action, until she had received some kind of signal - *Probably from her irritating blonde friend.* - At that point, she had become a different warrior. It was no mean feat of strength to drag down both a horse and its rider. The timing involved in removing a second rider with the sweep of a pike had been equally impressive. But the ease with which she had roundly beaten one of his best men with that same broken pike was phenomenal.

He'd seen the bloodlust in her eyes, the rage that burned deep within her soul, as she stood above the prone soldier. But she had refused to gratify that same lust, that the crowd had shown with their baying for blood, and when she stood to face him he had seen that her rage was reserved for him alone .. a personal declaration of hatred and contempt said without words in front of thousands of witnesses.

He smiled softly, without humour, to himself. - *Life needed danger to add spice to the victories.* - He thought briefly of Crassus who had proven too weak to be matched against the Warrior Princess, "I told you Crassus," he whispered to himself, "Divide and Conquer." He leaned back into his chair and allowed the many pieces of the puzzle to fall into place, as his eyes burned with malicious intent, "Her friend **is** the key, and I will use it." He laughed out loud as his plans shaped themselves, "A key that will finish Verchinex once and for all, and leave you a powerless pawn, Xena." he leaned forward and poured himself a cup of wine, "I promise you, Xena, my sweet," he said raising the cup in a private toast, "that you will be sorry that you ever interfered in my plans!"

Chapter One: Menassos

The day was hot, the sun blazing in a cloudless sky. A sleepy feeling permeated the arid air, so that it was something of a surprise to see two figures moving, however unhurriedly, along the dusty road as the candlemark approached midday. The tall, dark, warrior walked with an innate, lazy grace that spoke loudly of controlled energy. Alongside her strode a much smaller, golden blonde, young woman who smiled easily and seemed ready to enjoy everything that life threw in her direction.

Obviously easy in each other's company, the pair were a stark contrast to each other in so many ways. The smaller woman had a lightness to her features that spoke eloquently of a sunny disposition, and an animation to her movements that was currently being expressed by expansive hand gestures, illustrating some point she had made to her friend. The warrior, however,

displayed a dour expression as she listened to her companion's incessant chattering. Apart from the fluid strength of her movement, the most notable things about her were the ice blue of her eyes, that appeared to burn with an inner fire, and the certain awareness that an explosive power lurked close below a placid seeming surface.

"Is he dead?" questioned the blonde woman as she thought about the problem her friend had set her.

"No," came the terse reply.

"Hrrrmphh!" snorted the third member of the group; a golden horse that trailed lazily behind the two women on a loosely held rein.

"That's no help, Argo," proclaimed the blonde with a smile. She glanced at her friend who almost seemed lost in thought. The smile deepened. Even on a peaceful day, with no one to save and no battles to fight, Xena found it impossible to relax. Gabrielle knew that her friend was listening intently to every sound around them; analyzing them to see if they were out of place or a likely source of danger. There was a slight crease to her brow, however, which was a tell-tale sign that something was worrying the warrior. She decided to broach the subject, "What's up?" she asked gently.

"Oh, I don't know," came the prompt reply with something of a mischievous gleam in the eyes. An expression that very few people ever got to see, "Could be the sky, or a bird or the sun. There are just so many possibilities."

The crease disappeared immediately and the light answer was enough to confirm to the bard that her friend had something on her mind, "Ha, ha!" responded the honey blonde, her tone heavy with sarcasm. - *Okay, - she thought, - she doesn't want to talk about it yet. Give her some slack and she'll get round to it eventually . -*

"You ready to give up?" asked Xena with a slightly smug look settling onto her features.

"Ummm ... How about Cecrops?" she hazarded, without much hope of success.

"Nope." came the laconic reply that gave no clues to tell the bard if she was even close to the right answer.

The name game was one of their favorites for passing the time on the endless leagues between villages, especially when they were in no hurry to reach a destination. Now was such an occasion. It made a change for them to have some time to themselves; it seemed that they had been chasing around, moving from one fight to another with no time to draw breath, since they had returned from Rome. Gabrielle determinedly put those memories, along with many that had happened after, out of her mind; she still had trouble reconciling her actions there with her conscience.

Frowning the bard tried to concentrate on the game, whilst enjoying the brilliance of a wonderful summer's day. They dawdled unhurriedly along the road, that led to the village of Menassos, kicking up swirls of clinging dust that bore mute testimony to the parched dryness of the long summer. Normally the bard in Gabrielle would have used the time to compose new verse, allowing the almost idyllic setting to soothe her into a gentle passage of poetry, which she could scribe out at their evening stop. Today, however, her agile intelligence was fully occupied with solving the mystery identity of the person in their game. It was fun and she felt it was necessary to try and relax Xena so that she could eventually coax out whatever was worrying her warrior friend.

As the time and distance passed, fields began to replace the more forested areas, indicating that their destination was drawing near. Gabriel tried another question in the game, "Did you know him before you met me?"

"Yup," came the oh so informative reply.

Gabrielle looked hard at the warrior, "You know you're so frustrating," she breathed under her breath, "Well, have I met him?"

"Yup," agreed Xena once again and allowed a brief smile to flicker across her lips, "At this rate you're gonna use up all your questions," she told the bard.

"I'll get the answer long before then," retorted the blonde quickly as she started to re-examine all the information she had learned, speaking out loud as she tried to fix a logical sequence to possible events in the established criteria, and so work her way to the answer. The trouble was that Gabrielle had the habit of speaking quite loudly to herself and also used big gestures to emphasise points she was making.

Xena arched an indulgent eyebrow at her friend as she allowed the conversation to wash past her awareness and into a relegated background noise. However much she tried to relax, her senses were always alert to possible dangers. It was part of her nature and in suddenly dangerous situations her reflexes tended to take over without conscious thought on her part. It made her rather unpredictable and appear like an over wound spring, but it had saved her life, and Gabrielle's, too often for her to ever think of trying to subdue it.

Another faint trace of a smile almost made it to the Warrior Princess's features as she watched the bard chew her lip in concentration, working on the problem at hand, "Give up?" she questioned mischievously, knowing that Gabrielle would rather go without lunch than admit defeat. She noted that the blonde's stomach chose that moment to rumble loudly, and silently amended to herself, - *Well maybe!* -

The bard scowled at her in that stubborn manner that Xena recognised so well and stated in no uncertain terms, "No way!", almost scandalized to think that anyone, let alone her best friend, would expect her to give in so easily, "I'll work it out," she assured passionately, "just give me some time!"

Xena glanced around with sharp interest as she recognised that slight smoky haze that always seemed to hang over a village, "Yeah well, there's Menassos," she told the bard as they rounded a turn in the road, "and I'm hungry," she admitted as her own stomach chose that moment to protest, "so what say we suspend the game until after we've had some lunch?"

Gabriel tried to judge the distance to the village before saying, "Plenty of time yet, you just don't want me to get the answer."

Xena sighed in mock exasperation as she gave Gabrielle a light, two handed, shove to get her moving down the road once more, "Please yourself," she told her.

"It could be Draco," tried the bard looking closely at her friend trying to judge if she was right, and then before Xena could speak she changed her mind, "No wait a minute, it's Niklios!"

Xena's sardonic look confirmed her failure to guess right before she said, "Wrong on both counts," and dazzled her with a smug smile that really irritated the bard.

Scowling again, Gabrielle suddenly poked her tongue out and went cross-eyed at the big warrior. Xena allowed a spontaneous laugh to escape her, a sound that was so easy and natural, and so very rare, it soon had the bard joining in. "Okay," she said when she got her breath back, "that narrows the field down .. a bit anyway." and she went back to loudly working out who that left for the answer.

- *Well she is a bard,* - thought Xena irreverently as she watched the smaller woman, - *She must like to hear herself talk, and the gestures are a part of the trade.* -

The road was beginning to pick up other travelers, local people, farmers and a few merchants heading for the village, or back to their homes. More frequently the pair began to attract startled looks; the tall, darkly menacing warrior, and the small blonde who was lost in a world of her own, speaking random thoughts and wildly animating the conversation with sweeping gestures. Those who foolishly gaped for too long, found themselves the recipients of an icy stare, a look that chilled to the bone and quickly cleared the path for the oddly matched pair and their horse.

Upon reaching the centre of the village, Xena selected a likely looking tavern. She carefully avoided those that looked like they attracted some of the rougher elements in the area, even though she knew Gabrielle raved about the ambience of such establishments, opting for one where the wafting smells of cooking seemed good enough to tempt even her.

Throwing Argo's reins over the hitching post, she rubbed the mare's neck affectionately and told her softly, "Stay put girl, we'll only be a short while." When she looked up, she spotted Gabrielle some distance further up the dusty street still talking to herself. Xena was unable to keep a sardonic half smile from her face as she sent out a loud, piercing whistle to attract the girl's attention and called, "Hey! The food's this way!"

Gabrielle stopped dead in the street suddenly very aware of the looks that she was getting from the villagers who surrounded her, "Ahh ..." she began with an embarrassed laugh, her thoughts

racing furiously, "It's not what you think ..." she tried desperately, "not that I know what you could be thinking really," she struggled wondering what she could give as a convincing explanation of her actions. She tried for the truth, "You see, my friend and I were playing this game." The faces surrounding her looked back blankly and she desperately turned to indicate the place where Xena was standing, only to find her gone. "Well, umm ... she must've got hungry," she smiled reassuringly at the local population as she silently promised herself, - *I'll get you for this, Xena.* - She shrugged in embarrassment and laughed uneasily again as she started backing down the street to the tavern where Argo stood waiting, "Well, ummmm ..., I've got to be going now." she nervously giggled as she ducked into the tavern, relief filling her to be away from the stares of the villagers.

As she made her way to the booth that Xena had appropriated, her fertile mind was creating several scenarios in which she was able to make the Warrior Princess very sorry for the humiliation she had just put her through. She noted that the booth had a view of both of the tavern doors and that her friend had already purchased the drinks.

"Thanks a lot," growled Gabrielle as she slid onto the bench opposite the warrior. She noticed that slightly distracted frown on Xena's brow again and wondered whether she should venture an opinion on it.

Before Gabrielle could say anything, however, Xena waded in with a distraction, "Hey you're the talker. I was sure you'd find the right words to convince those villagers that you weren't the raving lunatic they thought you were."

"That's not funny, Xena," growled the bard swallowing the bait along with a mouthful of the cider from the flagon before her. "I promise I'll find a way to get you back for that."

One of those superior, smug smiles crept onto the warrior's face as she almost purred, "You're welcome to try ... anytime you feel lucky."

Gabrielle looked at her friend belligerently. It was one thing to make such a promise and quite another to execute it. - *It just wasn't that easy to catch Xena with her guard down ... what was she thinking! ... it was downright impossible.* - Her usual attempts at getting her own back, normally ended with her getting very wet or suffering some equally unpleasant form of discomfort and humiliation. It really wasn't fair. She sighed and mentally chalked up another debt to be collected at some indefinite time in the future.

As Xena ordered two servings of whatever was the tavern's dish of the day, the bard tried to work out how she was going to tackle whatever was worrying her friend. She was fairly certain of the cause, but getting Xena to talk about it might require a lot of work. She thought about it for a while longer as she drank another, longer, draft of the cider, "S'good," she declared, happy to wash away some of the trail dust from her throat, "If the food's as good I think I might be persuaded to forgive you for helping me to make a fool of myself out there on the street."

Xena smiled sweetly, "You didn't need my help for that, Gabrielle."

"I'll get you for that crack too," grinned the bard getting a raised, quizzical eyebrow in return. "I will too, Xena," she responded sensing the challenge, "One of these days I'm definitely gonna catch you with your guard down."

"Never happen," Xena told her with a feral grin that oozed confidence.

The banter seemed to lighten the atmosphere somewhat, and Gabrielle decided that the time had come to test her theory about what was troubling her friend, "Xena. You know, it's okay and nothing to worry about." The warrior looked at her in incomprehension, "I mean, lots of people have put bounties on you in the past, but it has to be someone really dumb to try and cash in on them, though."

Xena sighed and leaned back on the bench, composing her thoughts as the meal they had ordered was delivered. It was easy to forget that the chattering bard had a shrewd intelligence and a strong sense of insight into her thoughts and feelings and, no matter how she tried to hide things, the bard would often manage to ferret them out. Just as she had on this occasion.

In a way she knew that Gabrielle was right about the outstanding bounties on her head, but in the last three moons they had been hit four times by mercenaries out for the two hundred and fifty thousand dinar prize that he'd offered for her. It was a flattering sum, an amount far in excess of that she had asked for his ransom all those years before, and one sure to tempt even those wary of her reputation.

What was more worrying was that she was certain that Caesar also had designs on Gabrielle. Her conversation, during her private meeting with Pompey, had set alarm bells ringing in her mind at the time and they were once again clanging furiously as she remembered:

- *He's sent Brutus out to find your friend, Gabrielle.* -

- *You mean Crassus.* -

- *No. It's your friend he wants. He seems to think that she has some sort of power over you. He wants that power.* -

She knew it to be the truth and if Caesar was really aware of it then Gabrielle would be in real danger. Perhaps if they talked the whole thing over she could get the bard to go and visit with the Amazons for a while. No one would find it easy to get to the Amazon Queen whilst she was surrounded by all of her people. It was a good idea. The problem would be in getting Gabrielle to agree to it. Her brow twitched a frown as a half memory struck her, - *We'll cross that bridge when we come to it,* - she told herself, knowing that the Amazons would likely be hostile towards her. The bard looked at her to see how she would respond to what she had said, "Eat your lunch before it gets cold," Xena told her and began to munch on the roast lamb and vegetables on her plate.

Gabrielle looked as if she might say something before thinking better of it and started digging into her own meal, suddenly realizing just how hungry she was. She was delighted to find that

the food was as good as the cooking aromas had promised and she even had a second helping before leaning back with a contented smile and declaring, "Gods! it makes a change to get a good meal that I didn't have to cook myself."

"Hey!" protested Xena in mild good humour, "Don't I always get you the best ingredients available?"

"Yeah," agreed the bard patting her pleasantly full stomach happily, "But it's still nice not to have to cook once in a while."

Xena looked at her mischievously, "Wanna swap jobs for a while," she suggested, "Y'know. You hunt, me cook?"

"Ahh, no thanks, Xena," Gabrielle told her hurriedly, "Slow poisoning is not my preferred method of death." she shuddered as she thought about her friend's last attempt to cook dinner.

"Well," drawled Xena in the tone that Gabrielle just knew held a joke that was going to be at her expense, "I don't suppose it would come to that ... we'd most likely starve before that happened .. what with you doing the hunting."

"Funny!" retorted the bard in a tone laden heavily with sarcasm, "really funny". She looked thoughtful for a moment though and then asked, "Do you want to stock up with dried goods before we leave here? Anyway, where are we heading for?"

- *Well,* - thought Xena, - *we're both in a good mood, so now might be the best time to broach this subject.* - She looked seriously at the bard before saying, "I wanted to talk to you about that," she began, realizing that Gabrielle was making a mental shopping list of the things that she would like to add to their stocks. "You know, we're not too far from the Amazons, and it might be a good time for you to go for a visit."

Gabrielle totally missed the edge that had crept into the warrior's voice, as well as the emphasis that she had placed on the singular '*You.*' She grinned at the thought and enthused, "Yeah! We could go visit with Ephiny for a while. it might be fun for us to get some relaxation in. It's been a while and we have a few fences to mend there as well"

She broke off as she saw the look on Xena's face and replayed in her mind exactly what the warrior had said before growling very slowly, "Now wait a minute, Xena," the voice low and urgent, "I go where you go. We're a team, right?"

"Listen, Gabrielle ..." the warrior tried to reason.

"No, Xena!" Gabrielle reiterated in a quiet but thoroughly immovable tone.

Xena carried on anyway, "... I need you to be somewhere safe for a while. At least until I can make some of the more stupid members of the bounty hunting profession realize that chasing after me isn't such a good idea."

"No, Xena. I go with you." the bard repeated with a stubborn determination that could have given stubborn resistance lessons to a mountain.

"Gabrielle ..." tried the warrior again, but the set of the bard's jaw and the look in her eye halted her. "Alright, Gabrielle," she gave in for the moment, "But we will talk of this again." she promised.

"The answer will still be no, Xena," her friend assured her, "You're not getting rid of me that easily."

"I'm not trying to get rid of you," protested the warrior heatedly, "I'm just trying to keep your stubborn neck out of trouble. I don't wanna have to face losing you." that last came out almost as a whisper. It was difficult for the Warrior Princess to admit to any feelings, let alone the deep affection that she had for her friend.

Gabrielle looked at the warrior's earnest expression and tried to decide the best way to respond, "Hey," she began, "I'm not that little girl anymore," she said lightly, "I can take care of my end of business. We'll do fine ... just like we always do." She laid her hand on the warrior's arm.

"Yeah," returned Xena, obviously unconvinced, "Well, we'll see."

They finished off their drinks and paid for the meal, complimenting the tavern keeper on his cook. Gabrielle asked him about the best place for them to pick up the supplies they wanted and armed with the relevant information, they headed for the street.

The hot afternoon air hit them hard as they left the relative coolness of the tavern. What people there were on the street moved sluggishly as if the heat of the day had sapped their strength. Most of the people who had been milling around before the pair had their lunch had disappeared and there was a quiet air of tenseness that seemed to thicken in the atmosphere as the warrior and bard stepped into the road.

Senses tingling with the need for caution, Xena pulled to an abrupt halt, grabbing Gabrielle's arm to prevent her from moving forward. Something was definitely not as it should be. Even on a hot day there should be more people out on the street, and those that were there seemed suddenly anxious to be elsewhere.

"Wha...!" gasped the bard as her friend's strong fingers dug heavily into her arm.

"Get your staff ready," hissed the warrior quietly, "There's something wrong here. Stay close." she told Gabrielle as she pulled her sword from the scabbard that hung from her back. As Xena walked forward, her movements smoothed out into a lithe, graceful glide, much like a hunting panther. Her whole posture and body language portrayed menace and a readiness for sudden, deadly action.

Shaking her head, the bard took a firmer, fighting, grip on her staff and followed behind her friend, muttering to herself, "I wish I knew how she did that," as she slowly became aware of the abnormalities that had triggered Xena's alarm systems.

The street was now empty of everyone except the two women and their horse. The still air was laden with a tension that could be tasted. Xena, followed by Gabrielle, moved into the centre on the street, giving themselves as much room as possible for the fight that they knew was coming.

Minute sounds from side streets told the Xena that there were warriors waiting in ambush. The harsh scrape of leather and metal armour on brick walls, the softer scuff of boots in the dirt as men moved into their given positions. The Warrior Princess knew that they were surrounded, it was just a question of how many they faced and who was leading them.

The familiar desire for battle, confrontation and danger began to boil in Xena's veins. A burning light blazed in her eyes stoked by the anticipation of conflict. It made her feel whole and alive, and it shone forth like a warning beacon to those who were foolish enough to stand against her. She lived for this. Once, the rest of her life had merely been the way to mark time between the fights she gloried in. Now, the danger was the zest of life that made the rest of her time precious to live.

As if recognizing that they had failed to surprise their intended victims, and almost reluctant to face the fabled fighting prowess of the mighty Warrior Princess, the warriors, who had sought to ambush the two women, began to emerge from their points of cover to surround their intended prey.

Xena stood perfectly motionless. Her stance was confident and all but arrogant in her knowledge that she could best these men. Those approaching her did so with trepidation. Her very icy calmness ate away at their own confidence in their ability to beat her.

As she stood, seemingly nonchalant, Xena was counting the numbers against her and Gabrielle. As far as she could tell, there were about forty warriors in the party. They had faced worse odds and won and the Warrior Princess relished such encounters, enjoying the chance to test her abilities to their limits.

Gabrielle moved warily behind her, watching her partners back. Her whole attitude to such confrontations was totally different from Xena's. She fought as means of self preservation. It was not something she enjoyed, but something she endured. It was the price of being the friend of the Warrior Princess, and she paid it, though with none of the relish savoured by her friend.

Xena bounced on the balls of her feet with the eagerness engendered by expectation. Her eyes watched the approach of three men from behind the ring of warriors, although her finely tuned senses were ready to react to any hostile movement from those around her. - *The warriors*, - she noted, - *look tense and nervous. Not the best way for troops to enter a battle*, - she mentally grinned.

The obvious leader of the group was a rather small, lithe man, who looked both capable and confident in his own abilities. He had dark brown hair and a well trimmed beard that gave him an almost debonair look in comparison to his men. "Hello Mavrikios," Xena greeted, an icy edge to her chilly tone. She had recognised the man instantly. He had at one time been a junior lieutenant in her army, but had branched out on his own and had been, she knew, making something of a name for himself as a reliable man for a job, "You're a long way from home," she said conversationally, although her tone did not rise above freezing.

"Xena," smiled the smaller man, looking almost happy to be in the presence of his former commander. He showed no obvious signs of tenseness, his muscularly compact frame seemed to be relaxed and at ease, a sign of quiet confidence. "You're looking good," he ventured a compliment.

Xena raised an imperious eyebrow at him, waiting to hear what he had to say, all the while taking close note of the subtle shifts and movements of the men around her and Gabrielle, and checking to make sure that the bard was staying close to her. She hadn't failed to note that the men trailing their leader were each carrying heavy sets of manacles. She almost smiled at Mavrikios's over-confidence.

Knowing that his warriors were in position, Mavrikios felt no urgent need to hurry matters. If he could achieve his ends without having to battle the Warrior Princess, then so much the better. - *Talk*, - he decided, - *costs nothing*. - His head tilted slightly to one side as he said, "We could do this the easy way," his deep, gravelly voice seemed as if it should belong to a much larger man, "You could lay down your weapons and save us all the time and trouble of a fight."

Xena's voice almost purred with silky menace, "And why should I want to do that, Mavrikios?"

"Because it might make the trip we're going to take a little better if my men, and you two ladies are not so damaged as to make it uncomfortable." he replied suavely.

"And where would this trip be to?" Xena asked deceptively lightly, although she already knew what his answer would be.

"Rome," grinned Mavrikios.

"Sorry. I've been there. Can't say I liked it too much. Too big and ... dirty!" returned the Warrior Princess.

"Well," said Mavrikios, with tinges of regret in his voice, "That's a real shame. You see Caesar is really keen on you having another look at some parts of the city that are rarely seen. I hear he wants to give you a tour of the dungeons and torture chambers. In fact he's so keen that you drop in for another visit, that he's willing to pay whoever escorts you to him a 'kings', or should I say, Warrior Princess', ransom in dinars. He'll even pay a big bonus if we can get you both there to him alive." He smiled, showing perfect white teeth, but maintained the hardness in his eyes and voice, "I don't know what you did to annoy the Man, but he is mighty anxious to see you again."

"Life is one long disappointment," Xena told him bluntly, her tone loaded with pure menace and her eyes looked cold enough to burn. "You run along back to 'the Man', puppy, and tell him that Xena's got better things to do with her time."

Mavrikios' smile barely wavered at her insult and his voice dripped with insincerity as he said, "Sorry you feel that way, Xena, but this invitation is not one you can refuse. If anyone is going to collect that bounty, it's going to be me." He'd been darting looks to gauge his men's preparedness and, satisfied that they were ready as they'd ever be, he shouted, "GET THEM!"

A surge of men leapt towards the pair of women, confident that their far superior numbers would be enough to subdue them, even if one was the redoubtable Warrior Princess. Xena met the onrush with a high snapping kick to the head of the first man to reach her that saw him collapse bonelessly to the ground. She spun in a smooth, fluid, motion that put her into place to smash a left fist into a bearded face and the pommel of her sword into the temple of a third. Not waiting around for the next wave, or for any of the three she had downed to recover, she back flipped away from the situation, just as four more attackers attempted to converge upon her. A kick into the back of the legs of an incidental soldier, left her with a clear path to Mavrikios who smiled confidently and raised his sword to engage the Warrior Princess.

Gabrielle soon found herself in the thick of the fighting. Mavrikios's men swarmed around her like bees around a honeypot. However, the bard was no easy conquest for anyone. Her time travelling with the Warrior Princess had given her the chance to refine her staff fighting techniques and she employed them to good effect. The first man to reach her got a full blooded jab to the stomach that doubled him over for the roundhouse swing that cracked sharply across his jaw, sending him spinning away from the fight. Showing good reflexes, she quickly adjusted to face her second opponent. With the staff held around its centre point, Gabrielle swung both ends in lightning fast moves that hit the warrior across the knees and arms, before she adjusted her grip to jab him in the stomach and leave him writhing on the ground, fighting for breath.

With no time for thought, the bard slid back to the central grip and tried the same series of manoeuvres on her next assailant. He, however, was ready for her. As she struck out with the staff, her opponent got a good grasp of it and tried to pull it from her. Thinking quickly, Gabrielle, twisted around under the staff, so that she was back to back with the warrior. She was ready for him when he used his superior strength and weight to pull her over his back so that she faced him once more, but as his hands slipped on the staff, she used timing and strength to smash it up into his face, and then, once free of his restraint, she pummelled him until he dropped to the ground.

She swung around in time to intercept a fourth man who was trying to sneak up behind her. He pulled to a halt, intent on keeping out of range of the staff that seemed to be everywhere. On a sudden inspiration, the bard dropped to her knees, taking a grip on the staff at the very end of the shaft, and swung it hard to crack into the man's ankles, bringing him down with a satisfying thud so that she could crack him across the temple to remove his interest in the proceedings.

Swords clashed as Xena and Mavrikios met. Sparks slid down the weapons as they locked together in a deadly embrace. Xena's senses warned her as a warrior attempted to sneak in on her

blind side to help his leader, and she kicked back hard, connecting with the man's left knee and recognized the stark 'crack' as the bone shattered beneath the force of the blow. The Warrior Princess gathered her far from inconsiderable strength and threw Mavrikios back so that she could grab an incoming arm wielding a heavy club. She stopped the blow in mid strike and barely gave the warrior a glance as she spun under his arm and flipped him some distance away from her. She returned to her confrontation with Mavrikios and said with a barely disguised sneer, "Ya gotta try harder than that. If these goons are the best you've got, Gabrielle can take them on her own." She punctuated her sentence with a double handed swing of her sword that Mavrikios barely managed to turn aside.

"Think so?" he retorted, the smile that had been on his face had been replaced by a snarl, "Well the dance isn't over yet." he feinted with a thrust to her chest, turning it at the last moment to a slash at her legs which Xena parried with contemptuous ease.

The smoldering rage that was never far from the surface in the Warrior Princess, flared joyously in her eyes as she allowed the reins to be loosed on the dark side of her complex nature, allowing her to revel in the arts of battle that were so much a part of what she was. Screaming out her ululating war cry, she leapt high into the air, did a forward roll at the apex of her ascent and landed safely behind Mavrikios taking out a soldier with a swift slash across the belly and a second one with her elbow as she drove it into his windpipe, "Gotta tell you, Mavrikios, the bands beginning to wind down."

The warlord, turned swiftly raising his sword once again to face his foe, "My piper's still playing the tune, Xena," he told her with an arrogant confidence that seemed more than a little misplaced with so many of his men down and injured. He continued, "But you're gonna get to pay him!" as he launched into another series of slashing attacks.

The bard was beginning to feel picked on. Normally, all the bad guys congregated around Xena eager to earn the kudos for bringing the Warrior Princess down. For some reason, however, there seemed far too many who wanted to test her fighting skills. Not that she could blame them exactly. She personally felt that anyone would have to be mad to voluntarily go up against her best friend in a fair fight.

She planted her staff into the ground and used it as a fulcrum to push off and deliver a double heeled kick into her nearest assailant's chest. She landed the manoeuvre cleanly, spun her staff and looked for the next problem waiting to confront her. Two warriors moved before her menacing her with swords. As she swung the staff to confront one the other tried to slip around her guard until she swung the staff in turn to menace him. Deciding that attack was going to be her best way out of the situation, she concentrated on moving forward in a fighting stance only to suddenly find herself hampered by a net that had been cast from behind in a sneaky move to disable her. Before she had time to extract herself from the confinement, something heavy slammed into her skull causing instant darkness to descend.

Mavrikios and Xena exchanged a rapid series of sharp blows while his soldiers milled around the pair of them creating a screen of bodies to confine the fight. Xena had to be constantly aware of

her position in relation to those men as Mavrikios pressed his attacks to push the Warrior Princess back into range of the waiting warriors.

Using the momentum from the warlord's shove, Xena back flipped over the encircling men and flashed a wicked grin at him saying, "Not good enough, Mavrikios." She emphasised her contempt by delivering a hard kick to the backside of one of the soldiers propelling him into the arms of his leader. Then punched another man in the face, grabbed his arm and spun to send him hurtling into a group of his fellows, used a stamping kick to the stomach to fold up another and a sword cut to the ribs to disable the next.

Seeing his men dropping like so many flies, and having seen his contingency force dragging Gabrielle off the street, Mavrikios decided that his best option was to order a retreat, "Pull back!" he yelled. - *With the bard in hand, Xena will come to me!* - He told himself as he waved his forces off.

Xena flourished her sword in a complex display of weapon mastery before sheathing it and aiming a half playful kick at a retreating backside. She grinned to herself, confident there was no one to see her unusual display of delight at the fight. "Good workout," she muttered as she turned to check on her friend ... and bit back a curse as she saw no sign of Gabrielle in the road other than her staff which lay in the dust. "GABRIELLE!!" she yelled, knowing that she wouldn't get an answer. "Damn!" she swore, all signs of good humour gone.

She quickly scanned the area for tracks and read the signs all too clearly of what had happened. They'd taken her down the alleyway between the tavern and a house. Throwing caution to the winds as the need to get her friend back over-rode all other thought, Xena moved quickly hoping to catch the abductors before they managed to regroup with the main body of troops. Her haste, however, led her straight into the trap that had been set for just such an eventuality; an arrow slammed into her left shoulder.

Relegating the pain, from the wound, to be dealt with at another time, and not waiting around for any other surprises, Xena backed out of the tight confines of the alleyway with far more caution than she entered it. Collecting the bard's staff from the road, she whistled for Argo who came readily to her mistress's call. She swung herself into the saddle and headed out of Menassos as fast as she was able. She'd get Gabrielle back, but she couldn't do that if she got herself killed or captured through carelessness.

The Warrior princess burst through a cordon of Mavrikios's surprised pickets and galloped down the road as fast as the horse could carry her. She had to find a place where she would be safe to deal with her wound and get herself away from the hunters that she expected to follow hard on her trail.

Gritting her teeth against the pain she was trying not to feel, Xena growled, "Hang on Gabrielle. I'll come and get you."

Chapter Two: A Bard in the Hand

and Xena in the Bush

The first thing that Gabrielle was aware of was a throbbing ache that started somewhere at the back of her head and spread out from there. Keeping her eyes tightly shut against the blinding light of the sun, whose hot rays she could feel on her face, she stifled a groan, and raised her right hand to feel the lump she knew would be on the back of her skull. It was at that point that she worked out something was seriously wrong. Her arm felt leaden and she lacked control! She opened one eye to squint at her right arm and saw the manacles even as her senses registered the feel of metal about her wrists, "Gods," she breathed softly. "I never knew I was that dangerous."

A voice thundered out from close by, causing her to wince from the further pain it induced, "Hey boss!" a man yelled, "She's awake!"

Forcing both of her eyes open, the bard edged herself into a sitting position and gratefully leant against a handy tree, desperately fighting off the nausea that threatened to engulf her fragile sensibilities. A quick look around at the cluster of warriors told her that there was no sign of Xena - *Was that good or bad?* - she tried to make up her mind. As she struggled with the thought, Mavrikios moved into her line of sight, before bending to examine the tender lump on her head.

"She'll live," he commented, "Give her something to drink, then we'll get moving."

Gabrielle gratefully took the water skin and gulped down some of the tepid, lifeless water that it held, before fixing her eyes on the warlord and saying, "I don't know who you think I am, but I can assure you that I'm a writer, not a fighter." She rattled the chains at him, "Don't you think that these are a little bit excessive? I mean with all your warriors around, I'm hardly likely to be able to run off, now am I?"

"I know exactly who you are, little girl," retorted Mavrikios with a touch of sarcasm in his voice, "You're the irritating blonde that just banged up half a dozen of my men, and whom Caesar will pay me a lot of dinars for once I get you to him." He looked at her in a calculating way, "Now, I'd like to do this as easy as possible, but that's going to be up to you. You cause me any trouble and I guarantee that you'll regret it."

Gabrielle looked at him with more than a hint of pity in her gaze, "Trouble? Listen buster you've got more 'trouble' coming your way than you can shake a stick at!"

The smirk on the warlord's face made her want to slap him, as did his awfully articulate answer of, "HA!"

Keeping her temper, and doing her best icy intimidation impersonation, Gabrielle pointed out quietly, "She'll find me you know. She's not going to let you get away with this."

"Xena's got troubles of her own," sneered the warlord, "One of my men put an arrow through her and, although it's not likely to kill her, it'll slow her down for a while, and make it that much easier for me to take her when she shows up again."

"You're not chasing after her?" asked the bard in surprise. The bounty on Xena was big enough to make most men drool at the chance of collecting it and make them forget about the dangers of facing her, especially if she was injured.

"There's no need to chase her round the countryside," he told her smugly, "She'll be coming after you and I'll be waiting for her."

Gabrielle's stomach clenched as she realized that she was bait for a trap. It seemed that Xena had a valid reason to be concerned about her vulnerability - *He's smart*, - she decided. She tried to dredge up any information she had about this warlord from her aching head as she took another swallow of water. Xena had once, long ago, mentioned that Mavrikios was a good leader of men. He weighed odds carefully and looked after the welfare of his troops. He was also a dangerous man with a blade. She seemed to remember that Xena had said he had an uncertain temper when things started to fall apart on him, and that he was not a man to anger or cross.

She looked up at Mavrikios as he ordered his men to be ready to move, "I've seen her take out a small army when she'd been blinded," she said conversationally, "An arrow wound won't worry her too much ... but it should worry you."

The warlord swung his attention back to the bard, "Oh? Please do enlighten me as to why I should worry?" he growled full of confidence in his abilities and plans.

Gabrielle grinned happily at him, "Because a wound is gonna make her mean, and I wouldn't want to be in your shoes when she gets through with you," she said sweetly.

If her words had worried the man, he didn't show it in his voice or eyes. He just grinned nastily at his captive and rumbled, "Well then, we'd better get moving, hadn't we? I want to meet Xena on ground of my own choosing," he told her as he grabbed her by the chains and hauled her roughly to her feet, making her head swim.

"Hey!" complained the blonde indignantly.

The warlord grinned maliciously, "Get used to it. I'm sure Caesar has far worse in mind once he gets his hands on you two." He tugged her towards where the men were mounting their horses, "Here Gregorias. Keep her safe, or I'll have your head," he barked as he threw the bard up over the front of the warriors saddle, so that she hung face down like a sack of oats. Swinging on to his own mount, Mavrikios ordered his men to move out.

The cave, she had found, was really just a shallow depression in the side of a cliff, but it was shelter of a sort and it gave Xena a clear view if anyone tried to approach her. Sweat beaded her brow as she lowered herself from Argo's saddle and staggered over to where she could lean herself against the support of a large boulder.

The arrow had entered beneath her collarbone and, from the feel of it, the head was pressing against the underside of the bone. She didn't think it had done any major damage, but it needed

to come out before the wound became infected. She couldn't risk being incapacitated by a fever; she had to be back on her feet if she was going to rescue Gabrielle.

Carefully, she unclipped her armour so that it slid away and gave her more freedom to work on the problem - *So far so good* - she told herself mentally, - *Now things start to get interesting.* -

Clutching the shaft of the arrow, she concentrated her strength to break off the fletchings to leave a shortened stub to work with. The jolting pain that stabbed through her as she did so, told her that the arrow had probably nicked the bone, and with that thought came a wave of nauseating darkness that swept up causing her to black out

Consciousness returned with an immediacy as she became aware of a man leaning over her. Movement came without thought and, in less than the blink of an eye, her boot dagger was in her hand and pressed against the stranger's ribs. Even though the motion called up waves of darkness once more, this time she mastered them and forced them back down.

"Easy," came a soft, soothing voice, "easy there. I mean you no harm."

The tone was gentle, comforting and reassuring. Xena recognised it as the tone she'd use to calm a frightened animal, or the type a physician used with a nervous patient. "Who are you?" she demanded, her voice a rough growl from the pain she was enduring. Her eyes blazed as she studied the blonde haired, blue eyed man who filled her line of sight.

He spoke as he continued to inspect the arrow shaft, probing the wound with strong, though seemingly delicate, fingers, "My name is Patroclese, warrior," he told her, still speaking in that soft calming tone, trying to put her at her ease. "I'm a physician ... a wanderer. I heard your horse from down on the road and, since I was lost, I came to see if someone could give me directions ... and found you lying here with an arrow in you." He looked at her and a slight smile played over his features, "I can take the arrow out, although I'd find it more comfortable to work without your knife digging into my ribs."

"Take it out," she told him, blinking the sweat out of her eyes as it trickled down her brow. "The knife stays where it is ... just in case." She looked down at the blood slick half-shaft sticking out from her flesh, "You're gonna have to push it through. I think it's got a barbed head, and it's pressing on the collarbone, probably nicked it on the way in."

"Uh huh," agreed Patroclese, "you seem to know an awful lot about my craft."

"I have many skills," Xena told him flatly.

"If I push that arrow through, and the pain causes your muscles to spasm, I'm likely to end up in a worse condition than you're in now," he told her with a worried glance towards where she held the knife.

"That's the chances you take bein' a good Samaritan," she told him through pain gritted teeth.

"A nice friendly way to put it," replied the physician dryly, swallowing hard.

"Just do it!" hissed the Warrior Princess pressing the dagger tighter to the man's ribs before relaxing it a little.

He nodded his agreement and placed the heel of his hand over the broken shaft. He looked searchingly into her face and asked, "Ready?"

"Do it!" gritted Xena, clenching her teeth against the anticipated pain.

Patroclese shoved hard, feeling the slight resistance from the edge of the bone, before the arrowhead cleared the flesh of his patient's back to stick out covered in crimson gore. Xena groaned, involuntarily with the pain, "Hang in there," he encouraged her as his hand moved around to grip the blood slick arrow and draw it fully from the wound. "It's out," he told her.

The warrior gave a tight smile that never reached her eyes, "As a friend of mine once said, 'That'll wake you up in the morning.'" She moved the dagger away from Patroclese, although she retained it in her hand ready for instant use. She licked her dry lips before gritting out, "Can you get it bandaged? I need to be somewhere else."

He moved to his horse and rummaged in his saddlebags, quickly finding the things that he needed. As he came back to her side he said, "As your physician, I would recommend some time to rest up. You've lost quite a bit of blood and you're right to suspect that the arrowhead chipped the bone. I think we're going to have to stitch those wounds to stop the blood flow too."

He worked as he spoke, cleaning the wound with some alcohol, that caused the dark haired woman to draw in her breath sharply, before inserting three neat stitches into the torn flesh at both the entrance and exit wounds, then smearing a healing salve over them.

"Just patch me up, best you can. I'll take it from there," Xena told him curtly as he slid her leathers and under tunic down to her waist so that he could bandage the wounds securely, oblivious to all thought of modesty. "I'd be grateful for some water if you'd pass the skin before you do that," she requested and drank thirstily when he complied and held the skin to her parched lips, doing his best not to stare at her ripe torso. The tepid water felt like nectar as it slid down her dry throat. She thanked him with a nod of her head and a slight quirk of her lips as he stoppered the skin when she had taken her fill.

Watching him work as he skilfully padded and wrapped her wound, Xena was impressed by the professionalism being shown by the young man. "By the way," she asked him, in a far more friendly tone, as he finished the task, "What do I owe you, besides my thanks?"

"No charge," he told her, "I started treating you without consultation. But," he forestalled the protests he could see about to spring from the warrior's lips, "you could give me some help with those directions and information that I came looking for in the first place."

"Deal," agreed Xena, putting some warmth into her tone for the first time, "What do you want to know?" she asked, carefully testing the shoulder's mobility as Patroclese finished dressing the wound.

"I'm a stranger in these parts ... in Greece, actually," he told her with a twitch of his lips. "I'm looking for a woman, a warrior like yourself. Her name is Xena."

The defensive look sprang back into her eyes and Patroclese found cold metal pressed against his throat as a very sharp blade pressed close, "What do you want with her?" she demanded, her tone as frozen as ice.

Patroclese swallowed hard and became, suddenly, very still, as he saw instant death staring him in the face, "I" he licked his lips nervously, "I have a message for her from a friend." He realized that more information was called for and quickly added, "I owed the man a favour and I promised that I'd take his message to the Warrior Princess for him."

"What's this man's name?" demanded Xena pushing the knife a little harder to nick the physician's skin and draw a tiny speck of blood.

"Isumbras of Narbo," squeaked Patroclese quickly, "That's in Narbonensis. He's a merchant," he added suddenly very eager to please.

"That's a long way to come to deliver a message," prodded Xena, although she relaxed some of the pressure on the knife, "Why would you agree to undertake such a difficult and hazardous journey, huh?"

His throat dry and tight from fear, Patroclese swallowed hard again and explained, "I owed Isumbras. He helped finance my studies as a healer and the only thing he's ever asked of me in return was to deliver this message." He saw some of the doubt ease from her eyes and added, "Besides, I always wanted to see more of the world and the chance to meet the legendary Warrior Princess was just too good to pass up."

Xena still looked coldly at him and there was a warning bite in her tone as she demanded, "What's the message?"

"That's private, " tried the physician, sweat beading his fair brow and his blue eyes shifted nervously, "It's for Xena."

A far from friendly smile appeared on the Warrior Princess's face as she said softly, "It won't do anyone any good if the messenger dies before delivering it," she told him grimly.

Patroclese licked his lips, indecision plain on his face, "I ... er ... well, if you put it like that," he stuttered. "He told me to tell her, ummmm," he screwed his face up in concentration to make sure that he got it exactly right, "Remember Artellios. I need you."

"That's it?" questioned the woman, although the healer was pleased to note that she did remove the menacing knife.

"I swear by the gods," promised the physician, relief plain on his face that he was away from the blade. He touched a finger to the spot the knife had nicked and brushed away the blood that had quickly dried there. He saw a look on Xena's face that must have frightened him because he added, "I have no idea what it means. I just agreed to deliver it."

The Warrior Princess looked at him suspiciously for a long moment before sheathing the dagger back in her boot, "Well you've delivered it, " she told him flatly, pushing herself a trifle unsteadily to her feet.

"Y ... You're Xena?" he asked in amazement, "Gods! What are the odds on us meeting like this?" he wondered.

"I was thinking the same thing," agreed Xena suspicion underlying her tone, but her eyes didn't seem quite as cold as they had been. She pulled her clothing back on and refastened the clips to her armour, before gently easing herself back using the boulder to steady herself.

"Gods, but you're an untrusting woman, " Patroclese returned with a nervous half laugh.

Xena gave him the 'look' that could send the cold chill of imminent death through the heart and bones of even the most hardened warlord, and saw the physician take two or three involuntary steps away from her, "It keeps me alive," she told him with scarily quiet menace. A wave of blackness swept up again as she moved her arm too quickly, but she refused to let it take hold, and continued to the healer, "You've delivered your message, and have done your good deed ... I'm grateful for the help, but now I suggest that you go home."

Patroclese nodded his agreement, still having to swallow to get some of the moisture back into his throat, while trying to disguise his nervous fear of this infinitely scary woman, "Yeah, right ... fine," he agreed and was turning away, back to his horse when a movement caught his eye, "Xena, look out!" he cried, diving towards where his horse stood and reaching for the bow that he carried there.

An arrow sped from the screen of trees, straight towards where the warrior was turning to confront the danger. Patroclese just knew that his medicinal efforts had been wasted; there was no way that the Warrior Princess could possibly avoid the shaft that sped towards her.

As he waited for her cry of pain, or for her to drop to the ground, he had to blink in amazement. The warning he had given had triggered the woman's incredible, battle honed, reflexes. With movement faster than the eye could follow, she plucked the arrow out of the air, just as it seemed certain to skewer her throat. All time for thought was instantly gone as a dozen warriors charged from the trees, across the clearing, towards Xena and her companion.

Raising her chilling battlecry, Xena leapt high into the air did a flip and came down in position to tackle her attackers. A heavily planted boot in the stomach met the first man, and a backhand,

roundhouse, punch snapped into the jaw of a second. A well placed right elbow to the throat left a third man choking on the ground, and gave her the space to backflip away to draw her sword. But the warriors were quickly upon her and before she was settled, one had clubbed the weapon out of her hands, while a second slammed a staff into her abdomen.

Dropping to the ground, she braced herself with her arms as she swept the feet from beneath the warrior with the staff. A forward roll took her to where her sword had landed and she scooped it up ready to face the next attack. Holding the weapon two handed, she swung with incredible force at the warrior closest to her. He met her blade with his own, but staggered under the impact and failed to recover in time to avoid the straight right punch that plastered his nose across his face.

Xena bounced on the balls of her feet as she prepared to meet the next wave of assailants, only to see the lead man taken out by a well placed arrow through the heart. She spun instinctively, kicking out with a muscular leg, to take out a warrior who was trying to get behind her, then used her momentum to force herself into a low forward flip which enabled her to get in position to be able to sweep her blade across her next opponent's chest. Another arrow buzzed past her to take a threatening warrior in the shoulder, as she fell into a flurry of exchanged blows, finally taking the man out with a reverse sword sweep. And then it was over, with those left alive scuttling for the safety of the trees they had emerged from.

Xena dropped to her haunches taking deep breaths to try and clear away the spots, that were swimming in front of her eyes and the nausea that made her want to vomit. Patroclese was quickly at her side, checking the dressing on her wound and making sure that she hadn't taken another injury. "Thanks," she told him with grudging appreciation.

"Just part of my job," grinned the healer as he adjusted the bandage, "Doesn't look like you've done any more damage, though I can't imagine how you managed to avoid doing so."

"Benefits of a healthy lifestyle," she half mockingly replied. "Thanks again, by the way," she told him in a much more friendly tone than any she used previously, "I'd have chased them off eventually, but your archery certainly speeded things up." She eyed the physician questioningly, "How did a healer learn to use weapons with such skill."

Daring greatly, Patroclese used a question in answer, "I could ask how a warrior learnt quite so much about the healer's art?" He smiled to show it was a rhetorical question, "For myself, I'm not stupid. I knew that being a wandering physician would not be the world's safest occupation, so I took steps to learn how to protect myself."

"Good thinking," agreed Xena as she pushed herself, more than a little unsteadily, back to a standing position, aided by Patroclese who willingly gave her an arm to lean on, although she tried her best to do without his help.

"You really could do with some rest, you know," he told her, "Loss of blood is going to make you weaker for a while, and that could hurt you at a crucial moment."

"I'm fine," she told him, though not unkindly, "I don't have time to rest up at the moment."

He looked at the bodies lying around in the clearing and nodded, saying, "I see what you mean." He hovered behind her as she took a couple of halting steps to where Argo stood waiting patiently, "You know, I'm not in the habit of abandoning my patients before they're fully fit."

"Forget it Patroclese," she told him bluntly, "Where I'm going is no place for a healer," she told him in no uncertain terms. She moved away from him towards Argo, while the young healer checked the bodies of the five men, scattered around them, to see if any still clung to life.

"Are you going to see what Isumbras wants?" he questioned as he moved between the men, finally assuring himself they were all dead before moving across to his own horse.

"Maybe," she told him non-committally, "when I've done what I've gotta do first." She checked Argo's cinch, tightening it a notch. The effort caused her to grunt with pain and sweat beaded on her brow once more.

Patroclese noted the problem, but wisely refrained from commenting on it, "Can you tell me what that message is about?" he asked cautiously, "I've been carrying the thing around with me for a couple of moons now, and it's been driving me crazy wondering about it." He watched the woman mount her horse, before swinging easily into his own saddle.

Xena looked at Patroclese long and hard, and saw an eager young man of good muscular build, blonde haired and blue eyed in a handsome sort of way, with an air of competence about him that shone through in his every movement. He had done her a good turn by removing the arrow from her shoulder, and had stood with her against attackers, "I'll tell you on the way back to the road," she told him with a wry twisted grin.

They heeled the horses into motion and picked their way carefully back towards the road, senses alert in case any of the beaten warriors should be lurking around in the hope of getting a second chance at them. Xena threw a look across at the healer and said, "Isumbras was a merchant, even back when I knew him," she explained. "He supplied me with some of my more unusual needs ... including information." Her eyes seemed to go distant as she allowed the memories to flood back into her mind, "My army was at a little village called, Artellios, and Isumbras provided me with some intelligence that proved vital in keeping me alive." She ducked under a low branch that was in her chosen path before continuing, "He wouldn't take any money for it. He just asked me to remember in case he ever needed anything."

Patroclese nodded his understanding and said, "So you owe Isumbras this big favour, but you're only 'maybe' going to help him. I'd thought better of you, Xena."

"Now look, Patroclese, I know you feel a responsibility to Isumbras, and I know I owe you my gratitude, if not more, for your help back there, but I've got my hands full at the moment and Isumbras will just have to wait until I can get round to him!" she was annoyed that she'd let the healer get to her.

A few minutes later they reached the road, "You'd better head South. You'll find the village of Menassos there and you should be able to get some work there too." she told him.

"Which way are you going?" he asked.

"I'll cut across country. I need to get past some people, and I'd like to do it without having to fight my way through them." she told him.

Xena turned Argo away from the physician, just as a shout erupted behind them. Turning her head she saw some twenty armed men riding up the road towards where the healer sat his horse staring at them, "Patroclese!" she yelled, "This way!" and waited only long enough to ascertain that he followed, before heading the horse into the scant safety of the copse on the far side of the road.

As they broke out of the cover of the trees, and into the more open ground of hilly pasture, Patroclese drew up alongside the Warrior Princess and shouted, "Have you done something to upset someone? Because something seems to have stirred up an awful lot of warriors in these parts."

"Long story," Xena cast back at him, "Keep close to me. Too many people have seen you with me now, so you better tag along until I can find somewhere safe to leave you."

Chapter Three: My Kingdom for a Wagon

Gabrielle wasn't sure what hurt most: her head, her stomach or her ego! She'd never really cared for horses and her dislike of that particular mode of transportation had been reinforced by a long journey, face down, over an uncomfortable saddle. Her voluble complaints had got her nothing except a gag, and she was beginning to feel that someone, somewhere, really didn't like her.

The whole afternoon had been torturous. The motion of the horse was akin to that of a ship, making her uncomfortably queasy and forcing her to jab at the pressure point in her wrist to keep herself from throwing up, not an advisable action whilst wearing a gag. Laying across the thighs of a brawny young warrior was not exactly comfortable, either. Especially as his hands had wandered, in an exploratory fashion, over her thighs and just under her skirt, before he was roughly warned off by Mavrikios when the bard began to wriggle and curse through her gag.

"Keep your hands off her, Gregorias," the warlord warned menacingly. "The contract is to deliver her whole and unharmed."

"Aw, this won't harm her," grinned her guard, "She might even like it," he laughed.

Mavrikios gave him a cold glare, - *That definitely was an imitation of one of Xena's*, - the bard noted mentally, - *Wonder if he studied her, or if there's a warlord's handbook out there that they learn from. Hey!* - she suddenly, irreverently, thought, - *I bet there's a warlord school, and I just know who came top of her class when she graduated!* - She allowed herself a grin while she listened to Mavrikios as he dressed Gregorias down.

Metraclles stood screened on the other side of the greenery, whistling tunelessly as he stood holding the leg iron that insured the bard could not sneak off. It was taking Gabrielle some time and the warrior began to get impatient with his own needs, "You about done yet?" he demanded.

"With you in a moment," agreed Gabrielle, the glimmer of an idea beginning to take root in her fertile mind.

The guard urged her speedy return from the bushes, and as they returned to the fire, Gabrielle noted, with great interest, that a couple of scuffles had broken out around the camp and she saw more than a few uncleared plates from the evening meal. Metraclles rechaind her leg iron to the stake and made a quick dash to the bushes before he went back to the dice game he'd been involved with before being hauled out of it. Gabrielle sat with a thoughtful look on her face before deciding to act on the germinating seed that was beginning to grow.

Facing the group of warriors, who were relaxing on the opposite side of the fire from her, she proceeded to turn on all of her considerable charm and initiated the conversation by asking them, "Is the food normally this bad, or was it done specially for me?"

"T'weren't food. T'was but pig swill," one of them replied and many of the others joined in with half-hearted laughs or growling grumbles.

>From the unhappy replies she'd soon learned that the army's cook had been laid low with a fever some days back and the food had been appalling ever since as no one else had any idea how to boil water! Having tasted Xena's cooking, Gabrielle knew that warriors didn't spend much time learning how to prepare food, they relied on a cook for that. However, they were always ready to grumble when their meals were not up to standard, and the bard thought that she could see a way to exploit that.

Skilfully, she set about manipulating the conversation so that she could regale the warriors with the splendours of some of the feasts that she's seen and eaten, and eventually gave descriptions of some of the more humble fare that she had prepared for herself and Xena.

"At King Gregor's palace we had a wonderful feast to celebrate the announcement of his heir, Prince Gabriel, and in Troius, King Lias always served a wonderful delicacy called croesis. Xena just loved those, although to be fair, Xena really appreciates my cooking, in fact she's told me on numerous occasions that she wished she'd known me when her army was looking for a cook," that was a blatant lie, Xena would rather have been hung from a meat hook than even think of the bard as part of her army.

Mention of the Warrior Princess, however, tended to dampen the soldiers good spirits and put them on edge. Seeking away to continue the conversation and plant some more seeds for her plan, Gabrielle dropped the information that she was a bard into the chatter, in case they hadn't been aware. This brought an immediate demand for a story and she was happy to oblige them, launching into the tale of Hercules and his on going battle with Hera, strategically adding wonderful descriptions of glorious, mouth watering food, at every chance she got. The

performance began to draw a larger audience and they clamoured for another story as soon as she finished her recital.

Smiling good naturedly, Gabrielle agreed, carefully avoiding full blown stories about her best friend, seeking to introduce her into the narrations once the audience was firmly hooked. Choosing artfully, she plunged into the story of Ulysses. "I sing the song of Ulysses, King of Ithaca, husband of Penelope, father of Telemachus. This great King was a mighty warrior, renowned for his bravery, wisdom and cunning," she began.

The gifted bard wove a tale of his feats: of his great sea adventures, when Aeolus, the Guardian of the Winds, gave him a bag that contained all the winds that might harm the king's ship, only his curious crew opened the bag releasing the winds and changed a prosperous voyage into a disaster. How the great Ulysses was reluctant to take part in the Trojan war and so tried to make his fellow kings believe he was mad, but was foiled by Palamedes who proved him sane. How the King of Ithaca proved his greatness in the Trojan war and was awarded the armour of Achilles when that great hero was slain. How it was the trickster king's idea to use a hollow horse to gain entrance to the city of Troy, and for the Greeks at last to win the long war.

>From there, Gabrielle told how he had fallen foul of Poseidon's wrath as he tried to travel back to his kingdom and, of course, his meeting with Xena and how she had helped to defeat Poseidon and return the King of Ithaca to his island home in time to rescue his wife, Penelope, from the piratical suitors who were attempting to lay claim to Ithaca at the Sea God's behest.

At the end of that story, the talented bard quickly launched into another Xena tale, telling of her near miraculous, single handed, defeat of the elite Persian scouts, that gave the Athenian army the time it needed to assemble and march to protect their land from the invaders. The bard kept a careful eye on her audience, gauging their reactions, which seemed to become increasingly those of very nervous men as she spun the heroic deeds of Xena into a tapestry of words that brought them to life. It was becoming increasingly plain that these warriors were not at all sure that they wanted to face an angry Warrior Princess!

She was half way through the story of Xena's titanic battle with Ares to prove to the Furies that the God of War was her father, when there was a stir in the crowd as Mavrikios pushed his way through them. "What are you sitting around here for?" he demanded, "You've all got things to attend to. Alexandros, you were supposed to relieve Thomases on guard half a candlemark ago!"

There were loud grumblings as the gathering broke up. The warriors had enjoyed a rare evening of entertainment, even if some of the tales did make them uneasy. Now with the stories finished, conversation naturally drifted back to food and some of the descriptions that Gabrielle had spun of wonderful offerings. The grumbling was loud and heartfelt.

Mavrikios scowled as his men dispersed, before turning to the bard and demanding, "What have you been saying to my men?"

Nothing much," she replied with a bright innocence that really made Mavrikios burn with suspicion, "I just told them a few stories to pass the time ... oh yes, and we talked about the food. What we've just had really wasn't very good you know, and I think your men expect better."

"Have you been stirring up trouble with them," quizzed Mavrikios, who was well aware of the men's feeling about the quality of the meals currently being served, and was distinctly defensive about it, "because if you have, I can always have you permanently gagged!"

"Look, all I did was tell a few stories and compare notes with them about some of the meals we've eaten. It's not my fault if your cook's a professional poisoner!"

"You think you could do better?" he demanded in frustration.

"Without a doubt," grinned the bard, "Even Xena could, and she hates cooking." It was pushing it, but unless Mavrikios had ever tried any of the Warrior Princess's culinary delights he wouldn't know how far she was stretching the truth with that statement.

Mavrikios threw his hands into the air in frustration, "The army's cook is down with a fever and no one else here can cook worth a damn, so get used to it." He glared around the camp at his men, who instantly found other things to occupy their attention.

"You know, unless the food improves, you're going to have a mutiny," Gabrielle pointed out.

"Are you looking for the job?" he asked in disbelief, before his eyes narrowed and he asked her pointedly, "I'd have thought you'd have been cheering my men on to desert. It would give Xena a better chance of rescuing you."

"I like to watch a good fight," she told him seriously. "The odds are about fair right now, Xena doesn't like things too easy. "No, I'm far more concerned with surviving to be rescued and, quite honestly, that looks pretty touch and go at the moment with what I'm being given to eat. Besides, I'm a pretty mean hand with a stew."

"By the gods you're irritating," he snarled at her, "Don't you ever stop talking?" he demanded, frustration evident in his tone.

"Oh I have been known to be quiet on occasion .. particularly after a good filling meal," she stressed pointedly.

"You're up to something," the mercenary leader's mind was working overtime on what the girl could be trying to achieve and suspicion was second nature to his devious mind.

"Of course I am!" agreed Gabrielle wholeheartedly, taking him by surprise.

"I knew it!" snapped Mavrikios triumphantly, although he was far from sure what it was that he was claiming to know. "Just what were you hoping to achieve .. were you spreading dissent? Trying to get the men to mutiny?"

The bard grinned at him, "Something far more satisfying than that," she informed him pleasantly, "Wanna know what?"

The warrior glared at her with frustration, "Alright!" he yelled, drawing the attention of his men, who quickly found something else to occupy them when their leaders angry eyes swept over them.

"The chance to eat a decent meal while I'm stuck here," the bard told him lightly with a teasing smile on her face.

He fixed her with an infuriated stare, "You're offering to cook for us?" he questioned uncertainly.

"That's what I said," agreed the blonde seriously.

"You're willing to cook for the men that are holding you captive?" he persisted.

"Yup. You got it Socrates," she affirmed.

"You want to cook and clean ..."

"Hey! I never said anything about doing the dishes," she broke in firmly.

He ignored her continuing, "... for the men who are taking you to Caesar?"

"Let's just get the terms right here, buddy! I'll cook, but I won't wash! Got it?" she insisted, but Mavrikios was still trying to get his brain around the weird phenomenon of a captive doing the cooking chores willingly.

"You're gonna do the cooking ..."

"Cooking only bub!" she reminded him.

"Okay, okay," he growled, "but you'd do the cooking even though we're going to catch Xena and take her and you to Caesar?"

"That's about the long and short of it," agreed Gabrielle. "Call it self preservation, because as sure as Xena's gonna whip your sorry butt, none of us will survive that long if we keep eating the slops being served up to us right now ... so what bit are you unclear on? Sheesh, doesn't anyone learn good Greek nowadays?"

"Fine," snarled the warlord, ready to take a chance on the bard's cookery, knowing he couldn't stomach much more of the muck they were currently forced to digest.

"One more thing, though," ventured Gabrielle as Mavrikios turned to leave.

"What!" he almost shouted in exasperation.

"It's only fair," began the bard, "that if I'm doing the cooking, I should get to ride in the cook wagon. If I spend a day thrown over a horse's back, I'm not going to be in any condition to cook a meal for your army, now am I?" she told him reasonably.

Mavrikios stood stock still, a look of doubt creeping across his face. He liked the idea of his valuable prisoner being very firmly under the eye of a guard at all times. However, he was a practical man and he knew that something had to be done about the food situation ... and soon. He looked at Gabrielle dubiously. He had the definite feeling of being manipulated into something and he was sure he was not going to like the end results of it. Yet he could see no way that the girl would be able to escape from the cook wagon, especially if he set guards around it and used the leg iron to anchor her firmly in place.

"C'mon, Mavrikios," encouraged the bard, "You know it's a good deal."

He had a really uneasy feeling about all of this, but he just couldn't put his finger on why. Maybe it was just nerves about Xena; where she was and what she was up to. The Warrior Princess was enough to rattle anyone's nerves and, although he didn't show it, Mavrikios was more than a little intimidated by his ex-commander. He'd been a lowly, junior, lieutenant before striking off on his own, and he really doubted that the ruthless, vicious, warlord he had known could be so easily buried and reincarnated as the Warrior Princess of the current stories. Too much prodding, and he was certain that the dark, driven Xena of old would re-emerge. He prayed to the gods that he wasn't going to be the one on the receiving end of that. It was a prospect that did not fill him with joy. But, money was money, and if he could just manage to keep things together, the rewards would be well worth a few sleepless nights.

"Fine," he agreed at last, "Tomorrow you travel in the wagon, and get to cook the evening meal. You better make sure it's a good one after your boasting, because the men won't be too happy if it's not." he warned her.

"Great," enthused Gabrielle before a sour look crossed her face, "No washing dishes though," she insisted.

"Yeah, yeah!" agreed the warlord.

"Oh, I'll make sure it's the most memorable meal they've eaten," she grinned at the suspicious look he gave her. "At least since your regular cook got taken ill," she clarified with a twinkle glittering in her eyes.

Mavrikios stamped off to his tent, waving frustrated hands in the air, even more uneasy about this deal and unable to put his finger on just exactly why. As the warlord disappeared into his tent, Gabrielle pumped her fist in the air, gave a little jig and hissed, "YES!", before realising that it wasn't probably a good idea to advertise her joy in such a public manner. She smirked to herself before stretching out by the fire for the night.

Chapter Four: Hot Pursuit

They had been pressed hard. No matter how they had tried to shake off the hunters, Xena and Patroclese found that they were driven relentlessly for the rest of the day. They switched direction, doubled back, laid false trails and tried to use streams to confuse their pursuers, all of which took time and was allowing Mavrikios to get further ahead of them.

Not for the first time, Xena wondered if all the warriors she was encountering belonged to Mavrikios's band, or whether they were in the midst of a swarm of bounty hunters who happened to be in the right place at the wrong time. Towards evening, however, they did manage to break through a screening picket and were even able to pick up Mavrikios's trail before it got too dark to see.

Xena had concluded that it wasn't going to be safe to leave Patroclese anywhere in their present locality. So, much against her normal instincts, she had kept the healer with her. She did have to admit, even if only grudgingly to herself, that Patroclese was far from the liability that she thought he'd be. He had shown some skill with a short sword that he carried on his saddle, as well as his previously shown ability with a bow.

The physician was also proving useful with his healing skills. Her shoulder continued to pain her and had required re-bandaging twice as blood soaked through the cloth where the stitches pulled open. The Warrior Princess was feeling more than a little unsteady from loss of blood, but she was too stubborn to give into the pain from the chipped bone, and the wound, when she knew she had to get to Gabrielle. She was aware that a little rest would work wonders with her body's normally phenomenal healing capabilities, she just needed to get far enough ahead of the pursuit to make it safe for her to take that rest.

Patroclese' silent disapproval was almost thunderous. He'd urged Xena to rest several times, worried about the amount of blood loss she had taken. However, after a stop to change the bandage, and the third time he'd suggested they rest, she'd pinned him up against a tree with his feet four inches off of the ground and told him, "I'll leave you hanging from a branch the next time you mention it again." Patroclese had the scant satisfaction of seeing her stagger a little after she released him, but he'd learnt his lesson and now kept his mouth firmly shut. It didn't, however, stop him from 'voicing' his opinion with pointed looks.

By the tracks, it looked as if Mavrikios was heading for the port city of Acanthus where, no doubt, he intended to catch a ship headed in the direction of Rome. So despite Patroclese's concerns about her welfare, and the one's he'd expressed about losing the trail in the gathering darkness, Xena elected to press on. She had two distinct reasons for doing so. Firstly to keep ahead of the pursuit that dogged them, and secondly, to make up ground on those they were pursuing in turn.

Xena felt an urgency pressing her to catch up with those ahead of her. With all of the dodging and diving that they'd had to do during the day, they were way behind and the Warrior Princess knew that Mavrikios wouldn't be wasting any time. That and the fact that Acanthus was barely four days away from them.

Some two to three candlemarks after the meal was finished and the plates cleared away, the first stirrings of the bard's stratagem began to emerge. Men began to make their way into the brush with increasing regularity, many failed to re-emerge, all victims of a violent gripping of the bowels. Groans echoed around the camp, with no one being immune. When she judged it appropriate, the bard loudly demanded her need for the 'bathroom'.

Mavrikios, no less effected than his men, turned an accusing finger at her and snarled, "You've poisoned me and my men!"

Gabrielle, effectively feigning the symptoms of the malady assailing every man in the camp, retorted, "It's not my fault if you've brought rotten rations!" then she added, "And I'm hardly likely to poison myself, am I? It's far more likely, anyway, that this was due to last night's so called meal!"

Mavrikios found it very difficult to dispute that argument, especially as he'd seen the bard dish herself up a healthy portion of the stew and sit and eat it. However, he was unaware of the rather clever sleight of hand the blonde had used to get rid of the food, learnt after she first encountered Xena's cooking and had found herself in need of getting rid of it without hurting her friend's feelings.

"I need to go now!" Gabrielle told him bluntly, clutching her stomach and doubling herself over.

Mavrikios, struggling with his own problems, threw the leg iron key to one of his men and ordered him to escort the bard to the bushes. The warrior exhibited a thin sheen of perspiration on his brow and had the look of uncertain control in his eyes, that was testament to her unusual culinary skills.

Once safely screened in the bushes, Gabrielle hunkered down and waited. After close to five minutes in sheer agony, the warrior could remain in position no longer. He abandoned his end of the leg iron and his post, in the certain knowledge that the prisoner would not be in any condition to go anywhere in the immediate future, and dived into a bush of his own.

As soon as Gabrielle saw the guard run for the bushes, she gathered in the free chain and set off into the surrounding woods as quickly and quietly as she could. She was certain that Mavrikios and his men wouldn't be in any condition to mount a search for her until at least morning, so she wanted to put as much distance between herself and them as possible. With luck, she might even stumble across Xena.

The further away from the camp she got, the quicker and less furtive were her movements. She was quite happy to sacrifice stealth for speed, besides which, the chains she was still wearing made silent movement all but impossible. Still, she felt that she was making reasonable progress and she endeavoured to employ much of the knowledge that Xena had instilled into her to keep herself on a straight heading back towards where she hoped to find the warrior.

She was stumbling along a fairly deep gully, when she thought she heard a noise that was alien to the environment. Freezing into a motionless crouch, she tried to attune her hearing to the

sounds of the forest around her. - *I wish I had a tenth of Xena's senses*, - she thought for about the millionth time - *She'd know what was out there by now ... and where it is.* -

Now, hearing nothing but the sounds of a forest shrouded in night, Gabrielle finally decided to take a look over the gully edge. Moving as slowly and quietly as she was able, she inched her way up to the rim to find herself confronted by a pair of boots and the point of a sword that hovered mesmerizingly close to her nose.

Swallowing hard, she followed the sword upwards, until she saw a blonde haired young man with bright blue eyes looking down at her, "Um ...," she began thinking fast, "You're probably wondering what I'm doing running around in a forest, in the middle of the night, in these," she said rattling the chains she was wearing.

The man made no answer, nor did the point of the sword waver. She was about to try another tack when a familiar voice spoke from behind her saying, "Don't sweat it Gabrielle. He's with me." and she nearly collapsed in relief as Xena jumped into the gully to give the bard a quick hug and a check over to make sure she was unharmed.

"Are you all right?" demanded the blonde remembering the arrow wound that Mavrikios had told her Xena had taken.

"I'm fine," responded the Warrior Princess, "My friend over there," she said nodding towards Patroclese, "took care of it." Xena's eyes took in the manacles and the leg irons and quipped, "Who did they think you were? Cerberus, or something?"

Gabrielle's quickly stifled giggle held more than a hint of relief in it, showing her pleasure in being back in friendly company, "I think Mavrikios was trying to discourage me from escaping," she replied.

"I think he blew that one, " the Warrior Princess returned with a totally straight face and a very dry tone. She quickly inspected the shackles before drawing her sword. Gabrielle had no time to think or protest before Xena sheered through the leg iron with one, precise, clean blow. Checking around for something she could use as an anvil, Xena spotted a large rock a few steps away, and pulled the bard after her as she headed for it, "Stretch your hands apart over that rock, " she instructed.

"Now, Xena," Gabrielle began hesitantly as she complied with the order, "remember I need my hands and any attached fingers for writing and ... and ..." she screwed her eyes tightly closed as two quick blows from her friend's sword sliced through the metal cuffs without leaving a scratch on the bard's flesh.

"Wow! that was amazing," spoke Patroclese for the first time in Gabrielle's presence. "Hi, by the way. My name's Patroclese, and you must be Gabrielle."

The bard seemed a little distracted as she replied, "Um, hi," the healer noted that she seemed to be counting her fingers.

"Come on Gabrielle," pressed Xena, springing up out of the gully in an easy bound, "We've got to get moving before Mavrikios catches up to you," she said as she reached down a hand to haul the blonde up beside her with astonishing ease.

Gabrielle blinked a few times, refocused her eyes and then responded, "Oh, don't worry about that. He's going to be a bit busy for a while."

Xena looked at her suspiciously, "Just how did you manage to get away from Mavrikios?" she questioned, "He's not an easy man to best."

"Why, Xena," the bard replied in a supercilious tone, "You're not the only one who can make and act on plans. We don't all need to use brawn when brains will get you the result."

Xena quirked an eyebrow at her and drawled lazily in a no nonsense way, "Gabrielle!"

The bard laughed her light, clear, innocent peel that nearly always made Xena feel better for hearing it, "Oh, Xena, it was so easy!" she giggled, "The food was so terrible in the camp, and the men were near mutiny over it, so I talked Mavrikios into letting me cook supper this evening."

"And?" pressed the Warrior Princess.

"And," grinned Gabrielle with childlike mischief twinkling in her eyes, "the stew I cooked for supper somehow came into contact with quite a large dose of cascara. The last I saw of Mavrikios and his men, they were all prospecting suitable spaces amongst rows of overcrowded bushes."

"That was brilliant!" exclaimed Patroclese impressed by the girls ingenuity. "True genius."

"Of course, I knew that Xena would be out here somewhere," continued Gabrielle smugly, "so it was just a case of keeping going until she found me."

Xena gave her a hard, yet somehow worried look, "Yeah, well, with the amount of warriors around after that bounty, you're just lucky you didn't stumble into them."

"You're kidding, right?" stated Gabrielle, with a half smile.

"No, Gabrielle," Xena told her as she gave a sharp whistle for Argo, "As a matter of fact I'm not."

"But ... but, that's not possible!" declared the bard. "Mavrikios told me that he wasn't going to lose men chasing after you. He knew you'd try and get me back, and even if you didn't he'd get a good price from Caesar for me." She saw the 'look' appear on Xena's face and quietly mouthed, "Oops!"

"Uh huh," grunted the Warrior Princess, as she stepped lightly into Argo's saddle and reached down to pull the bard up behind her, "Well that settles one thing," she said with a note of finality.

"Now, Xena," began Gabrielle adopting a stubborn tone as she settled herself behind her friend.

"No, Gabrielle," the warrior cut her off, "It's getting way too dangerous. You can visit with the Amazons for a moon or two, while I draw the hunters away from here." She waited until she saw Patroclese into his own saddle then started the horse moving.

The bard wasn't going to give in easily, "But, Xena!" she began to protest.

"No buts, Gabrielle," replied the warrior with an unshakable firmness that the blonde recognised as immovable, "I'm gonna have to do an awful lot of quick travelling and hard work to quieten this down. One or two people might need to be taught a lesson, and I won't be able to concentrate on things if I'm worried about you."

"Not Caesar," the bard put in quickly worried that the raven haired woman would seek to end matters with the Roman, risking her life in the process.

"No, not Caesar," agreed Xena, regret evident in her voice.

"Xena, I can help you. You know I'm not a little girl anymore,' she pressed valiantly, but knew that her friend's mind was made up on the point.

"No Gabrielle. In this situation I'm safer if I just have myself to worry about," she could feel the hurt in the blonde's eyes, even if she couldn't see it, "Besides, you're the Amazon Queen. You should spend some time with them now and again," she said softly. Then, laying a hand on the bard's leg she added in a quiet voice, "Please, Gabrielle, do this for me."

"Hera's teeth," swore the bard with deep feeling, "I hate it when you resort to dirty tricks!" If Xena had tried to bully her into staying with the Amazon's she would never have agreed to it, but by simply asking .. something Xena rarely did .. Gabrielle felt, morally, that she couldn't refuse her friend.

Xena smiled into the darkness, unseen by either the bard or the healer, "We've got quite a way to go, and I wanna keep well ahead of the pursuit." She looked over to where Patroclese rode beside them, "I've also got to find somewhere safe to leave the healer. He's been helpful and it wouldn't be fair to leave him some place where some toughs can rough him up."

Patroclese spoke up for himself, "I'm capable of looking after myself," he told her indignantly.

"I know you are," assured the Warrior Princess.

"But," continued the healer, "If it's all right with you, I'd like to take the trip to the Amazon's with you. It'll probably be my only chance to get to see them."

Gabrielle was certain that Xena was going to say no to the young man, but she felt that Patroclese deserved something for helping her friend, so she chirped in quickly, "Of course you can come. It'll make a change to have someone to talk to while we travel. You've probably noticed that Xena, doesn't tend to say a lot." she said getting a dig in at her taciturn friend.

Patroclese, wisely forbore to make any comment, while Xena grunted non-committally as she concentrated on guiding them safely towards the path they wanted. Her mind was occupied elsewhere on how to draw off Mavrikios and all of the other hunters in the area. She was fairly certain she'd be able to accomplish it without too much difficulty, once she was unencumbered with worries for others. She should be able to leave the hunters sniffing aimlessly through eastern Greece, whilst she took a quick trip to Narbonensis. Nothing was going to cool off the ardour of the hunt faster than a cold trail.

Chapter Five: Beware Amazons

Bearing Grudges

It was four long days travel to the lands of the Amazons. During that time, Xena pressed her companions hard, intent on keeping ahead of the pursuit. She often left the bard and the healer, while she scouted ahead to make sure the way was clear, or swung behind them to cover tracks and cut false trails. The hunt was still on, but those tracking them never got close enough to challenge them. As they entered the Amazon forest, and read the warning totems, a sense of relief, tinged with uncertainty, came over the Warrior Princess; the chances of being ambushed here were greatly reduced, but the Amazon's held a heavy grudge against her and their memories were long.

She and Gabrielle had had several long and serious discussions about what they would face upon their return to Amazon jurisdiction. The bard had been certain that her position within the Nation would ensure the Warrior Princess went unharmed, "After all," she reminded her best friend while Patroclese had been washing up in a creek at one of their night camps, "it's not as if you did any real damage."

Xena quirked her a mirthless smile as she responded sarcastically, "Oh no .. no real damage. Just broke the Regent's arm, battered her a bit, kidnapped the Queen by dragging her out of the village with the full intention of killing her."

"Stop that," rebuked Gabrielle firmly, giving her friend a concerned look, knowing that she didn't really remember any of it and was just quoting from what the bard had told her about the incident. "Ephiny's a friend, Xena, she owes you far more than could be destroyed by a broken arm .. as for me, well I'm still here and very much alive. If you'd really wanted me dead, I'd be dead."

The bard watched closely as the blue eyes jerked away from hers and Xena concentrated on prodding a stubborn cook fire into life. Moving over to the raven haired woman's side, she hunkered down next to her, laying a gentle hand on her friend's arm, "Xena, you weren't yourself ... the grief, the anger, all of it ... in your right mind you would never have done what you did."

"Gabrielle ... I ... I'm so very sorry," the warrior whispered as she tried desperately to remember what had happened within the Amazon stronghold. Her mind tried to picture the scene as the bard had painted it, but her memories refused to focus and images slid into a nothingness that left her feeling frustrated and deeply ashamed for what she had nearly done to her one true friend.

Slipping her arm around the other woman's shoulders, Gabrielle hugged the tormented warrior and whispered softly, "It's alright, Xena. It's over .. past. We'll find the way to make the Amazon's get over it too."

Allowing herself to be comforted, Xena still couldn't shake the feeling that the Amazon Nation would be far less likely to forgive and forget than the young Queen who had chosen to remain at her side after all she had done to her. It was something that remained foremost in her mind as they pushed steadily towards Nation territory. But however the Amazons might feel about the Warrior Princess, they would welcome their queen back with open arms, - *And right now, she needs to be somewhere that's safe from Caesar, - her practical mind argued. - I'll worry about me when I know she's safe! -*

As they probed deeper into the forest, Xena's highly tuned senses soon registered the fact that they were no longer alone. However, if she'd been asked how she knew, or how she knew that the watchers were Amazons, she wouldn't have been able to find the right words to explain. A feeling, a sound, a movement, all were part of a whole, along with a myriad of other minor things that came together to give her an answer. Now she knew that they were in the midst of a screen of Amazon warriors.

"Alright," she said coming to a standstill in a small clearing, "Throw down your weapons and raise your arms in the signal I showed you."

Gabrielle grinned at her partner patiently. She knew the ritual, having performed it before, but went along with it anyway for Patroclese's sake, who this was all new to. She threw down her staff and clasped her hands together over her head in the Amazon sign for peace at about the same time the others did.

As the weapons hit the ground, the Amazon's appeared, almost like magic, from their vantage points in the trees that had camouflaged their presence. Patroclese's eyes nearly popped out of his head at the suddenness of their arrival, and then they goggled at the women who surrounded them in their full exotic splendour.

"Hi Solari," greeted the bard happily, recognising the distinctive mask of the head of the Royal Amazon Guards, "how are things going?"

"Gabrielle," greeted the Amazon, the tone warm for her. Then she and the other Amazons levelled their weapons in the Warrior Princess's direction. "Xena," she said grimly, "You should know better than to return here!"

Xena studied the Amazons recognizing latent hostility in their attitudes, "Solari." she greeted coldly with an icy stare, "I'm just escorting Gabrielle to Ephiny. I won't be staying. I have to be somewhere else."

None of the Amazons relaxed and Solari's tone was anything but friendly as she replied, "We'll see. There's a lot of hard feeling against you amongst the sisters at present," she stated stonily, "We'll see what Ephiny and the elders have to say."

Gabrielle began to feel worried for the first time. The atmosphere generated by the Amazons was cold and distinctly unfriendly. They looked tense and ready to spring at Xena at the first wrong movement, "Solari ?" she asked in concern, "What's going on?"

The stolidly, dour, Amazon, glanced in the bard's direction, softening her tone slightly as she answered, "Amazons died when she raided the village to get to you. Many of the sisters want justice." She took a deep breath, before continuing, "Therefore in the name of the Amazon Council, I arrest you, Xena of Amphipolis, on charges which include treason and murder."

Gabrielle was stunned. She knew that Solari stood close to Ephiny, was in fact the Queen Regent's head of the Royal Guard, and for all her distinctly aggressive posture, her tone and demeanor were not greatly different from normal, but the attitude of most of the other dozen Amazons was definitely antagonistic. Quietly, the bard said to her, "Is this a call for justice ... or vengeance, Solari?"

Ignoring the comment, Solari eyed Xena warily, "Are you coming along peacefully, or must we fight?" Her question was emphasized by four of the Amazon's drawing bows with the arrows aimed at the Warrior Princess.

Xena looked long and hard at the Amazon before answering, "I'm not here for trouble," she told her with chilling coolness, "So we'll keep this peaceable ... for now."

"Lay down all your weapons, Xena, and take off your armour as well," the Amazon warrior ordered coldly.

"Solari ... " Gabrielle started to intervene, worried about how Xena would react, anxious about just how bad the situation with the Amazons really was.

Her eyes never leaving the Amazon leader's, the Warrior Princess interrupted her friend with the quiet words, "It's alright, Gabrielle. We'll do it Solari's way for now."

The bard watched in uncomfortable silence as she saw Xena arch an eyebrow and gain Solari's tacit nod of approval as she slowly reached to remove her armour, bracers and greaves, tossing them down in a pile in front of her. Moving carefully, she divested herself of the breast dagger and the two boot daggers she carried, before unhooking the chakram from her waist and handing it over to a reluctant Gabrielle, "Keep it safe for me," she said with a crooked smile.

One of the scouts stepped in and expertly looped some heavy ropes around Xena's wrists, binding her with professional expertise. The Warrior Princess stood motionless for the indignity, accepting that now was not the time to start a fight. She needed to ensure her bard's safety before her own.

Gabrielle, however, was far from silent. "Solari!" she exclaimed, "What do you think you're doing? There's no need to tie her up, she's surrendered her weapons."

"I'm sorry, Gabrielle. But she has to face charges and I can't take any chances .. I have too much respect for her fighting skills to do that." came the flat reply.

As the bard spluttered in indignant disbelief, Patroclese held the reigns of the horses and looked on. He felt totally out of his depth and very uneasy in presence of such hostility where he had expected a different kind of reception. He wondered what he should do, but as the Amazons formed up around the trio any decisions were taken out of his hands, "Me and my wanderlust," he muttered morosely, "I could have been safe and comfortable in some tavern by now."

Gabrielle tried to banish her look of concern over the situation and reassure the healer, "Don't worry," she told him encouragingly, "We'll clear all this up when we see Ephiny." - *I hope* - she added silently as she took note that all but three of the Amazons were tightly clustered around Xena.

The armour and weapons were quickly gathered and packed to be carried by Argo, with one of the guards taking the reigns from Patroclese and leading the two horses down the barely defined trail. Everyone else in the party followed on, Gabrielle and Patroclese behind the horses, Solari and the bulk of the guards next, arranged around Xena, with two flanking scouts out.

"Who is this Ephiny?" asked the healer intrigued about the name he'd heard mentioned several times.

"She's the Queen Regent of the Amazon's. Kind of the deputy for the real Queen," explained the bard with a half smile, "and a friend."

"That's good, agreed Patroclese edgily, "But wouldn't it be better to have the real Queen on our side too?" he asked, throwing a look back at Xena and the Amazon Warriors who were regarding their prisoner rather like they would a deadly snake.

Gabrielle's smile broadened, "Well, she is as well," she told him.

Patroclese looked at her with frank disbelief, "Oh yeah," he said with a touch of sarcasm in his tone, "Well then, who is she, and why doesn't anyone talk about her?"

The bard looked at him in slight confusion, "I thought you'd heard Xena say," she replied, although when she noted the blank look on his face, her glance became sly and she told him, "Actually, I'm the Amazon Queen."

Patroclese stumbled in mid step and would have fallen if Gabrielle hadn't moved quickly to support him, "You're kidding!" he blurted out.

"Actually she isn't," the dark warrior voice rumbled from behind them, looking to move forward when she saw the healer stumble.

The Amazons had tensed at the sudden movement of their prisoner, hands gripping weapons tightly in the expectation of use, and only relaxed when Xena realised how nervous she was making her guards and dropped back into the dense pocket they had formed around her with a mocking arch of a darkly sardonic brow.

"What's with all the hostility, then?" he demanded, grappling with an awful lot of suddenly new ideas.

"Long story," Xena answered him from behind, ignoring the edginess that the Amazons continued to display.

Patroclese fell in beside Gabrielle again and demanded to know, "What have they got against Xena?"

The bard sighed. It was not really a story that she wanted to go into with such a new acquaintance, but she could sense the healer's concern and understood his need to know, "Not so long ago," she began, " Xena and I had serious falling out." she grimaced at the inadequacy of the words to describe the hatred and torment that had welled up between the two of them, "It was pretty bad," she added, putting a lot of emphasis on the 'bad'. "Both of us ended up hating each other - or so we thought at the time. Anyway, I went to stay with my Amazon sisters, while Xena went somewhere to get through what she felt." Gabrielle collected her thoughts and continued with her narration, aware that most of the Amazons were listening as well, "Well, eventually, Xena decided that she'd feel much better if I was dead, so she rode into the Amazon's village and abducted me, intending to kill me."

"What? She rode into a whole Amazon village on her own and just took you away?" asked the healer incredulously as he stole a look at the Warrior Princess who sauntered along stoically behind them.

"Yeah." agreed Gabrielle, " That's what this problem is about. Xena wasn't exactly in full control of herself at the time, and several of the Amazon's got hurt, but neither of us realized that any had died." she explained.

"Hey," said Patroclese suddenly, grabbing the bard's arm, "How come you're still alive, then?" He thought about it for the barest second before clarifying what he meant, "I've seen her fight and if she wanted you dead, you'd be dead."

"Yeah," agreed Gabrielle with heartfelt understanding, as she pulled her arm free, "Well I guess I was lucky, because even though we were both hurting, the love in our friendship was enough to break through all the pain, anguish and hate that we'd managed to build up," her eyes were a little

misty as she remembered. "Yeah... I guess I was real lucky." The bard looked over her shoulder and smiled a sad, pain tinged smile at Xena, who returned the look with a faint, tender, smile of encouragement that Gabrielle had grown to recognize and treasure.

They spent the rest of the day toiling through the dense woodlands that protected much of the Amazon Nation's lands. No one spoke much, not even Gabrielle. She was busy trying to work out ways to defuse the situation once they reached Themiscyra, while Xena wasn't known for her verbose conversation and with the Amazon's edgily watching the dark warrior's every move, Patroclese had no one else to talk to.

Evening came and a camp was made. They were still a good half day's journey from the Amazon capital and Solari saw no sense in travelling through the night. Xena was detached and, worryingly, more silent than was usually normal for her, even when Gabrielle sat beside her in open support of her friend. Yet the bard sensed that her partner was grateful for the company and the Amazons looked on, knowing that there was no longer a rift between the Warrior Princess and their Queen.

Patroclese had gotten over his nervousness about the Amazons and was in a deep conversation with a young girl that Gabrielle seemed to remember was called Alexa. The pair were soon lost in trading stories and soft laughter. The rest of the Amazon's didn't make a major show of it, but they were obviously keeping a careful watch on Xena, even though the Warrior Princess had done nothing but comply with them.

Gabrielle watched as Xena twisted her wrists within her bonds to keep the blood circulating. The warrior was staring into the fire and seemed far away from the reality of the campsite. "Hey," said the bard softly, "You okay?"

Xena seemed to return from some distant place before nodding and answering, with "Stiff shoulder," which both of them knew was an evasion of the question.

"Here, let me take a look at it," offered the bard, just wanting the warrior to know she was there for her.

Physically relaxing under Gabrielle's gentle ministrations, Xena switched back her finely honed senses to the area around them. She was aware of the movement of the wild creatures that ran almost silently in brush and through the tree canopy, all normal sounds for where they were. She had remained alert all day, more worried about the slower pace that the larger group travelled at, than her current uncertain situation. She wasn't sure how close the pursuit was, but she hoped being within Amazon territory would discourage the bounty hunters from continuing after them.

For a long period, she had heard nothing out of the ordinary. They had eaten their evening meal and settled down for an uneasy rest for the night. Gabrielle had remained at her side and she had spoken of inconsequential things, her concern at the current situation showing in her incessant talking. Xena didn't mind, in a strange way it was soothing. She almost laughed, - *There was a time when her ceaseless chattering nearly drove me insane .. now I find it comforting.* - She shook her head wryly at the thought.

Stiffening, her eyes suddenly narrowed as she picked up the sound of someone, or something, moving closer towards the camp - *Several someones!* - she decided. She concentrated, fining down her senses, narrowing onto the area of concern and blotting out everything that was not relevant to the situation. She was only vaguely aware of the salve that the bard had been rubbing into the almost healed wound, but she responded with a quiet, Thanks," as the blonde replaced the dressing.

"Have we got problems?" asked Gabrielle, recognising the tell tale signs in her friend's attitude.

"Yeah," breathed Xena, as she got slowly to her feet, "Get your staff, and try to keep out of serious trouble ... don't get caught this time, huh?"

"Who me?" whispered the bard incredulously, giving Xena her most wide eyed innocent look.

"Yeah, yeah," muttered the Warrior Princess as she moved towards the fire to add some more wood to the flames, making the embers leap into renewed life and add some light to the clearing. Circling around the camp fire, she hunkered down next to Solari and told her quietly, "We've got visitors out there. They could be after Gabrielle, so keep an eye on her."

Solari looked at her with stoney implacability, acknowledging Xena with a bear movement of her head. She gave a signal that sent two of her scouts into the woods, the Amazons stealthily slipping between the trees like silent shadows.

"Any chance that you'll cut me lose and give me my weapons?" asked the Warrior Princess neutrally.

Solari gave her an unreadable look before replying, "Can we Amazons trust you, Xena?" she replied flatly, "How do I know that this isn't a trick of yours?"

"Forget it." Xena told her, disgust evident in her voice, "Just keep Gabrielle safe," she instructed in a tone like chiselled granite.

She was on edge. She could feel the presence of the intruders, and she knew that the Amazon's were far more concerned with keeping an eye on her, than in getting ready for an attack so deep into their territory. Xena flexed the muscles in her wrists, straining against the ropes, but knowing that they had been tied all too well. it was going to make the coming fight ... interesting, to say the least.

Ghostlike, one of Solari's scouts returned bringing the news of an imminent attack, but before any of the Amazons could consider cutting the Warrior Princess loose, or even decide whether it would be safe to do so, the undergrowth around the clearing erupted and spewed forth dozens of warriors, yelling war cries and brandishing weapons.

Caught at a disadvantage, the Amazons followed Solari's shouted order, "Protect Queen Gabrielle," leaving Xena outside the protective ring of their weapons and disadvantaged by her tied hands.

A warrior rushed towards her his sword held high. Xena ducked beneath his wild slash, and rolled away from him as he swung down at her, only to have his feet kicked out from under him as he did so. Xena sprang athletically to her feet, meeting another man with a double handed punch to the gut and a two fisted uppercut to the jaw that threw him backwards and his sword up in the air to land safely into her waiting hands. With no time to cut herself free, the Warrior Princess turned to face the charging mass, weaving a deadly arc with the blade to keep the warriors back.

The Amazons held a tight cordon around Gabrielle and Patroclese, with the pair mopping up any attackers that got past the Amazon defenders. Many of the sisters had taken wounds as they dealt back death to the warriors who were pressing to reach the bard, but so far none of the women had fallen.

Xena was beating back four warriors, when her sword was clubbed from her hands, leaving her weaponless, once more, in the face of the enemy. She swiftly remedied this with a slugging backhand blow to the nearest warrior, sending him sprawling into his comrades and taking them down into a confused bundle on the ground. As another man ran towards her with an upraised sword, Xena neatly sidestepped and grabbed his passing arm, slamming it down across her knee in two heavy blows that snapped the bone and sent the sword flying. A quick forward roll gave her the opportunity to grab the fallen blade from the ground and, on the upward roll, the momentum to execute a thrust under the ribs of a warrior just about to spit Solari.

Booting the warrior's body off of her weapon, Xena spun with a whipping high kick that struck an attacker across the side of his head and somersaulted him out of the action. Yelling out her ululating battlecry, Xena backflipped over the heads of those converging upon her and landed beside a newly fallen Amazon just in time to deflect the killing blow the soldier swung. A reverse thrust of her sword took out the warrior attempting to sneak up behind her, but as he fell the sword was twisted from her grip.

Swaying to one side, Xena avoided a sword thrust, grabbed the extended arm, spun under it and used the created torque to flip him out of her way into three rushing warriors. The move, however, left her open to attack from her flanks and three warriors leapt at her clubbing her down with fists. They all went down in a heap, but one man was ejected from the brawl with a double footed thrust that sent him skywards to land some distance away. As the two remaining warriors tried to haul the Warrior Princess to her feet, she pushed off hard from the ground, flipping over to break their grip on her and head butted one before back handing another.

A quick look assured her that Gabrielle was fine and in no danger, although the Amazons had lost two sisters, and a couple more looked badly hurt. A glance up, however, told her that the attacking warriors had had enough and were dragging their own wounded and dead back into the forest where they had come from.

Xena scanned the area with a professional eye to make sure that all sources of danger were gone and, only when she was satisfied on that point, did she start to make the rounds to check what needed to be done for the injured. Gabrielle and Patroclese were already moving amongst the Amazons doing what they could to patch them up.

Xena moved to the fallen girl, Alexa, who lay unmoving. Hampered by the ropes around her wrists, she had difficulty examining her. Noticing an abandoned dagger to her side, she started to reach for it, intending to cut herself loose, only to feel the cold steel of a sword blade against her neck. A glance over her shoulder revealed one of Solari's warrior's standing guard over her. Xena shook her head slightly in angry disbelief, before pushing the weapon aside and continuing her examination of Alexa. The girl had a variety of small wounds, none of them serious, except for the sword thrust through her side, "Patroclese," she called, "You better come here. She needs to have this wound cleaned and stitched before she loses much more blood or we'll lose her," she told him.

She looked up into Solari's eyes. The Amazon remained as dour as ever, but she grated out a, "Thanks," before turning back to check on the rest of her sisters.

Xena stood wearily and shook her head. She doubted that the warriors would be back for more, they'd taken quite a beating when they had probably felt they were going to get an easy victory. However, the rest of the night wouldn't be a comfortable one, with very few of them getting any sleep. But they stayed because the injured needed to rest and the group, as a whole, would be better off moving through the forest in daylight, rather than darkness.

Looking down at her wrists, Xena sighed. She'd be damned before she asked Solari to release her again, her pride wouldn't allow it. She hoped that she hadn't made a mistake in bringing Gabrielle to the Amazons, but in truth, the sisters were still the only people that she felt the bard would be safe with. Glancing at the alert Amazon guard behind her, Xena made her way over to where Gabrielle had laid out their sleeping furs and settled down, moodily, to get what rest she could.

Chapter Six: A Meeting of Friends

The journey was not an easy one, even if short. Most of the Amazons were hurt, and they'd had to make travois litters to carry Alexa and one of the others. There were three dead that were wrapped in blankets and hung across the backs of the horses who also drew the litters. Xena remained bound, and the scouting party divided their attention between watching her and focussing their attention for another possible attack.

Word of the imminent arrival of the scouting party, and those that they were escorting, spread through the village at a pace that only such news can travel. It was also known that, before the party made their appearance, there were several injured amongst them, which meant that the Amazon healers were there to meet them as they limped into the crowds that had gathered for their arrival. The injured and dead were quickly spirited away, leaving Xena, Gabrielle and Patroclese surrounded by a large, inquisitive body of Amazon womanhood. Not all of the faces were hostile, but even the women who were usually friendly towards Xena looked concerned.

A disturbance at the back of the crowd, saw a gap open to allow Ephiny access to the new arrivals, before closing behind her as she passed through. The Queen Regent bowed her head to Gabrielle in formal greeting and then gave the younger woman a quick hug of friendship, before holding her out at arms length and with a smile declared, "Welcome home, my Queen."

Gabrielle returned the smile and was happy at the warmth of the greeting, but she shook her head slightly and said, "You're more the Amazon Queen than I am, Ephiny."

"Only until you return to take your rightful place," insisted the blonde Amazon.

"I'm just glad there's at least one friendly face here," the bard said pointedly, glancing around at the gathered Amazons and the group of guards that surrounded the Warrior Princess, before noticing that Ephiny's eyes hardened as she glanced over to where Xena stood.

As Ephiny observed Xena, a look of hostility edged onto her face, "Hello Xena," she greeted, noting that the warrior's hands were bound, and making no move to extend her the friendly reception that she had given the bard.

"Ephiny," returned Xena neutrally.

"You aren't responsible for the scouts' injuries, are you?" coldness evident in her words and her eyes.

The warrior Princess returned the look with an arch of her eyebrow and an icy blue stare that would have frozen most people to the spot. Ephiny forced herself to maintain eye contact with the warrior. Xena had broken her arm when she had tried to defend Gabrielle, and had killed two sister Amazons. As Regent she had to appear strong in front of the Nation, she couldn't afford to seem to be intimidated ... even if she was!.

However, before Xena could make an answer to the question, Gabrielle jumped into the breach and stated, "Actually, I suppose I'm responsible."

The other woman's attention switched back to the bard as Ephiny exclaimed in disbelief, "You! ... But how?"

Gabrielle explained smoothly, "The warriors that attacked us were after me." - *Well it wasn't exactly a lie. They might well have wanted Xena too, but they were definitely trying to take me as well.* - "If it hadn't been for Xena, all of the sisters would be dead," she told her audience bluntly.

"Is that true?" Ephiny demanded of Solari.

Whatever opinions Solari may, or may not, have held about Xena, the woman had a deep abiding respect for the truth, and quickly verified Gabrielle's statement with, "She warned us that she 'heard' movements outside the camp," she affirmed and then added, "Even though she was bound, as she is now, and weaponless at the start of the fight, she managed to fight off the bulk of the attackers and, not only that, she also saved my life and Alexa's."

Ephiny gave Xena a mildly warmer look. The report of the attack, technically, should have been made in private, but by making it in open public, it gave a lot of Amazons something to think about, other than Xena's attack on the village. It also gave Ephiny something else to think about. However she quickly ordered the Amazons to go back about their business.

As the women dispersed, except for Solari and a guard of nine that included six archers, Ephiny invited Gabrielle, Xena and Patroclese to attend her, "Come with me," she said heading into the heart of the town. As they walked, they were all too aware of the stares that they, or more precisely Xena, was getting.

The silence hung around them like a cloak and, as was usual, it was Gabrielle who broke it, "How's Xenan?" she asked her friend. In a bid to find a neutral subject, she asked about Ephiny's son, named for Xena after the Warrior Princess had delivered him in a difficult birth that had threatened both mother and child's lives.

"Fine," enthused Ephiny, the proud mother, "he's getting bigger and stronger all the time and he's so like Phantes now. You'll have to see him later." She looked over to Xena, concern and coldness back in her features, "You know I have so much to thank you for there, Xena. But we have a big problem, here."

"Do tell," came the warrior's slightly sarcastic reply.

Ephiny chose to ignore the comment, although she did explain the problem, "When you smashed through the village last time, a lot of Amazons were hurt and two died. Charges were raised against you and, now that you're here, Amazon law is going to demand that you stand trial for your actions."

Xena casually answered, "You are supposing that I'd be willing to let you try me," she smiled darkly at the look that Ephiny gave her.

"Xena!" warned Gabrielle as the archers drew their bows and sighted on their prisoner, ready in case the Warrior Princess should attempt flight. Xena flicked the bard a look that said she was aware of the archers and of what she was doing. The bard was not reassured and turned to the blonde Amazon, "Ephiny," she remonstrated, "stop this. It's madness."

Ephiny looked at her friend, her Queen, and said with a tinge of sadness, "I can't Gabrielle. the charges have been laid. There is going to have to be a trial, and neither you nor I can stand against the law." She turned back to Xena and drew a breath, "Xena, you're going to have to stay in a cell until the trial."

"Oh, c'mon!" exploded an incensed bard, "Is that really necessary?"

"Hush, Gabrielle," Xena told her, "Don't worry. We'll work it out." Her icy gaze flickered across to Ephiny, "Won't we."

The blonde Amazon inclined her head slightly and answered, "Tomorrow. We'll organize the trial for the morning," she promised.

Xena swung to look at Solari, "Give my weapons to Gabrielle. I'll want to know where they are when I leave." That, of course, could have been taken in several ways, but at Ephiny's nod, Solari

handed over the sword and assorted knives that the Warrior Princess normally carried about her person, Gabrielle already being in possession of the Chakram.

"Thanks," Xena drawled, "Now are you gonna show me to my 'room' or do you want me to find my own way there?"

Solari motioned for her to follow and led the Warrior Princess, and her escort, off to the town gaol, where she would be lodged for the night. Gabrielle watched them go, chewing her bottom lip in concern about how the whole situation was developing.

Turning back to Ephiny, she demanded, "This trial thing is a formality, right? I mean, there's no way that she can be found guilty of anything, right?" She was aware of the look of concern on Patroclese's features that must be a mirror to her own.

"There's a lot of hard feeling towards her, Gabrielle," the Amazon told her, "She's always had a hard core of enemies within the village who have resented what they see as outside interference in Amazon domestic issues, and those people have had a lot of time to stir up feeling against Xena. After what she did, even those who were friendly towards her doubt the wisdom of leaving her loose. She's just too damn unpredictable and violent."

"Is that what you feel, Eph?" the bard asked softly.

The curly haired Regent refused to look her friend in the eye, "Gabrielle, after what I saw her do .. after what she did to me and you ..." she shook her head, "I don't know if we can trust her anymore."

The bard put a hand out and pulled the Amazon to a halt, "What about all the good she's done for you and the Amazons as a people?" she asked quietly, "If it wasn't for Xena risking her life time and again for you, do you really think you'd still have an Amazon Nation?"

Ephiny shook the hand off, "I know, Gabrielle. I know. But isn't she as much a danger to us as those that she got rid of? I owe her a lot, but I have to think of the Amazons and what's best for them."

"Are you sure that's it?" asked the bard, misty green eyes boring into brown, "Are you sure that you're worried about the Nation and not just smarting over being bested by her so easily?" She saw the Regent wince.

"All right, I admit it, she embarrassed me. Broke my arm and trampled on my pride, but God's, Gabrielle! I can forgive her that .. I can, but what's going to stop her from doing that again? .. to you? to us?" questioned Ephiny intently.

"She can't make any promises, Eph, neither can I. But the circumstances were pretty unique and I doubt they'll ever happen again. I'll fill you in on all the painful sordid details, so you'll really know what happened," she told her friend, "Then I hope you'll judge Xena differently. She doesn't deserve your hostility .. she really was a victim of the whole thing."

Ephiny snorted derisively, "Oh yeah! You get dragged out of here behind a horse and Xena comes out of it the victim."

They turned and headed along the dirt streets, through the tight packed huts to where Gabrielle's own dwelling stood. The bard's lips tightened at her friend's comment, but she knew that pushing the matter wouldn't help, so changing the subject slightly, the bard asked, "What exactly happens at this trial?"

"A council of five elders will sit to hear the evidence." explained the Amazon, trying to adjust her perceptions and relegate her own anger from her thoughts, "The trouble is that everyone here knows, or thinks they know, exactly what happened that day. So, at the moment, things don't look good," explained the Amazon.

"What do you mean, 'things don't look good'?" demanded the bard angrily, "I thought there wasn't supposed to be a judgement until all the evidence was heard in a trial."

"Gabrielle," Ephiny explained patiently, "She killed Amazons. Our people want justice."

"I'm all for justice," agreed the bard, "I'm just not into lynch mobs and revenge mentalities!"

"Neither am I," agreed Ephiny, "That's why as Queen Regent, I'm going to appoint the most fair minded of the available elders. I can't sway their decision, but I can make sure that Xena gets a fair hearing."

"I suppose that's something," agreed the bard as they reached her hut, "Ephiny?" she asked, "Can you let me have some scrolls on Amazon law? I think it might be helpful if I know what's going on in the court."

Ephiny smiled warmly, "I'll bring some right over," she promised. "You should know, however," she told her friend, "that although you can't influence the trial as Queen, there's nothing to stop you taking the part as Xena's advocate. You know everything that happened, so you're in a unique position to draw the truth out. When all of the facts come out, it might just be enough to sway the elder's decision." She saw the look of hope spring onto the bard's face, "That's not a certainty," she warned, "but it's better than nothing."

"You're right," agreed the bard as the Amazon turned to go, "Ephiny," she said, "Thanks."

"For what," smiled the fair haired woman.

"For being a friend ... to me and Xena both," Gabrielle told her with feeling.

"I'll do the right thing, Gabrielle. Just don't expect too much of me. I've got a lot of bad thoughts to work through, but I'm willing to listen to what you have to say. Tell me about what happened when I find those scrolls for you, please?" Ephiny asked earnestly as she turned and headed off to find the law scrolls that the bard had requested.

understand what was going on, or what had caused the problem in the first place. Gabrielle was pretty much uncommunicative about the whole thing .. he'd been sent out of the hut to get a meal when Ephiny had returned, and hadn't heard the tale of exactly what had transpired in the past. Now, as the bard worked her way through endless scrolls on Amazon law, he felt that he couldn't put his head outside the door because the Amazon's were suspicious of any man on their territory. His trip to the dining hall had been really nerve wracking.

He sat in a chair and fumed silently, until he couldn't stand it any longer and demanded, "Can't you do anything? I mean, you are the Amazon Queen. Surely your word has got to count for something here."

Gabrielle looked up from what she was reading and answered bluntly, "Technically, I have no say in this whatever. The Amazons brought in a law, many years ago, that removed all jurisdiction of trials from the Queen to prevent judgements based on favouritism, rather than the law."

"So you're just going to sit back and do nothing?", Patroclese sounded incredulous.

"Well," Gabrielle told him thoughtfully, "I can't do anything to influence how the Elders decide the case, but as Ephiny said, I can act as Xena's advocate." She looked a little abstracted as she added, "I'm sure that I can make the Amazons see some of the wider issues that were at play here."

"What issues?" asked the healer in exasperation. "What happened?"

Gabrielle had returned her attention back to the scrolls and was making some notes, "I don't have time to explain it all now, " she told him impatiently, "Wait for the trial tomorrow. You'll find out all about it then."

Patroclese rose from the chair in frustration, and moved across to the window where he watched the Amazon women going about their lives, "Did you get a look at the faces of some of those women?" he asked morosely, "They've already made up their minds about what the verdict should be." He turned back to look at the bard again and asked, "What's the penalty for what she did, if she's convicted?"

"The Elders have a fairly wide range of discretionary punishments that they can hand out." Gabrielle told him quietly, "They range from banishment to death."

"Death," whispered the healer in disbelief, "But they can't"

The bard did her best to calm the healer's fears, although her own doubts were clear to read in her eyes, "The Amazons are a fair people," she assured him, "Once they get all the facts, they'll let Xena go." She tapped a scroll thoughtfully, "Besides, if things go wrong, there might be another way out of this."

Patroclese looked a question at her, but Gabrielle just shrugged and told him, "Wait and see what happens tomorrow, before we start worrying about other ways to free her."

Chapter Seven: Trials of Life

The trial was held in the Amazon meeting hall in the centre of the town. The hall had been built to house Amazon gatherings so that it was plenty big enough to hold everyone who wanted to attend .. which was close to being the whole local Amazon community, along with a few of those from farms that lay close by.

The court assembled about two candlemarks after the night's fast had been broken. Xena was brought into the hall, and the assembled Amazons took their seats on the benches provided. The Elders then entered and took their places on a raised dias, behind a long table at the far end of the hall. Xena sat with Gabrielle at a table immediately in front of them, with two guards standing directly behind the chained Warrior Princess. Tarelle, the prosecutor, sat at a second table to the left of the first.

As they waited for the court to come to order, Xena allowed a small, self mocking smile to flit over her face. Gabrielle caught the look and asked her friend, "What are you thinking?"

"Oh," replied Xena lightly, "Just that it seems we've been through something like this before."

The bard smiled back, "Well that turned out all right in the end," she reminded her friend.

"True," agreed Xena. "But I don't think that I'll be able to trick Ares into resurrecting the dead this time," she added. However, she felt comforted by the gentle squeeze that the bard gave her hand.

With everyone assembled, the hearing began. Tarelle, an Amazon who clearly stood with the anti-Xena faction, had been given the task as prosecutor of the charges, "The Amazon People charge Xena of Amphipolis, Warrior Princess of Calmai, Destroyer of Nations, with murder, grievous bodily harm and the abduction of Queen Gabrielle, with the intent to do murder upon her, and thereby commit treason against the Amazon people."

"Now wait a minute," declared Gabrielle hotly, standing up to contest the last part of the charges, "I have never sought to charge Xena with my abduction! And just how could she have committed treason? She's not an Amazon."

With a look to the Elders to gain their approval, the red haired Tarelle turned to the bard and said, "Forgive me, my Queen," it sounded almost as if she choked on that bit, "but you are the Queen of the Amazons and as such your person is part of the Amazon state. It is therefore within the people's right to bring the charge of abduction, because it was their Queen who was abducted."

Gabrielle looked a bit stunned about that, but she wasn't giving up on the charge of treason, "Look, even if the charge of abduction is admitted to the proceedings, there's no way that treason could or should be considered."

"On the contrary, Queen Gabrielle," Tarelle almost purred, "Xena is the Queen's Champion, and as such subject to the laws of treason."

"Tarelle is correct," contributed Elder Katanis, a raven haired woman with flecks of grey at her temples and a hardness to her face that seemed to speak of severity.

Amara, the Eldest, a white haired woman with an air of wise patience about her, made the first ruling, "The charges stand as presented. Tarelle," she instructed, "call your first witness."

"I call Ephiny, Queen Regent, to hold truth," stated Tarelle formally.

The blonde Amazon made her way from one of the front benches where she had been seated. Called to hold truth, all Amazon's were honour bound to give a true testimony of events they were questioned about. Ephiny stood stiffly as she faced Tarelle. Her talk with Gabrielle had led her to re-evaluate her opinions and position on the case.

"Were you present on the day of the attack?" asked the prosecutor.

"Yes," agreed the blonde.

"Did you see the accused in her attack on this village?" continued Tarelle.

"Yes," repeated Ephiny.

"Were you not attacked by Xena as you sought to protect Queen Gabrielle from a savage assault?"

"Yes, I was," agreed Ephiny and tried to add, "but it wasn't the Xe...."

"You've already agreed that it was Xena?" interrupted Tarelle.

"Yes, I know, but...." agreed the blonde Amazon, trying to clarify what she had seen.

"Well then, can you describe what happened?" pressed Tarelle relentlessly.

Ephiny had no choice but to describe how Xena had fought past her attempts to stop her, breaking her arm and attacking any Amazon that had stood in her way until she was able to get to Queen Gabrielle and remove her from the village by dragging her behind a fast moving horse.

"You saw Xena strike Mariss and Denara?" demanded the red haired prosecutor.

"Yes," agreed Ephiny quietly.

"And both of these sisters died of the wounds received from Xena's hand?" she pressed.

"Yes," agreed Ephiny almost reluctantly.

"And you also witnessed the brutal abduction of Queen Gabrielle?" persisted Tarelle.

"Yes," Ephiny stated once more to the hushed hall.

"Did Xena attempt to kill her, while here in the village?" demanded the prosecutor.

Ephiny bit her lip and stood quietly, reluctant to answer the question.

"You are under oath to answer truly," reminded Tarelle.

Ephiny looked an apology at both Xena and Gabrielle, "She threw her chakram at the Queen," she answered in a quiet voice.

"Xena is deadly accurate with this weapon, is she not?" asked the red head.

Ephiny nodded her reply.

"How is it she failed to hit the Queen?" she demanded.

"I deflected her aim," returned the blonde Regent softly.

"I have no further questions of this witness," Tarelle told the Elders.

"Do you have anything that you wish to ask Regent Ephiny, Queen Gabrielle?" asked Amara for the Elders.

Gabrielle rose from beside Xena and moved around in front of the table she had been seated at. Speaking to the Elders, Gabrielle began by saying, "I'd like to go back to the time a few days before the raid on the village took place."

"Is this relevant, Queen Gabrielle?" asked Sarelle, the youngest of the Elders serving as judge, a woman who looked young even though she had reached her fiftieth year.

"It's crucial to the whole event, Elder Sarelle," affirmed the bard seriously.

The Elders conferred quietly together for a few moments before Amara nodded her head and invited, "Please continue, my Queen."

Gabrielle turned to Ephiny who stood to one side of the dias, "I want to go back, before the day of the attack," she instructed her witness, "Can you tell the everyone of the events that took place at the Centaur gathering prior to Xena's alleged attack here on the village."

Ephiny outlined the events surrounding the appearance of Callisto and Hope amongst the Centaurs. She described the murder of Kaleipus and the battles that ensued, along with the many deaths and Xena's heroic part in limiting the damage and those deaths, finally defeating Callisto.

Tarelle, stood and objected to the relevance of the evidence being given, "The trial has been called to judge Xena's crimes against the Amazons, not to applaud her aid to a bunch of worthless animals."

That, drew a heated glare from Ephiny, who had married the Centaur, Phantes, and whose own son, Xenan, was a Centaur Prince. However, the Elder Amara, quickly quashed Tarelle's complaint with the statement, "To understand the instant we must look at the whole," and was backed up by nods of affirmation from the other Elders sitting in judgement.

Gabrielle returned to her questioning, while a fuming Tarelle returned to her seat once again, "And you say that Xena managed to save all the children at the gathering, including your own son, Xenan?"

"Yes," agreed Ephiny, "she particularly made certain the children were safe, as well as managing to ensure the safety of many of the adults as well."

Gabrielle had thought hard about the next questions. She moved behind the table until she stood behind the Warrior Princess and placed her hands firmly on her friends shoulders, partly as support, partly as a form of restraint. She knew that Xena's face was a blank mask, emotionless, expressionless. Her shields had come up as soon as Gabrielle had begun to trespass on the sensitive areas surrounding Solon's death. She also knew that raw pain still existed under that emotional barrier, because this was a topic that still seared her own feelings as well.

"Ephiny, a boy died in the centaur village .. the boy was Kaleipus' adopted son, Solon. Did you know that the boy was Xena's own son, given to be raised by the centaurs just shortly after his birth?" asked Gabrielle clearly, the question bringing a hum of speculation to the hall.

Ephiny shook her head, "At the time I didn't know that Xena had a son. She'd kept his existence a hard secret. It was only afterwards at the funeral pyre that I found out the truth," acknowledged the Regent.

Calming herself, Gabrielle looked at Ephiny and asked, "Do you know who killed Xena's son, Solon?" She tightened her grip on Xena's shoulders as she felt her tense beneath her hands.

"The daughter of Dahak, the child Hope," came Ephiny's quiet reply.

"Do you know who Dahak is?" questioned the bard.

Ephiny nodded and answered, "He's known as the Dark One. He is a god of ultimate evil and destruction, who seeks entry to our world and total dominion over it."

That produced a stir amongst the Amazons, most of whom had never even heard of the entity called Dahak.

Tarelle, stood once more, however, and demanded of the Elders, "Has this any relevance to Xena's slaying of our sisters, or her abduction of our Queen, or her treason? I have heard nothing to shed any light on the Warrior Princess's actions in mitigation of her offences."

The Elders conferred once more and then Amara spoke to Gabrielle, "Tarelle has a valid point. Testimony should be relevant to the charges."

"If you just give me but a moment or two," pleaded Gabrielle, "I'm sure the relevancy of this will become clear."

The Elders whispered together again before coming to a consensus that Amara pronounced, "Very well. You may have a little more time so that we may judge where this is going. But, my Queen, I hope that you are not trying to waste this tribunals time."

Thank you Elder Amara," acknowledged Gabrielle gratefully. She turned back to Ephiny, "Do you know who Hope's mother is?" she continued with a dogged determination, fighting her own feelings while trying to help Xena control hers.

"Yes," responded Ephiny quietly.

"Tell the Elders, and our sisters, please," instructed the bard.

Ephiny looked towards the table of Elders and said in a clear voice, "The mother of Hope was Queen Gabrielle." Surprised murmurs rippled around the hall at that revelation.

When the noise had quietened down, Gabrielle asked, "With your intimate knowledge of the events prior to the advent of the attack, would you say that Xena was deeply affected by grief and a sense that I had betrayed her?", she squeezed tightly on Xena's shoulders, knowing she must have hurt the still tender wound from the arrow at Menassos.

Ephiny licked her lips and hesitated before answering, "With the loss of her son, I think that Xena's grief may have unbalanced her reason. She could have believed you'd deliberately betrayed her."

"Ephiny, when the prosecutor asked you about the attack on the village, you tried to say something about Xena. Could you tell us what that was?" questioned the bard.

The Regent thought for a moment before answering, "It's just that when Xena was in front of me, she seemed like a totally different woman. Everything she said, did, the way she moved were all different from the woman I knew. It was as if she'd become a totally different person."

Gabrielle excused Ephiny as a witness and returned the floor to the prosecutor, "Thank you, Ephiny for your candour in this matter."

Upon resumption, Tarelle called the bard to the witness stand, "I call upon Gabrielle, Queen of the Amazons, to bear truth," she announced smugly.

As she stood up from her seat beside Xena, she gave her friend's arm a comforting squeeze, before walking calmly, head high, to the witness stand where she turned to face Tarelle and her first question.

"Queen Gabrielle, on the day of the attack against the town ..."

"Excuse me, but the attack was not aimed at either the Amazon's or the town. It was directed at me, personally and alone. It was unfortunate that other people were hurt and killed in the process, but it was not, and should not be described as an attack on Themiscyra and it's people," the bard corrected firmly.

"Perhaps I should remind you that under Amazon law you are the embodiment of the Amazon Nation and, therefore an attack on you is an attack on us," smirked Tarelle with assurance.

"Then I think I should ask the Elders to take under consideration the fact that I have a personal life away from the Amazons and these events stemmed from those, and had nothing to do with the Nation," protested Gabrielle again, turning towards where the Elders sat quietly listening.

"Your point is noted, my Queen," acknowledged Amara, "Now if you could please just answer the prosecutor's questions, we would appreciate it."

"Thank you, Elder," said Tarelle appreciatively.

"As you wish," answered the Amazon Queen simply having made her point.

Turning back to Gabrielle, Tarelle smirked and began once again, "Now on the day of the attack against the town and our people, where exactly were you?"

Closing her eyes and taking a deep breath, "I was in the purification hut where I had been for three days, trying to"

"Just a statement of your location is sufficient, my Queen," purred Tarelle making the title sound like an insult. She saw the bard clench her fists and could see the knuckles whiten, "What happened when you heard the carnage taking place outside?" she questioned.

"Joxer had come into the hut to get me after hearing me cry out," Gabrielle remembered.

"Joxer?" questioned Elder Sarelle, who had not been in the town at the time of the attack.

"A male friend of both the defendant and the Queen," offered Tarelle in explanation.

"Very well," acknowledged Sarelle, "Please continue, my Queen."

Swallowing, and looking over Tarelle's shoulder to lock eyes with Xena, Gabrielle continued her narration, "I was weak from the purification ritual, and Joxer carried me outside to revive me. As he stepped through the door I could see there was trouble. Amazon's were attacking Xena, Ephiny was on the ground .. it was a scene from one of my nightmares," she ventured softly.

"What happened then?" prodded the prosecutor.

"I .. I .. don't remember," replied Gabrielle, very aware of the anguish in Xena's eyes as she struggled to recall exactly what had happened.

"Oh, come now, Queen Gabrielle, surely you're not asking us to believe that you can't remember the Destroyer of Nations throwing her chakram at you?" persisted Tarelle.

"I .. It's really not clear," stammered Gabrielle.

"Perhaps the memories, the memory of your best friend trying to kill you, hurts too much?" pushed the prosecutor, "Or perhaps it's what she did after, that you are having trouble reconciling as an act of friendship?" probed the red head relentlessly, "Are you telling this court that you remember nothing of what happened to you?"

"Leave her alone!" growled a voice that promised severe retribution if it was ignored. Xena was on her feet and moving across the floor before her guards realised what she was doing.

Tarelle rounded on her, showing either supreme bravery, or total stupidity, when she sneered, "What! The Warrior Princess seeks to protect the Amazon Queen! There's a turn up for the books. Or is it just that you believe only you have the privilege of inflicting severe physical damage upon her whenever it suits you ... and you alone!"

Having reached Gabrielle, the raven haired warrior rounded on the prosecutor, and the look that Tarelle saw on the Warrior Princess's face made her own blanche. With a furious wrench, Xena snapped the linking chain on her cuffs and bore down on Tarelle who, to give her her due, stood her ground, even though she looked terrified.

"No, Xena!" shouted the bard making a grab for her friend's arm as pandemonium erupted throughout the meeting hall, with guards rushing towards the scene of the confrontation, weapons levelled and ready to subdue the tall warrior.

Amara hammered thunderously with her gavel, trying to restore order before the whole affair turned into a riot, "Everyone stand still!" she roared with an amazing volume of lung power for an elderly woman.

Gabrielle pushed herself between Xena and Tarelle, and tried to use her body to shield her friend from the hostile guards. Knowing that, if she really wanted too, her friend could by-pass her restraining influence in a wide variety of ways to get to Tarelle. Instead she merely pressed forward until Gabrielle felt like the meat in a sandwich as the two squared up.

Ignoring everything that was going on around her, her eyes never breaking contact with the redhead, Xena's voice pitched down to a low threatening register and spoke words that only she, Tarelle and Gabrielle could hear above the noise, "You can say what you like about me, you can accuse me of whatever you want to, but don't you ever speak to her in that manner again!"

The prosecutor went as white as a ghost as she saw and read the undeniable menace in the Warrior Princess's eyes and knew that it wasn't an idle treat. She tried hard, but couldn't stop a convulsive swallow in a very dry throat.

"Be nice!" warned Xena in a deadly tone, "Or I won't be."

Seeing that the warrior was not physically threatening anyone, or trying to escape, the guards had enough sense not to charge in and make a tense situation turn deadly. While Solari snapped orders to the guards, Xena, having made her point, allowed Gabrielle to push her back away from the prosecutor, where members of the guard could surround their prisoner once more.

The bard turned to her friend and hissed in exasperated irritation, "That was plain dumb, Xena. You could have gotten yourself killed, and may have done our case all kinds of damage here."

Shrugging, the dark haired woman, looked down into her friend's eyes and told her, "She was attacking you, Gabrielle. Alright, not physically, but it was still an attack on you, on your position. I needed to let her know that it wasn't a viable option for her, okay," she quirked a smile, "I'm still Queen's champion and protector, remember?"

"Xena ..." began Gabrielle again, still angry and very concerned about the effect the outburst would have.

"Yell at me later, Gabrielle," the warrior told her calmly as she surveyed the shouting angry crowds as those supporting Tarelle demanded that action be taken against the Warrior Princess, while the Elders demanded order and Gabrielle's supporters railed against the way that Tarelle had badgered the Queen.

Finally, after a lot of shouting, threats, and a few outbreaks of physical violence, order was restored to the court, with several of the most vocal and belligerent Amazon's having been ejected from the meeting house by Solari's guards.

Her voice sounding a little ragged from all the shouting she'd been doing, Amara addressed the court, "Since we are nearing the time for the evening meal, and there is still a substantial amount of evidence to be heard as well as tempers to be cooled down, we have decided to adjourn for the day." She turned to Solari, "Take the prisoner back to the gaol."

With alert guards watching her every move, Xena allowed herself to be escorted from the meeting house, ignoring the catcalls and jeers that were thrown in her direction, idly twirling the broken chains hanging from her cuffs.

"As for you, Tarelle, and you, Queen Gabrielle, we'd like to have some words with you in the back chamber," Amara stated, while scribbling a hurried note, handing it to a guard, and quietly speaking a few directions. Noticing the bard's gaze following the prisoner and her escort, she reinforced her order with a curt, "Now."

Cheeks flushed with embarrassment at the dressing down she'd just received from the Elders, Gabrielle made her way quickly across town to where the thick stone walled gaol stood on a backstreet next to Royal Guard command headquarters. Amara and the other Elders had not been happy with the way that the court session had been forced to end; the bard was told plainly that she was expected to answer all questions put to her truthfully, without being influenced by friendship or personal concerns. She was Amazon Queen and it was time she behaved as such, and not some spoilt child!

Tarelle had looked smug at that, but she didn't get off lightly either. She was lectured about harassing and goading witnesses, the Queen in particular, and she was also warned that her belligerent attitude towards the defendant was far too personal. Amara had finally told her, "If you cannot remain objective about this task, we will replace you with someone who can."

Thoroughly chastened, the pair had finally been allowed out of the Elder's chambers and free to plan their strategies for the morrow's continuation of the trial. Gabrielle knew that she had to speak to Xena to try and work out some plan of action. She would try to fudge her evidence as much as possible, but she didn't want her friend getting protective when Tarelle pushed her. Outbursts like the one that had ended the day's session looked bad and made true the statement that the Warrior Princess couldn't control her temper and resorted to physical argument whenever it suited her.

As she reached the gaol, she saw Ephiny approaching with a large covered tray. She stood and waited by the door as the Regent caught her up, "Thought you'd be heading here when the Elders got through with you," she grinned rakishly, "Get a spanking did you?"

"Ephiny!" exclaimed the bard, "We're all mature women, not children."

"Well did you?" insisted the curly haired blonde.

Gabrielle gave her a version of Xena's 'look', but when it made no impression on her friend, she sighed and conceded, "A verbal one."

"Thought so," she grinned, "C'mon, lets get this food into Xena. I've brought enough for you as well, I don't think either one of you ate much at lunch. Solari said Xena didn't touch hers."

Gabrielle scowled as she held the heavy door open so Ephiny could get in, - *If I don't watch her, she really doesn't take proper care of herself*, - she thought.

"Open it up Solari," she heard the Regent saying, as she hurried along the gloomy corridor to catch up, "Gabrielle's right behind me and I want them both to eat this while it's hot."

There was the sound of a key turning in a lock and bolts being drawn back. As the bard entered the brightly lit cell, her searching eyes soon found Xena sitting moodily on her cot. She was pleased to note that the broken manacles had been removed and not replaced.

Ephiny set the tray down on the bed and then gave the warrior and bard a stern look, "Before either of you starts yelling at the other, you eat what's on that tray. If you don't agree to that, I'll have Solari bring the guards in here and force feed the pair of you .. I don't want you collapsing in court from starvation." she warned. She got a scowl from Xena and grin from Gabrielle, but she also got their agreement.

The Regent left them digging into the large pot of fish stew and fresh warm bread, and knew that they wouldn't be able to resist the soft crumbly cheese that the bard adored, nor the fruit that Xena favoured, - *Well at least they'll have full stomachs to argue on,* - she told herself as she watched Solari swing the door closed and lock it tight.

"Hey, you're head of the guards, Soli, what are you doing pulling this duty?" asked the blonde intrigued, knowing that her guard captain had plenty of people she could assign the task too.

Glancing through the door grill at the two occupants, Solari sighed and shrugged, "Xena's got an awful lot of sisters ready to try something stupid against her. Poni, Malonda and me figured that the best way to avoid that was to make sure one of us was always around her."

"I didn't realise things were that bad," muttered Ephiny, annoyed at herself.

"Well you've had your hands full with Gabrielle and arranging the trial," soothed the dark haired guard captain. "Poni figured that no one was going to try anything dumb if the three highest ranking officers in the guards were on duty."

The Regent nodded. Technically, Solari and Eponin were of equal rank, Solari as Guard Captain, Eponin as Weapons Master, but everyone knew that Poni was a wily campaigner and probably had more influence than the Guard Captain. Solari didn't mind or care, she knew she still had plenty she could learn from the other woman, and they were firm friends. Malonda was their protege and head of the Scouts. The pair of them were grooming the younger Amazon to fill in where they needed someone they could trust and who thought like them.

- *It seems to be working pretty well,* - acknowledged Ephiny to herself.

"Eph, what do we do about Xena tomorrow? I know she's your friend, but honestly, we can't have a repeat performance of what happened today in court," Solari ventured.

"Have we got any stronger shackles?" she asked.

"Nothing that would hold her if she was determined to bust them," responded the other woman, "Honestly, Eph, if she wanted to break out of here, there's absolutely nothing we could do to stop her.

today, and none of it was familiar. It was like I was never there." She looked absently at the wall as if willing the scene to be played out there for her, "I know it's me they're talking about. I remember all the anger, rage and frustration I felt after we .. after Solon ... well after that everything seems to get foggy."

"Xena," the bard spoke gently, "I know it's hard, and we've avoided talking about this because it hurts, but it's important we know now. Just what did you do when you left the centaurs?"

"Do?" she ran her strong fingers through her luxuriant black hair, "Gods, Gabrielle. I don't know. I think I just went off to mourn somewhere."

"Try to remember, Xena. It might help us sort out why you don't remember coming to Themiscyra and what happened here," pressed the blonde Queen carefully.

Chewing her lip, Xena tried to take herself back to the time after the funeral pyres, "I .. I left the village, and travelled north," her brow wrinkled in concentration as she struggled to replace missing time in her mind, "It was cold. I re .. remember snow? A mountain?" She shook her head in frustration, "Gods, Gabrielle," these could be memories from any time!"

The bard looked at her with pleading eyes, "Keep trying, Xena. I know we're getting somewhere. You just have to keep trying."

The warrior pulled in another deep breath and concentrated on the cold, on the mountain, on the snow, "My heart felt as if it had been shattered then crushed," she said in a small quiet voice, the pain of the memories was causing her head to hurt, and it almost felt as if a wall had been erected around those memories to keep her out.

Concentrating hard, sweat beginning to bead on her brow as she fought the building pain and hammered against the stubborn wall. "I found the highest place I could to sing Solon to rest, but my song was filled with the screams of my soul. I was alone again, everything had been a betrayal, I'd lost my son and my best friend ... and ... and then," her eyes snapped open full of fiery rage.

"What?" demanded the blonde anxiously, "what happened, Xena?"

"Ares," the warrior breathed the name like a curse, "Ares came."

Images now flooded into her mind. She felt again the crushing ache that she had felt upon that frozen mountaintop and she knew that Ares had worked on that, on her maternal instincts and the hate that had sprung up, like black bile, to infect her mind, her whole being! He had twisted the knife with the delicate precision of the master tormentor that he was, and she had responded with the murderous rage that had needed Gabrielle's blood to satisfy it.

"Xena?" there was a worried edge to the bard's tone, "What about Ares? What did he do?"

Turning her haunted gaze back to the Amazon Queen, the warrior said in a whisper almost too soft to hear, "I'm so sorry, Gabrielle .. I'm so sorry."

"It's okay," the bard tried to soothe her, "It's over, I forgave you long ago."

"I never realised," the dark haired woman choked, "I didn't remember." A single tear rolled down her cheek, "How could I have done that?"

Trying to turn Xena's thoughts away from the harrowing personal attack on her, Gabrielle attempted to get her to focus on Ares, "What happened with Ares, Xena. What did he say? What did he do?"

And so she told her. Haltingly and with much pain filled self-recrimination .. she told the bard all of it, and felt the full weight of what she had done slam into her with a sickening reality that burned her fragile soul.

Chapter Eight: The Trial Continues

Morning came early at the gaol. Vallis, the smith, turned up at first light with one of the items she had been working through the night on, "Need to check the fitting on this," she told Malonda who'd had headed the early hour watch. "She likely to cause any trouble?"

"She hasn't so far," shrugged the black haired warrior, her eyes roving over the metal in the chunky smith's hand, "I'll have some guards in there with you, though just in case." Taking the key to the cell from her belt, Malonda turned it in the lock and pulled back the heavy bolts at the top and bottom of the door. Signalling four of the guard detail to follow, she motioned Vallis to proceed her into the cell. They found Xena sitting up awaiting them.

After Gabrielle had left the previous evening, the Warrior Princess had spent a troubled, restless, night when all the memories, that had been clouded by Ares interference, had jumped, with sharp detail, into her vivid nightmares. Several times she had woken in a cold sweat, her raven bangs plastered to her forehead. After the fifth time, she had resolved not to sleep any more that night. She was, therefore, wide awake, and beginning to get restless, when she heard the door being unlocked.

She frowned slightly at the unexpected appearance of the smith, and more so when Malonda and her guards all entered the cell. The black mood induced by a poor night's rest was not making her feel very sociable. She wouldn't pick a fight, but that didn't mean she had to be friendly.

The Amazons, almost immediately, felt the dark shroud that Xena had enveloped herself with. The last watch had warned them that she had been having a restless night, but they'd only heard her thrashing and moaning on one occasion during their watch, so had figured that she'd worked her way through whatever was tormenting her. Obviously she hadn't, they now realised.

"I need to check these have been sized right," Vallis growled without preamble, holding out a strange set of restraints.

Xena eyed them appraisingly. The cuffs were shaped pretty much in the fashion of her bracers, not as long, but tapered to fit snug around the wrist and broaden further up the arm to a comfortable fit, they looked heavy and solid. The restraint between the cuffs was a six inch long, one inch diameter, bar of steel. She wasn't surprised that they'd come up with it after the ease with which she had snapped the shackles the previous day.

"Hold your wrists out," grumbled the smith who looked tired and red eyed from a long night's work over her forge.

Arching an eyebrow at the bluff middle aged woman who seemed almost disdainful of her much vaunted, savage, reputation, Xena had to swallow a grin that wanted to emerge and ruin her black mood. She held out her hands, instead, in fists clenched, palms turned up.

Vallis gave the warrior an amused quirk of her lips. She liked Xena under normal circumstances. The woman was a true warrior, an Amazon in every sense of the word, except her only known connection to their people was through Queen Gabrielle as her champion. However she had seen the miracles that the Warrior Princess had worked on their behalf, more than once, and felt it to be a pity that a brief spurt of mindless violence had brought them all to this pass now.

Giving her head an almost imperceptible shake, she locked the unusual manacles around the prisoner's wrists, checking to make sure that they weren't loose enough to wriggle out of, nor so tight that they would chafe, "Seems a pretty good fit," nodded the smith, taking pride in her work, "If she breaks out of those I haven't got anything stronger that could hold her." She told Malonda as she produced a key to unlock them.

"Don't worry about taking them off, Vallis," Malonda told her touching her arm lightly, "Everyone will feel better if she's under restraint and the court will be sitting again soon, so it'll save us having to put them back on her."

There was something in Malonda's tone that Xena took exception too and she stood in a smooth, menacing, movement that had all the guards tensing in readiness for a fight. Ignoring them, the Warrior Princess turned frosty eyes on the head scout and told her in a low frigid voice, "You got a problem with me?"

"The Amazons have a problem with you, Xena. I'm just doing my job," the warrior replied with a irritated snap in her tone.

"Don't push me, Malonda. I'm not in the mood," warned the raven haired woman, her words resonating ominously.

Malonda looked like she might try and make more of it, but Vallis intercepted her with a strong grip on the other Amazon's arm and pulled her towards the door, "Cut it out Malonda," she told the woman firmly, "what's gotten into you," she chided gruffly, as everyone exited the cell with the door clanging shut behind them.

They just managed to beat the entrance of the Elders, hurrying with undignified haste that made Gabrielle want to giggle at the image of the Queen and her Regent rushing around like adolescent schoolgirls. Flushed with amusement and embarrassment, she didn't at first notice that Xena was sitting with a face like a thunder cloud.

"Hey," the bard said sitting down next to her friend, "How're you doing?" Getting no reply, she looked more carefully at the raven haired warrior and noticed the tense lines of anger on her face, "Xena?" she questioned quietly. She glanced at the unusual manacles that imprisoned the Warrior Princess' wrists and sighed. "We knew that they'd have to come up with something to try and hold you," she said soothingly, forcing her own anger about the shackles into the back of her mind. "We discussed it last night and you were fine about it then." She didn't bother to add that she'd just had a row with Ephiny about the very same thing that had her friend seething.

Xena glared at her, "I don't mind these," she raised her hands a little to emphasise the fetters, "Well I do, but it's no more than I expected." she snarled, "What I object to is being staked out like some sacrificial goat!"

"What?" questioned the bard, not really understanding.

"Take a look under the table, Gabrielle," growled Xena angrily.

The honey blonde, young, woman leaned back in her seat and pursed her lips. Xena's ankles were trapped into a device that looked very much like the manacles she wore on her wrists; same tapered cuffs secured to an eighteen inch long, inch thick bar of metal that was in turn fixed firmly to the planking of the floor. It was pretty certain that while locked into that, her friend would not be able to leave the vicinity of her seat.

"Calm down Xena," the bard said soothingly. "The Elders don't want a repeat of you disrupting proceedings, that's all. After yesterday's little demonstration, we can hardly blame them, and you knew that they would do something to avoid a repeat performance."

The Warrior Princess glowered at her, but finally, grudgingly admitted, "I suppose so .. it's just that I don't like being helpless, you know that."

"Xena," Gabrielle told her seriously, "They could wrap your entire body in chains, stuff you in a sack and lock you in a cage and you still wouldn't be helpless."

That forced the shadow of a smile onto the warrior's lips, "Only you'd say something like that, my bard."

"Oh, no, no, no!" Gabrielle retorted, "Most of your hardened enemies say that!"

"Hmph!" snorted Xena, finally cajoled out of her bad mood, "I just wish I knew who dreamed up these little joys," she grumbled, although her heart was no longer in it.

"Erm ..." answered the bard unwillingly, "Actually I think it was Ephiny."

"Eph!" snapped Xena a little louder than she should, drawing the Regent's attention. She gave the blonde a cold look that had the Amazon running her fingers through her unruly mane in agitation, "Remind me to have a word with Ephiny about this sometime."

"Oh gods, Xena!" hissed Gabrielle as she lightly slapped her friend's arm, "She was ordered to find some way of restraining you by the Elders. She didn't have a choice and she's been up all night working out the best way to do it so that it's as unobtrusive as possible, so give her some slack here," she chided. Xena just looked at her stonily.

As the Elders settled into place, the court came to order and Amara addressed everyone, particularly directing her remarks to Gabrielle, Tarelle and of course, Xena, "After the scenes yesterday, I hope that everyone understands that we will not tolerate any more such antics .. from anyone," her grey eyes swept the hall to include the assembled Amazons.

Getting no disagreements, - *Not that I expected any*, - thought the Eldest grimly, - *Not if they all know what's good for them, anyway*. - Amara turned to Tarelle and asked, "Do you wish to continue with your examination of the Queen?"

The prosecutor stood and answered with a firm, though respectful, "Yes if it pleases the court."

"Just make sure that you don't get too enthusiastic in your questioning, Tarelle," warned Borayne, a dour Elder with a red thatch of hair that had been liberally sprinkled with the grey of age. She had the reputation of speaking rarely and only when she had a clear point to make. Tarelle, knew it was a warning that the Elders didn't intend to have their patience stretched.

At Amara's invitation, Gabrielle resumed her place on the witness stand and waited for Tarelle's first question which, as expected, resumed at the point where the proceedings had been disturbed by an angry Warrior Princess out to protect her best friend.

"My Queen," began the prosecutor with a vicious smirk, "I believe you were about to tell us what happened to you when you emerged from the purification hut." Gabrielle looked at her in silence, "Queen Gabrielle?" pressed Tarelle, although not forcefully, "What did you see when you came out of the purification hut?"

Reluctantly, Gabrielle responded, "I saw Xena surrounded by Amazons, with Ephiny on the ground before her."

"And what happened next?" continued Tarelle who noticed the grimace that flitted across the young Queen's face as she remembered.

"Xena went to throw the chakram towards me, but Ephiny disrupted her aim." she answered flatly.

"What happened then," persisted the red haired prosecutor who was enjoying seeing her Queen squirm as she incriminated her proud, deadly, champion.

"Ephiny shouted out for Joxer to run, but Xena caught up with us. Joxer tried to protect me, but was knocked down and then Xena used the whip to snag my feet." Gabrielle's voice was toneless and her eyes were on the Warrior Princess who's sapphire eyes seemed haunted by the freshly raw memories. The bard forced a quirk of her lips as encouragement for her friend.

"Please tell us of the events that followed," invited Tarelle, who'd seen the brief smile and had taken the chance for a quick look at Xena who seemed discomfited by what was being revealed, - *Your turn soon, Warrior Princess,* - she silently snarled.

"There isn't a lot I can tell," shrugged Gabrielle uncomfortably. "Xena dragged me behind a horse. I lost consciousness somewhere on the journey. I came to on a cliff. We struggled and I took us over that cliff, intending to kill us both."

There was a hushed gasp that traveled around the meeting hall as the Amazons registered what their Queen had said. None of them had known about the events on the cliff. They knew that the Queen and her champion had disappeared from there, but any fall from that height should have killed both of them.

Waiting for silence to return to the court, Tarelle thought furiously what she should say next. She didn't want to press matters here; Xena's attempt at dragging their Queen to death had pretty much been covered. The last thing she wanted was to get into the sticky mire of Gabrielle's attempting to kill the Warrior Princess. She decided that she'd covered everything necessary here. When the noise finally abated she said simply, "I have no further questions for this witness."

"My Queen?" invited Amara.

Gabrielle turned to the Elders saying, "Since I can hardly question myself," that drew some chuckles from the crowd, "I'd like to make a statement at this point, to clarify some of the things that happened that were the root cause of the deaths of our Amazon sisters, and what happened to me."

Elder Amara looked at the other Elders to gain the agreed consensus before replying, "Please make your statement, Queen Gabrielle."

The bard composed her thoughts carefully. She knew that this was going to hurt both her and Xena, and had to steel herself for the ordeal that she felt would be like thrusting her hand into a furnace, "Some months ago," she began, " Xena and I travelled to Britannia to help Queen Boadicea in her fight against Caesar and his Roman Legions. While we were there, I became interested in a religion that pretended to goodness, whilst really being the worship of ultimate evil ... Dahak."

She paused to collect her thoughts, knowing that her expression was grim. A glance at Xena's face showed that it was set in stone, but the bard was well aware that violent emotions churned beneath the surface, "Xena rescued me from Dahak's altar, but not before he had planted his seed

in me." Gabrielle smiled wanly at the Warrior Princess, reliving the terrifying ordeal that Xena had risked her life to rescue her from.

"Within days I gave birth to a baby girl, Hope. Obviously my pregnancy was far from normal, but the father was a god and who knows what is normal to them." She explained to the assembly, "I thought that she was the most perfect, beautiful child that had ever been born and, against all the evidence to the contrary, I was convinced that she was an innocent ... she was, after all, my daughter.

"Xena, however, was convinced that Hope was the embodiment of evil. Her father's gateway into our world. She was certain that Hope had strangled a young warrior who was helping to protect us. He was good and kind and the only people in that room had been me, Xena and Hope. Xena accused my child and prepared to thrust her sword through her. My best friend wanted to kill my baby!" She heard Xena's knuckles begin to crack as her fists clenched tighter at the recollection of the memories and the angry mutters of the Amazons at the callousness of the Warrior Princess.

"I managed to escape with Hope, who was growing at an amazing rate, and eventually, when I knew that I'd never be able to lose Xena, I tricked her into believing that I had thrown Hope off of a cliff. Abandoning my child," she said quietly, "was the only way I had of ensuring her safety."

All eyes were on the Amazon Queen and the Warrior Princess. The suffering and anguish were clear to those who cared to read the signs. The powerful emotions played clearly on Gabrielle's expressive face, while Xena's stone faced blankness could not hide the rigid tenseness that her body language displayed.

Swallowing hard, Gabrielle forced herself to continue, "Some moons later, Hope, no longer a baby, but a growing child, turned up here and freed Callisto from the lava pit where Xena had sealed her and Valesca. An act of evilness in itself," the bard explained. "But, when I found Hope again, all I saw was my beautiful child. Not the daughter of Dahak, the Daughter of Darkness. My blindness to what her father was, and who she was, led to the death of Solon, a truly innocent and good child. And not only him, but others too. There could have been so many more deaths if it hadn't been for Xena!" she declared passionately.

She looked up at Amara and told her, "I poisoned Hope, but it was too late for Solon, and Xena's grief was all the deeper because she had never told him that she was his mother."

Taking a deep breath and allowing the listeners to digest the story she had told them, she then began to explain how these events had led to the deaths of Amazons, "With emotions twisted into tatters, it was the perfect time for Ares to return to reclaim his Warrior Princess," she told them. "All here know how much the God of War wants Xena, the Destroyer of Nations, to return to his flock.

"He went to Xena and tugged at her frayed emotions, playing on the hatred she felt towards me because of Hope. My deception in Britannia and the end result of Solon's death earned the hatred

that was driving Xena at that time, and Ares used that to warp her judgement. She was in no mental condition to fight against Ares' arguments and clever blandishments. He used everything in his armoury to turn her back to her dark side and sent her here to kill me. Not only that, but his interference wiped her memory of these events and we were only able to break through those blocks last night. Needless to say, Xena is suffering through these revelations, the more so since to her they are a fresh, new, wound."

There wasn't a sound in the hall as the Amazon's waited to hear what the bard had to say next, "Well," she continued, "you can see Ares plan worked ... for a while. Xena raided the village, killing and injuring Amazons without really knowing what she was doing. That she eventually regained her senses is shown by the fact that I'm here alive to tell you this story. And the point of me telling you all of this?" she asked rhetorically, "The point is that, if you must blame anyone for the deaths of our Amazon sisters, you could try Ares. Or should Amazon justice require a mortal culprit, then I really am more to blame than Xena is," she finished quietly.

Loud clamouring erupted throughout the hall, but one voice cut clearly across all of the noise, "No! Gabrielle! It was not your fault!" Xena shouted as she pushed the table away so that she could get to her feet, only to be restrained by two Amazon guards.

Gabrielle shot a pleading look at her friend, who appeared ready to do something reckless to the guards, "No Xena," she pleaded, "just let me do this my way. It's something I need to do. Something I have to do." She waited tensely until the Warrior Princess subsided and sank grudgingly back into her chair with the table drawn up in front of her again and the two guards each standing with a hand on a shoulder.

Xena could feel the urgency in the bard's voice and, although it hurt her to allow Gabrielle to try and shoulder the blame, she understood her need to do so. Forcing herself to relax, she allowed bard to continue to handle the situation in the way she chose.

As the noise in the hall gradually abated, the young Queen faced the Elders and declared, "There is no way that I can deny that Xena attacked this village killing and harming sisters. I cannot deny that she took me from here against my will. What I am telling you is that she was not in control of herself. Grief, and Ares, manipulated her actions. She was not responsible for what happened. She was a tool, a pawn, if you like, in the hands of a God."

Tarelle rose to her feet and heatedly shouted, "That's no defence, to hide behind the coattails of a God. She committed the acts. She should suffer the penalty for her actions."

Against restraining hands, Xena forced herself to her feet once more, a deadly look in her eye, her voice the whisper of Tartarus, "I hide behind no man or God!" she declared.

Pandemonium broke out in the meeting hall as the Amazons started to yell the arguments for the side they backed. Gabrielle moved quickly to Xena's side and hissed, "What do you think you're doing?"

"I won't be accused of cowardice, Gabrielle. I face up to my responsibilities," Xena told her bleakly.

"Just go along with me," pleaded Gabrielle. "Don't let Tarelle get to you. If she pulls you down, her faction won't be long in coming after Ephiny and me." It wasn't exactly fair to use that argument, but it got Xena's attention and a grudging nod of compliance.

With a storm of words raging through the hall, the Elders ordered Solari and her guards to restore order within the chamber so that the hearing could continue. When silence had been finally achieved, Elder Amara asked Tarelle, "Do you wish to ask Queen Gabrielle any more questions?"

"No Elder," the prosecutor replied smugly, "I do not believe that Queen Gabrielle's testimony has any bearing on this case."

Elder Katanis looked up sharply and reprimanded Tarelle, "That is not your decision to make Prosecutor. Only the Elder's may decide what is relevant to this case." Tarelle bowed in submission and resumed her seat. Only a twitch at the corner of her mouth showed her annoyance at being spoken to so.

"Thank you Queen Gabrielle," Amara smiled at the young ruler, "Your statement has been most illuminating." She turned to Tarelle, "You may call your next witness, prosecutor."

Tarelle arose and said in a clear, gleeful voice, "I call upon Xena of Amphipolis to hold truth!"

The silence in the meeting house was deafening until Gabrielle stood up and growled, "Now wait a minute! Defendants are not required to testify, unless they chose to do so, under Greek Law."

The red haired prosecutor smirked, "But this trial is being conducted under Amazon law, my Queen, and under Amazon Law I have the right to call anyone as a witness, including the accused. I therefore exercise my right under law to call Xena of Amphipolis to hold truth ... if she's capable of it." she added snidely, almost too quietly to be heard.

The Warrior Princess, though, with her remarkable hearing, heard and stiffened perceptively. Gabrielle heard and shot a murderous glare at Tarelle. Most surprisingly, Elder Sarelle heard the comment and glowered, before having a hurried, whispered, conversation with the other Elders whose faces also turned stormy.

Amara cleared her throat and spoke first to the bard, "Tarelle is right about the law, my Queen. She has the right to call Xena as a witness and may do so," her grey eyes were coldly angry as she turned them on Tarelle, "once she has apologised for the unnecessary, and insulting comment she just made, that demeans the Warrior Princess' honour."

The prosecutor had gone rigid with anger and all colour had drained from her cheeks at Amara's words. Her comment had been meant only for Xena's legendary hearing and maybe the upstart Queen's, if her ears were sharp enough. She had never expected her words to be picked up by the

Elders. She was well aware of the loud buzz of speculation in the background, as her fellow Amazons discussed just what kind of comment the redhead had made.

Slowly, under the scrutiny of everyone in the room, Tarelle stood and turned towards the table where Xena was seated. Her furious grey-green eyes bored into the raven haired woman's before she forced herself to mouth the required apology, "I'm sorry for any aspersion that I cast upon your honour," saying it in a flat monotone that carried no conviction whatsoever.

The Warrior princess made a slight bow of her head towards the Elders for their intervention and then ignored the event while, once again, a loud buzz of speculation filled the halls as Amazons again wondered about exactly what had been said.

Amara regained the attention of the packed court when she continued, "Due to implemented safety measures, this Council of Elders feels that it would be more suitable for Xena of Amphipolis to give her evidence from where she is seated. Therefore if you'd care to begin, Prosecutor Tarelle?"

The red head had managed in that short time to pull herself together and was ready once again to wage war upon the Warrior Princess, "You are Xena of Amphipolis?" she questioned as she stood up and moved before the warrior.

"Yes," replied the raven haired woman in a cool, clear voice. "Is it not true that you have other, far less innocuous names?"

The question was met with silence.

"Come now, do you dispute that you are known as the Warrior Princess?" charged Tarelle belligerently.

"No," came the flat answer.

"Or the Destroyer of Nations?" continued the prosecutor detecting a subtle flicker of pain in the other woman's eyes.

"No," came the reply once again, flatly said with no emotion to be heard in her inflection.

"Can you tell the court how your acquired these names .. these titles?" sneered Tarelle getting into the swing of her attack.

Gabrielle jumped to her feet and appealed to the Elders, "I object. These questions don't have any baring on what happened."

"I disagree," responded the prosecutor promptly, "The Queen is the one who has insisted upon bringing evidence from the past into consideration, and the Warlord past of Xena of Amphipolis goes a long way to showing that her actions here, within the bounds of Themiscyra, were far from a one off abhoration in her life."

"But she's no longer that person," persisted the bard, "She's changed so much in the last four summers. It's hardly fair to judge her actions by what happened so long ago."

The Elders conferred for several moments before Amara turned back to them with a decision, "We will allow this line of questioning. However much she's changed, the Xena of then and now is still the same person and the latitude we allowed you, my Queen, must be allowed to the prosecutor also."

"Just make sure that your questions are to the point, prosecutor," Elder Borayne interjected.

Tarelle gave a short bow towards the Elder's bench before turning back in time to see Gabrielle return to her seat with a disappointed look on her face. Not bothering to hide a grin of triumph she returned to her question, "So how did you earn those titles?"

There was a long stretch of silence as the whole meeting house waited to hear what Xena would say. Just when it looked as if the Warrior Princess had no intention of answering the question, she gave a soft sigh and said simply, "I was a warlord for ten years. In that time I acquired many names and titles. Those two are the most well known. There were many more, mostly in foreign languages."

"You were a warlord?" prodded Tarelle.

"I have admitted so, yes," agreed Xena.

"And as a warlord you did what? Help farmers? protect villages? What?" pushed the prosecutor.

Xena glared at her before answering in a cold, distant voice, "I led a god's be damned successful army that conquered territory and the cities, towns and villages within those territories."

Tarelle nodded thoughtfully, "You ravaged the land?"

"My army did, yes," conceded the warrior.

"Ah, your army!" the prosecutor repeated as if stunned by the insight. She looked Xena full in the face, "So your army did the things you directed? You didn't participate in the fighting at all?"

"I was the leader," she took a deep breath and added, "I usually led from the front."

"So you were a full participant in the raiding, burning, looting and killing that went on at your orders?" prompted Tarelle sharply.

"Yes," came the agreement.

Tarelle wandered across the floor in front of the Elders bench, then turned abruptly and flung out the question, "Just how many people have you personally killed, Xena?" she demanded.

Gabrielle fought against the urge to squirm as she saw the look of self-loathing fill Xena's eyes. She wanted to stop this, but the Elders had made their position clear here. She watched helplessly as her best friend replied very softly, "I don't know."

Cupping a hand to her ear, Tarelle said sarcastically, "I'm sorry, I didn't hear that answer."

In a firmer voice the raven haired woman replied, "I said, I don't know."

"Oh," nodded Tarelle in a disappointed tone, "Now why is that, I wonder? Could it be that you've killed so many men, women and children that no one would ever be able to count the people that you've personally slaughtered."

"I object!" shouted Gabrielle angrily, "It's well known that Xena has never killed women and children."

"Prosecutor?" questioned Amara giving Tarelle the chance to back up her claim.

"The women and children of Cirra are a well known case, Elder Amara. I'm certain there are others, without the women warriors that have been slain by her hand."

"Can you dispute these?" the Elder asked Gabrielle.

"Well, no," admitted the bard edgily, "But Cirra was an accident. Xena has never deliberately set out to injure defenceless women and children."

"Just defenceless men?" sniped in Tarelle.

"You may have a little longer with your line of questioning prosecutor, but I want to see a connection to the issues we are looking at before much longer" Amara insisted.

"The Point I'm trying to make here, Elder Amara, is that Xena, the Warrior Princess, Destroyer of Nations, has for a large part of her life, gloried in spilling blood and taking innocent lives. She's killed so many people by her own hand that she cannot count the deaths attributable to her. Whatever changes she's made in her life, she is still the woman who has done these things."

"Have you finished with you questions to her?" asked Amara.

"Almost," agreed the prosecutor and turned back to face the defendant. "When you rode into Themiscyra that day, what did you intend to do?"

Xena stared at her for a few heartbeats before answering, "I came to kill Gabrielle."

"Like you have killed countless others before her?"

"Yes," the warrior admitted, feeling the burden of her overwhelming guilt grow heavy once more on her shoulders.

"Was there any difference between the Xena who came here bent upon murder, and the Xena of old? The Xena who was a bloody, murdering warlord?"

"No," came the quiet admission that carried across the silent hall.

"I have no further questions," said Tarelle as she returned to her seat.

"My Queen?" asked Amara, "Do you wish to ask any questions?"

The bard gave the Elders a wan smile as she stood and answered, "It seems that I need to." She walked in front of the table so that she could look at her friend. Her brows knitted in concentration as she looked to find the best way to begin. Her face brightened suddenly and she asked, "Xena, in the last three to four seasons, what have you been doing?"

"I .. I have sought to help people who couldn't help themselves," she replied slowly.

"Why is that?" questioned Gabrielle gently.

"I wanted to .. needed to try and make amends for what I have done in my past," she told her.

The bard assumed a perplexed look on her face "Why?" she asked, "I mean, weren't you happy as a warlord? You'd managed to conquer half of Greece at one time. You were pretty good at what you did."

Xena looked at her friend, puzzled over what she was trying to get at, "Hercules made me realise that what I was doing was wrong. He gave me a chance to change."

"Ah," the bard nodded her head, "So Hercules looked you up, had a chat and asked you to change, so you did?"

"Um, not quite," responded the warrior, beginning to get an inkling of how Gabrielle was handling this.

"Oh? So what happened?" the blonde asked.

"I was trying to kill him," Xena relied matter of factly, and almost grinned at the rumble that ran around the hall at that news. There had always been rumours, but this was the first definite confirmation on it most of them had heard. "We fought. I almost succeeded .. would have succeeded if it hadn't been for his cousin interfering .. but finally he had me down with a blade to my throat. I told him to kill me. He let me go." A very straightforward recitation of bare facts.

Gabrielle nodded and wandered around in the clear space between the Elder's bench and the two tables occupied by prosecution and defence, before turning back and saying, "So you're telling us that the greatest hero in Greece, a man known for his stance on law and justice, had the opportunity to kill you or take you captive? and he just let you go?"

"Yes," agreed the Warrior Princess.

"Why?"

"He said afterwards that .." she paused somewhat embarrassed by what she was going to say next, "there was goodness in my heart." She shrugged.

"So the son of Zeus released you because he saw goodness within you?" re-iterated the bard.

"That's what he said," confirmed Xena.

"Why did you try to kill me?" asked the Amazon Queen suddenly.

The raven haired woman looked at her for a long moment before answering slowly and carefully, "Because you betrayed me."

"Some moons ago, I betrayed you to an enemy in the land of Chin and nearly caused your execution. Why didn't you try to kill me then?" the bard asked feeling a fresh stab of pain at the memories that she was raking over and hearing more muttering from the assembled Amazons, who knew nothing of this.

Xena looked at her manacled hands and tried to find the right words for the answer, "You are my best friend. Your intentions were good, I was angry with you, but I couldn't blame you for what you did."

"Why did you try to kill me here, then?" pushed Gabrielle.

"After the death of Solon .. of my son," she felt a constriction in her throat as the emotion boiled up again, "I wasn't thinking clearly. All I thought of was the time I never got to spend with him, because I had to hide him from my enemies. My heart was full of rage and grief .. and Ares came. You know the rest."

The bard thought for a moment, looking at her boots as she tried to cover the angles, "How many people who have betrayed you more than once are still living?" she asked carefully.

"Just one," returned the Warrior Princess grimly.

"What about the people who have betrayed you just once?" the Queen asked.

"Just one," replied Xena coldly.

Gabrielle looked up at the Elders and said, "Since I betrayed you twice I know who the first person is. But who is this other, that betrayed you."

"Caesar!" the warrior almost snarled.

"Every other betrayer is dead?" queried the bard academically.

"Yes," agreed Xena.

"Then why is he still alive?" she demanded bluntly.

"Because I've never had an appropriate opportunity to kill him," snapped the Warrior Princess.

"If you had the chance, would you kill him?" probed the blonde.

"Yes," agreed the warrior eagerly.

"Then why should the Elders and the Amazons believe that you won't try to kill me again?" came the succinct question.

Xena looked at her blankly for a moment before blurting, "Because you're you. You're my best friend. Gods, Gabrielle! If I was going to kill I would have done it moons ago. No one would have been around to stop me, not that anyone would have been able to should I have really wanted to."

"Thank you, Xena," the bard smiled warmly, "I've finished with my questions, she told the Elders.

"Have you anymore witness's to call, prosecutor?" asked Avena, the smallest of the Elders, a neat, petite woman who sat ramrod straight and had a stern face.

"No Elder, I have finished calling my witnesses," answered Tarelle demurely, giving a slight bow.

"Queen Gabrielle," Avena addressed the bard, "Have you any further witnesses that you wish to question?" "If the court will allow, I would like to ask Solari some questions," responded the honey blonde woman.

Solari came forward to the witness stand as the Elders nodded agreement. She turned and awaited Gabrielle's first question. The bard knew that she could trust Solari to answer truthfully and only intended to use her testimony to emphasise the fact that Xena bore the Amazons no ill will.

"When we met as we entered Amazon territory, did Xena show any hostility towards any Amazon?" she asked.

"No," was the simple reply.

"Did Xena cause any harm to, or any problems for, any Amazon sister?" asked the bard.

"No," returned Solari for the second time.

"During the evening, when we were attacked, can you tell the Elders what actually happened," invited Gabrielle.

Tarelle stood and asked in a weary tone, "Can I ask the relevance of this to the attack on the village?"

"I'm trying to show, that the attack was an abhorration performed at a time of severe mental trauma and not within the bounds of Xena's normal dealings or attitudes towards the Amazons," answered Gabrielle hotly.

"We'll allow this, so long as it's brief," instructed Amara.

Taking a deep breath, Solari gave an honest description of the events of that evening, finishing with, "If Xena hadn't warned us about the imminent danger, we'd all have been dead. Both Alexa and I owe our lives to Xena, who blocked killing blows aimed at us by attackers."

"So in conclusion, could you honestly say, in your own personal opinion, that Xena holds any hatred toward or for the Amazon people or that, in normal circumstances, she would do anything to harm an Amazon sister?" questioned the bard.

"In truth," conceded Solari, "No. Xena has always proven herself to be a friend of the Amazons."

"Thank you," Gabrielle said, turning back to the Elders, "I hope that from the testimony given, and the explanation of the events that led up to the attack, you will see and believe that it would be a very harsh judgement to hold Xena responsible for what happened. It would also be poor thanks for all of the help that she has given the Amazon Nation in the past. Additionally, I hope that you can see that I am in no personal danger from Xena." having finished, Gabrielle returned to her seat next to her friend.

Amara looked at Tarelle, "Do you have anything that you wish to say, before we retire to consider out judgement?"

"If it pleases the Elders," began Tarelle, standing up, "All I wish to say is that Xena is responsible for the deaths and injuries of Amazon sisters. Whatever circumstances led her to do this, there can be no doubt that she is responsible for those deaths and injuries, nor can there be any doubt that she abducted the Queen and so committed an act of Treason, and the judgement should be rendered accordingly."

Amara and the other Elders rose as Tarelle took her seat once again. The Eldest announced, "We will withdraw to consider all that has been said here. We hope to give our decision shortly."

As the Elders left, Gabrielle patted her friend lightly on the shoulder, "It will be all right," she tried to reassure.

"Gabrielle," the warrior said softly, "I ... you ...," she stumbled trying to find the right words as she stumbled over a host of emotions that she had tried to bury, " ... Thank you," she said simply at last.

"Hey," smiled the bard, "What are friends for."

Chapter Nine: A Long Wait

With the Elders leaving to deliberate upon their verdict, the Amazon's slowly left the meeting hall to continue their daily chores. Xena was released from the leg restraints that had kept her in place during the second half of the trial, and escorted back to her cell, even though Gabrielle remonstrated with Solari to release the Warrior Princess into her custody until the Elders announced their decision.

"I'm sorry, Queen Gabrielle," the big Amazon told her, "The law doesn't allow for that. Xena must remain in custody until the judgement of the Elders is made."

"Don't worry over it, Gabrielle," Xena told her, "It's only for a little while longer, and It's as comfortable a place to wait as any." she reassured.

"Xena" the bard said, laying her hand on her friend's arm.

"Hey," smiled the warrior softly, recognising the concern in the blonde's mannerisms and loss of words, "I'll be fine. You did a great job as an advocate. No one could have done better."

"Move you," growled one of the guards, giving Xena a rough shove on the shoulder to get her started.

The Warrior Princess gave the Amazon a dangerously feral look before leaning close to her and saying softly so only the other woman could hear, "Bite me!" Before turning and smiling reassuringly at the bard as she allowed the guards to steer her away towards the door.

As Xena was lead away by her guards, Gabrielle looked after and whispered, "But will it be enough? Did I convince them?" She allowed her vacant gaze to flick across the banners of fallen foes that decorated the walls of the meeting hall. Here were the honoured trophies that Amazon Warriors had collected throughout their battle history. She closed her eyes as against the prospect of her Amazons being the ones to bring the Warrior Princess down. - *Of all the enemies she has made, is it going to be her friends that finally destroy her?* - she wondered miserably.

Patroclese came over to join the bard. He too had watched Xena being led away, standing quietly, recognising that Gabrielle needed time to collect herself. When she finally turned to him she said, "Well, now you know all the details of the problem. As an outsider, how do you think it went?"

The healer looked at her thoughtfully for a moment or two before replying, "You understand that I'm a sceptic about Gods manifesting themselves to ordinary mortals?" Gabrielle nodded her head impatiently, and motioned for him to continue what he thought. "Well, from an outsiders

view, the whole thing seems incredible! I mean this thing with Ares chasing after Xena! You made it sound like it's an ongoing contest, or something," the healer mused trying to get a grasp on the concept.

"It is," the bard told him quietly, "Xena was once Ares' greatest creation. His Chosen. She revelled in war and destruction. Not only that she was very, very good at what she did. Shall we say very good at being wickedly bad. It's only in the last few years that she turned away from that side of her nature to begin to make amends for all the evil she has done in her life. Ares, however, hasn't given up on her, and he tries his best to return her to the dark path that she followed as his greatest disciple."

She looked at Patroclese and offered him a half smile, "None of that is questioned by the Amazons. They've had their own brushes with the whims of the gods, so they won't be sceptical over that. No, the problem here is that Xena's reputation as a cold blooded killer is too well known, and the fact that she unleashed her might upon them may well have scared them enough to make them forget all the good she has done for them as well."

"Look," Patroclese said taking her arm, "We might as well sit down. We don't know how long the Elder's will be, so we might as well be comfortable, and here's as good a place as any. We've got it to ourselves at the moment." So the pair took seats at the table where Xena had sat with Gabrielle during the hearing and continued the discussion.

"Alright," the healer began, "lets take it as read that the gods played a part in this whole affair." He looked at her with a slight frown of concern, "You really gave birth to a half goddess, and then abandoned her?"

A look of loss and hurt came into Gabrielle's eyes. She really hated talking about something that had caused both her and Xena such pain, but since the story was now common knowledge amongst the Amazons, and Patroclese was fast becoming a friend, she felt she needed to explain her actions, "Patroclese, I know it's hard for you to understand, but although Hope was my child she was always her father's tool. I was blinded to that when she was born. Even after Hope killed her first victim when she was but a few candelmarks old, I couldn't see the evil in her. Xena did. And she wanted to kill her."

The bard wiped a tear from her cheek that escaped through her tightly wound emotions, "I felt I had to protect my baby. Xena doesn't stop once she makes her mind up about something. The only way for me to save Hope was to convince Xena that she was already dead, and that meant I had to abandon her." Her eyes were red with tears she refused to shed, "If I had let Xena kill Hope, so much hurt and suffering would never have had to happen."

They sat silently for some while, Gabrielle lost in her tormented memories, the healer worrying over the conundrum that he had found himself spectator to. - *Everything has become so complicated,* - he mused. - *From the time I met up with Xena until now, I've done nothing but stumble from one scrape into another. I wonder if their lives are always like this? -*

Looking across at the tense bard, he asked a question that had been puzzling him, "This other Goddess ... Callisto? Why does she figure in the story?" he asked.

"Callisto was once a mortal. She was everything that Xena once was, cold, uncaring, deadly, ruthless, but where Xena always had a spark of humanity in her soul, Callisto was eaten up by the desire for revenge. She has been Xena's most deadly enemy for a long time. Her hatred consumes her and she will do anything to destroy Xena ... and me. She murdered my husband, Perdicus, and she played her part in the death of Solon," she told him with little emotion, then a thought flickered in her mind and she said in an absent way "I'm not sure if Xena hates her more, or Caesar." She thought about that for a moment, "No I think Xena feels responsible for Callisto, feels pity for her, perhaps, angry that she tries to hurt me and those Xena holds dear, definitely ... but her real hatred belongs to Caesar."

Patroclese looked confused, "What's Caesar got to do with this?"

"Nothing," the bard told him, "Maybe everything." the bard seemed to get a distant look in her eye, "Caesar is so responsible for so much that has happened in Xena's life. If he hadn't had her crucified, and her legs broken, all those years ago, so much of the evilness that she has been responsible for, may never have had to happen. In a very real way, Caesar moulded Xena into what she became and must share the blame for her actions."

"Why was she crucified?" he asked, a hint of concern in his eyes. He had formed a grudging liking for the warrior woman he had heard such bloodthirsty, evil, tales about. In the time he had been with her he had gotten the chance to see that there was so much more to her than the stories could ever convey. - *She is.* - he admitted to himself, - *the most enigmatic person I have ever met.* -

"She captured Caesar years ago when they were both very young. Xena, in truth, was not much more than a child. She'd cut her teeth on fighting off a Warlord who attacked her village, and was determined not to allow her family and friends to be threatened again." Gabrielle sighed as she thought about what she knew of those early years in Xena's rise to infamy.

"She lost sight of her objectives though, and she became something of a Warlord and a pirate herself, although she only attacked targets that threatened her village. Caesar was picked up on such a raid. She ransomed him for a huge amount, but while he was with her she fell in love with him, and he made her believe that he felt the same way. He promised her that he'd find her again once he was free. He did, but he came as an enemy, not a lover. He had her, and all her men who survived his attack, crucified. He also had her legs smashed as she hung on the cross."

She looked Patroclese in the eye, "She escaped with the help of a friend, but even then Caesar wouldn't let her go. He sent soldiers after her to kill her. They managed to kill Xena's friend before the Warrior Princess killed them, but that final betrayal was enough to turn her into the murderous monster that you've probably heard about in the stories. She wasn't more than sixteen or seventeen summers old at the time and after that fateful encounter she went from being misguided into a dedicated killer of any and all who stood in her path. So you can see, Caesar has much to answer for."

Gabrielle fell silent for a while lost in a world of painful memories that the hearing had brought crashing back to the forefront of her mind. At last she came back to the present, she looked at Patroclese and said, "You know, you haven't answered my question. How do you think it went?"

Patroclese frowned into thoughtfulness, his long fingers tracing the patterns of the wood grained table top, "It will depend if the Elders want to take mitigation into account," the healer said after some thought. "You built a good case to show that Xena was not fully in control of herself, and you backed it well by showing that Xena had proven to be a friend of the Amazons in the past and present, but none of that will matter if the Elders decide that it bears no relation to the charges."

"Ephiny says that the Elders are all fair minded and not part of any faction, so we can hope that they'll take all the circumstances into consideration," the bard sighed in a worried way.

"Did I hear someone taking my name in vain," asked Ephiny cheerfully, as she returned to the meeting hall with a tray of fresh bread, cheese, fruit and a jug of wine. She saw Gabrielle looking at the food, "I thought you might be hungry." she told them with a grin.

"I'm too worried to eat," the bard told her, just moment before her stomach growled to betray her.

"Eat!" Ephiny instructed, slapping an apple into her hand, "Xena will have my hide if I let you waste away."

Gabrielle looked about to protest, but the apple did look inviting, so she obediently bit into it with a satisfying crunch. She gave Ephiny a sideways look as the Amazon sat on the table beside her, "You know, I'm gonna have Tasha assign you full time duties as a meal server," she grinned.

"Ha!" retorted the Regent, "Who d'ya think you'd get to run the Amazons in my place, then?" she smirked.

Gabrielle's grin faded slightly, "You may have a point Eph," she said softly.

The blonde Amazon gave her friend a worried look, "Hey, I was only joking," she told her softly.

The bard nodded her head solemnly, "I know you were, but I don't think I've really thanked you for taking on the burden, and you've done such a good job here." She looked up at the Regent, drew a deep breath and said, "So thank you, Ephiny, for all you've done for me."

Not quite sure what to say, the blonde attempted to lighten the suddenly very heavy atmosphere, "Hey no problem, but you owe me big-time, ya know?"

Understanding what her friend was trying to do, Gabrielle forced a half grin onto her face and asked, "What do you have in mind?"

Ephiny shot an impish look at her, "I don't know. How about you take over running this place for a moon and let me go and have a holiday?"

Her Queen looked back at her with mock terror in her eyes, "Do you know what Xena would do to me if I agreed to that?" she demanded playfully.

The Regent smiled back at her, "Gods forbid," she laughed, "how about we make it a half moon, then? Your warrior shouldn't be able to object too hard at staying in one place for that length of time."

"Hah!" responded Gabrielle, a real smile shining from her expressive features, "Xena doesn't like staying in one place more than a couple of days .. fourteen would be pure torture."

"Well that will be paybacks for my arm then," snickered Ephiny.

Taking another large bite of the fruit, the bard's mind turned back to the present situation. "How long do you think they'll take to decide?" she asked around a mouthful of apple.

"I don't know. But I think the longer they take the better," Ephiny answered, adding the explanation, "Tarelle was certain that things were cut and dried. She had all the evidence of the attack, after all. But the longer the Elders take, the more it means that they're considering your arguments."

"How do you feel about her now, Eph?" asked the bard softly.

"I think .. I really hope .. that you're right, Gabrielle. For all Xena has done for me in the past, I hope the Elders agree with you. Xena's suffered enough, is still suffering, I think," she smiled as the bard squeezed her arm in gratitude for her words.

Patroclese finished chewing on a piece of cheese and asked, "How long do these things normally take?"

Ephiny considered a moment, "That's difficult to answer. Nothing like this has ever really come up before. Normally though, in straight forward cases, the judgement is usually delivered within a candlemark."

"How long has it been now?" asked Gabrielle who had lost all track of time. She reached for some of the bread and cheese.

"The Elders have been deliberating for about five candlemarks now." the Amazon told her.

"No wonder I'm hungry," admitted the bard.

"I suggest that you go home and get some rest," encouraged Ephiny. "The Elders could be a long time yet."

Patroclese nodded his agreement. He could see that Gabrielle was running on nervous tension, and felt that she should at least try to take a nap while they waited, as he knew that she had got

- *I promised not to leave her again*, - she acknowledged guiltily.

There were other problems to consider too. Xena knew that if the Amazons should decide to execute her, then her bard would find it impossible to remain in the Nation. She would see the Amazon's as responsible for her best friend's death, and would never be able to settle with them .. which meant, what would she do? She loved her family and home dearly, but had always found it far to restrictive for her, so returning there would not be a happy option for her. Athens and the Academy might provide the answer, but she'd already turned her back on that life once .. - *Would she be able to settle to a life of study and teaching?* -

She shook her head, - *If they decide to execute me .. and I break out of here .. I can't take her with me. Caesar's not going to have gone away and it would be too dangerous for her to be around me. But ... I know she'd follow me*, - her mind worried at the problem.

Unable to sit still any longer, she started to pace the cell, the same problems swirling around in her mind as she tried to find some way .. anyway .. out of the situation she found herself in. - *C'mon, warrior, think! Use your brain! You're supposed to be able to come up with a plan to tackle any situation!* -

A mirthless grin slowly edged it's way onto her face and she stopped pacing as the seeds of an idea germinated in her fertile mind, - *Oh yeah. If there's no other way .. if they condemn me to death, then that's what I'll do!* -

Chapter Ten: The Verdict

It was well into the early candlemarks of darkness when the summons came to return to the meeting hall. Gabrielle felt sandy eyed and no better for the long, deep, sleep that she had slipped into. She had been one of the first notified that the Elders had reached their decision, and so was back in her chair as the hall filled up and Xena was brought back to the chamber under escort.

"You okay?" asked the bard, as Xena took her seat next to her friend.

"Fine," assured the Warrior Princess, gritting her teeth as the leg irons were locked back around her ankles. "I'll just be glad when all of this is over," she told the blonde, and allowed the faintest of smiles to flicker as the bard squeezed her hand in support.

Once the Amazons had taken their places on benches that stood in serried tiers around the edges of the meeting hall, the Elders returned to Solari's summons, and took their places on the dias behind the table there. They swept their eyes over the assembled Amazons and finally came to rest upon their Queen and her accused Champion. When silence had been attained, the five elders of the Council of Judgement took their seats, followed by everyone else in the hall.

Tarelle looked malevolently across at both Xena and Gabrielle. She exuded confidence, almost as if she already knew the decision that the Elders had arrived at. Gabrielle knew that was impossible, but she was feeling insecure and was looking for trouble where perhaps none existed. The muted whispers and shuffling from the spectators did little to soothe her fragile nerves, either.

Solari moved to a position in front of the dias and rapped her ceremonial staff on the wooden floor three times. The sound echoed through the hall which became suddenly still and silent in anticipation of the announcement that was about to be made, "Quiet!" ordered the Amazon, unnecessarily, but it was part of the ritual of judgement, "All quiet for the decision of the Elders!" she declared in loud, ringing tones, "Amazons stand to hear what has been decided!"

The entire gathering within the hall stood attentively to await the pronouncement of the Elders. Xena stood with the lazy grace that characterized all of her normal movements. Gabrielle could never work out how something so smooth and fluid could appear so threatening at the same time.

When quiet had descended once more over the hall, Amara delivered the Elder's findings to the expectant crowd, "This particular issue has proven to be very complex," she began in a strong voice that carried without difficulty through the hall. "It is far from the simple issue that the charges appeared to present." She looked thoughtful for a moment before continuing, "We hold it as truth that Xena has often aided the Amazon Nation, even though we haven't dwelt upon these issues, it is a well known fact that the Warrior Princess saved the Nation from a senseless, and potentially totally self destructive, war with the Centaurs, as well as ensuring that Valesca, in her madness, didn't lead our people to annihilation. But however important her past actions may have been to the continuity of our people, those actions cannot be used as a broom to brush over the wrongs that she has committed here. The deaths, injuries, abduction and treason are all issues that are required to be addressed."

The statement caused an outbreak of loud mutterings amongst the assembly. Tarelle grinned smugly at the bard and the Warrior Princess triumphantly, certain of her successful prosecution of the case. Gabrielle's face bore a worried look as she began to feel more uncertain about the outcome, while Xena stood in stoic silence, almost apart from the whole affair.

Amara continued as the noise abated, "However, what cannot be cast aside is the interference from the Gods. This has become a problem that occurs far too often in the affairs of humankind. So often, the Gods seek to use us as pawns in their games, and the victims of that interference .. whether they be an ordinary person living their lives as best they may, or one of the mighty, whose lives and actions affect those around them .. suffer enough through the God's whims, without us further inflicting penalties upon them."

The murmurs and noise were even louder this time as the assembled crowd discussed and digested what Amara had said. It was Gabrielle's turn to shoot a look of vindication at Tarelle, and the bard could plainly see the disbelief and bright outrage etched on the redhead's features. Feeling a little more confident, the blonde waited impatiently for the noise to die down once again. She glanced at Xena, who remained stoney faced as she waited for the hearing to play out.

Once again Amara continued as the sound level died, "In this case, it seems that more than one God could have been causing turmoil within the lives of many, Xena included. Evidence given makes it clear that both Callisto and Hope sought to destroy, and cause torment, to not only Xena, but all those present at the Centaur gathering. However, did all those who suffered losses react as the Warrior Princess did? Argument has been given that Ares intruded himself upon her grief, distorting her perceptions. However, we have no proof of this. Queen Gabrielle has told us

this was so, having undoubtedly heard the tale from the defendant, but there is no one to corroborate that meeting, making it suspect in the eyes of the law."

Again Amara was forced to wait as the gathering argued amongst itself about the validity of Ares role in the affair. Tempers rose and it wasn't until Solari demanded order, punctuating her demands with the striking of her staff on the floor, that some semblance of control was restored. "Any more of these interruptions and I will start ejecting people from the hall," the Guard Captain warned sternly, glaring at the assembly with intense grey eyes.

"Another aspect," Amara resumed, "that has to be taken into consideration, is the fact that Xena saved the lives of Solari and Alexa, even though she was already under restraint and had been advised that she would be tried for her criminal acts. Her actions here, although they can in no way be used to excuse her killing of Mariss and Denara, do show that whatever drove her to attack the village, had nothing to do with animosity towards the Amazon people."

That raised little in the way of speculation from the assembly as they waited to see where Amara intended to go from there, and were mindful of Solari's warning, "Everyone is well aware of the blood stained reputation belonging to Xena, the Destroyer of Nations," Amara continued, "Her propensity for violence and slaughter has been talked about for many years. Yet in recent times, she has also begun to redress those actions and she has begun to garner a reputation as a Champion of the People, someone who stands for the downtrodden and victimized. We see in Xena a woman of a deeply complex nature who is capable of performing acts of great evil or great good."

Again there was an electric buzz as this was discussed by the Amazons. The pro and anti-Xena factions began to loudly debate their standpoints, almost coming to blows as the arguments became more heated. Solari signalled her guards to move in and eject the loudest and most belligerent of the crowd in an attempt to restore proper order, while Tarelle looked elated. She was certain that the Elders must find Xena guilty: the whole of Amara's summary had looked at and then seemed to discard the defence that Gabrielle had given.

Gabrielle felt desolated. She had been so sure that the Elders would understand what had taken place once it had all been explained. - *Surely they can't just dismiss it out of hand when everything had been so crucial to the events that had taken place here?* - A glance at Xena showed her to be dispassionately observing the whole affair. - *How can she remain so cool?* - wondered the bard.

When Solari once more restored order to the hall, Amara finally got to the heart of the judgement, "As to the charges, we the Amazon Elders, find you, Xena of Amphipolis, guilty of causing the death and injury of Amazon sisters. The charges of abduction and Treason we feel to be misplaced. Queen Gabrielle has been returned to us alive and unharmed, and her feelings that those two charges should never have been made, we have decided to respect."

Tarelle had a sour look playing around her mouth, but her eyes gleamed with delight at the guilty sentence passed on the first part of the charge. She waited expectantly for the Elders decision on the punishment.

"We have adjudged you guilty of these crimes, even though we harbour reservations about the events that led up to them," Amara told the hushed crowd, "Our decision is, therefore, that you, Xena, should be banished from Amazon territories for a year and a day, on pain of imprisonment, should you return during this period. The sentence to be enforced from sundown tomorrow to allow you time to remove yourself from Amazon lands."

The hall erupted as the Amazons on both sides of the debate roared their opinions of the verdict. Tarelle looked ready to explode. She undoubtedly had wanted and expected the death penalty to be passed, and viewed banishment as little more than a slap on the wrists. She turned towards the Queen and her Champion and treated them to a glare full of hate and the promise of future retribution, before collecting her scrolls and stalking from the building.

Relief flooded through Gabrielle as she heard the pronouncement. Banishment was just about the lightest penalty that could have been imposed. She turned to Xena and gave her a long tight hug, overjoyed at the outcome to the case that she had feared would be far worse. Xena was uncomfortable with public displays of affection, although she was aware of the bard's need for such comfort, and so stood a little stiffly, but made no effort to disengage from her friend's embrace.

Gabrielle looked up into the Warrior Princess's face and beamed with delight, "Well, it's over with. Things are going to be okay."

Xena disentangled herself from the young woman's arms and waited while a guard released her from the leg restraints. Turning back to Gabrielle, she allowed a tight smile to light on her lips as she said, "I'm going to have to get my things together and leave pretty soon." Two guards remained at her shoulders, and the manacles remained on her wrists. She was a convicted felon of Amazon justice and would remain under restraint until she had been escorted from Amazon land.

"I know," replied the bard sombrely as she realized just how much she was going to miss the travel, the adventures, and most especially, her taciturn, unpredictable best friend.

"I'll send for you as soon as I can," promised Xena as they pushed through the still arguing crowds in the hall, ignoring those around them and the black looks thrown at them by Tarelle and her clique.

Patroclese and Ephiny managed to catch up to the pair as they finally got out of the hall. The Regent, greatly daring, gave the warrior a quick hug before pulling back, brown eyes meeting blue, saying all that needed to be said between them. The healer had a cheerful grin for both of them as they headed for Gabrielle's house, to collect the weapons and belongings that Xena had entrusted to the bard's keeping.

As they walked Ephiny told them, "I don't think that I'd want to go through that again. And it wasn't me on trial." she smiled.

"Well if it had gone totally wrong, there was always the 'Rite of Truth'," Gabrielle returned lightly.

Ephiny stopped and looked hard at the bard, "Gods, but that would have to have been a last resort," she said in a shocked voice.

"That's why I didn't bring it up before," Gabrielle told her. "And death would have pretty much been the last resort," she pointed out.

"What's the Rite of Truth?" demanded Patroclese, as they walked on, quickly arriving at Gabrielle's door.

"It's where the convicted felon may attempt to prove her innocence by force of arms," Xena told him as she pushed the door open.

"Well, why didn't we go straight to that?" asked the healer, "I doubt that anyone here could beat you one on one."

"That's just the point," Ephiny told him, "She'd have to beat the twenty best Amazon warriors in one fight, and not only that, but the fighting takes place over a stake filled pit covered by about ten poles. Any of the Amazon's may move onto or off of the poles at any time during the Rite. But the woman undertaking the rite, must not touch the ground until she has defeated all of her opponents."

"That would have made things interesting," Xena said dryly.

"You knew about the Rite?" asked Gabrielle.

"I was ready to demand it if Tarelle had got her way with the sentencing," Xena told her with a smile, "I was kinda hoping that Tarelle would have been one of the warriors that I got to face."

"But that's a barbaric way of deciding things," object Patroclese, "It wouldn't have been fair. It hardly supports the innocent, just the strong. Has anyone ever gained their freedom by winning?" he demanded of Ephiny, as Xena began to gather her things.

"Nooo," she told him slowly, "I don't think anyone ever has." She threw a glance at Xena and grinned, "But I bet there would have been a first time if she'd tried it."

"Oh, c'mon!" Patroclese said incredulously, "I know she's good ... but is anyone that good?"

"Yes!" came the emphatic reply from both the bard and Ephiny at the same time.

"Look," said the blonde Amazon, "I'll go and get Xena some supplies. She'll need some food for the journey." Gabrielle gave her a grateful look.

Patroclese, having shook off his stunned disbelief, began to hurriedly gather his own belongings together.

"Where do you think you're going?" demanded Xena as she looked up and saw the healer's sudden activity.

"I thought I'd go with you as far as the nearest town," Patroclese answered quickly, "I think I've seen enough of the Amazons," he told them suppressing a shudder, "And I need to get somewhere where I can start to earn my living again." Xena looked distinctly doubtful about the idea, so the healer added, "You know I won't slow you down and I can defend myself if necessary."

Handing her weapons and armour over to the guards that still shadowed her, Xena gave him a brief nod of agreement before, checking through her saddlebags to make sure that she had everything that she needed.

Ephiny returned at that moment with the promised provisions, "Cheese, fruit and trail bread," she said apologetically, "I didn't have time to find anything else.

"Don't worry," Xena told her, "I'm not going to have time to cook."

"Hrmmph?" coughed Gabrielle, thinking about the Warrior Princess's culinary abilities.

"Be nice," Xena told her with a slight quirky smile.

"Um. Patroclese," Ephiny said, noting the healer had got his own gear packed and making the right guess about it's meaning, "If you're going with Xena, why don't you bring her saddlebags and I'll take you down to the stable to get the horses."

Patroclese looked a question at the Amazon, who raised her eyebrows and gestured towards the two friends, "Oh! Right ... yeah," he agreed, suddenly falling in to the fact that Xena and Gabrielle probably wanted privacy to say their farewells. He led the way to the door as Xena threw Ephiny a look of gratitude.

"You two can wait outside until she's ready," the Regent instructed the guards.

"But we're supposed to stay with her," objected one of them.

"Look, she won't go anywhere without her weapons, so just do as I say," growled Ephiny very definitely invoking her authority.

When the door closed behind the Amazons and the healer, the bard and the Warrior Princess stood in silence, neither really knowing how to, overcome the awkwardness that had suddenly risen. Gabrielle finally took the bull by the horns saying, "You know I hate this, don't you?"

"I know," agreed Xena moving to the bard's side to give her a hug, "but it'll only be for a short while." She could feel the emotion building in the younger woman and so pushed her back to arms length and told her lightly, "Hey, look at it this way. You've got a chance to put in some intensive training with the Amazon staff masters. Who know's, by the time we get back together, you might just be able to show me a thing or two."

"As if," laughed Gabrielle sadly. She looked steadily up into the blue eyes that usually appeared so cold .. at least for other people. The bard knew that she was one of the honoured few that got to see some of the soft warmth that was normally shielded by the ice. "You be careful," she warned seriously, "Without me to keep an eye on you, you're bound to get into all kinds of trouble."

Xena chuckled throatily, "That'll make a change."

"I mean it Xena," the bard insisted, "Caesar has it in for you. Don't be too overconfident about it. You're ahead on points, but he's not going to like that and he'll want to even the score."

"I know, I know," The Warrior Princess assured her, "and I promise I'll be careful." she attempted a reassuring smile.

"That'll be the day," grumped the bard, knowing her friend far too well to believe that.

"You just make sure that you stay close to the village," Xena told her in return, "No wandering off on your own."

"I know," Gabrielle told her, "he wants to get at you through me. I'll stay tucked up safe like some chick in a nest," she said in a martyred tone.

"Good!" Xena told her with heavy emphasis. She lifted her manacled hands over the bard's head and pulled the bard into another hug and kissed her lightly on the top of the head. "I'll send Joxer with a message as soon as I get back from Narbonensis," she said as she moved apart from the bard "He'll let you know if it's safe to join me and where I'll be." For a brief, poignant moment, she stood looking at Gabrielle, seeming to imprint her features onto her memory, "I've got to go," she said all too soon as she turned for the door.

"Xena," called the bard as the Warrior Princess reached for the latch. When the dark haired woman turned back to look, Gabrielle said softly, "I love you."

Xena smiled, one of those stunning smiles that changed the whole character of her face and was so rarely seen by anyone, including the bard, "I love you too, Gabrielle," she told her and then she turned and was gone.

[Continued...](#)

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Chapter Eleven: Journeys and Arrivals

Xena didn't waste time leaving territories that the Amazon's claimed for their own. She had no intention of breaking the terms of the sentencing and so incur further problems from Gabrielle's sisters. Patroclese found the pace hard, but he'd travelled with the Warrior Princess before when she was in a hurry and so had known what to expect. The Amazon guards were hardened veterans. There were six under the command of Eponin and they easily matched the Warrior Princess' forced pace.

Sometime after midday, following a long night of hard riding, they reached the boundary marked by Amazon totems that were there to warn off the unwary. Here it was that Eponin called a halt to the group and fished out the key to unlock the heavy manacles that still graced raven haired woman's wrists. She quickly unlocked them and handed the restraints to one of her warriors, as she watched Xena briskly chafe her skin where the irons had sat.

Eponin handed over the woman's, leathers armour and weapons before coughing softly to draw the warrior's attention, the Weapon's Master gave her friend a smile, "I'm glad things were worked out okay .. I was worried there, for a while, but I should have known that Gabrielle would work her usual charm."

"Know what you mean, Ep," agreed Xena as she hurriedly re-clothed herself and re-placed her armaments.. "Speaking of Gabrielle .. I want you to make sure that she stays safe. She's in a lot of danger right now, which is why I'm leaving her with you .. don't disappoint me," she warned, a hard edge creeping into her tone.

"We'll take care of her, Xena," promised the Weapon's Master, "You have my word."

"Good enough," acknowledged the warrior as she swung up onto Argo's golden back and waved a farewell, "Take care of yourself too, Poni!" she called as she headed, away from Amazon lands, at a fast canter, heeled by Patroclese.

Eventually, Xena allowed the pace to slow, somewhat, although she kept a wary eye out for any trouble, all too certain that Mavrikios and the other bounty hunters would be waiting for her somewhere. They would know that she would be unable, or unwilling, to stay in one place for long and she had no doubt that there would be fast mounted messengers posted at strategic points around Amazon lands ready to pass the word of her emergence .. it was, after all, what she would have done!

It was early evening when she found the perfect place for a campsite. In a small, difficult to find, valley she discovered a fair sized pond. Being off the beaten track, it was unlikely anyone would stumble across them, unless they were closely following the pair's trail, but she had taken steps to hide their passing as far as possible. Not only that, anyone seeking to approach could only come from the direction they had entered the valley from themselves, and the entrance was a tight winding cleft that a grandmother could hold with a broom.

"Do you like fishing?" Xena asked the healer eyeing the pond speculatively.

"I don't think I've ever tried it," he replied.

"Guess it's going to be down to me then," she told him. "You see if you can get a fire started. With a bit of luck we'll have something to eat other than trail rations."

Patroclese looked confused, "But you haven't got any fishing line?" he told her.

She looked at him as if he'd just told her that she couldn't defend herself because she didn't have a sword, "You just make sure you get the fire started," she told him as she began to peel off her armour, leathers and boots, before wading into the cold water in her shift.

Patroclese had barely finished collecting the wood and getting a blaze going, when the Warrior Princess returned with four fat trout, "Why don't you see to the horses, while I see to these," she told him sitting by the fire to dry off.

"How did you do that," asked the healer as he started to get up to do what she had suggested, "I mean, that was so quick and ..."

"I have many skills," she told him levelly. But then she added, "However, cooking isn't one of them, so I'll clean these, but I hope you can do something with them, otherwise we'll have to risk my culinary expertise."

"No! I can cook," Patroclese told her hurriedly. He'd listened to some of Gabrielle's descriptions of Xena's cooking as they had travelled to Amazon territory.

who rarely saw a stranger, Xena waited until deep night, when the farmers had long since sought their beds and the village lay dark and silent.

With almost unnatural stealth, the Warrior Princess worked her way around the quiet houses, until she reached the blacksmith's shop. A village as small as Tassos was lucky to have a blacksmith as a resident, but Xena knew that Kolianis hadn't always followed his peaceful trade. He had in truth been a farrier in her army at one point, until he grew sickened by war and sought out the peaceful life in a remote village normally too far off the beaten track to draw more than a handful of visitors a year.

When she reached the smithy, Xena whispered to Argo, "Wait here," before slipping around to the dwelling, where she found Kolianis' window with a sure proficiency that spoke of her having done so more than once. She scratched lightly on the shutters, knowing that the smith was a light sleeper, and waited for him.

"Who's there?" his deep base voice rumbled like a giant bee as he tried to whisper.

"Xena," the Warrior Princess told him softly, so as not to disturb her friend's wife.

"A moment," rumbled the voice.

Quietly, Xena slipped back to where she had left Argo, knowing that Kolianis would soon join her there. She began to remove the gear that she would require for the rest of her journey, slinging a long brown cloak around her shoulders and, after checking through the contents of her saddlebag, she swung it over her shoulder, just as the smith arrived at her side.

"Xena," he greeted with a smile, clasping her arm in greeting, "Been a long time. What brings you here?"

"Trouble," Xena told him seriously.

"So?" he asked, "What's new?"

"Cynic," she told him shortly but with affection. "Can you take care of Argo for me for a while?" she asked.

"You know I will," Kolianis answered her, "Where're you headed?"

"I can't tell you that, my friend. Just at the moment the less people who know where I'm bound, the safer I'll be," she told him.

"Bad?" he questioned quietly.

"Bad enough," she answered him, "Things have been worse, but not for a while," she looked into the smith's eyes, "I'm not sure how long I'll be either."

"Ignore her, Gabrielle," Eponin told her. "You beat the taller opponents because you used to practising with a tall woman. You're also able to deal with their greater strength because you're used to fighting someone far stronger. The problems you have are all to do with opponents who are smaller, attack lower, and use guile often in place of power. As I said, you need to be aware of this and allow your style to become flexible enough to compensate for it."

Looking around the field, Eponin announced in a loud voice, "Practice is over for the day. Time for you all to get on with some serious work."

"You know," Gabrielle smiled at Ephiny, "If I can get the hang of what Eponin's been trying to teach me, I might just manage to give Xena a real surprise next time we spar."

"Are you daydreaming again?" Ephiny laughed, "I've yet to see anyone who could fully best Xena with any weapon."

"God's, has she been paying you to sing her praises?" demanded the bard. "Every time I tell her I'm going to get her back for something she's done to me, she always says more or less the same sort of thing that you've just said."

"Pardon?" asked the blonde Amazon, irritably.

"You know what I mean," Gabrielle told her with a laugh, "But one of these days I am going to surprise her."

They laughed together over the mental picture of the event that sprang to their minds. The two had been steadily cementing their friendship in the nine days that Xena had been gone. Ephiny was doing her best to instruct the bard in the culture of the Amazons and how to rule. Things did not always go smoothly, but they were beginning to develop an understanding, in the area, that was gradually improving with time.

They had almost reached the bard's house when she heard a familiar voice call out, "Gabrielle!"

"Patroclese?" questioned the bard in confusion as she turned to see a scout party bringing the healer towards her, "What are you doing back here?"

The tall fair haired young man tried to push past his Amazon guards but they expertly prevented him from getting through their spears. Frustrated, he looked pleadingly at the Amazon Queen and said, "I've got to speak to you privately, Gabrielle!"

Motioning for the warriors to let him pass, Gabrielle signalled the healer to follow her and included Ephiny with a quickly glanced invitation. They hurried to the bard's home where, as soon as the door was closed behind Ephiny, she turned and demanded of Patroclese, "What's the matter? Is it Xena?"

He nodded slowly, almost reluctant to speak now he had the chance.

"What's happened?" Gabrielle demanded, as her stomach clenched in alarm.

"Nothing .. Yet ... As far as I know," he faltered, agitation plain in his mannerisms and speech pattern.

"Nothing? Then what's got you so worked up?" demanded the bard as she quickly added, "And just what are you doing back here?"

"Please just listen, Gabrielle," he pleaded and waited for her acquiescence before he continued, "After leaving here, Xena dropped me off at a village called Daxion. the village hasn't got a healer and so I've been able to spend several days treating the sick and injured and earning enough for food and lodging at the inn, as well as a little more besides."

He noticed that the bard was beginning to become impatient with him, and hurried on, "Three days ago, some soldiers came into the village, one of them needed patching up. From what they were saying, Xena's been heading west. They were part of Mavrikios' force, but when they got cut up by another band of warriors after the bounty, these three decided that they'd had enough and cut and run."

"What's this got to do with anything?" Gabrielle demanded, "We knew that Xena was heading west!"

"I know, I know," agreed the healer, trying to calm her down. "One of those men had a pretty nasty cut across the face. I needed a herb to help clear it of infection, and I went to get it from my kit. On the way back, I heard them talking."

"Go on," encouraged the bard.

"They were talking about the bounty. They said that it wasn't worth the money they got even just to chase her," he licked his lips nervously, "They said that they pitied the poor bastards in Narbo who tried to pull the trap closed."

"What!" Gabrielle erupted grabbing the healer's arms and squeezing them tightly as she tried to make sense of what he was saying. The thought sprang into her mind, "The only reason she's going to Narbo is because of the message you brought her from that merchant."

"Isumbrus," agreed Patroclese dejectedly, "I know," he told her as he saw the look of accusation in her face, "That's why I had to get back here to warn you. I feel a fool. I was tricked into delivering a message that has baited a trap for a woman I've come to admire," he told her miserably. "I thought that maybe, between us, we could come up with something to warn her or, if the need arose, to rescue her. I've got to do something. I must make up for my part in this, even if I was tricked into it by a man I've always counted as a friend."

Swallowing her fear, Gabrielle touched the healer's cheek softly and said, "It's not your fault, Patroclese," her mind was whirling with plans and odd images that flashed through her brain leaving vivid pictures that caused her to clutch her temples as if in pain.

"Are you all right?" asked Ephiny who moved to her friend's side, recognising some kind of problem.

"I'll be fine ... in a moment," Gabrielle told her, although she was grateful for the support Ephiny's arm gave. The Amazon guided her to a chair. "A little much exercis and sun," she tried to reassure the Regent. She looked up at the healer and told him. "We need to get to the nearest port that has ships bound for Narbo, or as close as we can get to it in Narbonensis."

"Xena told you to stay here," Ephiny told her sternly, "She told me to keep you here," she added.

"Everything's changed now, Ephiny," the bard told her briskly. "Xena's walking straight into a trap and I've got to try and stop her."

Ephiny looked mutinous, "Xena knows what she's doing. She's quite able to take care of herself. You going after her might just get her into the kind of trouble she can't get you both out of. You know! The reason she wanted you to stay here in the first place."

"I know Ephiny," Gabrielle agreed with her, "I know. But Xena thinks she's going to help an old friend. She thinks she's left all of Caesar's traps behind her. I wouldn't be much of a friend if I didn't try to warn her, would I."

"We could send a couple of Amazon scouts .. or I know Poni would go if I asked her," protested the Regent.

"They'd stand out like sore thumbs and you know it, Eph .. at least I'm used to travelling outside the Nation. If Patroclese comes with me it will act like a disguise they're not going to be looking for a man and his .. wife, now are they?" argued Gabrielle persistently.

Ephiny sighed in defeat, before a grim determination came over her. She crossed her arms across her chest and asked, "How many sisters should I ready to go with us?"

"Pardon?" questioned the bard taken by surprise.

"How many sisters?" repeated Ephiny.

"Ephiny, you can't come," Gabrielle told her firmly, "You're needed here as ruler."

"That's your task," reminded the blonde.

"I have another one to perform,' she said to the Amazon, "And I'm not taking any of the sisters, either," she declared firmly. "They'd attract too much attention, and I'm going to need to try and be as inconspicuous as possible."

"Is there anything I can do for you, then, my Queen," was Ephiny's flat response.

"Cut that out, Ephiny," Gabrielle told her shortly, "We're friends. Don't go all formal on me just because you don't like a decision."

Ephiny looked mutinous again, but she slowly controlled herself and sighed once more, "Is there anything I can do for you, Gabrielle?" she asked in a milder tone.

"Yes. Will you please take Patroclese and find some supplies and a horse for me. I'll join Patroclese after I see you back here." the bard told her.

Nodding her assent, the Amazon lead the healer away with her, giving Gabrielle a chance to bundle her things together hastily. Then, with the images she had seen still burned into her mind, she took three sheets of paper and wrote three almost identical letters. She sealed them with wax she softened over the candle flame, imprinted the seals with the Royal Amazon crest and wrote three different names on the outside.

By the time that Ephiny got back, she had finished and was ready to leave, "Can you make sure that these get delivered as quickly as possible?" she asked her friend.

Ephiny looked quizzically at the names and shot Gabrielle an intrigued glance.

"It's a feeling, that's all," the bard told her. "Sometimes I see things. I think that they might be some help."

"Well, it's certainly a mixed group," the Amazon told her, "Patroclese is down by the stable. Good luck, Gabrielle," Ephiny told her as she gave a quick parting hug. As the bard left the house, she added, "Be safe, my Queen."

Chapter Twelve: The Spider's Web

It was three days hard travel, sun up to sun down, for the bard and healer to get from the Amazon lands to the city port of Torone. For Gabrielle it was a period of frustration and, not to put too fine a point on it, pain as she was unused to long candelmarks spent in a saddle. But speed was of the essence, and she was willing to suffer a little discomfort if it meant saving time.

The pair posed as husband and wife on their journey for, although Xena had done an excellent job in drawing off the warrior bands after the bounty, both Patroclese and the bard thought that precautions were in order. As they were certain that any hunters would be looking for two women, it seemed reasonable to assume that she would pass detection as a travelling physician's wife.

However, no matter how quickly they were managing to make the journey, the crease of worry seemed to be permanently on the bard's features as she tried to convince herself she would get to Xena in time. After all, the Warrior Princess had had to drag half way across Greece to achieve her aims, so with luck they might even make it to Narbo ahead of her.

Yet still the doubts persisted, and Patroclese frequently heard his companion mutter, "She has to be alright."

"She will be," assured the healer for what must have been the hundredth time, "We'll get to her and find her in one piece, I have no doubt," he told her although there was an edge of concern in his tone that belied his words.

Torone was a rapidly expanding commercial port with ships from many different lands. It was a thriving, noisy, bustling place that quickly swallowed two newcomers into its mass with an impartiality that can only be found in such a big town that was indifferent to its populace. All were welcome here .. those hiding, those seeking. Identity mattered nothing to the city watch .. their only concern was to keep the peace .. however violently they needed to do it.

"We better get down to the docks and see if we can find a ship heading for Narbo, or somewhere close," Gabrielle told the healer, eager to be on her way.

"Um, Gabrielle," responded her companion, "It might be better if we got you somewhere out of sight while I go and find us a ship." He looked into the blonde's green eyes, concern etched on his face, "There are still men looking for you, even if we have got this far without any problem. But the docks might be different ... There could be people down there with a description of you, there just on the off chance that they'll be able to grab you."

Gabrielle smiled and shook her head disparagingly, "Oh come on, Patroclese. Have you seen anyone look at me twice?" she asked him. "I think Xena's pulled everyone away from this whole area who has any interest at all in trying for the money."

"Do you think that Caesar, won't have planned for the chance you might take a ship to go after Xena?" he asked her seriously, "He seems like the kind of man who lays deep plans when he wants something." He grabbed her arm and pulled her into the shadow of an alleyway as he became aware of a warrior beginning to take too much notice of them.

The man emitted a coarse laugh and shouted, "If she's any good, let me know. I might try her myself," as he grabbed suggestively at his crotch.

Gabrielle flushed redly in the shadows, flustered by the man's obvious meaning, and annoyed that she hadn't realized that she was being watched. Although Patroclese had his arms around her in a 'lustful' embrace, he effectively ignored her close proximity as he concentrated on the warrior who, luckily, lost interest in them when one of his mates drew him into a tavern.

"Look," he scolded as he turned towards the bard, "Do you really want to risk everything on the chance that I'm wrong about this?"

Gabrielle wanted to tell the healer that he was being over cautious, but there had been a look in the warrior's eye that hinted at something other than what he'd suggested, and the bard knew that she couldn't afford to take the chance that Patroclese was wrong. Finally she shook her head, knowing that frustration and impatience could bring disaster if not held in check. - *Focus* - she thought - *Xena's always telling me to focus!* - She nodded her agreement and added, "Okay. Let's find a quiet inn somewhere. I'll keep a low profile while you find us that ship."

Relieved at her agreement, the healer guided her through the crowded streets, taking sudden detours if he thought anyone was paying them too much attention. Eventually they came to an inn, set back away from the popular sailors district, obviously geared to cater for the needs of travellers who wished to be close to the docks, without being intruded upon by the raucous sailors on shore leave.

A room was quickly secured with Patroclese telling the host, "My wife needs to rest, she's in the early stages of a delicate condition, and I don't want to drag around the docks while I find passage on a ship."

The innkeeper nodded his understanding and, once the healer was satisfied with the hosts assurances of good lodging, led Gabrielle to a small, but comfortable room at the end of the upper landing, while Patroclese, left for the docks and, she hoped, to find a ship that would suit their purposes.

While he was gone she paced the floor restlessly. He seemed to be taking forever, and she had unconsciously began to count her steps as she moved between the window and the wall, avoiding the small table in the centre of the floor, - *One, two, three, four, five six, seven and turn* - she counted in her mind, a litany to give her something to concentrate on other than just where Xena was and if she was safe.

Although it had seemed like much longer, Patroclese had returned within two candlemarks. When he rapped on the door, the tension she had been building up inside her was so great that she almost leapt three foot off the ground! She cautiously went over to the door and asked, "Yes, who is it?"

"Me," came the answer, "Patroclese," he clarified, just in case she hadn't recognised his voice. She quickly opened the door for him and he slipped in shutting and locking it behind him once more.

"Did you find one?" she asked at once.

He smiled broadly, "The Perinax is sailing on the midnight tide bound for Elne, which is no more than two days hard travelling from Narbo. With luck we'll be there before Xena." Gabrielle started to gather their things together, but he stopped her with, "We better wait until dark."

"Why not get aboard now," demanded the bard still impatient to be doing something .. anything .. that got her closer to her goal.

He looked at her calmly and told her, "There a far too many people around the docks asking after a blonde bard," he told her. "Getting to the ship at night should help us disguise you a bit, especially if we wrap a cloak around you."

Much as she hated to, Gabrielle could only agree with his logic and be grateful for the fact that the healer seemed almost desperate to make up for his inadvertent betrayal of the Warrior Princess. His thoughtfulness and help had kept her clear of trouble so far, and his knowledge of

"Why didn't you get away while you had the chance?" she questioned the healer, a touch of reproach in her voice, "You might still have been able to get to Xena and warn her about the trap."

Ignoring her look and her words both, Patroclese turned to the men restraining the bard and barked with an air of authority, "Let her go. There's no reason to be rough with her."

Realization hit her like a forceful blow. Patroclese was far from the friend he had pretended to be. As soon as the legionaries released her, Gabrielle whirled on him and slapped him as hard as she could across the face, "Traitor!" she hissed at him, now fully aware of his authority over the soldiers by the way they had obeyed him, "How could you do this?" she demanded sick to her stomach that she had fallen into his artfully laid snare.

"No traitor," he protested calmly, "I've served Lord Caesar man and boy, as my family have served his for generations." He looked at her with a tinge of sadness in his eyes, "I regret that this had to be, but I owe my allegiance to Caesar and but follow his commands. You should understand that, Gabrielle. It's not far from your argument about Xena not being a traitor to the Amazons, because she isn't one."

The bard looked daggers at him, unable to refute his logic, she hated him the more so because he was right. The fact that he had betrayed both her and Xena by first befriending them and leading them into traps, was unpalatable to her, but fully understandable considering the master he served.

He signalled for the legionaries to leave the cabin, "The door is to remain locked, unless I give instructions otherwise, and a two man guard is to be on duty at all times." He turned back to the bard and smiled in a friendly, compassionate way that Gabrielle personally found totally unsuitable for the occasion, "Make yourself comfortable, Gabrielle," he told her, "we've got a long voyage ahead of us." As he reached for the door handle he looked at her and said, "If you should need anything, just get the guards to let me know. I have no wish for you to be uncomfortable."

She quickly snapped back, "I need my freedom."

A slight smile played on his lips as he answered, "Sadly that is the one thing I cannot give you."

Struggling further was going to get her nowhere, but she needed to vent her frustration and defiance so she snapped at him, "Enjoy this little victory while you can. Your precious Caesar hasn't got Xena yet, and when she finds out the part you played in this you'll be lucky if you can escape with your life."

"No doubt you are right," Patroclese agreed, "You know Xena best. But I don't think even she will be able to avoid capture this time." Patroclese slowly, almost reluctantly swung the door closed and turned the key in the lock. Gabrielle was left in the confined cabin, knowing that she had been caught as neatly as a fly in a spider's web.

The Gull finally docked at Narbo and, although the passage hadn't been slow, it hadn't been particularly interesting either. Xena would almost have welcomed a skirmish with some pirates, just to take her mind off of her loneliness. As it was, she was grateful to be on dry land again. Unusually, the confines of a ship had left her on edge and eager for something to occupy her attention other than the nagging concern that something was very wrong.

Thanking Bellis for his hospitality and the fast passage, Xena swung her cloak around her shoulders, as she left the ship, with a cheery wave to the crew. The cloak effectively hid her armour and weapons from prying eyes, and a little bit of caution often saved an awful lot of mending. Besides, Narbo was full of Roman Legionaries. A thing in itself that was not surprising because Narbonensis was a Roman province and supported at least four Legions that were champing at the bit to get into the fighting in Gaul.

However, she wasn't looking for trouble with them, and it was unlikely that anyone here would recognise her. The only Roman she held a grudge for, currently, was Caesar and, last she heard, he was still trying to play Emperor in Rome, well away from her, and any chance of her inflicting the vengeance on him that she believed he richly deserved.

As she wandered along the busy docks, she plucked an apple from a trader's cart and threw him a copper for it, before biting into the crisp, juicy flesh. Enjoying the sights and sounds of the port, she was in no great hurry to find her way to Isumbras' establishment, but as she roamed, she began to develop a distinctly 'itchy' feeling, almost as if she was being watched.

Ducking into a side street, she made a couple of quick turns and doubled back so that she could check to see if anyone had tried to follow her. Finishing the remains of the apple, she sucked the juice from her fingers and discarded the core in a refuse heap at the corner of an alleyway, all the while reaching out with her senses and using her eyes to try to locate the reason for her unease.

Long moments were spent in a futile search that revealed nothing to her. The 'itch' had not intensified and there was nothing to suggest that she was either being watched or followed. Reluctant to mistrust her feelings, Xena could only put her worry down to the problem caused by the bounty and the depth of her loneliness, along with the nagging doubt that something didn't quite add up. She wasn't certain that they were the reasons, but with nothing else in evidence, she was almost ready to credit them.

Taking a roundabout route, just to satisfy herself that she hadn't missed anything, she slowly wound her way back towards the warehouse district of the docks. Stopping at the corner of a street, she dropped a small coin to one of the many beggars that littered streets (victims of the fighting in the area) and asked for directions to Isumbras' establishment.

"Just continue on down the road, lady," the beggar told her in a scratchy voice, "it's a big place with a big sign. You won't be able to miss it."

"Thanks," Xena told him and continued down the thoroughfare, still irritated by the feeling that she was being shadowed, yet unable to locate the source of that irritation. She sighed inaudibly

trying to shake off her qualms - *There's nothing there, for Zeus's sake!* - she swore to herself, as yet again she twisted off her planned path and ran a backtracking pattern to check her trail.

When she found the warehouse, she ducked into an alleyway to observe the comings and goings before she committed herself to going in. She watched a heavily laden wagon, pull out of the huge double doors at the front of the building, that she watched swing closed and heard barred with a heavy beam, that was dropped into place once the wagon was clear, "That's Isumbras all right," murmured Xena to herself, "Always a cautious man with his goods." Still she continued to wait.

At just after midday, a stick insect of a little man, let himself out of a small wicket door that stood next to the big double gates. He had hunched shoulders and the obvious look of a clerk off for his lunch somewhere. Deciding it was time for a little closer investigation, Xena moved stealthily out of the alleyway, and made a quick tour of the big warehouse.

Apart from the doors at the front of the building, and a window on the side, not far around the corner from the wicket door, a peek into which showed the clerks small office with manifests neatly piled on the desk, there didn't appear to be any other ways in or out. Not that she didn't believe that Isumbras had some hidden escape route in case of emergencies, but it was well disguised and not identifiable, even with her practised eye.

Still concerned that things felt 'other' than they should, Xena proceeded cautiously as she let herself into the clerks office through the small door. Taking her time and satisfying herself that there was no one else there, she moved stealthily to the rear of the office and listened at the door to the sounds of men working in the big building.

As she eased the door open, her highly attuned senses began to scream at her to proceed with even more caution. The 'itchy' feeling had intensified to such an extent that her skin began to prickle. Her normally graceful movements, became extra fluid as her fighting instincts took control of her body.

Silently dropping her gear, and the cloak, in the office to give herself full freedom of movement, Xena slowly drew her sword before proceeding further into the warehouse. Nothing seemed to be out of the ordinary here. There were the expected sounds of a few labourers moving about their business in the depth of the heavily stocked building. Long, neat rows of barrels, packing cases and crates, covered the floor space, each in blocks with walkways between them.

The building was brightly lit, so there were few shadows where danger could be lurking. A glance up to the roof revealed nothing other than a wooden gantry that ran around the edge of the building, allowing workers to find cargo that might be hidden from sight at ground level. To the eye, everything appeared as it should be, but there remained an indefinable tenseness in the atmosphere that the Warrior Princess was reluctant to ignore.

Moving with panther like smoothness, Xena glided silently along the central isle of the stacked piles of goods. Her senses were alive, listening for the sound that would warn her of an imminent attack, and hearing nothing other than the rowdy laughter of the workers. As she came to each

junction in the walkways, that crisscrossed the warehouse between the stored cargo, she made a careful inspection both to the right and left, before continuing on her stealthy way. She was unsure whether she was glad that nothing seemed to be lurking in ambush, or whether she'd rather something happened to clear the tension that seemed to crackle in the air.

As she neared the far end of the warehouse, she hung back as she inspected a raised platform that stood against the back wall of the building. Upon the platform stood a heavy desk and a scattering of chairs. Behind the desk was a door, probably leading to a back room and the way up to the gantry, if she didn't miss her guess. Sitting at the desk, seemingly working on an inventory, was a man she recognised. He was older, greyer and more lined than when last she had seen him, but she knew Isumbras as soon as she saw him. She would never be able to mistake the greedy ferret like features, nor the eyes that were constantly in motion, gathering information.

Still unwilling to ignore her senses, that were screaming warnings at her to be careful, she waited and watched for a while. No one seemed to be working in the area near her, but she observed three or four men over on the far left hand side of the warehouse, organising a load that was obviously going out in some shipment. A large crate stood covered by a tarp on a flatbed wagon.

Her eyes flicked up to the gantry that ran around the upper part of the building. If the warehouse hadn't been so well lit, it would have made an ideal place to conceal archers for an ambush. No doubt Isumbras had surprised unwanted guests that way more than once, but for now there was no one hidden there.

Nothing seemed out of place, yet the feeling of wrongness persisted. If there was a trap laid here, it was a well hidden one. She had little doubt that Isumbras would betray her if he felt that it was in his interest to do so, and 250,000 dinars was an awful lot of interest! - *Well* - she berated herself silently, - *You can't stand here forever while you make up your mind. If there is a trap here, I'm already up to my neck in it! So I might as well spring it and get things moving before old age creeps up on me.* -

She flicked her eyes over the area for one last time, before moving lightly into the open, her sword held, seemingly casually, at her side as she greeted, "Hello Isumbras."

He gave a start as he looked up from his work, and a smile lit his face as he leaned back in his chair and replied, "Xena! You took your own sweet time getting here." He looked thinner she noted as he motioned her forward, "Have a seat," he invited.

"No thanks," she declined politely as she moved forward onto the front edge of the dias, preferring to be able to move quickly if the situation should warrant it.

"Still as suspicious as ever," he noted with a mirthless smile, "I'd heard you'd changed."

"Not that much," she told him, "What did you want me for."

"Ah, straight to the point, as ever," Isumbras laughed, "Well, I asked you to come because a friend of mine wanted to see you," there was an odd gleam in his eye as he said that and a predatory set to his features.

Xena moved back, senses alive to an expected attack, her sword levelled in Isumbras' direction, but her eyes searching for the men she now knew were waiting to rush her. A movement on the gantry made her eyes flick upwards, to an instantly recognisable figure.

"Hello, Xena" greeted his familiar voice. One that stoked the burning rage within her to a white heat.

"Caesar!" she snarled in reply as she began to weave her sword in lazily complex movements ready to cover any assault.

"Are you going to surrender and save us a lot of time and effort? And you a lot of pain!" he drawled in a tone that seemed to make it clear that it made no difference to him one way or the other.

"I don't see anyone here to help you," she told him, well aware that he wouldn't have set this up without a body of armed men for his own protection, not if had any hopes of leaving alive with her either dead or a prisoner. - *Depends what he's got in mind!* - her inner self told her. She needed to draw them into the open, so she knew what she had to fight.

"You intend to make this difficult?" he arched an eyebrow at her, his brown eyes mocking.

She shook her head and snarled, "Oh no! I intend to make it impossible!"

"Very well, my men could use some exercise!" he scowled.

"If they're anything like that bunch in Rome they need more than exercise!" she sneered.

"Oh, believe me, Xena. These are good. Nothing but the best for the Warrior Princess." He snapped his fingers and a trumpet blared out a single note. Instantly, crates burst open to spew forth legionaries armed with a variety of heavy clubs, staves and nets.

She shot Caesar a mirthless smile that never came close to touching the cold fire that burned in her eyes. Within an instant, stillness became rampant death dealing action as Xena lashed out at the soldiers who rushed her. Two men went down to a sizzling right fist that crashed from one jaw to the next as she swung in a vicious arc. Another eager Roman got a boot in the groin as he tried to grab her from behind. Swinging her sword around her head she cleared a space for herself as men scrambled back, suddenly reminded of their mortality.

With the mad light of battle shining from her eyes, she let loose her fearsome war cry, "Yi,yi,yi,yi,yi,yi!" before leaping high into the air and landing, perfectly balanced, on the gantry rail, her eyes seeking out Caesar. Now was her chance to avenge herself on the man that had

twisted her soul into something evil. Without Gabrielle here, there was nothing, and no one, to hold her back and payment was long overdue.

He was still on the gantry, but now surrounded by a dozen soldiers. She smiled eagerly, her whole being infused with the heat of battle and the certainty of revenge. She was preparing to charge Caesar's force when her senses suddenly screamed at her. Left hand moving faster than the eye could follow, she snatched a shaft from the air, noting that it had a blunt head as she did so. The arrow was meant to stun!

Leaping back she was just in time to avoid a volley of similar arrows that thudded heavily into the wooden wall before dropping to the gantry deck. Xena threw a glare to where Caesar had been standing, only to find him gone. He'd taken the opportunity, presented by her pre-occupation with the arrows, to remove himself as a potential target.

Gritting her teeth, the Warrior Princess made the hard decision that it was time to get herself out of this mess. The warehouse floor seemed to be teeming with legionaries and the ones on the gantry were charging towards her with more appearing from the doorway all the time. Much as she hated to lose her chance at Caesar, her enemy had the upper hand here and retreat was her only viable course of action. She promised herself that there would be another time.

Sliding her sword back into its sheath on her back, she flipped off of her perch, just before the first soldier reached to grab her, performed a tuck roll high in the air, avoiding more stun arrows as she did so, and landed neatly on one of the pile of crates. Legionaries below her, thrust long staves at her, trying to bring her down. Xena kicked them aside and leapt for another pile of crates more to the centre of the warehouse, putting some distance between her and the gantry. As another staff wielder made to prod at her, she pulled the weapon from the soldiers grasp and used it to help her vault from pile to pile avoiding the men who were trying to snare her.

Arrows began to zip at her from archers who had taken up positions on the gantry. She avoided them as best she could, although her body, arms and legs, were getting struck more frequently as she found it difficult to dodge everything coming at her, she did manage to protect her head, however, reducing the chances of them doing major damage.

Using a new tactic, a group of men clambered up onto the stack of wooden boxes ahead of her. Others were closing in around her as they lowered themselves down from the gantry. Confronted by four soldiers directly in front of her, Xena gave voice once more to her ululating battlecry as she rushed them, her captured staff held horizontally before her to sweep them from the crates back to the ground below.

Using her momentum, she leapt the gap onto a stack of barrels that proved to be, unfortunately, unstable. Unable to hold her balance, she went crashing down with them and took a pounding from the heavy casks as they bounced around her. The fall did, though, give her a clear view of the clerk's office .. one look at the main warehouse doors told her that she had no chance of getting them unbarred before the legionaries would be able to overwhelm her. Once into the office, she'd have two options .. crashing through either the door or window, whichever looked to be the most feasible at the time.

As she struggled to her feet, a double handful of Romans rushed into her path, cutting her off from her objective. She drew her sword with a confident flourish, ignoring the bruises garnered from her fall, and growled menacingly, "Out of my way, boys!"

"Get her!" came the order from a decurion, sending the legionaries in to attack.

Xena parried the first club that slashed towards her, reaching out with her free hand to draw the luckless wielder into a smashing head butt. A sweep of her sword cut through the defence and armour of a second man, laying him open from chest to hip.

She dodged to one side to avoid a heavy swipe, but was a little slow and the club hit her solidly on the right upper arm, making it instantly numb and causing her to drop her sword. She dealt the successful soldier a wicked side on kick to the gut that left him heaving on his knees as he tried to suck breath into tortured lungs.

Ducking, she launched herself into a forward roll along the ground to avoid the legionaries who sought to sandwich her. Instead of grabbing the Warrior Princess, the pair ended up colliding with each other as they watched Xena roll away. As she came to her feet, Xena hit the soldier in front of her with a crushing straight left that dropped him like a poleaxed steer. As he fell she saw she had a clear path to the office door. Not hesitating she dived for the opening ... straight into the heavy confines of a special cargo net that had been slung as an obvious contingency if she should escape the trap within the warehouse.

Net and Warrior Princess, fell to the floor of the office in a tangled mess, small sharp hooks in the netting, catching on leather, armour and flesh. But Xena was not ready to give up yet. Drawing the knife from her boot she set to work to cut herself free from the prisoning mesh. An almost blind panic assailed her at the thought of being in **His** power once more and she fought with an unreserved ferocity that was incredible to behold.

Seeing that their quarry had still not given into the inevitable, the soldiers descended upon her with clubs, intent on beating the defiance out of her, incredulous that she would continue to fight in such a hopeless situation. Slowly, the resistance went out of her, as her bruised and battered body refused to respond to the unfair demands that she was trying to make on it, until she lay still, breathing painfully and heavily.

Her sight was blurred and she felt groggy as the net was hauled off of her. Oblivion beckoned, but she struggled against it and fought feebly as she felt the cold metal of heavy manacles being fastened to her wrists and ankles. Hands pulled her to her knees, while another grabbed a fistful of her hair, pulling her head back to stare up at the face of a man who stood calmly before her.

Caesar coldly examined his prize. She fought like twenty kinds of demons and he had little doubt that she would spend her last breath to kill him if she could .. and believe it to be well spent! A soldier approached, handing him her sword which he studied along with the chakram that had been taken from her belt. His smile was like the chill of winter as he looked down upon his one time lover.

Her face was swollen with one eye closed and her lip split in two places. Heavy bruising marred her smooth skin wherever it showed. Her breathing was laboured and her one open eye looked disorientated. - *But*, - he noted with grudging admiration - *she shows absolutely no sign of conceding victory*. - In her position he wasn't sure that he'd be able to maintain that air of defiance.

"Well, Xena," he said at length, the smooth tones that once thrilled her, now sent the icy fire of rage coursing through her veins. "Maybe you should have taken the chance to surrender to me after all. I warned you about the pain you faced."

Gathering her fast fading reserves of strength, and ignoring the screaming protests from every part of her body, Xena used her will to force herself to her feet. For the barest second she stood eye to eye with her nemesis, before spitting full into his face. Caesar gave no flicker of emotion, nor did he move, but an unseen fist crashed into the side of her jaw and blessed darkness rushed to claim her.

The Roman general carefully wiped the spittle from his face as he dispassionately observed his unconscious prisoner. - *Gods, but the woman could fight* - he thought to himself, glad that he hadn't had to face her himself .. not that he feared her .. he just knew that his destiny lay elsewhere other than on the end of her blade. Yet, he'd never seen her match and he privately admitted that she was absolutely magnificent - *But far more dangerous than a pride of rabid lions* - he told himself.

He turned to Brutus whom he'd given the task of setting the net to snare their game, while the rest of them had kept her busy in the warehouse. - *That net* - thought Caesar looking at the heavy rope that the cargo net was made from - *should have stopped any mere mortal in their tracks. But she almost cut herself free from it's strictures*. - "Get her under lock and key," he ordered, anxious that she should get no opportunity to effect an escape.

He studied the battered form at his feet for a few moments, "There is never to be less than twenty guards on duty around her. When you get her to the dungeon, strip her of her armour and boots, make sure she hasn't got any more weapons tucked away," he instructed examining the quality of the weapons he held. "Once that's done, she is to remain chained at all times." He handed the sword and chakram to the soldier who brought them, "Have those delivered to my apartments," he instructed.

Turning back to Brutus he told him crisply, "We leave for Nemausus at first light. I want the cage on a covered wagon with six guards, and another twenty around it at all times." he fixed his second in command with a hard stare, "Make sure that the men know I'll have one in ten of the whole special watch lashed if she gets anywhere close to escape, and I'll Crucify every fifth man should she manage to get away from them."

Brutus nodded, they'd heard the order before and the men knew what awaited them if they should fail Caesar, "What of the girl?" he questioned as he signalled for Xena to be taken away.

"Patroclese will keep her safe once he lands." He watched as the Warrior Princess was lifted roughly and carried back into the warehouse where the flatbed wagon now stood, a wooden cage evident upon it. As soon as Xena was bundled into it, the tarp was used to cover the cage making it appear to be a covered crate. "With that irritating blonde in my hands, I'll have Xena just where I want her." he explained.

Caesar's battered, elite, hand picked, maniple of almost two hundred men, (assembled for the specific task of capturing and guarding one woman warrior) formed up around the precious cart and, at their commander's order, marched back to the garrison barracks where they could lodge their dangerous charge behind stone walls and iron bars.

Chapter Thirteen: The Postwoman Cometh

Chopping logs was not his favourite occupation, he decided for about the umpteenth time. He swung the axe so it bit into the chopping block to keep the blade free from rust. Rubbing his forearm across his brow, he smeared some of the sweat away from his eyes, before flexing his sore shoulders, and studied the replenished store of firewood with a critical eye. Satisfied that he'd finished for the day, he knew that it would be sometime before he needed to do the chore again, - *Which suits me just fine!* - he silently grumbled.

He held his palms up to inspect the blisters that were raw on his hands and shook his head in rueful disbelief. It had been so long since he'd done honest chores that he'd become soft. He scooped up the waterskin that lay beside him and took a deep swallow, then poured some of the cool liquid on his throbbing hands before allowing the water to gush over his head. Shaking his long black hair from his eyes, he reached for his shirt.

He'd cut quite a stack of firewood to replace the depleted pile in the inn's woodshed. That he'd had to cut so much in one go, was testimony to the fact that he disliked the job and had put it off as long as possible. However, when his mother had started to threaten to do the job herself, he had reluctantly undertaken the arduous chore. - *Well it's done now* - he thought gratefully. - *Maybe I can get Tomas to go hunting with me tomorrow. Mother could use some fresh game to flesh out the stores.* - He glanced up at the sky and realized that the sun was lowering, - *Thinking of food,* - he grinned to himself, - *time to get something to eat.* - he thought as his stomach rumbled its agreement.

Pulling his shirt over his head he hurriedly tucked the tail into his trousers, leaving a substantial amount sticking out in a lopsided hang. He gathered the waterskin and the small pannier that he'd carried some lunch in, so that he wouldn't have to make himself halfway presentable to go back into the inn at midday, and headed for the kitchen door.

His mother met him with a towel and a bar of soap, "Wash up before eating," she told him lightly.

With a look of feigned patience upon his face, he swapped the things he carried for the wash gear, and headed for the well. There he drew himself a bucket of fresh water and proceeded to clean the sweat and grime, which had accumulated, from his well-muscled torso.

Reluctant to put the sweaty shirt back on, he threw it over his shoulder and, whistling cheerfully, he made his way back to the kitchen where his mother waited ready to take the soap, towel and shirt and hand him a fresh one. "You know," she told him patiently, "You'd find it a much easier if you tackled the chores in small amounts, rather than waiting for things to build up into mammoth tasks."

He smiled at his mother patting her cheek fondly, bringing an echo of the impatient child he had been with it when he said, "I guess I'm too old to change my ways now, Mother," he told her. "What's to eat? I could demolish a whole roast ox."

"Nothing so grand," she told him with a smile. "There's some cold mutton and fresh vegetables."

"Ah!" he sighed irrepressibly, "A banquet fit for a king."

"Get on with you!" she scolded as he gave her a hug. Since he'd been home, he'd done that a lot ... once they got over the strangeness of being around each other after such a long parting. She only wished her other children were home ... but, while she was at it, she might as well have wished for the moon!

She watched contentedly as he sat at the kitchen table and proceeded to demolish the large helping of food that she had prepared for him. - *It was good to cook for family rather than just the customers*, - she decided, and smiled as he helped himself to more. A sudden thought crossed her mind. - *The letter!* - She moved with her light easy step to the mantle shelf, where she had put it when it had arrived in the morning. The inn had been busy, and he had been working so well with the woodpile, that she had decided to wait to give it to him until he stopped to eat.

She smiled quietly to herself as she remembered the courier who had delivered it. The girl hadn't been more than seventeen summers, but she moved with an arrogant assurance that would have drawn attention even if she hadn't been wearing such exotic clothing. - *Amazon*, - had been her guess then, and remained so now. What they could want with her son, she wasn't about to guess, but she hoped that it wouldn't be something to take him away.

As he pushed his plate away with a sigh of contentment, she said, "A letter came for you today. An Amazon delivered it."

"An Amazon?" he questioned in amazement, "Do we know any Amazons?"

She shrugged, she had her private thoughts about who had sent the letter, but she didn't want to speculate when the answer was to hand, "Open it and see what it says," she suggested.

He looked at the red wax that had closed the document and guessed that it was a Royal crest imprinted into it. Carefully breaking the seal, he scanned the contents and a worried frown descended upon his features, "It's from Gabrielle," he told his mother who was showing signs of becoming impatient. "She says that Xena's in trouble and needs my help. Here," he said handing her the letter as he stood and made for the stairs to his room, "I've got to get my things."

cacophony of sound that marked his every movement. He glanced at the fishing pole, "Think you've got a bite," he said helpfully as the pole began to bend alarmingly, "Do you want me to get it?"

"No!" snapped the blonde as he grabbed the pole and started to work the fish. It seemed like he had a big one and soon became absorbed in the task.

"You're gonna lose it," the second man warned him pleasantly.

"Shut up!" responded the smaller man, "I know what I'm doing." The pole bent dramatically and the line snapped just as he said the fateful words.

"Told ya," pointed out his uninvited visitor unhelpfully.

Throwing the pole to the ground, the blonde turned on the other and shouted, "All a man wants is a nice peaceful day's fishing and what does he get?" he threw his hands into the air, "Uninvited know it alls who ruin the whole day!"

The collection of metal pieces seemed to shrug, "Sorry."

"Don't be sorry. Just do better," he was told and then the blonde added, "Go and find someone else to bug."

"Can't," he began, but was cut off by female voice.

"Is this a private fight or is anyone allowed to play?" it asked.

"Hey! How'd you do that?" asked the tin can, as his reluctant companion whirled round looking for the source of the voice.

"That wasn't me" he began, but was cut off by the voice.

"No it was me," announced an Amazon as she stepped out from behind the tree where she had been concealed.

"What is this!?" demanded the smaller man, "Is someone out there selling tickets to this place? Is there a sign out there pointing 'this way to the fisherman's retreat?'"

"Calm down," the woman said, "I'm not stopping. I just need to deliver this to you," she said handing over a sealed letter.

"What's this?" he asked as he took it from the Amazon.

"It's a letter, dummy," said the second man, "She just told you that."

"I know what it is!" he snapped at him, "it was just a manner of speech."

he coaxed the fourth lock into abandoning its duty. "That was the easy bit," he told himself dismissively, "Now comes the hard work."

He reached out his hand for one end of the rope that hung beside him attached to a second pulley. Carefully he secured the rope to the decorative ironwork surmounting the glass. With that done, he began to, very slowly, inch the casing into the air, away from its base, to give himself access to the prize beneath. The work was long and tiring, for although the casing was not inordinately large, the thick panes and the heavy ironwork made it a cumbersome and time-consuming task. He also had to make sure that he carefully curled the trailing end of the rope, as he was well aware that the floor was weight sensitive, and he preferred not to be disturbed by unhelpful guards as he laboured.

After long and careful effort, he had managed to move the casing high enough to be able to reach the jewelled dagger that lay on a bed of purple velvet beneath it. The thief, carefully took the strain of the glass and iron on one arm, and inched the fingers of his left hand down to claim the dagger. His grasp closed around his reward and he retrieved it swiftly, thrusting it through his belt for safe keeping as he returned the dome to its base, beads of perspiration appearing on his brow as the strain began to increase with the time it took.

Finally, having returned the case to its original place, he was ready to remove himself from the scene of the crime. That was when the vault door opened and admitted the King of Tressia's High Chamberlain, "Now what did he want to do that for?" muttered the thief as the Chamberlain spotted him and yelled.

"GUARDS!"

Releasing himself from his gear, the tall dark thief dropped lightly to the ground, ignored the cacophony of bells that erupted when the alarm was triggered. Showing a nimbleness on his feet, he dodged around the Chamberlain as well as the two guards who had rushed immediately to his summons, "You'll have to do better than that," he taunted them as he ducked out of the doorway, "if you want to catch the Ki... Ullpp!" and straight into the path of half a dozen guards rushing toward the vault.

Thinking quickly, the thief dived forward toward their feet, bringing the whole lot of armour plated soldiers down into a tangled heap around him. He easily escaped the mess, springing to his feet and sprinting up the passageway as fast as his legs would carry him.

"After him!" roared the Chamberlain.

The guards scrambled up and pounded down the corridor after their quarry. The thief took a quick left turn and heard one of the chasing men shout, "Now we've got him!"

At the end of the corridor stood a window, that opened high above the market square outside the palace walls, "Whoever heard of a vault being built in a tower, anyway?" muttered the thief as he leapt onto the windowsill.

She was still in the little stone cell and she seemed to be hanging from her wrists. She moved her head to see what was above her and had to fight off another bout of nausea as her vision swam and hammers thundered out a chorus on her brain. - *Slowly!* - she reminded herself.

Resting her head against her raised arms, she waited until the world stopped spinning and she was sure that she would be able to resist the fingers of darkness that clawed the far reaches of her mind. She inched her throbbing head into a position where she could see that her manacles were chained to a ringbolt in the ceiling above her.

- *Okay*, - she breathed hard, - *So, what's with my legs?* -

Again, moving with ultimate slowness, she edged her head forward until she could see the ground below her. Her vision slammed in and out of focus with a violence that made her want to throw up again, but she forced herself to resist, knowing that the heaving wasn't any good for her injuries.

Closing her eye, until things had steadied once more, she slowly forced it back open to look at her legs which were buckled at the knees. - *Well at least if I can stand on my feet, I'll be able to take some of the pressure off my wrists.* - she decided.

Thinking of an action and performing it was, however, proving to be poles apart in terms of effort. It took Xena what seemed to be an age to get her feet flat on the ground beneath her. Then it took far more time to encourage her tortured, abused, muscles into action. Her legs quivered like a banner in a breeze as she tried to get them to support her weight. But however unsteady they were, it did help to relieve the torment she was suffering in her wrists, arms and shoulders.

The next task was to take stock of her injuries. If she was going to have any idea of what she was capable of doing, she needed to assess the damage that Caesar's goons had inflicted. She took a deep breath and winced sharply. - *Bruised, probably cracked, ribs!* - she decided - *and at least one is broken and pressing on the lung. No puncture though, or I'd be coughing blood.* - She thought about that for a moment. She didn't remember coughing, blood or anything else, but then again she wasn't really sure of anything at the moment.

- *So, damaged ribs*, - she catalogued and allowed a gasp to escape her lips as her head swam violently again. When everything had stopped spinning, she added to her list, - *Heavy concussion.* - Her legs seemed fine, other than being battered and bruised. She couldn't recognize the pain of a broken bone there, so at least that was something. Her arms seemed to be more or less functional, although she was certain that her left shoulder was dislocated. Everything else amounted to scrapes, bruises and fatigue.

- *Could be worse*, - she told herself, trying to buoy up her courage. - *I'm not dead and I don't think I've got anything a little rest won't fix ... If he gives me a little rest.* - She resisted the impulse to dwell on what Caesar had in mind for her fate. He obviously didn't want her dead, at least not immediately, or she'd be taking a cruise on Charon's boat by now. Ergo, he had something else in mind for her.

She gently rubbed her throbbing head against her arm. Sluggishly her brain registered the feel of metal around her neck. A cold ring of metal that could only have one meaning, - *A slave collar?* - she thought incredulously. - *He wants to keep me as a slave?* - A humourless bubble of sound, that should have been a chuckle, escaped from her battered lips as she thought, - *Gods, but the man's arrogant!* -

She had no idea of how long she'd been in the cell, or how long they intended to keep her there. She knew that her only chance to escape, was to recover from her injuries faster than they believed she'd be able to. Towards that end, she slowly began to work on regaining control of her muscles: tensing and relaxing different areas of her body to get the blood flowing smoothly and force strength back into the weakened limbs.

- *Caesar won't hold me for long!* - she swore to herself. She'd never be anyone's slave, let alone a man she hated with a passion so rare in its strength and intensity. - *One way or another,* - she promised herself, - *I'll escape him!* -

Chapter Fourteen: The Road to Recovery

She had worked hard on reviving her muscle control in the time that she had been left in isolation. She felt a little stronger, although her head swam alarmingly at every movement, and she doubted whether she'd be able to stand unsupported yet. She closed her eye, shutting out the glare of light that still stabbed her brain with a sickening intensity.

In the fullness of time, the awareness of being observed forced her to open it once again. Her suspect vision revealed a blurred image of a man peering through the barred grill of the door, his voice was like the roaring tide as it at once crashed and faded to the rhythm of the waves, "CENTuriON! shES AwaKE!"

There seemed to be the bustle of movement in the room that lay beyond the confines of the door. The Warrior Princess, prepared herself as best she could for the invasion of her cell. Her survival instincts were still functional, even if her brain was failing to cooperate with her needs fully.

She heard a key grate in the lock and the heavy double '**BOOM!**' as two large bolts were thrown back. She braced herself as the door was swung open and seven men, six armed with heavy batons, entered her space. The officer - *The Centurion,* - she told herself, looked her up and down, eyeing the many obvious signs of the pounding she had taken during her capture.

The men seemed to rush forward and back at her as she vainly endeavoured to focus on them. The apparent uncontrolled movement made her feel sick, and she was forced to close her eye to steady herself once more and regain control of her rebellious stomach.

"My name is Publius Flavius Flaccus," the Centurion announced. When she gave no response, as she fought her inner battle for control, Flaccus used his vine staff of office to strike her thigh, "You will pay heed, slave!"

The word stung her more than the blow had. The white fire of rage coursed through her, driving away the clouds that fogged her mind, allowing her to open her eye and focus on what she saw

before her. - *Flaccus*, - she decided, - *is one of those hard disciplined officers that the Roman army boasts of. And*, - she considered, - *he enjoyed his power!* - That made him a hard task master, and one ready to enforce his authority with strong punishment.

Having succeeded in gaining her attention, Flaccus continued, "My men and I are responsible for your security. If you cause us problems, you will suffer, because my men will suffer. Failure to obey an order, will earn you a beating. Resisting a guard, will gain you a beating. An attempt at escape will bring a beating. Believe me when I say, that you will break before I bend an inch." His voice was cold and hard, perfectly suited to the craggy, scarred face and gray hooded eyes of a career officer in the Roman army. She believed every word he said almost. She remained silent, refusing to be bowed by his threats.

"Do you understand what I have said, slave?" he demanded, obviously requiring an answer from her.

- *C'mon Xena!* - she told herself, - *Don't let your pride get the better of you. Now isn't the time for this!* -

As she hesitated to respond, the staff descended with a heavier blow on her unprotected thigh, raising a red welt over the purple bruising. She bit back the agony as her leg collapsed beneath her throwing her weight onto her arms once again, and causing her dislocated shoulder to scream in protest. Her damaged ribs sent shock waves of torment searing through her, forcing her to gasp for breath and making her screw her face up in anguish.

Flaccus observed her distress with professional dispassion, waiting for her to regain control over her shuddering breathing before asking calmly, once again, "Do you understand, slave?"

"Y...yes," she responded in a hoarse, tortured whisper that barely made it through her bruised lips.

He probably couldn't make out the identity of the word she struggled to pronounce, but he took it to be an agreement to his question. He looked at Xena with an indifference that made it plain she meant nothing to him. Guarding her was just a duty he had been ordered to perform, one that he would execute with brutal efficiency.

He turned to a soldier who hung back in the doorway, "Give the animal some water, and try to get some porridge into her. We move out at first light, so I want her ready to be moved in less than a candlemark." He glanced at the Warrior Princess before adding to his men, "She might be in no condition to give you trouble now," he warned them, "but take no chances. The whole guard detachment will operate as if she has her full fighting capabilities ... at all times!" he ordered.

"Yes Centurion!" responded the men in the cell in unison.

Flaccus marched from the cell, allowing the soldier, carrying a variety of equipment including two water skins, a bowl of food and some rags to enter. The other six guards took position around the edge of the stone room, batons at the ready, should they be needed.

"Well now pretty," said the soldier softly. He was a thin wiry man of about Gabrielle's height, with graying hair and a clean shaven face. "I can see they've made a real mess of you. Let's get you back on your feet a bit, and then I'll see if I can't clear some of the blood of your face before we get some food and water into you."

"Remember what the Centurion said, Cornelius" growled one of the guards around the cell.

"You lot are here to take care of all that," retorted the man they'd named as Cornelius, "I'm just the physicians mate. I might not be able to take care of all the damage that your treatment has done to her, but it's my job to do what I can," he rebuked them while he used the liquid in one of the skins to gently wash the blood, and accumulated dirt from her face.

Xena winced at the acrid bite of the fluid, and recognised it as being a vinegar wash, used by Roman medics to clean wounds and help prevent infections. Her lips stung like wildfire as he worked around the two splits there. When the caked on blood had been removed he produced a needle already threaded with gut and, as gently as he could manage, put a stitch into each of the cuts on her lips and two into one above her right eye.

"Not much I can do about the bruising," he told her, as he finished his ministrations, "How about a drink, now," The Warrior Princess inclined her head slightly. With the fading of her rage, the sensitivity to movement had regained a hold. Cornelius, held up the waterskin, and allowed the fluid to trickle slowly over her lips, into her parched throat.

- How long has it been since I had anything to drink? - she wondered.

"Slowly now," he warned. When he judged she'd had enough for the moment, he took a careful look into her open eye, "I'd say you've got a concussion," he mused. "I'm no physician, but I've seen soldiers with eyes that do that. Can be dangerous," he added.

He lifted the waterskin to her lips once more and Xena found that she was able to swallow more of the fluid, taking bigger mouthfuls to release the water to run slowly down her throat, "Thanks," she croaked a little more audibly, although the battering her jaw had taken made forming words difficult.

"Any other problems ... other than the obvious ones, I mean, that I should be aware of?" he asked her as he began to clean the abrasions over the rest of her body, with the vinegar wash, "You'll know better than I. I hear you're skilled in medicine."

"Ribs," she managed to tell him, "one broken several cracked. Dislocated shoulder," she added although her words sounded slurred in her own ears.

She closed her eyes, focusing inwards, trying to blot out the pain and discomfort that had invaded her life. She sought refuge in her memories, seeking solace in her remembrances of good times, good friends and, as ever the smiling face of a bard from Potidaea. As she warmed herself in the glow of friendship and love, she attempted to take advantage of any rest she could manage, knowing that her body needed time and rest to recover from the ravages of the last day.

- *A day!* - she thought, - *Has it only been a day?* - She did not know for sure, and had no way of telling. She believed that it had only been the morning before when she had landed in Narbo, but she was not certain, could not be certain of that. Nothing seemed certain any longer. Except ... she had the certainty of Gabrielle! They couldn't take that from her. She had her memories (she almost smiled as the bard's face sprung forth in her mind's eye) and she had the comfort of knowing that her friend was far from the brutality of her present existence. - *Stay safe, Gabrielle!* - she sent out a silent plea.

It was a candlemark before midday, when they drew to a halt, and she became aware of many men around the wagon, stopping to eat their lunch rations of journey bread, cheese and olives, washed down with some of the watered, sour tasting wine that they carried in their flasks.

Cornelius drew back the canvass cover and hopped nimbly into the wagon carrying a waterskin and something wrapped in a cloth. The six guards recognised him and allowed him to approach the cage bars where he stopped and touched Xena lightly on the arm to draw her attention, "How goes it, pretty?" he asked as he handed her the waterskin, for her to slake her thirst.

She took a long grateful drink before answering, "Could be better," she mumbled wryly, pleased to note that the slur in her voice had definitely lessened.

"Here," he ordered, "Let's have a look at that eye again," He reached through the bars with both his hands and gently helped her tilt her head until he could get a good look at the one showing pupil. "That begins to look better," he said pleased, "The dilating has slowed and isn't so erratic either. You heal fast, pretty."

"So I've been told," she said carefully, trying to form the words so they would be understood.

He unwrapped the cloth bundle so the guards could see what it was, and handed her a wedge of soft, crumbly cheese, "I didn't think you'd be able to chew anything hard," he told her, "so this will have to do for now."

"It'll be fine," she answered, knowing that she still didn't have the stomach for too much food. She lay the cheese on her lap and took another long drink from the waterskin, before handing it back to Cornelius.

"We'll be on the march again shortly," smiled the wiry little man. "Get what rest you can." She inclined her head to him in agreement and watched as he left the wagon the way he came before carefully taking a bite of the cheese.

At the appointed candlemark, Flaccus unlocked the cage that housed Xena, and detailed two men to take her into Caesar's tent. As she was pulled out of her confinement, she stifled a moan as her pain filled shoulder protested the treatment, but was no longer assailed by the waves of blackness that had claimed her that morning.

The guards got her out of the wagon without much assistance from her .. even though her arms and legs were stiff and sore, she knew that some measure of strength had returned to them, but she had no intention of letting her Roman guards know that. - *Knowledge is power, and what they don't know helps me!* - she told herself.

With the soldiers bracing her under the shoulders again, she had to grit her teeth against the lancing agony that shot through the joint as she was dragged towards a large tent. - *Command tent*, - she registered with a practised soldier's eye. She took the opportunity to glance around and, from what she saw, she became certain that Caesar marched with an entire Legion. - *The VII*, - she thought as she located and recognised the eagle and banners that proclaimed the unit's identity. - *A crack, core of hardened veterans*. -

She was guided through the canvass tent flap into the brightly lit accommodation belonging to Caesar. Her good eye was dazzled for a second as it adjusted from darkness to light, and she blinked several times to try and focus the images around her. The guards halted about five foot from a table laden with the remains of their commander's meal. Xena appeared to struggle to get her feet solidly under herself so that she could stand to face her enemy ... her legs appeared rubbery.

Caesar looked at her with a measuring glance, noting the slight tremor in her knees as her pride held her upright before him. That she refused to acknowledge his superiority, did not surprise him. That she would be forced to accept his mastery, was something he was determined to see.

At a slight nod from their commander, the two guards kicked their charge in the back of her unstable legs, forcing her to her knees before the man who claimed ownership of her. Unable to restrain herself, the Warrior Princess directed a look of bleak, cold, hatred at her enemy. A lesser man would have recoiled from the sheer intensity of that look, but Caesar returned it with a cool one of his own, that further fuelled the fires of her rage.

She, unconsciously, strained at the irons that held her wrists. Yet even though she had broken chains in the past when gripped by her dark emotions, her muscles weren't recovered enough to duplicate the feat.

Caesar continued to observe her with seeming placid superiority, "Don't bother, Xena," he told her conversationally, "Those chains were forged especially for you. Even with your full fitness you would find it impossible to break free of them. They're far thicker and stronger than usual. You see the stories about you have given me the information I need to contain you." He poured himself a goblet of wine and plucked a grape from a dish of fruit as he studied her.

Her face, he noted, was heavily bruised. Her right eye swollen shut, the left only able to partly open. The whole of her normally sleek body was mottled by dark purple, blue and black marks.

Yet marred and chained as she was, she managed to maintain her air of majesty, as if she was in control of all around her.

He took a sip of the wine as he watched her. Saw the tightness around her mouth, the tension in her muscles. Stubborn, arrogant pride was written into her every look, her every movement. Breaking her to his will was going to be a long and arduous task, a test of patience, but worth the effort if it could be achieved. And there was the difficulty, - *Can it be achieved?* - he thought to himself.

His destiny was to become Master of the World. He had know this for many years, had even shared the vision of his destiny with the young, immature Xena, who had captured and ransomed him so many years ago now. He had shown his mastery then, by taking her, along with her crew of pirates, and having them all crucified. But she had survived, lived to mature and grow in her hatred of him, to become ... if not a threat, at least an irritant that he needed to exorcise. Besides, something within him demanded that he bend this woman to his will. Her strength mocked him, and he needed to dominate.

He placed the goblet back on the table before him and picked up a thin metal collar, inspecting the inscription he'd had written on it. It was a very expensive item. Forged from the metal extracted from a rock that had fallen from the heavens. It's twin was around her neck, and the pair were unique.

"Do you know what this is, Xena?" he asked her pleasantly, holding the collar up for her to see. His only reply was the icy stare, but that didn't worry him. He hadn't expected her to answer, "Of course you do," he supplied the answer for her, "It's a slave collar. A match for the one around you own, normally, quite lovely throat."

He locked his eyes on her. "These collars are unique. Made from a skyrock. That's enough to make them unique, you know, but these also have inscribed upon them, 'Property of Caesar'. That's you, by the way," he told her with a laugh, "and these collars are the only two in the world that bear such a legend. Add to that the fact that the metal from a skyrock is one of the most valuable commodities in the world, as well as being one that is invulnerable to the metals we normally use, you can see how much I truly value you."

He failed to provoke a response.

"Of course, I had the other one made for you irritating friend. Did I tell you that she'll be joining us in a few days?" he threw this piece of information into his monologue and noted the way her glare intensified and her muscles almost cracked in the desire to break the chains that held her. Yet still she refused to respond verbally to his taunting.

He smiled patiently. - *Everything would come with patience.* - he told himself. "Have you eaten this evening?" he asked, knowing she hadn't and gesturing to the scraps that remained from his own meal. It was a calculated insult, scraps to be offered to a dog. The insult continued his campaign to goad her into showing her strength.

He was now certain that she was better recovered than she was pretending to be. Her whole demeanor proclaimed it in a hundred, almost imperceptible, ways while she fought to keep that information hidden from him, "Why don't you ask me for some food, Xena?" He said sitting forward in his chair to look at her intently, "Why don't you ask me to let you friend go free?"

"I'll ask nothing of you," she ground out sullenly. "I'll give you nothing you want! And I don't believe you even know where Gabrielle is!"

He leaned back in his chair and smiled smugly, "You're wrong you know," he told her with confident certainty, "You're going to give me everything I ever dreamed of ... you and your little bard friend. She's on the way to Nemausus, by the way. The same as we are"

Xena stared back at him, trading glare for smile. Her rage had been banked to white hot and the molten fire that flowed through her veins cleared away all thought of physical pain. - *He can't have Gabrielle. It's impossible. She is safe with the Amazons. And yet! ...* - And yet, she knew that Caesar was not a man to make an idle boast.

Even as she struggled to control her fear and anger, her eye had been attracted by something small and metal on Caesar's table. She was aware of what Caesar was trying to do here. The sudden relaxation of the guard detail, shouted loud that he was fishing about her capabilities. Give her just enough room and she'd supply all the answers to the questions he needed to be solved. - *Well, maybe I will!* - her anger flared. - *but not for the reasons he providing.* -

She had no doubt that there were a good twenty soldiers within a call's distance, her acute hearing picked up the sounds that most people would miss. But, the thin, small piece of metal on the table called to her. Even though she risked more heavy handed treatment, she needed to make the most of opportunities as they presented themselves. She doubted she would be offered many such.

Beginning to feel that his goading was not going to get her to show her hidden strength, if indeed she had any and he was not just reading something into her that wasn't there, he suddenly grew wearied of the game. He looked at the guards and ordered, "Return her to her cage."

As the soldiers pulled their, previously helpless and pliant, captive to her feet, they suddenly found themselves trying to keep a hold on a force of nature. With double fisted swings, backed by the heavy metal of the shackles, she felled the two hapless guards with jaw cracking power.

With her ankles too constricted by the chains they bore to move her quickly, she executed a forward roll that took her to the table before Caesar. As she rose up from her tumble, she grasped its edge and heaved it at the man as he struggled to his feet, throwing him off balance as he grabbed for his sword and screamed, "**Guards!**"

She knew that she had bare moments before she would be overpowered. She had to make it look as if Caesar was the target of her efforts. She snagged the object that she'd been aiming for, and managed to force the small, sharp tool into the hem of her shift as she moved to confront her hated tormentor.

In the moment it had taken for her to secure and hide the object, Caesar had regained his balance and drawn his sword with an ease born of long practice. As she moved towards him, he was ready for her and levelled the blade to her throat just touching her skin. They stood, thus, in a frozen tableau as the tent suddenly filled with men. Strong arms grabbed her from behind, and pulled her roughly away from the Roman. She quirked her lips in a dark, chilling smile, letting him know that his control of her was illusory. She forced herself to relax as she was pushed back down to her knees. Not that she was in any real condition to resist. She had used her reserves to steal her prize, a fine metal toothpick that she would harbour against her next slim opportunity.

Caesar's face burned with fury. That he'd been right about her did nothing to soothe his nerves about her getting so close to him. He glared at the luckless, unconscious, legionaries who had been his 'bait' to test her, "Take those fools out and give them twenty five lashes each when they wake up. Maybe it will teach the rest of you to remember just how dangerous she is ... at all times!"

"Why blame your men?" she purred insolently at him, "We both know who's fault it was." She knew her barb had hit the mark. His plan had been transparent to her from the start, but even so she hadn't been able to resist the opening he had given her.

Caesar felt shaken by the sheer intensity of the woman. He had very little doubt that she would have done her very best to kill him if she'd been able, and be damned to the consequences. - *It will be different*, - he told himself, - *when I have the bard in my hands to use against her. But for now*, - "Yes we know whose fault it was," he snarled, "Yours!" He glared angrily at her, annoyed that she could so easily irritate him when he held all the trump cards, "It's time you started to learn the realities of your new position, Xena," he turned to Flaccus, "Give her twenty lashes here, now, before you put her back in the cage."

Two guards pulled her roughly back to her feet and hauled her over to the tent's thick central support post. Just above head height was a metal spike, used to hang a lantern from. The lantern was quickly removed and Xena's shackles hung over the spike in the lantern's place. Forced to stand on her toes, her shoulder, once again screaming protests at the abuses it was suffering, her ribs shooting exquisite torment through her frame, causing her to take short painful breaths, she could do nothing to resist the flogging that had been ordained for her.

The Centurion ripped open the back of her shift exposing more of the heavy discolourations that covered her body. Flaccus stepped back to give himself some room to swing the whip that had hung curled at his waist. No sign of emotion showed on the Centurion's face. He had warned the woman the price for transgressing the bounds. He would perform this task as he would any other ... with efficiency.

Xena closed her eyes and gripped the post as firmly as she was able. She heard the lash whistle through the air before it struck her exposed flesh, cutting deep, drawing blood. The shock was enough to drown the pain ... at first.

"One!" announced the Centurion as he drew back his arm for the second strike.

Clamping her jaws together as hard as she could, Xena tried to anticipate the descent of the whip, arching her back to ride the blow as far as possible, but the way she had been hauled up, gave her little chance of achieving her aim. The vicious leather bit again, causing her to jerk against her chains in reaction.

"Two!" came the count.

Breathing became added torture as her ribs made their condition felt. Sweat beaded her brow as she waited for the next blow to fall. She tracked the motion of the whip with her ears, hearing it fly back away from her body, then whistle forward again, with pitiless impartiality. It struck lower, across the small of her back, forcing her to draw breath sharply.

"Three!" she heard announced.

She leaned her forehead onto the pole, trying to gather her will to withstand the brutality of such punishment. As the lash slashed across her back from shoulder to hip, the slow heat of gradual pain began to increase as shocked flesh started to register the torment being inflicted upon it.

"Four!"

Blocking out the sound of everything around her, other than the whip's movement and the count of the blows, she moved her hands to take a firm hold on the chains above her and gripped them with white knuckled ferocity.

"Five!"

- *God's!* - her mind cried out as her back began to flame with burning fever as the lash bit deep once again.

"Six!"

She could feel the trickles of blood run down her back, as the wounds cut by the stinging leather increased in number. Sweat glistened from every pore of her body, mixing with the crimson flow drawn from her skin, further adding to her torment as the salty fluid fed into the cuts.

"Seven!"

Her jaw ached with the effort she used to keep from crying out. Her pride, her stubborn pride, was trying so hard to hide her agony from Him. She knew it was a vain effort, but she would withstand the suffering as long as she could.

"Eight!"

Another slashing diagonal cut roasted her tormented hide. She stifled a soft whimper before it could escape her. - *Not even halfway through the ordeal!* - she berated herself. - *Some Warrior*

Princess! - she flogged herself with contempt at her perceived weakness and stiffened her resolve.

"Nine!"

- *I've suffered worse.* - she told herself. - *The Gauntlet, the capture. I will survive this!* - She shuddered as the heavy blows further damaged the cracks in her ribs, finally breaking them forcing her breathing to come in agonized short gasps.

"Ten!"

- *I can endure whatever I have to.* - she told herself, - *But please let Gabrielle be safe!* -

"Eleven"

- *Does burning feel like this?* - she asked herself, her mind wandering, as white hot needles of agony lanced through her lacerated back. - *Did the people of Cirrah feel this pain?* -

"Twelve!"

Her torment took her into the nightmare depths of the dark recesses of her soul, - *So many deaths. So many pointless deaths. Is any punishment too great to bear for what I have done?* -

"Thirteen"

A grudging groan battered past the shield of her clenched jaw. Torture of body and soul combined to break her iron resolve.

"Fourteen!"

"Ugghh!" grunted Xena, no longer able to contain the torment inflicted upon her.

"Fifteen!"

Molten lava dripped where her back had once been. The excruciating rawness drove all thought, all other feeling, from her sensibilities.

"Sixteen!"

Another, louder cry was drawn from the Warrior Princess as the whip continued it's scouring of her flesh. Gone were all vestiges of human thought, she was enveloped in pure animal pain that had need to cry it's anguish.

"Seventeen!"

Again the searing lash slashed deep into the mangled skin of her back. The torment, that, in the deepest recess of her mind, she believed could become no worse, intensified.

"Eighteen!"

Her whole body shuddered, jerking in her bonds like a broken puppet. The brutal abuse that it had suffered in less than two days should have been enough to kill any normal being. Yet she survived! She would endure! She no longer cared that she could not stop the cries of pain that her agony demanded she release.

"Nineteen!"

- I will get through this! - the thought bubbled to the surface of her screaming mind. - The screams that he has drawn from me will not break me. He will never break me, No one will control my will but me! -

"Twenty!"

As the final stroke was laid on, Xena sagged from her rigid brace. Her thoughts ran like scattered raindrops, as the searing fire that raged across her back refused to allow her to focus. Yet slowly, floating to the surface, came the determination that Caesar would not see her fall at his feet. As the guards released her from the post, she defied her legs to buckle. Using all of her stubborn strength of will, she stood before Caesar unbowed, unbroken.

She forced her breathing into a normal rhythm and, refusing to let her pain show in her voice, she told him with cold venom, "Reality is what you make of it Caesar. My reality will never be yours to control."

"Take her away," Caesar instructed coldly and watched, reluctantly impressed, as Xena shook off the hands that reached for her and exited the tent unaided, if unsteadily. A feat of superhuman strength of will that was not lost on the Roman. *- Something has to be done to slow the speed of her recovery down, until she knows for certain I hold the bard. -* he decided.

"Flaccus!" he snapped, making an instant decision, "She's to have only a cup of water morning and night until we reach Nemausus. Let's see if a little starvation will dampen her spirits, and keep her from regaining too much strength too quickly." He gave a bleak smile. "Oh, make sure that the Seventh's healer sees to her ribs .. I think several of them broke under your ministrations .. after all the trouble I've been to, I don't want to puncture something that will rob me of her. Other than that, her injuries can wait for Patroclese to attend them in Nemausus."

Chapter Fifteen: A Matter of Life and Death

The continuing journey north, through Narbonensis, became one of unremitting agony for Xena. After her flogging, she had been returned to her cage where she curled herself into a protective ball on her side, trying to keep the bars from touching her tattered back, while struggling with the discomfort and lack of flexibility caused by her broken ribs.

morning and night. The guards administered it to her unconscious form anyway. Caesar had ordered that she drink morning and night, so the soldiers took the time to trickle it slowly down her throat.

Although Xena was unaware of time or travel, her passing did not go unnoticed. The heavy wagon that carried her was stationed in the middle of the marching Legion and dictated the pace of the march. Guards were thick around the wagon, keeping inquisitive ordinary soldiers, and peasants, alike well away from it. Such strong precautions were bound to lead to speculations, and the rumours of Caesar's treasure, wondered about (half joking) by the Legionaries, became the focal point of conversations for all the villages that they passed through on their route north.

For the rest of the trip, Caesar ignored his prisoner, other than to hear a daily report from Flaccus about her worsening condition. The Roman general was concerned to hear of the deterioration, but a messenger had arrived informing him that Patroclese had arrived at Nemausus safely with his charge, and he felt confident in Xena's ability to survive her ordeal until she could be treated by the physician he trusted. - *Besides, I still want her too weak to cause problems. At least until I have another means of control to hand!* - he noted grimly.

They reached the large garrison city of Nemausus at dusk on the eighth day. The VIIth legion was given orders to encamp outside of the city walls, while the special maniple, and the wagon they guarded, followed Caesar and his personal guards within the walls. Even at the late candlemark, there were men and women eager to stand on the street and cheer the great Julius Caesar as he rode by at the head of his troops.

And news, at it so often does, had run before him speaking of the great treasure that travelled in a covered wagon and was closely guarded. It almost seemed that more eyes were turned to the wagon than were on the heroic Caesar! If Xena had been aware of any of the interest that was being shown, she might just have laughed. Hearing herself described as Caesar's treasure might have been a joke that even she would have been unable to resist the humour of.

The column wound it's way to the centre of the city and the sprawling Roman barracks that held the standing garrison for the area. They were admitted through the huge, heavy, gates that allowed deeper access to the complex and the wagon, with its attendant guards, finally came to a halt in an enclosed courtyard that had been cleared of all other personnel.

Under the shroud of the gathering darkness, Xena had been dragged unresisting from her cramped cage and, oblivious to all around her, into the grim portals of the garrison and through twisting, torch lit, damp corridors, until they had reached the extensive dungeons.

The dungeon was a large one, for it also served as the city's main prison. The outer guard room seemed almost akin to a large stone cavern. It stretched thirty-six foot by forty foot, and provision had been made for up to forty men to sleep there, in bunks stacked four high around the edges of the room. There were also benches and tables scattered around, for the use of those on duty, where the soldiers could eat, gamble, or attend to the 'housework' that was required to keep their kit in order. The only door into the chamber was made of thick wood and was heavily bound in iron. It stood at one corner of the room and was diagonally opposite a single cell that

materials and a variety of herbs and medicinal decoctions that might prove useful. Caesar's description of his patient's condition sounded dire, and he knew that he had his work cut out for him.

He sent a runner for Cornelius to meet him in the dungeon with fresh water, the vinegar astringent, four charcoal braziers, half a dozen blankets and as many of the thick soft lounging pillows, from the officers quarters, that he could collect together. He also gave the orderly the authority to requisition such help as he needed in Caesar's name.

Having collected his equipment, Patroclese had hurried down to the cells, gaining entrance to the gaol only by using Caesar's authority himself. He had expected security to be tight, but had not realised just what lengths his master was willing to go to in ensuring that his prize remained in captivity. Flaccus had been notified to expect him by Caesar, but until he was identified by the centurion he was not admitted.

"Cornelius will be arriving with some more of the equipment that I require," the healer told the career soldier brusquely. "Before he gets here, I want to see your prisoner and evaluate the situation for myself."

"As you will, healer," acknowledged Flaccus with military briskness. It was known throughout the maniple that the physician was to join their elite band, and was to have total co-operation from the soldiers, on all matters medicinal regarding the slave.

Flaccus escorted the healer across the crowded guardroom to the cell where Xena lay without movement. Patroclese noted that six guards stood at attention watching the interior of the cell as if the hounds of Hades were within it, rather than one obviously very sick woman.

The Centurion took the key to the cell from around his neck and used it to unlock the door. The hinges squeaked as he pulled it open to admit the healer, and again as he shut the door behind him and turned the key in the lock. Patroclese turned and gave him a quizzical look. "Orders, healer," Flaccus responded to the unasked question, "The cell is to remain locked. Just call if you need to be let out."

Patroclese gave a slight nod and hurried over to his patient. He screwed his face into a wince as he looked at the bloody ruin of her back. Dried blood lay caked over the rib strapping and the visible cuts that showed the mottled discolouration of infection. He would have no idea of how bad that all was until he could get the wrappings off and the whole mess cleaned.

He noted Xena's shallow, laboured, breathing and the thick sheen of fever induced sweat soaking her whole body which was covered with the yellow, brown and purple remnants of the pummelling her frame had taken over a week previously. He gently turned her head so he could get a look at her face. The bruising and discolouration that covered the rest of her body was evident there also, and his fingers tingled with the raging heat of her fever that burned unchecked.

Taking a sharp knife from his instrument case, he used it to cut away the remnant of the garment she still wore and threw it behind her on the bench. Then, with infinite care and gentleness, he cut through the linen wraps around her torso and began the slow painful process of pulling the crusted mess of bandage, blood and oozing pus from her skin.

It took some time as he tried not to cause the unconscious woman any more agony than necessary. Once he had achieved his that aim, he allowed a livid hiss of exasperation to escape his lips. Xena's back was criss-crossed with bulging weals of putrid flesh where maggots feasted on the decay. Red and purple veins scattered haphazardly from the wounds visual proof of extensive infection.

Unable to start work on cleaning until the rest of the equipment he'd requested arrived, Patroclese made a careful examination of his patient to determine the extent of the rest of her injuries. He carefully ran his fingers down her sides, probing gently as he located the broken ribs. Three on the right side and five on the left one pressing dangerously against a lung. The dislocation of her left shoulder was obvious to the eye, and would be relatively easy to deal with once she was fit enough to take the strain. The damage around her eyes were healing, and the stitches in her lip and brow looked about ready to be removed.

A noise at the guardroom door, drew his attention away from his patient, and he turned to see, a small, wiry man, obviously Cornelius, lead a troop of soldiers in with the things he had ordered to be brought. Flaccus let the orderly into the cell, and the soldiers dumped the things they carried where Patroclese indicated. Turning to Cornelius, the healer said, "Clean her up as best you can. I need to be able to see just what more trouble is lying under all that muck. I'll be back in a few moments." As the healer left the cell he could hear the little auxiliary speaking softly to the unconscious woman, "Easy there, pretty. We'll soon get you back to rights." He couldn't help but smile at the words, and wondered just what the Warrior Princess thought about anyone daring to call her 'pretty' as a term of address.

Flaccus responded to his call to be let out and escorted him as Patroclese led him through the iron gate into the main cell area. The healer led him down the length of the corridor to the last of the small cells on the right hand side and looked through the grill at the prisoner within.

Gabrielle sat in the seclusion of her prison and tried to utilize her time to compose the stories that she had been meaning to record, but had never seemed to have the time to do so before. She had been in Nemausus for four days now, the Roman ship that carried her had made good time. She knew her little cell intimately. It was no bigger than six foot by eight foot and held a small truckle bed, with a small table and chair that Patroclese had secured for her upon their arrival.

Thoughts of the healer made her angry once again, and all hope of composition was lost as she considered the treachery that had lead her into this fix. Patroclese had made a considerate gaoler, but he was still a gaoler and Caesar's pawn. The writing materials he had provided for her were mostly unused, as her mind whirled in too much of a turmoil to be able to concentrate on rhythm and metre. Most of what she had written was of little use, and she knew that she would be in no state to write until she knew what had happened to Xena.

She threw down her quill in disgust and buried her head in her hands as, for the thousandth time she dwelt on her concern for the Warrior Princess. - *Where is she? Has she escaped Caesar's trap? Is she dead?* - The uncertainty was becoming an inescapable torture that she generated for herself.

She heard the key grate in the lock of her cell door, and looked up to see who it could be. Patroclese normally visited her in the mid morning to check on her well being and see if she required anything. She knew by the candlemark that it was late. She had no window in her cell, but the candle that stood on her table had burned low, and by it she reckoned that night must have fallen.

The door opened admitting Patroclese and, behind him, standing in the open portal was a stern looking soldier whom she didn't recognise. The unexpected visit roused her curiosity somewhat, making her wonder what had brought him so late. Yet despite her interest in his visit, she met him with the angry glare that reminded him that she hadn't forgotten, or forgiven, his treachery.

"Gabrielle" Patroclese began, but was interrupted.

"You're here late. What's the matter? Guilty conscience keeping you from sleeping? Perhaps you can't face your dreams. Treacherous acts usually lead to bad dreams," she sniped acidly.

"Gabrielle" he tried again, but got no further.

"You know, you just might never sleep well again!" the bard sneered at him.

"Quiet, Gabrielle!" he snapped at her, using the tone of authority she had only heard him employ with the soldiers under his command on the trip here. He fixed her with a determined look as she subsided into rebellious resentment. "Xena's here," he told her getting her immediate and undivided attention, "and I need your help."

"Frightened she's going to beat you to a pulp?" she grinned smugly. "If you want me to intercede for you, you've got the wrong bard. I might just join in and help her."

"Gabrielle," he told her firmly, "She could be dying."

The bard looked at him for an instant as if he were speaking some foreign language to her, "What? What are you saying?" she demanded as she scrambled to her feet and tried to push past him.

Patroclese grabbed her shoulders and looked down into her eyes, explaining, "She was hurt when she was captured, Gabrielle. Badly hurt. And since then she hasn't been treated kindly."

"What did you expect from Caesar," she demanded shaking his hands off and wiping a tear out of the corner of her eye with the heel of her hand, trying to blink back her hard pressed emotions.

"Get those braziers lit," the healer ordered Cornelius, as he searched through his medicines for the powder he sought.

"All of them sir?" questioned the little orderly.

"Yes. We're going to have to break this fever before it kills her. I want this cell like an oven." Patroclese explained and watched Cornelius set off about the task.

The healer reached for a cup and the water skin closest to him. He uncorked it, sniffed the contents, recognising the astringent smell of vinegar, and replaced the stopper, before getting the second skin and pouring a measure of water into the cup. He poured in some of the powder he had retrieved and shook the container to help dissolve it in the water.

"What's that?" asked Gabrielle suspiciously.

"It will help dull the pain for a while," he told her. "Get her to drink it all."

As Gabrielle climbed onto the bench and turned Xena so that she could coax the medicine into her, Patroclese turned to Cornelius and got him to bring one of the braziers close. As soon as he had it he began arranging several sharp bladed knives over the heat, "Has she drunk it all?" he questioned the bard, without looking at her, watching his instruments as the heat from the fire began to slowly turn the blades red.

"Yes," the blonde told him. "What are you going to do?"

"I've got to clear the source of the infection before it poisons her blood," he pointed to the red and purple skin that was forming around the wounds, "Unless we can clear out all of the infection, it will seep into her blood and be carried around her whole body. At that point there will be nothing we can do. As it is, we may be too late. That colouration is the beginning of the process. We can only hope that if we do a good job, her natural healing ability will pull her through."

He checked his knives and then snapped out, "Cornelius, come and help hold her down. Gabrielle, you're going to have to be strong here," he warned.

He took one of the hot blades from the brazier and delicately began to open up the infected wounds, carefully expressing each area, removing all evidence of the infection that he could find. The work was long and arduous and agonizing for the patient, even with the pain killing potion that Patroclese had provided. Gabrielle could feel Xena's torment as she writhed weakly beneath her hands. The fact that the bard had no difficulty in restraining the Warrior Princess, showed just how weakened Xena truly was. Gabrielle had no idea how long it took Patroclese to complete his task, but it seemed to take candlemarks that were filled with the stench of infection and burning flesh as the hot knives seared the wounds.

When at length he had finished, he took the skin containing the vinegar wash and liberally doused the raw wounds of Xena's back with the biting liquid that would serve to help kill any

infection remaining. Xena cried out in pain as the astringent bit into her, but did not regain consciousness.

With the first stage of the treatment completed, Gabrielle relaxed a little. As Patroclese checked through his kit, the bard noticed, really for the first time, the shackles that her friend bore. She looked at the healer and asked, "Are those really necessary?"

"First rule, Gabrielle," he told her, "under no circumstances is the Warrior Princess to be released from her restraints. She's far too dangerous to give her the slightest edge. No, she stays chained and we work around it."

Gabrielle knew that there was nothing that she could say or do to influence a change in that decision. Xena's reputation was what dictated such measures and Caesar would take no chances with her. She leant forward to pick up and discard the bloody and torn shift that still lay next to them on the bench. As her fingers grasped the material, she felt Xena's hand clench around her wrist, and she looked down to see her friend's blue eyes on her.

Gabrielle gave her friend a puzzled frown, but reading her friend's need she shielded her from unfriendly observation, while the warrior ran her shaking fingers over the scraps of material, until she found and retrieved the metal toothpick that she had paid so dearly to secure. She slipped the pick into the hem of the blanket that she was laying on, gave the bard a weak smile and lightly squeezed her hand, before her eyes shut once more. Gabrielle gathered up the tattered cloth and threw it onto the nearest brazier, before wiping sweat from her brow. It was beginning to get very warm within the cell and the guardroom.

She watched as Patroclese began to smear a pungent smelling salve over the open wounds. Then he picked out some rolls of bandages and told the bard and Cornelius, "We need to get her sitting up. She's got a lot of broken ribs that need to be strapped to support them and make it easier for her to breathe, and the strapping should help guard against a reoccurrence of infection in some of those whip cuts .. if we keep a regular check on them."

Carefully, with gentle slowness, Cornelius and Gabrielle managed to lift Xena into a sitting position on the bench. Then the pair gently lifted the warrior's arms so that Patroclese could get to work with the strapping, "Be careful of that left shoulder, he warned, "it's dislocated and likely very sore."

"Can't you put it back into place?" demanded Gabrielle.

"Not until her ribs have healed a bit," explained Patroclese patiently, "I'm going to need to lever it back into situation and those ribs need to mend before we try that," he smiled. Having finished wrapping the tight linen around Xena's ribs, he instructed, "Keep her upright while I do something for those sores around her wrists, where the chains bite."

He carefully bathed the wrists in the vinegar solution, where the chaffing manacles had open raw sores, before smearing the thick salve around them and binding them with fresh bandages. He then did the same for her ankles. Once finished, Patroclese and Cornelius arranged the thick,

stuffed cushions, that had been brought, on the bench before covering them with one of the new blankets.

Xena was laid carefully onto the cushions, "She needs to rest on her back to help those ribs," he explained, "but the cushions should help her protect her a little." He then took the other five blankets and wrapped them around the Warrior Princess tightly, before telling Cornelius, "Go and get a pot of good vegetable broth from the kitchen. No meat mind," he warned. The medical orderly left, and Patroclese mixed another cup of water with a powder from his kit, "Here get her to swallow this," he instructed the bard, "but slowly, just a sip at a time. It should help her to fight the fever, but shouldn't be taken too much in one go."

Gabrielle settled on the nest of cushions with Xena's head in her lap. She occasionally poured some of the concoction in the cup between her friends lips, and spent the rest of the time gently soothing her fevered brow. After a while, she became aware of those blue eyes looking up at her, "Hey. How y'doing?" she asked softly.

"Oh, fine, " came the weak reply with the ghost of a smile, "I thought I'd left you with the Amazons."

"Long story," Gabrielle told her neutrally, "I'll tell you about it when your stronger."

Xena nodded slightly and leaned into the bard's protective arms. Gabrielle brushed a stray wisp of hair away from her friends closed eyes. It felt odd to be in the position of protector .. that was normally Xena's role. But she intended to act out the part to the best of her ability.

Patroclese leaned over them and touched his hand to Xena's brow and then felt the pulse at her throat. He brought the braziers closer making the heat surrounding the pair almost unbearable. Catching Gabrielle's look the healer told her, "We must break that fever quickly. She's too weak for it to run it's normal course. We need to force the issue if we are to have any chance of saving her."

Cornelius returned with the vegetable broth which was placed by one of the braziers to keep warm, "When the fever breaks, and she wakes, she'll be hungry. She can have a little of the broth, but only in small amounts. She hasn't had any food for a week and her system won't be able to handle it."

The rest of the night was spent in a hellish nightmare of artificial heat designed to drive the fever from the delirious woman. Gabrielle stayed awake, making sure that Xena got as much fluid as Patroclese deemed necessary. The healer hovered protectively, checking on the fever's progress, while Cornelius curled up out of the way, but ready to respond to any order.

All three had worked their best to ensure that the warrior had her chance to fight for life, and all three were past tiredness and well into the realms of exhaustion. None of them slept other than for fitful dozes, passing the night , following day and the next night with slowly increasing concern as the fever continued to build within the restlessly stirring woman they watched over.

Just after cock crow on the second morning, Patroclese checked, yet again, on Xena and a slow, cautious smile split his lips, "I think the fever's broken," he announced.

"Thank the gods!" Gabrielle offered up a heartfelt prayer, the healer's words rousing her from an opened eyed stupor, and brushed her lips over Xena's hot, but cooler brow.

Chapter Sixteen: Promises, Promises!

Slowly, the irritating buzzing of noise that nudged at her brain, coaxed her back from the nightmare realms she had inhabited for what seemed forever. She had vague memories of movement, and people .. and Gabrielle, but they all seemed unreal; part of a dreamscape, perhaps, bent towards her destruction.

She allowed her eyes to flicker open and they lazily focused on a sleeping face. A beloved face. A face that, at one time, she believed she would never see again. Xena allowed a faint trace of tenderness creep into her eyes as she gazed up at the motionless bard. Gradually, she realized that she lay with her head in Gabrielle's lap, - *That's a change!* - she thought ironically.

As she lay still, so as not to disturb the bard, she became aware that she was being roasted alive by suffocating blankets. Trying to move gently, Xena attempted work her arms out from within the swaddling, only to find that her strength wasn't up to the effort, - *Gods!* - she swore to herself, - *A new born kitten has got more strength than I have!* -

Weak as Xena's struggles had been, they were enough to jolt the bard into wakefulness. She looked down at the Warrior Princess, concern written large in her expressive eyes as she studied her friend for any sign of the reoccurrence of fever, and found none. She smiled. It was an expression full of love and worry and it dazzled Xena with it's brilliance, "Hi there," said the bard.

"Hi, yourself," the warrior greeted weakly.

"Glad to have you back with us," Gabrielle told her, "You had me worried there, for a while."

There wasn't a lot that Xena could say to that, so she struggled again to free herself from the confinement of the sweltering blankets, "Can you get these off of me, Gabrielle?" she asked in frustration when she failed to achieve her aim, "It's like the inside of an oven in here." Her voice was a little hoarse but gaining in strength.

"Patroclese said that you were to remain wrapped up," the bard told her firmly. "He said a chill on top of that fever would probably kill you now. He still doesn't know how you managed to survive anyway."

"The healer's here?" questioned the Warrior Princess as she turned her head, and registered the bars of the cell for the first time. "Where is here, anyway? and how long have I been out of it?" she asked irritably. She hated the feeling of disorientation she was experiencing.

"We're in the Roman barracks in the city of Nemausus," Gabrielle told her, "and yes, Patroclese is here too. He's the reason I'm here, Xena. He's Caesar's man, and he lead us both into Caesar's trap. You've been here five days with a raging fever. The worst of it broke the second night, but it's taken until now for you to fight it off," she said carefully feeling her friends forehead pleased that her skin had cooled considerably.

The news didn't surprise the Warrior Princess. She regretted the healer's part in the affair, she had rather liked him. But all the parts now fell into place and made perfect sense to her, "Well, it's no good worrying about what's past. We've got to work on a plan to get out of here."

"Well, there's no point in worrying about that until we get you back on your feet. At the moment you can't even fight your way out of your blankets, let alone out of this cell and through all the guards," Gabrielle pointed out.

A look of determination flared in Xena's eyes as she focused her will and began to wriggle, trying to work her arms free, just to show Gabrielle that she was not going to be treated like a helpless invalid ... even if she was one!

"Quit that Xena," the bard told her firmly, or I'll call Cornelius in to help me snag you up in those blankets so tight you'll never get out." She watched anxiously as the Warrior Princess continued to struggle. "One of these days I'm going to learn to keep my mouth shut," she muttered, knowing that her friend found it impossible to resist a challenge. "Well not this time, Xena." she told her and drew a breath to call the little orderly who had left the cell to get some sleep in one of the bunks close by.

"Alright, alright, you win," growled Xena testily, more over the fact that she wasn't making much headway as for Gabrielle's threat.

"That's a first!" the bard told her with feeling. She looked at her friend and tried to warn her, "Xena, you've got to try and stop fighting the whole world. One of these days it's going to fall on you."

"Funny, from where I'm laying it feels like it already did." grumbled the irritated warrior.

A commotion amongst the guards, as the cell block door was opened, revealed the return of Patroclese who had left about a candlemark before Xena awoke to inform Caesar of the current medical situation. Xena turned her head to watch the confident young man stride across the outer chamber, escorted by Flaccus. The Centurion unlocked the cell door and swung it open to the normal accompanying screech of the hinges, before closing and locking it after the healer entered.

Patroclese moved directly to where Xena lay, and quickly felt her brow with a cool hand, "Warm, but that's only to be expected. The fever has finally broken. How are you feeling?"

"Hungry," admitted Xena, "and like a herd of centaurs just ran over me."

"That's to be expected too, considering what you've been through," he told her professionally.

Xena looked at him with a cold icy glare, "Tell me about it," she said chillingly. "It seems your responsible for all of this."

"No," he replied mildly and with self assurance, "I just followed my masters orders. All of the injuries you have suffered you brought on yourself. Weren't you offered the chance to surrender?"

She wasn't going to answer that! She also couldn't blame him, fairly, for his part in bringing about this situation. He was right. He was doing his master's bidding and had no real part in the intense animosity she felt for Caesar who bore the responsibility for all of this.

Patroclese moved to where the fresh batch of vegetable broth had been kept warm since being brought to the cell at first light. He ladled out a half a bowl full for Xena, and a larger amount which he gave to Gabrielle, "I'll feed her while you have something to eat," he told the bard. "You're not going to be able to nurse her if you collapse from lack of sleep and food."

"I slept!" objected the blonde indignantly.

"How much?" questioned the healer as he sat on the edge of the bench and carefully began to spoon some of the broth into the Warrior Princess.

"Some," admitted the bard reluctantly, "I wasn't tired," she told him defiantly as she tried, unsuccessfully, to stifle a betraying yawn.

"Uh huh," Patroclese said.

Both of the women ate their lunch and Xena thirstily drank down a measure of water that the healer allowed her, Patroclese decided that it was time to check on her wounds, "I don't like having to undo those strappings around the ribs, " he told her, but I've got to make sure that we got out all the infection from those whip cuts." With Gabrielle's help, the healer released Xena from her prison of blankets and helped her to sit up. Her breathing became a bit shallow and ragged as the pain from the ribs bit, and a bead of perspiration dripped from her forehead and down her nose.

Patroclese took a small pair of scissors and, carefully, cut through the bandages and gently peeled them off where they had stuck to the wound's bloody furrows. With Gabrielle supporting her friend from the front, Patroclese scrambled up onto the bench and began to gently probe the wounds to check them for any sign of festering and inflammation. Xena winced involuntarily as his fingers worked over a particularly tender spot.

"Looking better," he told them, quietly satisfied as he began to smooth salve over the wounds again. When he had finished, he wrapped fresh bandages tightly around her ribs once again.

Between them, they got Xena laying back comfortably on the cushions once more and, despite her voluble protests, snared her once again in the blankets, "She's never been a very good patient," Gabrielle said scoldingly. "She's great at making sure others follow **her** medical advice, but she hopeless when it comes to taking it herself."

"That I can see," agreed Patroclese. He gave Xena, who still struggled weakly to free herself, a thoughtful look, "I think I can fix it so that she lies still and gets some rest,' he told the bard as he prepared a cup of water mixed with another powder.

"Will you two stop talking about me as if I'm not here," growled the disgruntled and reluctant patient, "It's ... it's rude," she told them in annoyance. She looked suspiciously at the cup in the healer's hand, "What's that?"

"Just a sleeping draft. You need to rest without all the struggling." he told her.

Xena looked rebellious, "I've had enough sleep to last me a lifetime," she glowered.

"You have a choice here," Patroclese told her calmly, "Either you can drink this down of your own choice. Or I can call half a dozen guards in here with a funnel and force feed it to you."

Gabrielle took the cup from him and said, "C'mon Xena, You want to be up on your feet as quickly as possible, don't you?"

Giving both Patroclese and the bard a withering glare, Xena drank the potion down without further resistance. Within just a short while, she found her eyes drifting shut as a deep, dreamless sleep claimed her, and allowed her body the rest it needed to begin it's healing work.

Over the next few days, life for the two prisoners fell into a routine that involved eating, sleeping, checking on wounds and re-dressing them. Xena began to remain awake a little longer each day, and it was evident that her inner healing was diverting all of it's efforts to mend the wide collection of wounds and injuries that afflicted her. Also, although it was a slow process, bit by bit strength began to return to her weakened limbs.

Passing the time was spent in trading news of how they had been captured, remembering happier times and occasionally brooding darkly about the future. Gabrielle did her best to chivy Xena out of those moods, but the feel of the shackles and more especially, the slave collar, caused a bleakness to settle into her friend that was hard to dispel.

By the seventh day, after Patroclese had cleansed the infection from her back, he was pleased to announce that, not only had the flesh knitted together healthily, he fully expected there to be none of the scarring that normally remained after a flogging. Also, after gently probing the areas of the broken ribs he had found that they were setting satisfactorily. Her breathing had improved with the ribs' mending, and although they remained a little sore he made the decision to refrain from strapping them again.

"Do you feel up to me trying to put that dislocated shoulder back in place?" asked the healer as he packed up his equipment.

When Xena nodded her agreement, Patroclese called for Cornelius to join him. The little medical auxiliary had fussed around Xena over the past five days like a broody hen with just one chick. Gabrielle had had to cover the smile that sprang to her lips every time she heard the little man call her big intimidating friend, "Pretty," and had earned more than one icy look from Xena in the process.

With Xena sitting on one end of the bench, Cornelius sat on the other and took a firm grasp of the Warrior Princess's left arm, before raising a booted foot to brace under it. The manacles complicated things but they worked it out.

"Wait a moment," Patroclese ordered hopping up on the bench behind Xena's back. He worked an edge of blanket between Cornelius's boot and the woman's unprotected skin, "Now when I say go, pull strong and steady. The joint's been out for quite a while, so it probably won't go back easily. I'll manipulate it from above, you just keep the strain constant, understand?" he asked the little man.

"Yes sir," agreed Cornelius. He smiled at Xena, "You ready, pretty?"

The Warrior Princess glowered as Gabrielle covered a smirk with a cough, "Do it!" she told him firmly.

Cornelius leant back and pushed with his foot, seeking to draw the joint apart from where it lay, a bit like a rack would work. Patroclese probed with strong fingers looking to guide the joint back into its true socket. Finally, after an agonisingly long session, and with an audible "Pop!", the shoulder sprang back into its correct alignment.

"Ahhhh!" Xena yelled as the joint was reconnected. It had hurt worse than she had bargained for, and she knew the arm would be all but useless for a day or so as it recovered from its rough treatment.

The following day, with a blanket wrapped around her nakedness, Xena stood for the first time since being dragged unconscious into the cell. She leaned heavily on Gabrielle and the pair talked in low voices, trying to keep their conversation as private as possible. They knew it wouldn't be long, now, before Caesar removed the bard to a place he considered safe. She was his trump card. With Gabrielle safe within his power, Xena could be compelled to conform to his wishes, whatever they might prove to be.

Taking, cautious, deliberate steps, Gabrielle supported the Warrior Princess as she shuffled around the entire twelve foot square area of the cell. Xena's legs were weak and unco-operative, from their long period of inactivity. She felt unsteady and light headed after her illness, but it could no longer be doubted that she was mending fast.

"Well, at least we've got you back on your feet," encouraged Gabrielle.

"Uh huh," agreed the dark haired woman as she gritted her teeth and concentrated on staying upright.

"Any chance that you might be able to summon up that power from Chin and blast a way out of here for us?" the bard asked more in jest than expectation, knowing that her friend had never been able to recreate the incredible feat.

Xena shook her head, and explained, "I think I have to be empty of all emotion. Just now I'm filled with a raging hatred and a desire for revenge." she looked at the bard, "I know you think that revenge isn't the answer, and that we need to find forgiveness in our hearts, but I don't think I can, Gabrielle. Not for him. Not for all he's done," she said bitterly.

"I understand," the blonde told her, "and I can't blame you for that. I know how hard it is for you. But for your sake I wish you could set it aside." She was rewarded with a blank stare and knew that now was not the right time to be preaching forgiveness to her friend.

They took a few more heavy steps as the bard gathered her thoughts to ask the question that had been bothering her since she first saw the Warrior Princess here, "Xena?" she asked hesitantly, and looked full into the blue eyes of her friend as she turned her head towards the bard, "Were you trying to die?" There was an almost indefinable look of hurt lurking in the shadows of the blonde's eyes, that her friend identified immediately.

They had reached the starting point of their walk and the warrior sank gratefully back onto the bench before answering her friend's question, "I don't think so," she answered slowly, unsure in her own mind whether she had been or not.

"You don't think so?" pressed the bard who needed more of an answer than that.

Xena put her hand on the bard's shoulder and looked at her full in the eyes to show that she wasn't trying to hide anything, "I think I had in mind that Caesar wants me for something. I didn't think he'd let me die until he had achieved what he wanted from me. I suppose if I'd have been willing to beg him for treatment, food and water, he would have been delighted to give it. But I'll ask nothing of him, Gabrielle, not now. Not ever." she said that with a voice like granite, "So, I suppose the whole thing became a test of will and nerves," she said with a rueful grin and finished with, "I won this time ... I think!"

"Xena, what if he'd decided that he didn't want you after all?" asked Gabrielle in concern.

"Patroclese wasn't certain that he'd be able to save you, even at the time he began treating you. If it had been another day" her voice trailed off.

The Warrior Princess looked at the bard with a hint of compassion in those, oh so blue, eyes, before saying almost too softly for Gabrielle to hear, "I think Caesar miscalculated, but it might have been for the best."

The bard rounded on her, green eyes blazing with anger and more than a touch of fear, "Don't you say that!" she growled with a terrifying intensity, "Don't you ever say that!" She punched Xena's right shoulder to emphasise her point. "Too many people rely on you ... need you," Gabrielle swallowed hard to stop the tears from flowing, "I need you," she told her, " and you promised me!"

The chains clanked as Xena rubbed her arm where the bard had hit her. It hadn't really hurt, but the atmosphere had suddenly become way too tense and the Warrior Princess felt an instinctive need to back off and lighten the atmosphere that surrounded them, "Go on," she said with a small grin, "hit a woman when she can't defend herself." She watched as the anger slowly washed from Gabrielle's eyes although more than a tinge of concern remained in evidence.

"Xena, we will get out of this, somehow," the bard promised.

"Of course," agreed Xena with a false heartiness that didn't fool the bard at all.

"You know, we may get some help," Gabrielle told her seriously.

"Sure," agreed the Warrior Princess moodily, "Ares will show up any time now and promise to free us if I agree to return to him and lead his army."

"No I'm being serious," the bard told her in a barely audible voice. "I had a vision ... kind of ... before I left the Amazons, and it scared me so much that I sent off three letters before heading out to try and catch you."

Xena looked at her with curiosity. She knew her bard friend had occasional flashes of the future, so she was not about to make light of what she said, "Who to? and what for?" she asked.

Gabrielle got a distant look in her eyes, "I had this feeling, a premonition, a vision, something," she tried to describe. "Whatever it was I felt that something was going to go very wrong, so I sent out those letters. One to Toris," she ignored the vexed look from Xena, "another to Iolaus and the last one to Autolycus."

"There's no great chance that they'll come," Xena said seriously, and tried to hide a faint grin as she said, "Autolycus?" in partial disbelief.

Gabrielle grinned and shrugged spreading her hands, "I know it's a long shot, but"

"Autolycus?" grinned Xena again. Gabrielle just shrugged and both broke into grudging laughter at the thought of the thief coming to their rescue.

When Patroclese turned up the next morning to check on his patient, it was clear that he was pleased with the progress that Xena was showing. He got her to raise her arms above her head, which she was able to do for the first time without help, and his probing fingers soon ascertained that the ribs were once more whole and strong. He shook his head in disbelief, "Eleven days ago

you were on your way to Charon's boat," he told her. I've never seen anyone who could heal as quickly as you do."

"I've lead a tough life," Xena told him flatly, "and I've learned a few things along the way," she said thinking back to Lao Ma and all that she had been taught and shown by that incredible woman. "Now you've finished prodding and poking me, don't you think it's time that I got some clothes?" she demanded, "A blanket is all very well, but it's hardly the height of fashion, even in a place like this." She gave a very definite glare at the six sentinels that stood, as ever, watching her every move.

Patroclese let a faint smile ghost across his lips as he pulled a pair of cloth trousers and a creamy wool shirt from a bag he'd been carrying, "These should fit you well enough, and you'll find them more functional than one of those shifts you wear."

"My leathers would be better," she told him flatly.

"Not a chance," he grinned.

Xena bared her teeth at him in what could be taken as a smile, but any humour in it failed to reach her cold eyes. She was still not fully certain of her attitude towards Patroclese. He had a manner she liked, and there was something in him that she appreciated, perhaps a form of integrity. The god's knew he had betrayed her and Gabrielle to Caesar, but as he was already Caesar's man, could it really count as betrayal? The Warrior Princess reserved her opinion of him.

"Might be a touch difficult getting the clothes on over these," she told him as she rattled her chains at him.

"Yes," agreed the healer with a perfectly straight face, "that problem had not escaped my attention." He looked at Xena as if assessing his options. "There is a standing order that you are never to be released from those shackles without direct authority from my Lord Caesar." He made eye contact with her penetrating, clear, blue, gaze that could cause such fear when she chose. "If you give me your word not to attempt some futile escape, or resist being re-shackled, I have the authority to release you while you dress."

Xena's eyes flicked over Patroclese to the six guards alert around the cell, to the rest of the forty garrisoned within the guardroom. Added that she was barely strong enough to stand on her own, so even if she could batter down a locked cell door she doubted very much, with the best will in the world, that she'd be able to fight her way clear of the guards before the noise brought a hundred more men running! "Agreed," she told him, "You have my word."

Patroclese produced a key and unlocked the left wrist cuff of her manacles, allowing Xena to pull the shirt over her head and work her arms in, with Gabrielle guiding the chain and cuff through the sleeve. Once it was on, Xena fixed the healer with a cold stare and held up her wrists for Patroclese to snap the chain back into place. The same process was followed with the leg irons with a minimum of fuss.

"What about some boots," asked Xena, wriggling the toes of her bare feet.

"Sorry, that's all you get," shrugged the healer. "I'll be back this afternoon, just to check that you haven't taken too much out of yourself with the walking this morning."

As Patroclese left, Gabrielle admired Xena's new 'look', "Different," she said, and after another considering inspection, "Suits you."

"Yeah, well," drawled Xena unconvinced, "its better than nothing, as I well know, and it's a lot warmer too." She wriggled her toes again, "Pity about the boots, though."

"Oh yeah," grinned the bard, "they know how hard you can kick with boots on." She sat down close to the Warrior princess and said in a whisper, "Xena, if you've got any ideas of how to get us out of here, I think we'd better discuss them soon," an urgent note registered in her tone, "I don't think they're going to let me stay with you much longer."

The tall, dark haired warrior rubbed her friends arm in a reassuring gesture, ignoring the clank of the chains as a minor irritation, "I think they'll move you this afternoon when Patroclese comes back," she agreed. "I'm back on my feet now and healing fast. they'll want you safe so that they can use you to hold me. Caesar won't want to take the chance that I'll get loose and break you free at the same time. In fact I'm surprised that they've let you stay so long." She tensed her muscles, testing her strength against the metal of the chains, "Perhaps Patroclese thinks I'm still too weak to put up a fight."

"Xena, you're barely able to stand up on your own. I think Patroclese might be right." She saw the dangerous glint in the Warrior Princess's eyes that said she'd rise to the challenge, "Don't even think about it, Xena," the bard warned. "You've only just started to mend. I want you to promise me that you'll wait until you're fit enough to stand a chance of success."

Xena had that stubborn look that the bard knew only too well, "Gabrielle, if there's any chance" she began.

"That's just the point," the bard broke in quickly, "there isn't any chance. So I want you to promise me that you'll wait," she insisted.

"Gabrielle"

"No, Xena. I want that promise," repeated the bard.

A look of angry frustration flickered across the Warrior Princess's features. She knew that she had to make the promise or Gabrielle would nag at her for the rest of the time they had together and she didn't want that, "I promise," she said reluctantly.

The bard smiled in relief, "I don't know what's going to happen to us, Xena. But let's try and make sure we survive if we can. You can't make Caesar pay if you get yourself killed you know," she said shrewdly hitting Xena's weak spot.

"I know," agreed the warrior, "Believe me I know."

Chapter Seventeen: A Meeting of Minds

Toris sat at the rough table outside of a Narbo, dockside, tavern. The smell of the harbour was depressingly pungent, but his mind was far away from such mundane irritations. He re-read the letter for about the tenth time since he'd sat down and uttered a few choice, though low voiced, curses. A passing sailor looked impressed and tucked a particularly virulent phrase away for when he had the chance to use it himself.

He'd been in Narbo for three days, and his discrete enquiries had gleaned for him the information that someone answering his sister's description had got off a ship about nineteen days previously ... maybe! - *This is so frustrating!* - his mind raged! From there he had a possible sighting near the warehouse quarter, but very tentative enquiries at Isumbras' establishment had been met with stoney silences and less than vague threats about what would happen to him if he didn't remove himself post-haste!

The dark haired man glared into his cup of wine, as he shoved the letter back inside his tunic, and tried to work out what he should do next. Things were a lot more complicated than he had expected. Not only couldn't he find much trace of Xena, but there was also no word of Gabrielle ever having been in Narbo. On top of that, he'd also heard rumours that there were other men asking the same, or similar, questions to the ones he sought answers for.

He took a long swallow of the wine and muttered to himself, "Okay," as he tried to concentrate his thoughts, "Xena and Gabrielle have disappeared and there's barely a trace of them to be found." He brooded on that for a moment, but unless he could get some information out of Isumbras he didn't think he was going to be able to get much of a lead to their whereabouts.

- *So what does that leave me with? They're in trouble.* - he thought yet again, - *But how can I help them if I can't find them?* - He banged his fist on the table in anger at the seemingly impossible task he's been set.

A shadow fell across him and Toris looked up to see two very oddly matched men before him. One was fair, short and muscularly compact. The other was a joke! He looked like a walking ironmonger's shop and had a face like a tame ape. It was the blonde who spoke for them, "Can we sit down?"

Toris wasn't really in the mood for company, but the tavern was full and the only seating free outside was at his table. He nodded and tried to ignore them as he sought to concentrate on his problem.

A harassed serving maid, found her way to the table and asked, "What's your pleasure gentlemen?"

The blonde grinned and answered gallantly, "A pretty girl like you shouldn't go asking questions like that of strangers," he smiled.

The serving girl laughed giddily and offered, "Oh sir, you know I was enquiring about what you fancied."

His grin broadened into a smile as he replied, "There you go again, well if I was to answer truthfully, would it shock you?"

She blushed prettily before giggling, "Oh sir, you are awful .. you know I was talking about what drink you would like."

"I admit I did, sweetheart," laughed the blonde man, "but as it brought a smile to your eyes it was worth the time to say it. Bring us some wine please," he said handing over a few coins.

The metal, next to him, rattled as if with embarrassment, "Do you have to do that with every girl we meet?" he questioned.

"What?" asked the blonde with a grin.

"You know," said the second man, true embarrassment now evident, "flirt with them."

"Of course," answered the blonde. "A kind word and a friendly smile can take you a long way."

"Yeah," agreed the tin can, "like right to the end of a jealous boyfriend's sword!"

"That was all just a misunderstanding," the blonde told him, "we straightened it all out."

"Oh yeah. Finally. After you agreed to pay damages," agreed his companion, "Just be careful what you do here," he warned. "We're trying not to attract unwanted attention .. remember?"

The serving maid returned with the mugs of wine and smiled prettily at the blonde, who seemed inclined to respond to her before his friend dug him in the ribs with a sharp elbow, "Remember why we're here," he muttered darting a glance at the dark haired man they shared the table with.

"Right," agreed the blonde.

Toris had done his best to ignore the by-play between the pair, but their bickering irritated him. He was trying to concentrate his mind on his problem, so he wasn't in the best frame of mind when the blonde fixed him with a hard stare and said firmly, "I hear you've been asking around town about some friends of ours."

Toris pointedly ignored him. He wasn't sure if it was safe for him to say anything to them having no idea who they were. They could be some of Xena's enemies trying to find out who he was and just what he knew. - *Which is*, - he thought disconsolately to himself, - *a big fat zero!* - he looked at them blankly waiting for them to continue.

The tin can obliged. "Hey, look pal! Our friends have gone missing an' if your involved I'm gonna take you apart piece by piece." He reiterated his words with a pointing finger that he

hastily shoved under the table when Toris turned his cold blue eyes upon him. - *Wow*, - came the suddenly worried thought, - *he looks just like* - he allowed the thought to trail off as he cocked his head to look quizzically at the raven haired man.

"Shut up, Joxer!" ordered the shorter man, all evidence of the happy go lucky Romeo now disappeared. He turned his serious gaze back on Toris, "Look. We know you've been asking questions about two friends of ours. All we want to do is pool some information. You know, maybe work together to find them if you're a friend too."

Toris looked at them uneasily. He was almost certain that the fool, - *Joxer? Have I heard that name before?* - was too big a joke to have had anything to do with Xena's disappearance. He doubted that the man would be able to harm a fly, let alone his ominously dangerous sister. But the blonde man looked as if he was more than able to hold his end up in a tight situation. Anyway, he hadn't been able to get anywhere on his own, it might be worth the risk. - *I'll decide that when I know who they are .. and what they have to do with Xena.* - he told himself before asking, "Just who exactly are you?"

"My name's Iolaus," offered the blonde holding out his hand, "I'm"

"He's Hercules' best friend, is who he is," contributed Joxer enthusiastically, "and I'm Joxer the Mighty, close friend and companion of Xena, the Warrior Princess and her bard, Gabrielle!"

"For Zeus' sake, Joxer," hissed Iolaus obviously angry, "do you think you could have spoken any louder? I don't think they heard you up at the garrison!"

"Ya think so?" asked his companion ingenuously, then realized that he was supposed to keep his connection to their friends quiet, "Oh, right." he said obviously abashed.

Iolaus turned back to the other man at the table and offered his hand again, "I didn't catch your name, friend," he invited.

Toris looked at them levelly. He'd heard of Iolaus of Corinth, knew some of the stories that linked him to Xena, but he didn't know anything about this clown, Joxer. However, if a man like Iolaus travelled with, and trusted him, he felt he should be able to ... to a degree. He held out his own hand and clasped the blonde arm to arm saying, "My name's Toris ... I'm," he hesitated a moment, licked his lips, before committing himself, "I'm Xena's brother."

Iolaus smiled but his muscles tensed as he said, still in a friendly enough tone, "Wait a minute. Xena told me her brother's name was Lyceus and that he died fighting a warlord by the name of Krykus,"

"Wrong. The warlord was Cortese and Lyceus was our younger brother," Toris told him angrily. He'd gotten over all the guilt and suffering of the past, but it still made him angry at times.

"Just testing," admitted Iolaus, "I needed to be sure. Xena's never really said a lot about you."

"Yeah. Well Xena and I hadn't seen each other for about eleven years, until our paths crossed when we both hunted down Cortese for what he had done." explained Toris flatly.

"Right," said Joxer, nodding his head suspiciously, "Gabby told me that story. Something about metal masks and you being on this warlord's payroll."

Toris got angrily to his feet and made a grab for Joxer, who toppled off the bench in his hurry to avoid Xena's brother. Toris looked at him coldly, his eyes almost the image of Xena's, but without the deep intensity that she transmitted. In a low, deadly voice he growled, "I was with Cortese's band so that I could get close enough to kill him for what he did to my brother, my village and my little sister."

Joxer gulped and swallowed quickly before saying hurriedly, "Gabby said that too," he agreed.

"Hey!" said Iolaus, trying to calm things down, "We're on the same side, here."

"That's right," nodded Joxer as he picked himself up and returned to his seat a little warily, "What brings you here anyway?" he said and then added with a cheesy worried smile, when he saw the storm clouds in Toris' eyes, "If you don't mind me asking."

Toris fingered the parchment under his tunic and answered slowly, "The girl .. Gabrielle .. sent me a letter. She said she thought Xena could be in big trouble and asked me to get to here as quickly as I could. She also said a man called Isumbras would probably know what had happened to her, but not to trust him."

"I got the same message," agreed Iolaus, "though she also said that I should try to find a healer by the name of Patroclese if I couldn't find her or Xena. She said she thought he might be able to help us."

"How come I never got a letter?" complained Joxer. "You'd have thought Gabby would have sent me a letter too. Perhaps she knew I'd be with you," he said to Iolaus, "Or maybe I was right and it got lost in the post. Gabrielle would never have left me out of something as dangerous and important as this." he muttered on to himself, ignored by the other two men.

"You must be telling the truth," said Toris at length. "She put that in my letter too." He sat back down and took a sip of his neglected wine. "What have you managed to find out?" he asked.

"Practically nothing," admitted the smaller man with a shrug of his shoulders. He swallowed some of his own drink before adding, "We think we know when Xena landed, and Joxer found a beggar who directed someone, who answered Xena's description, to Isumbras' warehouse. After that," he shrugged again, "nothing."

"We've tried to get in to see this Isumbras, but his men won't talk to us and in any case he seems to have disappeared," Joxer added before saying in a worried tone, "And we've found no trace of Gabrielle, or this Patroclese, anywhere."

"Have you found anything more helpful?" questioned Iolaus.

Toris looked despondent. They hadn't got any further than he had. He'd hoped that they'd managed to turn up something he'd missed, "No," he began in answer to the blonde's question when he was interrupted.

"But I have," said a voice that both Joxer and Iolaus recognised immediately.

"Autolycus!" groaned Iolaus, "What are you doing here?"

"And it's good to see you too, Shorty." greeted the suave thief, "How's the big guy? Is he here. No of course not or I'd have seen him by now," and went on before his somewhat rhetorical question could be answered, "So you're Xena's brother," he said to Toris, "I was wondering about you, but you look enough alike that I should have guessed."

Toris looked completely out of his depth as he surveyed the man before him. He was tall, slim, well built with dark, handsome good looks that boasted a moustache , a thin slither of a goatee beard and a devil may care attitude that irritated everyone around him.

"Hi, Autolycus," greeted Joxer, who had been ignored by the newcomer thus far.

"Who brought him," asked Autolycus in a disparaging way.

"No one brought me," said the tin plated man belligerently, "I brought myself."

"Oh well, I suppose he can't get into too much trouble, can he?" asked the stranger noting the uncomfortable looks the others were trying to hide. "Just who are you?" demanded Toris, his hand resting threateningly on the sword hilt at his belt.

"My! You are like your sister, aren't you?" smiled the infuriating man. "Very well, may I introduce myself?" he didn't wait for an answer, "I, am Autolycus, the King of Thieves," he told Toris as he smoothed his moustache with an aristocratic flourish of his right index finger.

"But what are you doing here?" demanded Iolaus impatiently. His relationship with the thief tended to be a little strained at best.

"Well," drawled the King of Thieves, "Firstly I was having a little trouble in Tressia."

"You took something that didn't belong to you," interpreted the smaller man.

"An exquisite jewelled dagger belonging to the King actually," Autolycus told him with a boastful swagger, "It was a masterly operation spoiled by one fatal flaw."

"You got caught," interpreted Iolaus again.

"Naturally, I needed to be somewhere less ... dangerous to my immediate personal well being," he told his audience.

"What were they gonna do to ya?" asked Joxer with a grin.

"Publicly disembowel me, was the announcement I heard," confessed the thief with a jaunty smile. "So when an Amazon delivered my invitation to this little party, how could I possibly say no!"

"What else made you come?" asked Iolaus suspiciously, feeling that however much the thief 'liked' Xena, he'd need a large inducement to make him risk his own safety for someone else.

"Well, on the way here, I started hearing these incredible rumours about some fabulous treasure that Caesar is supposed to have." Autolycus told him candidly.

"Treasure!" sneered the blonde, "I might have known you'd be more interested in something to steal than in helping us find the girls."

"On the contrary," replied the thief blandly as he tried some of Iolaus's wine, "Mmm. Not bad. Quite a nice fruity tang to it."

"Autolycus," growled the blonde, half rising.

"Alright, alright, I'm getting there Curly," the thief swayed out of the way of Iolaus's attempted grab, "I'll admit, with my varied interests in life, I did take the opportunity to investigate the treasure."

"I knew it!" declared Iolaus in disgust.

"Hey! What'd you expect?" put in Joxer, "The guy is a thief after all."

"King of Thieves," corrected Autolycus.

"Look!" interrupted Toris, beginning to lose his temper, "What's any of this got to do with my sister?"

"Just this," said the thief smugly leaning towards the others conspiratorially, "Did any of you jackasses realise that Xena disappeared right about the same time that the rumours of this fabulous treasure started to emerge?"

Iolaus looked at him, making the connection suggested by the thief's words, "So?" he encouraged him to elaborate.

"So, this 'treasure' left Narbo before first light on the morning after Xena disappeared. Caesar himself was with it and there was an elite guard of close to two hundred men, detailed to watch over a covered wagon, attached to the entire VIIth Legion that went with them. That wagon," he

said disparagingly, "for those of you having trouble following this, contained the 'treasure'." He buffed his fingernails on his coat, "That's got to be more than a coincidence, don't you think?" he asked no one in particular.

The others sat in silence digesting the possibilities that this new information offered until Joxer queried, "What about Gabrielle?"

"Now of her," admitted Autolycus, "I could find no trace. But that treasure travelled to Nemausus. I'd bet my favourite lockpick that if we find Xena there, Gabrielle won't be far away."

"Is there any way of getting some verification on all of this?" asked Toris, wondering how far he could really trust his newly discovered companions.

Autolycus looked at him straight in the face and told him, "Short of finding Isumbras and getting the story out of him, then I'd say the only way we're going to find anything out, for sure, is by going to Nemausus."

"How long would it take to get there?" asked Toris, overcoming his doubts and eager to trace any clue that might solve the mystery disappearance of his sister and her friend.

"On horseback, pushing hard? I'd say we could probably do it in two days," ventured the thief.

"We?" questioned Iolaus, incredulously.

"Why sure," asserted the thief, "How else am I going to find out whether it really is a treasure or not?" then he added almost too quietly to be heard, "Besides, I like those two." He noticed the rather wry looks he was getting from Iolaus and Joxer and decided that a change of subject was definitely in order. "Where is Hercules by the way? We could probably use his help."

Iolaus finally recovered his cup of wine from the thief as he rose from the table with the others and answered, "If he'd known about this he'd have been here. But he's off tracking down some hydra that torched a village down in the south." He raised the cup to his lips and cursed when he found it empty, "Autolycus, you thief, you owe me a cup of wine."

The others chuckled as they headed down the street and made plans for their projected journey to Nemausus, while Iolaus and Autolycus wrangled intermittently. All four knew that if Xena and Gabrielle were truly captive of Caesar, they would have a difficult time in effecting a rescue.

Chapter Eighteen: Separate Rooms

Patroclese returned late in the afternoon, and this time .. as she'd half expected .. he didn't come alone. Xena watched with narrowed eyes as the healer made his way purposefully across the length of the guard room. Her eyes were not on Patroclese, however, but on the man who strode with a stateliness that spoke of power and omnipotence.

There was a bustle amongst the guard unit as they manoeuvred some heavy object into the guardroom behind the screen of soldiers that trailed at Caesar's heels. Whatever they were doing

would become obvious in time. For now, both women's attentions were rivetted upon the Roman Emperor.

As usual, Patroclese entered the cell, leaving Caesar outside flanked by guards .. the door remained open, a noticeably unusual occurrence! Xena sat rigidly on the stone bench with Gabrielle beside her. Outward appearances suggested that the Warrior Princess was calm and relaxed, but there was a tenseness to the line of her jaw, and her eyes remained fixed, beyond Patroclese, on her enemy.

Gabrielle had become instantly aware of Xena's rigidity and the reason for it. Caesar acted as an unfailing goad on the Warrior Princess whenever he appeared. The bard touched her friend's arm lightly and gave it a gentle squeeze of reassurance, and as a reminder of her promise.

Patroclese noticed the looks and the touch, and tried to give an encouraging smile of his own. He liked these women. He had tried not to, but there was something about them. Gabrielle had a purity, and for all the death and destruction she had witnessed, an innocence that burned bright. - *And Xena? Well, the woman was terrifying*, - he was willing to admit, but she also had an honourable integrity that he hadn't expected. The stories about her varied so wildly from a cold, merciless, evil killer to a woman who fought for the innocent against malignant warlords that preyed upon them, that it was almost impossible to find the real woman in them. "Let's have a final look at your back, Xena," he ordered.

It was almost a physical struggle for the Warrior Princess to break eye contact with Caesar. But she complied with the healer and stood carefully, turned her back on him and raised the shirt back with difficulty, hampered as she was by the manacles, and waited while Patroclese traced the fading outlines of the scars. The wounds had healed quickly and well, as the healer already knew. Faint white lines crisscrossed her skin, and the physician was certain, within time, these would also disappear. Patroclese stepped softly to one side to allow Caesar a clear view of Xena's back.

The Roman pursed his lips thoughtfully. He'd been kept fully informed, by Patroclese, of the seriousness and extent of the damage done to his 'prize'. He was well aware that many men had died from far less serious injuries than she had accumulated. Recovery, from any of the wounds that the Warrior Princess had sustained, was usually a prolonged affair. In fact the two hapless guards who had taken a flogging that same evening, still had livid wounds and had been excused from duty.

Yet, here was Xena, once more on her feet. She had been close to death. And now? Well, all of her injuries were healed. The visible indications were fading into nothingness and she showed every sign of regaining her full phenomenal strength within a few days. It was uncanny!

Patroclese was no less impressed, at a nod from Caesar, he moved back behind Xena and once more probed her ribs. All signs of the bruising had long since gone and the bones felt strong and healthy beneath his knowledgeable hands. If he hadn't known that the breaks had been there he would never have been able to identify where the damage had been located, "All healed up nicely," he commented.

Allowing the shirt to drop back in place, Xena turned around to find that Caesar had entered the cell with four of his soldiers, each armed with the heavy batons that they used to quell riots, and to discipline unruly prisoners. The sudden close proximity of her enemy triggered her instinctive reflexes as she dropped to a fighting stance, ready to launch an assault.

Gabrielle stood quickly and grabbed her friend's arm, "Xena," she cautioned in a low tone, concern evident in her voice.

The bard's warning was enough to restrain her warrior impulses; even as the guards snapped their batons forward in readiness for use against their highly dangerous prisoner, the Warrior Princess modified her stance which melted into casual relaxation that belied the readiness for violence just moments earlier. Her eyebrow rose in a half mocking challenge as she stared insolently at Caesar.

"Very good, Xena," the Roman complimented her, his voice full of smug sarcasm as he added, "Perhaps you can be taught obedience." He smiled mirthlessly as he saw her fists clench, her knuckles turning white with the strain required to control her anger.

As Xena looked into her tormentor's eyes, she silently berated herself for allowing his taunts to antagonize her. No one else was capable of doing that. Only him! It sometimes seemed that all he had to do was enter the same room and her hackles rose, causing her to react without thinking and often regretting it. That she seemed to have an almost identical effect on him was no real compensation. She gave him a cool look and said frigidly, 'Have your fun while you can, Caesar," she warned him, "You won't hold us for too long. I seem to remember two other occasions"

Caesar interrupted her, full of his brash arrogance, "Ah, but this time is different, Xena. I know everything there is to know about you now," he told her full of self-satisfaction, "and there will be no opportunity for you to escape. The guards know they face death if that happens."

"You're a butcher," she retorted her tone larded with the contempt she felt for him.

"The men are rewarded well for their vigilance," he told her. "It's only fitting that the penalty for failure should be commensurate. And, because I reward them well, any of my men would march with me against the gates of Dis if I asked it of them."

"Did Crassus agree to follow you, or should I say, precede you to Hades .. sorry, Dis?" Xena stabbed at a very tender spot, and had the satisfaction of drawing a glare before she added, "I wonder if his shade respects your decision to execute him." She smiled knowingly as she saw her barb strike home. Anger flared in the brown eyes before he crushed the emotion ruthlessly.

Caesar fumed inside as he contemplated the only person who could manipulate his inner feelings as easily as he normally manipulated others. - *I have to avoid responding to her jibes!* - he scolded himself. - *She's my property. And she will submit to my will! One way or another.* -

He brought his hands out from behind his back where they had been hidden by the folds of the scarlet cloak he was wearing. He held up the thin, metal slave collar that he'd shown Xena in the first night's camp on the road to Nemausus. He watched as Xena began to raise her right hand towards the one that rested around her own neck, before forcing it to stillness once more. He noted that the icy fire in her eyes sparked with rancour and frustration.

Gabrielle had remained silent throughout the exchange between the two old enemies. She recognised the explosive chemistry between them. She was well aware that, once, Xena had been totally infatuated by the Roman, but it had turned to a violent, deadly hatred that had set her friend's feet on the path of a dark destiny that she now struggled to leave behind.

- Caesar has so much to answer for! He used Xena towards his own ends and he continues to do so when he can! And yet, - thought the bard as she watched them spar with each other, - their hatred of each other is so passionate it's almost love! - She looked from one to the other and changed her mind, - Not love, but lust! -

The bard shook her head, trying to throw off the concern that she felt for her dark haired friend. She knew that Xena was seething inside, consumed by her lust to kill Caesar, even if it cost her own life! Caesar's lust was far more complex. He needed to dominate. The Warrior Princess was probably the only person he had ever encountered whom he could not bend fully to his will.

Gabrielle knew that she bore an awesome responsibility here. She was the only thing holding Xena back, even in her current weakened condition, from finalizing the account with Caesar. While the Roman held the bard, the Warrior Princess could be constrained to accept whatever punishment, insults or demands he cared to inflict upon her.

So far, Xena had managed to control her ferocious impulses remarkably well, but Gabrielle had seen the fire leap in her friend's eyes as her hand had started to reach for the slave collar at her throat. She knew that the twin collar, in Caesar's hand, had caused that reaction, and she watched as the Roman passed it to the guard on his left, who then moved forward purposefully towards the bard. Xena reacted automatically, stepping in front of her friend, drawing the younger woman protectively behind her.

Gabrielle glanced anxiously at the soldiers, outside the cell, who stood prepared with nets and batons in abundance. This was obviously going to be a test of Xena's tractability. "It's not the time for this, Xena!" she hissed a warning to her friend as she moved past her and confronted the guard carrying the collar. "If that thing's for me, you better put it on."

A quick look at Caesar to gain his nod of approval, and the soldier took a firm grasp on Gabrielle's arm and led her from the confines of the cell, to where a brazier, a small anvil and a hot rivet awaited use. Xena saw the bard pushed to her knees beside the anvil and the collar placed around her neck.

As she was bent forward so that the protruding tangs could be beaten closed by the fastening of the rivet, Xena moved a pace forward, only to be caught in the strong grip of two of Caesar's men.

Her strength, she found, was not sufficient to throw them off. She favoured Caesar with a glare, "You don't need to do that, Caesar!" she snarled.

He smiled. The smile of a teacher instructing a particularly slow pupil, "Ah, but Xena," he began, as a hammer pounded the rivet flat, "as I told you before. Those collars are unique. They are impossible to remove, so should either of you slip through my hands, you will easily be identified for what you are .. runaway slaves! .. and returned to me as soon as you are re-taken. And believe me Xena, you would be re-taken!"

He watched her like an eagle would study the rabbit it was about to take for its dinner. Gabrielle was brought close to the cell, between two guards, and the Roman could see a flicker of concern in his prey's eyes as the bard tried to keep the hot metal away from her skin.

"You know," he told them both, "those collars are worth a king's ransom. You should feel flattered about how highly I prize you both."

"Great!" said the bard with feeling, "Just what a girl needs. A slave collar that's worth more than she is."

Caesar smiled unpleasantly at her, before turning an amused glance at Xena, "Now did I say that?" he asked, his voice almost purring with pleasure. "Have I given you the wrong impression?" He cocked an eyebrow waiting for some form of reply. When it wasn't forthcoming, he continued, "Believe me, you are both worth far, far more than those bounties I put on you. The collars are merely a compliment to how much I do value you."

He nodded to the pair of guards who held Xena. They forced her back towards the stone bench, where the third of the soldiers, who remained in the cell, became busy trailing a long thick chain through the bars, up through a thick ringbolt in the stone ceiling, and down to where he waited further instruction. Xena strained against the men who held her firmly, while Caesar looked over at his physician, "Your medical opinion, Patroclese?" he asked curtly.

The healer had remained unobtrusive and silent throughout the contest of wills between his master and the Warrior Princess. However, when his professional opinion was sought, he answered promptly and to the point, "She'll be back to her full strength in no more than three days, my Lord."

"As I expected," Caesar said with satisfaction. He motioned for the soldier to continue his task.

A heavy padlock was produced and the chain fastened to Xena's manacles, "You'll have the freedom of your cell," Caesar explained to her, "but that chain will give the guards a measure of further control, should you chance to become fractious. It can easily be hauled in from outside of the cell to restrain you." he pointed out unnecessarily. Xena had recognised the chain's function immediately. Digging deep into her re-establishing reserves of strength, she finally shook off the soldiers holding her. But in spite of her urge to rip out Caesar's throat, she remained standing where she was.

Caesar's lips twisted into a sardonic smirk, "Gabrielle will go to the accommodation I've had prepared for her." He saw and recognised the distrust in Xena's eyes, "Don't worry, you'll see her each day. She'll be brought here so that you can see she's unharmed. I won't let anything happen to my key."

"Key to what," asked Xena idly as she gently tested the resistance of the new chain.

"You of course, Xena!" Caesar gestured expansively, "While I've got your irritating little friend tucked up somewhere safe, I've got the way to control you, my sweet," he told her chillingly. "Everything fits into my plans perfectly."

Xena's penetrating stare intensified as she asked coldly, "And those plans would be?"

He smiled at her patronisingly, "All in good time, Xena."

- *He is frustratingly insufferable when he becomes smug!* - she reminded herself.

"I'll let you know what I want you to know, when I want you to know it," he told her.

Xena made eye contact with him, before she seated herself with elegant slowness on the cushions covering the stone bench. In spite of the chains she looked like a queen giving audience from her throne. Her poise was so cool and self assured as she projected an image of power and control.

Caesar had seen it all before, yet she still impressed him .. although he masked his admiration well, "Make sure you recover your strength quickly, Xena. We have a long journey to make and I wouldn't want you to fall ill on me again."

"A journey?" she probed, although her tone was one of boredom.

"All in good time," he told her condescendingly, "'for now, learn a little patience and obedience."

His words and tone stung and she flared back, "Or what? You'll have me flogged again. I almost escaped you through that the last time." She heard Gabrielle's sharp intake of breath at that, but ignored it as she focused her attention fully on Caesar.

The Roman's face took on an almost demonic cast as he tilted his head and the shadows, thrown by the torches that lit the cell, shifted, "Oh, no," he told her, a maliciousness evident in his tone that was not lost on the Warrior Princess, "I'll have Gabrielle beaten."

Xena threw the bard a wild look of anxiety as she sprang from the bench and took a step towards Caesar. She saw him wave the soldiers into stillness and halted when he barked commandingly, "Just stop, Xena!" He waited to make certain she would obey him, but as she took another step he told her, "Every time you baulk, rebel or fail to respond to an order, it won't be you who receives the punishment," he said with cold intensity, "it will be her," he snapped, pointing at the bard but never taking his eyes off of the warrior.

Xena halted her forward momentum. She was caught in a cleft stick. Her whole being rebelled at the thought of conforming to Caesar's dictates, but he had Gabrielle. She couldn't allow Gabrielle to be harmed. Caesar knew he had her and moved in to complete his victory. He slowly walked to where she could easily get at his pressure points. He could be dead in less than thirty seconds. Her dark soul screamed to be allowed to exact its revenge, while she ruthlessly crushed it as she thought of Gabrielle.

"Do you want to test the process?" he asked grasping her jaw with his right hand to turn her head towards where Gabrielle struggled against the two men who held her. Flaccus stood behind the bard with a baton that he bounced against the palm of his left hand. "She'll take the punishments for your transgressions, and the only person you'll be able to blame is yourself, for your arrogant pride."

She shook free of his grip and struggled to control the rage that flared within her demanding vengeance. She turned furious eyes upon him, but inflicted a rigid command over herself, her body almost quivering with the violence of emotions that gripped her.

"What's it to be, Xena?" he asked her solicitously in much the same tone he'd ask someone if they enjoyed a meal, "Are you ready to become the biddable slave?" she nearly winced at the words, "Or do I order a beating? How much do you think she can take?"

Breathing deeply to try and calm herself, Xena backed off a step, and then another, "You seem to have the upper hand for now," she conceded reluctantly.

"Not for now, my sweet," he smiled with good humour, "for good." He flipped a hand and watched as the bard was pulled away, towards the dungeon exit. "Xena!" called Gabrielle, shooting looks of anxiety, and sorrow, mixed with a plea that warned against rash actions.

The Warrior Princess watched powerless as Caesar turned his back on her and left the cell, closely followed by Patroclese and the three soldiers. She stood, following him with her eyes, as he moved unhurriedly across the guardroom to exit by the prison door in the wake of Gabrielle.

Under the watchful gaze of her attendant guards, Xena felt constrained to give a performance of calm acceptance of the situation. Inwardly seething, and seeing no answers to the problem at the present time, she could only struggle with her frustration and rage as they gnawed at her. - *There has to be a way out of this mess, - she told herself, - I just have to focus on the problem and work out the solution!* -

Chapter Nineteen: An Unexpected Visitor!

Fully recovered, Xena was finding captivity a burden. She had never been a person that took kindly to inactivity, and she moved around her cell like a caged lioness, hungry for any kind of exercise. She had been in the dungeon at Nemausus for almost a moon now! She still had no idea what Caesar wanted with her, and hadn't seen him since the confrontation when Gabrielle had been taken away.

Escape still seemed an impossible dream. The guards remained as vigilant as ever, perhaps even more so since she had regained her full physical strength. She snapped the chains at her wrists irritably, making them crack like a whip as she strained at them. Caesar hadn't lied about the strength of her bonds either; they were far tougher than the run of the mill shackles that were normally used. The noise the chains made drew instant alertness from all around her cell. No one took anything she did for granted. - *It's like being the prize attraction at a menagerie!* - she thought sourly as she turned her back on them.

She sat down on her stone bench, now boasting only the two original blankets. "Pillows are not for slaves," she had been told when they were removed by Flaccus and his men. She couldn't have cared less! She was far more used to the hardness of the ground, anyway, so the stone bench served her quite well enough.

Sitting brooding over the prospect of escape, she considered what she knew of her location and surroundings. She was aware of the total environment of her prison with intimate detail. A twelve foot square room, with two solid stone walls, two heavily barred walls and a stone ceiling with a thick ringbolt set into it next to a, barely, head sized, barred, air vent that, maybe a rat could wriggle through.

Beyond her cell she knew only of what she could see and what Gabrielle had told her before being removed from the cell. The guardroom with its watchful occupants, the standard cells where the bard had been kept and, an uncertain description of the corridors beyond the dungeon door. That was it. She'd never been to Nemausus before. She had been unconscious when she had been brought to the cell. She had no idea of the layout of the garrison, or the city streets, or just how many soldiers were around that she might have to fight her way clear of. No matter how she attacked the problem, what angle she considered, what plans she made and discarded, everything came unstuck on one problem. Gabrielle!

The bard was brought into the guardroom for a quarter candlemark visit each day, but was not allowed within the cell. All that Xena knew of where she was held, was that it was a tower room. An added frustration to everything else. The chains snapped again as she strained against them without effect.

Sighing, she glanced at her one real luxury and very minor consolation. Patroclese had started visiting her for a candlemark or two each day, and he had brought with him a lightly constructed travelling stool, .. so flimsy it had no value as a weapon .. upon which he had set a board and some carved figures, "Chess," he had answered to her question about what it was, "It's a game that you should be good at, Xena. It's really a kind of battle board where you use strategy and cunning to defeat your opponent."

He had patiently taught her the movements of the pieces and she had quickly grasped the concept behind the game. As Patroclese had predicted she learnt swiftly and was soon displaying a natural ability that the healer found himself hard pressed to match.

As she studied the game in progress, Xena thought, not for the first time, - *It's more closely akin to directing a campaign, rather than just a mere battle.* - It suited her competitive nature and

gave her something to think about other than her present situation .. which was probably the healer's aim.

She stifled a sigh, realizing it would be some candlemarks before Patroclese showed up for his daily visit. Although she still harboured a resentment for his part in causing her problems, she had grown to appreciate his company. She had never felt a great need for talking in her life. But being around Gabrielle had accustomed her to being spoken to. It was something she missed.

She lay on the bench and closed her eyes and ears to the racket from the soldiers around her. If she couldn't escape physically, there was nothing to keep her within the cell mentally. She allowed her imagination to take her far away, to the fields and woods of home which she had haunted with her younger brother Lyceus.

Lacking a father's presence, and with their mother fully occupied in running the family business, the two youngest children of the family had led a wild idyllic existence as they romped and played, hunted rabbits and spent candlemarks fishing without the constricting influence of adults. It was the happiest time of her life, when innocence was in full flower and nothing evil had slithered into the darkened corners of her mind. Life was full and fresh, with new things to learn, new places to see, and all with a child's curiosity that gave zest to each new experience. Now, the memories were a sweet escape and a form of pure torture for her.

With a startling jolt, her awareness was suddenly pulled back to her current reality. Retaining the outward appearance of total relaxation, she allowed her senses to seek for the 'something' that had warned her of a change in the environment around her in some way. She turned her head to study the soldiers within the guard room. Nothing seemed to be out of place. The currently appointed six attendant watchdogs were keeping their usual vigilant observation of her. The men beyond were occupied with their normal practices; some diced, others mended kit, some took the chance to write letters while others worked nicks out of their sword with whetstones.

She flicked her eyes to where Gaius Blasius sat. He was one of the junior officers and it was his turn to command the guard detail during the present watch. He was a big thickset young man, with a permanently dark shadow around his chin .. no matter how often he shaved .. and a mean look in his eye. He was a bully, both with the men and with Xena.

She'd had several confrontations with him since she'd been back on her feet, although nothing major had come of them with the Warrior Princess having to keep a firm clamp on her temper. Xena knew that he was looking for an opportunity to prove his power over her. He was the kind of man who liked to push around people whom he thought couldn't push back. At the moment he was fully occupied in dressing down some hapless soldier who had gotten on his wrong side.

Nothing unusual there, then, to have disturbed the delicate hair trigger on her senses. Yet something was different. She could feel someone other than the six guards watching her, and if the feeling wasn't coming from the soldiers, then there was only one other location for an observer to be hidden ... the air vent!

Her eyes sharpened to narrow slits as they swivelled in the direction of the vent and sought to penetrate the darkness within. She hadn't been mistaken! Above her, looking out from the small, barred, hole was a face she recognised.

Moving slowly, as if stretching tight muscles, she brushed a finger across her lips to command silence. The head nodded its agreement leaving it to Xena to work on a way to allow communication between them. The Warrior Princess thought quickly. She was going to have to get up to that air vent if she wanted to exchange words with her visitor. The guards were going to see her do it, no matter how she went about it. Her only option was to take them by surprise, and ignore them as long as possible. The conversation would have to be quick, but it was the best she could do. She just hoped that the repercussions wouldn't be too severe.

Getting to her feet, she stretched .. as far as she was able to .. theatrically, and within the blink of an eye, she had launched herself upwards to catch the ceiling ringbolt, "Autolycus?" she whispered, as she swung on the ring. If she could make it look like a form of exercise it might gain her time.

"Sir!" yelled out one of the guards, "You better look at this," she heard him say.

"Fancy finding you here," grinned the thief impudently, "More to the point, how do we get you out of here?"

"You don't!" she whispered back at him. "Find Gabrielle and get her away. I'll find a way of getting myself loose as soon as I know she's safe."

"What's going on?" demanded Blasius' deep voice.

"She's here?" asked Autolycus softly, relief evident in his voice, "We hadn't been able to find any trace of her." He thought quickly, "Do you know where she is."

"A tower room, somewhere in the building," she hissed back as she watched Blasius heading for the cell door.

Hey!" shouted Blasius at her, "What do you think you're doing? Get down from there now!"

"What about you?" asked the thief, concerned about the situation he saw developing.

"Just get Gabrielle out and I'll be fine." she told him softly, barely moving her lips, as she watched the progress of the guards. The key was being fitted into the lock and it looked like a good ten men were going to enter the cell.

"Liar," Autolycus told her, "but we'll do what we can. Try not to upset everyone."

"Who me?" she returned mockingly, "As if!"

"You .. slave!" shouted Blasius, fury evident in his every move, "Get down here, now!"

Xena did a couple of extra long swings on the ring, before using the trailing chain to climb down in a neat display of the skills she had learned in her piratical past. She came to rest gently on the floor of the cell in front of Blasius and assumed an attitude of insolent relaxation to make sure she kept his full attention on her while Autolycus moved silently out of sight.

"What do you think you were doing?" he demanded with angry suspicion, his eyes looking up to the ring and sliding over the air vent with a dismissive flick.

Xena looked at him, her eyes mocking. She arched an eyebrow at him and replied with flippant sarcasm, "I was getting ready to escape through the hole up there."

With absolutely no warning, Blasius hit her powerfully across the jaw with a balled fist, cracking her head to one side with the force of the blow. He seemed a little shocked that it hadn't felled her, but he ground out, "Slaves are not permitted to speak to Romans in that manner!" She slowly turned her head back until she was able to look him full in the face. She didn't move or speak, but the junior officer took a hurried step away from her as her eyes seemed to promise imminent death. "We'll see what the Centurion has to say about this," he told her, trying to regain the upper hand in the situation, but unwilling to make eye contact with her again.

He made a signal and four of the soldiers, outside of the cell, began hauling in on the chain until, with her arms hoisted above her head and her toes barely touching the floor, they were satisfied that she could cause no harm. Blasius looked at her smugly, and snarled, "Hang around for a while, 'til the Centurion gets back. I'm sure he'll be interested to hear all about this."

The guards left the cell and Xena looked up critically at her wrists. She could probably alleviate some of the pressure by climbing up the chain again, but she knew that would just stir more trouble. Hanging there was uncomfortable, but she could bear it, while necessary.

Time would reveal what repercussions would emanate from her little chat with Autolycus. If she was lucky, nothing would come of it. If Caesar felt she needed a lesson, then she knew it would be Gabrielle who suffered. The thought hurt! But if Autolycus and the others - *He said we!* - she thought wondering just who else was with him, were able to get Gabrielle away, then it might have been worth the risk.

It was some candlemarks before Flaccus returned from wherever he had been. Blasius descended upon him almost as soon as he had been admitted through the dungeon door. Flaccus threw a look in the direction of her cell, and marched, his way across the guardroom.

- *The man doesn't know any other way to move!* - thought Xena irritably. Her wrists were chaffing with painful weals cut into the flesh and her hands felt alternately numb and afire with vicious needles being stuck into them.

The cell door swung open to admit the Centurion and his junior officer, along with four baton wielding guardsmen. Flaccus stood directly before her and looked her up and down, much as he would inspect a body of troops on parade, "What did you think you were doing?" he demanded.

Xena had considered what her answer should be. She had been flippant with Blasius, because the man's bully boy attitude irritated her and she despised him. Flaccus was a different kettle of fish altogether. He was a hard taskmaster, true. But he was generally fair and administered punishment only where he judged it to be warranted.

"She looked at him levelly and gave him an answer, "I was taking some exercise," she explained. "You know a warrior's body needs to be conditioned to remain at it's peak."

"You are slave," he pointed out, "as such you have no right to do anything other than what you are ordered to do, that includes taking exercise, if that was indeed what you were doing."

He looked at the ringbolt above them and then looked intently at the air vent. He knew full well that his prisoner could not escape through such a small space, but could she have been communicating with someone. There were rumours of men asking questions within the city. It was one of the things he had been summoned to discuss with the Emperor. - *The question is, could one have found a way to use the air vent to talk to the woman?* -

He turned his attention back the Warrior Princess, "You disobeyed an order, slave. You know the punishment for that." He looked at her jaw where the evidence of Blasius's fist was beginning to show in a purpling patch of skin, "It seems, however, that you have already received some punishment.." He turned the full force of his, not inconsiderable, gaze upon Blasius in silent reprimand. The junior officer's arrogant stance wilted before his superior's look.

Flaccus turned his focus back to her considering for a moment, "However, there are rules, and you will learn to heed them. When is the bard due for her next visit?" he snapped at Blasius.

"She should be here any time, sir," answered the junior officer promptly. Eager to regain his commander's favour.

"When she gets here she's to receive three strokes as punishment for this slave's failure to respond to an order. Then she is to be taken right back to her own cell. There will be no communication between them today," he said allowing his glance to stray back to the vent. Then Flaccus pronounced. "Keep her close hauled," he said pointing to Xena with his thumb, "You can relax the restraint after the bard has been strapped and removed."

He looked hard at Xena who returned his gaze with cold silence, "Do you have anything to say?" he questioned flatly, then added when she failed to respond, "A wise decision."

He marched from the cell, trailing his men in his wake. Xena boiled with impotent anger, and just hoped that Gabrielle would understand, eventually, what had happened to cause the beating she was going to receive. - *Autolykus*, - she offered up silently, - *I just hope you can get her out of here soon.* -

When Gabrielle arrived, surrounded by her own little coterie of guardian watch dogs, Flaccus informed her that she was to be punished for Xena's misdemeanour. The bard nodded stoicly.

Returned to her tower, Gabrielle brooded in her confinement. The three strokes she had been given had been painful, and prevented her from being comfortable sitting down, but they hadn't been as bad as she had expected. After seeing the mess that had been made of Xena's back, her imagination had created an expectation of far greater pain than the reality produced. In an obscure kind of way, it was a relief to feel the actuality of the strap.

As for her importance to Caesar, she had few illusions about that. He cared little or nothing about her, personally; she was merely the instrument to ensure Xena's total compliance with his wishes. Without the Warrior Princess, Caesar would have no use for a bard from Potidaea!

She wandered around her, comparatively, comfortable 'room'. She had a reasonably good bed, a small desk for her writing materials, a chair and even some reading scrolls, courtesy of Patroclese, who continued to visit her each day, for a short while, before her guards turned up to escort her for her daily visit with Xena.

The journey to the dungeon was quite a long one. Caesar had taken pains to see her lodged as far as possible from the Warrior Princess. The entire length of the garrison complex had to be traversed before reaching the dungeons where Xena was kept under close guard.

Her visits to the prison never lasted long .. usually just time enough to allow the Warrior Princess to see that the bard remained unharmed .. so long as both parties obeyed the rules and behaved themselves. There was little time for much talk, and what they did manage was closely monitored. Everything had been designed to limit their opportunity to conspire in the slim possibility of an escape attempt.

She felt frustrated, used and helpless. She was angry at her treatment and furious over the treatment of her friend .. although she had been pleased to note over the past few days, that Xena was displaying growing signs of health and vitality. She knew that with the Warrior Princess at her physical peak, they stood a far greater chance of extricating themselves from their predicament.

Sighing she sank onto her bed, only to rise again with a sharp, "Ow!" as she was reminded of the reason for her early return to her cell, that last stroke had descended squarely over her buttocks. Unable to settle, she wandered over to the only window in her accommodation. It was a good sized opening that let in plenty of light, but had been recently equipped with a thickly barred grill that prevented any possible chance of escape.

- Even without those bars, I'd never be able to get out of here on my own, - she thought as she looked out at one of the city's main market squares, some distance below her. The thought of climbing out the window in an escape attempt made her shiver with fear, *- Coward!* - she accused herself, but knew that didn't make her any less afraid of heights.

As she had frequently come to do, she lost her thoughts in the milling masses that haunted the market square. She liked to pass the time by imagining herself free to wander around the stalls to look at the goods, and maybe haggle with a seller over the price of a scarf, *- Or a new frying pan,* - she smiled to herself, *- if Xena's managed to bust one up in some fight! -*

Something familiar attracted her attention, she wasn't quite sure what it had been .. the way someone walked, the set to a pair of shoulders, a hat, maybe, or .. - *That was it! A warriors helmet ... well at least a helmet!* - she knew that the man under it was far from any real warrior she'd ever met!

Her eyes searched frantically, trying to find that unique piece of headgear once again. She went rigid when she spotted it and willed the face under it to look up and see her, so she could make certain of what she so desperately wanted to see, - *Gods! I must be going stir crazy to be desperate to see him!* - she thought.

For a fraction of a heartbeat, the crowd seemed to open up, and not only Joxer, but Iolaus also, looked up at her. Their eyes made contact with hers and she felt a warm glow as smiles of delight lit their faces, dazzling her in the emotion of the moment. Friendly faces become a resource to treasure when you are surrounded by enemies and strangers. She waved extravagantly to them and saw Joxer start to raise his hand in reply, before Iolaus knocked it down and gestured with his jaw at the walls of the garrison, - *Soldiers on duty!* - was Gabrielle's immediate thought.

Her attention was drawn away by a commotion as a squad of Legionaries bulled their way through the crowd towards the spot where Iolaus and Joxer had been standing. Gabrielle swung a worried look back to where she had last seen her friends, but the swell of the crowds had swallowed them, and the pair were no longer to be seen.

Turning away from the window, the bard felt a lightness of heart that she had almost forgotten could exist. She didn't know how Joxer had come to be there with Iolaus, but at least she now knew for sure that they had friends close-by. The fact that Xena had mouthed Autolykus' name said clearly she had at least seen him .. how, she had no idea .. and if she knew their friends at all, they would be working on some way to free both her and Xena from Caesar's captivity.

Chapter Twenty: A Hurried Departure!

Toris sat in the taproom of the inn where he and his companions had taken a room. He glared moodily into the mead that they served here. He found it too sweet for his taste, but he didn't care for ale and wine was prohibitively expensive in Nemausus .. something to do with local taxes he'd heard.

However, it wasn't the local beverages that were souring his mood. He and the others had been in Nemausus for four days now (the journey from Narbo had taken closer to four days than the two that Autolykus had predicted, mainly due to the amount of military traffic on the roads), and had found out almost nothing except that there was a fabulous treasure being closely guarded in the garrison.

He took a draft of the mead and grimaced at the taste. He'd spent the best part of the morning moving from tavern to tavern trying to find any information on either Xena or Gabrielle. News on either was not forthcoming, although he had heard talk of a good hearted healer named Patroclese, who was Caesar's personal physician, and was resident in the garrison building in the city.

Now, Toris sat waiting for the others to return. Iolaus and Joxer had been doing the rounds of the market places, looking to see if they could overhear any rumours that would help them place the bard in the city. They were all, more or less, convinced that the 'treasure' had to be Xena. They could think of nothing else to explain her mysterious disappearance and the sudden emergence of such a valuable cargo. But the other's were adamant that they needed to find Gabrielle as well.

As for Autolycus .. well the thief had been very closed mouthed about what he intended doing that morning. He had mentioned something about a lead that might get him into the garrison, but would not be drawn on it, and refused to allow anyone else to accompany him, pointing out that, "I'm the professional here, so let me do my job."

He looked up as he became aware of the return of Joxer and Iolaus. The pair wore happy grins, and Joxer looked like he was going to burst with the news that he was eager to relay to Toris. "What have you found out?" demanded the dark haired man as the other two sat down at the table.

Before Iolaus could reply, Joxer answered jubilantly, "We've seen her!", provoking warning glares from his companions who preferred that the whole taproom didn't know their business.

"Quietly, Joxer," hissed Iolaus, before turning his attention to Toris and explaining, "We've seen Gabrielle. She's being held in the high tower at the southern end of the building." He grinned, relief evident in his look, "At least we know she's there now. perhaps we can start to do something to get her out."

"What about Xena?" hissed Toris. "Did you see any sign of her?" he demanded, his voice low and vibrant.

"No," admitted the blonde, "but we can be certain that if Gabrielle's there, then Xena is going to be there too. Especially as Caesar's there, and that treasure hasn't moved either."

"That Patroclese is in there as well," Toris told them. "He's Caesar's personal physician. It looks fairly obvious that the man managed to trick both Xena and the bard into Caesar's trap."

"What are we gonna do?" asked Joxer, "I'd give up my life to get them free, but Caesar's got a whole legion in there guarding them, and I don't think the four of us are going to be able tackle all of them. I mean I'll do my bit, I am after all Joxer the Mighty, but I can hardly expect those of you who aren't mighty warriors to fight trained soldiers."

Iolaus scowled at the wannabe warrior, "There's not a legion in there, Joxer, but there's more than we can handle on our own, at least head on." He sighed, a note of frustration in his tone, "We can't do anything until Autolycus gets back," he told them. "We need to get into that garrison without raising too much fuss, and he's our best hope for that."

"Do we go up to our room, or do we wait here?" asked Toris.

"Upstairs I think," Iolaus told him, sending a glance at Joxer, "There's less chance that our conversation will be overheard."

Joxer looked at him with an offended frown, "Hey, I know how to keep quiet, when it's necessary."

"It's necessary right now Joxer," Iolaus told him, "Try not to say another word ... ever."

"Ha! Ha!" responded his companion sarcastically.

The three of them made their way to the stairs climbing the three flights to their attic room. It had been the only one left in the establishment big enough to take all four of them. Besides which, it commanded a good view of the streets around them and they had sight of the main road to the garrison. It had proven to be perfect for their needs.

Inside, they found Autolyclus busy trying to divest himself of the thick dust that covered him from head to foot. He sneezed heavily, sending up a cloud from his hair and clothing. The other's waved hands in front of their faces and coughed as the dust tickled their throats.

"What in Hades' name have you been doing?" demanded Iolaus as Joxer swung the door shut behind them. The small man moved to the window and opened it to let some fresh air into the room. There was a narrow ledge just outside that allowed the Landlord some access to his roof in case it needed fixing at any time.

Autolyclus ignored him as he stripped off his tunic and took it to the window where he waved it frantically, trying to get rid of the worst of the accumulated grime, before hanging his head out and rubbing it with his hands vigorously. When he was satisfied that he'd removed the worst of the debris, he turned back into the room and chose one of the four beds to lounge back on.

There was a glint in his eye that spoke volumes. He had news and was eager to share it. He waited as Toris and Joxer took seats on one of the other beds, while Iolaus leaned against the wall by the open window, "Come on Autolyclus, what have you found out," the smaller man encouraged.

"They're both in the barracks," the thief told them with a satisfied smile.

"We've seen Gabrielle," chirped in Joxer, keen to get in his contribution, "She's in the high tower at the south end of the building. She waved to me and Iolaus, so at least she knows we're here."

"The soldiers seem to know we're here too," pointed out Iolaus. "I don't know if either of you have noticed anything, but while Joxer and I were in that market square this morning we had to step pretty smartly to avoid a squad of legionaries who looked like they were heading in our direction."

"It was bound to happen," Autolyclus answered, although he sounded a little concerned, "With people asking questions, about an obviously sensitive issue, Caesar was sure to get interested at

some point. We just have to make sure we stay clear of trouble until we can work a way to get them out ... which I might add is not going to be easy."

"What's up?" demanded Toris, certain that the thief's reply alluded to a problem over his sister. "Have you found anything out about Xena?" he asked sharply.

Autolycus debated with himself over just how much he should reveal to the Warrior Princess's excitable brother. In the time that they had known each other, he had assessed that Toris did not always think things through before taking action. He tended to have his sister's burning anger, but lacked her iron control. In this present situation it could prove to be a problem. However, he guessed that should he try to keep something back from Toris, the man could erupt like a volcano and destroy any chance they had of getting the two women free.

"C'mon, Autolycus," prompted Iolaus impatiently guessing that something had worried the thief within the garrison, "tell us what happened. The four of us should be able to calmly work out what to do once we have something to go on." It was obvious that the small blonde understood his concerns by the emphasis he'd put on the word 'calmly'. Iolaus would help to control Toris and his volatile temper.

The thief played idly with a lockpick as he told them, "I've seen her and spoken to her," he told them simply, watching their reactions.

Joxer let out a low whistle, "How'd you manage that?" he asked, obviously impressed.

"Being a thief has it's advantages," he told them buffing his nails on his tunic, "and being the King of Thieves gives me more advantages than most."

Iolaus looked as though he was going to be sick over the sound of the thief's egotism, but instead he readied himself to make an impatient demand for more information, while Toris looked ready to explode, so Autolycus continued quickly, "I found a way into the garrison through an old pipe that led into the hypercaust and from there into some air shafts that run throughout the building. I poked around in there until I happened across the one that ran above the dungeons. As luck would have it, there was a vent from the shaft above Xena's cell."

"Then why didn't you get her out of there?" demanded Toris without thinking.

"Listen, hot stuff," Autolycus told him with heavy sarcasm, "Just how was I supposed to get her through an air vent smaller than her head?"

"You didn't say that before," subsided Toris grumpily.

"Use your brains," the thief told him. "Don't you think I'd have got her out if I could?" he demanded, and then added, "Besides, there are other problems."

"Like what?" asked Joxer ingenuously.

The thief scowled, "Like she's in a cell that's open to view by the soldiers in the guardroom. Like she's wearing a heavy set of leg irons and manacles that are fastened to a ringbolt in the ceiling. Like there's at least forty guards in that guard unit around that cell. Like she's watched at all times by at least six men, and like she refuses to go anywhere until she knows Gabrielle's safe." Autolycus told them, ticking off the points on his fingers.

"Hold it," said Iolaus puzzled, "back up! Just how did you manage to talk to her in those circumstances."

"Quietly, my friend. Very quietly," the thief told him seriously. He sat upright and gave them the gist of how Xena had arranged to get a few brief words with him, "As soon as the guards came rushing into the cell, I had to pull back out of sight. The Xena I know wouldn't meekly give in to those Romans like she did. They must be doing something to force her obedience to their orders. My guess is they're threatening Gabrielle, which is why Xena won't think of going anywhere until she knows the bard's safe."

"Damn," swore Iolaus, thinking hard, "How do we get her out of that?"

"There's something you're not telling us?" Toris said intuitively.

Autolycus sighed, "Look, you gotta understand that to those goons, your sister is something akin to a cross between a hydra and a demon from the pit, though she seems perfectly well and healthy," he assured Toris hastily.

"But?" prompted the dark haired man.

"But they're not treating her any too kindly. I saw that young officer punch her before I left ... hard enough to have left me seeing stars. She's also got a slave collar on, though I'll tell you I've never seen anything like the metal it was made from."

"What does Caesar think he's up to?" questioned Iolaus in perplexity, trying to find some kind of sense to it all, "I mean from everything Xena's told me about him, I'd have thought the first thing he'd have done was to have her executed ... but try and make a slave of her? What's he think he's going to do? He's having to tie up men and resources keeping her under constant watch. I just can't figure out what he's up to."

Toris looked at each of the men in the room as they pondered over the question. Not for the first time he wondered how his sister had managed to collect such a disparate selection of men as friends. In their own ways, each of these men knew far more about Xena than he ever would. Oh, he had all the childhood memories, that none of them could really know or share, but they had been a part of her adult life that he'd been excluded from due to their long separation and the total divergence of their lives since Cortese's attack on Amphipolis. "Look," Toris growled in frustration, "can someone please tell me why this Roman hates my sister so much?"

The others looked at him in surprise, taking it for granted that he knew the background to the situation. Joxer blurted out incredulously, "Doesn't your family ever talk? I know Xena isn't a great one for chatting, but surely she must have talked to her family at some time?!"

Toris looked at him, something of a pained expression lay under the mask that he was trying to draw over his emotions, "Xena and I haven't been close for many years. The only things that I'd heard about her were bad," his eyes became distant with memory. "Until I met up with her, a while back, I'd had no idea that she'd turned her back on the evil she was pursuing."

He pursed his lips in an expression that was strongly reminiscent of the Warrior Princess, "We didn't have a whole lot of time for talking when we were together. She told me something of what happened after I'd left home, but she didn't go in to any detailed explanations of her history, and I didn't ask. It didn't seem relevant at the time."

Iolaus, Autolycus and Joxer looked at each other in surprise. They all knew the basic outline of Xena's history; Joxer probably knew most of her more recent life, but Iolaus had a better, overall, grasp of the entire story. Getting a nod from Autolycus, Iolaus began to fill in some of the gaps for Toris, before Joxer could launch into a rambling monologue. Trying to cover the details as briefly as possible, Iolaus began, "After Xena had beaten off that warlord at Amphipolis"

"Cortese," put in Toris with grimace. Thoughts of that time were still painful for him.

"Right," agreed the blonde man, "Anyway, she started to get ambitious. Protecting Amphipolis became an urge to conquer and she ravaged more territories, eventually expanding her operations into sea raids."

"I know that part," Toris told him, "Where does Caesar fit into all of this?"

Iolaus thought for a moment, "On one of those sea raids, her men captured a young Roman noble by the name of Julius Caesar. She ransomed him for the huge sum of 100,000 dinars and, while she waited for delivery of the ransom, she became charmed by the Roman and fell in love with him. When she got the money for him, she released him and he promised to find her again."

"And?" demanded Xena's brother.

The small man looked hard at Toris before continuing, "When he did meet up with her again, he came not as a lover, but as an enemy. He took her captive with a trick and crucified her and every man in her crew."

Toris swallowed hard. Crucifixion was a hard, painful way to die. But in honesty, he had to admit to himself, piracy merited no less. Still, he had to know what had happened, "How did she survive that?" he asked, "Did she managed to free herself from the cross somehow?"

"Not quite," butted in Joxer, "Caesar also ordered that her legs were to be broken. None of the others, just her. The man she loved really betrayed her. There was no way she should have escaped from that."

However," continued Iolaus, "a slave girl she had befriended rescued her and took her to a healer. But Caesar wasn't ready to let her go. He sent a squad after her with orders to kill her. When they caught up to Xena, at the healer's, the slave girl was killed in the fighting. The whole rotten affair seemed to twist something in Xena and she turned into the monster that so many of the stories tell of."

Toris shook his head. It was so hard to believe. He'd missed so much of Xena's life that, when hearing about these things, it seemed like he was hearing the story of some stranger. He looked at Iolaus, "But why, after all this time is Caesar still holding a grudge?"

Iolaus smiled tightly, "They've had at least a couple of run ins since I've known Xena. Your sister recently orchestrated the rout of Caesar's troops, by Boadicea's army in Britannia. More recently still, she was in Rome where, the rumours say, she tried to assassinate him. All in all, I'd say if there were two people in this world that hated each other more, I've never heard of them."

Toris looked bleak. His sister's troubled path through life had not been easy. He was aware that his own life was driven by powerful emotions that forced him into courses of action without him always being aware of it. But by comparison to Xena, his motivating forces were little more than a trickling stream in relation to the raging torrent of a major river in flood. He looked at Iolaus, "Then why is she still alive? If their mutual hatred is so great, why hasn't Caesar finished what he started long ago."

Iolaus shrugged, "That's what I said."

Autolycus had been studying and weighing his companions as Iolaus delivered his history of the Warrior Princess. Joxer, of course was ... Joxer! An innocent abroad, so to speak. Inept but loyal to a fault. Just occasionally he could come up with a brilliant flash of inspiration at the right moment to solve a problem. But, at the moment he showed no sign of shedding light on the situation.

It was so easy to dismiss Iolaus as Hercules' tag along sidekick. But experience had taught the King of Thieves that the small man was both resourceful and competent in difficult situations. However, like Joxer, the short blonde had no idea of what Caesar was after, or how they were going to get their friends loose.

Toris was the type of man who sought quick easy solutions without understanding the full consequences his actions might bring. He actually knew less about his sister than any of the other men in the room and so the likelihood of him being able to provide the answers to the questions, "What's going on?" and "How do we solve the problem?" looked to be very slim.

That meant it was down to him. His ego was big enough that he could normally take such responsibilities in his stride, and so he set his mind to twisting the few facts that he was aware of into some kind of hypothesis. "Go along with me on this, for a minute," he said to the others when the tension and silence in the room had become something tangible. A nod from each of the men gave him sanction to continue. "We know that if Caesar was running true to form, he would have had Xena and Gabrielle executed. He's got everything he needs to do it. Xena's been

convicted of piracy, she's directed rebellion in Britannia and she tried to assassinate the man in Rome. Gabrielle was at least involved in the revolt in Britannia so he has the legal right there too."

"Does Caesar really care about legalities?" asked Iolaus irritably, gazing moodily out of the window.

"Probably not," admitted the thief, "but we know he has the legal right, and we know that he has pursued their deaths in the past, ergo, if he hasn't killed them yet he wants to use them for something ... and I don't mean just as slaves," he added hurriedly as he saw Joxer start to ask a question.

"Seems like we've, more or less, said the same thing already," pointed out Toris quietly, trying to keep a lid on his impulses and finding it something of a struggle.

"Just hear me out," encouraged Autolycus. "We can be fairly confident that he's using Gabrielle as a hostage for Xena's good behaviour."

"Obviously," put in Joxer with impatient sarcasm.

"But why bring them both here to Narbonensis?" asked the thief ignoring Joxer's comment.

That had them all thinking for a while, but Joxer grinned brightly, "They had to come here to spring the trap at Isumbras' warehouse. Xena was hardly likely to walk into Rome again so soon." he finished with a smug sneer at what he saw as Autolycus's short sightedness.

"No wait a minute, Joxer," said Iolaus, suddenly seeming to understand what Autolycus was getting at, "Why didn't Caesar just get on a boat for Rome when he'd caught Xena? Why drag her up here to Nemausus? And why bring Gabrielle here at all, when it would have been quicker and safer to take her straight to Rome?"

Toris looked a little confused, "Whatever he wants Xena for has something to do with Narbonensis?" he asked puzzled.

"No!" disagreed Autolycus, his face seeming to light up as the last piece of the puzzle dropped into place, "Not Narbonensis, but Gaul!" He looked at the bemused faces around him. He knew he was going to have to explain his thoughts to them, "We know that Xena went to Rome and that she was arrested for trying to assassinate Caesar. Well at the same time that all that was going on, a Gaul chieftain was going to be executed by Caesar."

"Verchinex," offered Joxer.

"Bless you!" came the identical response from the other three men.

"No!" drawled Joxer as he tried to make them understand, "The Gaul's name was Verchinex. I read about it in Gabby's scrolls. Xena tricked Caesar so that she could rescue this Gaul."

"But I heard that the execution took place," objected Toris.

"Wait a minute, wait a minute," put in Autolycus, "I heard some rumours about that. Something about it not being the Gaul executed, but Crassus, the third member of the triumvirate. Everyone dismissed the rumours because it was a known fact that Crassus died in Syria."

"That was the name of the other man in Gabby's scroll," announced Joxer, "Gabrielle switched this Crassus for Verchinex before the execution could take place."

"Whew!" whistled Iolaus, impressed, "Caesar must have been boiling mad over that."

"It also explains why Caesar's here. He promised the subjugation of Gaul to the Roman's. With Verchinex back with his people, something's got to be done before the whole thing blows up in his face."

"I don't see how Xena and Gabrielle are going to be any use in dealing with that," grumbled Joxer disbelievingly.

"Neither do I," admitted Autolycus, "but I'll bet my reputation that Caesar's got something planned involving them."

"Heads up!" said Iolaus suddenly, as a noise from the street attracted his attention. "You know I was worried about those soldiers in the market this morning? Well it looks like we can worry about them being here, now!"

Toris and Joxer scrambled to look out of the window, while Autolycus dived for the door and stuck his head out to hear the heavy thump of Roman soldiers charging up the stairs. He slammed the door shut, locked it and yelled, "Give me a hand to block this."

A bed was quickly dragged across the doorway and other bedding and beds thrown up against it as a hammering began on the other side. Wood splintered as an axe was used to cut through the obstruction.

"That's not going to hold them long," Toris said as he drew his sword, ready to defend himself, "We need another way out of here ... and quick!" he added as the axe blade bit again to remove a large splinter of wood.

As Iolaus pulled his own blade and Joxer fumbled his out, Autolycus grabbed for his bag of tricks and pulled out his specially constructed, high powered, pistol crossbow, "If we've got just a few moment's I can get us away from here," he told them as he darted for the window.

"Be quick," Iolaus encouraged him, as a large chunk of the door began to disappear now under the assault of two heavy axes.

Autolycus climbed out onto the small ledge outside the window, and swayed backwards quickly as a volley of arrows shot up from the road, "That was close," he muttered. "Good thing that the angle's wrong for them."

He took careful aim with his crossbow and sent a small, heavy set, dart winging across the street to a lower house, trailing a thin, very strong cord behind it. The dart bit into the gable of an attic window with great penetration. Autolycus swayed out of the way of another shower of arrows, before using the bow to shoot another bolt into their room's gable, and then stretched the cord tight.

"Hurry," shouted Iolaus as the door caved in under the axes and the soldiers began to push at the obstruction made by the bedding.

"Ready," returned the thief, "Toris you first."

"Why me?" asked Xena's brother, eager to get the chance to fight against the Romans who were abusing his sister.

"Because you're worth most to Caesar, so don't argue, and bring a blanket!" yelled back Autolycus.

Toris slid his sword back into its sheath and climbed hurriedly onto the ledge with the blanket, a question in his eyes. He glanced back when he heard the clash of steel as Iolaus and Joxer tried to discourage the Romans from what they were doing, "Throw the blanket over the line hang onto it and swing down to the next roof," the thief explained quickly. "Don't look down and try not to worry too much if an arrow or two flies your way. When you get to the other side hang on for Joxer, then climb over the roof and get out of here."

Toris nodded his understanding and pushed himself off, careening wildly down the rope, to land heavily on the roof of the next building. The move had taken the archers below completely by surprise, so he at least didn't have to worry about that.

"Joxer," called Autolycus, "You next."

"Go on, Joxer," insisted Iolaus, as he parried a thrusting spear that probed through the doorway. "I'll hold them off."

Joxer sheathed his sword, grabbed a blanket and climbed unsteadily out beside Autolycus, "I really don't like heights," he said sickly, as he swayed forward dizzily.

The King of Thieves grabbed his arm, threw the blanket over the line and tightened Joxer's grip around the end's. "Don't look down," he told him.

"Perhaps, I'd better stay and help Iolaus," he said to the thief, but before he could let go of the blanket, Autolycus gave him a strong push that sent him careering over the edge, "Watch out for the archers!" he yelled.

"Arrrrhhhhh!" screamed Joxer as he flew across the intervening space to be caught by Toris.

"Nicely phrased," muttered Autolycus as he turned to yell for Iolaus.

The small blonde man, swung his sword in a wide arc to encourage the soldiers to back off to give him enough time to grab a blanket and leap for the window. He swung it over the line and with the thief holding one side and him the other they launched themselves off the ledge for the safety of the next building.

"Yodalayheehoo!" yelled Autolycus as they sped down at an increasing rate and felt the brush of close passing arrows as they went.

Toris was busy hauling Joxer up over the apex of the roof and Autolycus, with Iolaus, scrambled quickly to join them. As he reached the top of the roof, Autolycus, ever the showman, turned back to the frustrated Legionaries and gave them an impudent bow, before following his friends down the other side, where they were able to shin down a trellis and disappear into the crowded streets of the city.

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~ Destiny's Dominion ~

by Power Chakram

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Disclaimer

[See Part 1.](#)

Chapter Twenty One: Traveling Companions

Caesar finished reading through the letter he had dictated. He signed it with a flourish before affixing it with his personal seal and closing it with the Imperial seal of Rome. He handed the missive to the waiting courier and told him, "Take it north as quickly as possible. I want an answer as soon as possible after I reach Lugdunum." He handed the messenger a warrant, "You may use this to command fresh horses and escorts when you require them."

"General," the soldier snapped off a parade ground salute and marched from the office, passing Caesar's second in command as he arrived in the chamber.

"Brutus," greeted Caesar cordially, "How goes the VIIth's preparations? I trust that they will be ready to march on the morrow?"

The dark haired officer stood before his commanders desk and replied, "They will be ready to march with the dawn, my Lord. As soon as we join them."

Caesar poured himself, and his second in command, a goblet of wine, motioning for Brutus to take the silver cup from it's place on the tray on his desk, "And what of those four men who have been asking questions about people they should have no reason to believe are here?" he asked.

"My Lord," Brutus began tentatively, "Four centuries were dispatched to arrest them at their lodgings. The men barricaded themselves within their room, and by the time our soldiers had managed to batter past the obstructions, all four men had effected an escape through the window, and across the street where they were able to dodge across a roof and avoid arrest."

Caesar's face took on a hard cast as he looked at Brutus, "How very resourceful of them," he said quietly, "And just how, exactly did they manage to cross a street through the air?" he asked coldly.

"One of the men set up a rope that they slid down to get to the house opposite," explained Brutus as neutrally as he was able to. He had not been present at the scene and was merely reporting events as they'd been reported to him.

Caesar considered the wine in his cup for a long moment. Brutus wisely refrained from paying his beverage any attention whatsoever. He held it in his hand, but had assumed a position of attention and would remain so until, Caesar indicated his feelings about the situation.

"Do we know anything more about these four men?" asked Caesar.

Brutus considered, "We have full and detailed descriptions of them. They sound a very unusual group to be travelling together, although all four are Greeks. From the reports that have come in they spend much time in arguing amongst themselves. We also now have names for them," added the Roman, "although whether these are false or not, it would be difficult to know."

"And the names are?" asked Caesar lightly.

"The small blonde man, who seems, in a way, to keep the group together is called Iolaus. The man who accompanies him, the one people have described variously as a fool or a clown, is called Joxer. The tall dark one with the moustache and beard is known as Autolycus while the brooding young man with the long dark hair goes by the name of Toris," informed Brutus.

Caesar's eyes sharpened as the names were listed. His research into the Warrior Princess's life had been very thorough and the first three names figured prominently in her adventures and history. Yet it was the fourth that was of most interest to him. Capturing all of them would have given him extra ties on Xena, but that fourth man would have been almost as important as the bard. Blood ties went deep and he knew that Toris was the brother of Xena.

others were too. That worried her, somewhat. Iolaus and Autolycus were good friends, and she'd hate to see them get hurt on account of her. But Toris was her brother, and she didn't have so much blood kin around that she could afford to lose any ... - *And if Caesar should find out about him!* - The thought left her cold.

Her situation was bad enough with Gabrielle in his power. If he had Toris as well, things would probably get distinctly worse. Two threats held against her and her chances of ever breaking free of Caesar's clutches would be negligible! - *Gods, but I loathe that man!* - she had fumed silently to herself.

Yet if things went well, and they could manage to free Gabrielle from Caesar's clutches, it might just enable her to do something about her own situation. She looked forward to the day when her captors could not produce Gabrielle in proof that they still held her. It gave her something to dream about that night.

She was awoken early the next morning. There seemed to be an unusual stir within the guard room, something different from the routine that had prevailed as the soldiers had settled into their new accommodation. She opened her eyes sleepily, focusing on her internal clock which suggested that the time was somewhere before dawn. She sighed softly.

It wasn't unknown for the guards to roust her out for a quick check through the cell to make certain she hadn't managed to secure and hide a weapon. So far she had been able to keep her toothpick hidden from the legionaries, who were looking for something far larger. That toothpick could be used as a weapon, but it was going to be far more useful for picking the locks on her chains when she finally got the chance to escape. The time her spirit had been lodged in Autolycus's body had provided her with a few more useful skills!

She turned her attention back to the soldiers. This morning's activity was definitely unusual. No one had approached the cell for a search, and the general activity throughout the guardroom suggested something different. To Xena's practised eye, the legionaries were moving in the purposeful way soldiers broke camp. Her eyes narrowed. If the soldiers were getting ready to move, she had little doubt that they'd be moving her and Gabrielle as well.

- *Can Caesar be aware of Autolycus and the others?* - she questioned herself. She could hardly credit that the Roman would be concerned about a handful of men that he could have arrested without any trouble to himself. She thought about that for a moment and smiled softly to herself, - *Well maybe not!* - she conceded. But she doubted that her captors were going to run away from four men, therefore the move must mean that Caesar was getting ready for whatever he was planning.

Needing to retrieve the toothpick from the blanket where it had remained hidden, Xena rolled over, rucking up the under cover as she did so, and then began to surreptitiously work the toothpick out of the hem. Once she had recovered it, she slid it into the collar of her shirt, working it around until any sign was hidden by the fall of her hair. With that accomplished, she stretched and rose from the stone bench, and was standing by the time the key to the cell grated

in the lock and the door screeched open on hinges that needed to be oiled. The sound had become an everyday occurrence in her life, and she would not be sorry to say goodbye to it.

"Morning boys," she drawled lazily noticing that Blasius was the officer in command of the detail that moved purposefully into the cell, "You goin' somewhere ... like maybe Tartarus?" she asked with feigned politeness.

Gaius Blasius was not amused by her comment and raised his fist ready to strike while Xena stared at him contemptuously. Before the officer could swing his blow, however, Flaccus' voice boomed across the noisy guardroom, "Blasius! That will be enough!"

The junior officer slowly lowered his upraised fist, his eyes sparking with anger for her taunt and his inability to exact what he felt was due retribution, "There will be another time!" he growled at the Warrior Princess threateningly.

"Count on it!" she hissed back, not bothering to hide her disdain for the bully, and bringing a whole wealth of dangerous meaning to the few words.

Flaccus marched to the cell and gave the two antagonists an appraising glance, "Just do your job, Blasius. The General wants her ready for travel. If you can't handle the task, I'll find someone who can."

The threat was unmistakable. Blasius snapped off a smart salute and watched as Flaccus retraced his steps across the guardroom to continue his own preparations for the imminent move.

Xena watched the Roman under officer much as a cat watches a mouse. There was a chance to exploit an opportunity here, - *Divide and Conquer is Caesar's motto*, - she told herself. If she was careful how she went about it, she might just drive a wedge into the ranks of her guards.

Blasius held his hand out and was given a thick, black leather belt that had a metal ring fixed firmly into the centre of it, "Please give me an excuse," the bully said to her invitingly, "It will make my day to hear your little friend howl because you proved to be difficult."

Xena's jaw tightened a little, but she managed a sardonic twist to her lips as she answered him, "Not in your lifetime," they were words that could be taken more than one way.

"Turn around," he ordered with a snarl.

Taking her time, the warrior turned her back on him and waited as Blasius put his arms around her, as he settled the belt into place. He threaded the end through the buckle and pulled the belt savagely tight, leaving the metal ring on the front side in the centre of her stomach. With a nod to one of his men, Xena's manacles were released from the long chain to the ringbolt, and the padlock was used to lock the manacles to the ring on the leather belt. The system was effective in restricting the use of her hands. She had a limited freedom of movement that would ensure that she could not use her shackles as a weapon, should the opportunity arise for her.

"Caesar afraid that I'm gonna jump him?" she asked lazily.

"You're valuable property, Xena," came Patroclese's voice from outside the cell, "After all the time, effort and money put into acquiring you, you cannot blame Lord Caesar for looking to keep his investment safe."

"Oh can't I," she returned with a distinctly frosty look and a tone sharp enough to cut. "Would you like to tell me where we're going?" she invited, not expecting to get a useful answer, although she was fairly certain that she knew what Caesar intended. Enforced inactivity had given her plenty of time to think, and she knew how her enemy's mind worked.

"You'll find out when Lord Caesar is ready to reveal his plans," the healer told her with a friendly smile, "As we all will," he added.

"Uh huh," she replied neutrally. "Don't forget to bring the chess," she told him far more enthusiastically as Blasius shoved her towards the cell door. The forced momentum, made her stumble in the restrictive leg irons, but her quick reactions kept her upright and she shuffled along as well as she could manage to avoid other pushes.

"Just going to pack it," Patroclese told her as she passed him. "I think that we'll manage to play a game or two on the trip, although you're getting far too good for my poor skill," he complained, and in truth Xena usually won nine out of every ten games they played.

Once into the main guardroom, the soldiers formed up around her and she was marched through poorly lit corridors .. that she was seeing for the first time .. where nighttime torches guttered low, awaiting replacement. It seemed a long walk until they reached the openness of a well lit courtyard. Xena stopped and breathed deeply of the cool pre-dawn air, relishing the freshness after being kept so long from it.

Blasius shoved her to get her moving again and, this time, she was only kept upright by the tight press of bodies around her. She was moved out to the centre of the courtyard close to where a familiar wagon awaited her. The thought of returning to the cramped conditions of the cage, that she knew was within, almost made her grimace.

She looked around the crowded space for something to take her mind off of the coming ordeal of cramped and aching muscles and the inevitable bruising from the jolting she would be forced to endure.

A movement on the far side of the courtyard captured her attention, as she saw another body of soldiers enter with Gabrielle closely warded amongst them. When the bard saw Xena amongst her escort of soldiers, she attempted to move towards her, only to be shoved back roughly by a legionaries spear butt.

"Hey!" barked Xena at the unnecessary roughness of the treatment.

"Quiet slave," ordered Blasius, digging a heavy punch into Xena's unprotected kidneys eliciting a grunt of surprised pain in return.

"Leave her alone!" yelled the bard, throwing herself at her guards and bursting past them with a surprising display of strength, speed and agility that caught the soldiers totally unprepared.

- *Gods in Olympus!* - screamed Xena's brain as she called out in alarm, "Gabrielle! No!" But it was too late to halt her friend's forward charge.

Soldiers began to converge on the blonde with raised batons. The Warrior Princess, knowing there was little or no chance of reaching the bard, still tried anyway. She could not stand by and watch while Gabrielle was roughly handled. Screaming a battle cry, "Ai,ai,ai,ai,ai,ai!", Xena launched herself in a flip over the heads of her own guards to land with crashing force on five men heading menacingly towards the bard.

The dark haired woman and the five soldiers went down into a tangled heap, as Gabrielle's arms were snagged by two of the guards she had avoided. The honey blonde was pulled to a stop, her arms twisted behind her in a painful lock, as she watched the struggling melee that thrashed on the ground.

Anger, resentment and plain, stubborn, pride, fired the fighting instincts that Xena had been forced to keep a lid on for so long. As she struggled, the familiar dark rage slipped its bonds and compelled her to fight, even though it was a hopeless task. She drove a two footed kick into the stomach of one of the struggling soldiers, ejecting him from the roiling heap to kneel heaving at the edge of the conflict. With limited use of her hands, she employed her head to good effect, using it to deliver crunching butts to anything that came close. One soldier's thigh came invitingly to hand, and a stabbing thrust of her fingers left him screaming in agony as she hit the nerve centre that made the leg a pain filled useless limb.

But there was no way that she could hope to win. Restricted in her movement and ability to defend herself, when six more soldiers leapt into the fray the sheer weight of combined numbers finally managed to pin her flat, face down, to the ground. She bucked and heaved, driven by the animal desire to fight for freedom even against insurmountable odds, until she finally managed to regain control of herself and lock the dark rage, that had broken free, back into the silent recesses of her soul.

"What's going on here?" demanded the voice of authority as Caesar stormed into the courtyard to be confronted by chaotic turmoil.

Flaccus snapped off a salute as he presented himself before his commander, "Sir, your slaves broke free of their guards and had to be subdued." he explained.

"And what was the reason for their actions." he growled, knowing full well that Xena wasn't fool enough to attempt an escape when heavily shackled and surrounded in a courtyard by nearly two hundred crack soldiers.

Flaccus explained the events that had lead up to the brawl and Caesar's brown eyes seemed to bore into everyone in that courtyard with a hardness that spoke volumes about his irritation here. The two women needed to be handled with care. Push the wrong buttons and the Warrior Princess exploded into an unstoppable killing machine. He frowned at the soldier who lay clutching his leg and groaned in agony.

His eyes flickered slowly over the bard who strained impotently against the two burly guards who held her and then fixed on Xena who no longer struggled, but remained pinned to the ground by ten men. Acts of defiance could not be permitted. The two women had to be made to understand and accept that they were property, condemned to slavery for their crimes, and as such, subject to discipline for their behaviour. He could not show Xena any weakness that she might exploit. However, the last thing he needed, at this time, was to inflict harsh punishment on either bard or warrior. He needed both to be fit and healthy .. especially Xena. - *Very well then. The punishments need to fit the crimes. They need to be hard but not debilitating.* -

"It appears that an ill thought out act of defiance from the bard brought this about," Caesar said consideringly, "Very well then. In fairness if she is to be punished for Xena's transgressions, it is only right that it work the other way. Therefore, Xena will receive fifteen strokes of your staff of office, Centurion."

"You can't do that!" objected Gabrielle angrily, "It wasn't Xena's fault."

"No," agreed Caesar mildly, "it was yours. Just as it's her fault for becoming involved in the incident after she had been warned about the price for such resistance. For that, you'll get five strokes."

"Caesar!" yelled Xena, starting to struggle against those who held her again.

"Be very careful, Xena," warned the Roman coldly. "Those five strokes are lenient for your part in this and they can easily be raised."

The Warrior Princess subsided under the soldiers hands once more, although her eyes watched Caesar with a deadly intent, "The girl first, Flaccus," he instructed.

Gabrielle was hauled over to the wagon, where a wrists were quickly tied to a wheel. Flaccus's staff of office was thick, heavy wood that had been carved with vine leaves. Xena knew from past experience that it could raise heavy weals and a cause a lot of pain.

The first blow landed across the blondes shoulders, and made her yell with anger as much as pain. The second was inflicted slightly lower and brought a louder cry. The third blow was again aimed a little lower and Xena heard her friend choke back a sob. The fourth stroke was aimed across the bard's hips and the sobbing intensified as the final blow fell on her thighs.

Gabrielle was cut free of the wagon and moved, unresisting, by her guards to a spot where she stood, arms wrapped around her body, trying to choke back the tears that streamed down her

cheeks. The beating could have been worse, but she was still recovering from the punishment she had taken just the day before, and the bard was not used to such pain.

At Flaccus's nod, the soldiers pinning Xena down on the courtyard ground, roughly hoisted her to her feet. She'd taken no injury from the struggle and with her body fit and healthy she doubted that the ordained fifteen strokes would harm her unduly. Caesar was obviously trying to instil discipline without disabling her. The soldier's secured her to the same wheel that Gabrielle had been tied to, and Flaccus administered the fifteen strokes with his normal impartiality. Xena willed herself to make no sound. The vine staff was heavy and painful, but it didn't rip her flesh as the whip had done. She gritted her teeth, closed her eyes and stood rock steady through the ordeal, knowing that Gabrielle winced with every blow, feeling responsible for them ... which was exactly what Caesar wanted!

Released from the wheel, Xena stood straight and turned her cold hatred upon Caesar, who smiled back at her knowing just how much it infuriated her when he did so. "Now that we have that little piece of unpleasantness out of the way, perhaps we can get on with the business at hand," he said brusquely. As he turned away he noticed the groaning soldier once more. Patroclese had shown up and was unable to do anything for the man's injury or agony, "You'll oblige me by fixing whatever you did to that man," he told Xena flatly.

There wasn't really anyway to avoid the order. Leaving the 'pinch' on would be an act of viciousness that she no longer allowed herself to do. Defying Caesar would bring more harm to Gabrielle. Pursing her lips, she moved with her shuffling step over to the writhing man and released the nerves with a practised twist of her hand, "You'll be fine in a few minutes," she told him coldly.

Caesar smiled at his victory, minor though it was. The more that Xena could be coerced into obedience, the sooner she would have to come to accept her new situation. He motioned for the soldiers to get on with their preparations, as he stalked off to where his horse stood patiently awaiting him.

The soldiers began to form up, and Xena was roughly manhandled into the wagon and shoved into her travelling cage. She was, however, surprised when Gabrielle was also thrown into the wagon. A leg iron was produced and locked around the bard's right ankle with the other end being fastened to the bars of the cage. "It seems we're going to be travelling together," smiled the Warrior Princess, relieved at having the bard's company, even in the conditions they found themselves. A section of her mind noted the presence of her six watchdogs as well, but they had become a part of her current existence and she had learned to ignore them.

Gabrielle smiled at her and began to apologise saying, "Xena, I just didn't think. When he hit you I suppose my instincts took over"

"I know Gabrielle. It doesn't matter," she shrugged off the beating like shedding a coat. "I shouldn't have reacted, then you wouldn't have been beaten."

"Quits?" suggested the bard, deciding that it would be better to end the mutual self recriminations before they truly got started. Her smile deepened at her friends nod of agreement.

"Quits," agreed Xena, basking in the warmth of Gabrielle's smile and realizing, yet again, just how much she missed not being with the bard.

"What's Caesar up to?" asked the blonde as she heard the order to march given. "I mean, all the effort to keep us apart and now this." she said indicating the wagon, "Not that I'm complaining," she added hastily.

Xena shrugged a little stiffly, "It's probably safer to keep us together while we're on the move. We've got a whole maniple surrounding us at the moment and I'm willing to bet that Caesar's got the VIIth Legion all ready and waiting to form up around us too."

"Xena," Gabrielle frowned, puzzled, "have you got any idea what he's up to?"

"Maybe, Gabrielle," she admitted softly, "Just maybe."

Chapter Twenty Two: Into the Pit

Iolaus quickly ducked down below the window ledge as a patrol marched past the ruined building that he and his companions had been forced to hide in, "Gods they're as thick as flies out there. That's the third patrol in a candlemark," he said frustration obvious in his tone. Normally, the soldiers would have holed up in their garrison until the unseasonal rain, that was teeming down outside, had eased up so that they avoided the soaking.

"Well just let them poke their heads in here," offered Joxer belligerently, "Joxer the Mighty knows how to deal with Romans," he declared with a theatrical ferocity as he drew his sword and brandished it at an imaginary foe.

"Cut it out, Joxer" Iolaus told him impatiently, "you can barely deal cards let alone deal with Romans."

"Ah ha!" replied the sallow faced man, "that was the old Joxer! The new Joxer has a lust for the blood of those who threaten his friends," he said with a repeated flourish of his weapon.

"C'mon Joxer, I've see you fight," Iolaus told him, "If you had a fight with a chicken, I'd bet on the chicken to win."

"Have you been talking to Autolycus?" asked Joxer suspiciously, "No he wouldn't have said anything about that, would he?" he muttered as he put the sword back into the scabbard and sat down on the dirty floor brooding about chickens and how his brother Jet was doing in prison in Myramas. His stomach rumbled loudly, "You know we could do with a chicken here about now, or any kind of food for that matter."

"Any sign of the thief," asked Toris from where he was laying on a grubby blanket in the corner of the room.

Iolaus took another look out of the window and grimaced at the pouring rain that was keeping most sensible people off of the streets, "Not yet," he announced. "But he'll be back. Autolycus is the proverbial bad dinar, he always shows up."

It was frustrating being dependant upon the sardonic thief to turn up news, but since their dramatic exit from the inn two days previously, the four of them had spent their time dodging and hiding from patrols that were very evidently looking for them. Of the four, Autolycus was the best equipped for 'sneaking' around to gather information and some of the things that they were going to need. Iolaus could probably have helped him. He'd been a pretty fair thief in his younger days. But both he and Autolycus felt that neither Toris, nor Joxer, should be left alone. The first because he was too hot headed and ran headlong into things without thinking them through. The second because he didn't think at all! or at least not very often. So Iolaus was left to play nursemaid on the pair which left the King of Thieves free to do what he did best .. next to theft that was .. which was sneaking around where he didn't belong.

The trouble was, he'd been gone longer than expected. And, as much as the blonde hated to admit it, he was beginning to get worried about the thief. Autolycus tended to grate on his nerves, but he was a useful man to have around - *If you can ignore all the egotism that goes with him!* - he thought sourly.

He was just about to turn away from the window when a heavily cloaked figure attracted his attention as it slipped cautiously along the street towards the building where they were hidden. Autolycus, for Iolaus was certain that that is who it was, carried a large bundle that surprised the small blonde man and engaged his curiosity, "Now what in the world has he got there," he wondered aloud.

"Autolycus?" asked Joxer shifting quickly from gloom to expectation as Toris stood up and drew his sword, just in case the person who came through the door was not whom they were expecting.

Iolaus moved to the doorway that they had wedged shut with a small wooden shim. He listened for pre-arranged signal, "**Knock knock, knock.**" before kicking the wedge out and dragging back the door that grated across the floor where the hinges had weakened.

Autolycus slipped in quickly, throwing off the black cloak that had protected him from the worst of the weather and hidden him from the notice of the patrols that were all over the city, while Iolaus heaved the door back into place and 'locked' it with the shim.

"That is no way to spend a morning," complained the thief as he shook his head to rid himself of some of the water that saturated him, despite the cloak.

"What did you find out?" asked Iolaus eager to hear any news.

Xena and Gabrielle fared far better in the wagon than the soaked and cold Legionaries around it did. Conditions may have been cramped and uncomfortable, especially for Xena, but at least they were dry and, if not exactly warm, they weren't cold either.

The first day's travel had proven uneventful. Gabrielle had chatted about inconsequentialities, lulling Xena with the familiarity of her voice and the ordinary topics of conversation she chose, realizing that they had to avoid the subject of the letters and the men who had answered them.

At one point, Gabrielle surprised the Warrior Princess by reminding her of the name game they had been playing all those long days ago on the road to Menassos, "I think I've worked out your name," she said with a thoughtful grin, "He's someone you knew before you went to Chin. I know him and he's still alive."

"At the moment," Xena breathed sourly as her mouth twisted into a grimace of distaste.

"Ah, ha!" cried the bard jubilantly, drawing startled looks from the guards, "I must be right then. It's Caesar! Go on admit it!"

"Very well done," congratulated the Warrior with heavy sarcasm, "It's only taken you just over a moon to work it out."

"I know," smiled Gabrielle happily, "but I told you I'd get it."

"Indeed you did," agreed Xena mockingly as she tried to straighten her legs out a bit, the tight conditions of the cage cramped her muscles, and with her manacles locked to her belt, she couldn't reach to massage the aching joints.

The bard saw her friend's face give the barest twitch of discomfort as she shifted her position. Reaching through the bars, she gently massaged the calf muscles of Xena's legs, doing her best to relieve some of the Warrior Princess' suffering. It helped ... a little, but it was going to be very uncomfortable if she was forced to spend the whole time in the cage as she had for most of the trip up to Nemausus.

The evening camp was set up with the normal Roman precision and economy of effort, with the unusual addition of the wagon in the centre of the camp. The VIIth Legion had grown used to the presence of the wagon on their march up from Narbo, so it attracted far less attention than it had before, but Xena still caught the occasional murmur about treasure from voices at a distance.

With the fall of darkness, however, Flaccus appeared and hoisted himself aboard, unlocking Gabrielle's chain from the bar it had been attached to, as well as unfastening the door to the cage, "Both of you out," he told them curtly, much to their joint surprise.

Gabrielle's leg iron was collected by one of the six guards, while Xena was pulled out of her confinement and supported by two 'helpful' soldiers who took a firm grip on her arms to make sure she didn't pull any more of the stunts she'd employed that morning.

The pair were escorted from the wagon to a large tent, erected next to Caesar's command pavilion. Inside, a metal stake, topped by a ringbolt, had been driven into the ground. The free cuff of Gabrielle's leg iron, was passed through the ringbolt and fastened to Xena's left ankle in addition to the one she already wore.

The Warrior Princess scanned the inside of the tent and counted twelve guards in addition to the six who had escorted them in from the wagon. Her eyes flickered to the Centurion, "In case you're considering something foolish, you should know that there will be twenty-five men stationed around this tent as well as those in here. The Emperor, in his wisdom, is a merciful man, and he sees no reason for you to remain confined in the cage at night ... so long as you do not abuse his goodwill."

"If he's giving me room to stretch my legs," Xena told the bard in a low voice, "then it's because it suits his purpose to do so. It seems that he doesn't want me in a crippled condition, for now."

Gabrielle looked at Flaccus and asked, "When do we get something to eat? If you need someone to cook some food, I could always lend a hand."

Flaccus made a gesture and the guards tossed each of the women a blanket, "Very good of you I'm sure," replied the stiff necked Roman, although a smile almost cracked his military facade, "But I'm afraid the physician has related tales of your culinary expertise, and has advised you be kept away from any cooking in case the army comes down with an unfortunate case of flux."

"Big mouth," murmured the bard, although Xena wasn't sure if it was Patroclese she was talking about or herself.

"You'll get a hot meal just as soon as it's been prepared," assured Flaccus, before leaving the tent.

Xena and Gabrielle, spread out their blankets and sat down. Any chance of escape still seemed way off, but at least they were able to talk softly in some privacy with the guards scattered around the edge of the tent.

"You understood what I meant about Autolycus?" asked Xena softly.

"I guessed," the bard answered, "How did you get to see him?"

"He found a way into the airshaft. We only had a chance for a few words, and even that was enough to earn you a strapping." the warrior said with bitterness.

"Never mind, Xena. It was important to speak to Autolycus," she looked at the dark haired woman and said very quietly, "and getting me sent back to the tower early gave me the chance to glimpse Iolaus and Joxer out in the market."

"J ..." Xena almost blurted out before looking around hurriedly to make sure no one was taking any more notice than usual, and continuing, "Joxer? What in Hades is he doing here? You didn't send him one of your letters, did you?"

"Of course I didn't," came the bard's sharp reply, "But you know what he's like," she said in a far more hushed tone. "He's got more heart than brain and if he found out about this, I don't think anything could have stopped him from coming."

Xena nodded moodily, agreeing with the blonde's assessment, "Did you see anything of Toris," she asked barely moving her lips.

Gabrielle shook her head in a negative, "I don't know what any of them will be able to do while we're surrounded by a whole legion, anyway." she said disconsolately.

"They'll find a way to get you to safety," promised the Warrior Princess.

"What about you?" hissed the bard.

Xena's smile was chilly as she said, "Caesar won't find it so easy to keep hold of me, once he loses you."

"What if he decides that if he hasn't got me, that he'll kill you?" asked the bard as she stiffened the slight tremor in her voice.

"That's not going to happen," Xena told her confidently, "He wants to prove his dominance over me. I think I'm his challenge in life. He's tried to kill me before and failed, so I think he's going to try and find out what makes me tick."

"You can't be certain of that," muttered Gabrielle, worry evident in her face.

"Nothing's ever certain, Gabrielle," the Warrior Princess told her, "Ah, I think dinner is here," she said changing the subject as they were handed a chunk of brown bread each and a plate of stew.

The meal was normal army fare, not bad but far from something to tempt the jaded appetite. Luckily, both Xena and Gabrielle were too hungry to care. The bard had noted that her friend had lost an awful lot of weight during her captivity .. most of it due to the starvation and the fever she had contracted. The Warrior Princess was gradually putting back some of her lost body tone, but it was a slow process and would take time yet.

After they had eaten, Patroclese found his way into the tent along with his chess board. He and Xena played a game, while the Warrior Princess explained the pieces and their moves to the bard. It passed some time before they settled down to sleep.

The next day had brought the rain, but they had also made it to Arelate around about mid afternoon, although the dark, thunderous skies made it seem later. Here, Xena was again locked into an open cell, very similar to the one she had been in at Nemausus. Gabrielle had been taken somewhere else. The big difference here, was, that they had been taken to the Prefecture, which housed not only the Prefect.. Arelate's head of government .. but also the most secure dungeons.

It was early evening and Xena was dozing, when she was awakened by a stir in the guardroom. A squad of soldiers were forming up, and Flaccus was approaching the cell, key in hand. She swung herself off of the bench and waited to see what new development was occurring.

"You will come with me," he instructed motioning her to step out of the cell.

It was unusual, but perhaps Caesar was getting ready to play his game, although she hadn't expected anything to happen until they had travelled further to the north, as she was certain they would.

Surrounded by twenty guards, Xena was escorted out through the torch lit corridors she had come through that afternoon. She was aware from the changing decoration, within the building, that she was being taken into the main residency of the Prefect. Bare, damp walls of the cells beneath the ground were replaced by the drier walls of the servant's areas until she was passing elaborate hangings, costly furnishings and fine porcelains displayed to show the wealth and power of this petty bureaucrat.

A change of direction took them down some steps and through a door into a very unusual room. Xena quickly familiarised herself with her new surroundings, and began to get that feeling that charged the blood in her veins .. an expectation of trouble.

The 'room' was a twenty foot square with fifteen foot high walls that opened up to a surrounding gallery. She recognised it for what it was immediately. A fighting pit. She looked up with narrowed eyes searching for Caesar, she found him almost at once as he leaned on the rail to look down on her.

"Here's my slave, Lucullus," he told his companion, a fat, balding man who affected an ostentatious show of his wealth, sporting gold and jewels over his hands and around his neck.

Lucullus looked sharply at the shackles and the strong guard that had accompanied the slave into the pit, "It's a woman!" he almost laughed with incredulity, "You want to pit a woman against my champion gladiator, Benidor? Why I'd almost be ashamed to take your money." he chuckled, "Almost!"

"Would you care to double the wager," smiled Caesar politely, "say one hundred thousand dinars?"

Lucullus looked like a vulture about to feed, "You're sure that you can afford such stakes, Caesar. I had heard that you were running short of money."

"I can cover my bet, should my slave lose," Caesar told him grimly, "But there is just one condition to the match."

Lucullus looked at the great Caesar with a smugness a rich man feels when he looks at someone in need of funds. He knew that Caesar's personal treasury was almost empty. It took a lot of

money to buy and maintain power in Rome and Caesar had been said to have been spending lavishly on some private project. If Lucullus played his cards right, the mighty Caesar, Emperor of Rome, might just wind up in his pocket. "Are you saying you wish to back out. Are the stakes to rich for you after all?"

Caesar used all his diplomatic skill at dissemblance to deny the sleight made upon him and explained, "The bet has been made the stakes pledged, my condition is that there should be no weapons involved in this contest."

"If you're hoping to preserve the woman's life," laughed Lucullus in amusement, "you should know that Benidor is the area's bare knuckle champion and he has killed six men in unarmed fights, here in this very pit."

"Never the less, I want no weapon to fall into my slave's hands," Caesar insisted.

Lucullus took a longer look at the woman below him. He had taken the strong guard as a token of gamesmanship, but he now noted the heavy chains and the way that the soldiers watched the woman's every movement. She stood relaxed, her eyes rivetted on her 'master'.

Beads of perspiration appeared on Lucullus's brow as he considered what the loss of 100,000 dinars would do to his finances. He was a rich man, it was true. But such a huge sum would take him years to recover. Caesar looked at him with calm assurance as if reading his mind, "I think you're bluffing," Lucullus told him at last. He couldn't afford to show weakness here, "A bare handed fight is agreed for the stake proposed."

It was at that point the woman spoke. Her voice carried the whisper of ice and her tone, death, "You are assuming that I'll play your game, Caesar!" she said.

This was not how a slave talked to her master. Lucullus shot a puzzled look at his powerful guest and was surprised to see him smile. It was a grim smile, but it showed none of the wrath that Lucullus would have been ready to inflict on his own slaves if they'd had the audacity to speak to him in that way.

"You'll play the game, Xena," he told her with a superior certainty. "You see, should you lose, I'll give Benidor your friend, Gabrielle, as a prize."

- *If looks could kill*, - thought Lucullus as he observed the by-play between the two.

"Oh, yes," continued Caesar, "just in case you decided that this was your chance to kill me," he made a gesture and the Warrior Princess saw the bard brought forward to the rail, with a soldier holding a knife to her throat, "I brought Gabrielle here to watch the contest. The first false move from you and she'll have her throat cut."

"Is the woman that dangerous?" asked Lucullus almost in awe, trying to remember where he had heard mention of that name before.

"You have no idea," said Caesar almost too softly to be heard. "One last thing, Xena," he said, "Don't give the guards any trouble when the fight ends. It will only be Gabrielle who suffers, you know." He gave a nod to Flaccus, who unlocked the manacles at her wrists and removed the belt from her waist, before releasing her from the leg irons.

Lucullus watched her like he would watch a snake and for all his seeming ease, Caesar did much the same, his hand glued to the hilt of his sword as if in instant readiness to draw it. Xena stood calmly massaging her wrists, barely registering the exit of her guards while she awaited the entrance of her opponent from a door opposite.

Benidor was a hulking brute of a professional gladiator. He stood over six foot six in height, with a wide spread of shoulders that supported thick rippling muscle. His face and body bore the scars of past fights and his nose showed signs of having been broken at least twice.

Xena made eye contact with him and saw animal cunning and meanness there, but little in the way of intelligence. The trick was going to be to defeat him without getting close enough for him to pound her senseless. She started to move around him, slowly, exhibiting the smooth, fluid, grace that took control in dangerous situations.

The gladiator threw a meaty fist at her, but she danced lightly out of the way, never losing eye contact with the brute. She read the coming lunge in his eyes and was ready for it, meeting him with a sharp heeled kick to his gut, that made him draw a deep breath and the crashing, backhand, left fist that smashed into his jaw almost rocked him.

He shook his head, a look of respect crept into his eyes as he tried to plan his attack. The easy victory he had envisioned would not be forthcoming. The woman was strong and had skill. His mind registered the faint smile that played across her face. She was enjoying herself.

Gabrielle watched in fascination as Xena sparred with the giant, looking for openings to exploit. The Warrior Princess's fighting skills never ceased to exhilarate her. She was so good at what she did that you could lose yourself in the beauty and grace of the movements as she seemed to dance through the danger.

Benidor fainted with his right fist, but whipped a sizzling left hook across that would have probably decapitated Xena if it had connected fully. As it was, the punch threw her off balance as she rode it, which was enough for the gladiator to wade in and start pounding her body with heavy blows. His fists were like sledge hammers as they thudded into her rib cage. Ignoring the punishment as best she could, she clapped her hands together, with all the force she could muster, on either side of his head.

"Arrhhhh!" screamed Benidor, as his eardrums ruptured with excruciating pain. Blood trickled down his lobes as he shook his head to try and clear it. But Xena followed up with a high, leaping kick to the big man's face. It should have been enough to poleaxe a steer, but the man remained standing and his eyes showed the blood lust of a maddened beast.

Xena stood before him, and beckoned him on, "C'mon," she encouraged, "Come and get me."

As Benidor rushed at her, arms flung wide to grasp her into a crushing bear hug, Xena executed a high, forward, flip, that carried her over the hulking brute and safely behind him. As she landed, she turned quickly and planted a solid kick at the base of his spine, adding to his momentum, to send him crashing into the wall of the pit.

He stood as if pinned to the stone for a moment, before he carefully pushed himself away from the wall, and turned to face his tormentor, shaking his head groggily as he did so. Xena noted in a detached part of her mind, that the collision with the wall had broken his nose again.

Moving far faster than she expected, Benidor lunged out and grabbed her right arm, pulling her closer to him where he delivered a knee to her stomach that folded her up. Drawing back his left fist, he drove it into her face sending her tumbling to the ground. The giant threw himself down on top of his opponent, only to find that Xena had twisted, lightning quick, out of his grasp.

As Benidor tried to scramble to his feet, Xena aimed a heavy punch just behind his right ear that saw him collapse bonelessly to the ground. Breathing deeply, Xena stood above the fallen man and shot a venom filled glare at Caesar.

"Very good, Xena," congratulated Caesar contentedly. "Very well fought."

The Warrior Princess glanced to where the soldier held a dagger to the bard's throat. If he had given her just half a chance, then she would have taken it, but with Gabrielle's life being so visibly threatened, she couldn't afford to venture the risk. She forced herself to relax as Flaccus re-entered the pit and fastened the belt back around her waist, wincing a little from the bruising her ribs had taken again. She held up her wrists for him to lock the manacles in place and stood patiently while the leg irons were replaced, never once taking her eyes from Caesar's.

"Take her back to her cell," he ordered, with a satisfied smile, "Patroclese will be along to check on her injuries."

Chapter Twenty Three: The Parting of the Ways

Caesar flicked a dismissive hand at the guards attending Gabrielle, and the bard was given a shove to get her moving from the gallery and back to her own little cell; a windowless storage room in the servants quarter that had a thick oak door and a proliferation of guards around it.

Lucullus looked down on his unmoving gladiator. No one had ever come close to doing that to Benidor before. Of course the man had taken punishment in his career, but he had never been even close to losing. The Prefect licked his lips. The woman, Xena, could be the mightiest gladiator the Roman world had ever seen. With the right management, she would make her owner a fortune.

"Caesar," he said, the light of avarice shining in his eyes. "How much would it cost me to buy her from you?" "Lucullus," the Roman noble replied with a hint of amusement in his voice, "you don't have enough money. In fact I don't think there's enough gold in the world to make me sell her."

intense emotions that she was not comfortable with .. not the anger, hate and rage that were part of her make up, but the softer emotions of caring, comforting and, of course, love.

"All right, what's the damage this time?" he asked knowing it would be quicker for her to tell him, then for him to find out by examining her.

"Nothing serious," she told him dismissively. "Some bruises around the ribcage and face, a slight dislocation on the jaw, and some scraped knuckles."

"Pull your shirt up," he ordered without thinking.

Xena lifted her hands as far as they would go and then shrugged at him, "If you took these off it would be easier," she told the healer neutrally.

"Don't you ever give up?" he asked as he motioned her to stand, so he could tug the shirt free from the belt, and lift it high enough to take a critical look at the skin that was beginning to show the mottled purple of bruising.

"No," answered Xena intently, "Not ever."

Patroclese suppressed a shudder. There was an obdurate determination in the woman that was an unstoppable force, much like an avalanche, nothing could stand in its way ... and if someone should be foolish enough to do so, the end would likely be very similar. "Hold still while I fetch the liniment, it'll take the worst of the sting and stiffness out of those bruises around your ribs and face. Then I'll bathe those knuckles. We don't want any more infections, do we?" the healer said sympathetically.

Xena watched Patroclese as he ministered to her hurts with a professional thoroughness. He was a talented physician who showed care and consideration for those he treated. Even her! In some ways, especially her. Yet he had sent her into a trap and tricked Gabrielle into falling into another. She gave him a frankly considering look, before asking him, "Why do you follow Caesar?"

"I thought I'd told you," he answered as he dabbed the cold liquid onto the required area.

"No," she said slowly, "I don't believe you have."

Patroclese sighed as he stopped what he was doing to look her full in the eyes, "It must have been Gabrielle I told ... while we were on the ship" he admitted.

"Well," she prompted gently, as he continued his work with the liniment.

"My family have been in the service of the family of Caesar for generations. Lord Caesar saw that I had some talent for healing and ensured that I was trained by the best of the Roman physicians. He has always treated me and my family well. He has always been a good master to serve." He said it as if he was reeling of something he had rehearsed a dozen times.

There was a look of doubt flickering somewhere in the back of his eyes. Xena saw it and allowed the silence to draw out as she waited for Patroclese to continue. Instinct told her that if she said anything now, he would clam up and become defensive of both his master and himself.

The, almost, accusatory silence eventually forced the healer to continue his thoughts, "When I was asked to go to Greece to find you and bait my Lord's trap, I asked about you to find out what kind of woman you were," he saw the grim look in her eyes and guessed her thoughts, "No, I didn't ask Lord Caesar, it wouldn't have been right, he would have thought I was doubting him. But everyone I did ask told of a woman warrior warlord who had sacked and despoiled countless nations. You were the 'Destroyer of Nations' so I was told. I also knew of your attempt on Caesar's life ..."

Xena cut off a sharp angry laugh as she said, "Believe me, Patroclese, If I'd wanted him dead at that time, he'd be dead."

The healer bobbed his head in a nod to acknowledge the validity of the statement, he knew it wasn't an idle boast, "Anyway, from all I'd heard, I was proud that my Lord had entrusted me with such a dangerous, important task. You sounded like someone that the world would be far better off without."

Xena made a non-committal grunt. That she in some part agreed with him was not something that would be appropriate to admit at this time. Her regrets for the suffering and destruction that she had caused in her past were hers to bear alone. She could not share them with anyone, not even with Gabrielle, fully, "But?" she prompted gently.

"But you have proven to be nothing ..." he gave her a considering look, remembering the report he'd heard on her capture, and having seen the trouble she had wrought in Nemausus, chained as she was, "or shall we say, very little like those descriptions I had of you."

She looked at him with her steady blue gaze. It felt to Patroclese as if she were boring into his soul, "The evil is a part of me," she said simply, "It's a part of everyone, some more than others. Some, like Gabrielle, barely know it's there. There was a time when evil was the only thing that filled me. I was able to change that. I am not the woman I was, I am not the person that I will become. We all change a little everyday. The choices we make, the deeds we perform, they all make their marks upon our souls and change us for the better ... or the worse."

"Are you saying that by serving my Lord I have committed an act of evil?" demanded Patroclese defensively.

Xena's features were a study of seriousness as she replied, "No ... Only you can say and know that, Patroclese. You are the guardian of your own soul."

Silence descended between them once again, as the healer finished his ministrations. Once completed, he helped Xena pull the shirt back under the belt, before packing his things up and leaving the cell. She'd given him a lot to think about. He was torn between his duty to his master and what he saw as an unjust action on his part.

"I just bet you do!" answered the thief with heavy sarcasm, taking a peep around outside the alley to make sure the coast was clear. "Now come on. Iolaus and Toris will be expecting us."

They hurried quickly through the rain drenched streets as they made their way towards the west end of the city. They found the other two back at the tavern they had arranged to meet in. Toris looked unhappy in the farmer's smock and peasant cap that Autolycus had procured for him, while Iolaus looked daggers at the thief, while he sat uncomfortably in his own female attire.

- Well there's no pleasing everybody, - thought the King of Thieves with a wicked smile, *- At least the disguises got us out of Nemausus and down here to Arelate without any trouble. -*

"I don't see as there's anything to smile at," grumbled Iolaus shortly as Autolycus sat down opposite him.

"Oh c'mon, Curly," Autolycus chided him happily, just for the fun of seeing Iolaus further aggravated. Winding up Hercules' blonde buddy was a source of constant delight for the lighthearted thief, "Isn't it good to see what it's like on the other side of the fence?"

"Very funny, Autolycus," growled the short man in genuine annoyance, "I've been propositioned three times and one of them just wouldn't take no for an answer."

"What happened?" questioned Joxer as he pulled his scarf straight on his head. It felt wrong without his helmet, and the scarf was dripping wet besides.

"Let's just say that he got more than he bargained for, and the last I saw of him, he was heading for a tavern as quickly as he could get there." replied Iolaus grumpily. "You owe me for this Autolycus," he told the thief threateningly.

The thief grinned even wider, "Don't get your skirts in a twist, shorty, things have worked out pretty well so far."

"Have you found any news of them?" demanded Toris.

"They're in the Prefecture," answered Joxer, though in a quiet tone for a change.

"More interesting, however," Autolycus told them, "Is the fact that the VIIth are moving north in the morning and that Caesar is going with them."

"We'd more or less worked that out for ourselves, so it's hardly that surprising," retorted Iolaus, still festering about being the indignities of being accosted on the street by lewd men.

"What is news, though," continued the King of Thieves, not put off by the blonde man's annoyance, "is that Brutus is taking a maniple of the VIIth and is heading on to Massilia."

"Gods in Olympus!" swore the small man, "That must mean he's splitting Gabrielle and Xena up!"

"That would be my guess," agreed Autolycus, "He's probably sending Gabrielle back to Rome for safe keeping, while he keeps Xena with him."

"What are we going to do?" asked Joxer, "We can't follow both of them at once."

"We can if we split up," Iolaus answered thoughtfully, "Two of us will follow after Caesar, the other two will go after Brutus and watch for the chance to free Gabrielle."

Before anyone else could say anything, Toris told them firmly, "I'm going north after Xena. She's my sister," he said simply.

Iolaus and Autolycus looked at each other, "I'd toss you for it, shorty, but I kind of promised Xena that I'd get Gabrielle free. So I guess I have to follow Brutus."

The blonde man looked at Joxer, with something like relief on his face. He was well aware that Autolycus felt the same as he did, that Toris and Joxer needed to have levelled heads around them. Therefore if the thief was going to Rome, he'd be going north with Toris, which left Joxer to accompany Autolycus.

"What?" asked Joxer as he felt them looking at him and unaware of the by-play between them.

"Looks like you're coming with me, oh mighty mistress of mayhem," Autolycus told him with barely concealed reluctance.

"That's Master of Mayhem," corrected Joxer in irritation.

The thief looked him up and down insultingly before saying dismissively, "Whatever." He looked at Toris and Iolaus, "Seriously, though, you should be very careful. There are descriptions plastered everywhere around this city, and I have no doubt that it will be the same wherever you follow them to."

"They'll be looking for four men," Iolaus pointed out.

"That doesn't mean to say they won't recognise the two of you, just because there is only two of you. Most Roman's are smarter than that," pointed out the thief.

"We know the risks," put in Toris, angry and impatient, "What would you have me do? Abandon her?"

Autolycus gave the dark haired man a long steady look before asking, "Are all your family so hard headed?"

Toris had the grace to look a little embarrassed over the ungraciousness of his words and tone, before offering a bear quirk of his lips as he returned in a milder way, "Mostly, yes."

Without moving, or opening her eyes, the Warrior Princess growled, "What do you want, Caesar?"

Her sensory abilities intrigued him. He couldn't understand how she could possibly know it was him, or that another pair of eyes was watching her, when her every move was observed by at least six men, day and night. He watched her as she swung her feet to the ground and sat up to face him. The look she gave him was filled with cold animosity .. the kind that is built up over years, nurtured, matured and allowed to cool into burning ice. He knew she would not speak again until he did, and he was tempted to allow the silence to stretch. However, he had come for a purpose and he did not intend to allow Xena to manipulate him this time, "We travel north tomorrow," he informed her.

The woman raised an eyebrow at him. Her eyes were cool and mocking, almost as if she knew what he was going to say, almost as if she knew what he was planning. She did not speak, and so he was forced to continue with what he had to say. "Your friend, however, will be going to Rome," he told her. He noticed the slight tensing of her muscles, and perhaps a faint gleam in her eyes, maybe of hope at the possibility of breaking loose and getting to Gabrielle before he could do anything about it.

"I'm telling you this because I want you to understand that the rules haven't changed significantly," he told her with assurance. He watched her watching him. There seemed to be an element of a cat watching a mouse here, but it was difficult to know just who was playing what part. "Admittedly, I won't have the bard to hand to punish for any transgression of the rules," he told her. "But believe me, Xena. Should you manage to escape from me, she'll be dead before you ever get to her. Messenger pigeons will get to Rome long before you can make it there, and your irritating friend will die a messy, painful, death. Believe it's so, because her well being lies in your hands."

She hadn't moved a muscle. Hadn't batted an eyelid. Whatever she felt at his announcement, she had no intention of showing it to him. And ... there seemed to remain a glimmer of hope in her eyes, - *Is Flaccus right?* - he questioned himself, - *Did she manage to speak with one of those four men. If so, it was almost certainly the thief. His reputation is ... impressive.* -

Well he had the means to crush that spark of belief, "Oh," he said with casual indifference, "I wouldn't count on much help from the thief .. Autolycus isn't it?." He saw her eyes narrow at his words, "Whatever he told you, he and his companions have troubles of their own. You know, Joxer and Iolaus ... and of course your brother ... Toris." He saw her fists start to clench before she forced them to relax, "I know all about them, Xena," Caesar told her with calm assurance, "It won't be too long before they join you in the cells."

Xena rose slowly from the bench and moved with a deadly menace over to where he stood. She said nothing, she made no overtly dangerous movement, but her whole body seemed to radiate an intense, deadly, intent that Caesar found difficult to ignore. Yet he met her look for look; a smile his response to the bleak frostiness of her attitude.

"Get some rest," he advised her, as he turned his back on her with apparent contempt for any threat she posed. "You'll need all your energy for what lies ahead of you."

Xena stood watching him until he had left the dungeon, before returning, with carefully studied indifference, to the bench upon which she lay down once more. Her thoughts boiling within her. It was obvious that all four of her would-be rescuers were safe for the time being, or Caesar would have delighted in showing them off to her. If they were loose then, with luck, they would go after Gabrielle and free her. Caesar probably wouldn't expect that. He failed to appreciate the love that the bard inspired in the people who knew her and counted her as a friend. Being unable to love anyone but himself, it was hardly surprising, but it could prove vital in this situation. He'd judge by his own standards and would almost certainly expect the four to come after her. - *His prize!* - she snarled silently to herself.

It was something to cling to. So long as the four men acted sensibly, and freed Gabrielle, then Caesar would be hamstrung. His efforts to hold and control the Warrior Princess would be severely hampered, and she just might get the chance to turn the tables on him But would Toris see it that way and understand that Gabrielle was the key to her freedom? She fell into a light sleep with the question running through her mind.

Chapter Twenty Four: Dreams and Reality

Gabrielle had watched the pit fight with some concern. She hadn't been sure just how much Xena's illness had taken out of her. She knew her friend had lost a lot of weight during her captivity, and was worried over how it would effect her strength. Much of her disquiet had been silenced by the familiar way that the Warrior Princess had handled the contest. She had taken a bit more pounding than the bard thought was normal, but Benidor was, after all, a professional gladiator.

When Xena had shot a look in her direction, after she had laid out her hulking opponent, Gabrielle had twitched her a brief smile, but she could tell that her friend had not really registered it: she was looking to see if there was the faintest chance of breaking free of the snare they were caught in.

She had swallowed hard as she felt the cold metal of the knife pressed tighter to her exposed throat. Xena's eyes had been on that dagger and, with it pressed against the bard's life, she had forced herself to relax and allowed herself to be re-chained. Gabrielle's heart had gone out to her best friend. The Warrior Princess was enduring humiliation and suffering at the hands of her oldest and deepest enemy, all because of the love she bore for the bard, - *Oh, Xena,* - she thought helplessly, - *this is all such a mess.* -

When Xena had been escorted from the pit, Caesar had dismissed her and her guards without a second thought. She had no importance to him, other than as an instrument of control over the Warrior Princess. As she was roughly shoved towards the side door from the gallery, she had heard Lucullus's bid to buy the dark haired warrior.

- *So now she's to be bartered over like some ... some ... slave!* - brooded the bard angrily as her hand reached towards the collar at her own throat. - *But that's the problem, isn't it? To him, and the Roman world, we are slaves. Property to be bought and sold like cattle.* - The thought disgusted her. They might not be treated like conventional slaves, but the collars proclaimed their status to anyone who cared to look.

As she was marched back through the prefecture's corridors, she allowed her thoughts to dwell on Caesar's intentions for them. She doubted that there was any price high enough to make him release Xena. He would never trust her out of his control. Besides, if this evening's wager was anything to go by, he could make a fortune in betting on combats. The bard felt a growing certainty that that was Caesar's intention. Xena would be condemned to a life as a 'prize' fighter, giving Caesar his vengeance and winning him a fortune.

Gabrielle shook her head in frustration. She couldn't allow that to happen. Yet while she was held hostage for the Warrior Princess's compliance, that was exactly what would happen. She had a choice here. If she could remove herself from Caesar's control, then Xena would have her own freedom to choose.

Depression descended upon her. Even if she were able to escape, or failing that, end her own life, what would Xena do? - *She'd go after Caesar and kill him, even though it would almost certainly result in her own death,* - shaking her head again, she knew she was as chained as the Warrior Princess, - *I can't allow Xena to waste her life in that way,* - she told herself with forceful determination. - *There has to be a way out of this There just has to be!* -

When they reached the storeroom door, she was shoved roughly inside. It was dark and airless, for they had given her no light and there was no window. She felt her way cautiously to the pile of grain sacks that she had used as a bed before she'd been taken to witness the fight in the pit. Slumping onto them despondently, the bard curled up into a tight ball and allowed the tears of anger, frustration and helplessness to flow down her cheeks in quiet testament to her misery. Gradually, a restless sleep claimed her and she descended into the painful world of guilt ridden nightmares that assailed her whenever she was parted from Xena.

In a landscape of twisting grey and purple light, Gabrielle awoke to find herself alone.

Truly alone!

No sound, no object, no person, no sky no ground. She felt abandoned, insignificant and afraid

She hugged her knees close to her body and felt her nakedness. She knew that she wore nothing ... nothing except the silver collar around her neck.

She screwed her eyes shut, rocking back and forth as the silent tears streamed down her face.

She felt lost. Something ... someone? ... was missing! Her mind raced as she tried to

remember who she was, what she was, what she had lost!

She had no idea how long she was captivated in her misery. Time had no meaning here.

Life had no meaning.

And yet

AND YET!

The thought was demanding and somewhere from her concealed memory a face floated into her minds eye. A dark face, hard and unforgiving. Grim in outlook and with eyes that promised the chill harshness of death.

She drew a quick, fearful breath as she realised that the face was looking at her. Cold and merciless eyes bored into her and she flinched from the accusation she read there.

She forced the image from her mind, but as she relaxed her will, the woman returned to stand before her. Her flesh in tatters, blood dripping from her wounds, her head bowed in subjugation. She looked up, her eyes holding a plea that was foreign to a wild and unfettered nature, a plea for release.

Gabrielle screamed!

She was alone. The shifting grey and purple of the impossible landscape swirled around her adding to her unease. She stood naked, but for the bright silver neck. With nothing else to do, and weighed down with a sense of hopelessness, she started to

walk.

Nothing changed, no one came, she was alone.

Feeling the tears burn hot tracks down her cheeks, she dashed them away with frustrated anger. Where they fell tiny flames sprang up. As she watched in mesmerized fascination, the flames grew and writhed together becoming a solid fountain of She backed cautiously away from what she perceived as a threat to her ... to everything she

held dear. To the very existence of the world.

A thick, snaking, tendril of flame lashed out at her, plucking her from her feet with startling ease, throwing her high into the air above the core of it's existence. She hung there helplessly, wrapped in the fiery intensity of malevolent evil.

And then

AND THEN!

A naked, scar clad form launched herself into the heart of the fire, laughing at the evil that she found there, and delivered the trapped form of the dreamer from the flame's grasp, throwing her to safety.

As she watched, her rescuer was gripped by the furnace heat which slowly melted away all that had been of the woman, all except the vivid memory of a pair of piercingly cold blue eyes and the glitter of a silver slave collar.

Gabrielle Screamed!

She was alone. The disturbed roiling of the purple and grey landscape made her feel sick as violent orange streaks shot through the striation adding a further level of unreality to the place.

She stood naked, except for a silver metal collar fastened around her neck, and a bracelet that seemed to fade in and out of her sight as she looked at it. As it solidified she could hear a groan of desperate pain, that faded as the bracelet became insubstantial.

She stood puzzled as to what it could mean. That the bracelet was precious to her she had no doubt, but it seemed to be an abstraction of a lost reality, something she had and had lost all too soon.

As the thought loomed in her mind, her memory folded and she stood witness as a coldly

determined woman drove a sword through the chest of a familiar man.

"Perdicus!" she shouted in crazed grief, "No!"

The blonde haired woman shot her a look filled with psychotic hunger, "That'll do!" she said maliciously before dissolving into nothingness.

She ran to the man who died in her arms. Another face hovered close to her own. Dark and strong, compassion filling her blue eyes as she gazed down.

And then she strode away and was seemed to be chasing after the insubstantial form of the murderer. She watched the progress of the chase with eyesight enhanced by time and

memory. She saw them both tumble down a sand dune and into ... a cage!

Borne down with chains the dark haired woman knelt before a tarnished god ... no a man!

He reached out with a strong hand and grabbed the woman's hair. A silver collar glinted at her throat.

The dreamer raised a hand to her own

A hand slashed down and the golden skin above the collar was sliced to release a fountain of gushing crimson that smothered the dreamer as she watched.

Gabrielle screamed!

She was alone! The landscape around her swirled in a nauseating mix of grey, purple, orange and crimson. She was naked except for the collar she wore at her throat. She stood staring into nothingness, unchecked tears running unnoticed down her face.

Wild images of destruction, pain, fire, death, pain, deceit, jealousy, hatred, pain ... above all pain, hers and another's, gripped her mind as she struggled to make sense of what she saw before her. To make sense of what she needed to do to make it right.

She felt the cold metal appear in her hand and looked down at the sharp blade of the knife.

With infinite slowness she raised the dagger until it hovered in front of her chest. It's sharp caress could end all the suffering, all the torment. All she had to do was plunge it into her heart and everything would end.

She looked up and saw the dark woman standing in front of her.

A sad look in the ice-blue eyes.

"It's for the best, you know," she told her through her veil of tears.

"Without me you'll be free."

"Without you I'm nothing," came the soft reply. "Don't do this, Gabrielle. I won't survive without you."

Her voice was hard with the certainty she spoke.

"Xena, without me he cannot hold you," she told her friend fervently.

"But who will hold my soul, Gabrielle? Who will be my light?" came the pleading answer.

"Xena," she sobbed.

"I love you Gabrielle Don't leave me!"

Gabrielle awoke!

The room was pitch black when she opened her eyes. She had no idea what time it was: the fuzzy yellow light that slid grudgingly under the thick door did not help her to judge. She could hear the occasional comment from one of the guards beyond the heavy wooden door, but they gave her no clues either.

She scrubbed miserably at her face, smearing away the dampness she found on her cheeks. She hated nightmares. Her occasional gift for prophecy often allowed glimpses of the future creep into her dreams, but her nightmares were nearly always formed from the awfulness of past doubts, guilt and fears.

Normally, she had a strong pair of arms to cling to when she awoke from such torment. A friend that would hold her until she stopped shaking and could make the nightmares vanish in her calm certainty. This time she was alone! She shuddered at the vivid images that the thought conjured up in her mind, clinging to that last desperate plea that rang in her memory as she awoke. Whatever happened, she would not abandon her friend if she could help it. However ill used they were at this time, however much she felt the guilt of chaining Xena to her captivity, she could not relinquish her friend to her darker self. For she knew in her heart that, whatever the Warrior

Princess had promised, grief would drive her into the arms of the darkness that she had struggled so hard to leave behind.

She hugged her knees to her chest and rested her head on them as she waited to see what morning would bring. She could not face returning to sleep in case the nightmares returned to claim her. She stifled a yawn as she held herself in her uncomfortable position as slowly, her heavy eyes drifted shut once more.

That was how Patroclese found her some candlemarks later. He entered the bard's makeshift cell, with a lantern to pierce the darkness, and found her huddled against the far wall, jammed in amongst some grain sacks. Her face was smudged and stained with the trail of the tears she had shed and, in her sleep, it made her seem so very young, innocent and vulnerable. - *Maybe, just maybe, Xena's past deeds have earned her the fate she's now living, - his mind told him, - but Gabrielle is a different case altogether. Her only crime is that of being the friend of the Warrior Princess!* - the thought made him feel sick. He put the lantern down onto a clear space on one of the shelves that lined the walls of the storeroom, and moved over to the bard, whom he gently shook into wakefulness.

Gabrielle returned to consciousness with startled disorientation. She had not intended to let sleep reclaim her, and the fact that it had been dreamless did little to compensate for the fact that she felt stiff and sore from the position she had drifted off in.

"Hey," he asked kindly, reaching out to touch her cheek, "are you okay?"

Crabby from nightmares, poor rest and an aching back, she slapped his hand away and demanded, "What do you care?" She desperately wanted to be with Xena, to talk to her and be comforted by her. It would be difficult in the wagon, surrounded by prying eyes. But it would be better than nothing.

"When are we leaving?" she asked grumpily as he handed her a soft roll of nutty bread for her breakfast.

"Caesar and the VIIth will be heading north within the candlemark. I just dropped in to wish you a good voyage." he told her.

"Voyage," she asked a little bemused, "Where's he sending us?" she asked, hopes rising that once away from Caesar, Xena might be able to figure a way to get them out of their trouble.

"You're going to Rome," Patroclese explained quietly, "Brutus will be commanding your escort. Xena will be going north with Caesar."

Gabrielle looked at him blankly, unable to take it in for a moment. After all Caesar had been at great pains to use her against Xena's indomitable will. If he sent her to Rome, then surely his grip on Xena would be loosened, "Why?" she asked in confusion.

"Lord Caesar feels that now Xena knows that he has you, there is no need to keep you quite so close. He can, after all, get a messenger pigeon to Rome long before Xena could get to you there." He did not spell out his meaning, he didn't have to. He knew the bard was smart enough to see the threat.

"Can I see her?" she asked quietly.

The healer shook his head, "My Lord sees no sense in risking another eruption like the one in Nemausus."

The bard looked blankly at the wall, misery plain to read in her eyes. She sniffed, bringing herself back to the reality of her present and asked quietly, "Who are you going with, Patroclese?"

"My Lord has commanded that I accompany him," the healer told her.

"Does he intend to make her fight again?" she asked dejectedly and grimaced at his nod of ascent. She sniffed again, "Will you give her a message for me?" the bard asked.

Patroclese smiled kindly and said, "Of course."

"Tell her not to take any chances, and that I want her to keep her promises," she told him, "It's important." A tear escaped and traced a crazy pattern down a cheek streaked with dirt and other tears.

The healer half held out a hand to comfort the young woman, before letting it fall back to his side. Gabrielle hadn't seemed to notice, but he feared another rejection, - *After all*, - he thought wryly, - *I can't blame her for that can I. I hardly deserve her trust now, do I!* - "Gabrielle," he said in a voice almost too quiet to hear, "I'm sorry."

The look she gave him was filled with anxiety and pain. She stared at him for the longest time before she grudgingly replied, "You thought you were doing the right thing You were only following His orders. I forgive you, and I'm sure Xena does too."

The words twisted like a knife in his gut. How could she say that after all he had put her through ... put both of them through. His certainty about the justness of his actions had been so strong. Yet from his first meeting with the Warrior Princess, that certainty had been slowly eroded. And now ... - *And now it was too late to do anything about this mistake.* - He felt lower than a worm! He stumbled, unseeing, from the storeroom, leaving the bard to munch with disinterest on her breakfast as she awaited the arrival of the guards who would escort her to Rome. The soldiers outside on duty, swung the door closed on her.

Chapter Twenty Five: Path of a Dagger

Xena was ready for the guards when they roused her out in preparation for the march to the north. She'd been given a breakfast of the meat porridge that was part of the staple diet of the legionaries, as well as a soft roll of a nut flavoured bread that was, - *Quite tasty*, - she admitted to

herself. She hoped that Gabrielle got to have some, as she knew that the bard was partial to nut breads.

Thinking of Gabrielle caused the slight furrow of a frown to appear on her brow. She had been troubled by turbulent images in her sleep during the night. They had been disturbing, especially as the Warrior Princess rarely dreamed. She avoided allowing herself to fall into a deep enough sleep to have them, for her dreams were almost always nightmarish relivings of her past career. Last night had been different. It was almost as if she had been looking in on someone else's nightmares, and from the images she saw, those dreams could have belonged to only one person ... Gabrielle.

Xena knew that she and the bard had developed a strong link during their years together. Their dreams had overlapped in the past. It was possible that she had found a glimpse of Gabrielle's nightmares. But if they were strong enough to create a link to Xena's light sleep, then she knew that the bard would have awoken shaking and miserable.

On the few occasions that it had happened since the dreamscape passage, where the Warrior Princess had saved her friend from being sacrificed to Morpheus (one of the Dream God Brothers) the bard had needed the reassurance of a friend's closeness to recover from the fit of shaking that had assailed her. The last time it had happened, Xena had spent the residue of that night with a protective arm around the bard's shoulders, while Gabrielle had sobbed herself back to a more peaceful slumber. She half-smiled at the memory. She'd got no more rest that night and had suffered a crick in her neck that had made her grouchy for most of the day.

Her look turned bleak as her thoughts returned to last night. If her glimpse into Gabrielle's dream was accurate, then the bard would have been in sore need of comfort. She was well aware that her friend was a capable woman. She snorted to herself, - *If I forget, Gabrielle is pretty quick to remind me*, - she acknowledged. But the bard also had an innocent vulnerability, that stood at the core of who she was, which made Xena so protective of her. It was an essence that was worth protecting, - *It's what makes her special*, - the warrior recognised, - *Warriors are a dinar a dozen*, - she thought wryly, - *but the world has too few Gabrielles!* - She hoped that the bard had managed to overcome her terrors of the night, but fervently wished she had been there for her. For all that Gabrielle had given her .. companionship, trust, friendship and love .. it was the least she could do for her friend.

Blasius had drawn escort duty for the morning ... again! and Xena watched him through narrowed eyes as he and the six fresh watchdogs, moved through the guardroom and approached the cell. She glared at the man moodily. Of all the officers in the guard detail that watched over her, he was the only one that she had developed an active dislike for. He made the hairs on the nape of her neck bristle, and the stubborn streak, that ran in her blood, scrambled to the surface looking for a fight. She forced it down, with regret. She wouldn't be responsible for Gabrielle taking another beating ... if it was at all humanly possible to avoid it.

The door was unlocked and the optio entered with his men. He roughly, checked that each cuff of her fetters was still locked tight by giving the chains a hard yank, watching the Warrior Princess for any reaction, and getting none, other than the raised, mocking eyebrow. He then

turned his attention to the belt around her waist, noticing that Flaccus had secured it less tightly than it had originally been.

With a malevolent look on his face, knowing that her body was bruised and sore from the previous evening's fight, he viciously pulled the fastening as tight as it would go and allowed a malicious smirk to appear as Xena was unable to stifle the slight wince that creased her features, "You'll do," he told her, giving her a shove towards the cell door.

The Warrior Princess was ready for the push and so had no trouble keeping her balance. She wished that she could see Gabrielle for a few moments before they took their separate paths, but knew that Caesar would have refused such a request even if she could have forced herself to ask it.

Her shuffling, chain restricted, footsteps managed to keep up with the pace set by Blasius, who marched behind her, ready to add impetus to her movement with a firm hand in the back. The rest of the guard formed up around them and they wound their way out to where the wagon and cage awaited her.

Once again, it was a long day's journey to Evignan, another extensive and prosperous city. The travelling had been monotonous, she'd had nothing to look at but her guards and the uninspiring canvass that covered the wagon. Her cramped muscles were soon aching, and this time she had no Gabrielle there to massage the pain out of them. Even the food was unimaginative and dull. She'd had the normal trail rations of flatbread, hard cheese, some nuts and raisins, washed down with some of the sour wine that the Roman army favoured.

Her close guard had been changed at three candlemark intervals to keep them fresh and alert, although they hadn't had a great deal to watch as Xena had resolutely kept her eyes closed and dozed through the day, shifting only when stiff muscles and sore bruises demanded a change of position to give them some ease.

It was edging into late evening and the sun was beginning to dip towards the horizon. Once again, the VIIth Legion made camp outside the city, while the maniple, commanded by Flaccus, escorted Caesar, along with his personal guards and the wagon, into the city where they took up residence in the prefecture once more.

The cells available here, for once, gave Xena a modicum of privacy. She was lodged in a stone walled room, that had a heavy, iron bound door, with only a tiny grill in it. The floor was stone, and covered with reasonably fresh straw, but there was nothing else within the small room.

Reluctant to leave men within her reach, Flaccus opted to fix the collar with a chain and secure it to the wall opposite the door. She had enough slack to be able to lay down, but the chain ensured that she would be in sight of the peep hole at all times. One set of eyes remained on her, yet she hadn't realised how much of a strain it had been having six men observing her every move, until the intrusion had been lessened to just one. The subconscious relief was almost enough to make her feel good. The relative privacy also gave her the chance to try out the toothpick.

By laying down, and turning her back to the door, she carefully tugged at her shirt until she manoeuvred her collar to a position from which she was able to retrieve the metal pick. With her senses alert for any sounds that would warn her of someone seeking entry to the cell, she carefully manipulated the pick in the lock that secured her wrists to the belt around her waist.

It was a slow process. She was aware of the technique, for being within Autolykus's body (when she had sought a way back to her own after her death) had improved her own knowledge of how to open a lock, so she felt confident enough to tackle more than fairly simple ones. But she had never had occasion to practice and it was far from as easy as the thief's memories had made it appear. However, she persevered, learning that touch and feel were key to the operation along with patience.

- *It is*, - she decided, - *like trying to do one of those metal puzzles that innkeepers keep for patron's entertainment*. - The only problem being, she couldn't see the shape of the parts or how they fitted together.

Finally, she was rewarded with a soft click as she manipulated the mechanism into its correct alignment. Allowing herself a pleased grin, she reversed the process, so that she put the padlock firmly back in place. Not wanting to push her luck, she slid the pick back into her collar, until she got another chance to practice. She was certain that the locks on the metal cuffs were going to be far more of a challenge to her basic skills.

Some time later, Patroclese showed up bringing his chess set with him, along with a bowl of stew and a loaf of fresh brown bread for her evening meal. He passed her the bread and stew, allowing her to eat while he set the pieces up on the board, "I saw Gabrielle before we left," he told her conversationally.

Xena, spoon halfway to her mouth, stopped and looked at him, "Was she ... alright?" she asked, a slight hesitation betraying her concern.

Patroclese continued laying out the pieces of the game, "She'd been crying," he told her quietly, "but she seemed okay."

The warrior began to slowly eat once more, concern evident in her eyes as her thoughts seemed to drift away. The bard had a tendency to have bad dreams. After Xena had 'died', Gabrielle had been assaulted by nightmares that drained her emotionally and physically. She hoped that this was not a reoccurrence of that problem, because this time she couldn't see how she was going to find her way back to her friend and cure them, "Sorry?" she said as she realised that the healer had been speaking to her.

Patroclese gave her a long look, wondering what had caused the woman's distraction and the definite flicker of worry that showed in her blue eyes, "I said," he repeated, "that Gabrielle wanted me to tell you to avoid taking chances, and to remind you that she wanted you to keep your promises."

Xena's lips twitched as she fought the urge to smile, "Trust Gabrielle to say that," she muttered.

She wiped out the bowl with the last of the bread and handed it back to the healer. She looked at him with a raised eyebrow as he held his other hand out, waiting until she flipped the spoon to him. He shook his head in grudging respect for her persistence as he stood and took them to the door and handed them to the guard outside.

By the time he had come back, Xena had made her first move on the board. He sat back down in the straw and moved his response, "So, what happens tomorrow? Another march north?" she asked conversationally.

Patroclese watched as she swept her high priest across the board, before answering, "We rest here tomorrow. I think my Lord is arranging another contest for you before we move on," he told her, not meeting the blue eyes that he could feel boring into him.

She could feel the rage rising within her. It was now obvious that at least one of Caesar's plans for her was to turn her into a gladiator, of sorts. The thought of being used so made her blood boil with outrage, but deep within her, she was aware of the stirring of that dark core that relished the prospect of battle. Her fury at both Caesar for using her thus, and herself for her combative desire, roared through her body, leaving her shaking with wrath as she fought back the emotions that gripped her so violently.

By the time she had herself under control, Patroclese had backed away from her so that he was almost at the cell's door. What he had seen in her eyes had terrified him. Her muscles had been quivering as she had strained against her fetters, and the Xena he had come to know seemed to have vanished leaving behind the murderous slayer from the dark stories of her past.

He swallowed hard as he saw the woman slowly force the violent anger back into its box. Whatever else she was, whatever she would become, the healer had just had a glimpse of the dark nature that lurked forever just below the surface, showing him that the deadly danger of Xena was far from a myth. His heart and his head hammered at each other once more, - *Lord Caesar was right, the woman's an animal and she must be kept under restraint*, - he told himself. While arguing, - *How can I condemn her for her rage at being treated as she is?* - They were arguments he had wrestled with for a long time now and still he could find no answer that would satisfy his conscience.

Xena looked at the obviously badly shaken healer. She shook her head ruefully, knowing that she could intimidate most people without really trying and, when she allowed her mask to slip, it could petrify even the most hardened warrior. She could understand that. It scared her. Losing control to her animal self, which had emerged after her first encounter with Caesar, was something she fought against every moment of her life. "It's okay, Patroclese," she told him softly, "I won't hurt you." She watched as he edged back to where he had been sitting, flinching at her slightest movement. - *Whatever progress I may have been making with the healer has probably been shattered*, - she thought disconsolately. "It's your move ... I think," she said, trying to break the tension.

When they had finished the game, Patroclese packed up the set and returned to his own quarters. He seemed to have regained some of his ease with her, but he left the Warrior Princess in a

darkly brooding mood, as she contemplated the monster within herself. It was at times like these that she believed she had earned whatever Caesar threw at her. For all of the death, destruction and horror she had caused in her life, surely she deserved punishment? And what could be more fitting than her current torment at the hands of her hated enemy. She spent a long miserable night wishing for the presence of Gabrielle. The bard would have soothed her fears and the loathing she felt for herself.

The following morning was spent alone in the cell, other than when breakfast and lunch were delivered to her. She amused herself by practising with the toothpick and working on the padlock that held her manacles to the leather belt. As she exercised on them, the manipulations became easier to accomplish, and the success it brought, gradually lifted some of the gloom from her.

Mid afternoon, Flaccus came for her. Releasing the chain from the ring it was shackled to, he used it as a leash as he motioned her out of the cell and ordered the soldiers to form up around her as usual. Keeping a firm lid on her anger and the self loathing that lurked at the back of her mind, she moved along with them as she was escorted to another pit room that bore marked similarities to the first she had fought in. However, this one was rimmed with sharp metal spikes, that jutted out from the top of the wall, over the pit just below the level of the gallery, to prevent fighters from turning on their masters.

She looked up and found Caesar immediately. Her eyes drawn to him like a loadstone. For the moment he ignored her. He was speaking with three men, their wealth obvious from their dress and from their attitudes. She glanced around the gallery and noticed the archers placed strategically. She counted twenty of them, and her eyes narrowed as she noted they all carried small hand sized dart crossbows cocked and ready for use.

- Bet those darts carry some kind of quick acting sleep drug on them, - she grimly assessed.

Finally, Caesar turned towards the pit and gestured towards Xena, "Gentlemen," he smirked at the men with him, "this is my slave. If you are agreeable, then the wager is that she will take on your three fighters, with the one stipulation that no weapons are to be used."

"Are you serious, Caesar?" questioned a tall greying man of aristocratic bearing and aquiline features, "Three against one? and our men professional gladiators while, your slave is nothing but a barbarian wench? Surely you jest!" he laughed.

"Not if you are willing to give me the odds agreed upon," Caesar told him his voice full of dark humour, "and the woman is a Greek, not a barbarian. Although I will grant you she's a savage."

The short, dark middle aged man standing off to one side gave a snort of contempt, "Barbarian ... Greek, what does it matter. She's a wench and will not provide much of an afternoon's sport against all three of our men. I'll grant you she has the look of a fighter," he said speculatively as he ran a considering finger down his jaw, "but I'd rather see a good match than a poor one, even if I do get to take your money."

The third man had been looking carefully at the guards, the chains and the bearing of the woman standing, head erect, below him. His chain of office declared him to be the Prefect of the city, and his shrewd look suggested little escaped his attention. A wry smirk appeared on his face as he turned to the others, "Quintus," he said clapping the small man on the shoulder, "Sertorius," he said including the nobleman, "I think my friend Julius may have gulled us. I think three against one may be very poor odds, and that we'll be paying out on the stakes we made. However if I'm wrong, I have some criminals that can entertain us if necessary."

"Damn it Gaius," protested the tall, elderly Sertorius, "I didn't come here just to watch a bunch of amateurs scrap it out. I was promised a real contest."

"And it will be Sertorius," promised Caesar, "other wise I'll pay you double the wager ... as long as it's your men that win."

"Oh, lets get on with it," Quintus drawled in a bored tone. "I'm sure we'll be able to find something to amuse ourselves with for the rest of the afternoon,"

Caesar turned his attention to Flaccus who stood waiting with Xena in the pit, "Alright Centurion, take them off," he ordered and watched as the officer unlocked the Warrior Princess from her shackles, "Very well, Xena," he began, and a smirk sparked in his eyes as he heard the men beside him register the name and understand exactly who he had pitted against their men, "Gabrielle's not here, which is why we've got the archers."

That brought another round of whispered comment from the three local men, who had obviously thought they were some form of guard for Caesar, - *Well they are, - thought Xena, - just not against your machinations.* -

"Not even you can catch the amount of darts they can fire at you, and just bear in mind what will happen to your friend should you managed to get out of there." The whispering had continued until Caesar halted and Gaius interrupted.

"Julius, are we right in presuming that this is the infamous Warrior Princess of Greece? The so called 'Destroyer of Nations?'" he questioned.

Caesar watched his captive as she carefully massaged her wrists and ankles, "She has worn those titles at times," he conceded. Then added for her benefit, "Now her only title is slave." His eyes gleamed as he saw her stiffen at his barb.

"My friend," laughed the prefect ruefully, "I think once this is over, you had better give us a detailed account of just how you managed to acquire this woman as a slave." Gaius gave a signal and three men, stripped to the waist entered the pit.

Xena dropped into a fighting crouch, her mind assessing the capabilities of those she faced, watching how they moved and how they carried themselves. All were tall, only one being slightly shorter than she was. They were muscular with scars decorating their bodies. They

spread out to flank her, intending to back her up to the wall of the pit and then close in for an easy kill, so to speak.

Allowing herself to drift backwards, Xena, startlingly let out her ululating cry, "Yi,yi,yi,yi,yi,yi!" and leapt into a back flip so that her feet landed halfway up the pit wall. Pushing off she propelled herself in a forward flip, over the heads of her opponents, landing behind the shortest one whom she flattened with an elbow jab to the base of the skull.

She spun smoothly to face the two others who scattered apart to either side, trying to make her split her attention between them. The one to her left was a younger man, with close cropped hair and an arrogant belief in his own ability. The second man was older, his head was shaved and his eyes showed the experience of past fights. A glance told her that the man she had elbowed would be no problem for a while.

As one, the men sprang for her. She tried to sidestep them, fooling the younger of the pair .. who rushed past in an uncontrolled lunge .. but failed to divert the older man who threw an arm around her neck, and smashed a hard fist into her back just above her unprotected kidneys. Pain flared, which she tried to ignore, as she forced herself to concentrate on the gladiator's arm as it tightened around her neck.

Using her elbows again, she rammed them back into his muscular rib section, making him grunt from the force, and slacken his hold a little. Dropping to her knees, the sudden dead weight sent the man catapulting over her head to slam into the wall in front of them. He slumped to the ground shaking his head to clear it.

Before Xena could get back to her feet, the younger fighter slammed a booted foot into her ribs, causing her to grunt as the breath rushed from her body. A second kick followed the first, before a hand dropped down and grabbed a handful of her long hair, pulling her up enough to receive a cracking right fist to her jaw.

Fighting off pain and dizziness, the Warrior Princess launched herself from her knees to tackle the gladiator around the waist and take him down to the ground where she straddled him and delivered a stunning left fisted backhand punch that was so hard the spectators heard the jaw crack. Before she could finish him off, though, the older fighter had recovered his wits and dove into her, carrying her back onto the floor of the pit. Straddling her as she had his team mate, the gladiator threw a right hand punch at her face, only to have it stopped in mid-flight by a grip like a vice. He threw a left to try and distract her, just to have it captured in the same way.

He looked at her with a growing awareness of fear, as she raised an eyebrow at him, and then with incredible power and impressive ease, she tightened her fingers, crushing his hands, before shoving her hands forward so that the fighters wrists bent back at an alarming angle, snapping the bones with an audible, "**CRACK!**" He screamed as she shoved him aside and sprang lithely to her feet.

The first man she had downed had recovered from her blow, and was advancing on her, a look of wild anger in his eyes. A quick glance at the other two men told her the older one was out of the

reckoning, while the younger one (with the broken jaw) was slowly climbing back to his feet. She smiled at the gladiator advancing on her and beckoned him on.

When he rushed her to secure her in bear hug, she chopped down hard with both hands into the base of his neck, before crashing her forehead into his nose, driving him to the ground with the force of the blow and laying him out with a stunning roundhouse right.

It was then that she heard the clang of metal as a dagger hit the ground by the feet of the last man standing. He grabbed it triumphantly, anger and pain flaring from his eyes as he swung to tackle Xena.

"Damn it!" swore Caesar vehemently, motioning for a messenger to get to Flaccus as quickly as possible, "Whoever let that knife drop in there, better have a damn good excuse!"

"Come Julius," grinned Sertorius, "at least it will make the rest of this fight interesting. If it's the bet you're concerned about, we can always call it void. And I'm sure that Olan won't cut her up to badly."

Caesar glared at the man, "He won't even scratch her," he snarled furiously, "But she'll get that weapon and as soon as she does she becomes ten times more dangerous, just with that dagger."

The other three men paled somewhat as they contemplated that concept, and just how angry Caesar was at the situation. They flicked worried glances at each other, the furious man beside them and then returned their gaze to the pit to watch the outcome of the fight.

The Warrior Princess eyed the fighter, sweeping the dagger before him as he approached, while she made her retreat towards the wall. Her eyes locked to his, reading his actions as they registered there. It was his eyes that would tell her his intentions, not the weapon. Suddenly she saw them widen as he launched himself at her, driving the blade downwards towards her neck. Xena grabbed the descending arm and twisted beneath it, using the build up of torque and momentum to flip the gladiator into a heavy fall, before finishing him off with a kick to the head.

Grabbing the dagger, she took a step, turned and threw the weapon straight at Caesar, eyes blazing as she watched the blade travel true. Before she saw it strike, bodies hit her from behind, as Flaccus and his guards steamed into the pit. She struggled for her liberty, making the soldiers fight hard to take her. But the pummelling she had already taken, from the tussle with the gladiators, along with sheer weight of numbers began to tell on her. Bodies piled on top of hers, pinning her down, while first the leg irons were locked in place, before the manacles were snapped around her wrists and the belt secured around her waist.

As she was dragged upright, her eyes darted to where Caesar had been standing. He stood looking back at her, hooded brown orbs blazing as blood dripped down his right cheek from the deep score made by the passage of the knife. - *Spot on!* - she thought, - *he'll wear my mark now!* - her eyes burned with her rage as she glared at him.

"Get her back to her cell," snarled Caesar, as he turned his glare on the three men who stood with him.

Xena's arm was jerked roughly as she was dragged from the fighting pit and back to her prison. On the way back, she railed at herself for being a fool, if she had killed Caesar, she may well have condemned Gabrielle to death. The fact that she had hit what she aimed for was immaterial .. he could have moved into a fatal position. She had no doubt that word would be gotten to Rome, or that Caesar would have made plans for such an occurrence.

Once back in the dungeons, the chain was reattached to her collar, but this time it was hauled tight to the ringbolt on the wall, giving her no room for movement, and keeping her standing. The soldiers were rough with her, but not excessively so, trained to await Caesar's orders for whatever punishment he might deem as necessary for the attempt on his life.

- *Oh that was so dumb, Xena,* - she told herself, left in the silence of her dungeon. - *Gabrielle would be having fits after what I promised.* - Yet she couldn't stop the small smile of satisfaction from playing on her lips, - *I bet the bastard nearly wet himself,* - She grunted as she tried to settle herself into any kind of comfortable position.

Her neck was sore from the attempt at strangling her, and wasn't being helped by the way they'd got her chained. The punch in her back over her kidney felt raw, as did her ribs ... again! where she'd taken a couple of heavy kicks. The rest of her body felt bruised from the soldiers piling in. She hadn't been able to count heads, but there had been more than the twenty men who escorted her there.

Another grin flitted across her face, she'd seen Blasius in the scrum, and had got in a good punch before they'd managed to subdue her, - *Oh are they ever going to make me suffer,* - she thought to herself, - *but ... I think I can honestly tell Gabrielle it was worth it. She won't believe me, but it was definitely worth whatever I have to pay for it.* -

The cell door opened to admit Patroclese, who came in oozing anger from every pore. He dropped his kit in front of her and silently examined the new wounds and injuries she bore. He roughly swabbed of the drying blood from a split in her lip, pulled her shirt up and gently ran his fingers across her ribs to check for damage, before applying liniment to the fresh collection of bruises he found there, he used a cool painkilling salve on the nasty bruise he found on her back, before finally rubbing a salve into her neck.

"Not speaking, huh?" asked Xena as he packed his things away.

"Are you mad?" he demanded as he stood glaring at her. "Do you think Caesar's going to shrug that dagger throw off?" the deliberately blank look she gave him seemed to infuriate him, "Didn't you think about Gabrielle at all?" he demanded, "There could be a message on it's way ordering her immediate execution."

Xena stiffened, "He wouldn't. He know's she's the only hold he's got over me."

"Some kind of hold," roared Patroclese, "You just tried to kill him!"

"If I had intended to kill him, he'd be dead," she told him icily, "and he knows it. That's why he won't kill Gabrielle, because he knows if there is ever a next time, he would die. She's his shield."

"Quite so, Xena," said a voice from the doorway, "Quite so." He stepped into the cell and she could see the livid cut that had required stitching to close the wound. His brown eyes flared with anger as he looked at her, "Possibly I made a mistake sending Gabrielle away. I think you believe that she's safe from punishment for your breaking of the rules." He glared at her with a savage intensity that almost matched her own.

Her own anger building within her, Xena couldn't stop herself from retorting with icy certainty, "No! Your mistake was bringing Gabrielle into this .. and as soon as I'm free I'll make absolutely certain that you regret every mark you've put on her."

He moved closer to her, his eyes burning with fanatic intensity, "You are in no position to threaten me, slave. Nor can you do anything to protect the bard. I think we'll keep a tally of the punishments you earn, and when we get to Rome, she'll get them in one dose. I think we'll call tonight's episode ten strokes for her. I wonder just how many she can take in one go?"

Xena lunged forward, only to be jerked back by the unrelenting chain attached to her collar. Unable to reach him, she fumed helplessly as he stood before her., knowing that anything she further said or did would make it worse. She hoped that Autolycus would make good on his promise to get the bard out of her captivity, but if he hadn't succeeded by the time Caesar got her back to Rome, she couldn't afford to have irritated Caesar into increasing the beating he had ordained.

Seeing the constraints that the warrior was putting on herself, the Roman added salt to the wounds, "Another time, my sweet, and I would have ordered you the lashing you deserve for your actions. However, I have some more contests to arrange for you and I want you fit enough to handle them. You must continue to win, you know Xena," he told her warningly, "because if you lose, I will make her suffer."

He swirled out of the cell, sweeping Patroclese along with him. As the door slammed shut she cursed her temper and Caesar both, - *Ares' hairy buttocks! But that was dumb, real dumb.* - Having nothing to vent her fury on other than herself, she continued her mental berating before forcing herself to settle into an uncomfortable night's sleep standing up.

Chapter Twenty Six: Lugdunum

The two men sat silent on their sweating mounts as they looked down on the walled city of Lugdunum. It was not so very long since this area had been part of the loose Gaulish empire. But the Romans had worked their usual architectural miracles and had transformed the place below them from a rude peasant village into a thriving city with several impressive public buildings, and many luxurious looking villas in the surrounding fields and valleys.

Iolaus scratched at the thickening whiskers on his chin, and wondered yet again how anyone managed to put up with the irritation that the face fungus brought. A glance at his silently brooding companion caught him also rubbing the bushy bristles that had sprouted over his lower face.

Hearing the sound of marching feet, the pair drew their tired horses back into the shelter of the copse that they had stopped by. It was only a patrol, no more than a half century. Iolaus did a quick calculation and reckoned that there were less than forty men. He glanced at his companion and almost laughed. Hiding had become second nature to them, but truth to tell, they now looked very little like the descriptions that were posted everywhere offering a sizable reward for their capture.

Grinning, he admired the blonde hair and whiskers that considerably changed Toris's looks, only the piercing blue eyes proclaimed his kinship to Xena now. - *While I*, - he smirked again at the thought, - *didn't even recognise myself in the mirror in that last inn!* - He pulled a very black hair out of his chin and winced ruefully at the sharp point of pain it momentarily caused. - *Not even our own mother's would recognise us now*, - he chuckled to himself.

They waited for the legionaries to pass, on their way back to their barracks in Lugdunum. The area still had problems with Gaulish raiders, so strong patrols were maintained to ensure the safety of the outer lying Roman dwellings in an area being rapidly populated by colonists. Once the soldiers were safely down the road, the pair urged their mounts forward once more, where they could get a clear view of the road to the south.

"How long do you think before they get here?" asked Toris, curbing his impatience with effort.

Iolaus scratched at his beard again as he considered, "Hard to say," he answered non-committally, "Well before dusk, I should think. That last camp the legion made wasn't too many leagues back there. We've got time to find ourselves a decent inn that overlooks the Prefecture. You never know, we might get lucky and get a glimpse of her."

Toris looked moodily down the road. So far they hadn't been able to accomplish anything of use. As Autolycus had warned, the pair of them had been recognised as soon as they switched back into their own clothes. He grimaced about the close run problem at Orange, a small city a days march north of Evignan. They'd thought they'd managed to slip into the city without any notice. They'd got ahead of the VIIth Legion, much as they had today, and had stopped in a tavern to get a bite to eat, and hopefully watch the wagon go by and, maybe, catch that elusive glimpse of his sister.

It had been Iolaus's sharp elbow digging into his ribs that alerted him to the odd way that the tavern keeper was acting. The man had flipped his hand at a young floor sweeper, who scuttled away on an errand, before the florid, sweating, man came over to their table to take their order.

"Ah, no thanks," Toris had replied to the host's offer to get them something, "we've changed our minds." He stood up, following his blonde companion's lead and tried to brush past the man in his way.

The tavern keeper had put his hand against Toris's chest and said, "But sir, you've only just arrived, and we serve some of the best wine in all of Narbonensis."

Seeing that the man was not going to let him pass peacefully, and recognising Iolaus's worried impatience, Toris tried a trick of his sisters. He allowed his ice-blue eyes to harden and directed a chilling stare at the tavern keeper. The man had gone a little white around the gills and swallowed hard as he stepped back sharply, - *Good one, Xena!* - thought Toris as he strode purposefully past. He doubted that he'd be able to intimidate a warrior that way, unlike his 'oh so scary' sister, but it had worked well enough there.

"C'mon Toris," the compact blonde had encouraged, heading for the door with a purposeful stride, "Let's get out of here before we hit tr...."

He never finished the sentence, because eight members of the town watch bulled through the tavern door at that moment, their officer shouting, "That's them! Get them!"

Whatever else he had done in his life, tavern brawling was not a skill he had practised enough to be able to call himself proficient at it .. even if he had been brought up in one! Iolaus on the other hand, seemed to be quite comfortable in such situations. Grabbing a bench, the small man had hoisted it and then charged into the soldiers of the watch, before they were able to spread out too much.

Following his friend's lead, Toris hefted a small table and used it to shove the forces of law and order from the side, managing to use it as battering ram and shield both. Several bodies went down in a tangled pile, including Iolaus. But Toris dumped the table on top of the bulk of the heaving mass, before hauling the smaller man out, by his feet, from under a chaos of arms and legs.

With boyish grins at each other for the turmoil they had wrought, the pair, made a dash for the tavern door and their horses, "Ares' left hairy nut!" swore Iolaus as he swung his gaze up and down the street. Legionaries were coming at double time from each direction and converging on them.

They'd scrambled for their horses and darted for the only street providing a clear exit for them. Pushing the horses from a standing start to full gallop, they had raced the running soldiers for the narrow passageway that offered their only chance for escape.

It was a close run thing, but they made the alleyway before the Roman's did, and they'd set the horses for the fastest way out of the city, only to find the gates being closed when they reached them. Iolaus had given a wild whoop to distract the soldiers, then they'd driven their horses towards the narrowing gap as the heavy wooden portals were being slowly pushed shut and, by the skin of their teeth, and the grace of Zeus, they'd just managed to slip through and out into the open countryside. That had been about fourteen days previously. Since that close shave, they had decided to dye their hair and cultivate beards. It had worked and they were now able to pass among the Romans without being challenged or attacked, but they still maintained their cautious approach.

As Iolaus explained to Xena's brother, "If we're cautious and get in to trouble, at least we know we've done everything we can to avoid it. If we're careless, then it's too late to start worrying about caution when we're thrown into Caesar's dungeon."

Impatient though he was, Toris had seen the sense of the argument and had followed the smaller man's lead. In the time they had been together, he had developed a respect for Iolaus and found him to be both good company and sensible ... that is sensible over everything except women.

It had been a wet miserable day when they'd taken shelter in a tumbled down barn from an afternoon storm, somewhere on the long haul between Orange and Valence. They'd brought the horses in and had taken the chance to munch on some jerked meat. "Pity we can't cook some soup or something warm," grumbled Iolaus.

"Can you cook?" asked Toris, more for something to say than any real interest.

Iolaus wagged his hand from side to side and answered, "About enough to get by on. I've never poisoned anyone ... unlike your sister."

Toris had grinned at that, remembering some of Xena's more flamboyant disaster's in his mother's kitchen when they were children, "It's never been one of her many skills. But I never heard that she poisoned anyone with it before."

"That might have been a slight exaggeration on my part," agreed the smaller man with a grin in return, "but not by much."

They ate in silence for a while, each lost in his own thoughts as the rain fell heavily beyond the sagging door and lightning cracked throwing jagged lances around the darkening skies.

"You know," Toris said at last, just to break the silence between them, "You never told me how you and my sister met." For a long while he didn't think that Iolaus was going to answer him. The blonde had stared out into the wet afternoon and a frown had etched itself onto his brow, "I'm sorry," he said, "I didn't mean to pry."

Iolaus sighed and turned to look into the blue eyes of his companion, "Toris, you know very little about Xena. What she did, what she became, even what she is now. I suppose it's only natural that you should try and fill in some of the gaps. But you've got to remember that it's who she is now that's most important." He glanced out into the rain once again, "I think this has settled in for the night, we might as well make a camp here. We can probably risk a small fire and make something warm to drink ... then I'll tell you about how I met Xena."

They'd unsaddled the horses and rubbed them down well before giving them some of the grain they'd brought along for feed, then a search through the decrepit building had turned up enough dry wood to give them a comfortable blaze and a chance to dry off a bit.

They sat on the bedrolls that they'd laid either side of the fire and, taking sips from the herbal tea they'd made, Iolaus began his story, "I first saw Xena about a league outside of my home town.

Her horse had gone lame and she seemed to be wary of strangers, even a little frightened of them."

Toris choked down a laugh, "My sister?" he asked incredulously.

"She's a very good actress," his friend told him with a straight face. "Anyway, I'm a sucker for a damsel in distress ... for any kind of damsel really, it's gonna get me killed one day. As it happened, this particular time, it nearly got me and Hercules killed."

"She tried to kill you and Hercules?" Toris almost squeaked as his voice moved up another octave.

"Yeah," came the nervous answer, "not straight away, but that's what she had planned."

"So what happened?" came the demand.

"Well, she got me to fall in love with her, really fall deep for her, you know?" he saw Toris give a small nod, "She is such a beautiful woman and believe me Toris she has more in her arsenal than a sword and a chakram. I'd have done almost anything she'd asked of me." He winced at the painful memory.

"She asked you to kill Hercules?" his companion asked.

"No," Iolaus told him quietly, "her plan was far more devious than that," he sat quietly for so long that Toris almost thought he wouldn't tell the rest of the tale. Finally, with a long sigh, however, he continued, "I spent an idyllic eight days with her at my home, before she told me about some Warlord terrorizing her people in Arcadia. She said she'd come to get Hercules' help, but that she'd found me."

Toris sat quietly as Iolaus picked up a stick and prodded the fire, "I agreed to go back with her and help her. I was so crazy in love with her I'd have gone anywhere with her. I told Herc that I was going with her and she turned down his offer of help, telling him that I was all she needed. Gods, but that thrilled me. Here was this incredibly beautiful woman turning down Hercules in favour of me .. I mean, Herc's my best buddy, he always has been and always will be, but sometimes living in his shadow can be a bit ... you know?"

"Yeah," agreed Toris bleakly, "I know. I have this sister, remember."

Iolaus gave him a tight lipped smile, "Yeah. Well I went with Xena and the more time I spent with her, the more I came to worship her. She became everything to me. So when Hercules turned up a few days after we reached her camp at Elyssia, telling me that Xena had sent a man to kill him, I kind of exploded and told him that I never wanted to see him again."

Toris looked grim, "Must have been tough," he said softly.

"You have no idea." A far away look settled into his eyes as he shook his head ruefully, "Anyway, Herc went and spent the night in a nearby village where he learned all about your sister and her reputation. He hadn't realised until then, that this was the Warlord Xena, Destroyer of Nations, who'd caused so much havoc over the years." A twitch of his lips highlighted the glint in the blonde's eyes as he went on, "Anyway, Herc decided that he'd be damned if he'd let Xena use me as a pawn, and he came back to Elyssia to get me. On the way, he ran into Xena and a lieutenant of hers, name of Estragon. He and Herc fought, but when Estragon surrendered to my buddy, Xena killed him with her chakram for going against her code."

Iolaus shook his head in despondency, "She came back to the camp looking like she'd gone three rounds with ol' Herc, and told me that he'd killed Estragon and attacked her, so when my buddy, my best friend, came striding back to Elyssia I tried my damndest to kill him."

"But you didn't, did you? and he didn't kill you either, or you wouldn't be here now," pointed out Toris softly.

"No," agreed the blonde, "Xena's plan was for Hercules to kill me and when he broke down over what he had done, she intended to kill him. Trouble was, I couldn't kill my best friend, and Herc doesn't kill anyone unless he has to. I suddenly wised up and saw through her plan and teamed up with Herc to try and whip her and her men, but she got away."

There was a long period of quietness around the campfire as the dry wood popped and sent tiny showers of sparks flying, before they were captured by the larger flames and drawn back into the whole. Iolaus poked at the fire again, lost in the painful memories of the past that Toris had stirred up.

"After what she had done to you, how in the name of Zeus did you and Hercules, ever become friends with her?" asked Toris in bewilderment.

Iolaus smiled again, "It wasn't easy for me. But Hercules .. he sees things that I don't, although he wasn't too friendly towards her at first. He'd heard rumours of raiders in the Parthian province and had gone to help the people. He found villagers slaughtered and crucified, learned that your sister was responsible and swore to bring her to justice. As he tracked her he found an entire village that had been slaughtered. Men women and children. Nothing had been left alive before the place was torched. He said it was one of the worst things he'd ever seen." Iolaus said softly.

"Oh gods," choked Toris, "I'd heard of some of the atrocities that she'd done, but I'd always heard she spared women and children."

"She did," agreed his companion, "but this time she hadn't been leading her army, her chief lieutenant, Darphus, had and he was a butcher. Xena was away north with her scouts and returned to her army only after the village had been sacked. She saved a baby there, the only survivor of the massacre, and for that Darphus was able to turn her army against her and eject her as leader."

"So what did she do?" questioned Toris, "Surely that didn't make her change her ways?"

"Not quite," agreed Iolaus bleakly, "Darphus put Xena through a gauntlet. Her own men beat her with fists and clubs to within an inch of her life. No one had ever survived one before ... but she did."

"I'll kill him! If I ever find the murdering whoreson, I swear I'll kill him," cursed Toris his eyes alight with anger, "Whatever Xena once was, she's still my sister!"

"Xena took care of that a few years ago ... twice!" smiled the shorter man.

"Twice?" was the disbelieving question.

"Give me time and I'll get there," Iolaus told him. "After the gauntlet, Xena figured the only way to get her army back was to kill Hercules and take his head as a trophy."

"Whew!" whistled his audience.

"Yeah," agreed the blonde with a grin, "Anyway, she must have been hurting like hades from the beating she'd taken, but she tracked down Herc and challenged him one on one. Damn near beat him too, by all accounts .. even as beat up as she was."

"Then why didn't Hercules capture or kill her?" asked Toris in surprise.

Iolaus shrugged, "I told you Hercules doesn't like to kill and I think he saw something in your sister that even she didn't know was there."

"What was that?" wondered the taller man, "I'm her brother and even I could see she deserved to be tried for her crimes."

"Well Hercules told her later that he saw the goodness in her heart," answered Iolaus seriously.

Toris nearly choked on his last swallow of the tea, "What! C'mon Iolaus. My sister was a bloodthirsty, power crazed, murdering madwoman and Hercules saw the goodness in her heart? You have got to be kidding."

"No, straight up," he told him still seriously, "and if you think about it he's been proven right, because since then she's turned her life around and shown that goodness over and over again."

Toris shook his head as he tried to get his mind around the concept before asking, "Okay so what happened after she tried to kill him?"

"He let her go."

"He what?" the bigger man looked stunned.

"He let her go," repeated Iolaus, "He figured that she had some things to work out for herself, and he had to go and stop Darphus and her ex-army. She turned up later in the town of Parthia

their room, but the canvass over the wagon had been drawn tight and they didn't get the hoped for sight of Xena. Still they maintained their watch on the barracks, and it was into the early evening when they saw a group of laughing legionaries heading away from the garrison, and into the city, obviously intent on relaxation.

"Not garrison soldiers," Toris pointed out.

"Looks like some of those that came in earlier," agreed Iolaus.

"Well some of them were given evening passes in Evignan," reminded the taller man.

"We could shadow them and see if we could pick up some news," suggested Iolaus tentatively.

"Risky," answered Toris sucking his teeth, then turned and grinned at his companion who was already smiling back at him, "Let's go."

They followed the six legionaries down into the city where the soldiers liked to carouse. It was an area full of gambling dens and whorehouses as well as cheap drinking establishments, that served barely drinkable wine. "What'd we come here for?" complained one man, as he grimaced at the taste in his cup, "We've got enough dinars to be somewhere where the wine is decent."

"Quit complaining, Marcellus," laughed another man slapping his friend on the back, "We've got everything here that we need for a really good night out, and we won't have to spend too much to enjoy it. I intend to keep some of my dinars so that I can invest it in some bets with the local grunts here when we get the chance."

"Shut up Quintus, you'll get us all flogged! You know that subject's off limits." growled a strapping soldier, a decurion from his rank badge.

As they drifted along behind the soldiers, Toris raised an eyebrow at Iolaus. It was the closest they'd got to anyone from the guard unit, and it was obvious that these men were part of that special maniple.

"Do you think we could separate a couple from their uniforms?" asked Toris in a whisper.

"Too risky. That unit's so tight they squeak. A couple of strange faces showing up would land in a cell before they could blink," answered Iolaus just as quietly, "but if we could separate one from the flock, and get him drunk enough, we might just find out something worthwhile."

Toris nodded his agreement, and they trailed after the six, waiting their chance to grab one of them. They went from inn to tavern, to gambling dive to tavern, until they finally ended up in a less than salubrious house of ill repute, where the legionaries intended to end their evening.

"Now what?" asked Toris as they stood outside the whorehouse.

Iolaus drew him around to the rear of the building and pointed to the verandah, "We need to get up there," he hissed, "If we can get inside, we can see where the Romans go and grab one when he's alone in one of the rooms."

Toris looked at him, "He won't be alone you know."

"What?" asked Iolaus not quite understanding what he meant, "Oh, you mean the girl. Don't worry I'll take care of her while you get the soldier."

"How come I get the hard job?" demanded Toris. "I thought of it first," grinned the shorter man, "C'mon." Toris boosted his companion up to the balcony, and grabbed Iolaus's hand when the smaller man offered it, managing to scramble up to join him. "Shhhh!" warned Iolaus pointedly with a finger to his lips.

They carefully made their way to an open window and listened for any sound of occupancy. Hearing nothing, they slipped inside a dingy, stale smelling room that had a heavy overlay of cheap perfume. Moving carefully, they crossed the floor to the door that opened up onto the landing.

Iolaus eased the door open and pressed his eye to the crack, "One of them's coming this way," he told Toris as he closed the door and moved back into the room.

"It's not that big decurion?" hissed the taller man plaintively, "Is it?"

"Nah," grinned Iolaus reassuringly, "It's Quintus."

"Oh Gods," muttered Toris feelingly, "The man's built like a"

"I lied," grinned Iolaus again, "It's the squirty one, Marcellus."

"Damn it Iolaus ..."

"Shhh!" the smaller man warned him, pressing himself back against the wall on one side of the door, with Toris on the other.

"C'mon honey," they heard a husky voiced woman say, "It's just in here."

"Take me to Elysium," they heard Marcellus reply eagerly.

The door opened and admitted the pair, arm in arm. Toris used the pommel of his sword to hit the soldier on the back of the head, while Iolaus grabbed the woman around the waist and clapped a hand firmly over her mouth. He bit off an oath as she kicked back at his shin and jabbed him in the ribs with a meaty elbow.

"Oooff!" he grunted as he lifted her forward and pushed the door closed with his foot, "Cut that out," he told her, "I'm not here to hurt you, we just want to borrow your playmate."

"Mmmph yrrrg rtt!" came back the muffled retort, before she bit his hand savagely.

"Ouch! " he yelped, as he tossed her on the bed, sat on her back and held her face down while he ripped a strip off the tatty sheet and used it to gag her. He heard Toris choking back a laugh behind him as he worked on tying the soldiers arms behind his back, "Do you want to come and give me a hand?" hissed Iolaus as he struggled to keep the woman still.

"Thought you wanted the easy job," answered the taller man as he ghosted to his friends side with a couple of rawhide strips. He quickly tied the woman's hands and feet, before Iolaus got off her.

"Zuuu crssee yrr ttt Hyydds" came the muffled yells of anger.

"You too sweetheart," answered Iolaus patting her cheek as he sucked the hand that had been bitten.

They pulled Marcellus up between them and ducked out of the window. Toris dropped down into the back courtyard where he caught the Roman as Iolaus lowered him, before the shorter man dropped down to join him. "Where are we gonna take him?" asked Toris.

Iolaus shrugged, "Back to the inn. If we wrap your cloak around him, no one will see his hands are tied, and if anyone asks we'll tell them he's a friend come to spend a few candelmarks drinking with us. Pull the hood up, and with you holding him one side and me the other, no one will be able to tell."

With their plan hastily made, they headed back to their room without mishap. Once they had Marcellus safely tied to a chair, Iolaus hurried down to the tap room and bought six bottles of good red wine, "Met an old friend," he explained, "and we've got a lot of catching up to do."

He shot back up stairs where he found that Toris had brought round their guest using the expediency of dumping a pitcher of water over him. He shook his head groggily and looked around the room with bleary eyes, "Where am I?" he asked sullenly.

"Oh no, no, no, my friend," answered Toris softly, "We ask the questions here."

"Who are you," Marcellus blinked, shaking his head to clear his brain, "Do I know you? You look awfully familiar."

"What have you got in the wagon that your squad so carefully guards?" asked Toris patiently.

"Don't know what you're talking about," came the answer.

"Yes you do," said Toris gripping the luckless Marcellus by the chin, "and you're going to tell us all about it." He smiled as the Roman shook his head free and watched as Iolaus handed the tall man a large tankard of wine, "Have a drink with us Marcellus."

It was some candlemarks later when the two men left their guest propped up against the barracks wall. Toris' dark features were grim, and even the normally sunny Iolaus looked bleak. They hurried back to their inn and tried to decide what they should do next. "How long can she keep it up?" Toris questioned Iolaus, once they were alone in the room, "Marcellus says she's had three pit fights on her way here, and has taken some pretty heavy beatings in the process."

"She's won so far," Iolaus reminded him, "That healer, Patroclese, seems to be taking care of her injuries, and you know ... she's tough, right!"

"Yeah. But Damn it Iolaus! He's turning her into a gladiator." snarled Toris enraged by the idea. "I know she's about the best fighter around, but even she's gonna get really hurt after a while. You know gladiators don't have a very long lifespan. If we can't get her free it'll break Mother's heart."

"Caesar will keep her fit," Iolaus tried to soothe him, "You heard what Marcellus said, she's making him a fortune. If he can get her to the big fights in Rome, he'll clean up."

"We've got to get her away from him, Iolaus," said Toris softly.

"I know, my friend," agreed the shorter man patting Toris's shoulder in sympathy, "I know." He thought bleakly about what the continuous fighting and being treated like an animal would do to Xena. He prayed to the Gods that it wouldn't strip her of her hard won humanity and turn her back to the monster she had once been.

Chapter Twenty Seven: Gauls and Games

Verchinex glared at the messenger with an angry gleam in his eyes. Not only was the man a Roman, but he came from the hated Caesar. - *If it wasn't for the fact that he had come under the white shield of truce* - He let the thought slide. The man was here to present a message from Caesar and the truce signs would be honoured.

The long wooden hall was silent as Gaul and Roman looked at each other. Verchinex sat on a carved oak wood throne with no arms and a low back. The walls of the hall were hung with the skins of bear and wolf. A fire pit blazed in the centre of the floor, for all that it was mid-summer. Warriors lined the walls in leather armour, spears held in readiness to their chieftains command. One or two had faces painted blue with woad, yet others had used a solution of lime to stiffen long hair into frightening aspects.

- *Savages!* - Tirem spat with mental contempt for the Gaulish warriors.

The Gaul held his hand out for the message scroll that the soldier bore. It carried the Imperial seal of Rome. With a wry grin he ran a jagged fingernail along the seam of the seal and broke it with a stiff 'crack!'. The message was written in Latin and was meaningless to him, but he had a man in his tribe who could read it for him. Turning his disconcertingly light eyes back to the messenger, he told him, "Malvin will take you for some refreshment while I decide upon my answer to this," he held the scroll out contemptuously.

The Roman dipped his head in acknowledgement, hiding a wry smile at guessing that the Gaulish leader could not read Latin, and followed the tall Gaulish warrior from the council chamber of Verchinex. The bronze skinned, black haired Gaulish chieftain waited until the Roman had left the room, before motioning over one of his other guards and instructing, "Lachlan, fetch Folko to me. I have a task for him," he watched as the warrior turned to saunter from the hall, "And hurry, I would see him before the sun sets!" he roared, knowing full well that the sun had barely passed it's midday height.

Lachlan, however, speeded his step to a run and disappeared with commendable swiftness, knowing that his chief's temper became uncertain, at best, when mention of the Roman, Caesar, was made. Verchinex fought off a small smile that threatened as he mumbled, "Puppy," to himself.

"You should not tease your brother so," admonished a beautiful, fair haired woman, who wound her arms around his swarthy neck and gave his bearded cheek a gentle kiss. She had come in through the door of the anti-chamber in time to see the young man depart.

"Should I not," grumbled Verchinex as he pulled the woman from behind him to sit on his lap. He gazed with loving fondness into her blue eyes before kissing her thoroughly. Since he had been back from Rome, he could not stand to be away from her too long, - *My Mendala, my wife!* - he thought to himself, lovingly possessive.

"No you shouldn't, Verchinex, he is no different from any of your other warriors," she told him, "He idolizes you, my love" she told him with a soft smile, "as I do, and most of the Gaulish people for that matter."

"Hrrmpphh!" choked her husband, uncomfortable with that particular thought, "Lachlan, needs to be reminded that I'm his chief as well as his brother. He's too ready to let things slip because he thinks that I will protect him."

Mendala looked at him with that gentle smile he adored, "Just try not to be too hard on him," she told him, "for my sake, if not his. He did much to help me while you were gone from here, my love."

That brought a scowl to Verchinex's dark features as he waved the scroll at his wife. She stood up, took it from him and looked at the freshly broken seal, "From Caesar?" she asked, her fair brow creasing as she recognised the imprint in the wax.

"Aye," grumbled her husband, "I've sent Lachlan after Folko so I can find out what the serpent wants. Truthfully, Mendala, I'd rather deal with a viper, but with the build up of Legions along the borders I cannot ignore the chance of a peaceful settlement if possible."

"Can you trust Caesar?" she asked him carefully.

Verchinex considered carefully before answering. Putting aside his personal animosity for the man and trying to look at it dispassionately, he answered, "Of himself ... no. I wouldn't trust the

man's word that the sky was blue." He held up his hand commanding her silence as he continued, "But if he has a proposal in the name of Rome ..." he glared at the Imperial seal on the scroll, "then I think he would honour such an agreement."

Mendala bit her lower lip as she fingered the scroll in her hands, "What is he proposing?" she asked. v "Can't say love," he grinned at her wolfishly, "until my sluggard brother gets back with Folko."

She scowled at him, a retort forming on her lips as the hall doors opened to admit the red faced Lachlan and the stout merchant Folko, who was gasping for breath due to the speed urged on him by his chief's brother, "About time you two got here," growled their unimpressed leader.

"I came as soon as Lachlan found me," Folko told him placatingly, puffing somewhat, "What do you have that needs my attention so?" he asked.

Mendala handed him the scroll and the merchant opened it, running his eyes over the Latin script as he allowed his breathing to return to normal. Knowing his chief, he raised an eyebrow at him and asked, "Do you want the full thing or the edited version?"

"Just tell me what it says, Folko, for Grannos's sake," returned Verchinex inciting the name of the sun god.

The merchant carefully read through the Latin hyperbole and began, "Ah, basically Caesar is inviting you to a meeting to discuss the situation in Gaul. He says he'd rather find a peaceful solution, than have to muster the Legions and impose a forceful one."

"Ha!" barked Lachlan snapping his fingers in derision, "That for the Roman," he declared. v "Quiet, Lachlan," ordered his brother impatiently as his brain absorbed the information in the missive. "Does he suggest a meeting place?" he asked thoughtfully.

"Aye, he does that, Verchinex, and a canny spot it is too. He suggests that as neither party is going to be very trusting of the other, that the meeting should take place on the border area close to the town of Vershin. He also say that he will draw back all Roman troops for a league around, if you will do the same with our Gauls, and that he'll bring an escort of just one maniple .. he says one hundred and eighty men .. just for protection against brigands." Folko told him handing the scroll back to his chief, "If he intends a trap he's making it very difficult for himself. The area around Vershin is very open and we'd see any treachery long before it could harm us."

"True," agreed the Gaulish chieftain, stroking his beard thoughtfully, "I wonder what Caesar thinks he can offer me at this meeting that will be to our mutual benefit. I trust the man not, but it would be unwise to spurn this chance in case we may bring peace to our people. For too long we have had to go hungry through the winter months because we were not able to gather the harvests."

"Should you not speak of this with Hyman, Calvert, Lyulph and some of the other chieftains," suggested Mendala. "They have a right to know of this message from Caesar."

"Watcha hit him for?" asked her younger brother as he helped her roll up a blanket and collect a fishing line.

"Doesn't matter," Xena told him, preferring not to tell her younger brother about the awful things she'd heard Tomases saying about their mother. She'd made certain that he'd be too scared to repeat them. Her mother had enough trouble trying to raise her family and run the inn without kids spreading gossip that she was of easy virtue. She winced a bit at the thought. Those hadn't been the words he'd used. She just wished she'd been able to find out who had started the lies.

"Where's Mother?" she asked, knowing that she needed to gather some food from the larder. She wouldn't be able to live on just the fish she'd be able to catch. Besides she wanted to lie low until the hunt died down.

"I think she went over to apologise to Tomases' parents. You really did mess him up some, Xena," Lyceus told her in a quiet voice.

"Good," she growled her very blue eyes becoming as cold as ice chips, "he deserved it." She looked fondly at her little brother and smiled as she ruffled his hair, "Stay close to Mother, Ly, she's gonna need you."

"But I wanna come with you," her brother told her in no uncertain terms.

"You can't Lyceus. Mother will worry enough anyway, I need you to tell her that I won't be gone long. Just until things cool down. Tell her not to worry." she said seriously.

She waited until Lyceus had nodded his head, shaking his curly brown hair as he did so, before slipping out of the room and downstairs clutching her blanket and a pouch to stuff some supplies into. She had gone silently, making no noise just in case her mother was lurking, but she'd seen no one and had tiptoed into the kitchen and the larder certain that she was safe.

It was as she began to gather some bread and cheese that she'd felt her mother's presence and had turned to bolt for the door. But Cyrene had swung the door shut behind her and stood with her arms crossed and foot tapping, waiting to hear her daughter's explanation for her latest piece of bad behaviour.

Xena had just looked at her mother, stubbornness written all over her very expressive features. There was no possible way that she was going to tell her what Tomases had said, and she hated having to give excuses to her mother at anytime. So she had stood there defiantly and waited for the punishment she knew would be forthcoming.

"Xena!" her mother had yelled, "By the God's child, when are you going to learn to control your temper."

Getting no answer and no explanation had infuriated Cyrene. Her strange, willful, rebellious, difficult, daughter, so often tried her patience. She had taken a firm hold of Xena's ear and hauled

her down to the root cellar and paddled her behind, before locking her in so that she couldn't just run off.

She had spent three days down in that cellar brooding and miserable while Tomases' parents demanded far harsher retribution on Cyrene's wild child. The inn keeper had stuck up for Xena like a she bear for her cub, but things hadn't been settled until Toris had heard exactly what Tomases had been saying and had reluctantly told his Mother, ashamed of his friendship with the other boy and the punishment it had caused for his younger sister.

Cyrene had felt bitterly aggrieved, not for herself, but for her daughter whose loyalty and love had been so poorly repaid. She had descended to the cellar with a heavy heart to find her wildly unpredictable child sitting huddled in a corner brooding quietly. Sitting herself on the bottom step, she'd held her arms out to Xena, who had come to her like some half broken filly, ready to shy away at the first wrong move, but she had, eventually, revelled in her mother's protective arms, fiercely refusing to allow the tears she could feel welling up within her, to fall.

- *That was,* - she thought to herself, wryly, - *almost the last time I allowed that kind of contact with Mother as a child.* - she allowed herself a self deprecating laugh over the loss, "Oh, Mother," she muttered softly, "If only you could rescue me from my imprisonment now." She shook her head refusing to acknowledge the tears that pricked at her eyes.

She heard a sound behind her and found Blasius moving close to the bars. She watched him as he approached, noticing the chain he carried in his left hand and the baton held in the other. Another ten men armed with batons stood ready behind him. Muscles tensed. She knew it wasn't beyond him to administer a little harsh discipline and claim she had failed to obey an order. None of the soldiers would dispute his word, they were too afraid of him for that.

A quickly flicked glance told her that Flaccus was watching. It gave her a little reassurance. For all that the senior Centurion had relaxed his edicts against her being too harshly treated since Orange, he was unlikely to allow Blasius to flagrantly abuse her ... without Caesar's specific orders to do so of course! - *Well,* - she thought, - *you've given him reason to do so.* -

"C'mon you animal," growled the optio as the cell door swung open, "You're wanted."

She should have guessed. - *Another fight. How many opponents this time. Four?, Five?* - After her last easy victory, Caesar might well be looking to increase the opposition against her and give himself better odds for his wager.

The brief thought of making them come and get her flicked across her mind and was discarded. She'd made a promise to Gabrielle and she'd try to keep it as best she was able to do so. Her face an impassive mask, she shuffled across the cell floor to the door, where she was met by Blasius.

He stepped aside to let her past him, and she instinctively knew what he was going to do. She relaxed the muscles in her legs and allowed the blow he aimed behind her knees to be absorbed, "When you're called, slave," he growled close to her ear, "you come running."

He roughly locked the chain to the collar around her neck and gave it a hard tug, hoping to provoke some show of resistance, some defiance that he could legitimately use as an excuse to administer a beating. Xena resumed her impassive stance and waited for the inevitable shove that she knew would come.

The ten men formed tight around her and a larger contingent of twenty formed up around them. She suppressed a smile that tugged at the corners of her lips. The awe and fear she inspired in her gaolers was something to behold. No matter that they had her chained and could beat her on a whim, they were still terrified that she would slip through their grasp and lay them open to Caesar's not so tender mercies.

Walking at any pace caused her quite a bit of pain as the cuffs on the leg irons bit savagely at her flesh. Patroclese fought a never ending battle with the cuts and sores that her chains rubbed around her wrists and ankles. She wore permanent dressings that protected her skin somewhat, but not on the forced marches that Blasius insisted upon whenever he commanded her guard.

Taking notice of her surroundings was second nature to the Warrior Princess. Her mind automatically mapped the route, from her cell, in her mind. It wasn't unusual for her to be taken up from the lower dungeon levels to the main quarters of a building to get to the fighting pit, but this time, they were taking her to a far higher part of the building.

Stairs were a big problem. She had a relatively small amount of slack allowed on the leg irons, and stairways took a lot of concentration and more pain as the cuffs chafed up and down over raw bound skin, and higher, unprotected areas. When she stumbled and slipped to her knees on about the fourth flight they'd negotiated, Blasius had jerked her upright with the chain to her collar, causing her to choke on the sudden constriction.

"What's the matter, scum?" he snarled at her, "The so called Destroyer of Nations, doesn't look so tough to me."

She looked at him. Just looked. It was one of those that touched the frozen wastes, that evoked the burning fires of Tartarus, that promised death. Just a look.

Blasius swallowed and took a step back, almost falling down the stairs, held up only by the press of men behind him. He heard a snigger and rage suffused his face. He hated to be made to look a fool. He hated anyone to see just how terrified he was of this woman. He swung the baton at her and stared with disbelief at the hand that had caught it. He tried to wrest it free from her grasp and saw the wild feral lights dance in her eyes, as she maintained her hold, pulling the weapon towards herself.

Blasius exerted all his strength to tug the baton from her grip, and heard her say grimly, "You want it?" before he had time to register her intent, she let it go saying, "You got it!"

The under officer found himself catapulted backwards by his own momentum. His hands released both the baton and the chain he held as he tried to grasp something .. anything .. to stop

his wild fall. The soldiers on the crowded stairway threw themselves out of the way of his flying bulk, although a few unlucky souls got carried along by him.

The rest of the guard pressed around Xena, one man grabbing up the chain, others presenting their batons in readiness to beat her into submission. The Warrior Princess ignored them, standing calmly, not threatening any of the others. She watched stone faced as Blasius hit the floor below with a solid crash. He lay unmoving as the three men around him got carefully to their feet. There was an unnatural twist to the optio's neck that heralded his certain death.

One of the soldiers, a decurion, the one with the chain in his hand, one that Xena was sure had been the object of much of Blasius's bullying, stared down at the officer and said to his comrades, "He slipped and fell. It was no one's fault but his own." He gave Xena a sharp nod of gratitude as the muttered agreement came from all the men of the guard. None of them had liked the optio.

"Aquila," instructed the decurion who seemed to have taken charge, - *Junius*, - she remembered his name as being, "Go and tell the Centurion that the optio slipped and fell down a flight of steps and appears to be dead from a broken neck ... we are sure he's dead?" he shot a question to the men at the foot of the stairs, and got a nod from one of the three standing with the junior officers body. "Tell Flaccus that we're taking the slave up to the General."

Well, at least that told Xena her current destination, but it didn't explain what Caesar might want with her. She turned back to negotiate the difficult steps and found Junius looking at her, "Blasius was a pig," he told her quietly, "and sooner or later he was going to end up dead, but don't get the idea that you can pick us off one by one, because the rest of us stick together, and we're the Emperor's picked men. We'll treat you fair as long as you behave fair."

Xena gave him a quick nod. The Legionaries were happy enough to be out from under the control of a bullying officer, but that's about all the slack she could expect from them. They wouldn't go looking to beat her just for the sake of it. She suspected they had a respect for her even, but it wouldn't stop them from doing their job, "Fair enough," she told the Roman.

Junius set an easier pace, giving the Warrior Princess the time she needed to negotiate the difficult levels. The guard, however remained tight around her. No one was going to get close enough to her to break her loose, and she wasn't going to get the room to escape them.

Two guards stood to rigid attention outside of a door that had to be Caesar's. Junius knocked on the ornately carved and gilded wood and was bidden, "Enter," by a voice that Xena's being throbbed to with the familiar pulse of rage that ran rampant through her blood. She forced the emotion down. She was going to need all her wits about her for another confrontation with her enemy. She needed to be focused and anger clouded her ability to do that.

Junius went inside the apartment, leaving Xena and her guard outside to await further instructions. The soldier's report took a few minutes as he explained the modified version of what had happened to the optio. Even the Warrior Princess's acute hearing couldn't hear what

was said beyond the door, but if Caesar wasn't bellowing, it was likely that he accepted the decurion's story.

When the door opened once more, the ten original guards were signalled to march her into Caesar's presence. With barely a movement of her eyes, she registered the lavish furnishings, the large window, screened by a heavy ornamental grill, the four guards (two by the window and two by the door), Junius, Patroclese and of course, seated behind a wide marble desk, Caesar himself, a livid red scar forming along the line of his cheekbone, the stiches having been removed.

"Hello Xena," he greeted as if she were a close friend paying a social visit. She returned his greeting with a look of freezing malice. Unfazed he motioned her to a chair in front of him, on the opposite side of the desk.

When she didn't move, Junius prodded her lightly. It was an improvement on her normal treatment and she saw no profit in baulking. Besides, she was intrigued as to just what game Caesar was playing with her now. She walked slowly to the indicated chair, her chains dragging across the floor with a metallic rattle. Sitting down, she kept eye contact with him and waited for him to speak.

Junius remained standing behind her, his hand wrapped around the chain that was leash to her collar, - *Just like a dog*, - she thought bitterly. The other members of the guard fanned out to the edges of the room.

"I hear that Patroclese has been teaching you how to play chess," he smiled, watching her with a contented possessiveness, "I thought I'd like to judge your progress myself." He snapped his fingers and a servant appeared from a connected chamber with a richly decorated set of ivory and ebony, both inlaid with gold and gems.

Her eyes remained locked to his. - *Do I really want to play games with this man?* - She thought about chess. "A battle board", Patroclese had called it. Perhaps Caesar sought to best her here having lost to her strategy on the field of battle. Her eyes glinted at the thought. She had little doubt that Caesar had been playing the game for many years longer than she had, and no doubt counted himself a master at it. He would expect to beat her.

She nodded her head in acceptance of the challenge, and almost smiled when she thought about what Gabrielle would have said, "You're impossible," the bard's words came clearly, "Show you a challenge and you just can't resist it." Well she'd be damned if she let Caesar think she was afraid to face him on any field of battle. She'd give him a game to think about.

Chapter Twenty Eight: Bard Watch

The trip from Arelate to Massilia had been hard on the bard. Sleep was becoming impossible. Every time she closed her eyes, her dreams were invaded by the incessant darkness of her brooding thoughts, jumbled together in a hybrid scenario of all the grim things that had become a part of her life and history. When she became too exhausted to fight the need for sleep, she would awaken just a few candlemarks later, screaming and shaking from the nightmare visions that insinuated themselves into her mind.

By the third night, in the small camp that the guard maniple had erected for their nightly stop, even Brutus was becoming disturbed about his charge's health and mental well being. He had been informed that the bard was struggling to keep up on the march, when he knew, full well, that the girl was more than able to keep to a hard pace. She had proven it in her travels with the Warrior Princess.

"What's amiss with her?" he asked the Senior Centurion, Paullus.

"The men have been reporting that she doesn't sleep, sir," answered Paullus, a man who looked younger than his almost forty summers, "And that when she does, she wakes up screaming. It's obvious that she's having nightmares and none of the men know what to do for her. She's stopped eating now and she seems to be shaking all the time."

"Juno good and great," swore his commander, "If we lose her, Caesar will have us all crucified, starting with me and ending up with the lowliest legionary. It's a damn pity that we haven't got Caesar's healer, Patroclese, with us. He'd be able to mix something up to make the girl sleep."

Paullus looked thoughtful, "Perhaps one of the medical orderlies has something, sir. It might be worthwhile asking. Meronius has a way with herbs, he might be able to suggest a remedy," he said after a moment's thought.

Brutus nodded his head. "Get your Meronius to take a look at her. We have to do something before she becomes really ill."

Gabrielle sat listlessly in her tent, eyes darkly shadowed, muscles shaking from fatigue and the knowledge that if she should sleep the shades from her past experiences would be there to torment her. Her bowl of stew sat untouched by her side, ignored as she retreated into the grey misery that her life had become.

Meronius was a big man. He stood over six feet in height and had a muscular build that totally belied his gentleness as he examined the bard. She sat unresisting in a foggy daze as he checked her over. He noted that her eyes had lost whatever keenness they had possessed, her gaze was distant and withdrawn. Her hair had lost its luster and spasms shook her body. The medic looked up as the senior Centurion entered through the canvas doorway, followed by the Tribune, Brutus. Meronius stood and moved to where the two men waited, and answered the unspoken question, "Sir, she's suffering from fatigue and a morbid depression."

"We'd worked that out for ourselves," snapped Brutus in annoyance, "Have you a remedy, man?"

"There is a sleep potion that may work. We use it on seriously injured men, who are going to die, just to ease their last few candlemarks. It should put her into a deep dreamless sleep and help her to recover," informed the medic.

"Why do I know that there's going to be a problem with this," muttered Brutus in frustration as he noted the man's edginess.

Autolycus shifted uncomfortably and wished, yet again, that Joxer had found a more painless spot from which to observe the legionaries camp. He stifled an exclamation as a particularly vicious bramble clung tenaciously to his leg. He threw a mortified look at his companion, "You chose this place particularly to get me back for the dress, didn't you?"

Joxer, who was now attired in the black leather trousers and tunic that he'd purchased just before his reunion with his brother Jet, looked at the thief with blank incomprehension and said, "Of course not." He plucked a blackberry from the brier and offered it to Autolycus, smiling hugely and saying, "Want some. They make a good breakfast. And it's not my fault that your cloths are cloth and mine are leather, now is it?"

Autolycus took the fruit and glared at his 'warrior' companion, "You sneaky little Cretin of Chaos, you. You **did** chose this on purpose."

Joxer's grin widened as he popped another berry into his own mouth, "Paybacks are a bitch," he exulted, rolling away when the thief looked like he was going to settle a score of his own. "Hey! C'mon. Ya gotta admit that this is the best spot to watch those Roman goons from."

Autolycus settled down muttering dire imprecations that Joxer failed to catch the meaning of. But he did hear the thief grumble, "I bet Iolaus hasn't got this problem with Toris."

Turning his attention down the sharp hill, the King of Thieves watched as the Roman maniple began to strike camp. His eyes narrowed as he saw a litter being taken towards the only tent still standing and he began to get an uneasy feeling in the pit of his stomach. He hoped that it was the blackberries, but he had an idea that it was being caused by something far worse. A sudden spasm of fear.

"Perhaps someone's ill?" suggested Joxer naively.

Autolycus looked at him as if he couldn't believe what he was seeing, "Do you know where Gabrielle is?" he asked pointedly.

"No, where?" asked his companion in return scanning the area looking for the familiar red blonde hair that would pin point her location.

Autolycus grabbed him by the nose and twisted hard to vent his frustration and anxiety, "She's in that tent. The tent where they just took that litter. Do I need to draw you a picture or do you understand what that means?" he demanded, yanking the nose hard as he let go.

"Owww!" moaned Joxer clutching at his tormented snout, "That hurt," he whined, before suddenly realizing what Autolycus had been trying to explain to him. "Hey!" he almost shouted, trying to scramble to his knees.

"Cut that out," hissed the thief, as he pulled his companion down next to him. Do you want to tell them where we are?" A spear sliced through the bramble cover and pierced the ground between them. Autolycus swallowed, his eyes rivetted to the spear head as he said, "This is not good."

A rough voice ordered, "Come out of there ... slowly. You make any funny moves and we'll turn that bush into a pin cushion."

The thief scowled at Joxer, "Hey Autolycus," he grumbled as he edged out of the bush, carefully, "I've found a great place to keep watch ... amateurs! Ha!"

"HmMMM!" grinned Joxer apologetically embarrassed, "Sorry."

When both men had extricated themselves from the brier, they found themselves surrounded by a decurion and a ten man patrol unit .. all with weapons drawn, four of them holding bows. "Put your hands on top of your heads," the officer instructed.

"Would you believe it if I told you we were just hunting up breakfast?" asked the thief hopefully.

"Not a chance," the decurion confirmed cheerfully.

"Thought not," grouched the King of Thieves unhappily.

"Search them," ordered the officer.

With Autolycus shooting black glares at his companion, the pair complied, while they were roughly searched for weapons and anything else that might be considered contraband in these particular circumstances. The soldier searching Joxer finished quite quickly, but the man assigned to search Autolycus kept finding a variety of odd looking metallic instruments, lock picks, grappling hooks, pistol crossbows and any other number of things that would be impossible to put a name too.

When the decurion looked a question at him, the thief shrugged and answered, "Just the tools of my trade, I'm a scrap merchant."

A grin split the grizzled Roman's face, "Don't bother son," he told Autolycus. "We know who you are, now tell us where your other two mates have got to."

Autolycus looked at him with incomprehension, "Sorry, don't know who you mean."

"He means Iolaus and Tor ... Owwww!" yelled Joxer hopping up and down on one foot, from the pain of Autolycus's boot coming down heavily on his toes, "Whatdidyadothatfor," he demanded in a garbled rush.

Autolycus shook his head ruefully, "You'll have to make allowances for my ... friend," he said with heavy sarcasm, "He tends to open his mouth at the most inappropriate times." He shot another glare at Joxer who got the message.

The decurion shook his head at them. "Never mind. We'll see what the tribune has to say about you both." He signalled his men, who formed up around the two captives, "Move out," he ordered, leading the way back down the hill to the camp.

"He has a thick head ..." answered Meronius.

"Never a truer word ..." muttered the King of Thieves.

"... he'll be fine." finished the medic.

A groan from Joxer bore out that comment and they heard him say, "Owww! My head feels like it's been run over by a herd of centaurs."

"You okay?" questioned Autolycus.

"I think so," admitted his friend.

"Then get over here and talk to Gabrielle. We need to try and wake her up, and I can't think of anyone more likely to succeed at doing that than you ... other than Xena of course."

"Ya think so?" asked Joxer scrambling over to their sides, a proud grin on his face.

"Oh yeah," assured the thief fervently, "your voice is enough to force the dead from their graves."

Joxer's jaw set ready for a retort, but before he could speak, a hand shot up from the pallet and grabbed his ear, "Joxer!" said a rasping, but very recognisable voice, "What in the name of Hera are you doing here?" she demanded, forcing her eyes to open, and seeing Autolycus as well. "Great guys, just great."

"We're here to rescue you Gabby," grinned Joxer as she released him. She looked pointedly at the shackles that graced both his and the thief's wrists. "Ummm, we've got a few details to work out," he admitted.

"Sheesh!" muttered Autolycus yet again. - *How do I get myself into these things?* -

Chapter Twenty Nine: The Games People Play

Caesar allowed his eyes to roll over the words on the scroll before him. A message from Rome detailing the relevant political events, and more importantly, an evaluation of Pompey's current ploys aimed at ousting him from power in the city. So far he had come up with nothing that Caesar's own agents hadn't been able to counter effectively.

He allowed a brief smile of contentment to ease onto his features. By the time he had finished his business with Verchinex, and got Xena back to Rome, he would have accumulated enough dinars to really cause Pompey problems. And, with the Warrior Princess to fight in the private pits of the city, and maybe even some of the big prize gladiatorial combats in the Coliseum, he would have plenty of money for the foreseeable future.

- *Oh, Xena, my pet,* - he thought possessively, - *What a true treasure you are. Far better than just a wagon load of gold! You replenish my stocks like a bottomless purse.* -

It galled her to lose to him, but no more than it did for him to lose to her, especially as she was so new to the game, and he was considered to be something of an expert. Xena had little doubt that she would eventually even the score with him, but she also began to recognise that in this game, much like in life, he was her match. Not in any physical sense. In a straight out fight she'd cut him into little pieces, although he might provide a little sport in doing so. And definitely not in a partnership sense! She may have loved him once, but that had long since been ground into the dust and the seeds that had sprung from that love had been rage and hatred. No they were matched adversaries. As commanders, strategists and tacticians they were a pair. Each counterbalanced the other to perfection. Which is why the bloodless battleground of the chess board was proving to be an attraction neither of them could resist.

She lowered her head towards her captive hands as the straw she was laying on began to irritate her nose. She scratched the offending area and pushed the unhappy memories of Chin, that the action conjured, firmly into the deep pits of her mind, preferring to think of happier moments with her bardic friend

Like the time, at some inn somewhere, when Gabrielle had been deeply involved in the telling of a story ... about one of their minor adventures, Xena seemed to remember. The bard was perched on a stool on a table, and had become very animated in her description of the Warrior Princess's battle with a rogue centaur which had the crowd spellbound

Unfortunately, during the action bard, stool and table had parted company, and Gabrielle had landed in a heap on the floor with a very red face and a very sore rear end. She had gamely finished the tale but, the following morning she had refused Xena's offer of a ride on Argo with heated vehemence and had become quite belligerent about the whole thing when she caught the Warrior Princess with a half smile on her face.

"Quit that," the bard had snarled, not feeling in the mood to be the 'butt' of anyone's amusement and cultivating an angry attitude to hide her embarrassment over the incident and her sore backside. It all just seemed to bring the worst out in Xena. Well, not really the worst, more like the playful, which seemed like the worst to the bard at the time.

"Make me," grinned Xena feeling, just for once, light hearted enough to play.

Gabrielle had stood in the middle of the road, frustration plain on her face, as she tried to work out some way of getting her own back, without suffering yet worse indignities.

"One of these days, Xena, I'm gonna do just that!" shouted the blonde stamping her foot angrily.

A look had edged it's way into the Warrior Princess's eyes as she cocked her head to listen for something. Then she swung a leg over the horse's head and slipped lightly down onto the dusty road. A wicked smile had played across her lips as she hooked her chakram and sword onto Argo's saddle, shrugged out of her armour and hung that there as well.

"Ah! Xena," began the bard, recognising the glint, and bringing up her staff protectively, "what have you got in mind?" she asked, swinging her weapon in defensive arcs as her friend had advanced on her.

"Oh, I just thought that you might need something to help cool you off," came the reply, with that wickedly playful grin and the devilishly flickering eyes.

Gabrielle had looked around wildly, guessing that there was water close somewhere, and that she was destined for it. She saw none, but in that brief second she had taken to look, Xena had bypassed the staff's menace by the simple expedient of a forward flip over the bard. She had then resorted to brute force, by scooping Gabrielle up off the ground in her strong muscular arms.

"Xena! Put me down!" yelled the blonde, wriggling wildly.

The Warrior Princess grinned impudently at her and had started a mad, haring run, through the woods, until she reached a spot where she had launched both of them off a high bank, into a deep pool below.

Gabrielle had come to the surface spluttering over the indignity of it all, looking to see where Xena had got too. When after some time, the dark warrior hadn't surfaced, the bard began to get frantic and started to dive down to look for her lost companion. After about the sixth such attempt at search and rescue, the blonde had heard a cool clear laugh from the shore, where she spotted Xena sitting by a fire, already drying out, while she was gutting and preparing two large fish, ready for lunch.

- *My bard's rage was a wonder to behold*, - grinned Xena to herself as she had remembered the rest of the day, which they had spent by the pool doing domestic chores, such as making some long needed repairs to her armour, while Gabrielle, once she had calmed down, took the chance to write out another story. It had been an idyllic, peaceful interlude in their normally hectic and deadly dangerous lives.

The smile slipped and faded as she returned to her present and remembered just exactly where she was, and where Gabrielle could be. She shook her head impatiently. They'd been in Lugdunum for four days, and there hadn't even looked like being another pit fight during that time.

Since Blasius's unfortunate 'accident' she'd been treated with a fairness and respect which she hadn't really expected. Her assorted bruises had, at last, all disappeared, although the sores around her wrists and ankles were still in evidence, if better than they had been.

So if there were no fights, and no movement, they were obviously waiting for something. - *The reply to a message*, - her active brain suggested. - *He's looking for a meeting with Verchinex. But just what are his aims?* - She didn't question her part in Caesar's likely plans. She was fairly certain that she'd already worked that out.

The two men sat huddled in yet another barn, on a farm just outside of Lugdunum. The city had got just too hot to hold them, with strong patrols out, searching for strangers and whisking off anyone they didn't like the look of. The pair had managed to avoid any real trouble, but they'd decided that they were better off waiting beyond the city walls until they could work out just what in Hades they were going to do next.

They had talked out just about every possible plan they could think of for getting inside the garrison, getting through a hundred and eighty or more trained, veteran, soldiers, getting Xena out of her cell and shackles and then getting out of the place with their skins in one piece.

- *It is*, - Toris had finally conceded, - *plain impossible! Unless we get ourselves captured and taken into the fortress, but then we'd be in just as big a fix as Xena is.* - He thought glumly.

"I wonder how Autolycus and Joxer are getting on?" said Iolaus, looking for something to break the silence.

"They can't be any worse off than we are," chipped in Toris.

"Don't you be too sure. I think those two could find trouble even in the Elysian Fields." smiled the smaller man, who Toris was rapidly beginning to regard as a good friend.

"Like someone else I could mention," grinned the taller man as he thought about his sister.

Iolaus looked at the man who was so like Xena, yet so different in many important ways. He had the blazing anger, but it was usually unfocused and quickly forgotten. He showed glimpses of Xena's fighting skills, but would never be the warrior his sister was. He shared her looks, but without the startling intensity. In many ways he was a pale shadowy imitation of the Warrior Princess. "What was she like?" asked Iolaus suddenly, "As a child I mean."

Toris thought about it for a long moment. How best could he describe his sister as a child, "Competitive," he said at last. "I'm three years older than Xena, but by the time she was walking she competed with me for everything. You know how it is, brothers never have any time for little sisters ... they just get in the way. My friends and me, we used to try and chase her and Lyceus, our younger brother he was about a year younger than Xena, away, so that we could play our games in peace, without having little brats about."

"I bet that pleased her," grinned Iolaus who could just imagine how a miniature Xena would take that kind of rejection.

Toris shook his head ruefully, "You have no idea. When I was nine, me and my friends spotted an eagle's nest about three quarters of the way up a cliff near the village. We'd all tried to find a way up to the nest to get at the eggs. It was like our own test of manhood, you see. The first one amongst us who could climb to the nest and get an egg would become the group's official leader."

"Don't tell me! Xena did it first." laughed Iolaus.

"Damned right!" agreed Toris, "She was six! Just six. She left Lyceus at the bottom of the cliff, after we'd gone home, and then she climbed up there and got an egg. I tell you Iolaus, none of us had managed to get more than halfway to that nest before we'd had to give up. On the way down she slipped and would have fallen and broken her neck if she hadn't managed to grab onto some root. She got pretty banged up, though and it took her a lot longer to get down the rest of the way.

"Mother was frantic. No one knew where Xena or Lyceus was, and it was pitch black by the time they got back home. Xena had broken her ankle and Ly had to support her all the way back from the cliffs. But they came in with Xena holding that damn egg, that she'd somehow managed to keep whole, and both had broad grins on their faces."

"I'm the leader now Toris," she said to me, "you gotta do what I say now."

The blue eyes looked up at Iolaus, "Have you any idea how that made me feel, Iolaus?"

His friend shook his head, being an only child did have some compensations attached to it, even if, as a child, he'd been unaware of them. He'd often wished that he'd had little brothers and sisters to play with like the other kids.

"It was amazing that she got the chance to grow up to become who she did. There are so many times I could have cheerfully strangled her, and my friends could have happily killed her as well. The trouble was she was quicker, stronger and far more intelligent than any of us. The only person who could match her was Mother, and she only managed it until Xena was about eleven or so. Up until then Xena's life was full of escapades, childish scraps, running wild and assorted punishments for a myriad of misdemeanours."

He grinned at the thought, "She always took the punishments without a murmur ... even when she hadn't done anything to deserve them. She picked up quite a reputation in Amphipolis. She was a great one for playing practical jokes and she was very inventive with them too. It soon became pretty natural for everyone to blame Xena for everything that happened. It must have driven Mother mad, because she got a litany of complaints about her daughter every day. Mind you, it meant that I had a fairly free ride through life. Mother was so tied up in trying to sort out Xena's disruptions that my occasional misbehaviour barely got sneezed at."

"Your mother must be a strong woman," smiled Iolaus at the thought of her battling wills with the young Xena.

"Where do you think the renowned Warrior Princess gets it from?" Toris asked quirking an eyebrow in a very familiar way.

The companionable silence fell between them once again before Iolaus broke it once more, "What do you think, Toris? We're doing no good here. We can't get near her. What do you say we go back and find the others. If we can help them get Gabrielle free, we might just be able to do something to prise Xena loose."

Xena had been kind and gentle around her. She had been there to hold the shaking bard when she awoke screaming from her nightmares. The dour, gruff, Warrior Princess had leant her friend the strength of her arms as she tried to sooth away the fears and the terrors. Gabrielle had known that Xena was absorbing the blame for all the pain and suffering the bard had shown. Xena had a capacity for taking the weight of other's sins upon her own shoulders. It worried and shamed the bard when she knew that the Warrior Princess already carried enough guilt for her own past misdeeds to crush twenty strong minded people. Yet still she insisted on taking the blame for more ... even when the guilt clearly belonged to another.

It had been amazing how they had managed to get past that period in their lives and still maintain their friendship. She knew that it was sometimes a little ragged around the edges; there were so many painful issues and memories that they shared, but they had not been enough to sunder the love, respect and friendship of these two firm friends. - *It's almost as if the fates have bound us together for a purpose and whatever may come our way will never be strong enough to destroy that bond,* - she mused thoughtfully.

They watched as stores were loaded on to the vessel and they passed the time as they waited, speculating about just what Caesar had in mind for Xena. As they talked, Autolycus was watching for the arrival of the rest of the maniple that had escorted them into Massilia. When Brutus arrived, it became pretty obvious that the twenty man guard was all that would be going with them. He wasn't sure how that would help them on the ship, but it was far better odds than they had been faced with previously. He stroked the stubble on his chin with his index finger as he speculated upon the situation.

When all the barrels and bales had been loaded, and Brutus had taken himself and his personal staff on board, the trio of prisoners were escorted up the gangplank .. Joxer and Autolycus stumbling somewhat in their chains, a problem that Gabrielle didn't have (they rarely bothered to chain her) and down to the small, well filled hold of the ship. As the hatch was closed down and bolted on them, they took stock of their surroundings. It was dark, a little damp, and uncomfortable, but they got to stay together, which had to be a bonus.

"You know," gritted out Autolycus with some feeling, "I never really did like boats and since our little underwater adventure that time, I think I've developed a definite hatred of them. Especially when I can't see the horizon."

"What underwater adventure was that?" asked Joxer, brightly, trying to ignore the darkness surrounding them.

"I really don't think you want to hear about it, Joxer," advised Gabrielle projecting her voice towards where she guessed her friend to be settled, "It happened a few moons ago and Xena, Autolycus and I were lucky to get out of it alive. It doesn't make a good tale when you're about to embark on a sea voyage," she assured him.

"Okay," answered Joxer uncertainly, although willing to be guided by the bard, "What about this pit fight that you watched Xena fight?"

Gabrielle squirmed about on the pile of sacks that she was sitting on, before proceeding to give them the edited highlights of what had happened in Arelate and the pit fight against Benidor, "I think," she concluded at the end, "that it's one of his plans for Xena. I think he's going to make her into some form of gladiator. He made a huge amount of money from wagering on that fight, and with Xena's fighting skills he'll make a fortune which he can then use to further his political ends."

"That makes sense," agreed Autolycus, from the darkness off to her left and a little way in front, "Once he gets her to Rome, Xena could make him the city's wealthiest man."

Gabrielle gave a vexed sigh as she thought about it all, "What I can't understand is why Caesar is traipsing all over Narbonensis when all the big prizes and money is in Rome."

Joxer's voice came from the darkness, "We think we've figured that one out, Gab," he told her smugly, "It's got something to do with this Vertical Gaul fella that you and Xena saved."

"Vertical Gaul?" questioned Gabrielle in puzzlement.

"The idiot means Verchinex the Gaul." answered Autolycus sneering at Joxer, "We reckoned that since Xena played such a prominent part in getting him away from Caesar, that it would be like the Roman to use her against him in someway. We haven't worked out what yet, but it seems to be the most logical reason."

"Mmmm, could be," agreed the bard thoughtfully.

They heard the muffled cries from above that told them the ship was ready to cast off and the sound of the side ropes being hauled aboard. Having never been on a galley before, the thud and thump of the rhythmic swinging of the oars took some time to register their meaning, and as the crew headed out to sea they began a chant as they rowed, to help them keep the beat of their task.

My father was a sailor,

Push it back dip it down!

He roamed far across the seas,

Thrust it in, pull it out!

And every port he visited,

Push it back, dip it down!

A willing girl he'd leave,

Thrust it in, pull it out!

Solari and Eponin both looked startled by the edginess in Ephiny's tone and demeanor. She had become increasingly worried at receiving no word from Gabrielle upon the outcome of her bid to warn Xena about the trap she was heading into. All of them were! And so, they had come up with the plan of paying a State visit to the Romans where, they reasoned, both of the missing women would eventually turn up. The problem was deciding who got to miss the trip. Ephiny, as Queen Regent, had to go as head of state, but Solari and Eponin had been bickering for three days over which one of them was best suited to accompany her as head of the one hundred warrior contingent that Ephiny intended to take.

"We could make sure that Tarelle and all her cronies came with us to Rome, then we could both go," offered Solari.

Ephiny sighed wearily, "Look, Solari, we know that Tarelle has influence over a good deal more than a hundred of the sisters. Do you really want to go off to Rome on a hunt for Xena and Gabrielle leading a group of Amazon's who are out for their blood?" she asked incredulously.

She drummed her fingers on her table and chewed her lower lip as she thought her way through the situation, "I'll take Tarelle and the rest of the leaders of that particular group with me. Without their following they can't really cause too much trouble, and without their leaders the rest of the bunch shouldn't be a problem either. So that just leaves us to decide which of you two goes and which stays."

Ephiny grimaced as the bickering started again. She held up her hand in a silent demand for peace before she made her decision, "Since you two can't agree, I'll decide for you. Solari," she said turning to the stern, dour faced sister who nodded expectantly, "you'll stay here and run the city and the outlying villages. Don't scowl at me," rebuked Ephiny, "You're the logical choice in that you've been running the nation's defence and with so many warriors away with me, you are best equipped to handle the problems that may arise from having to reorganise the rosters."

"Gee, I'm sorry that you don't get to come, Solari," grinned Eponin with abject insincerity, "Perhaps next time," she teased.

"Cut it out Eponin," warned Ephiny as she saw Solari's countenance darken even more, "I can always change my mind about this." She stared hard at the Weapons Master until she wiped the grin off of her face. "Now, there's lots of work to do. Solari, can I rely on you to make sure that Tarelle and her bunch are available for this excursion. I don't want her sloping off somewhere when it's time for us to leave."

Solari nodded her agreement, adding, "Off course you can," masking the feral grin that nearly made it to her features at that particular thought. She wasn't at all keen on Tarelle and her little clique, seeing them as a dangerous canker on the Amazon body politic.

"Okay, Eponin," continued the Queen Regent turning to her second lieutenant, "I want you to pick out sixty of the best hardened warriors we have. Fill the rest in with some of the good youngsters who would benefit from the experience, but make sure they're steady. I don't know

On the fourth day, they all noticed a change in the swell of the waves. They were just to the south of Pisse, little more than a day's sailing from Rome itself, when the previously friendly sky became ominously black with a speed that promised no good. The area was notorious for the vicious squalls that could blow up out of nothing, but it was weeks past the normal season for such weather and the bireme was caught napping as a serious storm hit them, driving them towards the inhospitable shores of the Italian coast.

As crewmen, joined by all the available manpower including their guards, rushed about lashing down everything that could be secured, and those working on the oars pulled desperately against the driving rage of the squall, Gabrielle, Autolycus and Joxer were temporarily forgotten about. The thief had been watching the way that the ship was being relentlessly driven towards the shore, and he made up his mind that it was time to do something. He had no intention of being chained to a ship as it rammed into some inconveniently placed rocks!

"I think it's time we thought about getting out of here!" he shouted above the howling wind.

Gabrielle nodded her agreement, although Joxer looked at the thief as if he was mad, "Where do ya think we can go?" he yelled incredulously.

"Anywhere we want to once we get free of the soldiers and this boat!" yelled back Autolycus.

With the practised ease of a master craftsman, he slipped the small pick out of his boot heel and expertly disposed of his, and his two friends, shackles with a moment's concentration. As the wind and rain screamed around them, he drew the others into the limited protection of the ship's prow and shouted his plan to them above the roar of the wind.

Gabrielle nodded her agreement. She looked pale and worried, but she was brave and ready to try anything that got her out of Caesar's clutches, so long as it would eventually give Xena a chance to extricate herself from her imprisonment. Joxer shook his head vehemently. He stood up carefully and peeked over the prow of the ship before ducking down again and yelling, "No Way! We wouldn't last a minute!"

It was doubtful that the others heard all of his words as the wind whipped them away with frustrating ease, but they did understand his general sympathies. Gabrielle grabbed his arm and shook it, trying to make him understand that it was their only hope.

He shook his head firmly and clung to the side.

Autolycus pantomimed an execution, letting him know that it was their likely end if they didn't take this chance that they've been offered.

Joxer resolutely shook his head.

Gabrielle looked a plea at the thief. She knew that they had to make the most of this slim chance. She was desperate to! But she hated the thought of going without Joxer. He had, after all, come

to help in her rescue and it would hardly be a fair return to abandon him to Caesar and Brutus' mercy.

A grating sound shuddered through the hull of the ship as the vessel scraped along the hidden dangers of a barely submerged rocky outcropping. The mast, already swinging dangerously in the high winds suddenly exploded in half with a shrieking, "**CRACK!**" that drew all heads in it's direction as the heavy timbers listed and fell, pulling rigging and men over the side with it.

Autolycus shook his head in exasperation over Joxer and bobbed up into the full teeth of the gale to check the ship's progress. They were awfully close to the rocks now, but the mast and canvas that had just gone by the board, was acting as something of a sea anchor and slowing their progress. Which was just as well, because the rowers, on the side that the mast had fallen, were no longer able to continue the unequal struggle against the elements. Many of them had been injured and the screams and cries from the galley pit could be heard above the roar of the sea and wind.

Autolycus knew that they would have to jump soon, to stand any chance of being swept past the approaching rocks. If they got too close, they risked being ground up on them along with the ship. Their chances weren't good, but both he and Gabrielle reckoned that they were better than remaining on the ship, and as Caesar's captives, if they should manage to survive.

He tapped on Joxer's shoulder and pointed at something off to one side of the vessel. Joxer bobbed up beside him, and before he could react, Autolycus tipped him over the railing and into the raging waters below. Grabbing Gabrielle's hand, he helped her on to the deck rail and then joined her by plunging into the swirling water, as the bireme struggled to shear away from the watery grave it was heading for.

Striking out hard, away from the ship to avoid oars and debris, all Gabrielle and Autolycus could hope was that Joxer would have enough sense to do likewise, because they could see no sign of him, and pretty soon, lost sight of each other. The one thing they had in their favour was that the storm was pushing them towards the shore which was less than a quarter of a mile away. So if they could avoid drowning and, or, being dashed to death on the rocks, they stood a good chance of reaching the beach in freedom.

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~ Destiny's Dominion ~

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[See Part 1.](#)

Chapter Thirty One: A Question of Honour

They were on the move again. Xena was once more forced into the cramped, uncomfortable, conditions of the cage as they headed north-west into the disputed territories. As was normal, Xena's guard maniple was packed close around the wagon with the VIIth Legion in marching order around them. It was an impressive sight and further propagated the rumours of Caesar's great treasure.

They were five days on the road. For the Warrior Princess it was a period where the daylight candlemarks were filled with boredom and discomfort, while the evenings offered the prospect of besting Caesar at Chess (something she looked forward to doing as much as she enjoyed humiliating him on the battlefield!).

After the first day, once the camp had been erected and night had fallen, Xena was allowed out of her cage and wagon, and taken into the tent that was always set next to Caesar's. The accommodation was large enough to house her and her watch dogs, usually increased to ten for this situation. She was given a blanket in the middle of the tent for her bed, and she was secured by a chain running from her collar to a heavy bolt driven deep into the ground. This allowed her to sit but not to stand, giving the legionaries a modicum of security from any rash action by her.

Around the outside of the tent, as always, was a guard of twenty men. No one was allowed near the area unless they carried authorisation from either Caesar or Flaccus, effectively cutting her off from everyone else in the camp. All guards were changed on a three candlemark basis to make certain that no one lost concentration about what they were doing. All in all, it was an effective way of keeping the prisoner secure, even without the added threat of Gabrielle hanging over her head.

Each evening, after she had eaten the plate of food she was given, Caesar would visit along with Patroclese, who brought his chess set with him. They barely exchanged words as they both concentrated on the game. For Xena it was a chance to best her captor, for Caesar it provided the chance to beat the Warrior Princess in a non-lethal situation. For both it was proving to be an addiction.

On that first evening as they played, while Xena concentrated on breaking up a slashing attack from her opponent's high priest, Caesar told her quite casually, "It appears that Brutus has found two of your friends."

Her blue eyes snapped up and locked onto his brown ones with startling intensity before she turned them back to the board, - *He'll tell me when he's ready*, - she told herself coldly, forcing herself to patience and to concentrate on the game.

If Caesar expected her to press him about either the identity of the captured men, or news of Gabrielle, he was sorely disappointed. But then again, her silence didn't really matter, because he knew that each of his words would sting her like fire, "Seems that the thief and the fool got careless," he continued in his bored, casual tone, "I'll really have to decide just what to do with them." He smiled viciously as a harder note crept into his voice, "Perhaps I'll have them executed, as a warning to any other 'friends' that you might have, not to interfere with Roman justice."

She knew he wasn't going to do that. Not when he could use them in a similar vein to Gabrielle. It gave him a stronger hand to play and she was well aware of it! She refrained from commenting, forcing herself to focus on the chess, using her tower to take out the intruding high pries and start a counter-attack of her own.

Caesar studied Xena carefully. He sat on a cushion opposite her, close enough to touch her, close enough to smell the scent of her. Even after long confinement, in dirty, ragged, blood marked clothes, she had an odour that was uniquely her own. Indescribable, it was heady and intoxicating. Coupled with her dark beauty, she was enough to make any man desire her. He smiled at his thoughts, - *Desires like that could get a man killed!* - He was realistic enough to settle for using her in his plans and the fighting pits. Turning her into a concubine was not an option he considered other than in his dreams. He valued his life too highly. Pushing forward he used his empress to take out one of her horsemen.

She moved her tower forward to threaten his emperor and waited for him to counter the move which would open the board to her empress within three moves and give her victory within five. She allowed a predatory smile to glide across her lips as she looked at him, knowing the game was hers.

Caesar frowned in concentration as he looked at the inevitable end that the move dictated here, "Your battle," he conceded, a hint of anger lurking around the edges of his tone.

"My game, I think you mean," purred Xena contentedly.

"Oh no, Xena," he shook his head in emphatic denial. "The game is all mine and I'm the master of it ... and you."

Xena favoured him with a look that could have driven nails through six inches of steel, "In your dreams," she told him, her voice dropping to a low, menacing, register.

His faced darkened before being smoothed into a broad smile that came nowhere close to touching his hard eyes, "You know, Xena, I think I have been far too lenient with you of late. Since I sent your little bard away, you have grown increasingly ... how shall I put this ... less tractable. Well, you're storing up a lot of punishments for poor Gabrielle. Do you think she'll forgive you for the beatings she's going to receive when we join her in Rome?"

"You haven't got me there yet," she reminded him darkly.

"Ah!" he actually produced a genuine smile, "Still think you can slip your leash and get to your friend before her guards get the message to ... play with her, shall we say. I think she might just welcome the cross after that, don't you?"

Rage and anger blotted out thought as she made a lunge for the monster in front of her, only to be jerked harshly back by the collar and chain at her neck. She lay on the ground gasping for breath, her hands unable to sooth her tortured throat, held short by their own chains.

"That wasn't a bright move, Xena," chided Caesar gently. "I really am going to have to teach you a little humility. Respect for your betters perhaps?" He motioned to the guards around the edge of the tent, "Teach her her place," he told them as he rose effortlessly from his cushion. "Don't damage her too much. Bruise her a little .. just so that she learns a dog does not try to bite it's master."

He left as the ten soldiers began to systematically beat her between shoulder and ankles with their heavy batons. Nothing that would break bones or do vital damage, but enough to leave her battered and sore for a few days. Xena gritted her teeth and allowed only the occasional grunt of pain to escape her, chalking up another tally to add to Caesar's ever increasing score.

When her guards had finished 'chastising' her, Patroclese approached and examined the damage that had been done, "Nothing broken," he told her.

"That was the object of the 'lesson', wasn't it?" she told him rhetorically, "Just Caesar letting me know my place." She failed to hide a wince as she sat on her bruised posterior .. travelling for the next few days was going to be more than a little uncomfortable.

"Why do you go out of your way to provoke him like that, Xena?" demanded the healer, as he applied some salve to the bruised and torn skin around her neck where the collar had bitten deep.

The Warrior Princess turned angry blue eyes on him, "Because it's the only way I can fight him at the moment." and the thought rang in her mind, - *If I give up the fight, if I allow him to cower me, then not only does he gain victory but I also lose who I am and I might as well be dead.* - She gave a mirthless smile and told the healer seriously, "A little pain is worth it to know that he cannot bend me to his will. It gives me something to live for."

"But that's just stubborn pride talking!" he yelled at her angrily. He had tried hard to fight it, but against all his prejudices, pre-conceived loyalties and general beliefs he found he really liked this woman, "Bend, Xena. Accept your new lot in life. Things will then get better for you and

Gabrielle. He values you greatly and you could find living so much more comfortable if you would just submit."

"Never!" she hissed. The word impregnated with all the rage, pride and passion that constituted her being.

Patroclese shook his head sadly and collected the chessmen and board together before leaving the tent, "Goodnight, Xena. Sleep well."

She hadn't slept much that night, not that she ever really slept well. Too many memories of past evil; too many nightmares! A deep sleep was something she had trained herself to avoid. Her latest beating ensured that she would be too uncomfortable to find much rest.

The following day had proven to be the trial she had expected. Her body was a mass of purple, black and blue contusions that allowed her to find no way of sitting without being constantly reminded of her discomfort. Added to this, the rain that had plagued them on their trip to Lugdunum had given way to hot sunshine and thick sticky humidity, that left all the passengers, in the stuffy wagon, irritable.

By the evening stop, Xena was tired, aching, and in a bad mood. Needless to say, Caesar won the evening's chess match as she found it hard to concentrate her focus on the game. The Roman had gloated over his easy victory, but had been disappointed over his inability to torment the Warrior Princess with words, as she flatly refused to say anything to him.

He had ordered another beating before he left the tent, and Xena began to suspect that her punishments had more to do with the physical impression that Caesar wanted to present at his meeting with Verchinex, than with trying to break her spirit. The bruising that he obviously wanted her to show was nothing that she couldn't easily handle and would heal very quickly if not added to. It was, therefore, part of the show that the Roman noble intended to stage.

The next three days had followed the same pattern. Xena became so used to the constant ache and soreness that it no longer had the power to trouble the light sleep that she took at night, - *I suppose you can become used to anything over time*, - she mused. However, it did leave her with a body that was smothered with skin that ranged in colour from sickly yellow to black, and included a variety of browns, blues, purples and greens that showed through the rents made in her torn and tattered clothing.

On that sixth day, she was aware that the Seventh Legion did not break camp. The guard manipule and the wagon had continued alone on it's march, which made Xena certain that they were nearing their destination. Wherever they had been heading, they reached it by mid-afternoon. The Warrior Princess could hear the sounds of a large tent being erected, larger than Caesar's normal command tent, - *A pavilion then, of some sort*, - she assumed, - *A place to hold the meeting*, - was her speculation.

She spent the rest of the hot afternoon and evening stuck in the cage in the wagon. Xena guessed that Caesar wasn't going to take a chance that some Gaulish spy saw and recognised her as she was moved from her travelling accommodation to wherever Caesar planned to keep her for the night. - *Of course*, - she brooded as she shifted her position in the cage, perspiration running down her face and over her cramped body, - *he could always leave me in here all night!* -

She almost convinced herself that that was what he intended to do, when dusk had long passed and there seemed to be no movement to let her out. However, several candlemarks after nightfall, Flaccus finally appeared to unlock the cage and supervise her movement.

She had been right. The tent erected was a huge, silken pavilion. She paid it little real attention as her busy eyes checked out the dispositions of the sentries and the lay of the land. Unfortunately, it was a new moon shedding very little light in a cloudy sky, so she got little more than the impression that they were probably in a wide valley, close to the river that ran through it.

With sore aching muscles that had set from the long, uncomfortable confinement, Xena was as much dragged as allowed to shuffle into the brightly lit pavilion. She blinked the glare away and took stock of her surroundings as she was hustled through the wide flaps of fabric that served as a door, and could be raised to open the full front of the tent, making it appear as little more than an extended canopy, allowing for easy access and open observation.

The ground of the pavilion, she noticed had been strewn with rugs and long banks of cushions were scattered down each side to where a table stood opposite the opening with one large, gilded chair behind it. The whole effect looked almost regally elaborate and was designed, she suspected, to make the visiting Gauls feel nervous and out of place.

Behind the table were three fabric doorways that obviously led into rear chambers. Caesar was evidently in one of them, but she had no idea what the other two were for, unless she was to be held in one of them .. though she had expected to be tethered in the central entrance area, especially when Flaccus ordered her to sit down there.

She obeyed his instruction. She tried not to invite any more punishments to herself than those she considered to be strictly necessary. For the most part she obeyed Flaccus and the other guards, but she refused to give Caesar the same obedience; he was the one she saved her resistance for. Her eyes followed the Senior Centurion as he entered the 'room' on the left behind the table.

Ten guards remained watching her, but she was not chained to the ground as had been the normal routine. She sat quietly, and ate the food that they gave her. Just bread and cheese that evening, - *But I'm hardly in any position to object, now am I?* - she thought wryly as she munched on the brown travel bread and the hard tangy cheese, - *Beside's*, - she was forced to admit, - *I've eaten worse.* -

When Caesar didn't appear for the evening chess match, and she still hadn't been fastened down for the night, she decided to test how far this unexpected freedom stretched. Moving gracefully and with fluid strength she stood up and stretched .. as far as she could .. carefully.

She was instantly aware of ten men snapping into increased alertness with batons ready to subdue her should it prove necessary, "Easy boys," she reassured them softly, "I just needed to stretch a bit,"

"Sit down," ordered the decurion in charge, firmly.

Xena smiled obligingly and slowly lowered herself back to her former position on the rugs. Chaffed by inactivity, she allowed her mind to contemplate the coming meeting. She suspected that Verchinex would be there the following day, for she doubted that Caesar would leave himself in too exposed a position for longer than necessary.

In a way it would be good to see the Gaul leader again. After they had slipped out of Rome, and got back to the ship, they had sailed with the chieftain to Massilia and, before dropping him off there, she and Gabrielle had got to know and like the man. Previously, they'd only had the myth to go on, much like he had with Xena herself, and that short interlude had given them both a chance to see the people behind the legends, with the bard, of course, taking notes.

However, although it would have been good to see Verchinex under normal circumstances, this was far from a normal time. She knew that she was going to be used in some way against the Gaul, probably with a direct assault on his honour, it was just a question of what Caesar would demand for it.

As if just thinking of the man had given her the power to summon him, the Roman general appeared from the left hand 'room' flanked by Flaccus and Titus, the Junior Centurion. Caesar allowed his gaze to linger on Xena for a moment, before saying, "Very well Titus see to it." The Centurion saluted and left the pavilion. Caesar turned his attention back to his captive as he seated himself in the throne like chair behind the table. He smiled at her almost benignly, "Well, Xena," he said smugly, "I suppose you're wondering what all this is about."

The Warrior Princess allowed a small quirk of amusement, for his arrogance, to show, before replying, "You're meeting Verchinex tomorrow. Obviously you're seeking to work out some form of truce between your forces and his, so it will leave you free to go back to Rome and announce that all is quiet on the western front. That should give you a chance to pull some of Pompey's teeth and quash some of the rumours about the execution of Crassus."

As he listened to Xena outline his carefully laid plan, the smile had gradually fallen from Caesar's face to be replaced by an angry scowl, - *The woman must be a witch*, - he snarled to himself as she had more or less detailed his general plan, which no one other than himself had known. - *Still she hasn't mentioned her own part in my plans, so perhaps it's just because she's almost as good at manipulating, people and events, as I am*. - He opened his mouth to give her some explanation of her part in all of this, but she continued before he could do so.

"You're going to use me, in some way, to manipulate Verchinex's honour. He is indebted to me for rescuing him from your executioners, and you intend to use that to compel him in some way," she told him bluntly, not trying to hide the contempt in her eyes she felt for him doing so, nor the

outrage she felt at being used in such a manner, even though she maintained a relaxed outer appearance.

Caesar offered her a slow derisive handclap as she finished her analysis, "Very good, Xena," he congratulated her coldly, "Well, my sweet, having worked out the basic elements, I think you can wait for tomorrow to witness the details at first hand." He snapped his fingers and she became aware of some movement at the pavilion entrance, but maintained her eye contact with the Roman general.

"For now," he continued, "we need to make sure that you're going to be comfortable for the night and ready for the meeting tomorrow." Two guards approached her and hauled her roughly to her feet. A thick, heavy bar of wood was threaded past the crook at her elbow, across her back and through the elbow crook on the other side, effectively removing all chance of using her hands. She strained the muscles of her arms and back to test the strength of the beam, and was not surprised to feel no give.

The bar was five feet long and had a metal ring at either end. Chains were attached to the rings which could be used to steer the prisoner. Flaccus motioned the guards to follow him, and Xena was forced towards the central chamber at the rear of the pavilion.

As she cleared the door flaps, she could see two heavy wooden posts that had been set into the ground. The legionaries manoeuvred her so that she would be facing the entrance and then secured the chains from the crossbeam, through the iron ring at the top of each post, and hauled them in tight so that Xena's upper body was bent forward and her weight rested painfully on her arms and shoulders. More lengths of chain were then produced to secure each of her ankles to rings at the base of each post, and finally, the collar chain was secured to a stake driven into the ground in front of her. Tethered in this way, the only thing she could move was her head .. just a little.

"Now I know you understand the generalities of my designs," purred Caesar, as he entered the 'room'. "This is just a minor precaution to make sure that you don't do anything foolish, and that Verchinex fully understands the situation." His face creased with pleasure as Xena scowled at him, he had mastery here whether she was ready to concede it or not.

He turned to go and then stopped, almost as if a thought had suddenly crossed his mind, "Oh yes," he said turning back, "gag her."

He watched as Flaccus forced the gag into her mouth and tied it tightly behind her head. Xena couldn't fight against it, but she allowed her dislike of this latest indignity to show in her blue eyes.

"Can't have you shouting out and ruining Verchinex's surprise now, can we?" Caesar told her happily. Why do you think I've gone to all the trouble of keeping you hidden from the public gaze?" He ran an almost tender finger along the length of her silky smooth jawline and his smile deepened as she jerked her head away from him as far as she could. "Sleep well, my slave." He

that neither Roman nor Gaul will seek to make incursions into the other's territory and that, to ensure it, a two league buffer zone should be established ... a no man's land if you like," he explained simply. He handed the paper to Verchinex.

"I would have my scribe look at this," the Gaul told him neutrally.

Caesar waved his hand in compliance, "Of course, I expected as much. Do you wish to summon him?"

Verchinex spoke a few quiet words to Merrythn who turned and trotted back to where Folko stood with the honour guard. Within moments, the merchant cum scribe had returned with the young chieftain and had moved to Verchinex's side to take the paper.

"It says that it's for a one year truce and the establishment of a buffer zone. Nothing else. It's straight forward and presented in clear language," Folko told them in their native tongue.

The dark Gaulish warrior turned his piercing gaze on Caesar, "Why would you offer this truce?" he questioned certain there had to be some trick, "I see no gain in it for you, although it gives us what we seek."

Caesar spread his hands deprecatingly and the smug quirk of his lips returned, "It suits my purposes."

Verchinex was not satisfied with the reply, "Unless I receive a reason that makes sense to me I will not trust you to keep the promise made on this paper," he said in a low threatening voice.

The good humour dropped from Caesar like a cloak, "Very well," he half growled, "I have business in Rome to attend to. I wouldn't want to leave here without knowing that we have a truce in place. Although I promise you that we can resume the usual hostilities when the truce ends." His eyes were fixed on the Gaulish chieftains, "Is that a strong enough reason for you?"

Verchinex studied Caesar for long moments. He was well aware that the Roman had an ongoing battle for power with Pompey and that a return to Rome would allow him to continue it. Dissent amongst the Romans was good for the rest of the world, "Aye," he agreed finally, "Your reason is good enough."

"Then will you sign the truce?" Caesar questioned intently.

"Let my scribe see the second copy and if there's no trickery to be found, we'll sign," agreed the Gaul. They had already decided to accept if the proposal was one they could live with. A year's peace gave them time to gather the harvest, which promised to be a good one this season, and prepare for a campaign the following year.

Folko looked through the second paper and nodded his assent to his chief. Verchinex and the others signed both copies before handing them to Caesar who signed and sealed them with the Imperial seal of Rome.

As the Gauls turned to leave, Caesar called out, "Verchinex, I have a private matter I would discuss with you before you leave."

The five men halted as one, turning back to face the Roman, "You may speak in front of my people," the chieftain told him coldly.

"I give you my word that this does not concern your people. Just you. It's a matter of honour," Caesar told him blandly.

"You cast doubt on my honour Roman?" growled Verchinex questioningly, real heat in his voice.

"Nothing of the sort," assured Caesar smoothly, "Of course if you doubt my honour when I give you my word that you will not be harmed or detained against your will" he left the rest unsaid.

Verchinex scowled and then motioned to his entourage to wait outside. Once they had left he turned his attention on his Roman enemy once more, "What is it you wish to say?" he demanded.

"Ah," smiled Caesar, "Actually I have something to show you, or rather I should say someone." He waved his hand in a signal and the central portion of the silk wall behind the Roman rose to reveal ten soldiers armed with batons, surrounding one woman chained and gagged. Her body showed the evidence of many beatings, and there was fresh blood running down her cheek.

"Xena!" breathed Verchinex explosively.

At another wave of Caesar's hand, one of the guards stepped forward with an axe ready in his hands, "As you can see, Xena is now my property to do as I will with." He stood and walked over to the Warrior Princess and gently fingered the silver collar that hung around her throat, "You see this woman has been condemned three times by Roman justice for, let's see," he said ticking off the items on his fingers, "oh, yes, piracy, rebellion and off course attempted assassination. Enough to earn her a place on the cross, don't you think?" he asked.

"What do you want Caesar?" demanded Verchinex angrily, "You want me to swap myself for Xena? Well I'll do it. I owe this woman my life and for honour's sake I could do no less."

"Very noble, I'm sure, Verchinex, but no. I don't want, or need, your person. As far as Rome is concerned you're already dead. If you turned up alive once more I'd have some problematical questions to answer," Caesar told him.

"What do you want from me, then?" growled the Gaul angrily.

"I want your written agreement, and your word as a Gaulish chieftain, that you will never again fight against me or the Legions of Rome. That you will retire from the military scene. Go and raise crops and children. Become a man of peace," Caesar explained.

Verchinex took a long breath as his thoughts whirled around the subject, "If I agree to do so, Xena will be released?" he asked.

Caesar shook his head firmly, "No," he said, "the Warrior Princess would remain in my custody. Her crimes are too great to justify her release. However, unless you agree to my terms, I will promise you that she will be executed the moment you leave this tent." The soldier with the axe swung it up in readiness. Xena looked hard at Verchinex, blue eyes boring into brown. She could not influence his decision in anyway. Her head demanded that she let the Gaul know that he should refuse Caesar, but her heart held her in thrall as she remembered Gabrielle and her friends: If she died, they would die.

"What assurances do I have that you won't just execute her anyway once I have made your agreement?" the Gaul asked

"I'll give you my written word. I'll also agree that once Xena is dead, you are released from your side of the bargain. Will that satisfy you?" the Roman asked patiently.

As she watched Verchinex, she could see his decision form in his eyes. A look of sorrow and mute apology projected from her own as the great Gaulish warrior nodded his agreement, "Very well. For the debt I owe Xena you will have your promise." He turned his gaze full onto Caesar, "I think that this parley for truce was a rogues way of taking a far greater pledge. The trickery for this was not needed. You only had to send word of your price and I would have paid it."

Xena shook her head in resignation. The Gaul was a great and honourable man and she felt outraged that she had been the instrument to remove him from the leadership of his people. She could not thank him for her life, she could only nod her head to him in acceptance of the gift and make a silent promise to make Caesar pay for his actions. She watched until the lowered cloth obscured him from her vision.

Chapter Thirty Two: Naked Fear?

Gabrielle coughed weakly and shivered. A wave crashed on the beach behind her and ran up, around, under and over the exhausted bard. - *Oh Hades!* - she cursed as she tried to coordinate cold, protesting muscles enough to drag herself further from the raging surf that was being driven by the storm.

Through sheer dint of willpower and an innate stubbornness, that had been fostered by her long association with a certain Warrior Princess, she pushed herself to her knees, and unsteadily made it to her feet. Taking deep breaths she commanded her tired, battered and aching limbs to obey her, before she staggered the few necessary steps away from the edge of the surf.

Clear of the sea water, Gabrielle tried to peer through the stormy deluge that was lashing the coast. If she had managed to make it safely to the beach, then she prayed, to any of the Gods who cared to listen, that Autolycus and Joxer had done so as well. The question was, where would they be?

The bard began to shiver again. She was cold, wet and exhausted. She couldn't see more than a few feet in any direction, and she was in enemy territory. And, just to make things even more interesting, she had no doubt, whatsoever, that as soon as he was able, Brutus would have hunting parties out looking for her. - *If he had survived the storm!* - her mind insisted. - *What would Xena do?* - she thought to herself picturing her strong determined friend at her side.

"Find somewhere to shelter, Gabrielle," she clearly heard the Warrior Princess tell her in her mind, *"You can't do anything until the storm lessens, and if you don't get into the dry, you're going to come down with a fever."* - *Fine,* - she decided, - *Let's see if we can find a cave then,* -

Decision made, she forced her protesting body to head towards the cliffs. If she was lucky, she'd be able to find a cave. If she was really lucky, there might be some dry driftwood in it that she could use to start a fire, always supposing she could find some flints, - *Ah well,* - she mused, - *it's something to dream about.* -

Stumbling along northwards in the lashing rain, she nearly missed the entrance to a small cave that was practically hidden behind a dense cluster of boulders. She squeezed in among the rocks and into the dark space beyond, feeling an almost instantaneous relief as she left the storm behind her.

Gabrielle could feel sand beneath her feet, but could see really very little of her shelter until a flash of lightning lit up the space revealing, for an instant, a cave not much more than ten foot square. She sank to her knees, and breathed deeply, trying to harness some of the reserves of energy that she hoped she still had.

As she knelt there, her instincts began to register a few details that were going to be important to her. Firstly the sand was dry and even partially warm, which was not too surprising as this was the middle of summer. Secondly, in the intermittent flashes of lightning, she could make out some piles of driftwood scattered around the edges of the cave, obviously deposited during the winter storms when much higher tides reached the base of the cliffs. Thirdly, she desperately needed a source of heat.

Coaxing her rebellious body into movement, she scouted around the cave to see if she could find anything that would help her get a fire started. Luck seemed to be with her when her questing hands found some unshaped natural stones that had the feel of being flint. She remembered Xena's patient lessons on how to start a fire. A half grin formed as she recalled how inept she had been when she first started to trail after the Warrior Princess .. she hadn't even been able to start a blaze then and the cold had finally forced her to approach Xena's camp. Since then, though, she had learnt much from her friend .. including how to get a fire started. She struck two together, testing them and her skill, and was able to produce a spark.

- *So far, so good,* - she told herself, trying to keep her spirits up.

Placing the flints she had found where she could easily re-locate them, she gathered together some of the dried wood that was scattered around the cave. The next part was going to be more difficult, however. Using her hands, she carefully examined her flints to find one with a sharp

It was hard going. He was cold and tired, and the storm made it difficult to see far. The only good things about the situation were that the Romans would find it almost impossible to search for them, at least until the storm abated, and that being summer the tide, even driven by the storm, didn't reach the cliffs. He was also fairly certain that the rain would wash out any tracks he left in the soft sand.

The brief flashes of illumination that the lightning provided, helped him gauge what was before him, but it also tended to leave his vision impaired in the after glow of the violent light. However, it was during one of those brief flashes that he spotted what appeared to be a body, laying at the surf's edge.

Shaking his head, to clear his eyesight, Autolycus stumbled down the beach once more and found an unconscious Joxer, laying half drowned with blood running freely from a scalp wound where he had hit his head, "Well at least that won't have caused any permanent damage," muttered the thief to himself. It was not a charitable thought, but it did afford him some relief from the worry he'd been feeling, for if Joxer made it to shore, albeit a bit battered, then it was good odds that Gabrielle would be found also.

He gently patted Joxer's cheeks with his good right hand. With his broken arm, he'd never be able to carry the wannabe warrior. He was going to need some kind of assistance if he was going to be able to get his companion off the beach, "C'mon Joxer," he encouraged as the other man's eyes began to flicker, "C'mon, we've got to find Gabrielle," he prodded.

"G ... Gab ... Gabby," Joxer slurred dazedly. The crack on his head was obviously a bad one.

"Can you stand if I help?" asked Autolycus carefully.

"Gab," the injured man rasped as he tried to make his eyes focus and his body work, "Where's G..Gab?"

Autolycus used his good arm to pull Joxer to his feet, where he staggered unsteadily and would have fallen back into the surf if the thief hadn't managed to loop one of his friend's arms over his shoulder and get his right arm around his waist, "C'mon Jox, help me out here," he grunted softly, "move your feet and let's get moving."

It was a struggle as they teetered precariously back to the scant shelter of the cliffs and, once there, continued north away from Brutus and his men. Autolycus hoped that they'd find the bard, and that she wasn't too hurt. He needed her assistance with Joxer, knowing that she knew far more about healing than he did, having learnt from Xena. He also wanted her to look at his wrist that was throbbing with undiluted pain. What he didn't want to do was admit to himself that he was worried about the golden haired bard .. it was far easier to concentrate on finding her for the help she could give him and Joxer.

They moved slowly with Autolycus encouraging his confused and disorientated friend every step of the way. If he could, he'd have found a way off the beach and up into the countryside above; he felt too exposed here, knowing that Brutus could be just a step behind him. - *Well genius*, - he

goaded himself, - *worrying about it won't do us any good. Besides, if Gabrielle's on this beach and we're up on the cliff we're gonna miss her.* -

He plodded heavily on, half supporting, half dragging, Joxer with him, exhaustion hampering his every movement. The storm continued to whip viciously around them, and in some way he was grateful for the closeness of Joxer's body because that was the only warm patch on his whole frame. - *We need to get out of this rain ... and soon.* - he told himself.

Lightning cracked overhead once more, half blinding him in the sudden brightness that left vivid jags of light before his eyes. It was almost enough to make him miss the soft glow that radiated around the edge of a tumble of rocks. Autolycus stopped and shook his head blinking rapidly to try and clear his vision. The glow remained constant, and he pulled his stumbling burden towards it, desperately hoping that not only would he find shelter, but Gabrielle as well.

With excessive difficulty, he scrambled over the storm slick boulders and was guided to the tight opening of the cave by the light he could see. Maneuvering Joxer so that they could both squeeze through the jagged hole, and into the beckoning warmth, was a trial, but he succeeded after expending a great deal of his failing reserves of strength. He stumbled to a swaying halt just inside, seeing the gently glowing fire and a fully naked Gabrielle stretched out beside it.

"Well," he smirked appreciatively, "Now there's a sight for sore eyes!"

Autolycus hauled Joxer deeper into the cave and sat him down close to the fire, which was in need of more fuel before it died. He gathered some of the bone dry driftwood from around the cave, wincing as he did so, and carefully tended to the fire making sure that it was burning well before deciding what to do next.

Seeing Gabrielle's clothes where they had been put to dry, he knelt down and touched them. They were a little damp, but had dried out enough to suggest that the bard had been here some time. He turned them over to help them dry evenly, before turning back to Joxer and stripping off his clothes. The 'wannabe' warrior needed to dry off as well if they didn't want further complications setting in to go with his head injury. He did decide, however, to leave the man's underpants on. Gabrielle was going to have enough problems when she woke up without seeing a pair of naked men to match her own state of undress.

Having seen to Joxer, Autolycus piled together more of the driftwood and sorting out the most likely looking pieces for a splint. With that done, he allowed his mind to focus on the nagging worry of the glow from the fire attracting more attention. They needed the fire for its warmth, they didn't want it to give away their hiding place. He went and studied the small opening. If he could just find something to block the hole with, it might just serve to hide them from the outside world. Sighing he looked distastefully at his sodden clothing, and, glaring at the storm tossed night outside of the warm cave, he made a decision.

Wrinkling his nose, he squeezed himself back through the hole and searched around the area for the item he wanted. It took a while, but he eventually located a scraggy bush that clung

tenaciously to the side of the cliff. He fought long and hard with it, before it eventually gave up the struggle and he found himself dumped onto the wet sand as its resistance gave.

Biting back a half hearted curse for the pain that lanced through his wrist, the thief, clutching his prize, made his way back to the safe haven of the cave, drawn on by the thought of the warmth that awaited him there. Once he reached the spot, he tried positioning the bush over the hole and seeing the effect it had on diffusing the glow. It didn't totally mask the soft light, but Autolycus figured that if he drew it into the hole after him, he might just be able to cut out all of the tell tale signs of the fire.

Satisfied that it was the best he could do, the thief pulled the bush out of the cave mouth and then backed himself in, pulling the greenery after him until it was wedged tightly. Smiling to himself he straightened up, only to feel a stunning blow to the back of his head that dumped him to the sandy floor with a sudden dizziness that was accompanied by bright stars.

"Autolycus," yelled Gabrielle as she dropped the large branch she was holding and sank to her knees beside the thief, "I'm so sorry, I didn't know it was you ... I just heard this noise as I woke up and ... and I thought it was Brutus and his men."

"Okay, okay," he grumbled rubbing his sore head with his good hand, "It was an accident ... I should have told you I was coming back, but I didn't want to wake you up."

"Wake me up?" questioned the bard in confusion, and suddenly reddening as she became aware of her state of undress, "Ah, what do you mean, coming back?"

"Well," began Autolycus, starting to stand and turn around, "I brought Joxer in here a little while ago when I saw the glow of the fi"

"Hold it right there!" Gabrielle squeaked arresting the thief's movement, "You've already been ... you were in here ... you saw me ..."

"Relax Gabrielle," he tried to reassure her, "Joxer's passed out over in the corner, and I've seen plenty of ... ah, unclothed females before."

"Not this unclothed female, you haven't!" she gritted out, "Just stay facing the entrance until I can get my clothes on."

"They're still damp, Gabrielle," he told her politely, "and you really have nothing to be ashamed of."

"Autolycus!" she yelled again, shocked at what she was hearing. "Just do what I asked," demanded the embarrassed bard as she shrugged back into her clothes which, although a little damp, were not really too bad. - *Better than being naked anyway*, - she decided. When she had finished dressing she told the thief, "All right you can turn around now."

"Great," he muttered and began to strip off his own soaking wet clothes.

"Erm, Autolycus?" she asked tentatively.

"What, Gabrielle?" he demanded more sharply than he intended as a ripping pain stabbed through his injured arm.

"How far ... I mean, just how much ... err?" struggled the bard defensively.

"Oh c'mon, Gabrielle. I need to get out of these wet clothes before I come down with something nasty. Don't worry, I'll keep my underwear on, and I promise to do nothing to compromise your virtue." the thief told her testily while thinking, - *Not that I'm not tempted, but the thought of what Xena would do to me kind of puts a dampener on the idea. Besides, the kids alright, but she not a patch on the Warrior Princess.* -

"Autolycus, why are you grinning?" asked Gabrielle as she crossed towards where Joxer lay unmoving.

The grin instantly disappeared and he side stepped the question by asking one of his own, "How's he doing?"

The bard checked the unconscious man's pulse and lifted his eyelid, before laying a hand on his forehead, "His pulse and breathing seem okay," she reported, "That crack on his head has probably given him a concussion, his eyes are a bit dilated," she explained, "and he could be coming down with a chill." She sighed, "There's nothing to give him, all we can do is make sure he stays as warm as possible and hope for the best."

"Gabrielle," the thief said quietly, "has Xena taught you anything about broken bones?"

She turned back to look at Autolycus, who was cradling his left arm carefully. The bard saw immediately the darkening skin and the slightly odd angle of the lower arm. The one good thing was that it hadn't swollen much yet, "Why didn't you say something before?" she demanded, worried about the thief.

"There was a lot of things to be sorted out before I could get around to it," he answered almost with embarrassment, "Joxer needed seeing to and the cave mouth needed to be hidden"

"Okay, I get the message," sighed the bard as she scooted across to look at the arm, "Did anyone ever tell you that you're a good man, Autolycus?"

"Don't start that again, Gabrielle," the thief replied beginning to go red around the neck.

"Alright," she agreed, "I won't, but you are," she added softly and almost laughed as he scowled at her. Looks aimed at intimidating didn't really effect her now, she'd studied the worlds finest intimidator and nearly everything and everyone else paled into insignificance beside her friend. "Look," she explained, "we haven't got any bandages, so I'm going to have to rip some off your shirt. Then I'm going to need some splints."

Autolycus nodded to the small pile of suitable wood that he'd previously sorted out, "You should find what you need there," he told her.

"Great," she agreed with a pleased nod as she turned her attention to the soaking wet shirt. "If I take the sleeves off this I can use it to hold the splints in place."

"Fine, Gabrielle. You know what you're doing." He paused for a moment as he watched her, "You do know what you're doing, don't you?"

"Of course," the bard replied with all the confidence she could muster, "At least I know all the theory behind it. I've watched and helped Xena do this dozens of times, so I'm sure that everything will work out okay. Besides I fixed your other arm that time with the Amazons," she reminded him, "although that was an easier break to deal with."

"Oh yeah," muttered the thief, "I get to be a guinea pig."

Once Gabrielle had finished her preparations, managing to rip the shirt sleeves into the desired pieces, and having selected the wood for the splints, she turned her attention to her patient's arm, "Now this is going to hurt a bit," she explained, "I'm going to have to pull the bone into the correct line, otherwise it will heal crooked and you might lose some of the use."

"Fine, Gabrielle," gritted out Autolycus, "Just do what you have to do."

"Ready?" she asked as she took his hand wrist to wrist. When he nodded his assent, she pulled on the arm, listening and feeling for the click that would tell her that the bone was back in the right place.

"Got it!" she said at last as she glanced at her friend's face and saw the beads of perspiration standing out from his brow, the look of agony in his eyes and along his tightly clamped jaw, "We're nearly finished," the bard encouraged, "just bear with me while I get this splint on."

She worked quickly, making sure that the injured arm was well supported and wrapped, finally tying the last knot to complete her handiwork, "That's it," she told him. "Why don't you get some rest. You look exhausted." She saw that he was about to protest, but she quickly jumped in, "I've already slept. I'll stay awake and keep watch and make sure that the fire doesn't die on us. Besides I need to bandage Joxer's head."

Seeing the sense in what she was saying, Autolycus reluctantly agreed, laying down in the warm sand close to the fire. Before he drifted off however, he remembered to warn the bard about the Romans, "Be careful, Gabrielle. I saw the ship slip through the reef before I found Joxer. I think it's fairly safe to assume that Brutus survived and that he'll be looking for us. If you hear anything, anything at all, douse the fire and wake me."

Gabrielle swallowed hard and put her hand to the collar at her throat, "Okay Autolycus, she agreed. "Get some sleep and then we'll figure out what we should do next when your rested."

As the King of Thieves drifted off into an exhausted, dreamless, sleep, Gabrielle worked on dressing Joxer's wounded head. She wished that she had some fresh water to clean it, but she thought that the washing in salt sea water would have probably ensured that it would remain free from infection. She tore the sleeves out of Joxer's nearly dry shirt and used one to carefully wrap a dressing, of sorts around his injury.

With her task completed, she put some more wood on the fire and arranged the men's clothing so that it got a chance to dry. Joxer's leather trousers and jacket looked a little worse for their ducking in the sea, but they'd still be an improvement on his normal choice of clothing.

Having finished that, she turned her attention to gathering all of the wood, scattered around the cave, into one easily accessible pile. It was while she was doing this that she uncovered a stout pole. It was a bit too short and a little thicker than she was comfortable with and would need some of the outgrowths of twigs to be removed, but it would serve as a staff and it made her feel better that she was no longer completely defenceless.

With nothing else to occupy her, she turned her attention to trying to compose this latest adventure into story form. Her heart wasn't really in it though, and she had no ink or parchment to record her ideas anyway. Inevitably, her thoughts drifted to Xena and as she wondered where her best friend was, and what was happening to her, slowly drifted into the realms of Morpheus and his brothers.

It was late the following morning before she struggled to force her eyes open. A quick glance around told her that everything was as she had last seen it in the small cave, although the fire had burnt down to softly glowing embers. The cave, however, remained toasty warm and it was only the work of a few minutes to coax the embers back into a decent fire.

Her stomach rumbled loudly. - *That's going to be a problem,* - she conceded to herself. She licked her lips and tasted the salt tang of the sea there, - *And we're going to need some water pretty soon.* -

She climbed stiffly to her feet and went across to the cave entrance to see if she could get any idea of what the weather was doing outside, and whether or not the Romans were out there searching for them.

She listened carefully, forcing herself to be patient, attempting to hone her sense of hearing as Xena had tried to teach her. She screened out the sound of the waves and the noise of the sea birds as they wheeled in the sky, - *At least that means the storm's cleared,* - her mind told her, and concentrated on listening for the sounds of men or a search.

Hearing nothing suspicious, she risked pushing the covering bush aside, so that she could gently poke her head out of the cave and around the sheltering boulders. - *Still nothing,* - she told herself.

Risking a little more, she edged out further, so that she could scan the beach, both north and south, to check in case anyone was searching. She saw nothing except a beautiful golden day,

and empty sands. With a long squint down to the south, she could just about make out the remains of the bireme against the camouflaging background of the headland, but there seemed to be no activity there.

Drawing back into the cave, she made certain that the bush was replaced and tried to decide what they should do. She knew that they couldn't remain in the cave indefinitely; they needed food, water and essential supplies like a medical kit and, for her some ink and scrolls, she felt undressed without them.

She crossed the cave to where Autolycus lay, and gently shook his shoulder, "Hey," the bard said, "time to wake up, Autolycus."

Reluctantly the sleep filled eyes opened and slowly focused on the wildly unkempt bard. He smiled gently and murmured, "Now there's a sight for sore eyes."

"Feeling better?" she asked, checking his head to see if he showed any signs of a temperature or chill.

"Well I couldn't have felt any worse," he replied, "could I?"

"Actually" the bard began.

"Yeah, I know," butted in the thief quickly, "after yesterday we're lucky that we're not all down with a fever. How's Joxer?" he asked as he stood stiffly and began to pull on his discarded clothes.

"I was just about to check on him," the bard told the thief with a smile. She knelt next to the wannabe warrior and gently felt his cheek, trying to judge his temperature. He was a little warm, which suggested he might be coming down with a cold, but she didn't think that it would be incapacitating.

As she touched his skin, Joxer's eyes fluttered open and a grin split his trusting, if rather foolish, face, "Gabby!" he said enthusiastically, "We're alive!" he winced as a dull hammering registered on his brain, and he put his hand up to feel the makeshift bandage there, "I think," he amended more softly.

Gabrielle looked into Joxer's eyes, trying to judge if the pupils were acting abnormally, but as far as she could tell everything seemed fine. She patted him on his bare shoulder and said with a grin, "You're alive and well, Joxer ... well near enough anyway."

It suddenly registered in Joxer's mind that the bard's hand had touched his bare skin. His face flared a violent shade of red, as he realized that he was almost naked, "Uh, Gabby, turn around," he said nervously as he tried to use his arms to cover some of his bare flesh.

"Oh, c'mon Joxer!" the bard threw her hands up in disbelief, "It's not as though you're totally naked, is it?"

"That's not the point. You shouldn't ... I mean it's not right ... Oh C'mon Gabrielle! Just turn around and give me my clothes," he demanded crimson with embarrassment.

"You're being inconsistent, Gabrielle," butted in Autolycus as he gathered up the other man's clothes and threw them at him, "Here hero," he said snidely, before turning back to the bard, "As I remember you weren't"

"Don't you go there, Autolycus," the bard threatened, "it was entirely different and you know it," she accompanied that with one of those 'looks' that she had learned off Xena and the thief was forced to smother a smile.

Joxer quickly shrugged into his dry clothes, but as he pulled his shirt on he exclaimed, "Hey, where'd my sleeves go?!"

"I needed something to bandage your head with," explained Gabrielle, "It was the best thing for the job."

"Oh, right," he replied, slightly mollified. He pulled on his leather jacket and a smile slid across his face, "You know, Gabby, I've just remembered this really neat dream I had."

"What was that, Joxer," she asked absently.

"Well I was laying in this cave, just like just now, only you were laying on the other side of the fire butt na"

"Joxer!" the bard whirled on him furiously, crimson staining her cheeks, "I don't want to know that ... and ... and you just better forget it too! Or else." She turned on Autolycus, marched up to him and glaring directly into his eyes, hissed, "Not one word from you," she said punctuating it with a heavy finger to the chest, "Don't even think about discussing his 'dream' with him, or you'll end up with some more broken bones to go with the one you've already got. Is that clear," she jabbed at him with her finger again, noting the thief's wince.

"As crystal," he answered, "But I still say you've got nothing to be ashamed of," he muttered as she turned away. Gabrielle elected to ignore that.

"Look," she started as they all finished re-arranging their attire, "We can't stay holed up here indefinitely," her stomach rumbled loudly once more. She looked at it when she saw her friends doing the same, "That's one reason," she admitted, "another is that we need water, and then we're going to need some other things if we're going to have any hope of keeping clear of the Romans."

"I can't fault her logic so far," the thief grinned at Joxer.

Gabrielle frowned at the interruption, "Anyway," she continued, "I checked on what's happening outside while you two beauties were asleep ..." a vague look came across her face as the phrase sprung something in her bardic muse, "Hey there's a story in there somewhere," she muttered,

before shaking her head and returning to business, "The thing is, at the moment it doesn't look like any of the Romans have got off the ship to start looking for us. They may just be too exhausted from the storm, or banged up or perhaps too many of them got washed overboard, but the point is we should use this time to get ourselves off the beach so we can lose them in the countryside."

"She sure talks a good idea," put in Autolycus with a grin, "I wonder if she does that with Xena?"

"Sure, talking's what Gabby does best," smirked back Joxer.

"Uh, guys. Hello," she said waving her hands in front of their eyes, "C'mon fellas, we've gotta work this thing out."

"Oh, I think you've got the right idea Gabrielle," agreed Autolycus mildly. "We've just got one problem."

She looked at him with a question in her green eyes, "What's that?"

The thief reached out and fingered the collar at her neck, "This little problem here. If anyone gets a look at that it's going to draw attention, it's not your average slave collar," he explained, "And if it draws attention and someone gets a look at that inscription, then we're in big trouble."

"Oh!" she murmured unhappily, "I kind of think that's what Caesar had in mind," she admitted. "Is there any way you can get it off?"

"Gabrielle, I'm probably the best thief in the world ... what am I saying!" he said slapping his forehead in mock disgust, "I am the best thief in the world. I can pick any lock given the tools and the time. Unfortunately, this collar hasn't got a lock and," he inspected the metal carefully, "even with good blacksmith tools, I don't think I could get this off. I've seen this type of metal once or twice before. It comes from some ore taken from rocks that sometimes drop out of the sky. It's the hardest metal I know, it's difficult to work and costs a fortune to buy. Even the rivet is made from the stuff. About the only hope we've got of getting this off you is for Hercules to break it off." He thought about it for a moment, "You didn't happen to send him a letter as well did you?"

"No," said the bard unhappily, "So I'm stuck with it, huh?"

"Fraid so," admitted the thief equally unhappily.

"Could we disguise it?" suggested Joxer. Both of the others turned to look at him, "Erm, I mean if we could wrap what's left of my shirt sleeve around it ... ah, maybe we could make it look like some kind of necklace ... or not," he finished hesitantly.

"Joxer that could be it," muttered Autolycus.

"Joxer that might just be a brilliant idea," agreed Gabrielle at the same time.

"Aw, it was nothing," smirked the pleased man, "You know, just something we great warrior types have to come up with at difficult times like these. Ya see ..." he started to wax lyrical about his gifts.

"Alright Joxer, we haven't got time for all that now," the bard interrupted him. "Here give me a hand doing this. I'd ask Autolycus, but his broken arm would hamper him."

They spent some time carefully folding and wrapping the black cloth from Joxer's shirt sleeve, and winding it around the collar, hiding the knot behind her hair, "What do you think?" she asked the thief when they'd finished.

"Mmm!" he said wagging his hand from side to side, "It covers the metal, but it looks like a disguised slave collar. It needs something else," he glanced down at the remains of the green material from his shirt sleeves, "Try using some of that to over-wrap the black. The green should match your top and make the thing look more like an ornament than it is at the moment."

Joxer spent some more time on carefully wrapping the green cloth around the collar. By the time he'd finished there was definite improvement, with the collar no longer looking quite as suspicious, and rather attractive in black and green stripes.

"You know, that just might work," admitted Autolycus, rubbing his chin thoughtfully, "It's far better than it was anyway," he conceded.

"Well then," smiled the bard, pleased with the outcome, "Let's get going shall we, before the whole of the beach starts to crawl with Romans."

She grabbed her newly acquired staff, and headed for the cave entrance, only to be stopped by the thief, "Let me go first, Gabrielle," he replied to her impatient frown, "I 'sneak' better than you do."

The bard nodded her agreement, and waited impatiently as Autolycus worked his way cautiously out of the cave opening. She heard a cough beside her, "Umm, Gabby?" came Joxer's questioning opening.

"What Joxer?" she asked while trying to keep an eye on the thief for any signs of trouble.

"Umm, well as I'm the warrior here, shouldn't ..."

"No!" snarled Gabrielle, interrupting him.

"You never let me finish," he complained.

"The answer would still be no, Joxer. You don't know how to use a staff well ... I do." she told him firmly.

"But Gabby" whined her companion.

at a leisurely pace .. there was work to be done, contracts to be arranged, people to see and money to be made.

Iolaus and Toris had made good time in getting from Lugdunum to Massilia. They maintained their disguises, keeping their beards and making sure that their hair was consistently coloured. No one gave them a second look. They were nothing like the pair of men being diligently searched for by the legionaries. Once they had reached Massilia, they had decided to take their horses to a trader. They were going to need money for a ship's passage and their funds were not plentiful, besides which they had no further use for the animals.

"How good are you at trading?" the small man asked Toris as they walked through the streets.

Toris shrugged., "As good as the next man, I suppose," he answered.

"Well then," smiled Iolaus happily, "you better leave me to do this. I'm a pretty fair hand at it and we're going to need as much as we can get for these two animals of ours."

Toris glanced over his shoulder at his mud flecked sweaty horse, "I'd suggest that we clean them up a bit before we try to sell them. We'll get more if they don't look like they've spent almost a moon of hard road travelling."

His smaller companion, looked back at his own gelding and stopped momentarily to pat the beasts neck, "You're right. A good wash down and some time spent with a curry comb should increase their value by as much as thirty dinars. He looked over at Toris with a smile, "Hey, I thought Amphipolis was sheep country, since when do sheep herders know anything about horse trading?"

"We breed sheep," grinned Toris dryly, "We don't advocate cultivating the brains of them ... we leave that to the city boys of Corinth."

"Ha, ha! Very funny," responded Iolaus with good humour, "Have you got any idea just how much like your sister you are?"

"What did you expect?" retorted Toris, pulling his horse along at a walk as he realized that they were attracting attention standing still in the busy street, "Who do you think taught her all she knows?"

That had the smaller man spluttering and choking as he tried to find a suitable reply to the offhand remark. Finally he managed, "Oh, I just can't wait to tell her that one," he smirked as he caught up to Toris, "It's going to be great to see her reaction to that," he laughed.

More soberly Toris added quietly, "I'll just be happy to see her. Safe, well and away ... from where she is," he added cautiously.

Iolaus nodded his approval of the sentiment and the careful wording of it. It seemed, at last, that Toris was beginning to guard his tongue and passions. It would help keep them out of trouble if they didn't have to worry every moment about what someone might overhear them say.

They found their way to a stable and paid the owner a couple of dinar's for the use of his facilities and another five for some oats for their tired horses. They then spent the next two candlemarks cleaning up the animals, and curry combing them until their coats shone in the warmth of the early afternoon sun.

"That's about as good as we're going to get them," grinned Iolaus after he dunked his head in the horse trough to wash off the sweat he had worked up and cool himself down. He shook his long curls to get rid of some of the excess water, before pulling his patchwork vest back on, "We'd better go and find ourselves a horse trader, so we can set about getting a passage to Rome."

"The stableman says that there's a dealer about four blocks over. He also said that he's a fair man, not like some of the others in the city," Toris told him, "I've sold the stableman, here, the tack. He said it looked fair quality and he needed some for clients who want to hire his horses. He gave me sixty dinars, which is pretty fair for their condition and the fact that they're used goods."

"Well at least it's some towards our fare. Now if this trader's as good as you've been told, we should make enough from the horses and some to spare," grinned Iolaus. "What's the name of this trader?" he asked.

"Calumnus," answered Toris, "If you're ready, we might as well get over to him."

The pair led their mounts, using some old rope halters supplied by the friendly stable owner, and soon found Calumnus's place of trade. While the shorter man got down to the business of selling the animals, Toris cornered a young man and engaged him in some careful conversation.

"My friend and I have to catch a ship, and we were advised that you were a fair man to deal with," began Iolaus.

"Aye, well most people would say so," agreed Calumnus amicably.

"What's your top offer for these two horses," encouraged the short man, "they're good animals and you can see that they're in good condition."

"Weeell," answered the horse trader sucking his teeth as he looked at the pair of geldings, "I might go as high as seventy five dinars for the pair."

"You've got to be kidding!" returned Iolaus, happily getting into the routine of offer and counter-offer, "we got almost that for the tack we sold. Now seventy-five dinar's each would be a fair price."

"I don't know where you come from, son, but the horses there must be worth their weight in gold if you think that these two would get you anywhere near that amount," he stroked his chin consideringly, "I'll give you eighty-five dinar's for the pair."

"Calumnus," retorted Iolaus in well acted disbelief, "I was told that you were a fair man. You know that these two animals are worth at least one Hundred and forty dinars as a pair."

Toris half smiled to himself as listened with half an ear to the bargaining while he engaged the apprentice horse trader in conversation, "Have you been with Calumnus long?" he asked, more as a way of opening conversation than in any real interest.

"Only about a moon or so," grinned the lad, "My Da knows Calumnus and arranged an apprenticeship with him for me. Up until then I lived on a farm outside of the city. It's cleaner there, but not as much fun." He glanced over at his boss and Iolaus, "You're friend's pretty good at this."

Toris gave him a quick smile, "He enjoys a challenge," he agreed. "Being new in town, I bet you've seen some things that you didn't on the farm."

"Oh yeah. The city's so full of people and so busy, there's always things going on, and there's so many soldiers about. I kinda wish that Da had let me join the Legions, but he didn't want any son of his being a soldier, so I guess I'll just have to settle for being a horse trader," he scuffed at the dirt beneath his feet.

"I heard that there was a unit of the VIIth in the city," mentioned Toris casually, hoping that the youngster, with his interest in the military, would have noticed something.

"Too right," agreed the lad. "The seventh are about the best fighting force around. They're Caesar's own, and crack troops to boot. I saw that maniple come into town and they'd got three prisoners with them. They kept the public well away from them, so I guess that they must be pretty important, but they didn't look like any of those Gauls and one of them was just a girl ... though she must have been ill 'cause she was being carried on a litter."

Toris tried to suppress his concern as he heard about there being three prisoners, he calmed himself and asked as casually as he could manage, "What made you think that they weren't Gauls?"

"Oh, just that they looked too well dressed. One of them looked like he was quite a dandy. The other one was dressed in leathers, you know like maybe a fighter, but he didn't look like any fighter I've ever seen before," answered the youth.

- Damn! - swore Toris to himself. - It can't be anyone else. How in Tartarus did Brutus manage to get his hands on them, I thought that Autolykus was far too canny for that! -

He looked up as he heard Calumnus and Iolaus spit on their hands and clap them together to seal the deal. The shorter man went off with the horse trader to get the money they'd agreed upon, while the young apprentice led the horses away, leaving Toris to sit in gloomy silence.

"Hey did you see that," laughed Iolaus when he reappeared, clapping his companion on the shoulder, "Guess I haven't lost my touch. We got one hundred and twenty dinars for the pair, and what with your sixty and the loose money we've got kicking around, we should have enough dinars for the passage and some to spare for once we get to Rome." While he was talking, the short man suddenly became aware of Toris's moody silence, "What's the matter?" he questioned quietly.

His companion refused to answer until Calumbrus had returned with their money and bid them a cheery 'Good-day', then Toris stood and pulled Iolaus along in his wake, out of the traders yard, until he could find a quiet spot to speak where he was sure that they wouldn't be overheard. They settled for a dark, dank alleyway that smelled as if it doubled as a cess pit, where Iolaus's impatience finally got the better of him and he demanded, "What's up Toris?"

Xena's brother looked at him, his blue eyes showing worry and uncertainty, - *A combination not usually found in his sister*, - Iolaus noted as he waited for his companion to speak.

"That apprentice I was speaking to," Toris began and waited as his friend nodded his head for him to continue. "Well, from what he's just said, it looks like Brutus managed to pick up Autolycus and Joxer."

"Gods in Olympus!" swore Iolaus in frustration. "Is he sure ... I mean are you sure ... I mean, " he ran his hands through his hair in frustration, "I don't know what I mean. Just tell me what the boy said."

Toris explained tersely how he'd questioned the lad, and just what he'd said about the two men prisoners he'd seen, as well as Gabrielle being carried on a litter, "Damn!" swore the smaller man emphatically, "It certainly sounds like a description of Autolycus, so the other one has to be Joxer." He banged his fist on the wall angrily, "I swear I'll rip Brutus' heart out if he's hurt Gabrielle in any way."

"We're not going to do a lot of good standing around here," put in Toris moodily. "We better get down to the docks and see if we can get a passage for Rome."

"You know, Autolycus and Joxer getting captured, might have been part of the thief's plans. You know, work at getting Gabrielle out from the inside. I might not always appreciate The King of Thieves, but I guess I should admit that I've never seen a lock he can't take," Iolaus muttered trying to convince himself that things would be alright.

"C'mon, Iolaus," encouraged Toris, feeling a need to be doing something, anything to work towards getting Xena free, "Let's get down to the docks and find a ship, huh?" he suggested, "We might be able to find out down there when Brutus and the others left."

splinters on some rocks just to the south of the city. They'd been driven through the only gap in the reef and had beached in the cove beyond, the hulk had only been towed back to Pisse earlier in the day.

With everyone talking about the battered wreck of the ship, the two men were able to pick up plenty of information without really having to ask any questions. All they had to do was listen, as the hulk and its erstwhile passengers were the main topic of conversation. Therefore, they soon learned that Brutus and his men had left the ship as soon as it had grounded, sending a sailor up the coast to alert the Pisse authorities about the wreck and demand reinforcements, in the name of Caesar, for the immediate scouring of the area to find three very dangerous prisoners that were being escorted back to Rome.

When Iolaus and his tall companion got back on board ship to collect their gear, it was all they could do not to pound each other's shoulders in glee at the thought of their friend's escape. However, it was not too long before a sobering thought took over.

"You know, we still don't know if they made it to shore," Iolaus pointed out, "I mean all we really know is that Brutus is searching for them. He may even have found them by now."

Toris thought carefully, "From what we've heard they jumped overboard to escape, when it looked like that the ship was going to hit the rocks. If the ship got swept through alright, it's a good bet that our friends did. Brutus obviously thinks so or he wouldn't have called out extra men to search."

Iolaus snorted in frustration, "Brutus is covering his ass. He's lost Caesar's second most valuable possession and if he doesn't turn up either a body or the live woman, Julius bloody Caesar is likely to crucify him ... literally!"

"How good a swimmer is Gabrielle?" asked Toris carefully.

The shorter man thought for a moment, "Good," he finally admitted, "she and Xena do quite a lot of swimming."

"Well then," tried Toris optimistically, "until we hear otherwise, we better work on the assumption that she and the others made it, and find them before Brutus and his soldiers do, or we'll be back to square one again."

Iolaus nodded his agreement, grabbed his gear and followed Toris off the ship, to start their search for their missing friends.

Chapter Thirty Four: To Crush Resistance

Left alone with her guards, Xena's anger began to build anew within her. There had been a time when no-one would have cared about her death. There had been a time when her life meant nothing to anyone. Now after three years of trying to atone for her past sins and crimes, she had become a liability to the few friends she had garnered. Verchinex forced into a pledge that

removed him as a leader for his people, Gabrielle, Autolykus and Joxer's lives all threatened. Iolaus and Toris being hunted.

- How do I always seem to end up as a force for destruction, no matter what I try to do with my life? - she thought bitterly.

She jerked in her bonds in frustration. For all of her phenomenal strength, she knew that she had very little chance of breaking loose from her chains. Caesar had planned long and hard to make certain that once he had her in his power, she wasn't going to be able to slip her leash with any ease. She ceased her struggles as a baton slapped her across the back. Not a hard blow, just a reminder that she was being observed.

Straining her senses she could hear the final agreement being signed in the pavilion, and knew that her part in this particular scene had been executed to perfection. Caesar had removed Verchinex as a challenge, and that removal would last as long as she lived. On the one hand this told her that Caesar was not planning her death soon, which meant that Gabrielle's life (if not her comfort) was also assured. What was almost as important, however, was that even if the Warrior Princess should break free, Verchinex would still be tied by his oath. It was enough to make Xena seethe.

Forcing herself to relax, she wondered just how long it would be before they began the move back to Lugdunum and from there to Rome. She had no doubt that Caesar wanted to be back in the capital as soon as possible. He had business to attend to with Pompey and he obviously intended using the breathing space, he had just gained from the Gauls, to do so.

- Pompey, - she thought, eyes narrowing, - he could be an ally for us in this. He's not going to like Caesar gaining the upper hand once more. The trouble is, will he view it in his best interests to see Gabrielle and me free ... or dead! -

The thought thundered around her mind as she tried to plan ahead. She had no illusions about escaping from Caesar at this juncture, the dangers for her friend's were too great. But once they were brought together again in Rome. Well then the game changed once more and she needed to be ready for it.

She was brought abruptly from her thoughts as Caesar returned quietly to the 'room'. She could sense him almost, but not quite, in the way that she could sense the presence of Ares. The God made her flesh tingle and crawl. The Roman just made it crawl. She raised her head to glare at him.

He smiled, *- Well why not, - he thought happily, - so far she has brought me everything I have sought from her. Now, however, it's time to start training her. I want her brought to heel. I want her to know and acknowledge me as master. - His smile broadened at the prospect, - This is not going to be a short campaign, but by the Gods, it will prove entertaining ... for me at least! -*

Caesar signalled a guard who quickly moved forward and removed the gag, "Well, now Xena," he almost purred with contentment, "as I promised, things are now going to change for you. I

think that you've been lounging around in that wagon for quite long enough. A warrior like you needs exercise to keep all your skills in place ... and you're going to need those skills, my slave, if you want to keep yourself and that little bard alive ... not to mention your other friends."

Xena's lack of response nettled him, but he knew her well enough to understand that she wouldn't respond until he pressed the right buttons in the correct sequence, "As I no longer need to keep you or your identity hidden from prying Gaulish eyes, we'll have you marching with your guards, from now on. Oh yes," he added, "I think we'll have some sparring between you and my men."

He saw her eyes light up with a feral gleam. He patted her gently, and contemptuously on the cheek, "Tut, tut, Xena. I'm hardly going to let you completely loose for that, am I now? We'll work something out to give you a challenge, while keeping you quite safe at the same time."

He sniffed, pointedly, "In the meantime, I think it's long past your bath time. I won't have a possession of mine at less than it's best, Xena, so I think that a trip to the river is in order for you before we set off today."

The Warrior Princess held back the urge to bite his hand, the hand that, she noted showed the small white scar left from the split javelin in Britannia. She chuckled inwardly. - *He may have left marks on me*, - she thought grimly, - *but he hasn't escaped either*. - She observed with pleasure the scar that ran across his right cheek, - *Just like Draco's*, - she grinned to herself. - *Mmmm, perhaps I should patent that, make it my trade mark*. - Her lips almost quirked into the private half smile of hers, but she crushed it before it could make it to the outside.

Caesar grabbed a handful of her usually luxuriant raven hair, now dirty and caked with blood, and pulled her head up sharply, disturbing her private thoughts once more, "I'm going to break you, Xena," he told her with calm assurance, "By the time I'm finished with you, you're going to be as meek as a lamb, unless I tell you to be otherwise."

Her answering smile held no humour as she replied to him in a low menacing tone that was heard clearly by everyone within the area, "Dream on, Julius."

She expected the blows that her retort had purchased and had steeled herself against them to make no sound as they thudded home. Nothing hard enough to break a bone, but on muscles and skin that were already strained, damaged and sore, the effect was not negligible.

"Enough," growled Caesar at length, "Get her down to the river and get her washed off. I want to move out of here in short order. Having given his orders he swung out into the main pavilion, and left the guards to unlock her from the posts and the stake that held her collar.

- *Oh Gods!* - her mind screamed as she tried to straighten her back, - *that hurts!* - Focusing her mind to compartmentalize the pain she was feeling, she kept her face a blank mask as she tried to encourage her tortured muscles to co-operate.

She stood immobile as a second long chain was fitted to her collar, with one leash holder to walk in front of her and the second behind. The chains on the wooden beam that imprisoned her arms

were held by two more of the guards, while the chains used to hold her legs to the posts were taken by a final pair. Once again, she had her six personal watchdogs and the control they exerted over her was not much less than when she had been stuck in the cage.

- Can't expect him to get sloppy, now, can we? - she snarled to herself. - My reputation is really doing me no good on this trip, - she brooded.

The legionaries moved out down towards the river that her sharp ears had located when she had been unloaded from the wagon the previous evening. She saw Patroclese waiting with Flaccus under the welcome shade of an oak tree. She stumbled towards them under the constriction and weight of the shackles, guided by her guards.

"Xena," greeted Patroclese with a smile that faded as he saw the streak of blood that trailed down the side of her face. He shook his head with genuine sorrow that he had been responsible, in his part, for so much of the pain that the Warrior Princess had to endure, "Can't you stay out of trouble for five minutes," he said in a tone that so reminded her of Gabrielle that a spontaneous laugh escaped her before she could contain it.

Not only Patroclese, but Flaccus and the soldiers looked at her with shocked incredulity. The laugh had been so clear and vibrant and was totally out of keeping with the dour, stoic warrior that they had become used to. She almost laughed again at the looks on their faces, but constrained herself and answered the looks with a roguish grin that totally confused them, especially when she added, "Not even my Mother could teach me to do that."

She looked at the lazy, deep running river and asked, "So, gentlemen. How have you got this little escapade planned out, huh?"

"Xena, will you give your word not to attempt to escape, and not to resist being re-shackled, if we let you out of your chains?" Patroclese asked.

Xena noticed that Flaccus looked uncomfortable about even suggesting that she be trusted to honour her oath. He remembered all too well how difficult it had been to catch her in the first place. Patroclese hadn't been there, so he had no real idea just how very dangerous the woman was.

She thought about giving the promise. It would undoubtedly have made things easier, but that was the problem. The easier she made things for herself, and the 'enemy', the closer she came to accepting their rules, their views and their orders. Her stubbornness reared up at giving that tiny inch. Once she started down the slippery slope she was lost and might just as well surrender to Caesar right here and now.

Xena shook her head, both in refusal to make the pledge and to give up the private war that she was waging with her old enemy. He'd have to fight her every step of the way, because there was no way on the Gods' earth that she'd ever give in to his decrees and demands, "No, I'll make no such promise, Patroclese," she told him evenly.

The healer shook his head in resignation, He could see the stubborn set of the Warrior Princess's jaw, and he knew full well that it would be easier to move a mountain than get her to reconsider her choice, "Very well, Xena, we'll do this the hard way."

Flaccus took over, "Get that beam out," he ordered his men, who complied with speed, releasing Xena's trapped arms so that she could at least move them for the short distance allowed by her manacles. It was a wonderful release and she revelled in her limited freedom.

"Okay," she asked, "what next?"

"Listen very carefully, slave," rasped Flaccus in his gruff, no-nonsense, voice, "I'm going to take the belt and manacles off of you. The collar chains, the leg irons and the leg chains stay on while you're in the river." He made a gesture and twenty archers, strategically placed around the bathing place moved into view, "You so much as look as if you're going to cause me any trouble and they've got orders to shoot. Don't worry, they're blunted arrows but they'll have enough impact to bring you down. Got it?"

"Oh, I think I can follow that," Xena replied coldly, arching an eyebrow at him.

"Don't push your luck with me, slave," Flaccus growled. "I don't know what happened with Blasius, back at Lugdunum, but I'm certain you had something to do with it. The man was a bullying brute, but he was one of mine and I don't appreciate slaves who retaliate against given authority. So just you keep in line and keep your smart mouth to yourself, understand?"

Xena nodded her comprehension. She really had no desire to force a confrontation and start a feud with Flaccus. She was aware that she was pressing his slender patience, and knew that it was her anger at Caesar that was making her act so provocatively with the Senior Centurion.

Flaccus gave her a hard glare which she held without dropping her eyes. She might not wish to deliberately provoke the soldier, but she was not going to be cowed by anyone here. Luckily he took her silence as sufficient conformity. "Healer," he instructed, waving Patroclese forward, "you know what to do."

As the physician stepped forward with a small sharp knife, Xena's mind suddenly screamed, - *The toothpick!* - If Patroclese cut the shirt off of her, he was almost certain to find the small piece of metal and there was absolutely nothing she could do about it.

The healer stepped behind her and she tensed as she waited for him to slit the material up the back of the shirt. He first undid the belt that secured the shackles to her waist, before making a slit in the dirt and blood smeared rag that she was wearing. Taking a firm grip with both hands, he pulled the shirt apart, up to the collar where he used the knife to slice through the thicker material.

She knew he'd found the toothpick. She felt his hands hesitate for a moment. But instead of declaring his discovery, he continue with his task of cutting the cloth away. When she was naked from the waist up, he slid the knife down the outside seams of the her trousers and asked her to

step away from them, at which point Flaccus removed the manacles and motioned her into the water.

Xena wasn't worried about being stripped in front of her guards; after all, they'd already seen her without clothing in Nemausus, and nudity had never been something to cause her concern. She had a fine body and had used it to her advantage against men on more than one occasion. What did concern her, however, was what Patroclese intended to do about that toothpick!

She settled down into the cold river and caught the bar of soap that the healer threw to her. She began to methodically clean the grime from her hair and body, as she tried to make up her mind how Patroclese would choose to act and the possible consequences of that choice. If he informed Flaccus and Caesar, she would undoubtedly be the recipient of some harsh punishment. Another whipping seemed the most likely bet, and she could handle it, but that could also mean a similar punishment for Gabrielle which she didn't think she could endure.

If Caesar thought about it, he'd realise that Gabrielle must have known about the toothpick. It was a logical step from the fact that the only time she would have been in a position to gain possession of the implement was that first night in Caesar's tent, which meant that they must work out that Gabrielle had helped her to keep it hidden during her illness. It presented Caesar with the perfect opportunity to really discipline them both, knowing that it would hurt Xena all the more.

Her face took on a grim cast, and the soldiers surrounding her began to feel the tension that was emanating from the woman they were set to guard. If Xena were aware of their nervousness, she didn't show it. She had far more difficult concerns to occupy her mind.

Finishing with the soap, she threw it back out to the healer and ducked herself under the water to remove any remaining residue that clung to her. For all her immediate worries, she did allow the stray thought to register that it was good to be clean once more.

"C'mon, slave," barked Flaccus, "get out of there. We're not going to stand around while you take your ease."

Xena rose from the water like a goddess from the depths and made a slow stately progress back to the bank where she was thrown a rough towel which she used to dry off her long, lean body, "What now?" she asked as she threw the towel back to the healer.

A fresh, blue shirt was brought to her by Patroclese who helped her put it on, threading the collar chains through the neck, first one then the other. As the shirt settled onto her shoulders, she made eye contact with the healer who shook his head slightly before looking away.

Flaccus brought the belt and manacles back and Xena offered no resistance as the leather was fastened back around her waist, and she held her hands up for him to snap the cuffs back around her wrists. "We'll take the leg irons and chains off, while you put a fresh pair of trousers back on," Flaccus told her flatly, "Don't give me any trouble."

She nodded her agreement once more, far more concerned with working out just what Patroclese had meant by that small shake of his head. - *Is it just possible that he won't say anything?* - she silently asked herself. She knew that the healer felt guilty over his part in tricking both her and Gabrielle, but had that guilt so shook his loyalty to Caesar that she might just have gained an ally in the enemy's camp?

She allowed Patroclese to help her into the pair of brown leather trousers that he produced, "They'll take more wear and tear," he explained to her questioning look. Then he gave her her boots, "You can't march back to Lugdunum in bare feet. Lord Caesar wants you in fighting condition when we get back to Roman territory, and you'll hardly be that if your feet have been ripped to shreds, now will you?"

He had to help her put those on too. There was no way her chained hands could have managed the job on their own. Once she was settled into her footwear, which felt strange after going barefoot for so long, Flaccus motioned a soldier forward with a new pair of leg irons. The chain between the cuffs was longer, obviously to allow her to keep up with the marching soldiers. The long chains to her ankles were replaced, as was the beam through the crooks of her elbows and across her back. Once again Xena flexed her muscles against the thick wood to see if she could make any impression on it, and was disappointed by her failure.

Patroclese approached with a comb, "Let's see if we can get your hair into order. You look like some kind of barbarian at the moment."

"I thought that's what all Romans consider other peoples to be," she sniped tartly.

Patroclese ignored the comment, although Flaccus hit her hard across the arm with his vine staff, "You will learn to keep your smart mouth shut, slave," he warned, "Or by Jupiter, I'll have the hide off of you."

Fire burned in her eyes, but she held her peace, forcing her anger down, refusing to waste it on the Centurion. Caesar was her target, all the rest of his men were his tools. She could, and would, reserve her despite for her true enemy.

"Sit down, Xena," instructed Patroclese. Which she did with less difficulty than he'd expected. The longer leg irons allowed her the freedom to lower herself to the ground without the use of her hands.

The Warrior Princess watched as the rest of the Roman contingent, worked on breaking their camp. Patroclese's hands moved with a deft sureness as he teased out the vicious knots and tangles that had been allowed to accumulate in her hair. Finally, when he'd finished that, he quickly plaited two thin braids from her temples and secured them with twine at the back of her head, as he'd seen Gabrielle do on their way to join the Amazons.

"There," he said, "not as good as you or Gabrielle could have done, but better than it was."

"Thank you," she replied sincerely. It felt good to be clean and tidy once more. It made her feel more human and less like some animal.

"C'mon," Flaccus demanded, "It's time to get moving."

Xena stood as easily as she had sat and allowed the pace of the march to be dictated by the legionaries who held the securing chains. This was not going to be the most comfortable way to travel, but she thought it was preferable to the wagon and the cage.

Since they started out long after midday, they didn't journey too far, even with the long summer evening. Yet, after over a moon of almost total inactivity, Xena was grateful when they finally stopped to make camp. The heavy weight of the shackles and the wooden beam, coupled with her bruised and abused body, left her feeling totally drained. In particular, her calf muscles felt as though they were on fire from such a long period of little use.

She gratefully lowered herself to the ground when they stopped. The wooden tie across her back made things uncomfortable and she couldn't lie down as she would have liked, but it was a relief to get off her feet. - *The bastard was right*, - she thought moodily, - *I am out of condition*. -

Camp was quickly set up and tents were erected for the soldiers who weren't on guard duty, as well as for Caesar of course. The wafting smell of a stew reached her and she realised that she was hungry and thirsty. Patroclese had made sure that she was given water on the march, but she hadn't eaten all day.

She noted with interest the twin posts being set into the ground in the centre of the camp. She had little doubt that they had something to do with her, but she was willing to be patient and wait to see what Caesar had in mind, - *Probably something to do with the sparring session he's got planned*, - the thought drifted across her mind and a wild light hit her eyes. - *If they put a sword in my hand, I'll damn well show them how to spar*, - she thought grimly.

By the time that the posts were readied, Xena had recovered from the hardships of the days march. Her legs felt a little tight and stiff, but she'd been in worse condition and the thought of letting loose some of her pent up anger and frustration was a balm to her soul. It was with a wild eagerness that she looked forward to the chance to fight. She knew that she should suppress it, that her dark self drove and encouraged her wild exhilaration in combat, but she needed the thrill that testing herself, and pushing her abilities, gave her. In a way it was what she lived for. Only in battle did she truly come alive, her skills made her who she was.

- *It isn't all of me*, - she conceded to herself, - *but if I'm ever to come to terms with myself, I have to recognise that it is an important part of my being. The wild dangerous part that's capable of perpetrating the great evils of my past, like Cirra, or the good deeds that Gabrielle has helped me to achieve*. - It irked her, however, that by allowing the lust for combat to rise in anticipation within her, she was granting Caesar some small measure to dictate her life. - *But*, - she decided, - *as long as I recognise that, and know that I'm doing this for my benefit and not his, then I'll go along with his little game. I'm going to have to be at peak fitness when it comes time to break out*. -

It wasn't long before Flaccus came and ordered her to move over to the posts. The belt was released and replaced by a long thick chain that was wrapped around her waist and held in place behind her back by a stout padlock. The ends of the chain were then secured to the post.

- Clever, - she admitted to herself as she tested the limits that the restriction was going to impose. She stood still as Flaccus removed all of the other fetters that loaded down her limbs, and removed the leashes from the collar. She revelled briefly in the relative freedom, stretching her muscles, making absolutely certain she could move well enough to fight, even testing the situation with a small tightly controlled backflip, bouncing immediately into its forward counterpart.

- Gods that felt good, - she could feel some of the tension draining out of her. Her body and psyche thrived on action and physical work. Being shut up and chained for long days had been a major contributing factor to the frustration that goaded her into baiting Caesar and, to a far lesser extent, causing her clashes with Flaccus. She shook her arms, loosening the tight muscles and waited to see just what they had in mind for practice.

Flaccus had detailed six big men for the sparring session. They'd stripped off their armour and discarded their weapons, Xena noted with disappointment. Caesar was obviously not going to trust her with a weapon in her hand in this situation. It was a pity, but unarmed combat could prove to be enjoyable. "Okay boys," the half smile played on her lips as the feral light shone from her deep blue eyes, "one at a time or altogether?"

Flaccus ordered the first man in. The soldiers, technically had the advantage being free to alter their angles of attack, while the Warrior Princess was limited by her bonds. Even so the first man was wary of her. He knew exactly how well she could fight. Moving to her left he attempted to come in at her making the most of the chain's restriction. He was met by a booted foot planted firmly in his gut that doubled him over to just the right height to meet the backhanded punch delivered with enough force to somersault him sideways to land with a crashing impact on the ground.

Xena growled in victory, her blood surging, pushing all thought from her mind of everything but the combat. She revelled in the surge of power that she felt and stood ready to take on the next opponent, or opponents as it turned out. Flaccus sent the next two men forward.

- More of a challenge this time, - she thought with satisfaction, - They're gonna come at me from either side. Good thinking, - she acknowledged to herself, - but really far too predictable. -

She readied herself for the concerted lunge she knew that they would make, and as soon as they came into range she leapt into the air, kicking out with both feet and getting solid connections under their chins, putting them out of the game.

As she made the leap, she realised she had put in too much power, feeling the chain tighten at her waist and pull her back to the ground, where she landed a little heavily. Yet it was a certain feeling, that she had identified at the apex of the leap, that suddenly quickened her thoughts. She had felt the chain give!

With no time to dwell on the thought, the final three men were waved into the fray. Working as a team, they took their time in trying to get themselves into a position where they could at least get in a blow against their formidable opponent.

Xena didn't wait for them to get their chance. She lunged against the restraint of the chain, getting herself close enough to the soldier in the middle to deck him with a solid blow to the nose, feeling the cartilage and bone shatter under the force of the blow. She also registered that the links of the chain were definitely beginning to give.

She skipped aside from the punch aimed by the man on the left, and rode out the worst from the one on the right who caught her on the shoulder, but with little force. Screaming her fabled battlecry, "Ay,yi,yi,yi,yi,yi!" she leapt high off the ground into a tucked backflip that produced enough momentum to snap her free from the chain at her waist and into enough clear space to give her the opportunity of glancing around quickly and see an opening that offered her the chance for escape.

Her mind on fire from battle, even of this minor nature, and wild with the thought of escape from Caesar, she sprinted for the opening taking out a soldier, who moved into her path, with a stunning head butt and relieving him of his sword in one fluid movement.

Two more men tried to block her passage of escape, and she cut them down with savage ease as all of the pent up anger and frustration she had been harbouring took control. She noted almost absently that the legionaries were beginning to swing into action, the initial shock of her breaking loose being overcome by discipline and the knowledge that their lives were at stake if she escaped them. A wild light danced in her eyes as she raced towards a group of twenty that had organised themselves ahead of her.

She didn't engage them. She just wanted to get past them, yelling out her warcry, she forward flipped over them and sprinted away just as fast as her long legs would carry her. In the exhilaration of her sudden freedom, she almost failed to register the pin pricks that hit her in the back and right arm.

As she continued to run, she picked at the slight pain on her arm and felt the small dart there, pulling it out. - Damn! - she thought. - I should have known that was too easy. The bastard's set me up. -

Pushing on hard, she could feel her body becoming sluggish as she continued to lope along, easily out distancing the pursuit. It took some time but slowly her mind became foggy and she began to stumble, - Need to find someplace to hide. Give this a chance to wear off before they can find me. -

She had tried to head towards where she guessed the town of Vershin to be. She hoped she'd be able to find a place to hide and later, maybe, after the drugs had worn off she planned to steal herself a horse. She knew that Caesar wasn't carrying messenger pigeons on this trip and that gave her hope that she might manage to beat his plans for Gabrielle by somehow reaching her first. - Even if I have to call on the gods for help! - she growled to herself. - They owe me! -

that they must have missed her .. because it was almost beyond belief that she could have come this far .. when the Senior Centurion had spotted that odd piece of blue material betraying the hidden escapee. Signalling his men, they surrounded the depression and one of them began to sweep aside the leaves, only to yelp in pain as a startlingly strong hand closed around his wrist and tightened mercilessly. The soldier scrambled back, pulling Xena from the bed of leaves as he did so. Her eyes were unfocused, she was groggy and disorientated, but an insistent voice, in the depths of her mind, told her that she had to fight or she would lose her freedom once more.

Flaccus had a ten man squad with him and he knew that they were in for a struggle. He brought his vine staff down hard on her knuckles, forcing her to release the soldier she had grabbed, and snapped, "Get her!"

The legionaries piled in on top of the Warrior Princess who had little chance of fighting off their combined weight. She still had very little control over her limbs and her mind was fuzzy and unresponsive. She did manage to get in a couple of solid punches and one really vicious kick to one man's groin, but then they had her pinned on the ground and Flaccus was locking the manacles back onto her wrists.

Gripped by an urgent frenzy she resumed her struggle, throwing off all but two of the soldiers with her wild thrashings, before they piled back on turning her face down, pushing her head into the damp dewy grass, while Flaccus took the opportunity to tightly secure the belt back around her waist. Two men lay across her legs as the irons were locked into place on her ankles, and a chain attached to her collar.

"Get her up," growled Flaccus as he surreptitiously rubbed his jaw. He'd been caught by one of her flying fists and it hurt like Hades. "Lets get her back to camp before she can cause any more trouble."

Xena had been hauled to her feet and then dragged back the ten miles to Caesar's camp, as she continued to fight the debilitating effects of the drug that had been used on her. Her mind screamed in anger at her failure to thwart Caesar's plan, yet a quiet corner stubbornly reminded her that if she had succeeded, she could have doomed her friends, and Gabrielle in particular.

Chapter Thirty Five: To Sleep, Perchance to Dream

Caesar's camp was still in an uproar, with the men tired and footsore from tramping through the countryside at night. Those that were back at the camp were in a foul mood, and there were many more parties still out scouring the countryside for the escapee. Messengers were dispatched to recall those who were to far away to hear the trumpets.

Xena was dumped down by one of the posts that had been used the evening before and her leash secured around it. Her mind was still hazy and her muscles felt heavy and unco-operative. She leaned back against the wood and rested, allowing herself to drift along with the drug induced relaxation she felt.

Patroclese soon appeared at her side. He checked her pulse, got her to open her eyes so he could check the progress of the Curamin and then encouraged her to drink from the waterskin he had

brought with him. He guessed that she was probably hungry, but she wasn't really in any state to eat at that time, and he doubted there'd be any breakfast for anyone that morning as Caesar was impatient to be on his way. Having done what he could, the healer scurried off to inform his lord of his observations.

"So she's still under the effects of the drug, but she's struggling to fight it off," the Roman noble considered the information. "Is she able to walk?"

"If she gets some support from the guards for the next couple of candlemarks, it will probably help to disperse the effects of the Curamin anyway." answered Patroclese carefully.

"Very well. As soon as the last of the search parties return, we'll move out. I want to get back to the VIIth and on our way to Lugdunum as soon as possible." Caesar instructed.

"My Lord," began the healer carefully, "What punishment do you intend to impose upon the Warrior Princess?"

"Slave," corrected Caesar.

"My Lord?" questioned Patroclese, confused.

"Not Warrior Princess, nor Xena of Amphipolis, she is just the slave, Xena, property of Caesar." His eyes bored into his physician with a burning intensity, until Patroclese gave a slight nod that he understood. "As for punishment, well, beatings impress the men, and since she managed to severely injure at least three of the guard force, I think the least she deserves is ten lashes from Flaccus. Hardly enough to seriously debilitate her, with you to tend her injuries, but enough for fairness sake. However, I think that my slave gets too much rest and relaxation, so from now, until we return to Lugdunum, she gets no sleep. Lets see what a little exhaustion does for her resistance."

Patroclese bowed as he left the general's tent, and swore under his breath. He disliked this campaign to break the woman's spirit. Yet he was in no position to do anything about it. Xena was Caesar's property, and Caesar was virtual ruler of Rome.

The Warrior Princess remembered very little about the march to rejoin the VIIth legion. She was vaguely aware that the wooden beam was back to pin her arms, and that the additional chains had been re-attached for her guards to control her, but the actual march was lost in a haze of cloudy impressions that flitted through her detached consciousness.

They were back with the legion by midday, and the officers had been alerted to be ready to move out as soon as their commander rejoined them. By this time, Xena was shaking off the foggy feeling caused by the drug, and became aware of the interest being shown by the legionaries they now marched with.

She heard the questions asked of her guard maniple about her, and their answers. Most of the soldiers of the VIIth Legion, were frankly disbelieving when told about the danger this one

woman warrior posed, but many of them knew members of the elite guard and knew that they were some of the best fighters selected from various units especially for this task. The result was that soon the men of the VIIth became as wary of the dangerous slave as the guard maniple were.

When they made camp for the evening, Caesar decided that Xena's punishment would do very well for entertaining his troops. A post was set up in a clear space within the camp and the Warrior Princess was hauled up, hands above her head once her leather belt was released. Patroclese eased the shirt up her back and over her head so that it left her flesh clear for the whip. "This slave attempted to run," Caesar announced, "In doing so she seriously injured three legionnaires. The punishment for this crime will be ten lashes laid on well by Senior Centurion Flaccus. I want you all to note that this slave is highly dangerous. She is also my personal property. I expect you all to guard against her getting free again. In the unlikely event that she should manage to do so, I want her taken alive for me to deal with as I see fit. Is this understood."

"YES SIR!" came the response from close to five thousand men. A full legion was something even Xena would think twice about before taking on alone.

"Carry on with the punishment, Senior Centurion," instructed Caesar.

The ten lashes were laid on hard, although to be honest, Xena had little difficulty in holding her silence against the pain. Flaccus had good control of the whip and he was able to lay the strokes in an even pattern that cut her back from shoulders to waist. The Warrior Princess had clenched her teeth and fists, closed her eyes and turned her thoughts far away from her present situation.

She had borne far worse treatment in her life. Her previous whipping at Flaccus's hands had been far more gruelling; her body had been in a pretty unhealthy condition at that time and there had been double the number of lashes to be endured. It hurt. But it wasn't unbearable and she was even able to smile condescendingly at her tormentor, making his brown eyes flicker with annoyance and anger.

The men were dismissed and Patroclese stepped up to attend the deep cuts in her back. She winced more when the vinegar was applied to clean the wounds than when they were being inflicted upon her. The salve that the healer then used made her draw a sharp intake of breath as it stung like fire, but gradually it produced a numbing sensation that allowed her to relax somewhat.

"Thanks," she said softly as she leaned her forehead against the post in relief that that particular ordeal was over. As the healer packed his equipment away, she asked, "Any idea what he has in mind for me next?"

Patroclese looked at her with troubled eyes. She couldn't see his face but she could feel his tension and uncertainty, "He wants to break you, Xena. He sees you as a challenge, and I think he needs challenges in his life."

"Did you tell him?" she asked very quietly.

"No," said the healer after a pause, "and I won't. You are suffering enough without my adding to your burden ... or Gabrielle's." he added almost too softly to hear.

"What does he intend doing with her?" questioned Xena, more than a touch of anxiety in her voice.

"You know he'll use her against you," Patroclese told her. He stood and worked the shirt back over her head and eased it over the tender flesh of her back. "Once he gets you back together he'll make certain that you see her beaten and humiliated. He thinks it will help break your will to resist him, and he's probably right. I know how much you care for Gabrielle."

"Patroclese," she said low and urgently, "I know you're a good man. You've got to help get Gabrielle away from him. I'll take whatever I've got coming. My past misdeeds have earned me no less, and probably much more, but she shouldn't have to suffer for my sins."

"I can't," the healer said unsteadily, "I can't."

"Please," whispered the Warrior Princess in desperation.

"I'm sorry," returned Patroclese quietly. "Look I'll get you something to eat. I know you haven't eaten for two days, and I don't want a repeat of what happened last time." He saw the mute plea in her incredible blue eyes and shook his head, "I'm sorry, I can't," he repeated before picking up his medical kit and heading off to the cook's tent to get some stew.

Xena closed her eyes to hide the desperation she couldn't crush. Caring for others was a liability to her, but Gabrielle's friendship and trust had given her so much and the little bard had inevitably found her way through the walls and defences that she had erected around her heart. If Hercules had been the one to discover she still had a heart, it was the gentle kindness and honest friendship of Gabrielle that had slowly returned it to life.

She grunted with surprise and pain as one of her usual guards jabbed her sharply in the ribs with his baton, "Keep your eyes open wench. There's to be no sleep for you this night." He and his mates laughed unpleasantly. None of them had gotten any sleep the previous night and they felt far from kindly towards her for her part in that.

Patroclese came back with a large bowl of stew and a thick wedge of bread, "I'm sorry, but I'm going to have to feed you," he apologised. "Orders are you remain there for the night."

She sighed in resignation and ate mechanically as Patroclese spooned the stew, and held the bread for her to take bites from. When she'd finished the meal, he held up a mug for her to take a drink from, "Wine?" she questioned in surprise.

"I figured you could probably do with something a bit stronger than water," he answered with a clipped smile, "Make the most of it," he advised and offered up the cup for another longer swallow, allowing her to drink at her own pace until the cup was drained.

"Thanks, I needed that," she agreed.

"Try not to aggravate your guards," he advised, "I'd rather not get up in the morning and find another collection of wounds that need treating."

Xena felt the underlying humour of that and graced him with one of her quirky half smiles, "As if I'd do that," she told him.

"Ha!" was his reply as he took the cup and bowl back to the mess tent. "I'll check on your back in the morning and bring you some breakfast."

The camp settled down as the light faded from the sky and darkness descended over the long rows of tents. The only illumination in the camp was made by the four large fires set around the post that Xena was chained to, brightly lighting the area to give the guards a clear view of her at all times. Every time, her eyes threatened to drift closed, she felt the sharp jab from the end of a baton.

Lack of sleep was something she was used to coping with. She hadn't slept well for many years and rarely went an entire night without spending some hours sleepless. She had, on occasion, gone as long as three days without any sleep at all, so remaining awake that night was no particular hardship.

The following morning, Patroclese had returned and plastered more salve over her cuts, before feeding her the standard meat porridge for breakfast. She ate it to keep up her strength. She'd promised Gabrielle and she tried to keep the promises she made, especially to her bardic friend.

The day had been harsh. Once they replaced that beam across her back, the pain from the whip cuts had intensified ten fold and had her biting her lip to keep from groaning at the agony it induced. She could feel the seeping blood as it leaked from the abrasions, soaked into her shirt and slid in little runnels down her back, pooling around the tight leather belt at her waist.

During the stop for lunch, Patroclese returned and had the wooden restraint removed while he cleaned her wounds once more and plastered more of the salve over them. They both knew that by the evening stop that the heavy wood would have rubbed the abrasions raw, but it was a price that she was forced to pay for her intractable stubbornness. While she resisted Caesar he would take every precaution to limit her capacity for either escape or violent retaliation to his 'games'.

That evening they had camped in a clearing around a huge oak tree and Xena had been chained, by her collar leashes, to a convenient branch about three foot above her head. Held in that way she couldn't sit, being forced to stand upright or choke against the collar. Her arms were released from the imprisonment of the length of wood, and Patroclese did his work in clearing up the lash wounds, paying particular attention to the ones chafed by the beam.

"Most of these are healing pretty well," he told her as he worked. "The cuts above and below where that spar rests are already closed and they won't need any more treatment after tomorrow. But those four in the middle of your back, they're going to cause us problems."

"I'll manage," she gritted out as he dabbed at the wounds with his astringent and then covered them in salve.

"Xena," he hissed pleadingly, "can't you just give in. If not for your own sake, then for Gabrielle's?"

His plea was met with a clenched jaw and an icy stare. He knew that he was wasting his efforts in trying to talk her into accepting Caesar's mastery and he began to understand that it wouldn't just break her, it would destroy her to give Caesar best in this.

- I think I have the misfortune to be caught between two of history's most indomitable wills, - he thought sadly. - Neither will be satisfied until they have achieved victory over the other. The question is, what will be the cost to them, and those around them? - Patroclese fed her once more and made sure that she had plenty of water to drink before retiring for the night.

Her time was spent uncomfortably awake. Her legs were tired and aching and sleep was denied her, firstly by the way she had been secured, and secondly by the constant prodding she received in the ribs if her eyes drifted shut. Despite being deprived of sleep, she was still alert and would remain so for some time yet, although she recognised Caesar's current game and knew that she would eventually succumb to exhaustion.

The next few days followed the same pattern as they made their way back to Lugdunum. By the fourth day of the march, Xena began to feel the effects of her enforced wakefulness as she frequently stumbled, and on one occasion fell heavily, scraping her face badly on the rough road as she was unable to break her fall.

The final day's march back to the city was a nightmare as she tried to focus her wandering attention on putting one foot in front of the other. she stumbled frequently and took three more serious falls that left her with a swollen and sprained left wrist, a painfully scraped jaw and a black eye where she had caught her face on a large stone.

She felt a painful gratitude when she was finally locked up into her familiar cell in Lugdunum's garrison barracks, and a sense of relief that they were actually going to let her sleep for a while. Free of the wooden beam, she slumped into the straw at the back of the cell and closed her eyes. She knew that she should fight the feelings that she was experiencing; gratitude and relief were emotions on that slippery slope that Caesar was trying to force her down. He was using tried and trusted techniques to break her will. She knew. She recognised them. She'd used them in her dark past. And she was beginning to believe that she was no more proof against them than any other tormented soul was.

Within seconds of laying down she fell into a heavy, deep slumber. Something on the distant edges of her mind tried to warn her that it wasn't a good idea, but exhaustion had a firm hold of her and she fell heavily into Morpheus' realm, opening herself to all the horrors that she had buried deeply from herself.

"Xena Xeeenaaaa!" she recognised the deceptively mild and silky tones immediately, "So you've come to play with me again at long last. I've missed you so, Xena."

She turned slowly to face the woman she hated, pitied, felt responsible for, and felt the familiar gut churning rage as she looked at the petite blonde goddess, madwoman, who had helped murder her son.

"Have you missed me, Xena?" she asked with that oh, so innocent smile. "It's been a while hasn't it? What have you been doing with yourself?" she asked inspecting the very physical signs of abuse that the Warrior Princess carried.

"What do you want, Callisto?" Xena demanded in a low menacing growl.

"Only to visit with an old friend," the blonde smiled pleasantly before her brown eyes hardened into chips of stone and her face changed into a rage filled snarl, "Only to see how you like being treated as one of the downtrodden."

The Warrior Princess stood motionless as her enemy circled her, gently touching the cuts and bruises that showed on Xena's long, lean body. "He's doing a pretty good job, isn't he?" Callisto whispered softly close to her ear, "He really knows how to take care of you, my sweet. I'm not sure that I really like that, you know." she continued with a petulant twist to her mouth, "You're mine, Xena, and I don't think I want him playing with you."

"Why don'tcha take it up with him, then?" the Warrior Princess snarled, "Oh, sorry, guess you can't at that, can ya!"

Callisto turned rage filled eyes on her nemesis, "You really shouldn't try to taunt me that way, my sweet," she snarled, as she pointed a finger at Xena, sending a bolt of power at the

Warrior Princess that slammed her back against a boulder that appeared out of nothing, trapping her there with strong hands reaching out from within it to hold her immobile.

"Tut, tut, Xena, you really shouldn't make me angry, because I can really hurt you here."

She stepped up close and the dark warrior tensed herself for the vicious backhanded blow that cracked into her jaw.

"Callisto, I've been hit harder by Joxer and children," snarled back the Warrior Princess as she strained to break free of the restraints that the mad goddess had set.

"Ah, no, no, no, no," chided the blonde softly, I've waited too long for this for you to make me end it quickly." She looked deep into Xena's eyes, an insane light flickered and sparked there, "Speaking of children, I'm sure that you'd like to see your child again."

"Callisto, no!" anger, pain and outrage sounded in the warrior's voice, "Your quarrel is with me. Leave him out of it."

"What, and miss a touching mother and child reunion?" asked the blonde cocking her head slightly to one side and tapping her jaw thoughtfully, "I think not."

She snapped her fingers and a young boy appeared at her side. Solan ran to Callisto and hugged her fondly, before turning his bright blue eyes on Xena, a look filled with hatred and condemnation filled his bright innocent face, "Solan and I have become quite good friends,"

Callisto tormented maliciously, "He understands now what a cruel, heartless bitch you really are, Xena. Aren't you pleased to know that he recognises you for what you are?"

"Solan?" she whispered, an aching loss in her voice.

"Tell your mother about all the innocent people you've met, who knew her just briefly ... before she slaughtered them!" sneered Callisto with relish. "Tell her how you've cursed her very name and the blood connection that you have with her."

"I hate you!" the boy snarled with pent up emotion shaking his frame, "You're a cold blooded murderer. You've destroyed more lives than you'll ever be able to make amends for.

Your very hands run red with the blood of the innocent."

Grief stricken, Xena glanced at her hands and saw the crimson stains that proclaimed his words as truth, "Solan, I ..." she didn't know what to say, she had no defence. His words were true and the faces of the dead haunted her once again.

She shook her head trying to clear the images from her mind. This was a dream. Her dream, she could control it ... she could ...

"Solan," said Callisto mildly, "you can end your Mother's reign of destruction," she snapped her fingers and the sword of Borias appeared in her hands. "Take your father's sword and run it through her black heart."

Xena watched horrified as Solan, her innocent, gentle, son, took the sword and advanced towards her while Callisto's insane cackle echoed and crashed in resounding waves, "Solan don't!" she pleaded. Not for herself, the god's knew that she had earned her death and place in Tartarus a thousand times over, but because of the damage that the act would do to her son - his loss of blood innocence, the crime of matricide, the guilt of murder.

He placed a small hand on her stomach and lifted the sword to aim for her heart,

"SOLAN, NO!"

she screamed again, jerking her arms free of the restraints and knocking his hand and sword away ...

She rose up from the straw like a demon from the ashes, ripping her chained hands loose from the leather belt and striking away the guard's hand and the baton he'd prodded her with, "SOLAN!" she screamed, not recognising the faces of the men who surrounded her, she lashed out in a frenzy of unleashed strength.

Ignoring the restriction of the chains she smashed double fisted punches into any part of her tormentor's anatomy that came into reach. Four men were quickly down and disabled. Two had broken jaws, one was curled into a fetal ball clutching his groin and making small whimpering noises. The fourth had been flung into the stone wall of the cell with such force, he'd collapsed in a boneless heap.

Her awareness didn't register the sudden activity outside in the guard room, her manic induced rage had her gripped in a frenzy that forced her to lash out in her anguish and pain. She brought her manacled hands around in a two handed gut punch that doubled her next victim over, then delivered a stunning blow to the back of his exposed head, the sixth member of the guard who had entered her cell was incautious enough to drift within her reach. She wrapped her chains around his neck and began to draw the chain tight, squeezing the life out of him with the increasing pressure.

A flood of men hit her like a tidal wave as they crashed through the cell door as soon as it swung open. She was borne to the ground along with the man she continued to strangle, under the piled bodies of twenty guards. She thrashed and heaved and bucked in wild abandonment as she threw all her strength, all her might, into fighting off the faceless men who had invaded her dreams and sought to bring her down.

With a burst of unbelievable, violent, power, she threw her attackers off as if they were made of straw, struggling to stand before they piled themselves upon her again and bore her down to the ground, "Somebody bring some chains in here," yelled a decurion, as they struggled to contain the thrashing madwoman.

Within moments, two guards scurried into the cell. It was difficult, but they managed to get the thick chain attached to her collar and another wrapped around her arms and body and a third wrapped and locked around her legs, "Okay, now lock that leash to that ring in the wall and get everybody out of here," ordered the decurion, breathing hard. As soon as the chain was locked in place, the soldiers released the Warrior Princess, who continued to strain and jerk against the restraints that held her, before collecting their fallen comrades and clearing out of the cell, making sure that the door was locked firmly behind them.

The young decurion, Junius, looked in at the tormented slave, "Quintus, see if you can find the healer, Patroclese," he ordered, "Marcellus, round up Cornelius and see what he can do for our injured."

- *Damn*, - Junius thought moodily, - *Why did this have to happen when the senior officers are all with the commander*, - he watched in concern as the woman's frenetic struggles gradually subsided and she drew herself into as much of a curled ball as she could manage. Junius saw her big frame begin to shake and he thought that maybe she was crying.

He stood observing the slave and wondered what had caused such a violent outburst. He was lost in reverie as a hand touched his arm and the healer's voice asked, "What happened here?"

"Damned if I know," answered Junius running a hand through his hair in frustration. "When we put her in there, she collapsed on that straw and fell almost instantly asleep as we'd been told to expect. A little while ago she started thrashing around and then began shouting out ... no screaming out a word over and over."

"What word?" demanded Patroclese intently.

"Solan, I think" he glanced at some of his men to get confirmation, "Yeah, that was it, Solan, over and over. I sent the six in there to wake her up, but when Cadmius touched her she just seemed to spring at him totally wild like," he shook his head in disbelief at how quickly and easily she had overcome six strong men, "I got a look in her eyes, an' I'm tellin' you, there weren't no one home. It was really scary."

Patroclese listened carefully, all the while watching Xena as her body shook as it lay in the straw. - *Solan was her son*, - he knew. He remembered from the Amazon trial. "You say she fell into a deep sleep?" he questioned again. "Yeah, must have been that exhaustion, you know, 'cause in all the time we've had her, I've never see her take more than a light doze." answered Junius.

"Alright, open the door and let me in there," Patroclese told him.

"You gotta be kidding," the decurion answered incredulously. "It took twenty of us just to hold her down and get her wrapped in those chains, and she nearly shook us all off, even then."

"It'll be alright," promised Patroclese, "She seems to be over the worst of it. I'll take the responsibility."

"Well," Junius said uncertainly, and hesitated over unlocking the door.

"I'll be fine decurion. But if you're really worried, have a double squad stand by," Patroclese suggested.

Still troubled, Junius opened the cell door and allowed the healer in before swinging it quickly shut and locking it. Patroclese stood inside and paused as he took a deep breath. He was likely to be in trouble if the Warrior Princess hadn't regained her senses, but he felt fairly confident that whatever madness had gripped her had run its course.

He approached her carefully, talking softly so he didn't come on her by surprise. He saw her stiffen, and work to control the silent wracking sobs that had been shaking her, as he came closer, "It's alright, Xena," he told her soothingly, "everything's going to be fine." He knelt cautiously beside her and slowly reached out a hand towards her, stopping as she jerked away, "C'mon, Xena," he almost crooned, "it's only me, I'm not going to hurt you."

Once again he reached towards her, noticing the involuntary flinch her body gave as he gently brushed the curtain of hair away from her eyes and revealed a window into a soul damned to be tortured for eternity. He almost cried out at the anguish and suffering that he saw there, before

the heavy shutters came up and the icy blue gaze he was familiar with returned. Moving carefully, he helped her to sit up, noting that the chains, the guards had used to stop her thrashing, had dug deeply into her flesh and that her neck had been badly chafed by fighting against the restraint of the collar, "What, in the name of the God's, have you been doing to yourself?" he said softly.

She didn't reply, and he could see a slightly wild, hunted, look in the corner of her eyes. He examined her quickly, but carefully, helped by his accumulated knowledge of the woman's body gained through hours of patching up the damage inflicted upon it, "Nothing too serious," he smiled reassuringly, still keeping his tone soft. "A few more bruises and scrapes, nothing that a little salve won't fix up." He noted the broken leather belt restraint, - *Gods, but she must have exerted some strength to break that*, - he thought.

He watched her carefully as she drew in a long shuddering breath, "Do you want to tell me about it?" he asked gently.

She shook her head, - *How can I possibly tell him about Callisto and what she was doing with my son?* - she thought miserably. - *How can I explain about the blood on my hands and the guilt that overwhelms me every time I sleep?* - "No, Patroclese. I don't want to tell you," she said in a rasping voice that mocked her normally silky tones, "and you wouldn't really want to know."

"If I get those chains off of you, are you going to do something stupid?" he asked with a smile, knowing that whatever demons the dreams had raised were once more firmly locked up tight in her soul.

A bare quirk around her lips answered him, "No, I'm fine now," she told him quietly.

Patroclese stood and went back to Junius, "Give me the keys to the padlocks on those chains," he instructed, "I want them off of her before they do any more damage."

"Are you sure, healer?" questioned the young decurion, "I mean, if she's going to have another one of those fits, I'd as soon keep her under those restraints."

"It wasn't a fit," assured Patroclese, "Just a bad dream."

"Just a dream? I'd hate to be around her if she had a nightmare! Who's this Solan she was screaming about?"

"Her son," answered the healer shortly holding his hands out for the keys.

"She's got a son?" questioned the young officer as he handed over two of the four keys he held.

"Had a son. He was murdered by someone trying to hurt her," he told his fellow Roman grimly, "The boy was very young and didn't even know who his mother was. From what I understand, her guilt drove her to the brink of madness." He looked at the two keys and raised a questioning eyebrow.

"You can unlock the ones from her legs and body, but the collar one stays in place, I won't put men more at risk than necessary," Junius told him.

"Fair enough," agreed Patroclese, "She's broken the belt, so you better send to the armoury for another one."

"Already done," assured the decurion.

"By the way, how much sleep did she get?"

"About four candlemarks, no more."

Patroclese crossed the cell once more and tried the first of the keys in the padlock that held the chain tight around Xena's legs, when it didn't fit he tried the second one and nodded to himself as the lock snapped open. He carefully unwrapped the heavy chain and discarded it behind him. Turning his attention to the one around her body, he made short work of the lock and quickly disposed of the chain.

Xena carefully flexed her muscles, using her relative freedom from the belt restraint to rub some life back into her numb arms, "Thanks," she said.

"Hold still while I get that belt off you," Patroclese instructed, as he deftly unbuckled the leather belt and examined the metal ring on the front that she had ripped apart, "That took some strength," he said carefully and saw her shrug unhappily.

"It's not always something that I can control," she admitted softly.

"Let me get something on that neck, and then I want to look at your back," he explained as he dug the salve he required from his medical bag.

"Take your time," she told him, "I'm not going anywhere."

- *A pale attempt at humour, but at least an attempt*, - he thought to himself as he gave her an encouraging smile.

He worked quickly and methodically, noting the dull aspect that had edged into her eyes, "You need to get some more sleep," he told her and saw the hunted look return before she took control.

She shook her head and replied, "I don't think that's a good idea."

"Try," he insisted, "You need the rest." He saw the stubborn set to her jaw, and patted her arm sympathetically, "Are you hungry, thirsty?"

"I could use a little water," she admitted.

Patroclese went back to the door and spoke softly with Junius who headed into the guardroom to return a short while later with a large cup of water. Patroclese thanked him and took it back to Xena who drank the contents of the cup thirstily.

As she returned the cup to the healer, she tasted the tang of herbs in her mouth. Anger burning in her eyes, she grabbed the healer's coat and demanded, "What did you put in there?"

"Just something to help you sleep. You need the rest and those herbs should ensure that your slumber is dreamless." He watched as she struggled against the potent effects of the herbs, slowly falling back into the straw, her eyes closing as the powerful drugs overcame her resistance and joined forces with the exhaustion she was already struggling against.

Patroclese stood up and sighed heavily. It was going to be a long trip down to Massilia. Caesar intended to keep up his campaign to break down Xena's resistance so that by the time they got back to Rome she'd be more pliable and easier to handle. The healer doubted very much that it would ever happen.

Chapter Thirty Six: Chobos and Demi-Gods

The sun was out, the sky was a wonderful shade of vivid blue and there were thunderclouds gathering around the Queen Regent of the Amazons as she sat brooding in the council chamber over some last minute details that she had to sort out before they could set off for Acanthus. Nearly all of the Amazon's were doing their best to avoid going anywhere near her, and the members of the Royal Guard who stood on duty outside the door were given pitying glances by any of their sisters who happened to pass quickly by.

The current pair stood stiffly and wore long suffering, patient, looks on their faces as they hoped their reliefs would arrive before their ruler decided that she needed to yell at someone again. Since they were the only one's to offer a likely target, with everyone else keeping their heads down and well away from the council chamber, they had taken more than their fair share of Ephiny's blistering tongue.

"How long before this state visit sets off?" hissed Calli, a young woman with mousy brown hair who had just been promoted into the Guard.

"Tomorrow," replied her older partner, Amantha, feelingly. "Hopefully she'll calm down once she gets on the road, otherwise I can foresee much misery for our sisters."

"I'm glad we're not going," muttered back Calli, who had gotten over her disappointment at not being chosen as part of the escort having been subjected to the Regent's bad temper during the past week.

"I can hear you muttering out there," came a thunderous voice from within the building, "If you two can't stand your guard as Amazon's should, perhaps you could both use some time in one of the outer villages digging up some weeds."

Amantha rolled her eyes theatrically, "Has she been taking lessons from the Warrior Princess?" she murmured to Calli and almost yelped as the door was flung open to reveal a scowling Ephiny.

"I heard that, Amantha," she snarled, her eyes sparking dangerously and giving ample warning that the Regent's temper was still full blown. She glared at the older Amazon who lowered her eyes and had the grace to look embarrassed at being caught out. "I want you two to get Eponin and Solari for me. You'll find them in the corral."

"Umm, we're not supposed to leave you unguarded you know, Eph," put in Amantha tentatively. The fact that she didn't really want to disturb the other two Amazon's who were rumoured to be sorting out some of their current differences .. strictly against the Regent's orders as she'd decreed that the pair should stay well away from each other .. was the only thing that gave her the courage to say anything.

"Ye Gods and Gorgons!" roared Ephiny, "Amantha, you and Calli get over to wherever they are and tell them to stop the fight right now and get back here to me, double quick, or I'll have them both hung out to dry and after they can join you out on the farm digging weeds until I get back!"

The pair took one look at the enraged Queen Regent and shot off faster than a speeding chakram heading for the corral behind the barn, where they knew that Solari and Eponin were 'sparring'.

"I don't think I'd want to be in their shoes," Calli told her friend as they sprinted along.

"At the moment, Calli, I'm not too keen on being in our shoes," commented Amantha wryly.

Ephiny glared around the town square of Themiscyra and had the satisfaction of seeing several curtains twitch as women pulled their heads back to avoid attracting their Ruler's dubious attention. Nodding her head in satisfaction, a scowling Ephiny, stalked back into the roomy, well appointed chamber that had one door and one large window at the rear .. furnished with some good rugs and comfortable chairs.. and made her way to her desk, sitting down with a thump on the cushioned seat.

She drummed her fingers on the table in nervous anger. Even after she had made her decision about who went and who stayed, Solari and Eponin had continued to bicker, finding things to niggle each other about, causing Ephiny, who was concerned and short tempered with worry about Gabrielle and Xena, to descend into a mood that had been likened, by more than one Amazon, to a bear with a mouth full of sore teeth.

The whole situation had gotten so bad, she had forbidden the pair to approach each other. The fact that they had disregarded her orders, over that, was bad enough, but to be so lax about it as to allow her to hear about their projected duel, was well out of order. She had enough to worry about without her two lieutenants acting like children and allowing Tarelle and her bunch to observe the whole sorry business.

That was how she'd found out about the 'sparring' match. Tarelle had taken great delight in revealing it to her at lunch, even telling her the time that it was due to start, which was how she knew when to judge to send Amantha and Calli off to round them up. Now she sat and waited, her temper at boiling point and she just knew that she was going to end up saying something to the pair that they were all going to regret.

Lost in her reverie, she almost didn't hear the soft creak of a floorboard behind her. Reacting with the ingrained instincts of a natural warrior, Ephiny flung herself out of her seat, executing a forward roll and came up ready to face her attacker as she heard the heavy thud of chobos smashing into the back of the chair she had just vacated. A quick glance took in all the relevant details. The woman was dressed in Amazon leathers, but her hair and features were hidden by a kind of hood that had eye holes and was drawn closed around the neck. Whoever the assassin was, she didn't intend to be recognised.

Ephiny braced herself for the attack that she knew was coming, watching the expert way that the chobos were flourished as the assassin stalked her intended prey. With a startling rapidity, the attacker swung a weapon towards the Regent's legs and, as Ephiny reacted, reversed her stroke hitting the blonde warrior hard in the stomach and heavily across the upper left arm with the second chobo.

Grunting with pain, Ephiny tried to back off from the assassin who stalked her intently across the room. The Regent threw a chair into the other woman's path, which the intruder neatly side-stepped and gave a low chuckle in response. Attempting to buy herself some time, Ephiny took a leaf out of Gabrielle's book and tried talking her way through this situation, "Who are you? What do you want?" she demanded, knowing that they were inane questions, but the bard always said it didn't matter how you got started, just find a way to make your enemy talk.

Another low chuckle was the only response she got, followed by a lightning quick attack, that Ephiny barely avoided by launching herself into another diving roll across the room. The move brought her close enough to where she had left a fighting staff leaning against a wall from a practice session a few days before. Heaving a sigh of relief, she grabbed the weapon and turned to face the assassin who backed off warily, knowing that facing an unarmed Regent was one thing, while being matched against an angry armed Regent was quite another.

Deciding that discretion was the better part of valour, the woman, gave another low laugh and backed off before turning suddenly and diving out of the rear window that she'd entered the room by. Ephiny rushed after her and swept the area outside the window with angry brown eyes. There was no sign of the assassin to be seen.

The noise of the door opening behind her made her almost leap out of her skin as she whirled, with her staff at the ready, to take on any other would be attackers. She lowered it slowly as she realised that it was only Solari arriving, "Where's Eponin?" the Regent demanded with a snap in her voice that demanded an immediate answer from her lieutenant.

"How would I know, Eph?" returned the taller dark haired woman, calmly, "You ordered me to keep away from her, remember?" Her intent gaze took in the dishevelled look of her ruler and

the unusually untidy condition of the chamber, "You wanna tell me what's up?" she asked quietly, "and why weren't Amantha and Calli at their posts?"

"I sent them to find you," Ephiny told her tensely. "I'd heard that you and Ep were going to try to knock each other senseless down in the corral."

"What!" yelled Solari, "and you believed it! What's more you left yourself unguarded! Eph, what's gotten in to you just lately?"

Ephiny looked at her guard commander in utter disbelief, "WHAT'S GOTTEN IN TO ME!" she shrieked, her anger, worry and recently inflicted fear all rising to push her into a roaring rage, "Not only do I have our pig headed, stubborn little Queen to worry myself sick over, along with her half mad, wholly dangerous and likely unstable champion, my two lieutenants have been snapping at each other like schoolgirls, and someone has just been in here ...," she swallowed and paused before adding in a softer tone, "... trying to take my head off with a damned set of chobos."

"What's all the screaming in here?" demanded Eponin as she shouldered her way into the council chamber past a dumb struck Solari, "Oh, hi Soli," she said quietly putting a little distance between herself and the guard commander before turning back to the Queen Regent, "What's up Ephiny?" she asked carefully, "Why did you send Amantha and Calli to find me?" she asked, gesturing to the two guards who stood just outside the open doorway.

"Because, I thought ..." she looked at her two expectant lieutenants and tried again, "Because I was told ... Oh Hade's armpits!" she cursed, "I was taken for a sucker is what," she told them as she ran her hands through her fair curls and winced at the pain that spasmed in her upper left arm.

"You're hurt," accused Eponin, moving over to Ephiny's side as Solari moved to the other.

"It's nothing," she assured them slapping away their anxious hands, "Just a bruise. There's nothing broken," she told them firmly.

"Who told you that we were supposed to be having a fight?" questioned Solari intently, drawing a questioning glance from Eponin. "We were supposed to be having a go at each other in the corral," she told the weapons master.

"Tarelle," admitted Ephiny.

"You think she set this up?" quizzed Eponin, her face turning grim.

A cough came from the doorway, "Ah, excuse me," broke in Amantha, "That fight was common knowledge. Anyone could have started the rumour. Tarelle might just have been gloating, or she could have instigated it," she pointed out carefully. "If she started the rumour, you can bet you'll never trace it back to her. She'll have covered her tracks pretty well."

"You two get in here," ordered Ephiny roughly, "and close that damned door behind you," she instructed, "We don't need everyone hearing this."

"Is this going to alter our plans?" asked Eponin as she seated herself on the desk and raised an eyebrow at Ephiny until she resumed her seat in her chair.

"No," the Regent said firmly, "It's important that we find Gabrielle and make sure she's safe, and the only place we're going to do that is in Rome." She sighed and wiped a hand across her forehead, "I don't think whoever it was intended to kill me, probably just hurt me enough to stop the embassy from leaving. If they'd wanted my death they'd have used something other than chobos."

"You're probably right," agreed Eponin. "A crossbow bolt would have done the job perfectly," she said eying the window. "Isn't it about time we put guards out there too?" she asked Solari, whose responsibility that was.

The guard commander looked as if she might argue the point with Eponin, but then sighed and shrugged before saying, "We tried that when Gabrielle was here the time before last, but she went ballistic and told me it was like being a prisoner. So for self defence, I removed the window guards, figuring that Xena would be around to take care of any problems. We never got around to replacing them. It was an oversight on my part and I'll take responsibility for what happened."

"Bit late for that now," grumped Eponin.

"Oh, hush," Ephiny told her quietly, "You two and this bickering is what gave them this opening in the first place. Now I want it ended here and now. There is to be no feud within my supporters." She looked at Solari, "Soli, I know that you're disappointed about not being able to go with us, but you really are the best person for the job here, and Ep is the best for the work we may have to do in Rome. So let's just stop all this niggling and make sure we've got everything settled before I leave in the morning." She wiped a tired hand over her brow, "You two," she said to Amantha and Calli, "go back to your posts. One of you take the door, while the other take the window for now, until we get the rosters changed."

Both bowed and intoned together, "As the Queen commands," grinning as they straightened up.

"Get out of here," smiled Ephiny in return.

Once they had left the room, the Regent turned to her two remaining companions and spoke clearly and calmly, "The burden of trying to solve who my attacker was is going to fall on you, Soli," she told the guard commander. "I very much doubt that it was Tarelle herself, although I can't be absolutely certain because she had a hood on. Don't be too obvious about it, but see what you can find out."

"Of course I will, Eph," assured the competent woman, "I don't take kindly to having the Queen attacked by one of our own, so if ... no when I find her, I'm going to make her wish she had gone

The atmosphere within the encampment was generally happy and good natured with most of the Amazon's looking forward with eager anticipation to the delights and sights of Rome. Hardly any of them had travelled far from their own lands, partly because they never found the need, but mainly because their people were looked on with resentment and suspicion from others. This trip, then, was something of a thrill for the older hands as well as the younger woman who had been brought along for the experience.

The Amazon's were just settling down for the night's sleep, when one of the pickets came loping back into the camp, making straight for where Ephiny and Eponin were settling down.

"What's up Karrellie?" asked Eponin, sitting up on her sleeping furs.

"The forward patrol's come across a man camped at the border of our lands, they're bringing him in now. He says he knows the Queen. Both of them," she added.

"Does this man have a name?" questioned Ephiny with sharp interest.

"Soma passed the word that he was calling himself Hercules," supplied the picket, "They should be here almost any time."

"Okay, Karrellie," said the Weapons Master, throwing off her blanket and climbing to her feet just a moment after Ephiny, "go back to your post and make sure you keep your eyes peeled." Eponin threw a glance at the blonde Regent, "Do you know Hercules?" she asked.

"We've met," she admitted, "and he's a real good friend of Gabrielle's and more especially, Xena."

They waited impatiently for Soma and her patrol to bring the man they had found back to the camp. Most of the Amazon's were asleep by the time that the group reached the encampment, but those still awake watched with frank appreciation as a huge, well muscled man strode confidently into the camp surrounded by six Amazon's who looked faintly on edge.

As his gaze lighted upon Ephiny, the man's face broadened into a friendly smile and his blue eyes twinkled in delight. The Regent had to admit to herself that he was a handsome man. He moved with a confidence that gave him a natural grace, for all of his size, and yet he exuded a gentleness that seemed totally out of keeping with the prominent muscles he sported.

"Hello, Ephiny," he greeted, moving towards her and Eponin, "Or should I say Queen Ephiny?"

"Ephiny's fine, Hercules," she responded warmly, "What brings you to these parts?"

"I was looking for news of my friend, Iolaus," he explained. "I heard that an Amazon delivered a message to him while I was away, and that he rushed off on some mission somewhere. He's been gone weeks now, and no one seems to know where he is. Can you tell me anything?"

Eponin and Ephiny looked at each other before the Regent drew a deep breath and waved Soma and the patrol away, "Go send out a fresh patrol and then get yourselves something to eat." As they moved off Ephiny turned back and faced the demi-god and motioned him to sit, "Can I offer you something to eat or drink?" she asked politely.

"No, I'm fine," he assured her with a relaxed smile, "but I really would like to know what's going on. It's not often that over a hundred Amazon's are seen headed out of their territories, and I really would like to know what you can tell me about Iolaus."

A fire close by crackled and popped as a knot in the wood exploded in the heat, almost making them start at the unexpected noise that had filled the sudden silence. Ephiny took a breath and tried to work out where to start, "This is a long convoluted tale," she warned him, "and for it to make any sense, I'm going to have to go back a way."

Hercules nodded, "Well I'm not in any hurry to go anywhere tonight," he assured them, "Tell me your tale and let's see what I can make of it."

"Did you know about Xena's son, Solan?" the blonde Amazon asked intently, "because that's where this story starts."

"I've heard the stories," Hercules admitted, "I haven't seen Xena or Gabrielle since it happened."

Ephiny crossed her legs and rested her arms on her knees, making herself as comfortable as possible as she began her story, "I was there, at the Centaur conference," she explained, "You know my son, Xenan, is a centaur prince, grandson of Tyldus?"

"I know," smiled Hercules, "I hope he's well, he seemed a fine young boy."

"He's just great, he's staying with Tyldus for a while," smiled the Regent happy that Hercules remembered her son, "Well Xena and Gabrielle came and what you've heard is most likely true. Do you know Gabrielle's daughter, Hope?"

"Our paths have crossed," he said bleakly.

"Well, she freed Callisto and then the pair of them plotted the death of Solan, Xena's son. Gabrielle was caught in the middle. She didn't want to believe her daughter was evil, the instrument of her father Dahok, and her love blinded her to it. She placed Hope in a position where she was able to kill Solan and that betrayal destroyed something in Xena for a while. Yet even in her pain and suffering, she pulled off some kind of miracle by sealing Callisto up in the Ixion Caverns, while Gabrielle used poison to kill her daughter."

"Sounds like they both had a pretty rough time," came Hercules's sympathetic comment when Ephiny paused.

"It got worse!" came the blunt response, "The two left the centaur village as strangers, Gabrielle came back to Themiscyra with me and Xenan, and Xena disappeared, until she turned up a few days later doing major damage to some of my warriors, killing two ..."

"And breaking Eph's arm," butted in Eponin.

"... and dragged Gabrielle off behind a stolen horse Hercules, all the stories I'd ever heard about the bloodthirsty warlord, were nothing in comparison to what I saw in Xena's eyes that day," she shivered, "she was deadly and unstoppable and there was nothing any of us could do to prevent her from taking our Queen, knowing that she intended to kill her."

"What happened?" asked the big man gently as he saw the Regent lost in thought.

"I sent trackers to trail them, and followed on with as big a party of warriors as I could assemble. If we'd caught up to them, I think I would have had the archers just pump arrows into Xena until she was dead," Ephiny sighed taking a deep breath, "Xena was a friend, she'd saved my life and the life of my son, but that wasn't the Xena I had come to know." It was a painful thought, "Anyway, we lost them. Their trail just vanished at the top of a cliff above the sea. Something told me that they weren't dead, so I had strong watches kept throughout our territories. I knew that one day they'd come back, and that Xena would have to face Amazon justice."

Eponin stood up quietly and went and retrieved three cups of good, hot, herbal tea, insisting that Ephiny drink some before she continue with the story, "You don't want your voice giving out on you, do you your majesty?" she asked playfully.

"Cut it out Ep, I'm not a kid," growled the blonde.

"Humour me," insisted the dark haired Amazon.

"Thank you," accepted Hercules as Eponin handed a mug to him. He took a tentative sip, "This is good," he complimented.

Ephiny swallowed some of the tea down under Eponin's watchful gaze before going on with her narration, "They arrived back here about two moons or so ago. My guard commander, Solari, was out with a patrol and found them. She placed Xena in custody and escorted her, Gabrielle and a healer named Patroclese back to the town, but there was some trouble on the way back, some bounty hunters attacked and hacked up the patrol pretty badly. They were after Xena and Gabrielle and there would have been a slaughter if Xena hadn't held them off."

"Must be a pretty big reward to make bounty-hunters risk getting caught in Amazon territory," commented Hercules pointedly.

"Two hundred and fifty thousand dinars for Xena and fifty thousand for Gabrielle, is what we've heard," supplied Eponin.

"Whew!" whistled Hercules in response, "Who wants them that bad?"

"Caesar!" Ephiny told him starkly.

"I'd heard that they'd been to Rome, and I know that Xena and Caesar have a history, but she must have done something to really make him mad." considered the soft spoken giant.

Ephiny nodded, before continuing with her story, "Charges had been laid against Xena's actions when she came and took Gabrielle, so we had to have a trial. The Elders pronounced a years banishment from Amazon territories for Xena and she left right after the pronouncement taking the healer with her and leaving Gabrielle with us. She wanted our Queen safe, while she drew off the bounty-hunters and had managed to get Gabrielle to agree to the plan."

Hercules smiled as he thought about the feisty bard, "That must have taken quite a bit of fast talking on Xena's part. Gabrielle can be really stubborn about being left sometimes."

"Don't I know it." grinned Ephiny, "Anyway, about five days after Xena left, that healer came back and told Gabrielle that Xena was heading into a trap in Narbonensis. She'd been asked for help from an old acquaintance and thought it might take the heat off if she left Greece for a while. Apparently, Caesar set the whole thing up and this healer heard some men discussing it in the village where Xena had left him. Gabrielle immediately decided that she had to try and warn Xena about the trap. She thought she might have time to get there ahead of her, because Xena was going to run the bounty-hunters over a good portion of Greece before leaving for Narbonensis." She swallowed down the last of the cooling tea and turned her brown eyes full on Hercules.

"Before she left she wrote three letters and asked me to have them delivered. One went to your friend Iolaus, the second went to Autolycus and the last was delivered to Xena's brother, Toris. I don't know what was in them, but obviously they asked those men for help. Gabrielle promised to write to me as soon as she got to Narbo. I haven't heard a thing from her. The reason that I'm sitting here talking to you is that I'm on my way to Rome on a State Visit. I think that's the only likely place that I'm going to find out what's happening to our Queen and Xena. I'm pretty sure they'll turn up there eventually. If Caesar had had them killed we'd have had news about it by now."

Ephiny looked at the demi-god in consideration, "It's likely that if Xena and Gabrielle end up in Rome, then your friend Iolaus and the others will turn up there as well. Do you want to come along with us and see what we find?"

Hercules considered the offer for a moment. What the Amazon Regent had said made sense and if Xena and Gabrielle were in trouble, Iolaus wouldn't be too far away, "Sure," he said with a slow smile, "I'd be glad to accompany you, though how you're going to explain a man being in an Amazon entourage I have no idea."

"We'll think of something," grinned Eponin mischievously.

Chapter Thirty Seven: Journey Through Tartarus

She lay in the straw tossing and turning violently, gripped by the visions that assaulted her from her past. Sweat drenched her as she moaned softly, "No, No," and she struggled to defeat her inner fears and torments that threatened to overwhelm her in her exhausted, drug induced slumber.

Fire burned in a circle around her.

She turned slowly looking for a way past the barrier.

The thought that she might be able to flip over it immediately produced a roaring increase to the height of the flames that made the plan impossible.

She waited.

"Hello, Xena,"

came the expected voice,

"I see you came back to play,"

Callisto appeared before her,

"Do you remember how the flames destroyed my home?"

asked the goddess innocently as her brown eyes reflected the brightness of the flickering fire,

"Do you ever hear the screams of the people who died there?"

she offered Xena a smile which turned into a snarl of hatred,

"Listen to the screams of my Mother and Sister, Xena!"

she demanded and the fiery ring filled with the plaintive cries of a terrified woman and child.

"Listen to the cries of all those poor innocent people that you burned without a moment's

thought for the lives that you were snuffing out, for the souls of the living that you

destroyed."

The cries became louder and more numerous, buffeting at the dark warrior, who pressed her

hands tight over her ears in an attempt to mute the sounds that sickened and shrivelled her

soul.

"You can't block it out, pretty,"

Callisto whispered gently in her ear.

"Those cries are burned forever into your black heart. You gloried in them while you committed your vicious destructions, and they're always going to be there to haunt you. You will never be free of your sin."

She crumpled to the ground assaulted by the tormented voices that forever echoed through her soul.

Silence

She waited

A hand gently brushed the hair from her eyes and she looked up into the smiling face of the woman who had borne her, raised her and watched her turn into a cold, ruthless killer.

"Mother?"

she choked, unwilling to believe the tenderness that she saw in the woman's eyes,

"Why have you come?"

"Oh Xena,"

she said softly,

"Why would any mother come?"

she asked compassionately,

"I'm here to ease your suffering,"

she told her as she gently helped her daughter to her feet, then waved an arm to indicate those who stood behind her,

"We've all come to ease your suffering,"

She looked and saw the crowds of faces that she had once known. Childhood friends,

kinsmen, villagers that had watched her grow up, and standing in front of them all, her brothers: tall dark Toris, so like her in looks, and blonde smiling Lyceus, the brother she had lost to Cortese's raiders, the brother whose death had frozen her heart. She frowned at the hooded figure that stood with them familiar and yet unknown.

Her mouth lifted in a tentative smile as her mother stepped back into the ranks of the many,

"It's so good to see ..."

she began and then saw the smiling faces had become suddenly hostile. She looked frantically from one face to the next and read only anger and hatred, she saw the rocks in their hands and shot a pleading look at her family, only to see indifference in all their eyes,

"Lyceus!"

she whispered, as she felt the dagger of betrayal rip through her heart.

"No Gabrielle to save you this time, my sweet,"

smirked the insidious voice of Callisto from behind her,

"This time your loving family and home town will get to take their revenge on you."

Xena flinched as the first rock struck her arm, a rock thrown by her Mother and followed by those thrown by her brothers.

She screamed!

Her anguish induced by the betrayal of those she loved and had tried to protect.

More of the heavy missiles slammed home, forcing her to try and protect herself with her arms, until a rock hit her temple and she crashed to the ground, curling into a ball to make a smaller target.

She floated in pain ...

She struggled to rise from the clinging torpor that held her tight.

Hanging from the cross, she looked down at the man she had allowed herself to love. The man she trusted as a friend. The man that had betrayed her to an agonizing death, and condemned her to a worse life.

"Break her legs,"

she heard him order as he turned away from her and she felt the heavy hammer blow that crippled her body and shattered her soul.

"Aaaarrrrrghhhh!"

she screamed out her agony as white heat radiated from her legs and throbbed in torment.

"Oh, Xena, Xena, Xena,"

purred a voice from behind her,

"were you ever so gullible? Did Caesar really have such an easy victory over you?"

teased Callisto as she let her fingers lightly filter through the warrior's long black hair.

Taking a strong grip on a handful, she yanked her prey's head back viciously and snarled,

"There's no one to save you this time, my sweet. M'Lila won't be coming to your rescue."

"Go to Tartarus, Callisto!"

gritted out the Warrior Princess through the cascading pain she felt.

"Been there, done that. Hades need to get the decorators in!"

came the quick reply followed by a,

"O my, Xena. Is that really anything to wish upon a friend?"

which she asked as she settled on the ground before her victim,

"Especially when it's so easy to hurt you here!"

She smiled sadistically running her hands over the broken bones of the shattered legs,

laughing in amusement as Xena cried out in agony at the touch.

"But perhaps it will be more fun to let the sea have you,"

she grinned as she indicated the rising tide that swept in an unstoppable rush up the beach.

Water dashed into her face as the waves roared towards her, she choked feebly

She jerked to a sitting position, wrenching her neck on the collar that was still chained to the wall. She coughed and spluttered as she choked up the water she had swallowed when the guards had dumped two buckets full over her to wake her. Roaring her anger, confused by the images that lingered in her mind, she lunged forward, only to be brought crashing down and choking by the collar once more.

Xena shook her head to try and clear her mind and throw her long curtain of hair away from her face. As she fought to master the rage and terror that were the legacy from her dreams, she pushed herself back against the cell wall, desperate to establish who she was facing, her mind still cloudy from the drug Patroclese had used.

"Stand up , slave!" barked Flaccus.

She shook her head again, trying to push the foggiess away. The motion was taken as refusal to comply and drew an immediate reprisal in the form of heavy blows from batons that rained down towards her head and shoulders. She threw her arms over her head to protect it, and drew her legs in tight to her chest, trying to minimize the area available for damage.

As her arms came up the beating stopped and she felt hands grab her and pull her to her feet. She stood swaying shakily, securely held by two guards. Flaccus grabbed a fistful of hair and pulled her head back roughly. Xena flinched as the memory of Callisto doing the same thing jumped fresh in her memory. Her eyes showed a haunted terror before she could control herself.

"You crippled six of my men, slave," snarled Flaccus, "I ought to have every inch of hide off your back and then some. You're damned lucky the general wants you in one piece."

"Oh yeah," she retorted fuzzily, "I'm really lucky to be here, aren't I?" a nervous chuckle escaped her before being silenced as Flaccus's fist crashed into her jaw, snapping her head sideways.

"I warned you about that smart mouth of yours, slave," he growled, "Keep your tongue between your teeth unless you want to lose it. Fighters don't need to be able to talk!"

The blow, though painful, had the beneficial effect of clearing her head from the last lingering effects of the drug. She drew herself up between her guards and looked Flaccus in the eye with just a hint of the icy fire, that burned within her, showing. She did refrain from saying anything, but he could see the defiance that lingered within her and Xena almost detected a grudging admiration in the senior centurion's grey eyes.

He held out his hand and one of the soldiers passed him a new leather belt complete with manacles that had been expertly rivetted into the thick leather making a far more sturdy form of

"NO!" she repeated more forcefully as she turned haunted blue eyes on him that contained a barely suppressed fury.

The healer laid a gentle hand on the woman's shoulder, but she shrugged it off with a surge of muscle. He tried to make her understand once again, "Xena, unless you take this willingly, you're going to have it force fed to you. Flaccus has his orders ... all I'm trying to do is save you some trouble."

She looked at him sullenly as he raised the cup to her lips. She took a mouthful then shook her head violently, knocking the cup away and spilling the contents. The liquid she had in her mouth she sprayed out over Patroclese, "No," she hissed, "I won't face them again!"

Flaccus appeared by the healer's side and barked gruffly, "We've tried your way, man, now get me some more of that stuff so I can carry out my orders."

Unhappy with the situation, Patroclese did as he was instructed and produced another mug full of the brew. He saw Xena clench her teeth firmly shut as he handed the cup to Flaccus.

"Bring that funnel over here," the centurion commanded as he shot out a large right hand and squeezed the Warrior Princess's jaw until she was forced to open it. She attempted to struggle against the hold, but Flaccus was strong and had a firm grip.

Xena gagged as the funnel was forced into her mouth and Flaccus began to trickle the drug down her throat a little at a time, the position of the funnel forcing her to swallow or choke. As she felt the mixture flowing down into her stomach she had to force down the wail of despair that sought to escape from her. The thought of the nightmare images that awaited her caused her to tremble in dreaded anticipation. Inside her body quaked as she tried to fight off the mixture of herbs that drove her relentlessly towards the deep slumber that she was desperate to avoid.

"There's a good girl," grinned Flaccus as he removed his hand leaving stark finger marks and the faint beginning of bruises on her jaw. As the funnel was withdrawn, he patted her lightly on the cheek, "Sleep well, slave."

In full Warrior Princess mode, Xena pinned him with an icy blue stare and dropped her voice to a lower register before growling at him, "I have never been, nor ever will be, a 'good girl!'"

"How long will that put her out for, healer?" demanded Flaccus for once ignoring the woman's disrespectful words.

"At least twelve hours, possibly longer," Patroclese answered him, "Once she wakes up we'll get some food into her and then put her out again. After three doses of the stuff she should be over the exhaustion enough to be able to control her sleeping patterns and get her back to normal.

The men's voices began to fade in and out of focus as Xena fought to concentrate against falling into the insidious creeping darkness that waited to claim her and lacerate her soul. There was so

"Peace offering," grinned Patroclese, who sat down on the bench beside her. "I know this sleep thing has been hard on you, but you're through it now. I think I've convinced my Lord that it shouldn't be tried again," he tried to assure her.

"Thanks again," she told him flatly. She didn't want to be reminded of her nightmare trips into Tartarus, and she was reluctant to express gratitude to anyone in Caesar's camp. She ate hungrily, avoiding conversation, allowing Patroclese's words to wash over her seemingly unnoticed.

"We'll be in Massilia in three days," he told her watching her spoon the food up with a fixed attention, "We're going back to Rome with the fleet that's been out chasing the Carthaginians. It should be a swift passage with nothing but sea and weather to bother us. Once we're there, you'll probably get to see Gabrielle again," he ventured.

"Oh yeah!" agreed the Warrior Princess, looking up from her half empty plate and pinning him with a stern glare, "I can just bet what Caesar has in store for her when he gets us back together. Is the thought of that supposed to make me feel good?" she demanded of him.

The passionate intensity of her outburst left the healer speechless for a moment. He hadn't really thought that she was listening to him, - *But then*, - he reflected, - *you can never take anything for granted about this woman*. - "Erm ... no," he got out finally, "I was just"

"Yeah, I know," she growled, turning her attention back to her food.

Patroclese looked at her with a mixture of the sympathy and sorrow that she had aroused in him for many, many days. He would have liked to help both her and her friend, but his loyalty lay with Caesar and this woman was a murderer, - *But the bard isn't*. - His conscience told him. - *I can do nothing to help either of them*, - he told himself firmly, - *Both have broken the law and Lord Caesar has shown mercy by condemning them to slavery rather than death!* - He bit his lip as his conscience came back at him, - *Keep telling yourself that for long enough and just maybe you'll convince yourself it's true!* -

She handed him the plate and spoon in silence as he passed her the skin, "It's wine ... it's not drugged. You have my word," he told her.

She gave him that half quirk, lopsided, almost smile, before she unstoppered the wineskin and took a long draught from it, "It's good," she told him, taking a second swallow, before replacing the bung and handing it back to him.

"You had enough?" he asked in surprise.

"Getting drunk won't help my situation," she told him bluntly, "And I really don't think you want to see me drunk. It's not pretty or healthy ... if you know what I mean."

"Right," agreed the healer uncertainly, "Well get some rest, we'll be leaving early in the morning."

She nodded her assent and curled up on the bench once Patroclese had stood, her mind focusing on the three day trip to Massilia and then the voyage to Rome, - *And Gabrielle* - she thought as she slipped into a light doze.

Chapter Thirty Eight: Hunters and Thieves

As Autolycus pulled Joxer into the trees, Gabrielle guarded their rear, taking careful note of just how many were likely to be following them and how close they were. A faint smirk scuttled across her lips as she turned and ran into the woods to join her friends. "Looks like they're spread pretty thin," she told them quickly, "That soldier headed back south, probably looking to gather up more men to come after us. If we get going, we may be able to slip away from them. They're not going to find it easy to track us through this. We can talk while we're moving. but we need to put some distance between us and them."

The wood was fairly thick and verdant green under the summer sun. Their footsteps were muffled by the thick loam that lay heavily beneath the canopy of branches and their movements were cushioned by the springy earth. Under other circumstances, Gabrielle would have relished the beauty of their surroundings, but now, as she worried about just how close the pursuit was, she just tried to keep the two injured men moving as quickly as possible away from the danger.

"Where are we gonna head for?" asked Joxer, and he stumbled heavily again as his foot caught a root and his recurring dizziness nearly sent him sprawling .. and would have if Autolycus hadn't managed to grab him. "I don't know where we are and I know nothing about the geography of Italia, do either of you?"

Gabrielle looked at Autolycus and sighed when he shook his head, "None of us do, Joxer," she answered him calmly. "All we can do is find a town or village and try and get some bearings and some supplies."

"Where, exactly do you have in mind to head for?" asked the thief carefully, already guessing the answer with a sinking feeling.

"We've got to get to Rome," the bard told him as she helped support Joxer so they could quicken their pace a little.

"Now how did I know that you were going to say that," muttered Autolycus unhappily, "Gabrielle, don't you realise that Rome is full of soldiers and that our descriptions are likely to be plastered up and down this Gods forsaken country just as soon as Brutus gets his wits about him. Hera's toenails!" he swore, "it's like putting our heads into a lion's jaw."

"Hey that's not a bad metaphor," commented the smiling blonde brightly, "mind if I use it sometime?"

"Gabrielle ..." began the thief a serious rumble to his tone.

"Look, alright, I know, Autolycus," she answered with a sigh, "But I can't leave her in Caesar's hands. I've gotta find a way to get her free. It terrifies me to think what he's been doing to her all

this time. By the time we were separated he'd already had her nearly beaten to death, left her to pick up infections in her wounds that nearly killed her and has got her fighting gladiators to win him money." She turned almost frantic green eyes on her friend, "I can't let her continue to suffer and as long as she thinks that Caesar still has me, she won't be able to free herself. He's turning her into an animal and I won't allow him to destroy all the hard work she's put in, all the pain she's endured for the last three years, as she'd tried to climb out of that pit he put her in before."

Her eyes flicked back to the course she was steering through the trees, "I know this is dangerous, Autolycus, far more dangerous than I have a right to ask you or Joxer to risk." She took a deep breath and continued, "So if you want to leave and find a ship back to Greece, I won't blame you."

The King of Thieves looked at the bard with a growing respect. The girl he'd first met when Xena 'introduced' herself had matured into a confident and able woman. "You've really thought this through?" he asked her, getting a nodded affirmation, "You know that they're gonna work out that we're headed for Rome?"

"Yeah ... " she began and then realised just what he'd said, "You're coming?" she asked with a delighted and relieved squeak that brought back the girl in her again.

"Well I could hardly let you go alone. "Xena'd carve me into little pieces with a blunt knife ... " he was stopped in his tracks as she threw her arms around his neck and gave him a ferocious hug. "Hey!" he demanded, "What's that for?"

"Just for being you. The nicest thief that I know." grinned the bard.

As Autolycus made embarrassed huffing noises, Joxer whined, "Hey, what about me? I'm coming along too!"

"I never had any doubts about that, Joxer," Gabrielle told him sweetly.

He puffed his chest out and said in his 'I'm being serious here guys' voice, "Well us warrior types know all about loyalty and sticking with friends to see our way through to the end." He turned his head and looked over to where the other two were walking, adding, "We know how to work out what's important in life. I can see the wood for the trees"

His voice tailed off suddenly as he walked directly into a very large, very solid oak tree that resisted the collision unmoving, and dumped Joxer rather suddenly onto his butt, leaving him in bewildered uncertainty about what exactly had just happened to him.

When they heard the crash of the collision and fall, Autolycus and Gabrielle turned back to find their companion staring in dazed amazement at the tree he'd just walked into, "Hey, who put that there?" he complained.

"We really haven't got time for this," muttered Autolycus as he turned back and hauled Joxer to his feet, "Listen log head," he told his companion tersely, "Just try to keep on your feet. We've

got to slip away from here before Brutus manages to catch up to us, and you leaving a trail by damaging trees with that thick head of yours is not going to help us."

"I know that," snapped Joxer feeling insulted, "just tell those trees not to step in my way." He thought about what he'd said for a moment, "You know what I mean. If I just had my sword I'd hack a way through here no trouble." he boasted, pantomiming wild slashes with a blade, "Yeah, these overgrown blocks of firewood wouldn't stand a chance."

Autolycus rolled his eyes and got a firm grip on Joxer's leather jacket, "Come on, Knot head. We haven't got time for you delusions of hacking power," and dragged him off after Gabrielle, who was doing her best to smother the giggles that kept trying to creep up on her every time she thought about Joxer hitting a tree with his sword. She'd tried attacking trees with swords and staves, you didn't get very far, just smothered in bark chips.

Taking a firm hold on Joxer's other arm she ushered him along at a faster pace as she considered, that in all probability, the trees would probably have knocked lumps off of Joxer, - *That would make him a chip off the old block.* - she thought irreverently. She giggled and said, "C'mon, Chip," drawing bemused looks from both the object of her mirth and the thief, "Never mind she told them. Let's just get a move on."

They headed east as far as they could tell. Luck was with them as they stumbled across a fast running stream that gave them their first chance to drink since before the storm had hit the ship. All three made the most of it, thirstily swallowing as much as they could, filling their stomachs with the cool, sweet water, in the absence of food.

They decided to take a short rest there. It was close to midday and Gabrielle really did want to check Joxer's head wound and bathe it in some fresh water before they moved on. As the bard tended the nasty lump and cut, Autolycus left to scout around and see if he could find any berries for them to munch on. He left his friends to the accompaniment of Joxer's moans and griping.

"Ouch!" he grumbled as Gabrielle unwrapped the bandage, "That hurts," he protested.

"Don't be such a baby, Joxer," she reprimanded, "If you hold still this won't take long." she promised as she expertly unwrapped the bandage, washed it out in the river and used it to clean the cut that seemed to be healing fairly well.

As she gently wiped his brow, the wannabe warrior looked up into her misty green eyes and sighed contentedly, "That feels so good, Gabby," he grinned letting his mind drift off into a private world where the bard was all his.

"Joxer!" her sharp tone cut into his reverie bringing him drifting back with a contented smile on his face.

"Yes, oh light of my life?" he murmured dreamily.

She twisted his ear hard, "Get your hand off of my butt!" she told him.

"Owwww!" he squealed as he was brought firmly back to reality, "Okay, okay. Sheesh, Gabby, I was almost asleep there," he told her moodily.

"I know," she smiled sweetly as she retied the bandage around his head, "That's the only reason that you've still got teeth."

"Umm! Right," he acknowledged, "Boy am I hungry," he announced trying to change the subject. Gabrielle's stomach chose that moment to growl loudly in protest at its emptiness. "Did I miss something?" questioned Joxer, "Did you swallow a live bear while I wasn't watching?"

The bard gave him a fair imitation of the 'look' that Xena used to quell opposition, and she nodded in satisfaction as her patient held up his hands in surrender just as Autolycus returned with several pocketfuls of blackberries, "Best I could do," he shrugged as he shared them out.

"They're great," encouraged Gabrielle as she hungrily demolished her portion. "At least it's better than nothing," she told them as they finished eating.

"We gotta get going," advised Autolycus. "We need to find somewhere to shelter before dark, and make sure that those soldiers haven't managed to hit our trail."

"We could head upstream for a while," suggested the bard, "it's going in the same direction that we are, and Xena says that it's real hard to track someone in a stream. We're just going to have to be careful when we get out."

"Sounds like a plan," agreed the thief, "You up for it?" he asked Joxer who was climbing to his feet.

"Sure," he agreed, "What have we got to lose?"

They headed upstream, pushing as fast as they could while trying to keep their feet from turning under them in the awkward conditions of the stream. It was far harder to travel this way, but they calculated that they had a big enough lead over Brutus's men to make it worth the risk .. especially if it hid their trail as they hoped.

- At least we're were close to a source of good water. - thought the bard as she splashed along doggedly. The day was hot and, although the thick canopy of leaves gave them ample shade, the heat made the wood steamy after the drenching from the storm. They were all grateful, in a way, for the cooling freshness of the stream even though they were constantly attacked by vicious biting insects.

Gabrielle suffered worst from this insidious attack as more of her bare skin was exposed for easy access. She muttered imprecations and slapped vehemently at buzzing mosquitos as they attempted to feast upon her, "Guys," she said at length, "We're gonna have to climb outta here soon, or I'm going to scream."

They selected an exit where a stoney shelf had been exposed by the lower summer water level, and carefully picked their way across it before climbing up onto the bank. With luck they'd travelled far enough in the water to hide their trail, so that now they could make better time until they could leave the woods behind.

They pressed on and were surprised when they stumbled onto a woodcutters track less than a candlemark after leaving the stream, "Looks like we could be getting close to a village," grinned Autolycus, "I should be able to use my skills to good advantage there," he said happily as he flexed the fingers on his good right hand and shook his arm to loosen it up.

"Autolycus, no," protested Gabrielle. "The people who live in villages don't have much and they work hard for what they've got. It's the same all over the world. We can't just rob them."

"Gabrielle," the thief turned to her and gave her a serious look, "We have no money, no weapons, other than your stick, nothing to make traps for hunting with. We need water skins and food and probably a change of clothing for you as you stand out in that garb and we need to blend in with the locals. We really don't have a lot of choice about this."

She bit her lip, looking perplexed at the situation she perceived, "I could always go to the village inn and tell some stories," she offered, "I usually make enough dinars for Xena and I to get the supplies we need."

"Like I said," returned Autolycus slowly, "We really don't have a lot of choice," he turned and started along the track.

Gabrielle watched his retreating back before shaking her head and running after him, "Hey! What did you mean by that?" she asked.

"Oh c'mon, Gabrielle. Surely you realise that just one word of a female bard in this area is gonna draw soldiers down on us like bees to a honeypot," he told her tersely.

"So you're saying that stealing is the only option we've got?" she demanded flatly, angry at having failed to realise what the thief had pointed out.

"No," he admitted, "There's two other options. One: we can go on as we are and ultimately starve to death. And two: We can let ourselves be captured again. You decide which you'd prefer," he stopped and crossed his arms over his chest waiting for her decision.

"Hey guys," Joxer broke in trying to break the tension, "We could always try working for food. You know odd jobs, that kind of thing."

Two pairs of eyes turned towards him, looking at him as if he'd just crawled out from under a rock, "Shut up, Joxer!" they said in unison.

"Geeze!" mumbled the object of their joint ire, "What rock did you both sleep on?"

"Umm, Gabrielle," murmured Joxer as he nudged the honey blonde in the ribs with his elbow, "Does that merchant look like he's taking too big an interest in Autolycus," he said pointing with his jaw.

The bard looked towards the man her friend was indicating and saw just what he meant, "I think we need to raise a distraction here," she muttered back to him.

"Like what?" demanded Joxer having no idea what kind of distraction the two of them were going to concoct between them.

Gabrielle took a quick look up and down the pathway they were sitting beside, "Stand up Joxer and step in front of me," she instructed. "Face the other way," she told him impatiently when he stood looking down at her.

"Well, alright, but I can't see as how this is going to help us," he complained.

"You will," promised Gabrielle with a smirk as she watched her target approaching. She flicked a glance towards where Autolycus was about to liberate a large pack from a leather merchant and hoped that the timing of this worked out just right, "Hold your arms out wide," she hissed to her friend.

"Gabrielle!" Joxer protested.

"Just do it, Joxer," she insisted as she got a firm grip on the water trough and watched the unwitting participants in her little ruse step into place.

Swiftly raising her foot she planted it with surprising force in Joxer's posterior, shoving him forward into an attractive older woman who was just passing them. The amateur warrior grasped convulsively at the woman to stop himself from falling to the ground and managed to grab something that he shouldn't have.

"What do you think you are playing at," demanded a shocked voice which was followed by a sharp slap as the woman hit Joxer squarely across the cheek with enough power to leave behind the reddened imprint of a hand.

Gabrielle noted that heads were beginning to turn in their direction, but the merchant hadn't yet heard the commotion and was still watching Autolycus. - *The heat needs to be raised on this little shindig*, - she decided.

Moving into the fray, the bard took a painful hold on Joxer's ear, "Did my no account husband just assault you?" she asked politely, twisting the ear so that Joxer yelled balefully.

"Owwwww! ... Ouch! ... That hurts ... Takeiteasywillya!" he implored, "It was an accident agggghhh!" he yelled at another painful twist.

Autolycus and Joxer were waiting with barely restrained impatience, knowing that the bard had a propensity for getting herself into trouble that was totally out of proportion to any other known living being. She heard them arguing as she approached.

"I tell ya Autolycus we ought to go back and find her. Letting Gabby loose in a market is asking for trouble," Joxer protested.

"Letting Gabrielle loose anywhere is a recipe for disaster," admitted the thief, "but it would look just too suspicious if we were to go back now. We'll just have to wait, but if she's not here by the time the sun sets ..."

"Hey! Isn't that her coming now?" interrupted his companion.

"You could be right, but what in Zeus' name has she been buying?" demanded Autolycus, "She was only supposed to pick up some food."

As she joined them she answered sweetly, "I thought of some other things we could use, and since I had the money, I thought that I might as well use it so that we can stay well clear of the other villages we come across. Too many people might remember us here and give Brutus too many clues as to where we went."

"She's got a point you know," agreed Joxer, as he helped the bard divest herself of the stores she'd purchased and began to divide the things up into three packs so that they shared the burden.

"Sheesh! Alright already!" protested the thief, "Can we just get out of here. The mere thought of Brutus catching up is enough to make my skin itch."

They each gathered up their packs and headed off into the gathering dusk, eager to be away from Cannetto and the danger that posed for them. As soon as they could they headed into the hills to find shelter, "I bought us a map," mentioned Gabrielle as they walked. "We should be able to work out a route to get us safely to Rome."

"I'll be happy if we can just find somewhere safe to sleep," returned Autolycus, "Is it me or has this been a very long day?"

"C'mon guys, don't worry. We're free, we're well provisioned, and we're gonna rescue Xena. Everything's gonna be alright!" Joxer exclaimed optimistically.

Gabrielle and Autolycus looked at each other and answered, "Right," drawing the word out pessimistically.

"I still think we should try to push on further," the bard protested as they wandered into the gloom.

"Gabrielle,"

horse and get a message sent up to Volaterrae. Put the garrison on alert and get them to send out patrols. Send some of those description flyers with the messenger so they know who to look for ... and you might as well include the description for the other two men. The way things are going they're likely to turn up here as well."

"Sir," saluted the Optio smartly and hurried off to carry out his orders.

Brutus knew that he could pull men from the garrisons to serve in this search and since the trio didn't know the countryside he felt he had a fair chance of picking them up once more. Once he got south of them he could put out a picket screen and net them as they tried to get through. He rubbed his jaw thoughtfully. He needed them safely back in his hands. He knew that he was too useful to Caesar for his commander to execute, but failure here would prove bad for his political aspirations.

Chapter Thirty Nine: Pirates, Queens and Concubines

It had taken the Amazon procession three days to reach Acanthus and during that time they'd had to run a gauntlet that consisted of the merely curious to the blatantly hostile villages that lay along their route of march. There wasn't any trouble. One hundred Amazon warriors armed to the teeth made certain of that. It would have taken a fairly major army to give the Queen Regent's retinue any problems. But the fact that so many people still remembered rampaging hordes of Amazon warriors sweeping victorious through the land, even after all the years since it had last happened (not counting the occasional raid by renegade bands), left Ephiny feeling despondent.

She and Gabrielle had both sought to secure good relationships with their neighbours, hammering out treaties and trade agreements that were beneficial to both parties. It had been good to stabilize their position in the area. The Amazon Nation had been in decline for several years, with many small factions being split off from the leadership of Themiscyra. Slowly, with patience and diplomacy rather than war, the problem was being addressed and the Amazons now had a firm foundation on which to build for the future.

That was why it hurt to see the angry reactions of people that hadn't even seen an Amazon war party in over thirty years. As she thought about it, though, it brought a wry half smile to her face, - *Is this how Xena feels every time she faces people who know her reputation from her warlord days? Even the Amazons, tend to treat her like some half mad animal, and for the most part she's only ever been a friend to us!* - She shook her head guiltily at the thought.

Apart from some hostile attitudes, they also had to deal with the excitement and interest that the Amazon cortege drew. The vision of an exotic group of one hundred women passing through a village drew out young and old, male and female in profusion to watch the unheralded parade. The knowledge that it was the procession of the Amazon Queen gave the whole thing a sense of being something from a fairytale. To see a queen in progress was something that would give many of these simple people something to talk about for many moons to come, and would undoubtedly take its place in folk-lore as something to pass down from generation to generation. It was a genuine rarity in the drab lives of so many humble villagers.

Hercules found himself pleasantly ignored for a change. All attention was focused on the Amazons, and they were such an unusual sight, that no one really noticed him. He did attract some envious stares from young men who, evidently, had made certain assumptions about his role there, but for the most part he was an almost anonymous personage.

On the third day, the big, tawny haired man, strolled along at the side of Ephiny, "We've spoken about how to explain my presence, we've talked about the possibility of all of our missing friends still being alive. What we haven't discussed is just what we're going to do when we get to Rome, or how we're going to manage to get everyone back out again."

"Ah," acknowledged the Regent vaguely, "I thought that it might be better to thrash that out on the ship, once we put to sea."

Hercules shot an inquiring look at her. He'd felt a tension within the Amazon camp and had narrowed it down to a group of women that everyone else seemed to be careful around, "Is there a problem?" he inquired carefully, not wishing to offend.

"Amazon internal politics," shrugged Ephiny, "you know how that can be."

"No, not really," admitted Hercules, "but I guess it's something you don't really want to talk about."

"Believe me," returned the blonde sourly, "you really don't want to know about it."

"Could it cause us a problem in Rome?" he asked, wanting to get some idea of how the ground stood.

"It shouldn't do. I've taken precautions that should prevent anything from getting out of hand," she saw the concern in the pale blue eyes of the demi-god and, placing a friendly hand on his arm, she told him, "I'll let you know if anything happens to endanger our situation from that source."

"I can't ask for more than that," he answered with a soft smile.

They walked along in silence for a while, listening to the banter from the Amazons who marched around them. Every now and then, Ephiny stole the chance to look at the son of Zeus, trying to evaluate him.

"Is there something you wanted to know?" he questioned finally, when the silence between them had stretched to an uncomfortable length.

Ephiny started guiltily as she realised her covert examination had been intercepted, "Well," she began hesitantly, "I've wondered for a long time now ... if you don't mind me asking ... just why did you spare Xena's life when she was still such a brutal warlord?" It was something she'd never been able to figure out, and she really was intrigued as to just what his answer would be. Hercules seemed to look far into the distance as his mind sorted through his memories of the

time. He was silent for such a long time that, at first, Ephiny didn't think that he'd answer her, "You know, it was kind of an intrusive question," she said suddenly feeling a little tactless, "please forget it."

The big man sighed, "Usually I get Iolaus to deal with things like this. He knows all the details of my adventures and he likes to talk about them. But even if he was here I'd probably have to answer this one myself. It was a painful time for him, and I think it took him a while to forgive me for giving Xena the chance to redeem herself."

This of course pricked Ephiny's, and not a few of the nearby Amazon warrior's, interests. All any of them knew was the barest outline of the story that Xena's army had turned on her for sparing the life of a baby, put her through a gauntlet, and that she'd gone after Hercules to kill him to use that feat to regain control of her men. Even Gabrielle hadn't been able to pry many of the details loose from Xena, and those she had she tended to keep to herself.

However, feeling that she ought to make some effort in the direction of not wanting to pry, the Regent said, "If this is too personal"

The big man seemed to start a little before allowing a quirk of his lips and replying, "No. Not at all, at least it really is a story that should be known, as it shows the incredible strength of will that Xena truly has. I seriously doubt if she'd tell anyone what happened, or just what she had to go through to bring about the change in herself. Anyway, even without that, it will pass some time."

Ephiny nodded and noticed the eager breeze of muttered anticipation that ran through the Royal Guard that marched around her and Hercules. Ephiny was almost tempted to tell them to spread out a bit, but a glance at Hercules told her that he didn't seem to notice the avid interest being displayed by the women he was surrounded by.

"About three and a half years ago, Xena decided that she could enhance her reputation if she could kill me. She hatched a plan to that end that involved seducing Iolaus, turning him against me and then getting me to kill him. She hoped that, I'd be devastated over killing my best friend, so I'd then be an easy kill for her. The plan would have worked, except my friendship with Iolaus was too strong for either of us to harm the other. It rather soured Xena and Iolaus' relationship for a while." he explained.

"What?" questioned the blonde walking beside him, "You didn't mind that she meant to kill you?"

"Oh, I minded," he admitted, "but at the time I was far more interested in getting my best friend back in one piece."

Ephiny grinned, "I can understand that," she agreed. "So what happened to Xena?"

"When her plan fell apart, she took off with what remained of her men, and I didn't hear anything of her for a while. Then about three moons later, I met up with a young cousin of mine who told

me about an army threatening the area he lived in. He asked for my help and I agreed to go with him. Iolaus had gone home to Corinth to visit my Mother and make sure she was safe. I also think it was an excuse for a fishing trip," he smiled as he thought about the blonde man's second favourite pastime.

"Anyway, the army that was rampaging around the Parthia area was butchering men and setting them up on crosses and wheels as examples to others. One man left a note in his own blood that it was a woman warrior who was responsible. I guessed it was Xena and was determined to stop her, but it wasn't until we came across a village in which every living thing, man, woman, child and animal, had been murdered, that I knew that I had to bring her to justice or kill her." There was a grim look on the big man's face as he remembered the horror of that devastated village and his certainty that Xena had been responsible for it.

Ephiny let out a low whistle, "You let her free after that?"

"Well actually Xena hadn't been with her army. She was off to the north with her scouts. It was her lieutenant, Darphus, who was responsible. Xena only returned in time to save the last living survivor"

"A baby," butted in the Regent nodding to herself, "which is why she was put through the gauntlet."

"Right," agreed Hercules, "You know it can't have been more than a day after she'd almost been beaten to death that she came after me. It was a close run thing and she almost ran me through before I got the upper hand and held that sword across her neck. I really don't think I'd like to face her fully fit as an enemy."

"What made you let her go at that point?" Ephiny almost demanded. After what Hercules had been describing it seemed incredible that the demi-god should just do an about face and release the Warrior Princess. Her mind was also full of the images of Xena storming into Themiscyra and sweeping through some of her best warriors as if they weren't there. She knew exactly what Hercules had meant about facing her at full fitness.

"I looked down into those incredible blue eyes of hers," he answered softly, "and I saw all the hurt, anguish and pain in the world. Here was a woman who should have been in a sick bed. She comes out and comes close to whipping me, when she really didn't have any right to being able to stand. And when I looked in her eyes, I didn't see some vicious warlord murderer. I saw a vulnerable woman, hurt, confused, with a goodness deep within her that was just waiting to be given a chance to flower."

The Regent swallowed loudly. The sensitive tone of Hercules's words told her something about his relationship with Xena that she was sure that he never meant her to know, "So you let her go?" she prompted.

"I was certain that if she was just shown a little trust, she'd be able to turn away from the dark path she'd been following for so long. I'm glad I've been proved right. She saved my butt from

"Funny you should mention it," he allowed a grin to appear, "Now be a good boy and take your friends home," he suggested. He glanced around and saw that they were beginning to attract a crowd of more drunkards as they rolled out of the tavern to look at what was causing the commotion.

The drunk man pulled away from Hercules and stood staring at him and the woman who had turned him down, "Don't like for'ners comin' in here an' acting snooty. Think we mi' jus' teach ya all a less'n. C'mon lads! get the harlots an' the big bastard!"

"Oh boy!" muttered Hercules as he was descended upon by half a dozen drunken louts, "doesn't anyone listen to reason anymore?" he asked rhetorically as he backhanded Ginger gently across the street ... about thirty feet or so.

"Amazons," called out Ephiny in a clear commanding voice, "no swords. Defence only!"

And then the fight was on. The twenty or so intoxicated roughs who piled into the fight weren't really any match for Hercules and eleven highly trained Amazons. In fact the son of Zeus was more than capable of taking care of the whole business on his own. However, the Amazons felt that since it was their honour that had been insulted, they didn't see why a man, even if he was Hercules, should have all the fun.

With a fist to the stomach of a tough who approached swinging, the man was bent double and Hercules swung over his back to deliver two solid kicks to the chins of a couple more of the would be fighters, dropping them out of the game. Grabbing the luckless man he was using as a leaning post, the big man swung him round and sent him crashing into half a dozen more of his accomplices.

While Hercules got to work on the bulk of the opposition, Ephiny and the Amazons worked their own brand of mayhem on those imprudent enough to get too close to them. Men fell to sharp painful jabs from fists and feet. These women were the elite members of the Queen's Guards and more than a match for almost any other fighter, with one or two notable exceptions, one being the man who was fighting on their side. Ephiny was no mean warrior herself and quite capable of holding her own in this type of street brawl.

It was all over in very little time with Hercules applying a light kick to a retreating backside that sent the staggering victim flying after his running companions, "They never learn," he declared as he brushed his hands together to remove the dust from the fight, "Shall we continue with what we came here to do?" he asked the Regent politely.

"Of course," smiled Ephiny regally, "Please lead the way," she grinned.

It didn't take them too long to find their way the wharf where 'Poseidon's Treasure' was berthed, and Ephiny had to strangle a cry of dismay as she saw the ship she had contracted laying alongside the dock with it's mast down and ships carpenters swarming all over the hull as they worked to repair whatever had happened.

She caught hold of the sleeve of a scurrying sailor and demanded, "Where's Captain Jurdis?"

"You'll find him on the quarterdeck, ma'am," came the hurried reply, "'Scuse me but I gotta get to the chandlers or the first mate'll have me hide."

While Ephiny was getting that information out of the sailor, Hercules spotted a familiar face further down the wharf, "Excuse me for a moment, Ephiny," he said to the distracted Regent who was trying to pick out the ship's master, "I'll meet you back here in a short while. I've just seen an old ... friend who might just be able to help us."

"What?" asked Ephiny, having only heard part of what the man had said, but registered him moving purposefully away, "Oh, right," she answered, as she gathered up her guard and headed for the quarterdeck of the ship and the unlucky captain who was about to get a full taste of an irate Amazon Queen.

Hercules carefully shouldered his way along the busy dock, heading towards the striking woman who stood out like a beacon amongst the normal salts of the sea that congregated in the area. With his height and build he had little difficulty making his way through the press, as people seemed to move instinctively out of the way of the controlled power that he radiated.

Before he had travelled half of the distance towards his target, the dark skinned woman with flashing, mischievous eyes and a mane of wild black hair, turned towards him and flashed him a brilliant smile, "How's my favourite demi-god keeping," she greeted as he reached her at last, giving him a friendly hug, "and where's Curly?" she questioned.

"It's good to see you too, Nebula," smiled Hercules with sincerity, "and Iolaus is partly what I want to talk to you about."

"I see," she answered reflectively, "Do you want to come aboard? It's private on there, at the moment. I'm looking for a new crew."

"Well, if you listen to what I have to tell you, It might just be that I'll get you a paying crew for a while, and a chance for an adventure that might just appeal to your sense of ... nobility," he told her intriguingly.

"Well come aboard and weave your yarn," she invited. "I could always do with another favour owed to me by the Son of Zeus," she grinned sharply.

"Somehow I knew you'd say that," muttered Hercules as he climbed the gangplank and followed her down to her cabin.

"Make yourself comfortable," she invited him, gesturing towards a padded seat that ran around the cabin's stern. "Care for some wine?" she asked, pouring herself a glass then replaced the stopper at a shake from his head. She took an appreciative sip and smiled slowly as she said, "A donation from the King of Seriphos," she told him, "A good vintage and he had plenty more, so he won't miss it."

"I thought you weren't going to do that anymore," he chided.

"Now whatever gave you that idea?" she asked playfully, "Actually, that's why I need a new crew. We did so well on my last voyage that my men have made enough to retire on."

"And you?" asked the big man.

"I enjoy what I do too much," she admitted. "Now down to business. What is it that you want me to do, and just how much is it worth to me?"

"I need someone to take me and some friends to Rome." he replied keeping it simple.

"That's easy enough, but it doesn't tell me where I'm going to make my profit, or where my crew is coming from," she answered, now all business woman.

"Ah, well my friends will pay you well for your time and trouble, and they'll be delighted to act as your crew ... although they'll be a little green as few of them have ever been to sea before. But you won't have to worry about pirates," he smiled gently at that thought, "or anyone else attacking your ship as they're all very competent fighters."

"Warriors?" she asked and got his nodded answer, "Warriors don't tend to make good sea men," she said simply.

"Oh, I think you'll find that these particular warriors will manage all right," he informed her in an amused tone, "they've all got a very good head for heights, so the rigging won't be a problem, and I can always help out while they learn the ropes."

Nebula gave him a hard look, "All right Hercules, let's cut out the crap," she told him in no uncertain terms. "Just who are these friends of yours?"

He looked mildly at her and answered, "Ephiny, the ruling Amazon Queen and about a hundred of her warriors."

"Poseidon's good graces," breathed Nebula impressed, despite herself.

"Funny, I never really noticed that my Uncle had any 'good' graces" muttered Hercules, before saying to the sometimes pirate, "Well, what do you think?"

She looked at him considering and he could tell that she was working out just what questions she needed to ask before giving him an answer, "I think that you haven't yet told me what's going on, or where Curly is?" she answered him.

"Ah, I was kind of hoping that you'd wait until we were at sea before asking those questions," he suggested, playing for time.

"Not a chance. I don't risk 'Wave Dancer' unless I know just what I'm risking him against," she told him flatly.

"Him?" he ventured.

"We all have our preferences about our ships. Most masters are men, so call them her. I'm all wo..."

"Yes I've noticed," agreed Hercules, "and it's quite understandable when you put it like that."

"Now quit stalling and spill the info, or demi-god or not, you won't be sailing on my ship this time," Nebula told him bluntly.

"Right. Um, well we have to get to Rome, because some friends of our are probably in a bit of trouble there," he tried to keep it simple again.

"What friends and who's the trouble with?" inquired the woman as she took another appreciative sip from her glass of wine.

"Their names are Xena and Gabrielle," he told her neutrally.

She gave him a long look and finally said, "The Warrior Princess, Xena, and her bard, Gabrielle?" came her question with an arched eyebrow.

"Eeeyeah," he agreed.

"Okay," she said slowly wondering just how the big guy had become friends with a woman who was a murdering, ruthless, warlord ... and that being her good points. "What's the trouble that they're in?"

Hercules looked her in the eyes, "We're not sure," he held up his hand for silence as he continued, "We think that Caesar's got them and we don't know what he's planning to do with them."

"Oh great," she breathed heatedly, "You want me to risk trouble with him. Have you any idea what he does to pirates? No don't answer that," she told him quickly, "If you know Xena you know what Caesar is likely to do to me if he catches me."

"He's got to catch you first, Nebula. And all you'll actually be doing, this trip, is ferrying the Amazon Queen Regent and her entourage on a state visit to Rome," he told her calmly.

"All right, I can buy that you're a friend of Xena's ... you've got some really odd friends, by the way," she informed him.

"Tell me about it," he told her looking at her frankly with a humorous twinkle in his eye.

Dancer'. As soon as they were on board, Nebula began instructing them, with Hercules' help, on just how to sail a ship. Most of the Amazon's soon had the basics, being quick studies, and Nebula had seemed mildly surprised at just how swiftly they had picked up what she was trying to impart to them.

"Right," she had declared finally, "You've got the basics, you can pick up the rest on the voyage. Now since we have the chance of catching the evening tide, we might as well slip the ropes and head to sea," declared the captain.

- And that had been that, - meditated Ephiny, - After all the delays and problems, we're finally headed for Rome. Lets just hope we can find Gabrielle and Xena, and work something out to get them out of the fix they're no doubt in. -

"NO!" came a very firm, slightly angry bellow from below decks.

- What's gone wrong now? - thought Ephiny rolling her eyes slightly, though she thought she could probably guess the problem.

She headed for the companionway steps that led down into the cabin area of the ship, and made her way to where she could hear muffled laughter and far from happy grumbles. *- I told Poni that he wouldn't like it, -* she thought with a wry chuckle.

Opening the door to the main cabin, she found Hercules stripped of his usual attire and now wearing a lion skin loin cloth and some silver ownership bands, *- Artemis alone knows where they found those, -* she thought, although she guessed that Nebula might have provided them as she saw the smug appraising look that the pirate was giving the big man.

"What's the matter, Hercules?" she asked politely, "You know that you agreed to this part of the plan. It's the only way that we can really account for you being with us."

"Ephiny I don't mind the plan," he yelled as Eponin stuck out a hand to feel his muscular back, "It's just that I don't see why I can't wear my own clothes."

The Regent took a deep breath and looked at him patiently, "Because to play the part of the Queen's concubine, you've got to dress the part. And that means what you've got on."

"I still" he protested.

"Please Hercules," she said quietly, "It's the only way for it to work."

He gave her a long hard look, before issuing a heavy sigh and conceding with, "Alright. But you tell your ... Amazons! to keep their hands off me," he told her sternly.

Ephiny grinned and looked at her Weapons Master, "Poni, keep your hands off of him, alright. The same goes for all the others. Make sure you tell them that from me." A mischievous smirk popped onto her face, "After all, he's mine." she laughed as she ducked out of the door.

"Ephiny!" she heard his raised voice as she scurried, very un-regally back up to the deck and away from the demi-god's very voluble and loud protests.

Chapter Forty: Due South

They had needed some supplies, not a lot, but they needed to replenish the dried foodstuffs that they would require on their trip south and, if they could afford it, a pair of horses so that they'd be able to make better time. Having seen a merchant's premises on their previous wander around the docks of Pisse, Iolaus and Toris knew where to head for to purchase the supplies they needed. They picked up trail bread, a flat brown, hard baked kind of biscuit that would sustain them if necessary. A supply of jerked meat was also added, again it would give them something to eat if they were unable to hunt or if there wasn't much game to be found. A bag of lentils and barley was added along with a packet of herbs for making tea as well as a few that had more medicinal value.

Iolaus grinned at the merchant, "All right friend," he began in a mild tone, "How much do you want for all of this?" he waved his hand over the goods he had selected.

"Twenty five dinars," the man replied promptly.

"What!" Iolaus almost screeched, "I'm not trying to buy your whole inventory! I'll give you five and even that's blatant robbery!"

"Times are hard friend, costs are high, but I might be able to see myself coming down to say twenty dinar." he conceded.

The short man gave his adversary a hard look. He guessed that the merchant was charging extra because he recognised them as foreigners who would be unlikely to know the local prices. Iolaus considered his options. They didn't really want to have to wander through the town looking for another merchant, it would take long enough to find a horse trader, but he would if pressed to it. He glanced at Toris who stood unobtrusively by the door keeping an eye out for any trouble, however unlikely a prospect it might seem.

He focused his attention back on the merchant and decided that he really didn't like the ferret faced weasel who was trying to bilk them and set about destroying him in a hard bargaining session that finally got them their supplies for a much healthier nine dinars. "Friend," Iolaus offered as he handed over the money, "If you try to charge all strangers those prices, I'm surprised you've managed to stay in business."

The man gave him a sour look, "Nobody forced you to buy from me," he replied sententiously with a shrug added for good measure.

Gathering up their hard fought for purchases, Iolaus divided the supplies between his and Toris's packs, before the pair headed back onto the cobble laid dock road. It was, maybe, a candlemark after noon and so both knew they had to get finished in Pisse and head out if they wanted to make any progress in locating their missing friends.

"Do you want to look for a horse trader?" questioned Toris, who would far rather ride than walk if they were given the option.

"If they charge prices similar to our merchant friend in there, there's no way that we're going to be able to afford to buy them," Iolaus replied with a shake of his curly blonde hair. "Still I suppose that there's no harm in checking the possibility out. We might get lucky."

As they wandered further into the town, they asked directions from people they passed. At first the answers they got were vague, but as they got closer to their target, instructions became much fuller and soon they were standing in the yard of a well kept establishment with a sign above the door proclaiming that Maxis Terricus's Equine Emporium could be found here.

"A name like that's got to add fifty percent to the cost of the animals," grumped Iolaus.

"Well let's just ask," prompted Toris shaking his black hair out of his eyes. Both he and Iolaus had washed the colour out of the hair, but had decided to keep the beards. Once they were out in the wilds they wouldn't have time to play with dyes and so they had rid themselves of that part of their disguise, but opted to keep the face fungus as a concession to the need to remain careful. "Besides," Toris couldn't resist adding with a smirk, "I know you just love to haggle with these guys."

Sighing with the mock air of being so misunderstood, Iolaus banged on the door and called out, "Hey, is there anyone interested in selling horses in there?"

It took a few minutes to get an answer from within, and the banging on the door attracted attention that they really didn't need.

"Iolaus," hissed Toris when he saw an obviously off duty soldier glance their way, "People are staring to look at us."

The soldier was subjecting them to some fairly close scrutiny and seemed to be deciding whether or not he should come across the street to investigate, when the door to the Equine Emporium was suddenly jerked open, revealing a painfully thin, red faced man with bright orange hair. He was hastily shrugging into his tunic and both Toris and Iolaus heard soft female giggling from somewhere inside, "Yes, what do you want?" he asked somewhat testily as he pushed his shirt tail into his trousers.

"Oh, Maxi!" called a mischievous voice from inside the office, "Try not to be too long."

Toris and Iolaus grinned at each other and watched the flaming spread of embarrassment race up Maxi's neck. The flushed man stepped outside and closed the door quickly behind himself, "Ah, please excuse ... umm, err, ... what can I do for you?" he tried again lamely.

"We're looking for a couple of mounts," as the man's face turned a deeper shade of crimson, Iolaus berated himself for a poor choice of words.

Toris checked over his shoulder to see what the soldier was doing, and sighed in relief to find that he'd gone, - *Probably just wondered what was taking Maxis so long to open the door*, - he assured himself.

"Come with me to the stock yards and I'll show you what we've got," the trader told them, heading out across the yard.

The friends sauntered after Maxis ready to look over his stock and see if they could afford anything he had to offer.

"What kind of animals are you boys looking for?" asked the weedy man conversationally.

"Riding animals, for the right price," answered Iolaus.

Toris let the smaller man do the talking, knowing that he was nowhere near as good as Iolaus in the negotiating stakes. He was, however, a far better judge of horseflesh than the other man, and so it was he who looked over the available animals while Iolaus engaged Maxis in conversation.

There was plenty of choice in the stables, but the most likely looking pair were a deep chested bay that had a mean look in it's eye and showed whip marks on it's flank. It had obviously been misused and likely had a foul temper because of it. It wouldn't be a suitable mount for Iolaus, but Toris knew himself to be a better than average horseman and believed he could handle the animal. Besides, with it obviously being a difficult beast, they would probably be able to get it for a much reduced price.

There was also a sorrel mare. It was an ugly looking brute but it showed evidence of having strong legs and a feel of stamina about her. She also seemed to be gentle and would serve his shorter friend quite well. People so often looked for 'pretty' animals that those with less than perfect looks, were often undervalued.

As Toris ran his hands across the Sorrel's back and down her withers, he became aware of a sudden clattering in the street. Throwing a glance at the courtyard entrance, he saw a double file of armed garrison soldiers rounding the corner and heading straight for them.

"Iolaus!" he warned the blonde man who was deep in negotiation with the horse trader, "we've got trouble."

"There he is!" snarled the leading soldier, "Get the bastard!" he yelled pointing his sword in the direction of Toris's friend and Maxis.

The tall dark man drew his sword and set himself to meet the oncoming rush, noticing, from the corner of his eye, that Iolaus had pushed the thin man away from himself, though his own sword lay with their bundled belongings. Toris decided it was going to be up to him to delay the soldiers, while the blonde found something to defend himself with.

Moving forward at a run, the big, black haired man shoulder charged the first soldier in the line, catching him unaware by coming from behind the sorrel where he'd been partially concealed, and catapulted him into a collision with the man to his left and the two men directly behind them. The ensuing chaos was satisfactory, as the four men went down in a tangle of limbs, causing havoc amongst those running along behind them.

Toris grinned as further confusion was inflicted by a hail of horseshoes being thrown with unwavering accuracy, bombarding the struggling soldiers with a deluge of iron that was both painful and distracting. He didn't have long to be amused, however, as the men at the rear of the heaped mass, began to get around the blockage, and he soon found himself confronted by three angry looking legionaries.

Having run out of horseshoes, Iolaus grabbed a pitchfork and rushed forward to cut off two more soldiers that had got around their downed comrades. With quick hands and a deft touch, he poked the stump end of the tool into his first opponents gut, before sending him tumbling into the heaped mass in the centre of the yard. The second soldier came at him with sword raised for a downward stroke, but Iolaus blocked it with a horizontal presentation of his pitchfork, only to see the metal sheer through the wood, leaving him with just a couple of sticks. With a look of disgust he tossed them aside.

Always inventive, however, the blonde dropped to the ground, braced himself with his hands and swept the other man's feet out from under him, before springing to his feet and kicking his adversary alongside the temple, rendering him unconscious, then turned to see what else needed his attention.

Toris grinned to himself. At last he was getting a chance to fight against the people who were holding his sister ... well at least their men. With relish he engaged the three men before him, parrying their blows and returning them with strong quick strikes. Working with enthusiastic determination, the dark haired man disarmed one of his attackers with a flat bladed strike across his knuckles, before risking a backhanded left fist swing to slam into his victim's jaw, sending him spinning into a corner of the yard.

He suffered for that piece of over enthusiasm, when the one of the others raked his right arm with his sword, drawing a long shallow gash that stung, and bled alarmingly, but in no way hampered him. A feral light sprung awake in his eyes as he clashed his sword, in a two handed swipe against the blade of the man who had marked him, with a shuddering 'clang' that left the soldier staggering, allowing Toris the time to plant a heavy boot in the groin of the third man, who whimpered in agony and dropped his weapon. That gave the blue eyed man the freedom to dispose of the recovering last soldier, felling him with a straight thrust through the chest.

Iolaus had kept a careful eye on Xena's brother as he faced off against three soldiers. He'd never seen the man fight before, but he'd always got the impression that he wasn't very proficient at it. Admittedly, he was basing his assumptions on what Xena had said, and he was fast coming to the opinion that her unflattering remarks had not done this older brother of her's justice. Toris was far better than merely competent .. almost as good as he was himself with the sword (and Iolaus knew that he had a well earned reputation of being very good).

"Then let's get out of this ice bath before I freeze my ... assets off," returned the smaller man with feeling. "Who'd have believed that a river could be so cold in summer?"

"Mountain run off," pointed out Toris as he gestured vaguely to the east where they had seen the mountain spine lurking, before it got too dark to see anything, "Do you want to press on? The night's warm, and it'll give us a chance to dry out our clothes if we keep on the move, as well as putting some distance between us and them."

Iolaus bounced up and down, once he'd managed to struggle back onto dry land, trying to get some feeling back into his cold body, "I guess that's the best idea. We've got to head south, and they're gonna figure that out soon enough, if they haven't already."

"Agreed," acknowledged the dark haired man, "Gabrielle and the others must be between here and Rome and they're gonna be heading south as well. Xena'll turn up there eventually, and now that Caesar hasn't got Gabrielle to hold over her as a hostage, we might just be able to figure a way out of all of this."

"Sounds like a plan," grinned the small blonde, "Let's get moving before I turn into a popsicle."

Hefting their packs the two men headed south at a staggering run, that slowly smoothed out as their bodies warmed up. They made sure that they kept well clear of the road because they would make too visible a target on there, even if the going was easier. They tried to keep back just inside the woods that ran parallel to the road but about fifty feet away. The ground in between had been hacked clear to discourage bandits from setting up ambushes on the imperial highways, and left a wide swathe of clear ground making it possible to sight pursuers from some distance off.

Escape from Pisse had proven to be a close run thing, with Iolaus being scored alongside his ribs, at one point, by an arrow as they'd sprinted away from the city walls. Since then, they'd been playing cat and mouse with the search parties that were combing the area for them. They hadn't had time to stop and tend their injuries, they were, however, grateful that neither of them had managed to sustain a bad wound.

"You know," huffed Iolaus as he ran along trying to keep up with Toris's longer strides, "I'm really not used to this. It's usually Hercules and I doing the hunting, not the other way round."

"Really?" queried, the bigger man who was relaxing into his stride, grateful that there was a full moon so that they could judge their footing.

"Well, yeah," replied the blonde a little less certainly, "I'll admit that sometimes we have people coming after us, but usually we stay and fight it out. This running game feels unnatural."

"Yeah, well," returned Toris as he hurdled a fallen tree, "My sister always used to say that you should pick your fights carefully and, when in doubt, run like the harpies were on your tail!"

"Shhhhh!" hissed the smaller man, drawing him down as he picked up the sound of rustling leaves.

The pair remained silent as another heavily manned patrol moved past their hiding place. They kept very still and uttered no sound until they were certain that the Romans were long past. Both men let out soft sigh's of relief.

"I think we'd better head back north and find somewhere safe to wait out the day," he glanced up at the lightening sky, "We'll have to try and work out some way of slipping by them," he explained to Toris.

The dark man gave a slight nod of his head and they very carefully withdrew. They retraced their steps back the way they had come, taking infinite care to do so quietly. Having come so far, they had no intention of falling at the last hurdle if they could help it. As they worked their way up a steep gully, they could hear the sounds of softly jingling equipment somewhere not far behind them. Toris and Iolaus swapped worried glances, and moved forward at a faster rate, praying to any god that cared to listen to keep their movements quiet enough to avoid detection.

A noise ahead of them left them in little doubt that they were in trouble. They couldn't go back, they couldn't go forward and the sides of the gully were too steep to climb without making the kind of noise that would bring the patrols at the double. In frustration they looked at each other knowing that they were caught like rats in a trap.

Both men backed up against the wall of the gully and drew their swords, prepared to sell themselves dearly if they had to. The rocky wall behind them would protect them from attacks from the rear and, depending just how many men were in that patrol, they might even be able to fight their way clear of trouble.

As they braced themselves for the coming fight, both men suddenly felt hands being clamped around their mouths from behind, and their bodies hauled back into, and beyond, the face of the gully. "Shhhhh!" ordered a familiar voice.

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[See Part 1.](#)

Chapter Forty One: A Room With A View

They reached Massilia three days after leaving Arelate. The journey was, once more, frustrating and uncomfortable for the Warrior Princess, as she was kept closely confined in the cage on the wagon. However, at least the stifling heat, that normally pervaded the interior of the vehicle, was alleviated by the canvas cover being raised at the sides to allow the air to circulate.

Bored, discontent, moody and forced to keep her temper in check, Xena shifted within the cage, trying, with difficulty, to relieve cramped muscles that had been forced to maintain one position for far too long. Sullen irascibility marked her demeanor as she rested her head back against the bars behind her. The exhaustion that had plagued her, from Caesar's last attempt to break her will, was gone, although she still bore dark smudges beneath her lustrous blue eyes, giving her a vulnerable look that really was in stark contrast to her reputation.

The black shadows were a testament to the continuing torment by the residue of her nightmares. Images burned into her memory, waiting to torture her anew, were just a shallow handspan away, ready to haunt her should she slip too far into the dream brothers' realms. She closed her eyes shuttering the flicker of horror away from her watchdogs. Torment that she couldn't stop her eyes from showing even of the least horrific of the memories that lingered in her mind. - *Windows to the soul, Gabrielle calls them*, - she thought as she pictured her gentle bard's face, driving away some of the shadows that clung there, allowing the memory of her friend to act as a soothing balm on her lacerated, blackened, soul.

Forcing herself to relax, she allowed the rocking motion of the wagon to lull her into a half doze until the mid-afternoon when they reached the city of Massilia. As had become routine, the VIIIth Legion set up camp outside the walls of the port, while Caesar led his personal guard, and the maniple assigned to watch over Xena, into the packed narrow streets of the city.

As they passed through the imposing western gate, the warrior could hear the excited pitch in the buzz of the gathering crowds. Here was a free spectacle to entertain the lives of the city folk. News of Caesar's entry attracted flocking crowds desperate to see their conquering hero. Loud cheers erupted at the head of the column as Caesar passed by, to be replaced by jeers and boos for the unknown savage shackled and caged like a dangerous beast.

Xena idly wondered if these people could have been any more hostile, even if they had known who she was. It had been many years since she had spent time raiding in Gaul and Narbonensis, but memories for such things ran deep, and she had little doubt that her name would have brought recognition. She didn't bother opening her eyes: jeering crowds were the same the whole world over and she had seen more than her fill of them. With the close proximity of the guards, and the narrow space between the bars of the cage, she had no fear that she would be pelted with

the city's refuse. - *Knew that they were useful for something!* - she chuckled to herself as she thought of her six watchdogs sitting in exposed positions around her.

The column, wound through the streets and the disciplined tramp of marching feet on cobbled roads brought back memories of her own armies as they paraded through captured towns and cities. The only difference was the cheering. Her progress had always been marked by silence; the silence of defeated peoples who wore masks of hatred for their conqueror. They were not memories that she cherished.

She opened her eyes as she banished the images from the past and was faced by the imposing bulk of the garrison fortress as they rolled ever closer to it. Large and stone built, it bore the stamp of thorough, functional, Roman architecture. A soft sigh escaped her, which she hid by shifting her aching legs, as she realised they were yet another step closer to Rome.

Wincing as a muscle spasmed in her calf she told herself, - *Be thankful for small things! At least, tonight, I'll be able to stretch in a proper cell.* - she almost laughed derisively at that thought!

As Caesar's approached, the huge main gates were swung open to admit the procession. The maniple drew up in the large courtyard and Xena watched as the massive wooden gates swung closed, effectively sealing them off from the excited city, the populace of which continued to shout out their approval of the Emperor, until it became obvious that they would see him no more that day.

Through slitted eyes the warrior watched as Caesar was greeted by a man who was obviously the garrison commander. They seemed to know each other pretty well as they stood talking together for some time, before a look and a gesture was thrown in her direction, which brought a comment from the garrison commander, a smile and a salute.

- *My accommodations being arranged,* - she decided, - *I wonder if I'll get a room with a view?* - she thought whimsically, - *Oh yeah! A view of yet another guardroom, no doubt!* - she chuckled softly to herself, drawing startled looks from her guards.

Titus, the Junior Centurion, was assigned the honour of escorting Xena to her latest in a long line of cells, - *Perhaps I should get Gabrielle to write 'A Guide to the Prisons and Cells of Narbonensis'* - she mused still in her whimsical frame of mind.

A contingent of twenty guards stood ready to surround her once she was freed from the cage and the rest of the maniple waited in the courtyard, just to make certain she wasn't tempted to try an escape. She watched with little interest as the centurion leapt lightly onto the wagon and produced the key for her small prison. Using his strong wrists to good advantage, he turned the stiff key to snap open the heavy lock and then swung the door wide.

"Out!" he commanded, and waited for her to obey. It was routine. The orders, the guard, her 'obedience' had become a routine. She closed her eyes forcing herself to subdue the stubborn pride that so wanted to assert itself, to encourage her to rebel. "I said out!" Titus repeated .. his order being reinforced by a sharp jab in her back by one of her six baton wielding guards.

Her eyes opened fully. Fastening on Titus they burned with the naked desire to resist. Another harder prod was accompanied by a gruff voice that growled, "The Centurion said move!"

She gave serious consideration to defiance. She was so tired of having to control her desires, her wants, her needs, but a face floated into her conscious thoughts and she heard the bard's voice scolding her, "Xena, you promised! Don't give them another excuse to hurt you."

- *Wrong time, wrong place*, - she decided drawing a shuddering breath as she quelled the rebellion and forced it back into its box. Sighing, the Warrior Princess forced cramped muscles to co-operate as she extracted herself from the cage. Once she began to move, she saw Titus stoop to retrieve the collar chain that had been left on the wagon bed floor when she'd been locked in that morning. She stood waiting, forcing herself to a semblance of docility as it was fastened to the band around her neck, and then shuffled forward at its pull, dropping from the back of the wagon in a clatter of chains.

The centurion moved forward, drawing her after him, and the guard detail took up position around them. She had expected to be led towards the door that she had marked as the entrance to the dungeons, but instead found herself heading towards the west tower of the garrison. She hid her surprise at this change in procedure; not that it was difficult to hide her thoughts. Taciturn by nature, since she had been Caesar's captive she went days without speaking to anyone unless spoken to first.

She concentrated on keeping her balance and keeping pace with the soldiers, silently cursing the fact that they'd changed her leg irons back to a pair with shorter links since she had been travelling in the cage once more. - *At least they let me keep my boots!* - Stairs again became a problem for her, and there were a lot of them to negotiate. However, she was given the time she needed to make the climb safely to the top of the five storey tower, where she was taken to one of four rooms that occupied that floor.

A heavy iron door was swung open revealing a small room with two, narrow, arrow slit windows, a simple pallet bed supporting a mattress stuffed with straw and a single blanket. The pallet was close to one of the windows. Two torches lit the dim room, light being jealously warded from the cell by the narrowness of the embrasures. Nothing else furnished the room except a somewhat rusty iron ring that had been set into the wall above the cot.

Titus drew her over towards the bed where he quickly locked the chain to the ring, giving it a firm tug to make sure it was secure. With Xena's freedom, further contained, the centurion felt it safe to exit with the guards, leaving her alone within the cell.

It felt strange, she realised, to be free from continuous observation. For more than two moons she had been subjected to having her every movement, waking or sleeping, watched by at least six men. The sudden removal of this silent intrusion left her feeling almost edgy and vulnerable. Unsure of herself in a way that she had no real experience of.

It took her time to isolate those feelings and dispel them, but once she had it had felt so good to be alone at last .. and that led to the inevitable fear her normal six guardians would come through

the cell door at any moment. So she remained standing where she'd been left beside the bed, waiting for them to return to take up residence, denying her the precious illusion of privacy and solitude.

She had no idea just how long she stood there.. her mind seemed to disengage, leaving her to soak in the wonderful feeling of seclusion that had been denied her for so long. Her mind dwelt on the relative punishments of solitary confinement and deprivation of privacy. Either could be a torment, but her nature would have coped better with the former rather than the latter. She was by nature a loner.

- *Except Gabrielle stole that from me*, - she conceded with a gentle smile. Her verbose young friend had broken through the walls she had painstakingly erected to keep her away from friendship and companionship, so that she was now at least willing to suffer the nearness of her friends. - *That's a strange thought in itself*, - she mused, - *I don't think I ever believed that I, Xena of Amphipolis, Warrior Princess, Destroyer of Nations, would ever have a group of people who would deign to call me 'friend'* -

Finally she awoke from her reverie and, satisfied that she would indeed be left alone, indulged her curiosity by shuffling across to the one window that the chain allowed her to reach, and looked out. - *Well, well*, - she chuckled, - *a room with a view indeed!* -

Although the slit was high and narrow, her own long frame allowed her command of the view below her, where a smaller person would have struggled to see anything but the sky. As it was, she had a bird's eye view of part of the city and all of the harbour where she saw and recognised a fleet of Roman triremes which lay at anchor there. She counted fourteen of the big war galleys and a handful of the smaller biremes as well. - *Transport for Caesar and his pet legion?* - she considered, - *Or are they here for some other purpose?* -

She spent some time just gazing out of the narrow window, just enjoying the chance to observe a normal world, when hers had descended into the pits of Tartarus. In her current existence the chance to stop and watch, without being watched in turn, was something rare to be treasured. She lost all track of the time that she spent just breathing in the distant sights and sounds of people free to come and go as they pleased, but it eventually registered in her mind that she had become jealous of the ordinary people with the ordinary lives, that had been unpolluted by the depths of anger and hatred that consumed her.

She turned away from the outside world with a discontented growl. She jerked her wrists against the shackles that restrained them, feeling her frustration beginning to burn up within her once more. She loathed being confined, she hated the chains that limited her movement, the cells that held her penned in, the intrusive presence of guards watching her every move! It was intolerable!

All of her life she had tried to avoid the confines of four walls. She felt constrained and hemmed in after any length of time spent inside. Her Mother had often despaired of her wild daughter who preferred to spend the daylight hours out in the woods and meadows, and the night time down in the more open stables, when she could manage to slip away. That feeling of being crowded in by walls, was beginning to be more and more persistent and invasive.

By returning to the bed, Xena relaxed the chain on her collar. Without really thinking, the Warrior Princess took a firm grip on it. She doubted that she'd be able to break the chain as it was made to the same strong specifications as her manacles and leg irons, but the ring was old and rusty. She examined it critically. With just a little effort she should be able to pull it out of the wall, leaving her free to roam the entire twelve foot square space of the cell.

A little more freedom. A small act of defiance. Minor things to remind herself that she was Xena of Amphipolis and not some pet animal belonging to Julius Caesar! With anger and resentment guiding her thoughts and actions .. and a need to assert her individuality, Xena took a tight grasp on the chain, flexed her considerable might and, with a screech of shearing metal, the chain came loose as the rusted metal was torn apart.

Allowing herself a crooked smile of satisfaction, she swung her attention to the cell door as it crashed back against the outside wall and the guard started to bull their way into the room. Facing them, blue eyes smouldering with icy fire that sent chills of fear through her opponents, she gathered in the thick length of chain and started to swing it in a lazy figure of eight pattern before her. "**BACK OFF!**" she warned, her voice like cracked ice.

The soldiers hesitated in the doorway for a heartbeat before deciding that it wasn't worth the pain involved in trying to subdue her at this point. They edged back out of her space, slamming and locking the door behind themselves. Senses alert, Xena heard the optio in charge of the guard, send a message to inform his superiors of the situation.

The Warrior Princess nodded to herself. The man was happy enough to leave her alone until ordered to do otherwise, secure in the knowledge that she couldn't get out of the cell except through the heavily guarded door.

Xena sighed. It was a minor victory and would no doubt be paid for, but it was necessary for her to keep her spirit alive. She shuffled across the floor to the arrow slit that she hadn't been able to reach, and gazed out into the falling dusk. There wasn't much of a change in the view but, since she had probably earned a beating to see it she was determined to make the most of it.

She stood by the window until the darkness obscured everything from sight, before shrugging her shoulders and turning back to her pallet. She had expected Titus or Flaccus to come charging in within moments of receiving the optio's message. She wasn't sure whether or not she should be disappointed by the lack of response to her small rebellion. That was a thought that almost made her laugh, - *Like some child misbehaving to get her parent's attention!* - That was not an image that sat well with her, however, so she mentally snarled, - *Well, I'm no child and I don't give a centaur's fart for any of the attention I get from Caesar and his lackeys. In fact the less attention the better!* - she declared silently.

She eased herself onto her bed. An unexpected luxury if ever she'd seen one. It had been so long since she'd slept on any kind of real bed that she'd almost forgotten what one felt like. As she settled into the prickly straw mattress, her stomach gave a hollow growl and caused her to wonder if she'd get any food after her little display of ire.

As if summoned, she heard the bolts being withdrawn on the cell door and, as they fumbled with the key in the lock, she quickly stood, readying the chain to employ it against anyone seeking to use it to re-tether her to anything. Her eyes narrowed dangerously as the door was swung open, but the look softened as she saw Patroclese, carrying a water skin and a tray of food, being ushered in and the door closing behind him.

"Xena," he said carefully, watching her to see if she was exhibiting any signs of violence.

She eyed him warily before dropping her defensive stance and allowed him to approach her, "Been given the task of talking me into more passive behaviour?" she questioned, "Or have you just been told to bring in drugged food and water so that they won't have any trouble when they come in here after me?" she demanded suspiciously.

Patroclese put the tray and skin on the pallet and held up his hands placatingly, "You have my word that neither the food, nor the water has been tampered with in any way," he promised.

She gave him a long, cool, look before deciding to believe him ... somewhat. The healer had, after all, proven himself to be a friend of sorts, so long as she discounted his role in bringing her to this pass in the first place. Since that time he hadn't lied to her, so she had no reason to doubt his word. She would be cautious though. Drugs could have been administered without his knowledge.

Xena moved around the bed and sat down on it facing the cell door. She picked up the tray and placed it on her lap. The plate on it sported a large helping of what appeared to be roast pork, as well as generous amounts of carrots, peas and turnip. Noticing the lack of any cutlery to eat with, she used her fingers to lift a piece of the meat and nibbled it cautiously checking for odd tastes that would alert her to tampering.

Motioning Patroclese to sit beside her, the Warrior Princess quirked an eyebrow and asked him, "Not even a spoon this time?" a faint tinge of sarcasm creeping into her tone as she sampled each item on the tray, before deciding that it would be safe to eat.

"Um, I think that you're upsetting Lord Caesar and his officers. They really weren't happy with you breaking that chain free," he told her. "I had to do some fast talking to get you a meal instead of a double squad of soldiers coming in here to batter you into submission again. I didn't think it too good an idea to press for cutlery. They seemed to think you might use anything I brought for a weapon."

Xena concentrated on eating for a while before she said to the healer, "Well, you better make your pitch."

"I'm sorry?" asked Patroclese a little confused.

"They sent you in here to try and calm me down and talk me into more suitable, slave-like behaviour, right?" she took another mouthful as he nodded, "Well you better get on with it, then."

The healer looked at her in confusion, guilt and anger, "Xena why do you do this? It gains you nothing but trouble. You can't escape, and every time you pull off some stunt like this you take punishment." He stood up and started pacing out the distance in front of her, "You know, I've fixed your injuries up more times than I care to count. I don't think I've ever treated any patient for more wounds ..."

"Talk to your boss about it," she suggested cuttingly.

He turned to face her, "I want to know, Xena, why you persist in drawing down the brutal punishments you get?"

She gave him a considering glance, "Look, Patroclese, I've tried to explain it to you before, but I'll tell you once again. It keeps me alive .. here," she reiterated, tapping her fist over her heart twice, "and, more importantly, it let's the bastard know that he doesn't control me. He may hold me captive and in chains, but he cannot control my will, my being. I won't be 'tamed' by him or anyone else. I am a warrior, this is the only fight in town and I'll be damned to Tartarus again before I let him beat me!"

He stood looking her for a long time as she finished off the food and meticulously licked the juices off of her fingers. He threw up his hands in exasperation and declared, "You are so stubborn!"

"You're not the first person to mention that," she admitted with a touch of wry humour, "So what do they intend to do about me?"

"Nothing," he replied shortly, "We're leaving for Rome in the morning. You can't get out of this room, so they'll leave you alone for the night. But in the morning, they'll come in here mob handed if you show them the slightest sign of resistance." He gave her a quizzical look, "You're not going to provoke them in the morning, are you?"

She raised an arched eyebrow at him, before sipping experimentally at the water in the skin. Deciding that there were no foreign substances in there, she took four long swallows, before avoiding his question with a compliment, "Nice meal. How'd you manage to get me that instead of the normal swill?"

Knowing that he was being diverted, Patroclese, never-the-less, answered the question, "I convinced Lord Caesar that you'd already lost far too much weight. You're not going to be much use to him if you lose your conditioning and strength. If he insists on making you his personal gladiator, he needs to make sure that you get good, nourishing food, or he could lose you. And if he does that ..."

"He loses his hold on Verchinex," she finished for him, "Yeah, I know. Don't think that I haven't considered that," she told him with a grim look in her blue eyes.

Patroclese turned stern eyes upon her, "Don't even think about it, Xena," he warned, "You're no use to your friends and family if you're dead."

The grim look was still there, but she replied, "Don't worry about it. I'm not dumb enough to think that Caesar won't bother with taking out revenge against those I care for should I deprive him of my services in that manner," She looked, he noted, glumly resigned to the situation, "No, I'll play his little game for a while longer ... but I'll play it my way, not his!"

"Xena ..." there was almost a plea in his voice, "Xena ..."

"Don't worry about me," she repeated as she turned her heavenly, dangerous eyes upon him, "I'll survive ... and maybe I'll give Julius a taste of his own games," she added softly.

Recognising that he could do nothing to change the warrior's mind, Patroclese gathered the tray, but left Xena the water skin. Without another word he walked across to the iron door and banged on it, "I'm through," he called, "Let me out."

Xena watched as the door was opened and swung shut behind his retreating figure. The torches that lit the dark room, were beginning to gutter making eerie shadows leap and dance as they spluttered towards darkness. Laying back on the bed, she allowed her eyes to drift slowly shut and she slipped into the light sleep that could be thrown off the instant her senses detected danger.

Chapter Forty Two: Row, Row, Row Your Boat

The cell was still gripped by unrelieved darkness as Xena's eyes flicked open into instant alertness. She knew that it was less than a candlemark until dawn and her heightened senses warned her that the enemy was gathering its forces behind the iron door. Even in fetters, she sprang nimbly from the cot and calmly awaited their entry. She relaxed her body and mind, lazily swung the collar chain .. reacquainting herself with the feel and weight of her only weapon .. and decided to await developments.

She heard the bolts being drawn and the key turning in the lock, even though they seemed to be taking pains to accomplish this task as silently as possible. The door was swung back and four men, bearing torches, stepped over the threshold. The sudden brilliance that the flaming brands brought, dazzled the warrior momentarily, forcing her to squint against the violent harshness of the light. She forced her eyes to become accustomed to the brightness and immediately recognised that Caesar stood framed in the doorway, with the torch bearers having moved to the side.

Xena waited uneasily. If Caesar was there he no doubt intended to deliver some ultimatum that she was unlikely to appreciate. She remained silent, although she arched one eyebrow questioningly at him as she watched the flickering light dancing and reflecting on his burnished armour. - *He looks ... good,* - she admitted to herself grudgingly as she felt the subtle pull of attraction that Caesar seemed able to exert at will. - *He knows the effect he has on women,* - she acknowledged, - *But I'll give myself to Ares before I ever allow myself to be fooled by him again!*

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Caesar looked at the woman before him, silently appraising her as he had so often over the passing days since her captivity, - *She's a half wild savage with a homicidal streak that makes*

her one of the most dangerous people living in this world, - he told himself coolly, - but she makes my blood burn like no other woman ever has! - he conceded reluctantly. - I may never break you, my sweet, but you'll never be free of me, and that in itself gives me dominance over you, O proud Warrior Princess. You are mine. One way or another, you will always be mine! -

They stood unmoving, silent in their contemplation of each other, locked in their private battle for control of the situation. A situation in which Caesar was always going to have the upper hand ... at least until some chance occurred that would allow the warrior to break his hold upon her. Finally, Caesar broke the silence and spoke, "Well, Xena. When are you going to learn proper obedience?"

A crooked twist to her lips accompanied her reply, "Why don't you come and teach me?" she invited as she hefted the chain. She knew Caesar wouldn't respond to her challenge, but it would rankle him that she knew he would avoid her invitation. As she saw the muscle in his right cheek twitch, she knew she had scored a point.

"I don't brawl with slaves, Xena. I have far better ways of handling them," he pointed out, gesturing his head in the direction of the waiting guards who stood just behind him. "Now we can do this one of two ways. You can walk out here and behave in a suitably docile manner, in which case we'll overlook your ... temper tantrum of last night. Or" he left the sentence unfinished.

"Oh, c'mon Julius, don't leave the best part out," she chided mockingly, "Or what?"

"I've got a dozen men with dart bows out here who'll pump your body so full of Curamin that you won't wake up until we're half way to Rome, and leave you to the mercies of your nightmares!" he told her flatly, "Your choice."

The mocking look remained on her features as she responded, "Choices, choices," she breathed as though she were considering her options, "Well I'll tell you what, old friend," she shot him a malicious look, "Since you so want me to take a sea voyage with you ... it's been some years since we did that together," she reminded him, "I think I'll opt to stay awake for a while. I like to feel awake at sea .. you never know what opportunities might present themselves," she informed him using stately tones that created the illusion that she was indeed solely in charge of events.

Caesar scowled. The woman was infuriating. However much he knew himself to be master of this situation, she always seemed to find a way to make him appear to be the lackey. However, he had no intention of showing her or his men how frustrated she made him. Standing aside from the door, he made a sweeping gesture with his arm, inviting her out from the cell, "If you please?"

Xena shuffled out of the room into the crowded corridors where her guards awaited her along with the thick oak beam, the longer leg irons, and the various handling chains. While the changes to her restraints were made, Caesar disappeared down the stairway, his personal involvement with her finished for the time being.

Flaccus appeared in front of her and grabbed the chain close to the collar, pulling her forward, "Your getting off light for your actions yesterday, but let me make it as clear as I can, as you have obviously failed to understand my previous explanations." He nodded to the two men behind him who slammed their batons against the taught muscles at her shoulders, "Firstly, if any Roman tells you to jump, you jump."

Again the heavy wooden batons struck, this time on her lower back. She grunted, realising that these were fully swung blows, not held back in anyway, and designed to hurt as much as possible, "Secondly, you will not attempt any form of resistance to your masters."

Two more blows smashed into the back of her thighs, making her legs tremble with the pain they induced, a bare, soft groan escaped her, "Thirdly, you speak only when spoken to."

The batons crunched in behind her knees causing her to collapse forward onto them from the force of the blows, "Lastly, you will always act with suitable humility and respect when in the presence of Lord Caesar!"

He grabbed her chin and forced her head up to be met with chill blue eyes blazing with anger and indignation, "Learn the lessons, slave. We can administer punishment for far longer than your body can take it."

Xena shook her head free and with dogged determination, forced herself to stand once more in front of the Centurion. He gave her a long, considering look. Flaccus had been in the army for many years. He was a hard demanding officer and had worked his ways through the ranks of the legions to attain his present post. He'd seen many men come into the legions during that time. Some were eager soldiers who adapted easily to the harsh disciplines of the legionnaire's life. Others were like this slave, strong, full of arrogance and pride who had tried to buck the system, until the system ground resistance out of them. They had either become good soldiers, or had died in the making.

This woman was made of similar metal. She was physically and mentally strong. She had withstood all the rigours of physical and mental abuse that had been thrown at her and continued to resist to the full extent of her ability. Flaccus had never been faced with a man he could not break to the discipline of his station, but he thought that this slave might be the first to fully resist him. He wasn't sure whether he felt anger at an impending first failure, or admiration for the tenacity of the woman.

"Take her down to the courtyard, and wait for the others," he snapped at the twenty man unit assigned to the task for the morning.

The lead jerked her forward as Xena dwelt on his words, - *Others? What Others? Gods, don't let them have taken Toris and Iolaus*, - she prayed silently.

It was a difficult climb, going back down those steps. Her guards were not in a mood to accommodate her awkwardness and, even though she now wore the longer leg irons, she still

stumbled, unbalanced by the beam restraining her arms, and would have crashed down a full flight of stone stairs if the press of bodies around her hadn't been so tight.

They finally made it out to the dark courtyard, where the rest of the guard maniple were assembling. She was pulled to a halt just away from the base of the tower, and she became aware of the rattle and clank of chains as maybe fifty men were lead out from the dungeon entrance to be detained on the opposite side of the yard from where she was being held.

- *Poor bastards*, - she thought with compassion and relief that she couldn't identify either Iolaus or Toris amongst them. She guessed that these men were destined to live out the rest of their existence chained to an oar in one of the Roman galleys out in the harbour. It was not an enviable life and, whatever they had done, no one deserved such a fate. - *Well at least I know why I wasn't put into the dungeon yesterday*, - she brooded, - *the accommodation was already taken*. -

The men wore an ankle cuff on the right leg and a chain connected each man to the next in a long line that was guarded by half a dozen garrison guards who looked bored and uninterested in their mundane task. Xena compared her own, highly efficient guards, the chains that loaded down her body and allowed herself a wry grin. She wasn't the only one to notice the difference. Men from the line of the condemned galley slaves whispered, nudged and pointed to each other as they became aware of the tall woman who stood in the midst of twenty men who watched her every move for the slightest twitch.

Finally Caesar, his staff and personal guards appeared and the whole procession formed up to make the march down to the harbour and the waiting ships. Caesar and his group led the way, followed by Flaccus and Xena with her attendant soldiers, - *I've got more of a staff than he has*, - she thought wryly. About half of the remaining soldiers from the maniple fell in behind these, before the luckless galley slaves were herded into line and backed up by the rest of the maniple.

The sun slowly began to push it's way over the horizon as they clattered along the cobbles of the harbour road. A few early risers watched them pass, many shook their heads at the sight of the chained men. No one spared a thought for the proud barbarian woman who marched along, her face a blank mask while she concentrated on keeping her balance on the uneven surface as the muscles in her legs screamed from the pounding they had received.

When they reached the docks, Xena could see that one of the large triremes had been warped in and secured to the wharf, while others had boats ferrying units of the VIIth legion out to them, - *So Caesar's taking his pet Legion home. I wonder how Pompey is gonna feel about that?* - she asked herself.

Xena studied the warship, while she and her escort waited for their embarkation orders. The ship was just over a hundred and eighty feet in length, she calculated, and had a beam of about twenty-eight feet. There were ports for three banks of oars on either side of the ship, suggesting that it could move very fast under the raw muscle power of the slaves chained to those oars. The prow sported a wicked looking curved ram, sheathed in bronze, designed to hole an enemy ship below the waterline, and sink her. There was a high, plain sternpost on the rear deck above the

junior officer's cabins, while senior officer's accommodations were up at the prow of the ship downwind of the slave pits. The stench that came from the slave galley was indescribable.

One thick mast rose from the centre of the slave pit with a large sail that would be used to catch favourable winds and save the strength of the slaves for when either the wind dropped or battle was imminent. Triremes could manoeuvre more swiftly and with greater turning capacity under the power of the oars, than the fickle fortunes of the wind.

Xena watched as Caesar confidently mounted the gangplank followed by his staff and guard, and was greeted by an enthusiastic captain, who was happy to show his pleasure in having his illustrious passenger aboard. The Warrior Princess shook her head in disgust. One of the worst things about the Roman military system was that it provided a route into politics. That meant that every mother's son who held commissioned officers rank was, - *Some fornicating arse-licker that's trying to ingratiate himself to the top of the tree*, - she growled to herself. She had far more respect for the likes of Titus and Flaccus who had earned their promotions from the ranks, though they could proceed no further in the military hierarchy.

While the guard maniple stood vigilant around Xena, the condemned men were herded on board the big vessel by their shepherds. The warrior received many inquisitive looks as they were hustled past her, and she watched sympathetically as they hesitantly climbed aboard the ship and disappeared from sight as they were taken below into the slave pit.

Xena could hear the muffled sounds of chains being secured as the men were assigned places on the oar benches, and the heavy thud of hammers as chain ends were secured into the oak frame of the ship with heavy staples designed for the job. Whips cracked as slave masters made their presence felt and 'instructed' the new men in the realities of their existence, sounds that filled the wharf with the brutal realities of a galley slave's life.

She didn't bother keeping track of how long she was kept standing on the wharf, but the sun had raised significantly before Flaccus tugged on the chain to get her moving towards the ship. She moved her feet carefully, her bruised muscles had seized with standing still for so long and made walking a little treacherous. Once up on deck the wooden stake was removed giving her a little more freedom of movement.

She glanced around at the layout of the ship. The slave pit lay along the centre of the structure, with gratings covering a long length and more solid, wooden decks at the prow and stern ends, as well as along the maindeck edges. The prow also had a small raised deck used as a firing platform for archers during battle, while the stern had a far larger, raised, deck housing the wheel and giving assault troops somewhere to mass ready for boarding parties.

Caesar appeared by the stern deck rail and looked down on his slave, "I've arranged for you to get a little exercise, Xena. I know how much you've hated being cooped up while we travelled in Narbonensis, so I've arranged with Admiral Veranius to have you do a little light rowing," he smiled at the glare she threw him, "It should keep you out of trouble on our journey to Rome and, if this fair weather holds, the voyage should be quite pleasant."

He gave her an evil grin as she threw her guards hands off of her, "Oh, Xena," he called after her, "Try to behave yourself down there. The oarsmaster has something of a temper, I'm told, and I can hardly expect him to treat you any differently from any of the other slaves, now can I? ... even if you are my personal property." His malicious laugh followed her as Flaccus dragged her to towards the hatchway and she was prodded along by the batons of her guards.

There were wooden steps down into the slave pit and the warrior tackled them with difficulty as she bent her head to pass through the hatchway. The stench of the slaves intensified as she descended from the open deck, making her stomach churn in protest.

Once down the steps, she could see a raised walkway that ran centrally between the benches of rowers, both in front and behind of where the steps ended. The walkway was about four feet wide, and there were extension platforms built to allow the overseers to pass the steps and mast without mingling with the rowers.

The rowing benches were built on a three tier system, to accommodate the three banks of oars. Six men were seated on each bench and shackled to their oars. As Xena understood the system, three men would row while three would rest unless they were going into battle when all slaves would bend their backs to the oars.

The Oarsmaster gave her a long considering look as he took note of the heavy chains that decorated her wrists and ankles, "This one's trouble, I take it?" he growled to Flaccus.

"Make sure your men keep an eye on her at all times," the centurion advised, "It took a whole maniple to capture her, and if she gets free the Emperor will have everyone on this boat's hides," he warned.

"Where's she think she's going to go if she gets free from the pit?" asked the oarsmaster incredulously.

Flaccus gave him an amused look, "Having come to know the damn woman, she'd probably swim for shore ... and I'm not certain that I'd bet against her making it."

The muscular oarsmaster eyed the troublesome slave with hostility. She turned the full force of her icy blue glare on him, "What if she causes trouble down here?" he queried.

"Treat her like any other galley slave," Flaccus told him, "you've only got one stipulation and that is you can't kill her. She's Lord Caesar's personal property and any man that kills the bitch is going to be skinned alive and roasted over a slow fire. Understand?"

The oarsmaster nodded reluctantly, "Those shackles have gotta come off her, she can't row an oar in those."

"The leg irons can stay on .. once I get her boots .. she won't need them down here," Flaccus told him, "That belt can stay around her waist. If you have any trouble with her that you can't handle, lock her back into those restraints, and send for me. I'll take the collar chain with me." He looked

hard at Xena, "She's got a smart mouth and hasn't learnt her place. Don't be afraid to use the whip on her, she can take anything you can dish out." He frowned at the warrior, "You gonna behave or do we have to get rough again?"

The warrior looked at him and said nothing, "Damn you slave," he growled with controlled exasperation, "Do we have to go through our conversation of this morning again?"

Xena's glance told her that all the guards were alert and ready, there wasn't really a lot she could do but submit, "No," she told him, holding out her wrists, "I won't give you any trouble," she conceded and then added the codicil in her mind, - *For now!* -

Flaccus unlocked the cuffs at her wrist, allowing the manacles to fall and settle at her waist. He gave her the key to the leg irons, "Take them off, get your boots off and then lock the shackles back on."

She took the key and gave him a wicked grin, but followed his instructions, handing her boots to him. He unlocked the chain from the collar and stepped aside as an overseer shoved her forward, further down the line of benches to where there was a spare seat on the end of a top tier bench.

Flaccus watched as Xena's wrists were locked into the manacles already secured to the oar. Once he was satisfied that she was secure, he gave one last word of warning to the oarsmaster, "She is about the most complete and deadly fighter I have ever seen, don't take any chances with her, and remember, any trouble, you send someone for me, hear?"

"Understood," agreed the oarsmaster as he watched Flaccus leave. "Urminus," he barked.

A six foot tall, solid slab of muscle moved along the walkway to his commander, "Aye Trassis?" he asked.

"I want you to give the woman a taste of what's in store for her if she causes any trouble here," he told him levelly, "then I want you to make sure that she remembers it throughout this trip. If she even looks like she's thinking about trouble, use the whip, understand?"

"Sure Trassis," Urminus replied with a grin. This was the kind of assignment he liked, he just hoped that the woman was stupid enough to prove troublesome. He made his way to where Xena sat passively on the bench. Without saying anything, he flicked his whip and slashed it across her shoulders, seeing her body jump to the bite, but noting that she uttered no cry of pain.

He grabbed a handful of her hair and used it to pull her head around to face him, "That's just a touch of what you'll be getting if you prove to be the trouble that I expect," he promised.

She gave him a look of contempt, then spat full in his face, "That the best you can do?" she sneered disdainfully.

Using his not inconsiderable brute strength, he smashed her head forward into the heavy wood of the oar, causing darkness and light to flash in her brain as she struggled to stay conscious. She

was 'helped' when another lash cracked across her back, jerking her back to full awareness with the pain, "You know, I might enjoy taming you," he told her.

"In your dreams," she growled at him, drawing a laugh from the hulking brute.

"Oh yes, this voyage could be fun." he chuckled.

Xena gave a tentative pull at the manacles holding her wrists and knew that she could break out of them any time that she had a mind too. Well if Urminus became too annoying, she'd give him a lesson in humility. For now, though, she'd go along with the rowing to work off some of the excess energy that had been forged during her confinement, that and the fact that it would give her lazy muscles a thorough workout.

Caesar sat relaxed in Admiral Veranius' sumptuous cabin that he'd appropriated for himself for the voyage to Rome. The chair that he lounged in was thickly padded and enjoyably comfortable. His inspection of the quarters had shown him that only the finest of furnishings found a home here, which meant he could look forward to a comfortable few days as they made the trip. He chuckled to himself at the thought of Xena in the slave pit, - *Not the most desirable way to travel*, - he congratulated himself for the idea. - *Four days with some hard labour and harder discipline, won't do her any harm at all. One way or another she has got to learn not to cross my will!* - There was a loud rap on the door that broke into his train of thoughts, "Come," he commanded.

Veranius gave a stiff salute and then broke into a friendly smile, "How do you like the cabin, Julius?" he questioned, taking the seat that Caesar waved him to.

"More than adequate for the few days to Rome, Marcus, my friend," he smiled in reply. "Have you settled my slave into her 'accommodations'?" he asked.

"Your Centurion, Flaccus?, saw that she was safely secured down there," the Admiral acknowledged, "Good man that," he mentioned recognising a thorough going professional when he saw one, "Would you care for some wine?" he asked as he rose from his chair and moved to the hanging wine cellar where he selected a stone bottle from the racks, "I can vouch for it's quality," he said with a wink, "It came from my own vineyards and is a very good vintage."

Caesar accepted the goblet that Veranius handed him and drank appreciatively of the golden wine, "It's as good as I remember," congratulated the noble as he watched his friend take his seat.

"Julius," the Admiral began hesitantly, "Are you sure that you want a woman slave down there. It's not a very healthy place and the slaves are treated more than harshly."

"Believe me, Marcus, that particular slave can endure anything that your men can throw at her for the few days it'll take to make the trip. Her strength is phenomenal, so much so that she is quite capable of manning one of your oars on her own. She is also incredibly deadly," he fingered the scar across his cheek.

"That's new," commented Veranius, taking a long look at the scar, "I intended to ask you about that,"

"A gift from Xena," acknowledged Caesar grimly.

"The slave? She's Xena?" asked the Admiral in concern, "Julius, do you really think it's wise leaving her down there? She could cause trouble. Surely it would be better to keep her in close confinement somewhere?"

Looking at his friend, Caesar shrugged, "That woman would cause trouble anywhere. Flaccus has warned your oarsmaster. It might not hurt for you to reinforce just how dangerous she is. Just make sure she's watched at all times, and work her hard. If she rows a double shift and then has one off we should be able to tire her out enough to keep her in hand."

"I'll see to it," agreed Veranius, uncomfortably.

Caesar took a long sip of his wine, "This really is excellent, Marcus," he complimented, turning his thoughts away from Xena and onto other matters, "Which route will we be taking?" he asked.

"I thought we could take the middle passage between Corsica and Sardinia. It's the shortest route, and I really need to be back on patrol as quickly as possible," explained the Admiral.

"So tell me, was your recent cruise successful?" asked Caesar idly.

An angry look fluttered across the Veranius' face, "No, by Neptune's trident, it wasn't," he growled. "The swine refused to stand and fight! I've been chasing them across the Mediterranean for weeks and as soon as I've dropped you and your men off in Rome, I'll be out after the bastards again," he grumbled, as he began to explain the current situation to Caesar.

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They had been at sea for a day and a half and it had been a painful and exhausting period for the Warrior Princess. Urminus had hardly ventured away from the oar she was chained to. Given the slightest excuse, the man was fully eager to use his whip. If she opened her mouth to speak to the men around her, both she and they felt the sting of the lash. Everyone was well aware that she was a 'special' case and did their best to keep a distance between her and themselves.

All through the long first day, she had pulled at the oar. The fact that she pulled double shifts, gave the other men on the oar extra rest, for which they were grateful, but four candlemarks of hauling on an oar, with only two off, left Xena acutely aware that she was severely out of condition. Her long period of captivity and relative inactivity had allowed her muscles to slip from the supreme condition she normally maintained.

Nighttime had brought some respite as the fleet only travelled in darkness in urgent situations, otherwise they were content to ride out the night and continue from first light in the morning.

The optio tugged hard on her leash and started moving towards the stern and the door that lead to the officers cabins. Plans flashing through her mind, Xena allowed herself to be moved in that direction until she reached the place where she could execute her hastily conceived idea.

Grabbing the leash in both hands, she pulled back hard on the chain, unbalancing the optio and sending him sprawling to the deck releasing the chain as he fell. Not giving the other guards time to react, Xena emitted her ululating cry and flipped with unbelievable ease up onto the stern deck close to Caesar. The Roman turned just in time to find himself face to face with the Warrior Princess, who grabbed him round the waist and leaped over the stern railing, taking them both into the sea.

Chapter Forty Three: You, Me and the Wide, Wide Sea

Weighted down with chains and a struggling Caesar, Xena knew that she had to act fast or all her hastily conceived plan would do would get her and her 'prisoner' drowned. Summoning her strength, she cracked a solid fist against the struggling man's jaw, knocking him out so that she could take stock of the situation. Fighting against the burden of shackles and a heavy, armour clad man, she desperately looked around for a large enough piece of wreckage to support both of them, and was relieved when she located the huge piece of decking, that had a stub end of mast through the centre, that she'd spotted from the ship she'd just left in such an unconventional manner.

Swimming towards it was not easy, especially towing the unconscious Caesar behind her, but she managed. Hauling herself up onto the 'raft' was a time consuming process that took a lot of her reserves of strength, especially as she had to hold onto Caesar so that he didn't sink under the weight of his armour. Having pulled herself out of the water, she turned her attentions to her enemy, forcing herself to slowly hoist his dead weight over the lip of the raft and onto the safety of the planking. Finally succeeding with her task, she allowed herself to collapse and, breathing deeply, recover from her exertions.

She knew that she couldn't rest for too long. She needed to find a way to secure Caesar so that he couldn't cause her any problems. As she pushed herself up from her prone position her hands brushed against the manacles that hung from the leather belt. She grinned to herself, - *Well, fair is fair*, - she thought, as her hands reached behind her and struggled to released the three stiff buckles that strapped the belt in place.

Xena contemplated her captive, - *The breast plate will have to go*, - she decided, - *in fact all the armour can go. I'd better see if he's got any weapons other than his sword, while I'm at it.* -

Working quickly, expert fingers released the buckles and straps that secured the Roman's armour. She tossed it to the far end of the raft before removing his sword belt and throwing that after the metal plates. Her hands worked quickly checking for any daggers that might be secreted about his person, and she found two wicked looking stilettos, one in either of his boots. She removed those throwing them to stand quivering in the wood with the other things she'd taken from him. As a final thought she took his boots and heaved them into the sea and removed his shirt, - *Let's see how he fares in the hot sun without some protection.* - It was a rather malicious piece of petty vindictiveness, but Xena thought she had earned the right to so be.

Rolling Caesar onto his stomach, she passed the belt around him and pulled the buckles tight, as he started to shift and moan. Before he returned to full consciousness, she turned him over onto his back and snapped the cuffs in place around his wrists and then dragged him across to the truncated mast stump and propped him up against it, moving round behind him she leaned against the opposite side of the broken remnant of thick wood and, using the chain from her collar, she wound it around the mast stump, including Caesar's neck, and held it tight by wrapping it around her left forearm. She needed to get some long overdue rest, and she wanted him where she knew exactly where he was.

She took a long look around the fog shrouded horizon and estimated that the sun wouldn't burn off the cloud for some time yet. She set her internal clock to allow herself three candelmarks sleep, and ignoring the feeble sounds coming from her prisoner, she willed herself into a light doze, from which she could snap to full alertness at the slightest hint of something wrong.

As Caesar struggled back to consciousness, his mind kept replaying the disturbing moment when Xena had appeared before him, like some vengeance seeking demon, before carrying him over the ship's rail and into the sea below. Then he'd been struggling in the water, his damned heavy armour threatening to pull him under. After that he remembered nothing.

His eyes flickered open and registered the wall of whiteness that still enshrouded them, and the soft waves that lifted and lapped at the edges of the raft that he seemed to be sitting on. He winced as a pain shot through his jaw and he attempted to lift a hand to massage it, only to find it brought up short by the manacles he wore. He jerked his wrists in frustration recognising the restraints, used to hold Xena, that he'd conceived himself.

Angrily, he tried to stand, only to be made instantly aware of the chain around his neck. He reached up with his fettered hands, and his questing fingers identified the heavy links that lay there. Fuming he struggled against the shackles that held him, knowing that it was a wasted effort, realising that he had nowhere near the strength to come anywhere close to breaking free of them. After all, they were designed and crafted to hold a woman with the reputed strength of ten men.

Calming himself, he allowed his eyes to roam over the raft, or what he could see of it. His eyes were immediately drawn to the pile made by his weapons and armour at the far end of the piece of wreckage, the twin daggers standing tantalisingly just out of the reach of his foot. He strained forward, muscles stretching as he tried to work his toes close enough to the handle of the nearest one to capture it.

"Don't even think about it!" advised a steely voice from behind him.

- *Of course, she had to be here somewhere,* - he berated himself, for forgetting about the woman. He relaxed and willed his voice to calmness as he asked, "So, now, what do you intend? The two of us alone in the middle of nowhere, you must have a plan for this?"

turning me into a monster who's only object in life was to kill!" She reeled off the catalogue with low menace, "No, Julius, I really don't think you can cause me any more suffering than you already have!"

He backed off under the intensity of her blazing blue eyes, not stopping until he felt the solid bulk of the broken mast behind him. Seeking to try and calm the highly volatile situation, he asked her in a more reasonable tone, "Just what do you think you can achieve by this?"

Xena kept an eye on him as she strapped his sword belt around her waist, threw one of the daggers over the side into the sea, and thrust the other into the belt. The armour she ignored. He wouldn't be able to use it as a weapon, and she didn't know if it would come in useful at some point. She curled up the neck chain and hung it over hilt of the sword - *At least it won't drag on me so much that way*, - she thought as she considered his question.

She gave him a hard look noting the way that his usual arrogant attitude slipped back on him like a mental cloak, "Maybe I won't gain anything out of this other than the satisfaction of making you squirm before I kill you ... And I can kill you, Julius. Over the years I've become very good at killing men. Then again," she grinned wolfishly as she saw him fighting the fear from showing in his eyes, "when the fighting's finished and the winner comes back looking for survivors, it just might be the Carthaginians who pick us up."

He gave her a searching, quizzical look, "What makes you think the men of Carthage will give you anything you want? You wear the collar of a slave, and under Carthaginian law you remain my slave, even if I'm taken by them."

She allowed the crooked half smile to play across her lips, never touching her eyes, "Laws are there to be broken. I have friends in Carthage, powerful friends who owe me a favour or two. I have little doubt that I'll be able to convince them to help me ... especially since I will have delivered you to them."

Caesar glared at her, as he weighed this piece of information for any flaws that he might be able to exploit. Seeing nothing he fell back to his previously prepared position, "Be very careful what you do, Xena, you're playing with the lives of your friends. When they die the guilt will be yours. You knew the situation, and you're playing with fire here. If I die, they die!"

The Warrior Princess laughed mirthlessly, "I have no intention of killing you, unless you force me to it. I'm certain that the Carthaginians will want to ransom you for concessions in land, trade and spheres of influence. I'm going to get the return of my friends tacked onto the ransom. Once they're out of your clutches I'll decide what to do about you."

"Just what, exactly, do you mean by that?" he questioned her suspiciously.

"I mean," she said as she slowly moved forward, her leg irons dragging heavily on the planking, "that I may just come after you for real, Julius. Especially if I think you intend to keep those bounties on mine and Gabrielle's heads."

"You honestly think you can get into Rome and past my security," he sneered contemptuously.

"I've done it before," she reminded him, "Only this time you won't know I'm there until you feel my steel in your guts."

"You mean my back, don't you?" he taunted, "That's how assassins work!" he sneered again.

"I'm not an assassin," she reminded him, "and I want to see into your eyes when I yank out your guts. It'll take you a long while to die from a wound like that. Maybe days. And I know no one who can heal such a wound. Oh, yes, I definitely want to see your eyes when I do that to you." she said as she put out a hand to lightly brush the scar she had left on his face, noting the mottled purple that studded his throat where the chain links had bitten.

He jerked his head away making himself wince as he did so by causing his wrist to jar, "You know, Xena, you'd frighten me far more if I didn't know that you care so much about these friends and family of yours. You won't risk their lives if you can possibly avoid it, even if it required you to surrender your own life to save theirs," he told her placidly, refusing to rise to her bait. He, after all, had a destiny, and it hadn't yet run its course, "It makes you weak," he taunted, "and emotional. Hardly good attributes for a warrior."

"You're wrong, Caesar," she told him softly, "Without love and compassion all you're left with is hate and indifference. That's a cold way to live ... but you've yet to discover the truth of that," she stood and glanced around the horizon noting that the fog had dispersed other than for insignificant tendrils that were quickly dissipating under the warmth of the afternoon sun.

The area around them was littered with the wreckage of at least one ship, possibly more. She recognised one or two corpses floating amongst the flotsam, showing the early signs of bloating as they absorbed water. There were no other live people to be seen. She tensed as she sensed Caesar beginning to move, "Unless you want another broken bone, I suggest you sit still," she warned him coldly without looking at him, continuing to scan the seas.

Trying to make himself more comfortable against the mast stump, Caesar crossed his legs at the ankles and gave her an intent look, "What if my men are the winners? What if it's Veranius who finds us?"

She didn't look at him as she considered what her response should be. Instead she tried to gauge how much daylight was left to them, and guess how long they were likely to be left floating around on a lump of wreckage. She could tell he was watching her, trying to predict just what she'd say, so she purposefully kept her face a blank mask, leaving him to sweat a little.

"You're right to be afraid if they come back for us, you know," he goaded, determined to force an answer from her, "When Veranius gets back here you'll be right back where you started from. Maybe I'll let Flaccus give you the whipping he's thought you deserved since the death of Blasius. You know he's certain you were behind that. He didn't care for the man, but he objects strongly when other people try to 'discipline' his men."

She refused to answer him, so he continued on in an almost conversational tone, "You know I think he has a grudging respect for you. He admires the way you stand up against adversity. But he has one small problem with that. He's never failed to break anyone put into his charge. You're providing him with a challenge and, after this little episode, I might just let him loose to break you as he sees fit. Perhaps I'll give him permission to work on you in between your training sessions in the Coliseum gladiator pits."

Xena turned coldly disdainful eyes upon him, "Don't count on it," she told him shortly, "I don't break easily, and I don't intend to let you get another chance at it, either."

Caesar was warming to his task, "You still haven't told me what you intend to do when we see that Roman ship coming towards us, Xena," he prodded, still failing to get her to respond, "Way I see it is you got three choices, none of them good for you."

"Please go on," she said sarcastically, "enlighten me as to what you think my choices are!"

He looked up at her proud, beautiful profile and felt his blood quicken, even in the midst of a situation where she held his life in her hand he could not stem the passion he felt for her. The heady mix of battle, conflict and lust that existed between them always made their emotions run high, although both were good enough actors to hide such feelings from each other. But he knew that they were both aware of some connection between them. Whenever they were within the same room they felt a charge of power that seemed to shed sparks as they clashed.

"Well," she prompted, "what are the three choices you think I have?"

Caesar smiled to himself. She may be physically dominant but his realm and art was manipulation, and Xena could still be effected in that way, however much she thought she had protected herself against him, "Your first choice is that you surrender and take the punishments that you'll have coming to you," he told her dispassionately.

"Go on," she encouraged, ticking that choice off of her own mental tally.

"Your second choice, would be to kill me and risk what my soldiers do to you," he informed her showing no real concern at the prospect.

"Now that's a choice that I might easily be tempted to take," she purred almost warmly, again ticking it off from her own mental list.

"I wouldn't advise that route, Xena," he told her calmly, "Not only would you die, but your little friend and those others would die a long and painful death." He watched as a shadow flicked across her expression, before it was once more set in the expressionless mask, "Your third, and final choice, is to kill yourself. Admittedly by doing so, you'd free Verchinex from his obligation to me, but you would once again be signing the death warrants of your friends. And I assure you that irritating blonde bard of yours will be cursing your name to all of your gods on Olympus before she reaches the gates of Hades."

He almost flinched as she turned her cold, icy gaze on him and sank slowly to her knees in front of him, withdrawing the dagger from her belt as she did so, "Let me make something quite clear to you," she told him in a low menacing rumble all the more chilling because it wasn't much more than a whisper and he had to strain to listen to her, "Should anything, and I mean anything, of that sort happen to Gabrielle, not all the fiends in Tartarus could stop me coming back for you and I swear you'll curse the day that your mother and father stole their first kiss!"

Never taking her eyes from his, she slowly ran the stiletto down the side of his face, down his neck and chest towards his groin, where her muscles suddenly tensed and she stabbed down hard, hearing a satisfying, "**THUNK!!!**" as it bit into the decking between his legs.

His eyes had widened in fear and relief as he realised that he was still intact. The Warrior Princess smiled at him, a smile that was as cold as the frozen north, and as devoid of mirth as the fiery pits of Tartarus, "Believe me, Julius, you know that's not an idle boast. I will find a way back to pay that debt to you."

He swallowed hard, believing every word she had told him. He knew of her previous death and her miraculous return to life. If she could do it once, he'd be a fool to believe that she wouldn't be able to do it again ... or find some other way to extract her vengeance upon him.

Knowing that she'd got her message through to him, she pulled the knife from the planking and slipped it back through the belt, deliberately turning her back on him as she went back to scanning the horizon for any sign of the returning victors. She almost wished that he'd try something stupid so that she could take some of her frustrations out on him.

Caesar watched the ease with which she moved, the confidence with which she carried herself. From the first moment he'd met her he had recognised a will, a spirit that more than matched his own. She was the only one, man or woman, who had ever caused him to fear. Even as he'd been held captive by the woman, - *No child!* - he amended, - *she could barely have been sixteen at the time*, - he had recognised that here was someone with a destiny as strong as his own. He had tried to snuff it out, before it could grow to challenge him, but at every turn he'd been frustrated in his efforts.

Yet through all the years they had been apart, he had never forgotten her. She festered like a wound in his soul. She burned like a coal in his heart. She was the thorn he knew would forever be in his foot, and when she had turned up in Rome those moons ago, she had again proven her power to disrupt his plans. Therefore he had turned his attention, to finally eliminating her threat, whilst providing himself with a use, a reason to keep her alive, so that he could prove his mastery upon her - *And still she refuses to submit!* - he growled in angry silence to her back.

Slowly he edged himself to his feet contemplating his chances of being able to take her by surprise. Without turning she snarled, "Unless you've got a death wish you better sit down and keep out of my hair!"

- *She's inhuman*, - his brain screeched as he sank back down on the rough planking. The sun was burning his unprotected shoulders and torso as it reflected off the sparkling water. As he sat

Turning back to her suffering victim, the raven haired woman's hands shot out, once more, to release the 'pinch' as she snarled at him, "That was really dumb!"

Caesar grinned weakly at her, as he regained his breath and wiped away the trickle of blood that oozed from his left nostril, "Can't blame a man for trying," he retorted, as he retreated slowly to his end of the raft.

"Can't I!" she growled. "Try that again and I'll pin you to that stump with the dagger!" That she was deadly serious was communicated by the dangerous tenseness throughout her body. She watched carefully as Caesar settled down once more. Pinning him in place with her eyes, she stood and stretched the kinks out of her muscles, hiding the shivers that threatened to shake her now wet frame. She allowed a grim smile as she realised that her 'captive' was unable to hide his own reaction to the cold and wet, before she swept the night for signs of a ship.

She stood for some time looking into the blackness before her sharp eyes caught the vaguest flicker of a torch in the distance. As it slowly brightened she could pick out more as a line of ships were spread abreast and clearly searching for the survivors of the sea battle that had taken place.

It took a moment for Caesar to realise that she had spotted something, but as she darted quickly forward and pulled him roughly to his feet, he guessed that the victors were returning. The question was, though, who had won? He froze in place as he felt the chill of cold steel on his neck.

"I don't know which side won," she breathed in his ear, "But you're going to behave yourself, while I figure out what to do," she pressed the knife closer, nicking the skin of his neck so that he felt the hot trickle of blood on his flesh.

"Why don't you do yourself a favour, Xena?" he told her almost companionably, "Surrender to me now. Veranius will have won. Our fleet was far superior to theirs. You're in enough trouble now, without letting my men see you threatening me," he tried to sound sincere.

"Nice try, Julius. But it ain't over 'til it's over. Lets just see how the cards fall, huh?" she told him mockingly, knowing that if it was the Romans coming back, it didn't matter what the soldiers saw, because it was Caesar who pulled the strings, and it was Caesar who would, in that eventuality, decide her punishment.

It was impossible to tell which fleet the ships belonged to as they came closer. The night managed to hide any tell-tale markings and the moon wasn't bright enough to help. All they could do was wait until the ships were upon them. Yet, as the big vessels moved closer, Xena felt her heart sinking. Closing down upon the raft, her sharp ears detected Roman voices and her eyes soon picked out the familiar faces from the elite maniple. Her gamble had failed. The Romans had won, beating the Carthaginians and dashing her slender hopes of escape and, ultimately, rescue for her friends.

"Give it up, Xena," Caesar told her quietly as he recognised the ship, "You've lost this one."

An instantly familiar voice hailed them from above, "Stand away from the General, slave!" No threats, no bluster, just a straight order.

Having already made up her mind what she'd do in this situation, never really having another practical choice, she removed the knife from Caesar's neck and stepped back, maintaining a stoic mask even as Caesar turned around and challenged her with that infuriatingly smug, arrogant, smirk that only he could managed to contrive.

"Drop the weapons, Xena," he told her, once more master of the situation.

She almost gave in to the urge to gut him like the pig he was. Almost! But the memory of her bard stayed her hand. The knowledge that such an action would condemn Gabrielle, Joxer and Autolycus to lingering deaths, held her tightly, and she could not give into her own desires.

"The weapons, Xena!" Caesar commanded more forcefully.

She looked him in the eyes and her hand moved faster than sight could follow as she threw the stiletto directly at her captor, to land with shuddering vibrations in the wood between his feet. He held up his hand, to stay any reaction from Flaccus and his men. He, Caesar, had control here and he would force his slave, through the strength of his will, to submit to his orders, "The sword," he told her.

Slowly, she unbuckled the belt and allowed it to fall by her feet, the chain to her collar uncoiling to hang down to the deck, "Put your hands on your head and kneel over by the mast," he instructed.

Breathing heavily at the mortifying frustration of the situation, Xena knew she had little option but to comply. Moving slowly and deliberately, she raised her hands and locked them together behind her head, before shuffling to where she had been directed to wait. Within moments four soldiers had climbed down to the raft. One had a pair of short linked irons that he used to manacle Xena's hands behind her back, before dragging her roughly to her feet once more.

In the time it had taken for that to be accomplished, a boson's chair had been swung over the side and was in the process of lifting Caesar back onto Veranius' ship. The Warrior Princess watched with no emotion as the chair was dropped back over and she was forced into the seat and strapped in. It took mere seconds for her to be hoisted back to the deck of the ship she had escaped from, and a hostile Flaccus stood ready to take charge of her once more. She noted that Caesar had been hurried below, Patroclese probably dancing attendance to minister to his master's wounds. She waited to see what they intended to do with her. She had little doubt that it would be both painful and uncomfortable.

When the four soldiers climbed back aboard with their commander's armour and weapons, Flaccus turned his attention to her. He signalled a man behind her who stepped forward and secured a rope around her ankles, "Take her up!" he ordered, and a dozen men leapt to pull on the other end of the rope, jerking Xena off her feet and sending her crashing to the deck, with no

way to lessen the impact of the fall with her hands shackled behind her back. Her head hit the timbers heavily and she blacked out while she was hauled up on the yardarm, to hang by her feet.

"I want ten guards watching her tonight. Tomorrow we'll see what the General wants done with her," Flaccus barked.

Chapter Forty Four: Oh, Gods!

"What's the matter, bro'?" asked the bubbly blonde as she materialised in a sheen of glistening light, "You look like when you lost your favourite toy and discovered the one you stole to replace it wasn't near as good."

Ares forced himself to control his startlement as he turned to face his flighty sister who flounced, as ever, in the scandalous pink garment that hid nothing and promised everything, "None of your business," he growled moodily, as he watched Aphrodite tour around his abode, trailing delicately sensuous fingers over the deadly weapons of war that decorated the place.

Ignoring her, Ares stumped over to his throne-like chair and thumped into it in a heap, hanging his left leg over the arm to present his visitor with an image of arrogant power. "What do you want 'Dite?" he demanded belligerently, "You here to gloat, or is it just my turn to suffer from your inanity?"

She grinned at him, turning on the full power of her dumb blonde act, "Hey, can't a girl visit her brother once in a while?" she asked with a brainless giggle, "I mean," she added, "especially since he's barely set foot on Olympus since that business with Strife and" an enraged growl brought her up short, as she looked at him and registered the snarl on his face. "Oh get over it will you!" she chided.

"I'm not exactly welcome around our brethren at the moment," he commented acidly, "or are you so busy playing matchmaker to a bunch of mortals that you failed to register the fact?"

She looked closely at her brother and noticed the signs of despondency that underlay his arrogant moodiness, "Look Are'," she said in a far more gentle tone as she moved to his side and touched his hand, which he drew away from her with a petulant lack of grace, "You've been shut up in this mausoleum of yours for far too long. What you need is a hobby, something to give you back a bit of interest in life."

He stared at her from under hooded brows, "I'm not interested 'Dite! There's nothing out there for me to enjoy."

"What!" she demanded, hands on hips her voice sounding incredulous, "All those wars an' things going on and you're not interested!" She climbed up on the dias, placed a hand to his brow and ignored his attempts to try and shake her off, "Well you're not sick, so that takes us back to you being a spoiled kid who's lost his favourite toy. So c'mon, Ares, snap out of it, get a life, 'kay?"

"Listen, sis. Athena's quite happy playing soldiers in my absence, and Zeus has made it very clear that I'm a disgrace to the family, so just what in Tartarus is the point?!" he demanded, his voice rising from a dull roar to crashing thunder as it crescendoed.

"My, my, we are in a funk, aren't we?" noted a silky feminine voice reinforced by just a hint of steel.

"What is this?" demanded Ares finding his patience being sorely eroded by the sudden appearance of another sister, "What do you want, Artemis?" he yelled unsociably, "I've not been messing with your Amazon's and that's about the only reason that forces you to pay me a visit?"

He watched as the new arrival turned to Aphrodite. She was tall, lithe with a sleekly muscular frame, had curling, chestnut coloured hair and sea green eyes. She carried herself with the elegant poise of a hunter. Which, of course, was exactly what she was.

"Have you told him yet?" Artemis demanded of her sister.

Aphrodite twisted her fingers in the fabric of her gown and pouted as she answered, "Not yet. He's in such a bad mood he's really not about to listen to anything I say to him."

"What are you two talking about," demanded Ares, "C'mon, c'mon, hurry up and tell me so that we can get this little family reunion over with."

Artemis shook her head in disgust, "Really, Aphrodite, you've got to try and concentrate on things. It's bad enough having one member of the family lost in his own world of sulks and temper tantrums, without having an airhead floating around on some fluff ball as well."

"Cut that out, Artemis. If you weren't so worried that he'd just toss a fireball at you when you first showed up, I wouldn't be here at all. I'm doing this as a favour for you, my sister," she pointed out, her words dripping with sarcasm, "I can always haul my butt outta here. I've got much better things to do with my time." she patted a vagrant curl back into place

Ares was even more bemused by this exchange and asked his question firmly and loudly to try and cut through the squabble, "Exactly what are you two here for?!" And got absolutely no response from the two goddesses.

"Listen bubble brain," snarled Artemis insultingly, "All you had to do was come in here and mention Xena, and muscles would have even left a devoted conquering army in the lurch to hear what you had to say!"

"Xena?" Ares queried.

"Listen here dear, or should I say deer?" Aphrodite returned insultingly to her sister, "Just because you've got your leathers in a tangle over the warrior babe and her irritating friend, doesn't mean I have to share your interests. I came here outta the goodness of my heart, and I can

see that my attendance is no longer required, so I'm outta here. You can tell bro' all he needs to know."

"APHRODITE!" yelled Ares losing his temper.

"Later," she grinned and blew him a kiss as she shimmered into nothingness.

"Artemis, for the love of Zeus! Will you tell me what all this is about and what does it have to do with Xena!" snarled the God of War as he turned on his sister.

She gave him a considering look before saying, "You really don't know, do you? I thought you kept a special watch on what the Warrior Princess was doing."

His eyes turned menacing, "Just tell me what you've got to say about Xena, and what in Hades name is your interest in her anyway."

Artemis's eyes also took on a threatening cast, "Well brother mine, one of your toy soldiers captured your ex-pet warlord and kidnapped my Amazon Queen. Both of them have been suffering from their captivity, although your darling Xena has taken the brunt of the beatings. Did you know she almost died a couple of moons ago?"

"Will you just tell me what's going on, without speaking in these cryptic riddles, Artemis, or I swear I'll send the biggest baddest warlord against your Amazons that I can find!" he threatened.

Artemis considered retorting in kind, but decided that filling Ares in on the situation would be far more telling, "Caesar captured Xena using a trick nearly three moons ago. He's had her chained, beaten, tormented and near death on a couple of occasions since. I wouldn't have worried, but he also took Gabrielle, my Amazon Queen, and had her beaten too. So I want you to use your influence with him to back off!" his sister told him bluntly.

"Well, well, well," Ares almost purred, "Xena's in the hands of Caesar ... again. I wonder if she's ready to listen to reason now."

"You never know your luck, Ares," she baited him, "But if Caesar gets her killed, your favourite hobby will be long past any way for you to tempt her back to your side. You need to get her away from him."

"Not that easy, my dear," he told her as his brain whirled around the situation. "Caesar tends to go his own way ... Oh I'm pleased enough with what he accomplishes, but he doesn't always listen to my ... 'suggestions'."

"Can't you control any of your people?" she demanded scathingly.

"He's too good at what he does for me to crush out his adherence in an overt act against him and, in his way, he wants Xena as much as I do. No I'll try to get her to pledge herself back to me, if she did that it would be worth losing Caesar, but I'll work on another way to release her as well,

Patroclese allowed himself a soft smile, "Something like that, my Lord. My teacher always told me that if the medicine doesn't taste bad then it won't do its job."

Caesar grunted as the herbs began to take effect and started to relax him, "Thought it must be something like that," he gave the healer a long look, "Well are you ready to get this over with?"

Patroclese had been waiting for some of the swelling to go down, which the removal of the manacle cuff had greatly facilitated. He laid out the splints and bandages that he was going to require on the desk and, once he was certain that the herbs were doing their task, he gripped his patient's arm and looked into his eyes, "Ready?" he asked.

"As I'll ever be," agreed his master.

Bracing himself, Patroclese grasped Caesar's arm at the elbow and took his hand, then began to pull and twist until he heard the bone grate back into alignment. Beards of perspiration decorated Caesar's brow while the healer set the wrist and he couldn't contain a scream of pain as the injury was manipulated. Satisfied that he'd got the bone back into its proper position, Patroclese took the splints and bandaged them into place, before settling a sling around his master's neck and easing the injured arm into it, "Try not to use it," he advised, "Give it time to heal properly, or you might cause yourself some problems."

Caesar nodded his understanding, before he gave Patroclese a quizzical look, "Aren't you going to try and plead Xena's case this time?" he asked, knowing that the healer had previously done his best to limit the damage done to the slave.

Patroclese rolled up the bandages he hadn't used and set them in his medical kit, "Xena stepped over the bounds with what she did. You could not allow her to go unpunished for that. It would set a bad example amongst the men. Yet I think, as you still want her alive, you will have to temper how far you go," conceded the healer softly.

Caesar had already got that in mind, "Could she withstand fifty lashes?" he asked the healer intently.

Patroclese considered, "Almost certainly. She is far stronger than anyone else I have ever met. If anyone could, it would be her."

"What if they were to be separated into two separate punishments of twenty five? You could treat the injuries after the first session and then the second batch could be administered the following day," considered Caesar.

"That would increase her chances of survival, my Lord. But even she will need time to recover from that beating, and she's going to need my skills to insure that she doesn't get an infection or fever, so that you lose her that way," explained Patroclese unhappily.

"Very well then," decided his master, "Xena can't be allowed to get away with this, and casual punishments are not fitting for this particular crime. It will serve as an example to the troops as well as to my reluctant slave!"

"Do you need me for anything else, my Lord?" enquired the healer solicitously.

"No Patroclese, I'll be fine. Thank you for attending to me," dismissed Caesar absently.

"Should I check on Xena, my Lord?" the blonde man questioned again.

"No Patroclese," repeated his master a far harder voice, "She hasn't come to any real harm yet, she'll keep until after the whipping in the morning."

As my Lord commands," agreed Patroclese reluctantly, bowing deeply before making his exit.

As the door closed behind the healer, Caesar heard a deep, rich voice resonate from the shadows of the cabin, "My, my. After all this time holding her, you still can't control her."

Caesar swung around to confront the owner of the voice ready to call his guards in, "Who are you?" he demanded.

"Oh you know me, Julius," purred Ares as he moved into the light allowing Caesar to take in his large muscular form and the silver decorated, black leathers of the God of War.

"Mars," acknowledged the Roman, "What can I do for you?"

Ares took his place in a comfortable chair, crossed his right leg over his left and contemplated his chosen, "Let's just say that I'm looking up a few of my more favoured adherents ... checking on their progress, perhaps. And what do I find?" he asked raising a dark eyebrow at the arrogant human before him, "I find that one of my favourite generals has dared to lay hands on my favourite da ... um ... disciple." he corrected himself smoothly.

"Xena!" stated Caesar flatly.

"Xena," agreed Ares in a neutral tone. He fixed the Roman with a piercing gaze as he continued, "I want you to release her."

"No," came the stark reply, "She's mine. I've gone to too much trouble to take her to tamely let her go, even for you, oh great God of War."

Ares had expected the refusal, what he hadn't expected was the arrogant assurance with which it was delivered, "You question my command? You think to stand against me, oh puny mortal? I could make you beg to do my bidding. If it wasn't for me, your vaunted glory would be nothing ..."

His eyes burned with a righteous anger as he replayed recent events in his mind. First he had received the news that Caesar had been scattering dinars like rose petals to gather information on the Warrior Princess. Next he had heard of the massive personal bounty that his rival had placed on the woman and her bard's heads. Then had come the disquietening news that Caesar had captured both Xena and Gabrielle, condemning them both to slavery for their crimes against the empire, - *As was his right*, - snarled the man, even though he hated to admit it. But what was far worse was the news that his adversary had concluded a treaty with the Gauls and, his spies assured him, managed to remove Verchinex from the scene entirely. That meant that Caesar was free to return to Rome and, with no trouble emanating from the Gauls, and no chance of Verchinex's name to stir the masses, it meant that the arrogant son of a bitch was free to woo the people of Rome and secure his position ahead of his rival.

What was worse, the man had made a fortune by using the Warrior Princess as a pit fighter. He now had enough dinars to buy Rome, and the blonde man had no illusions that the city wasn't for sale. Rome was the biggest whore in the known world and was willing to embrace anyone who could afford to purchase her favours.

The only good news that he had received was that Brutus had completely botched his task of escorting the bard, and two of her and Xena's friends, to be held safely within the confines of Caesar's palace. He was well aware of the current situation, that Brutus had men all around Rome scouring the countryside for the runaway slave and the men with her. It was also rumoured that there were two more men that Brutus was almost equally frantic to find. On top of all this, an Amazon delegation, including their Queen was due to arrive at any time. He had absolutely no idea what these women's connection to the situation was, but his acute political and honed battle senses told him that they were an interested party in the unfolding drama.

Therefore he had come to the temple to implore aid from Mars. He was, after all a regular worshipper of the God of War. He had paid homage on the battlefields and shed his blood for the greater glory of the Lord of Conflict. All he sought was a little divine guidance. For if he, Pompey the Magnus, couldn't coax Mars into aiding him, no mortal could.

As he reached the high altar, Pompey fell to his knees and then prostrated himself before his God. In his mind he cried out his petition and beseeched acknowledgement, - *Oh Mighty God of War, Greatest of all of the Gods. Famed for your deeds in battle, your courage, your honour! Help me in this, my time of greatest need, guide me on the path to victory that I might serve you better yet!* -

He awaited an answer, a sign, some signal that Mars had heard and acknowledged him. He waited in vain. Finally, after a candlemark's prostration, he arose from the chilling touch of the stone floor and stalked out of the temple the way he had come. Although he felt disappointment at being ignored, the exercise had not only been to seek the aid of Mars, but also to prove his religious devotion to the people of the city.

Outside, once more, in the hot early morning sun, Pompey leapt into the saddle of his great black warhorse and, looking the very image of the conquering hero, rode through the streets of Rome,

accepting the adulation of the masses as his due, as he returned to his palace in the northern quarter of the city ahead of his personal guards.

When he arrived there, he threw the reins of his mount to the waiting stable hand and took the steps three at a time as he hurried back to the work that awaited him in his office. He had much to do before Caesar returned, and the news was that his adversary would be back in just a few short days. He marched past the sentries on duty outside his door and swung them closed behind himself. It was then that he felt the presence of another being.

Turning swiftly, he quickly located the shadowy form, but before he could raise his voice to call for the guards, a commanding, richly seductive, voice spoke saying, "You asked for my aid, " Ares stepped out into the bright space of the large well appointed room, "and I am a God who likes to give help to my faithful, when called upon to do so." He smiled as Pompey dropped to one knee before him and bowed his head.

"My Lord Mars," he answered, "I am but a humble servant, and am truly appreciative of the great honour that you do me by being here."

- *Far more deferential*, - approved Ares as he observed the Roman before him, - *but just as stiff necked and arrogant as Caesar in his way. No wonder the two can't get along.* - "Get up, man" he ordered and waited until Pompey had once more risen to his feet, "Just what is it you want from me?"

Chapter Forty Five: First Arrivals

By the time they reached the Port of Rome, the Amazons had become far better than competent seamen. Nebula was quietly impressed with how quickly the woman warriors had picked up the rudiments of running a large ship and several of them showed such promise at being natural sailors that she'd have accepted them as part of her crew anytime, - *Might even offer some of them the chance to sail with me permanently after all this is over*, - she mused, as she turned the wheel to catch the fitful wind.

It had taken an uneventful half-moon to sail 'Wave Dancer' from Acanthus to Rome. During that time the pirate captain had been entertained by Amazon weapons training as Eponin put her warriors through their paces on the main deck at scheduled periods throughout the day. The training was gruelling and woe betide any Amazon who didn't match up to the Weapon Master's exacting standards and, Nebula had been surprised to note, that included the Regent herself.

She took a careful check on her bearings as she navigated the busy River Tiber, heading for the upper wharves that were reserved for the use of the higher echelon of Roman dignitaries and visiting officials from other states.

They had passed the lower port of Ostia, down at the mouth of the River about three candelmarks after dawn. Nebula had been conscious of the watch towers that flanked the river entrance and tried to memorize details of the port's defences, keeping very much in the background. This allowed Ephiny to deal with the harbour master's assistant, who had been ferried out to the ship

to inspect their papers and inquire about their business. When the man realised that it was the expected embassy from the Amazons, he fell over himself in his eagerness to please.

They were cleared to pass and given instruction on where to berth the ship when they reached the upper harbour within the city itself. The pirate had listened closely to the directions, but kept carefully in the background. She didn't think it likely that anyone would recognise her here, but the situation was complicated and dangerous enough without that little twist being added to the mix.

With a clear passage ahead of her, Nebula allowed her gaze to drift towards Hercules who stood at the bow dressed in his loin cloth and ownership bands, having clothed himself in them, once more, when they had reached the entrance to the river.

- The man is more than impressive, - she grinned to herself, appreciating the way his muscles rippled under his smooth golden skin, - I wonder if he realises just what effect he's going to have on the matrons of Rome? - she almost laughed out loud at the thought.

She had been grateful for all of his help on the voyage as well. Being the only experienced sailor, other than herself, aboard the vessel, had meant that the two of them had had to share the responsibility of captaining the ship, *- He makes a damn fine first officer, - she grinned, - Pity he's got those scruples. Being a pirate might suit him. -*

With her and Hercules to instruct the Amazon's and give the necessary orders and guidance, the voyage had passed quickly without any major troubles to deal with. She had noted that there was a small dissident element amongst the women .. about eight of the Amazons kept entirely to themselves when not actively engaged in ships duties .. and most of the other warriors tended to keep a wary eye on them. Something was obviously amiss in that area, but equally obvious was the fact that it was a domestic matter, and she doubted anyone would appreciate her interference. She shrugged to herself, barked an order for the topmen to shorten sail as they neared their destination, and decided that so long as it didn't cause a problem with the smooth running of the ship, it really wasn't any of her business.

As 'Wave Dancer' slowly glided into position on the mooring spot she had selected, Nebula noticed that both Ephiny and Eponin had ducked below decks, *- No doubt gone to prepare themselves for the Roman public, - she thought wryly, knowing that the initial plan was to stun the jaded pallets of the Roman elite with a taste of the exotic, barbarian splendour of the Amazon nation, - While everyone is chattering about superficial appearances, it might deflect anyone from getting too curious about what exactly we're doing here in the first place. Trade negotiations might wear a bit thin, although it's the only convincing cover story we could come up with, - acknowledged the pirate. - Well it stands a chance of working. I'm sure they'll have something else in mind if they need to cover themselves ... I hope! -*

As soon as the ship stopped moving, those designated to handle the side ropes, leapt over the rails and secured 'Wave Dancer' to the mooring stakes. Nebula noticed that Hercules had also gone below deck, and wasn't surprised when she saw two Amazons in full ceremonial dress, complete with masks, make their way over to the rail, one of them clutching a scroll.

The moment the gangplank was run out, the two were down it and heading for the Legionaries who were approaching the ship from the wharf master's building. A quick exchange took place, and the group stood waiting as a man was sent off on some errand. Within a short while the soldier returned, mounted with five others and two spare horses for the Amazons. Once the women were in the saddle, the group made their way away from the wharves to deliver their greeting and announce the arrival of the Amazon Queen to whomever would be receiving them.

Nebula concerned herself with the hundred and one things that were required of her: she had to allow a customs inspection, sign many forms as well as making sure that the ship was correctly secured, she didn't want to incur any fines for breaking Roman port regulations.

After about a half candlemark, the two Amazon's returned with their escort, boarded the ship and disappeared below. Nebula kept an eye on the traffic around the wharf, alert to any signs of danger to her ship, but could detect nothing overt from the Romans. Everything seemed to be progressing as planned, and the Amazon visit seemed to be accepted at face value.

The waiting continued as Nebula continued to work at the myriad things that always needed seeing to on a ship. She had arranged, with Ephiny, to retain the services of six of the Amazons, basically as a skeleton crew for the vessel and for running messages to wherever the Amazon embassy ended up staying. The pirate captain would keep an ear open in any of the taverns for gossip concerning the people they were looking for and send any information along to the Regent.

In a remarkably short space of time (which suggested that the relevant authorities had been alerted to their imminent arrival), there was a blasting fanfare of trumpets as a Legion Cohort marched its way down to the wharf burnished breastplates gleaming in the mid-afternoon sunshine. At their head, on a magnificent black stallion rode a tall, well built, man with short cropped blonde hair and an air of authority about him that almost seemed tangible.

As the sound of the trumpets resonated through the air, Amazons dressed in their ceremonial garb began to assemble on the deck of the ship, before flowing down to the wharf, drawing themselves up in colourfully exotic ranks that rivalled even the splendour of the Roman soldiers.

As the Romans drew up opposite the ship, Ephiny, wearing the mask and full attire of the Amazon Queen, stepped out onto the deck. She was followed by a subservient Hercules, who knelt by her feet and then both were quickly flanked by Eponin and Malonda, resplendent in the finery of court advisors, both of these women carried warstaves and in unison they rapped them three times upon the deck of the ship, the heavy sounds echoing through the heavy planking.

When the vibration halted, Eponin stepped forward, "Harken, harken ye Gods and Mortals all. Ephiny, by the grace of Artemis, her Regent and Queen of the Amazons, Lioness of Themiscyra, Daughter of the Moon, stands amongst you." At that point the Amazon guard turned as one to face the ship.

"Pay homage to her and welcome her coming," commanded Eponin.

Unlike many of her sisters, Ephiny had travelled and knew something about the splendours of modern architecture. She had, after all, seen Athens and a few other Greek cities whilst she had been in semi-exile during her marriage to Phantes and after his death and the birth of her son Xenan, - *But Rome, I have to admit, is truly magnificent!* - she conceded to herself.

She was glad that she had resumed the coverage of her mask, and that her sisters had remained masked, throughout the procession to Pompey's palace. It allowed them to stare in open eyed wonder at such sites as the Circus Maximus, off the Forum Boarium, the Capitol above the Roman Forum and in the distance the towering Coliseum.

They passed through the Servian Walls, the ancient fortifications that were the original boundaries of the city and north into one of the newer quarters of Rome where Pompey had erected his imposing palace. By the end of the procession, the Amazon's felt oppressed by the opulent magnificence that was everywhere to behold, and knew they were truly a world away from the rustic simplicity of their towns and forests ... their home.

While Ephiny with Hercules, Eponin and Malonda were shown lavishly furnished and luxuriously appointed apartments in the palace, the Amazon guard were given a barracks within the grounds of the building. It was large, spacious and had access to bathing facilities the likes of which the women had never before experienced. The only thing wrong with the arrangement was that the warriors were effectively separated from their leaders. However, Eponin came up with a partial answer by assigning extra guards, not only to Ephiny, but also to herself and Malonda as well, which gave them some sixteen warriors to guard the wing of the building that had been assigned as theirs for the duration of their visit.

Once Pompey had departed, after issuing them with an invitation to join him for dinner and making sure that they had no complaints as to their accommodations, the group made shift to settle in. Hercules, who had remained silently in the background whilst everything happened around him, slumped onto Ephiny's bed feeling a nervous exhaustion garnered from the tenseness he felt at the situation. "This is not going to be easy to get used to," he said quietly.

"You're doing fine Hercules," encouraged Ephiny, "Hardly anyone looked at you more than once. They've accepted you at face value for now, which is what is important."

"You know Eph," broke in Eponin as she looked appreciatively at Hercules again, - *I might not be able to touch, but no one had said anything about not looking.* - she smirked quietly. She heard Hercules groan at her glance and allowed the smirk to crease her features into a grin as she continued, "I don't think anyone has heard, muscles speak. If he could just play dumb around the Romans it might just prove useful."

"What makes you say that Poni?" questioned the Regent trying hard to keep the grin of her face at the stricken looks Hercules was giving her at Eponin's continuing predatory looks.

Eponin moved over to the bed and sat down about a body's width away from the demi-god, noting that his muscles twitched with the urge to move further away from the Weapons Master, only strength of will and the need to not further embarrass himself kept him there. Ephiny

coughed to get some attention and raised an eyebrow in suggestion that her friend answer her question, "Um, well. I think Pompey might just have a hidden agenda of his own. At some point he's likely to try and get you alone for 'discussions', and it might be useful if you had Hercules available to protect your interests. I don't think there would be a problem, but an extra pair of ears listening, especially if Pompey believes them deaf ears, might just get us an inside edge."

"It's an interesting idea," agreed Ephiny thoughtfully before turning her attention on her 'concubine', "Could you do it? Maintain the fiction throughout our stay here?" she asked him.

Hercules rested his arms on his knees as he thought about it, "I don't see why not. I've got a pretty good hold on my reactions ..." he broke off as his body flinched away from the light touch of Eponin's trailing fingers, "cut that out, Eponin," he growled mortified by the involuntary reaction, "At least normally I do," he glared at the smug Weapon's Master.

"Poni!" snapped Ephiny, trying to be stern and failing miserably as she struggled to keep from creasing up, "I told you he was mine. Just keep your hands off of him."

"Aw, Eph! You take all the fun out of everything." groaned Eponin in very mock contrition.

"Come on we've got plans to make," the Regent tried to be firm, "Do the warriors know what to do?"

Malonda from her self imposed position at the door nodded and affirmed, "They're going to mix with Pompey's soldiers and see what rumours they can pick up from them. They ought to be a good source of information, and the girls are looking to have some fun with them"

"What kind of fun?" questioned Ephiny tensely, "I don't want them to start anything that's going to put us in a compromising position."

"Don't worry, Eph," Eponin tried to assure her friend, "nothing to bad, just a few drinking games and maybe an offer to spar, you know, normal ... stuff!"

- *Oh no!* - thought the Regent anxiously, - *Nothing to worry about. How's it going to look when my Amazon guard drinks half his troops under the table and then whups the rest at sparring practice!* - "Eponin!" she growled dangerously.

"It's okay, Eph, honest," the Weapon's Master repeated her assurance, "The girls know not to go over the top, and I think it could save an awful lot of time in gathering information."

Seeing that Ephiny was far from convinced, Hercules attempted to sooth the situation, "I'm sure it will be fine, Ephiny. Your guards are all responsible women, I'm sure that there's very little that they could hurt."

She turned her glare on him, and it was his turn to try and hide the grin that kept wanting to force itself onto his face, "Have you ever attended any Amazon drinking parties or contests?" she asked him pointedly.

motioned for him to follow her. The feast had obviously ended for the guest of honour and her host, and Pompey wanted some private words with the Queen of the Amazons.

Following the Regent and Pompey out of the banqueting hall, he padded along silently as the Roman led the Amazon into a side chamber. Once the trio were within, the sentry who stood outside swung the door closed behind them. Pompey motioned Ephiny to a seat and took one opposite her. Hercules, sank down on his haunches by the doorway.

After a prolonged length of silence, the Roman leaned forward and said in the most casual tone he could manage, "I know why you're here." When Ephiny remained silent he continued, "You want to take the Warrior Princess back to Greece," he saw her eyes harden before he added, "and you want to rescue the true Queen of the Amazons, the bard, Gabrielle." He sat back and waited to hear how she would respond.

Chapter Forty Six: Stuck in the Middle With You

Gabrielle struggled along the edge of the hillside keeping as much of the scrubby cover around herself as possible. Since she and her friends had left the village of Cannetto, they had been hounded, chased and hunted in a wild game of tag that pursued them over the countryside of Italia. This had left them tense, angry and frustrated as well as afraid. A mix that wasn't really conducive to creating a happy atmosphere when they stopped to rest.

Three times they had almost fallen into ambushes set by the Roman troops that sought them. It was pure luck that they had managed to avoid them, although the last occasion had been a close run thing and it had only been Autolycus's quick thinking that had kept them out of trouble when he had managed to start a small landslide in a ravine.

Now they traveled with even more caution, finding places to hide as soon as daylight threatened, traveling only as night fell, and stopping before dawn broke. They had by-passed the city of Volaterrae, and any other smaller villages that they stumbled across, not wanting to leave more of a trail than possible in the memories of the people that Brutus would be able to track them by. Even so, it was obvious by the reactions they got from the odd traveler that they met on the roads in the early and late hours, that their descriptions were widely known and recognised. So they had taken to traveling in the rough country and avoiding everyone and everything. The farther south they went, the more patrols they had had to avoid. They had taken an easterly route and followed the path of the Via Cassia, before striking back towards the west in an effort to try and dodge the insistent patrols that dogged them. As Autolycus had predicted, the further south they managed to get the more soldiers seemed to be deployed to find them. Their lives had become a difficult game of hide and seek with their freedom, and Xena's, as the ultimate prize. It was frustrating, wearing and very hard on the nerves.

More and more frequently, Gabrielle found her thoughts turning towards her captive friend. She was certain that she was alive, for if Caesar had wanted to kill her he wouldn't have dragged the warrior across the countryside of Narbonensis, nor would he have bothered with sending her to Rome for safekeeping. No! What worried the bard, and haunted her dreams, was the knowledge that the Roman would be doing his very best to destroy Xena's resistance and crush her will. Confining her, chaining her, tormenting her, all these things would be taking a toll on the

Warrior Princess, weakening her ability to confine the darkness that battled for the dominance of her soul. Gabrielle prayed daily that her friend would find the strength to hold on to her humanity.

After eight nights of hard traveling, they had found a concealed crevice in a rocky valley wall. Pushing through the spiky bushes that hid the entrance, they had discovered a hidden rocky bowl that was supplied with cool spring water. Relief was evident in all of them, knowing that they had found their hiding place just in time to avoid a patrol that was crossing the area.

Autolycus, who had lingered around the bushes to make sure that their passage was covered, heard the soldiers speaking as they took a break close to where their quarry was hiding. He crouched silently and listened intently to all they had to say, not moving until the patrol was far down the valley and well away from where he and his companions were hidden.

Moving quietly back to where Gabrielle and Joxer waited anxiously, he gave them the signal that all was well and that they were likely safe enough there for the day. Gabrielle lit a small, well hidden, cook fire, making certain to use only the driest wood to avoid smoke, so that she could quickly throw together a bean and lentil stew, into which she added a few chopped, wild onions that she'd stumbled across as they traveled during the night, and some of their rapidly depleting stock of salt pork. They needed a hot meal to keep up their strength if they had any hope of reaching Rome.

As Joxer laid out their blankets Autolycus sat down on a rock and, using the soft tones that they had all taken to employing in their current situation, informed the others, "Looks like our soldier friends are looking for some other 'fugitives' as well."

"What did ya hear?" questioned Joxer showing interest.

Autolycus poked at the fire until Gabrielle slapped his hand away, "Don't, you'll burn the soup," she scolded, "Now answer Joxer's question. What's going on? What did you hear?"

"Yes mother," he grinned insolently at the small honey blonde, getting another slap for his pains. As she opened her mouth to scold him again, he held up his hands in surrender and said, "Okay, okay, I'll tell you." He expertly stole a biscuit from the food packs, earning himself a glare from Gabrielle who jealously guarded their stores, before starting with a question, "You know we've been wondering why so many patrols have been heading north, when they've been tracking us south?"

"Yeah," agreed Joxer, "We thought they might have thought that we would try to double back on ourselves, only we thought that they thought that we would think" He sank cross-legged onto the ground as the thief waved him down and into silence.

Gabrielle, shook her head to try and clear it from the babble and issued a soft command, "Quiet Joxer," before motioning Autolycus to continue.

Giving the other man an intent glare and muttering something that sounded suspiciously like, "Joxer the mouthy!" the thief cleared his throat and continued, "Well it seems that the soldiers are after more game than just us, and from what they were saying, it looks like Iolaus and Toris have made it here and are looking to get to Rome as well. So," he said giving his mustache a brush with his index finger, a habit he'd picked up to show when he was being clever, "that means that Xena and Caesar are either on their way to Rome or are already there." He looked at the other two who watched him silently almost as if they were expecting him to say something else. Finally, to break the silence he asked, "Well what are you thinking?"

Gabrielle took a deep breath and forestalled Joxer when she replied, "This isn't going to make things any easier, is it?"

Autolycus looked a little surprised at the question and shrugged his shoulders as he answered, "Well, no ... but we're hardly any worse off, now are we?"

The bard stirred the soup absently, "Gods! why does everything have to be so difficult!" she muttered, before looking back at the thief, "Can we find Iolaus and Toris ... before the soldiers do I mean?"

Shaking his head, Autolycus nibbled on his stolen biscuit as he explained, "Too dangerous. Too impractical."

"Why," asked the blonde, who would have liked to have the other two men with them ... especially Iolaus, with whom she always felt a comforting bond.

"Because," returned the thief.

"That's not an answer you know," the bard told him softly.

"Alright. If you insist," came the huffy reply, "If we go looking for the others we're just putting ourselves into more danger, giving Brutus more chance to pick us all up. Now I'm not sure about you, but spending several painful years as a guest of Caesar is not on my top ten list of things to do. Besides the fact that if we do get snagged, we're just going to put Xena right back in the same fix she was in before I got us out of their clutches."

"You got us out of their clutches?" snarled Gabrielle in pique, "Who was it that managed, against all the odds, to get a fire going so we didn't freeze to death, as well as fixing your arm and his head!"

Autolycus looked at her in utter disbelief, "That's all very well, miss-I-was-taught-by-the-Warrior-Princess, but you never would have got the chance to do that if I hadn't got those chains unlocked so we could get off that boat. Besides which if I hadn't blocked that cave entrance, the light from your fire would have given you away, and you'd be sitting right now in some dungeon in Caesar's palace."

"Egotistical thief!" snapped back the bard.

"Irritating blonde!" snarled the thief.

"Purloiner of peoples personal possessions!"

"Bardic brat!"

"Um, guys" broke in Joxer, "Don'tcha think your being a little bit childish," he swallowed as he added, "and loud?"

"Shut up Joxer!" they growled together while glaring at each other.

A moment or two lapsed before a frustrated Gabrielle spoke once more, in substantially quieter tones, "He's right you know."

"Well that's a first," grumbled Autolycus moodily.

"Hey!" objected the other man.

"We can't let our nerves and frustrations get the better of us," continued the bard, trying to convince herself as much as the others, "We're just under a lot of stress at the moment and we need to calm down, for Xena's sake." She let out a long breath as she finished.

Autolycus crunched through the rest of his biscuit as though chomping on nails. The argument had sprung up out of nowhere, and Gabrielle had been right ... frustration, tenseness and fear, was getting to them all. He replayed the little spat in his mind and a wry grin edged onto his face as he said softly, "Purloiner of people's personal possessions. How in Hades did you come up with that?"

Gabrielle shrugged her shoulders and grinned back, "It's a gift. It's what bardic brats do."

"Um, sorry about that," he apologised.

"Yeah, well, I shouldn't have called you an egotistical thief," she replied.

"Well I'm glad you two have made up," interrupted Joxer, using his I-am-an-adult voice, "I was pretty well ready to give you two kids a good hiding,"

Autolycus looked at Gabrielle.

Gabrielle looked at Autolycus.

They both looked at Joxer.

Then at the pool the spring made.

Then back at Joxer.

"Uh, guys," said the wannabe warrior in a worried tone, as the pair stood and advanced on him, "Uh, don't do something that I'm gonna regret," he pleaded as they grabbed an arm and a leg each, "Hey guys!" he tried again a note of panic creeping into his voice as they picked him up and advanced on the pool, "This is not acting ..."

'SPLASH!!!!!!'

He sat up and spat a stream of water out of his mouth onto the rocky edge of the pool, before finishing what he'd been saying, " ... responsibly or maturely."

When he hauled himself out of the water, he was not happy about having to strip off all the wet leather again .. although at least the sun would dry it out while he slept. He wrapped a blanket around his skinny frame and sulked as he sat on another one waiting for his meal. At least the bout of silliness had helped clear the air between them a little bit, although Joxer was certain they could have found a way that hadn't involved him in getting a soaking.

For the first time in days, the brooding, fear laden atmosphere had lightened and the meal was eaten with a touch of friendly banter that even nudged Joxer out of his sulk. However, when they had eaten their fill, and before they settled to get some much needed rest, they knew that they needed to discuss the options raised by the news that Iolaus and Toris were behind them.

"You're certain we can't go back," asked Gabrielle more to herself than anything else.

"Far too risky," Autolycus reiterated. "Besides, since we're all going in the same direction, we've got just as much chance of bumping into each other, as we'd have if we went off looking for them."

"I suppose that's the logical way of looking at it. It's just"

"I know. You feel responsible for us being here," his brown eyes surreptitiously examined the bard and saw a young woman torn with concern, "but we're grown men, Gabrielle, and we made our own choices. You and Xena are our friends, and friends stick together. If I was in trouble, I know both of you would do your best to help me. In fact I remember a certain bard trying to free me from a chain gang," he said with a smile ticking the edges of his lips.

"Not very successfully," she laughed and then shrugged, "I know, I know, I'm just worried" she trailed off.

"What? About Xena?" smiled Autolycus, and then spotted her about to form an angry protest. He moved quickly next to her and draped a brotherly arm across her shoulders, "She'll be alright, Gabrielle. You know she will. She might be uncomfortable, and even in pain, but if anyone can cope it's her," he turned her despondent face towards him so that he could look her in the eyes, "And we will get her back ... that's a promise."

After so long of trying to be brave, the bard finally gave in to her need to cry and she sobbed into the thief's shoulder as she allowed the anguish and terror and guilt that she was somehow

responsible for the whole mess to finally come out. Autolycus just sat holding her, gently smoothing her hair and making soft soothing noises as she cried herself out.

Joxer watched all of this from his seat on his blanket. He felt an irrational jealousy that Autolycus should be the one to offer comfort to the bard. Although he knew that Gabrielle viewed both him, and even to some extent the thief, as brothers, he couldn't stop himself from loving her. She was his great romantic passion. The unobtainable bard that he longed to make his own. Feelings he knew she didn't and would never return. A fact that scalded him to the very heart and soul. He turned his eyes from the scene and forbade the tears to form. Finally, Gabrielle, exhausted but far more relaxed, had lay down on her blankets and drifted off to sleep, joined shortly after by Joxer on his own bedding, while Autolycus had taken the first watch.

Since that day, they had continued to try and work their way south, though they continually found their path was being pushed more southwest by the heavy patrols that they dodged as they cautiously pressed on. Increasingly they were herded away from the 'Via Cassia', towards the margins between the 'Via Aurelia Vetus', and the 'Via Clodia', both of which also ran directly into Rome.

For most of a night they had scrambled through rocky gullies interspersed with noisomely fragrant marshes as the slipped past patrols or hid silently while soldiers passed them by. It was dangerous and intensely difficult to make any headway through the ring of troops that was getting thicker and thicker the further south they managed to go.

It was rapidly approaching dawn when the trio stumbled into a steep, down sloping, gully looking for somewhere safe to wait out the day. They were tired, irritable and had hardly managed to make any forward progress during the night at all. They knew that there was a patrol somewhere too close behind them and tracking them by torchlight, but as they struggled along the rocky ravine they had a bit of luck, or to put it another way, Joxer's bad luck gave them a place to hide in.

They were about halfway down the crevice when the 'warrior', who was traveling at the back of the group, gave a sudden low yelp that was almost immediately cut off. Gabrielle turned around and hissed, "Joxer," keeping her voice down, knowing that there were searching soldiers in the immediate vicinity.

She turned back up the gully, searching the dark ground for signs that her friend had fallen and knocked himself unconscious. She almost jumped out of her skin when Autolycus clamped a hand around her mouth and whispered close to her ear, "Someone's coming up the ravine."

"Son of a Bacchae!" she swore softly, "And I've lost Joxer."

"Oh great, just great," muttered the thief as he cast worried glances behind him, "The master of mayhem strikes again. I'm telling you Gabrielle"

"Hey guys," whispered a disembodied voice.

"Joxer?" answered the bard looking round vainly searching for him.

"Over here," the voice came again.

Autolycus zeroed in on where he thought the words were coming from and moved hesitantly over to the gully wall hands out before him. As he got close he could feel a covering of some kind of springy vine, but as he began to move along it a hand shot out and pulled at him.

"Whoa!" he cried softly as he found himself being swallowed by the vines.

Gabrielle, having seen the thief disappear, guessed that there must be some kind of hole that was hidden effectively by something. She crossed to where Autolycus had been standing and before she had time to utter a word, two pairs of hands grabbed her and hauled her into the enveloping blackness of a surprisingly large cave.

"Hey, cut that out," she warned them as she landed in a tangle of limbs with the two men.

"Sorry, Gab," grinned Joxer, "but you need quite a pull or a shove to get through those vines, and it was just easier to do it that way."

It was pitch black in the cave making it impossible for them to see each other, but over by the vine wall, the eerie cast of the moon allowed them to see something of the ravine outside.

"Well," sighed the bard, "we can't light a fire or a torch," she said quietly to the others, "It would be sure to be seen." She turned her attention towards where she guessed Joxer to be standing, "How did you find this place?" she questioned.

"Well we warrior types, have many skills, ya know," he answered importantly.

"Quit that, Joxer, and just tell me how you did it?" she ordered.

There was silence for a few heartbeats as he tried to find a way to make it appear as something clever and cunning. But when it came right down to it, Joxer was a very honest sort of a person and he couldn't bring himself to lie to the young woman, even to make himself look better, - Well at least not sustain a lie, - he thought ruefully as he remembered the lies he'd told Gabrielle when her memories had been taken by Mnemosine. "I tripped," he answered.

"You tripped," persisted the honey blonde.

"And fell through that curtain," he admitted. "When I realised that you couldn't see where I'd gone, I thought it might make us a good base for the day," he added.

"That's okay, Joxer. You're right. It's perfect," she complimented him.

"Hush you two," warned Autolycus, "There's someone out there."

The three froze, listening with bated breath as they heard movement outside their haven. There was the sound of feet moving as quietly as could be managed on the rocky ground, and somewhat further away could be heard the unmistakable sound of metal jingling, a noise recognised by all three of the caves occupants as belonging to the equipment of patrolling soldiers.

As they continued to watch and listen, two men edged into view. They seemed to swap worried glances before looking back over their shoulders. To those within the cave it appeared that they were ready to sacrifice stealth for speed as they began to scramble up the gully at a faster rate. However, a noise ahead of them left the pair in little doubt that they were in trouble. They couldn't go back, they couldn't go forward and the sides of the gully were too steep to climb without making the kind of noise that would bring the patrols at the double. In frustration they looked at each other knowing that they were caught like rats in a trap.

Both men backed up against the wall of the gully and drew their swords, prepared to sell themselves dearly if they had to. The rocky wall behind them would protect them from attacks from the rear and, depending just how many men were in those patrols, they might even be able to fight their way clear of trouble.

As they braced themselves for the coming fight, both men suddenly felt hands being clamped around their mouths from behind, and their bodies were hauled back into, and beyond, the face of the ravine.

"Shhhhh!" ordered a familiar voice.

Toris and Iolaus tried to make out just where they were. The sudden blackness that surrounded them seemed to rob them of their reactions for the moment needed to become aware of the soft female voice beside them, "Keep quiet," Gabrielle told them. "We don't want the Romans to find their way in here."

Realising that they were with friends, the two men relaxed a little. Iolaus gave Gabrielle a delighted hug before turning his attention, with the others, to the vine curtain they had been dragged through to watch the passing of those that hunted for them. They edged cautiously closer to the vines and strained their ears to listen. As they waited they could all hear the heavy approach of soldiers coming up the gully following after the trail of Toris and Iolaus, and down following the tracks of Gabrielle, Autolycus and Joxer. They met, as could be predicted in front of the vine covered cave.

"Halt in the name of Rome!" ordered the officer in charge of the upward moving group, "State your business here."

"Is that you Leonicus?" questioned the officer in charge of the downward moving patrol, "Have you seen anything?"

"Oh it's you is it, Martinus," recognised his counterpart, "I was trailing those two men that have come south from Pisse. I can't have been far behind them, you must have seen them as you came down."

"I haven't seen them," the second officer denied shaking his head as he moved forward to stand with Leonicus, squinting up at the sky, pleased that the darkness was beginning to break, "I've been trailing that escaped slave and her two companions. They weren't that far ahead of me, but they seem to have a knack for disappearing just as we get close." He took off his helmet and wiped a cloth around the inside to mop up some of the sweat accumulated from a hard night's patrol.

Leonicus pushed back his own helmet and scratched at his short cropped hair, "Well the five of them can't have just vanished, Martinus. Well not unless they climbed the walls to this gully. They're pretty steep, more like a ravine in places. If you followed yours down, and I followed mine up, there must be someplace around here that they can hide."

"Well I dunno about that," returned his fellow optio, "This gully seems just about devoid of places to hide anything."

They were interrupted by a man in Martinus's command, "'Scuse me sir, but my brother and his wife live in Chalmis, that little village on the cliff above this ravine. He told me that smugglers used to use this gully and that they had some kind of cave about halfway up. Do you think that the runaway and the criminals could have stumbled upon it?"

That gave everyone pause for thought. The officers looked up at the sky and judged that they'd have light in less than a candlemark, "Alright men, spread out and be prepared for a thorough search of the area once we get enough light." He signaled a couple of men over and spoke with them in a low voice. Inside the cave, the five stood in miserable dejection. It was light enough to count heads and Iolaus calculated that there were close to a hundred soldiers out there. Once the sun came up and a serious search of the area started they were bound to be discovered. It was only a matter of time. If nothing else they were bound to send someone up to Chalmis and demand to be shown the whereabouts of the smugglers cave. He signaled to the others to follow him to the back of the cavern where they'd be able to talk in hushed voices without giving their location away, "Unless there's another way out of here, they're going to find us," he told his friends.

"We'd better see if there's a back door to this place then," offered Toris. "I'm not too keen on the idea of just standing around waiting for them to find us."

"Without a torch we've got little chance of finding another way out," put in Autolycus, "And if we lit one they'd just find their way in here all the faster." The thief took an educated look around the dark space, "Smugglers would have made sure that their bolt hole was well hidden. We could probably spend days looking for it and still not find it."

"So you're saying we should just give up?" demanded the tall dark-haired man with startling blue eyes, so reminiscent of his sister's especially when they sparkled with anger.

"Look! If they think that we're not going to cause them any problems, they might be lax enough so that I can get us out of anywhere they lock us up," he pointed out, "I am after all pretty good at what I do. What am I saying," he corrected in a pained tone, "I'm the best at what I do!"

"That's just why they're not going to be lax," put in Joxer, "Face it. Caesar knows what each of us is capable of and, besides anything else, as soon as they get their hands on us they're going to whisk Gabby off to somewhere where even Hades Legions couldn't get to her."

"Joxer's right," put in Iolaus, "So I figure what we've got to do is make sure that if all else fails, that she can get away. What I think we should do, is crash out of here. Me, Joxer and Autolycus will draw the soldiers attention, and as they concentrate on taking us, Toris can get Gabrielle to safety."

That pleased no one, and there were several hotly whispered protests before Iolaus got them to calm down saying, "One at a time, one at a time, and make it quick because we don't have long before they start searching."

"I don't like it, Iolaus. It's not right for you to sacrifice yourselves for me. I'm the one that got you into this mess, and it's me they really want. If I make a run for it they'll follow and you four could slip away and make a plan to help me and Xena later." she told him earnestly.

"It won't work, Gabrielle," he answered running a soothing hand down her arm, "Besides if we going to have any chance of getting Xena loose, we need to keep you out of Caesar's hands."

"But"

"No buts, Gabrielle. You know I'm right," the blonde man insisted gently.

"Well I think Joxer should go with her," Toris spoke up. "I fight better than he does, and it will buy more time for her to get away."

"Toris, my friend. I know that you're not going to like this, but you've got to go with Gabrielle for pretty much the same reasons. Xena won't put your life in jeopardy for her own. You're almost as big a prize as my friend the bard here," he said ruffling Gabrielle's hair as he spoke.

"That's nuts," snapped Toris angrily.

"But unfortunately true," repeated Iolaus. "Look it's almost fully light out there. We have to make our move now." He quelled the remaining grumbles with a stern look.

They moved back over to the cave entrance and noticed that the Romans were beginning to start to search. The hastily conceived plan of attack was for Iolaus to lead, being the only man, besides Toris, with a sword, and knock a couple of weapons free for Autolycus and Joxer to use. Once the soldiers had their hands full, Toris and Gabrielle were to slip out of the cave and head either up or down the gully, depending upon which route looked easiest.

With nothing else to be done, Gabrielle hugged each of the three men, trying to hide the tears that fell unchecked down her cheeks. She felt responsible for them, and she knew that Xena would too. It was only the knowledge that Iolaus was right about her own and Toris' importance to her best friend that made her accept the plan.

With one last look, the short blonde man leapt through the vines yelling at the top of his lungs, followed quickly by Joxer and Autolycus. Watching intently, Gabrielle and Toris could see that the noise and suddenness of the attack, caught the soldiers by surprise, allowing Iolaus to achieve his first aim, which was to secure weapons for his two compatriots.

All too soon though, the training and discipline of the legionaries slid into place as they began to close in on the three, using their shields as a form of barricade to surround their prey without causing injury. Seeing their chance, Toris grabbed the bard's hand and slipped out of the cave, intending to head down the gully. But no sooner had they edged their way out and around the milling mass, than they were suddenly borne down by a weighted net dropped upon them from above.

Toris fought furiously, aware that they had been negligent in not realising that the soldiers would take some precautions and set such traps in case their quarry tried to bolt. The mesh of the net, however, was strong and held both him and the bard secure until the legionaries were able to secure them.

Within moments the struggle was over. The men were disarmed and their hands bound tightly behind their backs, two men detailed to watch each of them, while Gabrielle had a leash attached to her collar and her hands tied in front of her.

The two officers, Martinus and Leonicus grinned happily. They would gain a reward from this and would rise in their commander's ranks. Things couldn't have gone better for them if it had all been planned, "Take them to Rome," ordered Martinus.

Chapter Forty Seven: Out of the Frying Pan

Hercules felt decidedly out of sorts. He was ready to admit that he felt fractious and more than just a tad unsociable, and he knew just exactly what his problem was. Through all his life he had been looked at, pointed at, followed around and generally been an object of admiration and attention. He'd learnt to handle that. But since he'd been in Rome, he'd been prodded, stroked, grabbed, touched in embarrassingly intimate ways, drooled over, pinned in corners, lusted over, propositioned and ultimately been made to feel nothing more than some kind of sex object, and he was far from amused about it, - *It's just a good thing that Iolaus isn't here to see this or I'd never live it down!* - he brooded unhappily as he slumped on the huge bed in Ephiny's suite in sullen disgruntlement.

They had been ensconced in Pompey's palace for five days now and it had been a round of feasts and 'social gatherings' and generally a time where Rome's finest did their best to outshine each other, as they jostled to get a look at the barbarian Queen whole ruled over a tribe of women, and where men had been reduced to the role of mere possessions.

The Roman matrons and their daughters were fascinated by the concept, almost as much as they were fascinated by the hulking presence of Hercules. On more than one occasion he'd heard a Roman noblewoman speculate on the attributes of any other men that the Amazon's had at home. But there were other occasions when he truly wished he were deaf as they discussed his potential virility and various portions of his anatomy. It had taken all his strength of will to avoid blushing at some of their more pointed comments.

On top of all that aggravation, since their meeting with Pompey, they'd had no further news of any of their friends. Hercules allowed a frown to crease his brow as he thought about that first meeting between Ephiny and the Roman.

"I know why you're here," Pompey had said with smiling confidence, "You want to take the Warrior Princess back to Greece, and you want to rescue the true Queen of the Amazons, Gabrielle." He sat back and waited to hear the response.

Ephiny had stiffened for a moment, before relaxing back in her chair, resisting an impulse to look over at Hercules. She knew it wasn't a well known fact that Gabrielle was true Queen of the Amazons. It was something both the bard and her people tended to keep to themselves as much as possible, because the Queen being out on the road, even with a 'personal bodyguard' like Xena, was risky. Gabrielle would make a tempting target for anyone seeking to hold the Amazons to ransom.

Settling on his haunches, knowing that he was in for a long session, Hercules waited to see how Ephiny would handle the situation. The Regent pursed her lips as she directed a calculating stare at the Roman, "We came here looking for Queen Gabrielle," she admitted, "Xena" she paused for a moment seeking the best way to tackle that particular bunch of thorns. "Xena is currently serving a sentence of banishment imposed by the Amazon council, but she remains Queen's champion, and as such is of concern to the Amazon people."

Hercules had watched Pompey intently through that speech, seeing no reaction, which gave the impression that the man already knew the situation ... something not really possible, - *Unless he's been given a full briefing by someone.* - He covered a frown by running his hand over his face, pushing his hair out of his eyes, - *And the only way for someone to have such intimate knowledge of Amazon affairs is if they are an Amazon,* - an idea that he discarded almost immediately, - *or a God!* - His thoughts immediately turned to Ares.

Pompey smiled. Hercules had never met either him or Caesar before, but from what he'd heard there was really little to choose between them. Both were obsessed in gaining ascendancy in Rome, and once that had been achieved, they wanted to rule the World! The one thing that was stopping either one from attaining his goal, was the cutthroat competition they had going with each other. - *A small mercy to be thankful for,* - thought the son of Zeus, - *that and the fact that their hate for each other might just allow us to get our friends out of here.* -

"Caesar has Xena," Pompey dropped into the silence, "but you already know that, or had guessed it. They are on their way to Rome, according to my sources, and should arrive any time now." He

watched the blonde Regent for any sign of impatience, and found only a pair of brown eyes that had turned rock hard as they bored into him.

"He also had your Queen" he began before Ephiny interrupted him.

"Had?" she questioned pointedly.

Pompey smiled, as he rose from his seat and moved across to a table where refreshments had been laid for them, "Some wine?" he inquired politely, pouring one for himself and his guest when she nodded acceptance.

Ephiny, Hercules noted, had schooled herself to patience and had not pressed her question. The Roman was controlling the game for the moment, she needed to exert restraint if she was going to maintain a tenable position. She accepted the goblet that was passed to her and sipped appreciatively at the sweet red wine.

"Brutus was detailed to bring Queen Gabrielle back to Rome for safekeeping," he explained as he resumed his seat, "He also had two men, friends of hers I believe, in custody. The three of them escaped by picking the locks on their shackles and jumping off the ship in a storm ... quite a daring escape by all accounts."

- Autolycus, - thought Hercules immediately, - he must be with Gabrielle. But who's the other man? Iolaus or Toris? -

Ephiny softened her look a little, although the big man guessed that she was burning inside with impatience. He knew that she had a fiery temper, but his admiration for her rose as she, not only kept it firmly in check, but also presented the image of cool control as she asked, "And just where is my Queen now?"

"That," he admitted, "is a little difficult to say right now. Reports suggest that she and the two men with her, plus another two men that Caesar is interested in, are all currently heading south for Rome." He gave her a charming smile as he set his wine cup down on a side table, "Of course, Brutus is desperate to make good on his failure, and has got half the men stationed in Italia patrolling the area to make certain that they are safely back in custody, before Caesar returns."

- Four men? - thought Hercules distracted by the number, - Ephiny said that three letters were sent out, one to Iolaus and the others to Toris and Autolycus. Who's the fourth man? -

"What then," asked Ephiny in a level tone, "are you offering, or suggesting here?" Her look made it plain that there was nothing in what he had said that was of any real use to her.

Allowing the smile to linger on his face, Pompey leaned forward conspiratorially and whispered, "I'm suggesting, that we take Caesar's toys away from him and upset his little plans." He gave her a speculative look of his own as he continued, "I've no doubt that you know all about my little ... shall we say contest, with Caesar. At the moment .. by holding the Warrior Princess and,

if he retakes her bard .. he has the upper hand in our game. The pair are but pawns on a large chess board. I could...." He frowned, taking a draught from his cup before continuing the sentence, "easily find ways to remove those pawns from the game ... for good. However," he again smiled as he set his cup aside, "I found Xena to be quite stimulating when we met a short time ago and I would regret doing something permanent to her ... or your Queen of course."

Hercules saw the tightening around Ephiny's mouth as she recognised the veiled threat to her friends. Yet she waited, knowing that Pompey was merely establishing his position, knowing that he still had more to say. Something that he obviously believed would gain her co-operation.

"Personally," continued Pompey unworried by the sharp look he had attracted, "I'd far prefer to take them all away from Caesar and send them back home with you. It would annoy him far more, and of course, has the added benefit of retaining Xena as a threat to his personal safety."

"And do you have a plan for doing this?" asked Ephiny neutrally. She could not afford to appear too eager here. She would need to discuss her options with Eponin and Hercules before deciding what to do.

"Actually, I do," he told her with unassumed confidence, "At least as far as your Queen and the men with her are concerned. It might take a little work to extract Xena from Caesar's clutches. He really has an obsession with her, you know? Not that I blame him exactly, but it's going to make it all the more difficult to free her, and we're probably going to need her help."

Ephiny still wasn't sure whether this Roman could be trusted, but she recognised that he was playing a game that coincided with her own requirements, so for now, at least, it made sense to work together, "Xena will do nothing to endanger Gabrielle," she told him with certainty, even though her memory winced at the image of the bard being dragged from the village behind Xena's horse. "Before we can get her co-operation, we're going to have to prove to her that Gabrielle is safe."

"That is not going to be easy," he conceded. "Getting Gabrielle here and away from Caesar's men, may prove to be less difficult than could be anticipated, but getting a message to Xena, in a way that she would accept the message for truth ... now that is going to be far more problematical. Caesar has a full maniple of guards around her at nearly all times. No one gets to see her without direct authorisation from him. She has at least six guards watching her every move both day and night. The only time she's free of really close scrutiny is when she performs in a pit fight .. but then there are usually guards stationed everywhere around the pit watching her every move." He grinned, "Just in case she decides she's had enough and opts to try and dismember Caesar."

Ephiny frowned. She wasn't really surprised an that. Xena would, given the opportunity, attack Caesar no doubt about it. "These pit fights," inquired the Regent, an idea forming in her mind, "Just what happens? Are weapons used? And just what is the set up?"

"Can you honestly see Caesar willingly allow Xena to get her hands on a weapon? Any weapon?" he laughed at the thought of the discomfiture that such a situation would bring to his

rival, "To be honest, she did actually get a dagger in one of those fights she had in Narbonensis. Some fool dropped the weapon to his fighter, hoping he'd beat Xena with it. She got hold of it and threw it straight at Caesar. He's got a nice scar down the right side of his face to show for it." He laughed again.

"The pit fights are kind of like private entertainment for the rich and the nobility. Most of the larger houses have their own gladiator pit, and often, during a celebration or dinner party, the host will have arranged a series of pit fights to entertain his guests. The guests usually wager outrageous amounts on the outcome of the fight, and Caesar has accumulated quite a large fortune by wagering on Xena." He thought for a few moments noting her interest.

"The rules and conditions of the entertainment are decided by the owners of the slaves or gladiators being matched together. Some may want to see a blood match where the fighters use weapons and fight until first blood is drawn. Others might wish to see a death match, which is pretty self explanatory. Caesar only fights Xena in unarmed combat, sometimes she's matched against a single opponent, more often she's expected to fight off two, three, four or more. The fight ends when one side is unable to continue."

"The gladiators in Rome are of a far tougher breed than those found in the provinces, and I have little doubt that Caesar intends to continue to use Xena to stuff his treasury. It's unlikely that he'll risk her in the coliseum fights, unless there is some huge prize to be won. The fights in the coliseum are always performed with weapons, something he'll probably consider too dangerous to allow. As far as I can see, the only way we can possibly contact her is to get someone into a pit with her." He arched an eyebrow in question at her, "Could one of your Amazons be persuaded to take on the task?"

Ephiny relaxed into her chair and allowed her eyes to warm a little, "I think we may be able to arrange something," she agreed.

Hercules groaned inwardly. He just knew that that particular task was going to come down to him. He leaned back against the wall and closed his eyes, knowing that he'd have to spend some time here while Ephiny and Pompey exchanged a little social banter. It proved to be a long evening.

His mind focused back on the present as he pulled himself up off of the bed and walked through to the opulent bathroom where he poured water into a marble bowl and splashed it over his face, before groping for a piece of linen to wipe the excess off.

After the meeting with Pompey, Ephiny, he and Eponin had discussed what they had learned back in Ephiny's chambers. The Regent had fully explained everything to her Weapons Master and they had discussed at length their options. Eponin had been eager to send out some Amazon scouts to track down Gabrielle, but had to reluctantly agree with Ephiny that that particular move would have attracted far too much attention. It irked the dark Amazon that they had to 'play politics' as she put it, rather than take a far more direct approach.

"Pompey knows exactly what we're doing here," Ephiny had reminded them, "How? Only the Gods know!"

"Never a truer word," put in Hercules, and continued when he saw her questioning look, "I think it's a fairly safe bet that Ares is taking a hand in this somehow, even though Pompey made it clear that Gabrielle was betrayed by that healer, Patroclese. Any information he gave Caesar, about the Amazons and Gabrielle's position with you, would have been kept strictly between the two of them, Pompey couldn't have got it from that source. And given Ares infatuation with Xena, I can only presume"

"Fine, so we've got him to worry about too," groaned Ephiny.

"Probably not directly," assured the big man. "Ares has a connection to Caesar. I doubt if he'd want to damage his relationship by direct interference, which is probably why he's using Pompey."

"We'll just have to keep it in mind," shrugged Poni, "and hope Artemis is watching out for our interests." She grinned looking at Hercules, "What kind of terms are you on with your sister?" she asked.

"I try to avoid too much contact with members of my father's family," he replied dryly, "It's not good for my peace of mind."

"Getting back to the point," Ephiny interrupted, "We need to keep Pompey happy and play along with him. If he thinks that we're not going to be of use to him in his conflict with Caesar, he may just decide to eliminate Gabrielle and the others. By doing that he'll probably ensure Xena's death, because I have little doubt that she would do something ... rash."

"Well what's the plan?" asked Eponin, straight to the point.

"I think that Ephiny has got it in mind that I earn my keep," offered Hercules smoothly. "I'm going to need to establish a reputation amongst the Romans as a pit fighter of some quality."

Since then, he'd had two fights, arranged by Pompey as he hosted two elaborate gatherings in honour of the Amazon Queen. The gladiators had been good quality fighters, but they proved to be of little consequence to the demi-god, although for the sake of appearances, he did make something of a show of both contests.

That's when his problems with the matrons of Rome had really started as well. There was something about a big muscular guy, who could beat the stuffing out of other men, without raising a sweat, that really turned them on. If he hadn't been a grown man, Hercules would have cried in frustration. - *At least Eponin's leaving me alone*, - he brooded moodily.

He knew that Ephiny had had a long serious talk with the other Amazon after seeing just what the big man was being called upon to endure. Eponin had grinned mischievously and muttered

The tribune spent some time pointing out the sectors in which troops from the senate and Pompey's IIInd Legion had been identified, noting that at least two of the sectors were amongst the regions believed to be the most likely to be hiding the wanted fugitives.

"Have you had any word that they've found anything?" demanded the Roman commander.

"No my Lord. Both the Senate's troops and Pompey's are keeping mostly clear of our patrols."

"Make sure we have scouts keeping an eye on these 'interlopers' at all times," ordered Brutus. "If they find anything, anything at all, I want to know about it!" he instructed.

As Granius left him, Brutus felt the roiling acid of his stomach churn with an almost fatalistic knowledge that he was playing a game that he could not win.

Gabrielle sat despondently in the centre of a large tent. The others had done their best to try and cheer her up, but she was well aware what their capture meant for Xena ... the end of all hope. Caesar now had an even stronger hand with which to compel her friend into submitting to his mastery ... and it was all her fault!

Glumly avoiding eye contact with the four men who sat close to her, their hands still bound and all of them watched by alert guards, the bard sent out a silent message to her friend:

- Xena, you'll probably never hear this, but I have to hope that somehow you'll understand that I tried everything I knew to give you the freedom to get away from Caesar.

The others don't really understand just how terrible your situation is, or how bad ours will become once Caesar has us at his mercy.

All of this is my fault!

I should have done things differently. I should never have sent those letters to Iolaus, Autolykus and, especially Toris! By doing so I have given Caesar more power over you. Over us, because he will use our friends against both of us.

Please be careful in your dealings with him. He is not a forgiving man, and he intends, I think, to make your life Tartarus in this world. Try not to provoke him more than necessary.

I shall tell you all this when and if I get the chance to speak to you. I don't doubt that our 'master' will use me to hurt you, but whether he will allow me to spend time with you, I hesitate to predict. For now, I must hope that, by the Gods' benevolence, you will know that I'm thinking of you, and feel the message that I so dearly need to communicate to you.

Be well, my friend. Be safe.

I love you Xena. -

"Hey! Gabrielle," said Iolaus softly, nudging her with his shoulder, "C'mon. Don't give up on us yet. We can get out of this, right?"

The bard shook her head, but looked up into his concerned face, and glanced around at her other companions, "I feel so helpless," she admitted with a miserable sigh. "After everything. All the effort ... everything. I'm back where I started, and all I've done is get you all into this fix as well."

"Sheesh, Gabrielle!" broke in Autolycus, "Why should you get all the credit for this? You did everything you could. It's not your fault that the odds were stacked against us."

"That's right, Gabby," chimed in Joxer, "Don't blame yourself. It's not your fault."

She looked at the silent Toris, who focused on her with those so very blue eyes that were almost a match for his sister's, "No blame from me," he told her, "I would have come anyway, for Xena ... and for you."

She sucked in a deep breath and tried to force a halfhearted smile, which was pretty much a failure as she replied, "Thanks guys. You're all very sweet, but"

"No but's, Gabrielle," broke in Iolaus, "The games not over yet. Who knows, Herc might turn up to bust us loose yet."

Her attempt at a smile was a little better this time, "Okay, you win. But you might have to remind me sometimes. It just seems that very little has gone right for me recently. I think I must have some kind of curse on me."

"Nah!" shrugged the small blonde man, "It's just a phase. Happens to us all." He looked closely at the bard, knowing that she needed something to cheer her up, "Ah Gabrielle," he offered, "Did I ever tell you about the time just after Herc was turned into a pig, what Ares did to me and Autolycus for interfering with his plans?" He saw the spark of interest in her eyes and knew that she couldn't resist a new story.

"You promised you'd never tell anyone about that," groaned the thief knowing he was about to be embarrassed.

"It's in a good cause," Iolaus growled at him, "and I suffered too, you know."

"Come on Iolaus, spill it," ordered Gabrielle, the bard in her unable to resist a story and was grateful for the distraction that her friend was trying to offer.

Grinning, the blonde man began his tale, "It all started when a certain thief went and stole Artemis's bow, and then sold it to Discord. You know all about her turning Herc into a porker, I told you that last time we got together. Well after we got Herc turned back to normal, I kinda used the bow to turn Discord into a chicken."

"Oh, I like it?" grinned the bard, "I bet she was spitting feathers?"

"Well she wasn't crowing about it," put in Autolycus, "And Ares was more than a little bit miffed about the whole thing as well. Nearly laid an egg as I recall," he joked, getting groans from the others.

"Anyway, " continued Iolaus, "Ares decided that me and the thief were due for some 'serious' behavioural correction, so he chained us together with some shackles made by Hephestus ..."

"Yeah, and the miserable son of Zeus made certain that there weren't any locks to pick, either," grumbled Autolycus.

"But that wasn't the worst of it," came back the smaller man, "He also did something so that we could talk normally to each other, but all anyone else heard was some vicious snarling and growling ... pretty much how Autolycus normally sounds really," he added as an after-thought.

"You know, shorty, that smart mouth of yours is really gonna get you in trouble one of these days!" growled the thief.

"See what I mean," grinned Iolaus, getting a smile in return from the bard. "Anyway, did I tell you that Ares also left us in the middle of nowhere wearing nothing but a smile ... or a scowl in his case."

"That does it, blondie. When I get my hands loose I'm gonna"

"Yeah!" challenged Iolaus, "You're gonna what?"

"Hey guys," broke in Joxer, "just finish the story. It makes a change for someone else to have all the trouble."

"Break it up you lot," broke in the stern voice of one of the guards, "Just settle down and get on with the story, like he said." he emphasised pointing to where Joxer sat.

Autolycus rolled his eyes in resignation and listened as Iolaus continued with the tale, explaining how they'd managed to improvise clothes from stolen sacking, but then had been fighting each other so much that they'd fallen into a bog and got plastered in thick, evil smelling mud and were hunted by villagers, thinking that they were some kind of swamp monster.

"Then mastermind went and ate a gussenberry and passed out cold on me, so I had to lug his carcass along. Unfortunately, while I was crossing a rope bridge, I muttered something about wishing I had some boots. Well Ares was watching and, being Ares he thought it would be a great joke to let me have them along with size twenty feet. Autolycus ended up with the same treatment and we both had our features slightly re-arranged," he told them, pleased to see Gabrielle rolling with laughter, even if it was highly embarrassing for both him and Autolycus.

Next had come his explanation of winding up in a freak show cum Circus and that was where Hercules had found them, "Once Herc broke those chains that Hephestus had made, all the of

Ares tricks collapsed. But things weren't quite finished. Ares enlarged Discord in her Chicken form and she came after us, and anyone else who got in her way."

"Let me tell you, that was one big chicken," put in Autolycus.

"Well, me and my 'partner' there, we cooked up a scheme using Gussenberries to knock the stuffing out of ol' Discord, and because Ares hadn't laughed so much in eons, he kind of let us off the hook."

Tears streaming down her face with mirth as she imagined just what had happened, Gabrielle finally managed to ask, "Why didn't you tell me all this before? And what happened to Hercules?"

"Ah, well. The reason I didn't tell you about this Fowl," he winced at the groans from everyone in the tent including the guards, "story was because I promised twinkle toes, over there, that I'd never tell anyone the gory details, but you needed cheering up, so... and as for Herc. Well once he set us free, he had to take Katherine, the pig, back to her home, so he missed all the fun."

"Thank you, Iolaus," smiled the bard. "I think I needed something to remind me that things could be worse."

Feeling better, simply for knowing that she had friends with her, Gabrielle settled down to get some sleep and was soon joined by the others. None of them were particularly comfortable, but they were all exhausted, so the day slipped by without them really being aware of it.

Gabrielle thought that it was less than a candlemark until dusk, as close as she could judge it, when Martinus entered the tent and ordered them to their feet, "We're leaving for Rome, now," he informed the guards. "Get them up and outside. I want to be ready to move within a quarter of a candlemark."

Standing next to Toris, the bard leaned over and whispered to him, "Something's not right here. I thought we were being held awaiting the arrival of Brutus before we were taken on to Rome, but we haven't heard his arrival, so it seems as if our captors were just waiting for nightfall before moving us."

"What do you think's going on?" Toris asked softly.

Gabrielle looked around trying to spot anything that might give her a clue as to where the loyalty of these soldiers lay. She remembered all of Xena's lectures about looking for colours, banners and badges, but she really didn't know enough about the Roman system to be able to make out anything of use, "I'd say that someone else has gotten interested in what Brutus is doing."

"The Senate?" suggested Toris.

"Maybe," agreed the bard, "Either them or Pompey. He'd want to inconvenience Caesar anyway he could."

"Where are they?" demanded Ephiny pointedly.

"Currently? They're in my dungeons. I wanted everything to look as natural as possible to anyone who was watching .. spies are rife in Rome. They were brought in as captives so the natural place for them to be taken was the dungeon. But if they are your friends, then we'll have to find alternative accommodation for them ... as long as you are willing to go on with our plan."

Chapter Forty Eight: Into the Fire

The harsh Mediterranean sun beat down upon the deck of Veranius's ship, scorching the men working on the decks and roasting the miserable wretches who hauled on the oars in the slave pit. They were not alone, around the flag ship was clustered a gaggle of other triremes and the two surviving biremes.

The sea battle had effectively destroyed the bulk of the Carthaginian fleet, but a decision had been made to spend an extra few days mopping up any of the enemy ships that had escaped the carnage of the combat. Although Caesar was anxious to return to Rome, he was aware that his involvement in a crushing sea victory against Carthage, however tenuous his own part, would allow him a triumphal entry to his city.

Xena wasted little thought on reflecting how things had turned out. Three days on from the battle, and she was living in a world of searing agony, trying to cope with a back that had been stripped of it's flesh by Flaccus's whip, and the added torment of being left exposed to the merciless fire of the sun.

She was held spreadeagled facing into a section of grating that had been secured upright to the thick bole of the ships mast. She had been there for three days and two nights now. Three days of searing fire and pain filled delirium. Two nights of shivering agony and dark dreams. As she stood there, helpless, her thoughts continuously returned to the punishment Caesar had ordained for her.

After spending what remained of the night, after the Romans had found them, suspended from the mast .. mostly in blessed oblivion thanks to the crack on the head she had taken .. she had awoken to the screaming resentment of her shoulder muscles which had been tortured by the unnatural weight and pull placed on them by gravity and the manacles that stopped them from hanging down normally.

Her head ached with a throbbing pain centred in her right temple where she had struck the deck as she was pulled off of her feet by Romans detailed to haul her up where she would be rendered helpless. The ache was intensified by the motion of the ship as she swung in rhythm with it and frequently collided with the unyielding mass of the thick mast.

- *All in all*, - she had admitted to herself, - *I have felt better*. - She winced as the roll of the ship swung her into the mast once more and she struck one of her tortured shoulders, - *So Xena, was shaking Caesar that little bit worth this?* - she asked herself. - *Damn right!* - she growled back in

answer, - *although I doubt Gabrielle will see it that way. And I don't doubt that Caesar has something far more ... agonising in mind for the morning.* -

She had been right about that, of course. She moved her head carefully and tried to rub her long hair away from her eyes with the aid of the grating. It hurt. Any movement, no matter how small, hurt! Sometimes she found it difficult to remember a time when she didn't hurt. A single tear ran traitorously down her dirt smeared cheek, leaving the track of it's passage in evidence behind it.

The sun had been up a full three candlemarks before Flaccus had ordered her cut down. She had crashed back to the bare planking, twisting to take as much of the impact on her strained shoulders as possible, reluctant to take another heavy hit to her head.

Bright lights flashed through her brain as the racking distress of those joints were intensified by the immediate pain of the fall. Biting her lip to stifle the groan that threatened to erupt, she sought to press her hurts into the compartment of her mind she maintained for the purpose.

She was aware of the rope being removed from her ankles, but the raw chaffing it had left was only a minor inconvenience in her current state. Far worse was the sudden rough grabbing of her arms as she was pulled to her feet. The induced agony of the movement and, after a night of being upside down, the abrupt change to vertical, led to a momentary loss of control.

She vomited.

A fist cracked heavily against her jaw, causing the lights to return and flash in turmoil as she struggled against her need to be sick again and tried to focus her attention on the world around her. She blinked owlishly at the livid face of Flaccus before her and realised that he had been the recipient of most of her puke. She allowed a half mocking crooked smile to play on her lips and braced herself for the backhanded blow that she knew she had goaded from Flaccus. - *Dumb, Xena*, - she chided herself. - *Aren't you in enough trouble without practically begging for more?*

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She felt the slow trickle of blood as it seeped from a fresh cut at the corner of her mouth and again deliberately allowed the mocking half smile to appear, as she realised that she could disrupt their immediate plans for her .. or at least their satisfaction in them. - *Maybe, if I'm lucky, Flaccus will beat me senseless so I won't feel what Caesar's got planned for me*, - she thought, and then added, - *Yeah and Centaurs might fly!* -

Flaccus had glared at her, before smiling a chilling, mirthless smile of his own. He knew what she was trying to do, "It won't work!" he growled at her, "You're going to feel every bit of what's coming to you. Afterwards .. there will be plenty of time for us to discuss the appropriate behaviour of a slave in the presence of a Roman."

She held his eye, knowing that she had made an implacable enemy in Flaccus. The man was devoted to Caesar, and she'd not only laid hands on centurion's hero, but had also caused injury

to him. - *What had Caesar said? He respects me.* - Well Xena saw no respect there now, just cold, hard, determination to break a slave of her rebellious spirit once and for all.

"Bite me!" she growled, her voice hoarse from lack of water.

She winced as she tried to ease her aching muscles. Ropes, passed through the grating, pinned her tight against it. She was bound at the ankles, knees, waist, upper arms elbows, wrists and neck. The restraint around her waist was excruciating where it cut into flayed flesh, as was the one around her neck. She bit her lip and refused to allow the howl of agony to escape her lips.

She had watched as a grating had been removed from over the slave pit and made secure to the mast by thick ropes. At Flaccus's nod she had been dragged over to it, her shirt had been torn from her back, before the irons had been unlocked from her wrists. She barely had time to flex her muscles before she was roughly seized and bound to the grating with heavy rope. Three loops around each of her wrists, elbows and upper arms holding her tightly in place.

Then they removed her leg irons, moved her limbs apart and roped her ankles and knees in place, putting a heavy strain on her muscles knowing that she would, in time be forced to hang against the rough hemp bonds and endure the chaffing it brought.

- *Little things,* - she thought, - *Minor irritations individually, but when taken as part of the whole* - she allowed the thought to drift as she became aware of movement up on the stern deck. His arm in a sling, only wearing a light tunic rather than the armour that would seriously chafe his sunburnt skin, the deep purple and black of the chain marks around his neck. She permitted herself a quirky smile of satisfaction.

The men of the guard maniple began to assemble on the decks around her, leaving ten foot of deck space clear beneath the rail where Caesar stood.

- *The maniple is beginning to shrink,* - she noted, aware that she had hospitalised more than a few as well as killing some of the men who guarded against her escape.

Somewhere behind her, a drummer began to beat a steady tattoo. Xena, along with the soldiers assembled to witness the morning's punishments, watched as five men were hustled out on deck and were made to kneel facing where their commander stood. The rhythm of the drum halted.

"These men failed in their duty," announced Caesar, his voice made husky by the bruising he has sustained. "All know the penalty for such failure. For allowing the slave, Xena, to escape these men will be executed." He nodded to Flaccus.

Once again the drummer beat his tattoo, allowing a rolling flourish to orchestrate the show being performed, punctuating each death with a sharp rap on the stretched skin of the instrument.

"Publius Oranis!" Flaccus announced as a man in a black hood swung his axe and expertly decapitated the first of the men.

Xena's muscles strained against her bonds. She was the cause of these men's deaths.

"Lucius Trantares!" continued Flaccus, and the axe fell once again.

It was true that she would have sent them to the other side herself if it had meant she, Gabrielle and her friends could be free.

"Marcus Martellus!" came another name, followed yet again by the 'swoosh!' of the death-dealing axe.

- *This isn't punishment! This is murder!* - her mind raged as she watched the continuation of Roman justice.

"Publius Voranus!" was the fourth name, and death.

- *I will not be made to feel responsible for these deaths!* - swore Xena, - *All of these men treat me like a chained beast.* -

"Brassius Davros!" came the final announcement from the list of the condemned and a final head joined the four others on the deck.

Silence washed across the decks in the wake of the crimson river bearing mute testimony to the justice of Caesar. "The sentence has been carried out, Lord Caesar," announced Flaccus.

"Let all remember and learn from it," warned the Roman nobleman.

- *I cannot accept responsibility for his actions,* - insisted the mind of the Warrior Princess, although her aching heart spoke otherwise, - *If I accept this as my fault, I have no chance of ever freeing myself or Gabrielle. They chose to follow Caesar. They knew the risks of joining this detail. He and they must take responsibility!* - Her practical brain told her.

She looked up into the remorseless brown eyes of her captor, - *Do you ever feel guilt for what you have caused to be done?* - she wondered as she expressed all her hatred and loathing in steely blue eyes.

Caesar smirked at her, knowing her to be impotent in her bondage. He waited until the bodies and heads of the dead men had been thrown over the side of the ship. Men derelict in their duty did not deserve the honour of a proper burial. - *Another lesson for the troops!* - thought Xena contemptuously.

"As for my slave," attention returned to the Roman commander, "her crimes are only to be expected. She is an uncivilized barbarian who knows no better ... yet! However, although I have no wish to execute this piece of property that I went to such lengths to acquire, she must learn a slave's place within Roman society." He looked sternly at his men, "I have little doubt, that even after this punishment, this slave will still struggle against her lot. Men! You must be vigilant

against it. You have seen the penalty of failure. The reward, for those of you performing a duty well done, will be a gift of one hundred gold dinars each."

- Very clever, Julius! - she silently complimented him. - The carrot and the stick! You've shown them the price for failure and will buy their loyalty with gold. The consummate warlord commander! -

"The punishment for the crimes of the slave, Xena, will be twofold. She will receive fifty lashes"

His announcement was punctuated by the mutters of disbelief from the soldiers who had never seen anyone survive a whipping of that magnitude.

"SILENCE!" bellowed Flaccus, gaining immediate quiet.

"Fifty lashes," repeated Caesar, "split into two groups of twenty five. The first group to be administered now, the second twenty-five to be given at this hour tomorrow. The slave will be left bound to that grating, as an example to all, until we reach Rome. No one, other than the healer, Patroclese, or Centurion Flaccus, is to touch her, unless I specifically order otherwise." He nodded at Flaccus as he moved around behind Xena to executed the sentence of flogging upon her, the drummer once again beating out his tattoo in accompaniment.

Xena clenched her fists remembering the exquisite agony of the burning whip as it tore her bronzed flesh. Flaccus had drawn blood from the first lash as he scoured her back from right shoulder to left hip. She remembered biting down hard, stubbornly refusing to cry out as she endured the assault. She remembered the beads of sweat that had gathered on her forehead as she strained to hold her silence. Holding back the almost silent whimpers she had allowed to escape, refusing to let them grow in volume to become full blooded cries of agony.

And then it had ended.

She had hung shivering from the ropes that held her, drawing deep lungfuls of air as she tried to control her shaking muscles, tried to push the pain away. Tried to endure.

She screamed when a bucket of salt water was thrown over her bloody back, partly to wash the cuts, partly to revive her enough to listen to Caesar's words. He was stood in front of her, looking intently into her eyes, trying to see any cracks in her resolve; her will.

"I will remit the whipping tomorrow, if you beg for mercy, Xena," he told her starkly. "No more pain .. all you have to do is beg me."

Gathering her resistance she mustered the effort and forced the icy glint into her eyes, "Never!" she told him as forcefully as she could manage. The word quavered a little tinged with the agony she endured but her resolve was firm.

Caesar shook his head, almost sadly, "You will have to learn the hard way, Xena. But remember, the choice was yours." He turned away and moved a few steps, before stopping, hesitating and looking over his shoulder, "You have up until the punishment starts again tomorrow to change your mind. I won't ask you again, but I will give mercy if you beg for it."

"When Tartarus freezes over," she gritted out through clenched teeth.

She closed her eyes against the blazing sun, feeling the burns it made on her arms, and the aching sickness it caused in her unprotected head. - *Little things*, - she reminded herself. She had made him suffer the pain of sunburn, he returned the compliment tenfold.

Patroclese had come to attend the wounds on her back, carefully cleaning them with a strong vinegar solution that had made her writhe with the effort to keep her groans barely audible as the acidic astringent bit deep into the raw flesh that her back had been reduced to.

"The flow's beginning to stop already," he spoke quietly as he worked carefully trying not to hurt her any more than was necessary. He was still amazed at how quickly the woman healed.

"Oh fine," she panted her tone larded with sarcasm, "Well there will be plenty more work for you tomorrow."

"Xena" he started.

"Forget it. Not now, not ever," she told him slowly as she forced down the agony.

Patroclese shook his head dejectedly as he continued his work, applying a soothing salve over the wounds, carefully working around the ones that really needed stitching, but unable to treat them because the resumption of the punishment on the morrow would just rip them out, "You need to drink," he told her, holding a flask to her lips.

She nearly choked on the fiery spirits as they burned their way down her throat, firing her blood, giving her a little extra strength, "I think I would have preferred water," she told him.

"That's next," he said holding up a skin and allowing her to drain what she wanted from it, "You also need to eat." She nodded acceptance and swallowed her pride as he spoon-fed her the gruel that passed for breakfast on the ship. "I'll be back to check on you," he promised.

Leaning her head against the grating, Xena sought for a way to relax. She knew that she had put up a good performance through that first day, even when Flaccus had added the rope ties around her neck and waist that had made her whimper involuntarily at the added stress it placed on her wounds.

The next day, - *Yesterday*, - her mind told her, had been far worse.

She'd had all night to think about what the coming day would bring. The anguish that her pulverised back had felt, screamed out against a renewed assault. She had an option. She could crawl to Caesar and avoid the pain, but that act would cut her heart and soul to ribbons.

She had not begged for mercy, and Caesar, via Flaccus, had given none. After the rope around her neck and waist had been removed, reopening the partially healed cuts, the flogging began again. This time the lash strokes ran from her left shoulder to her right hip, crossing the lacerations from the day before and burning like molten lava.

Her screams had started early. She tried to fight them down, but it was too much. Each lash wrung a response from her throat and tears had streamed unchecked .. uncheckable, down her finely sculpted cheeks.

She thought that she'd passed out before they reached the halfway point of the punishment. They had revived her with a bucket of seawater dashed over the wounds on her back, and then continued with the flogging, although she quickly succumbed to insensibility once more. She knew she remembered nothing after that, until she heard Patroclese's voice as he finished his ministrations. While she had been unconscious, he stitched what he could of her remaining skin back together and had done his best to ease her agony with a cool, numbing salve.

When Flaccus had put the ropes back around her neck and waist, she had surrendered to oblivion once more.

Now, after three days of hunting the remnant of the Carthaginian fleet, they were again turning for Rome. "Another three days," she had heard someone saying, "and we'll be home."

She sighed in weary resignation. Her chances for making an escape, once Caesar had her in Rome, would diminish significantly. There was nothing she could do about it. She was completely powerless, a situation she hated with all her being. Yet tied and helpless as she was, she couldn't help but hope, that somehow, someday, a chance would come.

As she stood beneath the blazing sun, thoughts of Gabrielle filled her mind and lulled her into a waking dream. She almost felt she could hear her gentle bard's voice as the sea breeze blew a welcome respite across her hot tired body. But, as she listened to the silent words a frown etched itself onto her brow.

"Not your fault, Gabrielle," she murmured in her half conscious state, "Never your fault." A smile played over her lips as she whispered, "I love you too, Gabrielle."

A bireme had been sent on to Rome to announce the great victory over the Carthaginian fleet, so the whole city knew to expect Caesar and Admiral Veranius and a triumphal procession was planned to escort the heroes to the Capitol where they would be presented with the laurels of victory on the steps of the Temple of Jupiter.

As soon as the news became known, it was decided that Eponin should return to 'Wave Dancer' and see if she could get a look at Xena as she was brought off of Veranius's ship. Although the

rest of the fleet would dock at the lower wharves, outside the Servian Walls, the flagship carrying the Admiral and Caesar would moor not too far away from where Nebula's ship lay and offer a good chance to see what shape the Warrior Princess was in, for no one had any doubt that Caesar would have kept her close to him.

The Weapons Master stood at ease on the deck of the ship, leaning on the rail and talking quietly with the pirate captain, "You know, Nebula, Ephiny really wanted to come down here with me, but there was no way we could find an excuse for her to do so," she sighed, "Besides which, she had to stay at Pompey's palace to make sure that Gabrielle and Xena's brother, Toris, stayed put. They're both going out of their minds with worry."

"Their descriptions are plastered all over the city," the tall, dark, pirate told her. "You make sure that they all stay well hidden. That palace is probably the only safe place in Rome for them at the moment." She glanced up at the crow's nest where one of the Amazon's was keeping watch for the arrival of the fleet, "Anything?" she called.

"Nothing," came the reply, followed by, "Wait a minute .. Yes! They're just clearing the bend. The lead ship should reach here shortly."

"I hope she's okay," murmured Eponin showing signs of agitation, "Gabrielle is really jittery and she might do something stupid if she thought Xena was in real trouble."

Nebula sighed, "Caesar is not known for his mercy, and Xena hasn't got the reputation of someone who bends willingly to the command of others. I suspect that mixing the two is a recipe for disaster, and Caesar's got the strongest hand to play."

Frowning, the Weapons Master leaned as far over the rail as she could manage, trying to get a glimpse of Veranius' ship, "I can see it," she announced, "By the gods that's a big boat!" she exclaimed as she watched the trireme approach, oars rising and dipping to the beat of the drum heard through the bowels of the ship even at a distance.

As it came closer, Nebula frowned, "There's something wrong with the base of the mast," she told Poni, intrigued by the sight, "No," she amended, "they've got a grating up against it and it looks like they've got someone lashed to it."

"One of the Carthaginians, perhaps?" hazarded Eponin, although a sinking feeling she told her just who it was.

"Tall woman, black hair," informed the pirate.

"Oh gods. That's got to be Xena." muttered the Amazon in concern.

They waited, watching with stark interest as the big ship came ever closer. Across the river, they could see the men, women and children lining the banks to cheer their heroes home. Those on board the 'Wave Dancer' only had eyes for the woman bound to the grating.

Slowly, she worked on tensing and relaxing her legs to get some feeling and control back in them. She knew it would take some time, which was why Flaccus had cut them loose. She didn't relish the anguish that she would have to endure when they released her arms. She guessed that it wouldn't happen until Caesar was ready to disembark, and she would be given no time to get any use back into them before she was chained once again.

As the ship moved slowly to its designated mooring place in the upper wharf, Xena was almost certain that she caught sight of a familiar face on one of the ships already there. - *Eponin?* - her mind queried, - *Surely not! What would she be doing here?* -

Sailors running around the deck obscured her view of the ship where she had seen the woman she believed to be the Amazon Weapons Master and, by the time she had an unobstructed view once more, whoever it was had gone. But she locked eyes with a tall, striking woman, full of confidence and dark good looks, and her eyes seemed to sympathise with her plight and say, - *I know who you are*, - yet Xena knew that she had never met whoever it was before in her life.

Her mind had been so intent on concentrating on the woman and her ship, that she failed to register the fact that Flaccus had spoken to her. Two sharp blows, one to each biceps with his vine staff, jerked her attention back sharply, forcing her to stifle a yelp of pain as her sun blistered arms seared on her locked muscles.

"You will learn to pay attention, slave," he growled as he took a firm grip of her hair and turned her head towards him, "If you show any sign of your tricks when we get off this tub, I'll have you staked out for a week, and then I'll have the rest of your hide off of you. You got that?" he demanded slamming her head against the grating for emphasis.

Xena's nodded reply was not acceptable.

"I said have you understood," he demanded once more and again slammed her head against the thick wood of the grating.

Wincing from the shooting stabs of agony that travelled up her lacerated back and into the newly created wound on her head that was starting to bleed, Xena forced out a soft, "Yes."

"I didn't hear you, slave," Flaccus told her as he banged her head down again, "Now say it again, louder."

"Yes, I understand," she said in a stronger voice.

"Sir," he said in a firm commanding voice, again smashing her head into the wood.

"What?" she questioned in slightly hazy confusion as the incessant pounding on her skull began to take its toll.

"Yes, I understand, sir," he insisted cracking her head hard onto the grating once more.

"Yes, I understand .. sir," she repeated dully.

"Good, I'm glad we've got that settled. You're slow at learning, slave, but I've got all the time I need to educate you .. and your friend."

He saw the sudden tenseness in her frame as his words registered and recognised the fire that flashed in her eyes as a rekindling of her rebellious nature, "Keep your hands off her, Flaccus," her voice, settled into it's lowest, deadly, register, warned him.

"You're backsliding, slave," Flaccus returned, a note of mock regret in his words, followed by half a dozen heavy numbing blows to the backs of her thighs, "Now what do you say?"

"Go to Hades!" she snarled with venom.

"Wrong answer," he replied with exaggerated patience, once again beating her legs with his staff. "You keep this up and that little bard is going to be a mass of welts from head to heels," he warned, "So I'll ask you again. What do you say?"

He watched as Xena, breathing heavily against the burning agony of her injuries, forced her stubborn will back down. She swallowed a couple of times before forcing out the words that brought bile to her mouth, "I beg forgiveness."

"Sir," reminded Flaccus almost gently.

Taking a shuddering breath and screwing her eyes shut against the humiliation she repeated, "I beg forgiveness, sir," self-deprecation in every line of her body.

"Much better," Flaccus almost purred, "and as a reward, I'll let you off of that thing early, so long as you sit quietly and behave yourself. What do you say to that?"

Xena knew the technique. She'd used it herself often enough in her past. Inflict unbearable pain until you got the concession you wanted from the prisoner, and then give a reward. After the overly harsh treatment the merest relief from the torture seemed like an act of great compassion and kindness, bringing gratitude from the sufferer, who moved one step close to total subservience. Xena knew the game, yet still she felt the gratitude well up within her at the thought of being let off the grating a mere candlemark or so early.

She forced her will to stamp on that feeling, - *I will not be broken like some animal*, - her mind flared, - *But I need to make him think he's winning. Perhaps, then, he'll leave Gabrielle alone.* - "Thank you .. sir," she managed to grate out without it sounding full of sarcasm. She loathed herself for doing it, but would do whatever she could to protect the bard.

It had been a long while since they had used Gabrielle as a direct threat, but now that she was within their reach, the threat had potency once more and could be used to whip the Warrior Princess into line, with far better results than applying the physical lash to her would bring.

"I've got to go," the bard said suddenly. "I need to see if she's alright."

"Gabrielle," the Regent said calmly, reaching out a strong hand to restrain the younger woman, as she tried to brush past and head for the doors. She tightened her grip when the bard tried to shake her off, and placed herself firmly in front of her Queen, securing a hold on her other arm as she did so, "You know you can't do that, you know all the reasons why you have to stay here, that collar not being the least of them. You won't do yourself, Xena or any of the rest of us any good if you just rush off and get caught. They're still looking for you, you know."

A wild gleam flashed in the bard's eyes. "Perhaps if Hercules tried again?" she pleaded, "He might be able to break it open if he had another try, and then I wouldn't be so noticeable. I could go and look for myself."

"Gabrielle, stop that!" Ephiny commanded firmly. "If I have to call the guards in to restrain you, I will," she warned her friend.

"You wouldn't do that, Ephiny," the honey blonde said with an almost frantic desperation.

"Wouldn't I?" came the flat reply, "There's too much at stake here to risk you throwing all our hard work away because you're not mature enough to wait for Eponin to get back here with the news."

Drawing a deep breath Gabrielle forced herself to get a grip, "That's not fair, Eph. You have no idea what he's been doing to her."

"Neither do you," the Regent replied gently, "Let's just wait to hear what Poni has to say. We've managed to get you and the others back in one piece, don't ruin everything now. What would Xena say if you allowed yourself to get caught again?" she asked.

"I know ... you're right," agreed the bard dejectedly, "But, Eph, for days now I've had this feeling that something's very wrong .. and just now, I felt ..." she threw her hands up in frustration, "Oh, I don't know what I felt, but I know she's in trouble." She slumped into the seat that the Amazon had just vacated and chewed moodily on a thumb nail.

"Gabrielle, even if you got past me, past the Amazon guards and Pompey's guards, both sets of whom have got orders to stop you, Toris and the others from leaving the palace, what do you think you were going to do?" asked the Regent gently, knowing her friend was a frazzled bundle of nerves.

"I ... I could ... O, Gods Eph, I don't know, something, anything! This just sitting waiting is driving me nuts!" growled the bard.

"Fat lot of sitting you've done so far," laughed Ephiny lightly, "You've just about worn a hole in that rug!"

Finally the five of them had settled down for some sleep, knowing that exhaustion would make escape from captivity all the more difficult. They had insisted that Gabrielle take the bench, the rest of them had just found a patch of stone floor for themselves and huddled against the chill.

Toris knew that he hadn't been asleep long when he was disturbed by some kind of commotion at the prison door. He edged up onto his elbow and noted that the others were showing signs of interest in what was happening. All of them were alert as a proud looking Roman noble walked in with two women dressed in the exotic garb of Amazons.

"Ephiny?" he heard Gabrielle question softly, disbelief evident in her tone. The bard had scrambled to her feet and rushed over to the bars, "Ephiny?" she said in a stronger voice, "What in the name of Artemis are you doing here?"

Toris had moved from his place on the floor, to stand just behind the small honey blonde woman, his eyes studying the details of their visitors, taking in the arrogant stance and bearing of the blonde, good looking, Roman as he stood silently inspecting them all in turn. His eyes had widened slightly when he had looked at Toris and the dark haired man knew that the Roman had met his sister before.

He returned his glance to the Amazon with the fair curly hair and serious brown eyes as she answered the bard's question, "Looking for you," she had smiled, "Honestly, Gabrielle, I don't think I've ever met anyone with your ability to find trouble so easily."

"Ephiny!" protested the bard.

The Regent ignored her friend's indignation, and smoothly continued, "I recognise Autolycus ..."

The thief executed a precise bow and grinned, "Good to see you too, Ephiny."

"... and Joxer," she added, looking towards him as he grinned back at her, "So, I presume that you," she said looking at Toris's short blonde friend, "must be Iolaus, and you," she turned her eyes towards him and paused for just a heartbeat as she recognised the electric blue eyes in the face of a familiar seeming stranger, "can only be Toris." She smiled at the slight scowl that had etched itself onto his features, "Oh yeah! A definite family resemblance there."

Ignoring the scowl that had deepened on his face, Ephiny gestured to the Roman at her left hand side, "This is your and my host, Pompey the Magnus," she bit her lip to keep herself from smiling at the title, even though she was aware that the man had earned it in battle. She found such things just too pretentious.

"We've met before," responded Gabrielle flatly.

"I know, Gabrielle, but the others don't know him," agreed the Amazon. "I don't think any of you have met my second in command, Eponin, either," she finished the introductions by indicating the dark haired woman at her side. "As you've probably gathered," she said to the men, "My

name is Ephiny and I have the somewhat dubious privilege of being Amazon Regent in the usual absence of our Queen, Gabrielle."

"Ephiny," broke in the bard, her frustration beginning to show, "Are you going to get us out of here?"

"That depends ..." began the Regent.

"Ephiny!" broke in Gabrielle in exasperation.

The Amazon held up her hand to cut off her friend, "It depends on whether you all give your oath to remain hidden in Pompey's palace. We cannot afford for any of you to be seen. There are soldiers searching everywhere for you, and that's only going to intensify with Caesar on his way back to Rome."

Gabrielle looked at Ephiny with an almost rabid intensity, "Are you sure?" she demanded, "Is Xena with him? Is she safe?"

Toris had also stepped forward eagerly at the Regent's announcement and gripped the bars with a fierce concentration that was not lost on either Ephiny, Eponin or Pompey, "Will we be able to free her?" he growled his voice pitched low with eager desire to succeed in this.

Ephiny looked at the pair. Their need was almost palpable and she could give them no reassurances, "All we know for sure is that Caesar is on his way back to Rome. It is likely that Xena is with him, and it's going to take a lot of work and cooperation to be able to pry her loose from Caesar's grip."

She gave the pair a stern look, knowing that it was these two who were going to cause the most problems, simply because they were the ones that Caesar wanted the most, "Now, do I get those promises?" she asked, "or do you want to stay in there?"

Of course they'd made the promise. Which was why Toris was ready claw his way through the walls of his fancy new prison, because he'd not been allowed outside the door for three days. Admittedly, Iolaus, Autolycus and Joxer hadn't been allowed to go anywhere either but he hated the closed in feeling and the guards on the door with orders to make sure none of them left.

It hadn't been too bad the first day. Especially since he'd got to meet Hercules! He almost chuckled as he remembered Iolaus's face when he'd entered their suite of rooms to be confronted by his best friend.

He'd seen the big man make a small gesture for silence and had waited until Pompey and the Roman guards had left the room. Eponin had checked to make sure that Amazon guards were in place before turning and grinning the all clear.

Hercules had clasped his oldest friend in a warm embrace before saying, "You have no idea how good it is to have all of you here safely. With Brutus beating the bushes for you, we've felt powerless to help you."

Iolaus had grinned at the demi-god and said, "Hey, buddy. What brings you here?"

The tall, tawny-haired man smiled lazily at him and said, "When so many of my friends disappear, do you think I'm going to stay home and leave you all to have the fun and adventures."

"Hah," grumbled Autolycus, "You'd have been welcome to my place in this adventure. Not that it's not good to see you."

Toris had seen the big man's eyes fall on a subdued Gabrielle. He held open his huge, muscular arms, and the little bard flew into them sobbing, "Oh Hercules, you have to do something to get Xena away from Caesar. He's doing terrible things to her. I've seen it, I know it."

His massive hands gently stroked the young woman's hair until she had managed to gain control of her emotions. Then, holding her away from his body so he could look down into her green eyes, he told her solemnly, "I know, Gabrielle. We have a plan, but it means that all of you are going to have to stay hidden until we're ready to leave here. Will you do that for Xena?"

His blue eyes had held hers until she agreed to what he was saying, "One other thing," he told them all, "Here I'm known as Heston. If there are any Roman's about I cannot be seen to speak or listen to you .. it's part of our plan."

"Do we trust Pompey?" Toris had asked, drawing the demi-god's attention for the first time.

Hercules had looked him over with a professional eye before saying, "You must be Toris." he held out his arm and had taken the dark haired man's in a warrior's grip, "And in answer to your question, no! We trust no Romans, however friendly they may seem."

They had spent some time discussing the plans they had made for freeing Xena before Gabrielle had asked Hercules to break her free from the hated collar she wore. Hercules had smiled at her and fastened his strong hands on the metal exerting his strength to pull it apart. His huge muscles bulged, but the collar remained stubbornly in place. He'd tried two or three more times to break the obdurate metal, but with no success and had to finally surrender the struggle, although he promised to find a way to get it off of the bard as soon as he could.

With nothing else pressing for their attention everyone had finally turned in for the night, the erstwhile prisoners being exhausted from their travels. The next morning they had heard the news of the Carthaginian defeat and Caesar's victorious return.

Since then Toris had found worried apprehension growing inside of him. He knew Gabrielle felt it as well, and the confinement to the two suites of rooms, these and Ephiny's, began to grate on

"She'll understand, and believe me as much as she'd like to see you and Toris, she'd far rather you be kept safely away from Caesar," insisted the Regent.

"How long do these things last?" asked Xena's brother of Pompey. When he'd heard about the punishment that had been inflicted upon her, it had taken Hercules to prevent him from ploughing through the guards and out of the palace. He'd calmed down enough now to put a cap over his erupting anger, but it still bubbled waiting to explode at the least excuse.

"The parade and the presentation of the Laurels will take about a candlemark or two, then there's the victors feast." He shrugged, we should be through a few candlemarks after nightfall.

Iolaus moved over to his friend and touched his elbow gently, "We can wait, Toris," he told him calmly, "We've waited all these moons now, a few more candlemarks aren't going to take forever to pass."

Toris took a deep breath, forcing his impatience firmly down. He needed to be rational and clear sighted about this, - More like Xena - his mind quirked in thought. He forced his tense body to relax.

Iolaus gave a small smile to Ephiny, "We'll be fine. Just get back as quickly as you can. Are you taking Heston?" he asked casually.

The Regent appeared to consider that for a moment, "Yes, I might get the chance to wager on him in a pit fight."

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~ Destiny's Dominion ~

by Power Chakram

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[See Part 1.](#)

Chapter Fifty: The Power of Caesar

Sitting on the edge of the raised grating, Xena's face was a blank mask hiding the emotional turmoil that raged just below the surface. She ignored the admiring looks that she was attracting; sitting half naked on a crowded deck was bound to get attention, although the presence of the six watchdog guards made sure that no one was stupid enough to approach her.

She had been there perhaps half a candlemark, when Patroclese appeared from the doorway that led to the officers cabins. He came straight across the deck, carrying his medical equipment and a small bundle of cloth, moving directly to Xena's side, ignoring the silent inspection of the guards as he did so.

"How are you doing today?" he inquired as he settled behind her to start his daily routine of tending her injuries.

"Oh, fine," she breathed a little heavily as the healer's hands began a careful exploration of the cuts and welts that covered her back, "Loving every minute of it!" she added, the heavy flavour of sarcasm evident in her words.

"You know, I wish I could work out just how you manage to heal so fast .. some of these stitches are ready to come out," he told her as he searched his bag for the delicate scissors that he carried.

"Clean living and healthy exercise," she grunted mockingly as he began working on the stitches near to her shoulders.

Once he had removed those ready to be taken out, he began to work a cleaning fluid across her back, careful to concentrate particularly on the areas where the stitches had just been pulled, "You know this is going to be sore for quite a while, but I really believe that all you're going to be left with is some light scaring .. it's incredible."

"Yeah! lucky me! You ought to try it from my perspective," she grimaced as the cleaning fluid bit at a particularly painful spot.

Finished with the cleanser, he proceeded to gently sooth in the salve that helped numb the pain from the lacerations, "I see you've been upsetting Flaccus again," he said, stopping what he was doing for a moment to turn her head towards him, "That's going to need a couple of stitches." He finished treating her back and moved round in front of her, gently wiping the blood away from her face and the cut on her hairline, "You are single handedly working me to death. Not only do I have all your wounds to take care of, but then I get all the ones that you hand out to the guards as well."

She fixed him with a cold stare, "Don't forget Caesar's little aches and pains," she told him with more than a touch of satisfaction in her words.

Patroclese dabbed firmly at her latest wound with the cleanser, "That wasn't a smart move," he told her sharply noticing her wince a little from the pain of his ministrations. He held a wad of linen to the cut, "Can you hold that?" he asked.

She grimaced a bit, but bent her back and head down low enough so that she could hold the cloth to the wound while he readied needle and thread, "What happens next?" she asked, more for something to take her mind off the agony induced from stretching the healing tissues of her back than anything else.

Moving her hand aside, the healer took hold of the scalp split and quickly worked to put the required stitches in, "Rome is organising a Victory Parade for Caesar and Veranius. Nothing much will happen until the VIIth Legion has disembarked with the Carthaginian prisoners, then the parade will form up and march through the assembled citizenry to the Temple of Jupiter where victor's laurels will be accepted, then onto a formal reception and dinner .. there that should hold it."

"What's he got planned for me?" she asked as he rubbed a little of the salve onto the stitched cut.

He looked at her seriously, "You'll be part of the parade, Xena. He wants to show Rome that no one can escape him .. you pretty much made him look at best foolish and at worse incompetent when you escaped from the prison. He's going to display you to everyone who dared to laugh openly, or behind his back."

"Figures," she answered with the slightest of shrugs as though she'd expected no less ... which she hadn't.

"Flaccus has orders to keep you tightly in line, Xena. If he even thinks you're going to give trouble, he won't hesitate," Patroclese warned.

Xena grinned her quirky half smile, "What possible trouble could I give?" she asked rattling her chains at him, while hearing one of Gabrielle's favourite comments, *'You could find trouble in a totally empty room!'*

"Just don't do anything to antagonise them," he asked, knowing that she would do what she thought fit. He pulled out a jar of aloe and rubbed the cooling ointment across her blistered arms, guessing how sore they must feel.

"I've got some fresh clothes for you," he told her pulling the cloth bundle over.

"What? He doesn't want to parade me half naked through Rome's streets to humiliate me?" she asked in mock disbelief.

"He doesn't want to shock the matrons of Rome," he gave her a frankly considering look, "Nor make them mad with jealousy."

Xena almost snorted with laughter, "With their hero come home, do you think anyone's going to spare my beaten carcass more than a passing glance?"

"Don't underestimate your beauty, Xena," the healer told her with a broadening smile, "I think that's one of the reasons he wants you fully clothed. He wants all eyes on him, and you would be

Xena responded .. not immediately, there was enough hesitation in response to show she'd thought about it, but it wasn't enough for him to object too. She could tell he was looking for an excuse, was looking to test how far her stubborn independence had been cowed.

He moved behind her checking that the belt had been replaced securely, and found it too loose for his tastes. He tightened each buckle three holes so that the leather pinched tight into her flagellated skin, making her bite her lip to avoid crying out. He then examined each cuff of her shackles to make sure that they were locked securely.

Grunting with satisfaction, he pulled out the small ring of keys that Patroclese had returned to him, and selected one. Using it, he unlocked the chain from the mast and gathered in the slack until his fingers could curl around the collar. Pulling her face close to his he told her in a menacing growl, "We're going down to the wharf, and you are going to do exactly as you are told, when you are told ... you got that?" he demanded.

Quelling any number of smart retorts that sprang to her mind, Xena looked him squarely in the eyes, fighting to keep fire from showing with little success, and answered in a low but audible tone, "Yes ... sir."

Flaccus knew there was plenty of fight left in her. - *The woman has a strong spirit, we may never break it but, by the Gods, we can grind it so far under that she'll need a shovel to find it again.* - He released his hold on the collar and gave the leash a firm tug to get her to follow him. She trailed behind, the image of docility, but he had seen the wolf still lurking, and knew that she was far from subdued.

They moved down the gangplank, the allotted guard members already in place behind the chariot, Xena stumbled along, seemingly concentrating on keeping her footing as she trailed the leg irons over the deck and down to the wharf, but her eyes took in all the details, analysing prospects, weighing possibilities, even knowing that there would be no opportunity for her to effect some miraculous escape.

She stopped when Flaccus did, pinning her eyes to the ground so that he couldn't read the challenge and defiance that she knew she couldn't bury for any length of time. She watched covertly as the centurion locked the end of the chain to the chariot, - *So I'm to be a prize hound on a leash awaiting her master's pleasure, am I?* - She could feel the slow burn of indignation and attempted to crush it before it could flare and cause a reaction. The attempt was only partially successful, but so long as she didn't look Flaccus in the eyes, she thought she'd be able to hide it and keep it under control.

"Sit!" Flaccus demanded.

- *Even issues commands as if I were some kind of damn dog,* - her mind growled, but she sank to the ground as ordered and thought about working on some simple meditation techniques to still the growing anger she was feeling. She needed control, or she would doom Gabrielle to a life of agony that matched her own current existence.

"Alright slave," Flaccus growled at her, "We will soon be taking a nice leisurely stroll along the streets of Rome. You will behave yourself, because I'm going to be right behind you with this." he dangled the flail in front of her downcast eyes, and grinned as he saw the involuntary twitch away from the whip, before she could control her reaction.

"When we reach the Temple of Jupiter you will mount the steps behind Lord Caesar and there you will kneel to him in supplication and you will stay there until you are told to move," he saw her nostrils flare as she struggled to control a burst of temper, "Do you understand?" he flicked her shoulder lightly with the whip to emphasise his question.

Xena breathed deeply, - *I can do this*, - she told herself, forcing her stubborn pride into a queasy nauseating feeling in the pit of her stomach, - *I have to do this*, - she told herself firmly. The vicious looking whip began to draw back for a harder blow, she drew a deep breath and answered, "Yes .. sir." It made her want to vomit.

Flaccus reversed the flail in his hand and used the leather pommel to lift her chin so he could look into the icy blue eyes, "Remember that, slave. You really wouldn't want to see what kind of mess this little .. toy would make of the bard's back, now would you?" He saw hatred and anger flare and noted how the knuckles of her clenched fists turned white as she glared at him with a chilling intensity, "I said, would you?" he repeated threateningly.

"No .. sir," she managed to grit out without choking on the words.

"Very good, slave. You will learn how to be obedient .. eventually," he smirked patronizingly and removed the whip handle allowing her to drop her head once more as she struggled to retain self-control.

- *God's!* - her mind screamed, - *I just want a chance to shove that thing right down his throat!* - She could visualize just how hard and at what angle she should push it to get the best effect. She shuddered with the effort to control her desire to perform the feat.

Deciding he'd made his point for the moment, Flaccus did a quick inspection of his men as he waited for the VIIth Legion to move into position. Two Cohorts were to march at the front of the procession ahead of the Carthaginian prisoners and then the elite maniple, with Caesar, would follow in their assigned places before the rest of the VIIth, the other eight cohorts, brought up the rear.

Xena looked up from her place on the ground as she heard the familiar tramp of marching feet. The second cohort of the VIIth Legion marched past her, followed by the Carthaginians chained in ten rows of five men, each man wearing a single ankle cuff through which was threaded a long chain linking one man to the next.

As they passed the heavily guarded woman, her fellow captives called out words of encouragement to her, "Don't let them grind you down, Xena!" she heard, "Stand up to the Roman bastards!" came another. She lifted her head as they started a rhythmic handclap and the low rumbling chant of, "Xena, Xena, Xena!"

She gave them a dazzling smile, even as guards with whips started flicking the lash over the shoulders of the men, - *So they'd heard about the punishment I received.* - she thought, - *News like that seems to fly around a fleet even while at sea,* - she grinned. - *Well fair is fair, let me give them some support in return.* -

"Long Live Carthage!" she called out in reply as the mid point of the captive men passed her. Getting a loud cheer in return.

She sensed the motion of the whip, managing to turn slightly so that the lashes fell more across her arms than her back. Drawing her knees up, tucking her head down, she protected her head with her hands and kept her front to Flaccus who beat her four or five times with the merciless scourge.

"Don't you ever learn, Slave?" he demanded having covered her exposed arms in red welts. He grabbed a fistful of her hair and yanked her head up, seeing the flash of animosity and rage that appeared there.

"You said nothing about talking to other captives," she bridled. - *Dumb move, Xena,* - she admonished herself expecting the back hand fist that rattled her jaw.

"I've warned you on more than one occasion about that smart mouth of yours," he growled at her, "I think that maybe once we're settled, I'll have the armourer make up a muzzle for you, that should help you to keep your mouth shut. But, until we can bring that about, I'll just have to deny you the privilege of seeing the bard until you mend your ways." He felt her body tense and stiffen, "Maybe I'll order a nice healthy thrashing with a switch and arrange for you to listen to her yells."

Xena's muscles tightened with the need to react and ice settled into her eyes once more, "Just one more twitch," Flaccus almost purred, "and by any God you care to name, I'll have the hide off her back just like I did with you."

He felt her slowly relax, the icy rage dying in her eyes to be replaced a look of sullen defeat. Gabrielle's safety was more important to her than her own. She could even control her rage and pride if the price was the bard's continued safety ... well she fervently hoped she could.

- *Damn,* - thought Flaccus, - *We really need that bard, otherwise the only way we're going to keep control of this one is by continually reinforcing commands with beatings. Lord Caesar wants her more or less intact so she can be fought in the pits, so I'm going to have to come up with something else to subdue her spirit.*

- Eyes were drawn once again to the marching of feet, as the first cohort moved to take its position at the head of the column. As they began passing the chariot, there was a blast of trumpets which blew a fanfare to herald the Admiral and Caesar as they disembarked from the ship. Xena's meticulous eye noted that her enemy had dressed himself as the conquering hero; his white tunic and golden body armour was complimented by the scarlet cape that hung from his shoulders, disguising the splints on his wrist in its folds, and the golden helmet trimmed with

scarlet plumes that adorned his head. He smiled as the fist cohort bellowed in recognition, "Hail Caesar!" and executed perfect Roman salutes to their beloved general.

- Bastard knows how to dress the part! - she admitted grudgingly to herself. - Knows how to keep his troops happy too. -

Caesar preceded Veranius down the narrow gangplank, leaving the Admiral his right to be the last to leave his ship. When he reached the cobbled stones of the wharf, he moved with confident stride directly to the chariot and looked down at his slave, "Welcome back to Rome, Xena," he said to her, "I trust you're ready to begin your new existence here, because all you have known before is ended."

"And if I'm not?" she questioned flatly.

Caesar saw the centurion tense his arm, ready to bring the flail down across Xena's shoulders. He held up a hand, halting the action, "Rome's my city Xena. Here I have absolute power"

"I'm sure Pompey disputes that," she growled, interrupting him.

This time Flaccus wasn't stopped, a heavy blow fell across her shoulders, breaking open some of the partially healed wounds there, Xena could feel the tickling trails of blood as the cuts began to weep once again.

"As I was saying," continued Caesar smoothly, "My city, my power. No one here will help you or your friends. It's time you accepted the inevitable and gave up the struggle. For all your stubborn pride, there is only one outcome to this situation. It's just a question of how many beatings you and the irritating blonde are going to have to take to convince you of it."

Veranius joined him, "Ah, my friend," smiled the Roman noble, "Are you ready to receive the plaudits of the people?"

"As ready as I'll ever be," grinned the stocky Admiral, "I much prefer to leave this kind of thing to others."

"You've earned this, my friend," smiled Caesar, motioning Veranius onto the chariot, "Let's enjoy the rewards being offered." He added, hopping gracefully onto the vehicle.

Flaccus motioned two men to haul Xena to her feet, and then growled at her, "You're pushing your luck, slave. From now on when you address the general, you call him master. Got that?"

The Warrior Princess's reply was drowned in another blast from the trumpets. Flaccus didn't get the chance to repeat his question as the procession began to move out, and Xena was forced to concentrate on adjusting her stride to the restrictions of her leg irons, and the pace of the chariot. Her body ached and the cobbles hurt her feet .. something that she knew would be a real problem before they reached their destination.

Ephiny stood under the portico of the Temple of Jupiter along with Pompey and Hercules, as well as a dozen members of the Royal Amazon guard, currently under the command of Malonda, and another dozen men of Pompey's personal guard. They were awaiting the approach of Caesar and Veranius, along with the redoubtable VIIth Legion, the prisoners captured at sea and, of course, Xena.

Pompey had described the route that the procession would take from the docks. They would move through the Forum Boarium, away from the Capitol, south east past the Circus Maximus. From there they would turn north-east on the Via Triumphalis, until they reached the Via Sacra on which they would turn north-west and march straight up to the Capitol and the Temple making the final approach on the Clivus Capitolinus. It was a long circuitous route that was designed to allow as much of the population of Rome to get a look at their hero as possible.

They could see them coming now. The first cohort of the VIIth Legion marched proudly along the Via Sacra, standards borne prominently, discipline showing in their bearing and the rigid marching that kept them in perfect step with each other. Their armour gleamed in the sunlight making a dazzling display that had the tumultuous crowds happily cheering as they passed.

Ephiny listened as the cheers became louder as the Legion continued up the wide highway, behind them she could hear rolling 'boos', hisses and catcalls as the luckless Carthaginian captives followed along in the wake of the first two cohorts. Even from a distance, the Regent could see that the men were being pelted with rotten fruit and vegetables, as well as stones and other refuse of a far more unsavoury nature. She spared them a momentary thought of sympathy, but her eyes continued to search from the tall dark haired form that she was most interested in getting a look at.

So intent was she upon the approaching spectacle, that she almost failed to notice the leading members of the senate taking their place upon the steps of the Temple, dignified in their stately togas, along with the High Priest of Jupiter and members of the priesthood of other deities as well, resplendent in their ceremonial robes and masks. Pompey also moved forward to take up a more prominent position, leaving Ephiny and a number of other dignitaries, currently visiting Rome, in the background. A situation that suited the Regent comfortably. Especially as she could feel the tense anxiety radiating off of Hercules in waves.

Finally the superbly magnificent chariot, drawn by six splendid, matched, white steeds came into view. The cheering intensified into a solid wall of sound that rolled along the Via Sacra in a surge of crescendoing voices that was like nothing the Amazon had ever heard before.

As the procession made it's slow way towards them, she was able to pick out the figure that could only be Caesar on the chariot. He waved his hand to the people with graceful charm and occasionally threw handfuls of golden dinars into the delirious, screaming masses. Ephiny recognised a consummate showman. The throwing of his personal wealth to the people was a master touch that would endear him to them. The man was obviously a shrewdly calculating politician as well as a fine tactical general. Defeating him would not be easy.

- *But Xena did it!* - she reminded herself. The Warrior Princess had given Boadicea the strategy to defeat the Roman, and the people of Britannia had handed him a crushing defeat. - *He is not invincible. He is not infallible.* - she chanted to herself like a mantra, knowing that they were going to have to beard the lion in his den, and still find a way out of the city.

As if thought of Xena had suddenly conjured her, the Regent became aware of the dark haired figure that stumbled along in the wake of the chariot. She was still too far away to make any details, but she was certain about the identity of the heavily guarded woman, dressed in grey, who tried to hold her head proudly, despite the constant staggers that broke her usually graceful gait. She felt Hercules stiffen at her side as his pale blue eyes narrowed and focused on the woman he had rescued from the dark bonds of her past, giving her the chance at finding redemption for all of her horrifyingly evil misdeeds, while at the same time discovering a woman he could truly admire and love. Xena meant a great deal to him. They might never be able to share their lives, but they could share a deep, abiding and loving friendship.

As they drew closer and the faces gradually came into focus and took on definition, Ephiny could see that the march with the procession was beginning to take its toll on her strength. Although the Warrior Princess tried to present an attitude of haughty disinterest in her situation, and walk with her normal proud bearing, to anyone who knew her the evidence of strain and exhaustion could be read in her bearing .. a point emphasised when she suddenly stumbled and fell forward to be dragged a few paces by the chariot she was tethered to, before two of the guards hoisted her back to her feet.

The Regent held back a cry of angry indignation as she realised that the beautiful, sculptured, face of her friend was marred by heavy bruising. She could see the angry red welts that scored the woman's arms and recognised that the wounds were fresh.

More details became evident to the watching Amazon's and demi-god as the triumphal procession moved ever closer to Capitol and the Temple. They could see the heavy chains that bound her, the collar that matched the one around Gabrielle's throat and the thick chain that was secured to Caesar's chariot like a leash on a favourite pet. They were aware of the unusually armed, heavy, guard that surrounded her, and the way that those soldiers never allowed their eyes to flicker away from their charge for more than the odd moment. They identified the tall centurion, who marched just behind her and carried a wicked looking whip that had obviously seen use.

But worse was to come.

As the chariot was halted at the foot of the temple steps, Ephiny bit her lip as she saw the blood streaked back of the shirt that Xena wore. The Regent stepped hard on Hercules's foot as his body seemed about to sway into movement and a low growl started to emanate from his throat.

They watched in bitter silence as they saw the centurion step forward and unlock the leash from the chariot and wait for Caesar and the Admiral to dismount from their vehicle. Ephiny could see that Xena was swaying unsteadily and watched in concern as the warrior's eyes drifted closed,

our gallant men were able to destroy the conspiracy when they captured one of the ring leaders, the notorious Warrior Princess, Xena!" He motioned to the woman kneeling before him.

Loud cheering once more rang around the Capitol along with growing screams and shouts of, "Crucify her!", "Death to the Warrior Witch!", "Kill the barbarian wench!", "Make her pay for Britannia!"

Caesar saw Xena begin to struggle against her guards, her anger at his blatant lies and the humiliations being forced upon her, stirring up a reaction even though she knew in her heart it was futile. Caesar nodded to Flaccus, passing him her leash and watched as the centurion and his men hauled their struggling prisoner over to the far side of the steps and proceeded to beat her into proper submission.

Holding up his arms once more, Caesar obtained the silence he needed to continue his speech, "With this woman in my power, I was able to secure a treaty with the Gauls that guarantee us peace for this year! By next year, we'll be ready to sweep through their miserable hovels and bring them fully under the jurisdiction of Rome. As for Xena ... death is too good for her. She will serve out the remainder of her life as a slave and be a living reminder to all those who would pit themselves against the might of Rome!"

More cheering echoed long and deep as Caesar took their approbation and basked in the glory of his power. When the cheering finally subsided, he wound up his speech with, "Victory! For the Glory of Rome!" Even more cheering echoed on the back of his words, causing him to smile.

Turning back to the dignitaries, he walked through them and into the Temple of Jupiter where a feast in his and Veranius's honour was to be staged. He threw a glance across to where Flaccus stood over the unmoving form of Xena and, with a twitch of his head, ordered her to be taken inside.

Chapter Fifty One: Eating With the Enemy

Xena had folded as much of her large frame into a tight ball as possible, knees pulled up to protect her stomach, hands protecting her head, elbows clamped down to shield her ribs. She couldn't do much to save her back which was, once more, bleeding freely as half healed lacerations were re-opened by the pounding of the heavy wooden batons that her guards wielded.

She had given up trying to fight them. Her strength was mostly illusionary after the long walk through the hot city streets and all she could do now was try to minimize the damage until Flaccus decided she'd taken enough. She was unable to prevent pain filled whimpers from escaping her lips nor, when they finally stopped hitting her, the violent quivering of her muscles as her eyes caught each slight movement of the men around her.

An anguished groan escaped her as she felt Flaccus pull on her leash. She had known what would happen to her even as she had fought to get to her feet. But she couldn't remain kneeling as Caesar slandered her. Her whole being had revolted at the idea and forced her to react, to let him know that he hadn't subjugated her to his will as he seemed to have subjugated his people with a mixture of charm, lies, spectacle and the lavish extravagance that he displayed.

- *You don't have to conquer a people with force to enslave them*, - Xena contemplated bitterly, and then forced herself to focus on what Flaccus was saying to her.

"Gods be damned, slave. I'm beginning to think you're not happy unless you've been beaten half to death. Doesn't it register in that brain of yours that if you keep defying authority you are going to be disciplined! You have no free will any longer. You are property, and you will learn a suitable demeanor because I can keep this up longer than you can take it." He glanced up to see that all the dignitaries had entered the temple. Yanking hard on the leash he commanded, "Get up! We've got a feast to attend."

Slowly, the Warrior Princess uncurled, her muscles screaming protest, her back aflame with pain. She was shaking with fatigue as she carefully pushed herself to her unsteady feet. She didn't like the way that everything seemed to be on the verge of spinning. Closing her eyes, she shook her head hoping to clear it, and found that she was only partially successful. Feeling sick to her stomach she willed herself to remain standing, and tried to concentrate on something other than her pain and the trouble she was having focusing her swimming head.

She glanced up at the huge double door entrance to the temple and blinked as she thought she saw someone wearing Amazon leathers disappear inside. - *I must be hallucinating*, - she told herself derisively, - *First I think I see Eponin down in the port, and now I'm seeing Amazons in the centre of Rome going into the Temple of Jupiter, no less!* -

Flaccus chose that moment to start moving to the top of the steps, dragging on the chain to pull Xena along behind him. Forcing her exhausted body into movement, the Warrior Princess hobbled unsteadily in his wake, her guards forming up around them.

When they reached the portico, Flaccus didn't lead her to the main doors of the temple, instead he turned to the right, making his way around the building to a far smaller doorway which gave them entrance to a small corridor that led deeper inside the edifice.

The centurion made his way with obvious confidence. He had been here before and he knew which turnings to take, which stairways to go down and what doors to go through. They finally arrived in a large underground chamber, fully prepared for the lavish banquet that would be served to honour the proud victors.

Xena automatically took note of the room's layout as she trailed along behind Flaccus. Two long tables were stretched down the sides of the hall, garlanded with vines and flowers. Benches ran both sides of the tables, which were laid with silver platters and goblets, with silver ewers full of thick red wine waiting for the celebrants to arrive.

At the head of the chamber, where Flaccus was taking her, was a raised dias with another table stretching across it's width, linking the two side tables with it's length. Here stood two throne like chairs, obviously meant for Caesar and Veranius, with more chairs stretching either side of them for the visiting dignitaries and Roman elite.

fruit to wash through his mouth, he continued to cut his way through the horde of guests only to suddenly find himself confronted by one of the guests of honour.

"Ah Pompey. So good of you to come to do me honour .. and so kind of you to bring such an exotic and alluring woman. Who is she?" Caesar smirked annoyingly.

Ignoring the comments about Ephiny, the blonde Roman let a sour grimace, that could just possibly pass for a smile, grace his expression and replied acidly, "Ah Caesar .. I see you managed to insinuate yourself into Veranius' hard won victory. Such a shame that you can't win your own laurels .. or get a woman to stay with you ... except in chains, of course!" A barbed reference to Xena.

"You never did understand the importance of symbols, Pompey," growled his enemy.

"I thought the only symbols you were interested in were the graphic, public executions of both friends and foes alike," the blonde purred, beginning to enjoy himself. "I'm sure that Crassus would have understood your use of symbol .. he may not have appreciated it particularly, but I'm certain he understood and, who knows, he may even have forgiven you for the particular symbol you made of him." He grinned as he saw the colour drain from his enemy's face anger and resentment plain in his expression. "I really was surprised that you didn't make a symbol of Xena's death," he twisted the metaphorical knife.

Struggling to control his temper, Caesar took a calming sip of wine from the goblet he held before answering Pompey, "Oh she is a symbol, Pompey. A symbol of what happens to anyone who crosses me. Right now I'm sure she'd rather be hanging from a cross with the certainty of death close to hand. She has caused me far too many .. aggravations .. to allow her such an easy death. Besides which her current situation has certain benefits for me .. not least of which is the pleasure I get through tormenting her." He took another sip from his goblet and returned to his original topic as his rival did the same, "Now what of this .. Amazon Queen? I believe she has been your guest for some days?"

Glancing over his shoulder, Pompey saw Ephiny politely laugh at some sally from the soldier she was conversing with. "That's Ephiny .. a charming woman for a barbarian." He threw a shrewd look at Caesar who's eyes were rivetted to the vivacious blonde queen in the exotic clothing, "I doubt if even you much vaunted prowess with women could breach her defences," he breathed tauntingly, "See that hulking brute over in the corner with those Amazon guards?" He saw Caesar incline his head slightly in acknowledgement, "Well that's Heston .. her concubine. He's a deaf mute and apparently services all of her needs."

"Ah!" breathed the arrogant Roman slowly, "So she has spurned your attempts at a .. closer friendship, then." was the accurate guess. "I can see where you would try to dissuade another from attempting something you failed at .. after all, another person might succeed and leave you looking .. second best. But that's nothing new for you is it?"

them, and somewhere within the depths of her being she felt the flame of hope fanned into glowing life. - *He's come to help us!* - she acknowledged to herself, - *So has Ephiny*, - her mind prodded, - *Gods, but if they can just free Gabrielle and the others there may just be a chance .. for me.* -

She watched them covertly as they approached the dias, seeing the nervous anger and tension rolling off the demi-god in heated waves. It was so obvious to her that she was surprised that everyone else in the room couldn't see it. She lost sight of them as they passed beyond the table, but she could hear Ephiny conversing with Pompey and she knew that they were seated just behind her close to where Caesar would be ensconced.

Then he was there at the door, Veranius at his elbow, the High Priest of Jupiter with them. The Admiral walked up the right hand side of the feast hall, while the High Priest took the left, leaving Caesar with the opportunity to parade up the centre of the room, to the loud cheering and evident delight of the majority of the guests.

When he reached the dias he stood for a moment regarding Xena with a burning stare. Slowly, almost gently, he reached out a possessive hand and brushed her cheek claiming her in front of everyone in the hall, letting them know that she belonged to him.

Xena jerked her head away, venom almost spitting from intense blue eyes.

With a casual flick of his good left hand he slapped her lightly, almost insultingly across the face and announced to the quietly watching gathering, "The best slaves are the ones with spirit .. once it's been tamed! And she is going to make one of the most magnificent."

He smiled with proprietary superiority as she struggled with her desire to retaliate, knowing that such a reaction would lead to yet another beating, but more importantly, might just push Hercules into attempting something rash. With a great effort of will she pushed down the dark wolf that threatened to take control of her soul and actions, but allowed the pure malevolent hatred to burn in her eyes, making Caesar take an involuntary step back.

However, consummate showman that he was, he turned the motion into a mocking bow in her direction and announced, "Behold how the mighty Warrior Princess is fallen. Chained and abased before Rome as will be all of our fair homeland's enemies." With a mocking smile, he walked along to the right hand side of the dias, mounted it and made his way to his seat behind where Xena was held.

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The feast was long and noisy. Hercules knelt silently behind Ephiny's seat, accepting the occasional tidbit that she handed him like some favourite pet. It was part of their assumed guise, but it still rankled him to be treated in such a manner, even if it was by a friend and for the best reason in the world .. namely to help another friend.

>From his place on his knees, Hercules could occasionally manage to get a glance under the table and the covering cloths, to see how Xena was holding up. Each time he looked he could see

Smiling an apology to Graccus, Ephiny turned and looked past Pompey into Caesar's intense brown eyes, "Heston is a redoubtable fighter. None of your Roman gladiators have been able to match him as of yet," returned the Regent her own hazel eyes sparking in challenge.

"I'd very much like to see him fight," smiled Caesar seductively, "I'd offer to match him against my slave," he gestured to where Xena sat immobile listening to every word that was being exchanged between the two, "Only she's not really in any condition to compete at the moment, and may not be for some time. She has a rebellious nature, and I think I'd like to take the time and effort to crush that before I fight her again."

"That's a pity," returned Ephiny with a sigh, "We Amazon's know well the Warrior Princess. In fact there is a warrant outstanding in Themiscyra for her arrest on charges of crimes against our nation. You wouldn't consider selling her to me so that I could take her back for trial?" she asked.

Caesar allowed her a smile in return, "Unfortunately, that would not be possible. Xena has been condemned for capital crimes against Rome. In my mercy I commuted her death sentences to life in perpetual slavery. I could not allow her to escape Roman justice when she has only just begun to serve her sentence."

"That truly is a pity, but perhaps we can indulge the conquering hero today, if we can find a match for my Heston, and then maybe, if you can get your slave," she added a sneer to her tone expressing contempt for the Warrior Princess, "fit in time, maybe we can match them before I have to return home."

Caesar smiled pleasantly, leaned his elbow on the table and rested his chin on his fist, "I doubt that will be possible. The slave has much to learn, and is but a slow student."

He gave the woman a long appraising look. He really doubted whether some little queen of a barbarian, backward nation would be able to wager the sums that made fighting Xena worthwhile. However, she really was very attractive, not really a match for the stunning beauty of his captive, but more than just pretty and had that dangerous edge that was so lacking in the high bred ladies of Rome. "How long are you staying with us?" he asked politely.

Ephiny answered him in a languorous purr, "Probably for another moon, then I really must return to my people. The delights and luxuries of Rome will be sorely missed however," she smiled encouragingly at him.

"Excellent!" he declared, "So I will have the chance to entertain the Amazon Queen in my own humble dwelling?"

"Of course, Lord Caesar," Ephiny accepted graciously, "It would be my great pleasure to accept an invitation from you."

"The feast has just about run its course," Caesar gestured with his hand at the empty dishes and wine jugs, "High Priest Arrestes maintains an excellent pit on the premises. If we can just find a challenger for your man, then maybe we can retire there for some entertainment," he suggested.

"I didn't realise that the priesthood were interested in such matches," remarked Ephiny, although she was not really surprised to hear it.

"All true Romans are interested in the arts of warfare and battle," Caesar explained, "It is part of who and what we are."

Ephiny looked around the chamber and could see that the majority of the guests were either very drunk, or getting there. Most of the guests on the high table had partaken sparingly of the wine, and some few on the lower tables had maintained their control. The crowd watching the fight wouldn't be too large and it might prove to be the bait to hook Caesar.

Making up her mind, the blonde Regent ran a hand through her unruly curls before turning and answering, "If a suitable opponent can be found, I'll be happy to stand Heston against him ..as long as my wager of five hundred thousand dinars can be matched."

Caesar's dark eyes took on a gleam as he re-assessed the wealth of the Amazon, - *If she is happy to risk that sort of money on a spur of the moment bout, then how much would she be willing to risk on an arranged fight with Xena. Whatever the amount, it will be mine, for there is no one to beat **my** Warrior Princess when she is fit.* -

Turning to a slave who stood at his shoulder, Caesar whispered the boy an instruction and sent him on his way. He watched as the lad moved down to one of the lower tables and spoke with one of the fairly sober guests there. The man looked at Caesar and nodded, then gestured to his own man who scurried from the hall.

Pompey looked at Caesar, "Lucius seems eager to match his Ethiopian." The blonde man's looks became predatory, "How much will you wager on this bout, Caesar?"

"You know I only bet on my own property, Pompey," came the bored reply, "I'm just going to be an interested observer."

"That's all very well, gentlemen," put in Ephiny, "but just who's going to cover my stake?"

Chuckling, Caesar allowed his mirth to shine in his normally cold, calculating eyes, "Oh, don't worry my dear. I'm sure the wager will be covered by many eager men. You see the Ethiopian has never been beaten."

Chapter Fifty Two: Feasts, Fights & Facilities

A candlemark later and Ephiny was standing next to Caesar on the gallery around the Temple of Jupiter's fighting pit, looking down at 'Heston' and the ebony skinned Ethiopian, waiting for the start of the fight.

When they were notified by Lucius that his gladiator had arrived, Caesar had signalled to the looming centurion at the side of the hall, who had moved quickly forward to unlock Xena's leash, and haul her, none to gently, from the chamber. Effecting a satisfied smirk, as she watched the warrior stagger and stumble, Ephiny had turned to Caesar, "That is undoubtedly the way to treat that savage. With all the trouble she has caused throughout the world, she deserves no less."

The blonde cringed inwardly at her own words, but it was necessary to assure the Roman that she and the Amazons were no friends of the Warrior Princess. She graciously took his offered, splinted, arm as he escorted her towards the doorway that Xena had been hustled out of. She could feel Hercules' presence as he stood and silently followed.

"You must tell me just why the Amazons hold such a grudge against her," he said smoothly, "I had heard that she was revered as a hero by most of the people in your land."

Ephiny snorted her apparent contempt. "Some while ago, she abducted and attempted to murder one of our Queens," replied Ephiny easily sticking to the bare truth knowing it likely that Caesar would have heard some vague rumours along those lines, "She was tried and condemned by the Amazon council, and I would have liked to have seen her endure the full rigours of that sentence." She forced a charming smile as her sharp ears picked up the sound of a muffled groan, "However, at least I will be able to report to the Council that the woman is suffering for her crimes and that she will never be able to rampage across our territory again."

"I'm glad to have been some small service to you in that respect then," declared Caesar with pseudo gallantry, raising her hand and kissing it softly, before he escorted her through the door and found Flaccus waiting for him, "Excuse me, for just a moment, Queen Ephiny," he said courteously, turning to observe the centurion and his slave.

Ephiny eyed Xena carefully. She was on her knees again, and the raven haired warrior's body seemed to be trembling with pain and fatigue. There was another budding bruise on her left cheek and fresh stripes across her arms. The Regent's heart went out to her friend as she fervently wished, - *Xena ease off on the stubborn resistance, or we won't have anything left to rescue!* - She listened carefully to what was being said.

"She knows to behave, my Lord," the craggy centurion affirmed, handing his superior the chain attached to the slave collar.

"Very well," acknowledged Caesar, "but I'll want you and the guards in close attendance with, I think, you and two others right behind her at all times, Flaccus."

The centurion allowed the whip to swing threatening in front of Xena's face, and Ephiny was almost certain that she saw a muscle twitch in her cheek, "We'll be right there, sir, and she knows what to expect if she so much as moves a finger unless told to do so."

The Regent hid the urge to flatten the soldier for the harsh, threatening tone he used, and watched as Caesar jerked on the chain forcing Xena to stagger upright onto her painful, cut,

blistered, feet. Turning his back on his dangerous slave, the Roman offered his splinted wrist to Ephiny once more and asked, "Shall we proceed?"

Masking her reluctance to even touch the man, Ephiny returned her hand to his arm, and prayed to Artemis that Hercules wouldn't do anything to blow their cover. With the demi-god trailing along behind her right shoulder, and Xena shuffling along behind Caesar's left, they made their way through the maze of corridors and passages, with Ephiny doing her best to ignore the soldiers who followed in their wake.

When they reached the pit room, they were greeted by Malonda and the rest of her Amazon guard, Caesar having sent a slave to guide them down from the atrium. Ephiny excused herself from Caesar's company for a moment as she touched Hercules' arm and steered him over to her guards.

"Heston will be fighting shortly, Malonda. Have Eris and Yolanda take him down to the pit entrance." She dropped her voice so low that only the big man would hear her, "Don't make it look too easy, Herc. I want him drooling at the prospect of making a fortune from the backwoods, barbarian queen with more money than sense. If you beat this guy too quickly, he might decide it's not worth the risk." She looked up and saw his lips twitch in response.

The sound of voices drifting along the passageways drew her attention back to where Caesar stood. Xena was kneeling 'compliantly' at his feet, the centurion behind her grasping the wicked looking whip in case he was called upon to remind the 'slave' of her place and demeanor. Ten more soldiers were clustered close by, with two of them at the centurion's shoulder.

- They really take no chances with her, - noted the Regent grimly, - She can barely muster the energy to walk, yet they watch her as if she could break loose at any moment. - Returning to Caesar's side, she glanced at the splint on his arm, the fading bruises around his neck, and the scar across his right cheek, - I bet she was responsible for those, - she reflected, - If she was, it's no wonder they watch her so close. And Caesar must be braver than I thought if he still allows her to get that close to him .. even in those chains and with guards close by. -

Slowly the gallery began to fill with those revellers who were not too drunk to make the trip down to the pit to watch the fight. Small fortunes were wagered, easily covering Ephiny's stake and many others besides. However, the blonde Amazon's thoughts were definitely elsewhere, even though she pretended to closely study the Ethiopian who had at last entered the pit.

- Xena could easily kill Caesar from this range, - the Amazon concentrated on her chain of thought, - So after all he's done to her, why hasn't she? Why doesn't she? - She chewed that over for a few moments before berating herself, - Of course! She still thinks he has Gabrielle .. and I have no way of telling her that she's safe. - She almost let out a sigh of annoyance, but caught herself in time. - Once the fight is arranged we can let her know .. until then - she allowed the thought to go unfinished, not wishing to contemplate how much more harm her friend was likely to come to.

"Damn lucky!" growled the warrior, "Your Harlot Queen ..." she drew a sharp breath as Flaccus cut the scourge across her bare arm, raising a fresh pattern weals on her battered flesh.

Ephiny tried not wince in sympathy turning instead to Caesar and remarking cuttingly, "It doesn't appear that your efforts in taming the bitch are having any great effect .. perhaps you should try other methods. I've heard that the savage thrives on her own pain, perhaps you should find another to inflict it on to keep her in line?"

Xena couldn't believe that Ephiny was preposing to Caesar that he use the bard against her in that fashion! - Maybe she want's the job of Queen for real and is here to see that neither Gabrielle or I ever return home. - came a mocking thought. Anger hardened in her eyes turning them frigid as she stared hostilely at the Regent, "That's typical of an Amazon .. use others for their dirty work," she snarled, lunging forward only to be pulled up short by the leash Caesar held. He yanked back hard causing the metal collar to bite viciously into her flesh, leaving her choking for breath as Flaccus once again disciplined her with his whip.

Ephiny was frantic trying to think of a way to get her message across so that Xena would understand and stop fighting her captivity long enough to allow them to arrange an escape, "I have heard that the bitch travels with a bard," she offered nonchalantly to Caesar while Xena struggled with against her Roman guards. "It would be a pity to waste such a valuable commodity as a bard merely as a tool to quell the savage. We Amazons hold bards in very high regard. In fact the Amazon bard in my retinue is considered to be the priceless jewel of the nation. However, we must use whatever materials come to hand when necessity drives us." She smiled seductively at Caesar, hoping that Xena understood the message she was trying to convey.

As Ephiny's words registered, the Warrior Princess slowly ceased her struggles and risked a brief questioning look at the Regent, praying that the friendship and compassion that she saw in the Amazon's eyes meant what she had desperately hoped for .. that Gabrielle and the others were free. Breathing heavily from pain and exhaustion, Xena could only hope that it was so.

"I believe you owe the Amazon Queen an apology, Xena," growled Caesar, privately amused to see the flaring animosity between the two women.

The warrior raised a pain filled glare for him, "Kiss my butt!" she ground out, preparing herself for another round of physical abuse. She needed to make Caesar believe that she and Ephiny hated each other .. it now seemed obvious what the Regent was attempting to establish within the Roman's mind.

Flaccus drew back his arm ready to inflict more punishment, when Ephiny broke in smoothly. "I shouldn't worry about that. An apology from a slave is worthless. It will be far more satisfying to me, for her to receive her punishment at the hands of my man, Heston," she told them, glancing back at the fight in the pit. "For that to happen she needs to heal and she's not going to do that while you keep beating her. I'm certain you ingenious Romans could find another way to discipline the animal." She smiled encouragingly at Caesar.

Having been in Rome only recently, Xena recognised the route that she was being taken along. She was well aware of the layout of Caesar's palace too. The thought that they'd lock her into the dungeon that had held Verchinex, allowed her to plot possible escape plans. She knew that she'd still be under close guard but ...

That was where her thoughts had taken her to Gabrielle. - *What was it that Ephiny had said? 'They were very lucky to get her back into safe keeping'? Have they managed to rescue Gabrielle? .. and the others? By the Gods, - she swore, - If they're free and safe, then Caesar better start counting his life in days!* - She thought about the Regent's brief discourse on bards, - *Jewel of the Nation, huh?* - The only Amazon bard she was aware of who might rate that description was Gabrielle. - *She has to be safe, doesn't she?* - she questioned herself, - *Or is Eph trying to tell me she will rescue her?* - The puzzle made her head pound worse than it already was, but she was unable to push it aside .. it was crucial to everything!

If Flaccus had been able to see the savage gleam that sprang to light in the Warrior Princesses eyes as she mulled Ephiny's words over, he would have known that something had changed .. something had given her a resurrection of hope. However, he walked oblivious behind her just noting with satisfaction the exhaustion that was evident in her movement and the slump to her shoulders that she had carefully maintained.

When they reached the palace, she had been expecting to be taken down to Caesar's personal prison. However, it seemed that they had other plans for her lodging. She was hurried through the long parade of corridors and finally out into a torchlit drill yard. The guards obviously knew exactly where they were heading for as they marched to the centre of the high walled, gateless enclosure.

When they came to a stop, two soldiers bent down and struggled to raise a very heavy, barred trapdoor that opened up onto a seven foot square pit that hosted just a wooden bucket and a pair of blankets.

Flaccus unlocked the chain from her collar and gave her a none to gentle shove that sent her down into the eight foot deep hole. Even injured and shackled as she was, she landed in a cat like crouch on the packed earth floor, "This is your new home," the centurion snarled, 'Get used to it!'

She watched helplessly as the thick bars of the pit door were dropped into place with a heavy "**THUD!!!!**" and secured by a bolt and two thick padlocks. Anger and despair gripped at her as she heard Flaccus post the six watchers close to the cell and a further twenty around the walls, all armed with pistol crossbows and drugged darts. There would be no escape for her for the foreseeable future.

Chapter Fifty Three: Traitor's Gate

Ephiny, Hercules and the Amazon guards arrived back at Pompey's palace some time before the Roman did: they had left him conversing with his own clique of supporting senators. They knew it was later than they had expected to be, and that their group of friends would be worrying.

They made directly for the men's suite, aware that everyone was going to be waiting for them there. The Amazon guard that secured the wing of the palace occupied by the queens and their male companions, bowed their heads in salute as Ephiny passed, and wondered just what had happened to put such grim looks on the faces of everyone in the Regent's party.

The guards swung the doors open as the blonde Regent and her companions approached and they were met by a volley of strained, tense questions all about how Xena was faring. Waiting until the door had closed, Ephiny held up her hands and said forcefully, "Silence! We won't get anywhere if you all babble on like a gaggle of geese." She glared around at the suddenly quiet room, knowing that the anger that had been rising within her all afternoon and evening had suddenly boiled over.

She wiped a hand across her brow and forced herself to calm down, "Look, I'm sorry for snapping, but it's been a really bad day." She sat down on one of the chairs scattered around the room as Hercules did the same, running his fingers through his hair in an effort to ease the tension he felt.

"Wine Eph? Hercules?" offered Eponin, standing by a pitcher.

"Water for me, please," returned the demi-god morosely.

"And me, Poni. I've had enough to drink for one day," agreed the Regent.

"Alright, Ephiny," the bard said as she came to sit next to her friend, "Just how bad does Xena look."

The Regent drew a deep breath and, looking Gabrielle square in the face, she replied, "Bad." She grasped the bard's hand and threw Toris a look as the dark haired man slammed his fist into the wall in frustration and anger, "Getting ourselves worked up about it, and breaking our own bodily parts," she frowned in Toris's direction, "are not going to help her. We need to stay focused on our objective, which is to get her away from Caesar."

"Tell us how she looked," demanded the blue eyed male image of the Warrior Princess.

"What Poni said earlier is true. I didn't see the full damage, but the blood that was soaking through the shirt she was wearing suggests that her back is pretty well ripped raw." Ephiny closed her eyes to screen out the infuriated looks that stole over her friends' faces. "She's pretty bruised up around the head and I suspect over most of her body. Her feet are bloody and blistered from a barefoot walk through the streets. She's picked up fresh welts over her arms, and we saw a bunch of guards beat her on the Temple steps. I'd say she takes more than one pounding every day, because she refuses to give them an inch without them forcing her to."

Taking the goblet of water from Eponin's hands she took a couple of long grateful draughts before she added, "Caesar's carrying a few wounds himself. He's got a fairly new scar down the length of his jaw, a broken arm and some heavy bruising around his throat. If I had to guess I

know who I'd put my money on for having done it .. which probably explains her back, if nothing else."

Eponin handed Hercules his water and the big man tossed it back in a single long swallow, then sat moodily cradling the cup. Iolaus looked at Ephiny and then back at his friend before he spoke, catching the worried glance that the Regent threw at the son of Zeus, "Umm, Herc? You haven't said much." His eyes were drawn to the silver goblet that gave out a screech as his friend crushed it in one mighty hand, "Ah, I guess that means you're not too happy about the situation," he offered.

Light blue eyes were raised to his, "Happy is not a word I'd use to describe my feelings at this time, no," rumbled the big man. "Try livid, furious, incensed or enraged, but nothing like happy!" He squeezed the remnants of the goblet into a ball and threw it with all his might at the wall opposite him.

Iolaus flinched as he heard the metal punch a hole through the solid stone of the wall and take off for parts unknown. As he gave his friend a pensive look, he knew he couldn't remember a time when he'd ever seen him this mad before, - *Not even when Deianeira and the kids were killed!* - He was certain it was because this time he was on the spot, and still he couldn't do anything to help someone he loved. Moving across to Hercules's side he patted the man gently on the shoulder and gave it a squeeze, letting him know that he understood.

"Ephiny tell me exactly what happened from the time you first saw her," Gabrielle insisted softly. She needed to know the worst. She needed to know if her friend would be able to hold out until they figured out a way to snatch her from the predators jaws.

"You're the bard, Gabrielle," the Regent gave a wan smile, "but I'll do my best."

She told them about the parade, how Xena had been made to kneel before Caesar on the temple steps. The way the crowd had howled for her blood, and Xena's reaction to Caesar's speech. The beating she'd got for trying to resist and then how she'd been chained as an exhibit in the banqueting hall. The humiliation of being forced to sit through the Romans' taunts and having scraps thrown at her. The whip's stinging reminder to make sure she behaved herself in Caesar's presence when they had gone to watch Hercules fight the Ethiopian. The way she had to be half dragged from the temple when Caesar finally dismissed her.

Gabrielle sat quietly, a far away look in her eyes as she absorbed everything that Ephiny had to say. - *I told her to be careful. I told her not to make them angry. I knew that stubborn pride of hers would get her into trouble. Oh, Xena! Please take care. Try to keep out of trouble until we can get out of this miserable city!* -

"There is one good thing .. well maybe two," the Regent added at the end of her description, "Caesar has agreed to match Xena against Hercules in a pit fight at the new moon, which means they have to ease up on the beatings or she'll never be fit for it." She smiled encouragingly as she got a more hopeful look from the bard, "I also tried to let her know you were safe. The message

She saw temper flare in the guards eyes, and was aware that the other Amazons standing sentry along the corridor were turning their heads to see what the problem was. Nebula hoped that someone from inside would come and investigate the noise, before she was forced to get rough.

"Now look here, pirate!" snarled the angry Amazon, "Just who do you think you're threa...."

The door to the apartment flew open with a sudden bang, and a very unamused Eponin stormed through it, radiating authoritative ire in all directions, "What in the name of Hades is all the yelling about!" she demanded in a tone just short of a roar that gained everyone's immediate attention as she glared up and down the corridor. Amazon heads snapped back to look directly in front of themselves, not wanting to attract the weapon master's attention.

"This .. pirate doesn't understand the words 'no' and 'permission'," returned the tall guard who was still smarting under Nebula's threat to throw her through the door.

"Since when did you learn to understand them, Berra?" growled the weapons master testily. She waved a hand at the woman as her back stiffened in defence, "Alright, alright, you were just doing as ordered, but next time just ask if we want to see the visitor, don't start a major brawl in the corridor, we'll have the Romans thinking we're more barbaric than they already do."

Turning on her heel, Eponin headed back into the room before realising that Nebula wasn't following, "Well? Are you coming?" she demanded brusquely.

"Just waiting for an invitation," grinned the pirate, "wouldn't want anyone to think I was gate crashing," she added levelling a glare at Berra and getting one back in return.

Nebula followed Poni into the big room that seemed somehow to be almost crowded by the amount of people there. The pirate looked round with interest picking out the familiar faces of Hercules and Iolaus, whom she treated to a long, lascivious, grin. She, of course, knew Ephiny and Eponin and so presumed the third woman had to be Gabrielle, bard and Amazon Queen.

At first glance she thought that there must have been some mistake. The small honey blonde looked anything but Amazon material her whole demeanor seemed gentle and non-threatening and, after spending quite some time in Amazon company, Nebula knew that that was far from normal. However, when she looked up, and misty green eyes caught the pirate's gaze, the tall dark woman reconsidered her evaluation. There was a quiet strength to Gabrielle, nothing showy, just a confident air and a steady competence that asserted itself. A second glance also told the sailor that the bard was far from being a weakling. The muscular frame wasn't obvious. but anyone looking could see the sleek ripple of strength and an unconscious sense of co-ordination that spoke volumes.

- Well, - mused Nebula, - *Amazon Queen, bard and warrior. A woman of hidden talents and depths. Wonder what she's like on a ship?* -

In the instant it had taken to recognise and evaluate Gabrielle, the door had been swung shut behind them and three more men moved into sight. From the descriptions that Eponin had given

her, she recognised Autolycus and Joxer before turning her head and meeting a familiar blue eyed appraisal. Familiar, because she'd encountered it's twin only a candlemark previously outside the Temple of Jupiter, - *Xena's brother, Toris, obviously*, - she identified, - *Well the looks obviously run true in that family.* -

Ephiny drew everyone's attention, "This is Nebula," she introduced, "She's the captain of the ship that brought us here and she'll be taking us back to Greece once we've managed to rescue Xena." She then proceeded to acquaint the pirate with everyone formally.

After making a few noises in the direction of social smalltalk, Ephiny asked the question everyone wanted to hear the answer too, "Did they take her to Caesar's palace?"

"They surely did, and they had a whole maniple to guard her. I thought those soldier boys were hanging around to escort Caesar home. You can imagine my surprise when they formed up around her and marched her off," the sea woman told them, "Look, is there any chance of getting something to eat and drink here, I've been stood around on streets since just past midday and I'm both famished and parched." she grumbled.

Iolaus grinned and threw her an apple, "Chew on that while I pour you some wine," he told her.

She snagged the apple with graceful ease, grinned and said, "Thanks Curly," before she took a large bite from it chewing thoughtfully. Swallowing, she looked up and told them, "You know, thinking about it, I shouldn't have been surprised at the amount of guards she's got. While I was hanging around waiting for the parade to start, I overheard some of the sailors off the trireme gossiping, and they reckoned that in the time Caesar's had her she's been responsible for the death or hospitalisation of close on twenty men .. and that's with all the chains and injuries she's been carrying around with her. Those legionaries in that unit are the handpicked elite from Rome's legions and they're all pretty scared of her."

"Xena, is not someone you mess with lightly," Gabrielle told her. "Caesar knows that, which is why he's gone to such lengths to take and hold her."

Ephiny allowed the pirate to finish her apple and take a long draught of the wine that Iolaus handed her, before asking the woman to fill them in on what had happened on the march through the city, knowing that everyone in the room felt the need to know what their friend was suffering through.

"The march was bad for her. She's carrying around a lot of pain and wounds and her strength looked like it was flagging. It was only the sedate pace that allowed her to keep going .. it probably didn't help her having to walk in bare feet. To be honest, I'm surprised that she made it to the temple steps without being dragged half the way. She took a couple of heavy falls, but those guards got her too her feet before she could be dragged too far." She took another mouthful of wine and allowed it to trickle down her throat.

"Ephiny's most likely filled you in on the scene at the temple, and what went on inside. When they came out they just marched her off to Caesar's place. She was being supported by two of the

"Jerushan!" breathed Eponin explosively her muscles tense, anger clear in her voice. The pirate saw the Regent touch her friend's shoulder lightly drawing her attention. There was a faint shake of the pale curls and the weapons master allowed herself to relax .. a little.

"What about the guard?" pressed Ephiny.

"That was Essaine. I recognised her because she was pretty good up top on the yards," filled in the sea woman.

"Ephiny?" questioned the bard in confusion, "What's going on here?"

The Regent gave her Queen a worried look. She had more than enough to worry about without the problem of domestic Amazon squabbles added to it. The only thing was that with Jerushan dropping in to visit Caesar, it looked like the domestic problems were about to get more complicated.

"Ephiny?" repeated Gabrielle, concern evident in her voice and eyes.

"When I," she threw a look at Eponin, "we decided to come after you and Xena, we decided that it wouldn't be wise to leave Solari with the problem of keeping an eye on some of the more vigorous dissidents .. so we brought the leaders with us."

"Tarelle," stated the bard flatly.

"Yes. Her and seven of her playmates. We thought that bringing them with us and keeping a close watch on them would keep them out of trouble," explained the Regent, "Eponin, Solari and Malonda hand-picked the rest of the sisters to make up the guard so that we could be certain that we'd be able to keep a close eye on Tarelle and her clique."

"Then how did Jerushan get out of the barracks and why was Essaine on guard duty?" demanded the small, green eyed, woman.

"Because neither Jerushan, nor Essaine are part of Tarelle's seven." Eponin butted in.

"I guess we have a real problem here guys," interjected Nebula, "because unless you can sort out just who to trust in your group, Caesar's going to know everything we've got planned and the outcome of that ain't going to be pretty."

Chapter Fifty Four: Traitors in Our Midst

Autolykus groaned in frustration, as he looked at the three dice on the floor in front of him, "Sheesh!" he grumbled, "I've heard of beginner's luck, but this is getting ridiculous." He glared balefully at the three VI's that had just lost him another three dinars, "Joxer, are you sure you've never played this game before?" he demanded of the man sitting next to him.

Joxer gave him a cheesy grin and answered, "Well I didn't actually say I've never played before. I just asked you to explain the rules," he chuckled. "Actually I'm pretty lucky at dice games. In fact I've been called 'Mr Lucky' before." He laughed as he crossed his legs.

"Well, I suppose you have to be lucky at something," the thief continued to grumble, having the feeling that he'd just been suckered.

"Just pay him the money, Autolycus," smirked Iolaus, rather pleased that the wannabe warrior was able to get one over on the thief. "And pass me the dice, I'm gonna make the numbers tumble."

"Listen, shorty," began the King of Thieves testily, "I've just about had it up to here," he gestured over Iolaus' head, "with you."

"You wanna make something of it," growled the blonde man as he stood and loomed over the thief. They'd been stuck together for many days, and these two men had a short tolerance of each other.

Autolycus jumped up too, and leaned over to look down at the far shorter man, "And if I did, what do you think you could do about it?"

Bunching a fist in a threatening manner, Iolaus took a step towards the other man as Toris scooped the dice out of the way, "I'm sure that I can think of something," snarled the blonde.

Autolycus stepped back and held up his hands placatingly, "Now let's not be hasty. You don't want to start something that I might not be able to finish."

"Aw, c'mon guys," Joxer tried to calm things down, "Let's get back to the game."

Both looked down at him and said in perfect unison, "Shut up, Joxer!" before turning back and glaring at each other.

"Hey!" barked a voice from the other side of the room. All eyes turned to see Hercules regarding them sternly, "I'm trying to read here," he said gesturing with the scroll in his hands. "Play nice."

Under the demi-god's scrutiny, the two antagonists glared at each other for a heartbeat more, before Iolaus grumbled, "You're bacon just got saved, pal," as he reseated himself on the floor and caught the dice that Toris passed to him with a grin.

"Anytime you want to try, Curly," muttered Autolycus as he took his place in the circle too.

"Oh, Autolycus," called the big man, his eyes back on the scroll that Gabrielle had lent him.

"Yeah?" returned the thief.

"Don't forget to pay Joxer the money you owe him," instructed Hercules.

Grumbling under his breath, Autolycus dug through his various pockets and hidden pouches to dig out the three dinars that he owed Joxer. He handed them to the grinning man, who happily took them and pocketed them with a cheerful, "Thanks."

Settling back down to the game, bets were made on the next round of throws and order appeared to be restored once again as the four men egged each other on cheering and groaning as luck either brushed them or passed them by.

Hercules kept a surreptitious eye on the group, particularly watching Toris. Since he had met the man, the demi-god had been struck by just how much he and his sister were truly alike. He'd heard, from Iolaus, all about the raven haired man's suspect temper and hot headed actions, which he suspected were not so unlike Xena's before she learned to channel her rage and focus on an objective. To add to this he was sparing with his conversation almost to the point of reticence, a characteristic that was matched by Xena's own absence of social chatter. Then of course they were very physically alike. Tall, hair as black as a raven's wing, piercing blue eyes and strong, muscular bodies. Hercules judged that Toris had the edge on his sister in height and carried a few more pounds, but Xena's strength far surpassed her sibling's and was not greatly less than his own.

Of course, the Warrior Princess was a lethal weapon in her own right as well as with the tools of the bloody trade she once followed. The son of Zeus had never seen a warrior who approached her total fighting capabilities. Her competitive nature and relentless drive made her the best at what she did.

Iolaus had told him that Toris was good with a blade and pretty handy in a brawl, but he had none of Xena's phenomenal ability and power, and Hercules doubted that he had the gift that allowed the woman to heal far faster than any mortal had a right to. That, more than any other characteristic that she possessed, had caused him to speculate about her, because the only other person, he was aware of, with that particular ability, was himself.

He shook his head and turned back to concentrate on his reading, allowing the chattering from the game to wash over him as he followed the story of Caesar's pursuit and capture of the bard and the Warrior Princess. Gabrielle had written it out to alleviate her boredom, and Hercules had asked if he could read it to try and gain a better understanding of the entire situation.

It was at this point that Ephiny, Eponin, Gabrielle and Nebula re-entered the men's suite of rooms. Hercules looked up, somewhat surprised to see them return so quickly, and instantly noted the glum frowns that the women exhibited. Something had happened, and it obviously wasn't good news.

He saw Eponin stop just inside the door, barring entry to anyone, and making certain that no-one could crack the door to eavesdrop. It would take someone with extremely acute hearing to be able to glean anything through the thickness of the heavy oak doors themselves.

Nebula gravitated over towards where the men had looked up from their dice game to see what was going on. When she reached Iolaus, she ruffled his hair and grinned as she greeted him, "Hi, curly."

"Quit that!" he snapped, the rosy hue of a blush showing evidence around his neck. He looked up and saw Gabrielle watching and the flush ran rampant up to the roots of his hair.

"Aw," chuckled Autolycus, "Isn't that sweet."

"Look, I've had just about enough of you and your comments!" flared the blonde man, making a lunge away from the close proximity of the pirate and towards the throat of the thief.

"If you gentlemen have quite finished playing," Ephiny cut in coldly, "I think you should know that we have a problem that we need to sort out."

That brought everyone up short and captured their attention, except for Iolaus who suddenly found himself in close proximity to Nebula once more as she draped an arm across his shoulders and squeezed him close, "Decided that you're ready to do the bondage thing that you promised me?" she asked in a stage whisper that had him blushing crimson once again.

"Well," commented Autolycus speculatively, "Well, well, well. Didn't know that you went in for that kind of thing, short stuff."

"I don't," growled the short man huffily as he extracted himself with difficulty from Nebula's grip and hurried over to stand at Gabrielle's side, only to get a somewhat frosty stare from the bard.

"She's just teasing," he shrugged as everyone turned their eyes on him once more, "Honest."

"I'm certain that you don't owe us an explanation," the Amazon Queen stated frigidly, "Whatever you do with Nebula is your own affair, I'm sure."

"Gabrielle ..." Iolaus tried before giving it up not knowing what to say to the young woman who had stolen his heart three years previously.

"Iolaus, let's hear what the ladies have to say, shall we?" put in the demi-god, as much to rescue his floundering friend as anything else. Iolaus shot him a grateful look. "Uh .. sure, Herc," mumbled the blonde man.

"Ephiny?" questioned Hercules politely, standing up and offering the couch to Queen and her Regent.

The two women sat down and gestured for the rest of the people in the room, with the exception of Eponin, to gather around them so that voices would not be required to be raised. The men all moved across and seated themselves on the floor in a kind of semi-circle, with Iolaus keeping a wary eye on Nebula until she went and stood behind the two Amazon Queens.

Taking a deep breath, the Regent started with, "This is a little difficult to explain. It's a domestic Amazon issue that I hoped we had under control, only now it seems we don't and it's threatening to undermine everything that we're doing here."

"Forgive me, Queen Ephiny," put in Toris, "but that's a little obscure, you know. How can domestic issues for Amazon's affect my sister's rescue?"

The Regent turned her eyes to the tall man and wondered, once again, how he could look so much like his sister, "You can drop the Queen part, Toris," she said, not unkindly. "I hope we're all friends here and titles are really only for formal occasions."

Toris smiled back at her lighting up his normally brooding face as his wonderfully blue eyes sparkled, "As you wish, Ephiny. But why should Amazon issues interfere with what we're trying to do?"

Her smile vanished to be replaced by a small frown as the Regent sought for the best words to explain the problem that had suddenly reared it's ugly head once again. Sighing, she started to explain, "What you all need to understand is that Xena, through her ties to Gabrielle, is very much bound up in Amazon disputes. There is a loud minority within the Nation that resents Gabrielle's right to rule as Queen. They consider her to be an outsider, who is rarely present within the lands, and believe that she has no idea about, or concern over, traditional Amazon heritage. They are convinced that the only way to restore the Nation to former glory is by deposing Gabrielle and replacing her with a more fundamentalist ruler."

"Excuse me," interrupted Joxer, "but if Gabrielle were to be deposed, wouldn't you become the next Amazon Queen?"

The bard rolled her eyes, and retorted sharply, "No Joxer, it doesn't work like that."

Ephiny laid a hand on Gabrielle's arm to calm her, before she tried to clear things up, "I'm Regent for Gabrielle," she told him stressing the word 'for'. "The Amazon's accept me in that role, but they would probably not accept me as Queen in my own right. I was married to a centaur and my son is a centaur prince. Those are two black marks against me. On top of that, if Gabrielle was deposed, I'd be seen as a threat because of my support for her."

Seeing some blank looks on faces, Gabrielle was about to try and explain, when Autolycus stepped in, "All right. From what you've said so far, there's a bunch of Amazons who don't like you and Gabrielle. How does that effect Xena?"

Gabrielle gave him a grateful look and took up the next part of the explanation. "The only way that I can be deposed is if a challenge for leadership is issued. That means a fight to the death," she spoke up quickly as she saw Joxer about to speak. "In that situation, the challenger fights the Queen or her elected champion ..."

"Xena," put in Toris his voice filled with certainty.

"Xena," confirmed the bard as she continued, "so naturally enough it's in the interests of the dissidents to make sure that Xena cannot accept a challenge on my behalf .. after all, who's going to be mad enough to go up against the Warrior Princess in a one on one?"

"I am," Hercules groaned trying to lighten the brooding atmosphere a little, and was rewarded with a few chuckles.

"That's different and you know it," grinned Gabrielle impishly. "She won't hurt you ... much!"

"Tell me that when you're tending the wounds I'm bound to get from it," he smiled back at her, making her laugh.

"You'll get over it," she told him unsympathetically. "You heal as fast as she does."

"Fine," Toris tried to turn the conversation back to the matters in hand, "So some Amazon's don't want to see Xena free. How is that affecting the situation here?"

Ephiny took over the story once again, "When the beginning of all this trouble blew up, Xena brought Gabrielle back to Themiscyra to try to keep her safe. The trouble was that there were outstanding charges, against Xena, before the Council of Elders." She saw the look of recognition in Joxer's eyes and she'd already told Hercules about it, but there was a look of outrage on Toris' face and his concern was mirrored by both Iolaus and Autolycus.

"After all she's done for you!" the dark haired man exclaimed, jumping up as his temper got the better of him, "What ? Isn't saving the Amazons from extinction, not once but twice, enough?" he demanded, eluding to the narrowly averted Amazon and Centaur war and the malignant Velasca. "Doesn't saving your life and the life of your son count towards anything!" he raged. "What was it that she did that was so bad you needed to charge her with it?"

Ephiny also rose. Her body quivered with anger at the accusation in the man's tone and the knowledge that he'd found all the incidents that the Amazons found so difficult to reconcile to the sight of an out of control Warrior Princess rampaging through Themiscyra's streets in search of Gabrielle, the clear intent of murder shining in her eyes.

"What did she do?" hissed Ephiny in return, "What didn't she do! She cut down two young Amazons, seriously injured several others and broke my arm, all with the intent on murdering the Queen! What she did to me I could forgive. But the two deaths had to be accounted for!" she fumed.

"Ephiny," Gabrielle said quietly, touching her friend's arm, "Why don't you let me try to explain to Toris and the others?"

Grudgingly, the Regent deferred to the Queen, retaking her seat, although her glare never left Toris' face. - *He's got that same burning look in his eyes as she has,* - she noted, - *but Iolaus is right, he doesn't have her control and, thank the Gods, he's not the danger that she is.* -

"What is all this, Gabrielle?" Xena's brother demanded. "None of your letters ever mentioned trouble with the Amazons, and you never let us know that you and Xena were having difficulties."

The bard looked at him, waiting for him to force his hasty temper under control before motioning with her hand and saying, "Sit down Toris." As he was grudgingly complying her mind was racing furiously, - *O Gods, what should I tell him? He knows nothing about Solon or Hope. I deliberately kept quiet about those things. I really didn't want to hurt either him or Cyrene.* -

"Gabrielle?" he asked in a tense though quieter tone.

Glumly, she decided that he should hear an edited version of the events, "I don't want you to tell your mother what I'm going to tell you now. I don't want her hurting for something that's in the past" She waited for his reluctant nod of agreement before continuing, "Some things happened a while ago that led to other things .. you don't need to know all the horrendous details," she forestalled his question, "Suffice to say that both Xena and I did some fairly horrible things to each other. The result was that we split up nurturing a lot of hate."

She bit her lip as a tear trickled down her cheek. Brushing it away with a quick flick of her hand, and refusing to let the dam burst she continued, if a little shakily, "I went to stay with the Amazons, while Xena went off on her own. Wherever she went Ares, found her. He worked on her hatred so that the next thing that happened was that Xena came tearing through Themiscyra, looking to kill me. She removed anyone who got in her way and flattened Joxer for trying to protect me. Then she .. then ..." she bit her lip once more and found it impossible to go on.

Putting her arm around the young Queen's shoulder, Ephiny drew the shaking Gabrielle down on her shoulder and took up the story in a calm, almost detached voice, "She snared Gabrielle's ankles with a whip, mounted a horse and dragged her from town and over the countryside intending to kill her."

Iolaus looked angry, Autolycus was thoughtful while Toris had gone white, obviously seeing visions of his sister's past ascent to the position of the most feared warlord in Greece.

"When they reached the cliffs overlooking the sea on the boundary of Amazon lands, Xena intended to throw Gabrielle over the edge. There was a struggle and Gabrielle broke free, but then threw herself at Xena taking them both over the edge of the cliff." She saw the stunned looks on the men's faces, "Somehow, they both survived. According to the little I've been told the 'gods' allowed them to review their differences and work them out, and both escaped from the entire mess without any physical injuries and healing emotional ones." the Regent finished.

After some moments of shocked silence, Iolaus cleared his throat and asked, "And you still came here to try and rescue her?"

Ephiny shrugged, "She's my friend. Whatever she did, or didn't do, the Council of Elders decided that she could only be held partially responsible for her actions. They believed that Ares had

much to do with the way events transpired. They sentenced her to a year's banishment from Nation lands, which was about the mildest sentence she could be given."

"Gabrielle," spoke the quietly subdued voice of Toris, "How can you still trust her after doing that to you?" his voice was filled with shame, his eyes were fastened on the floor.

"Look at me Toris," the bard commanded and waited for him to comply before trying to explain, "I trust her because she's my best friend. I trust her with my life." Keeping contact with the blue eyes of the man before her, she continued, "The question should be, 'How can she trust me?'. You see I lied to her and betrayed her, not once but twice. The first betrayal almost resulted in her execution by an old enemy, I'll never know how we escaped that or how she could forgive me for what I had done. How many people has she ever forgiven for betraying her?" she asked.

No one answered knowing full well that Xena, the warlord, had always exacted harsh retribution against anyone foolish enough to do so. Her reputation as a cold, merciless, leader had been legend and everyone in the room knew that the price of betrayal was death.

"Well she forgave me for that, but my second betrayal led to the death of someone she loved very, very much, and the grief it caused her left her easy prey for Ares . Whatever he did to her, left her mind cloudy about the entire event in Themiscyra and what she did to me. It wasn't until about halfway through the trial that I managed to get her to remember what had happened .. it almost broke her heart." Gabrielle swallowed as she remembered holding the warrior as she shook with unshed tears finally knowing what she'd done to the bard.

"She was just as much a victim as I was. The Gods were playing their vicious games and we were their pawns." She cleared her throat and finally said quietly, "Now if any of you don't want to help free her, then Ephiny and I will find a way of getting you away from Rome as quickly as possible."

Moments seemed to fly by as everyone waited for someone to speak. Finally, Hercules stepped into the breach and said gently, "I don't think anyone here wants to abandon her. We all care for her too much to do that. So why don't you just tell us what has happened to cause a problem here and now."

Ephiny ran her fingers through her blonde curls, a habit when she was worried, angry, or both, and tried to focus on the problem, "When I decided to come here, to try and find out what had happened to Gabrielle and Xena, I judged it unwise to leave the leading members of the opposition at home, so I brought them with me where I could keep them under observation and out of trouble. The rest of the honour guard was made up by warriors screened personally by Eponin, Solari and Malonda, to ensure that only those loyal to the Queen would be here."

"Let me guess," chirped Autolycus, "your rebels have managed to hatch something anyway, right?"

Ephiny gave a brief nod, "Nebula was good enough to follow Xena, after she left the Temple, this evening, just to make sure we knew where she was taken. As we had expected, she was

escorted to Caesar's palace. What we hadn't expected, however, was for an Amazon to be seen leaving by a side exit of the building. Nebula followed her back here and then came and told us what she had seen."

"I thought your people were keeping an eye on your rebels," ventured Iolaus.

"They are," responded the Regent.

"So how did ... no don't tell me," groaned Autolycus as he slapped his palm to his forehead, "your screening process was not as rigorous as you thought, and now you don't know who you can trust. You've got a bunch of Amazons that not only want to see Xena out of the picture permanently, but they'd also be happy if you and Gabrielle happened to be swallowed up in the proceedings as well. Sheesh! This just gets better and better!"

"Well," the bard said quietly, "Autolycus has just about summed things up. For safety's sake, the only people that we know we can trust are here in this room. Has anyone got any suggestions about how we are going to deal with this situation?"

There was a gloomy silence before Toris asked, "Can we identify the suspect women? I mean I know you brought the leaders out here and know who they are, but what about the ones you've only just found out about?"

Ephiny gave a slight nod of her head, "Some," she verified, "Nebula recognised Jerushan and Essaine, as the messenger and the guard who allowed her out of the barracks. Now admittedly Essaine may not be one of our traitors," the word left a foul taste in her mouth, "she may have just let Jerri out thinking she was going to do some site-seeing or something, but we really can't afford to take that chance. So, as far as the situation is concerned, Essaine must be counted as being against us."

"Are there any amongst the guards that you would definitely count as being sound?" questioned Iolaus.

The Regent threw a look over her shoulder at Eponin, "Poni?" she asked.

Nebula strode across to the door, "You're gonna be more use in the discussion than me," she told the weapons master, "I'll hold the breach, you go and thrash this out with them."

Eponin gave the pirate one of her rare smiles and a short, "Thanks," before heading across to the others to apply her knowledge to the problem, "The warriors that I personally selected I'm certain are above suspicion. Each of them has expressed loyalty to both Gabrielle and Ephiny, and most have a high regard for Xena. They were the first chosen for this mission and I'd trust them with our lives."

"How many of them are there?" asked Hercules.

"Fifty-seven," answered the weapons master promptly, "The rest of the guard were vetted and selected by either Solari or Malonda."

"Who recommended Jerushan and Essaine?" asked Gabrielle, hating the idea that either of the two highly placed women could be part of a conspiracy against her.

"Solari recommended Essaine, Malonda, Jerushan," reported Eponin, "although that doesn't mean anything. They could have easily been taken in by some clever acting. We were kind of in a hurry to put together this expedition."

"Autolycus cleared his throat, "In that case how can you be so sure about those you selected?" he questioned.

"Because each of those warriors has been personally trained by me. I've known them all well for years and I know their views. Not one of them has ever expressed a word against Gabrielle," snorted Poni derisively.

"Okay," persisted the thief, "So why don't you know the others so well?"

"To mount this expedition, we had to call in warriors from the village garrisons and the border outposts. I know all of them. They have all trained under me at one time or another, but I am not close enough to them to be able to tell their sympathies. We had to make certain that Solari had a strong enough, loyal guard at home to protect against problems there, so we did our best with what we had." Explained the dour Amazon brusquely.

"Are you sure this Solari is trustworthy?" insisted Autolycus.

Gabrielle held up a hand to halt the heated responses that she could tell were about to erupt from both Eponin and Ephiny, "If I were to doubt Solari's loyalty, I might as well doubt yours, or Iolaus', or even Xena's," she told him calmly. "Solari has stood by me and Ephiny from the moment I became Queen and had to face Velasca. It was through her 'good offices' that you were able to get us out of that cell in time to get to the ambrosia."

Recognition flashed in the thief's eyes, "She was the one who ..?" he held his hands to the sides of his chest and mimed the squeezing together of the woman's breasts as he remembered extracting the metal pin from her leather top to use as a lock pick. "That was her?" he asked.

Gabrielle nodded in confirmation, "So you see, Solari is beyond reproach."

"Mmmm," he considered, "Well what about Malonda, then?" He thought about the black haired Amazon who acted as Eponin's second.

"Loni's been with the Royal Guard for about six moons. She's a very talented Warrior and has risen quickly in the ranks to hold the position she does. She's never given us any cause to mistrust her," Ephiny answered.

"Great!" snapped Toris, "So we're back to trying to figure out just who we can trust in the guards, then, aren't we."

"If we'd got Xena here she could use her pinch to interrogate this Jerushan," muttered Joxer.

"Well Xena's not here," winced Gabrielle as the thought of where her best friend was impacted once more on her mind, "and we can't afford to alert our enemies that we're onto them. The question is what should we do?"

Silence reined in the room for many heartbeats before Hercules ventured a solution. To be sure it wasn't an ideal solution, but it was the best that could be come up with at the time, "I think that perhaps that Eponin should spend some time in the barracks and check out just who is particularly friendly with Essaine and Jerushan and see who, if anyone speaks to Tarelle and her people. Once we know who is working with whom, we can take steps to confine them."

"The question is, though, where?" puzzled Iolaus, "I mean we don't want half of Rome knowing that we have problems, so we can hardly get Pompey to lock them up or something."

"My ship," Nebula spoke from the door, "Use that. We can make it look as if they're a work detail to keep the ship in order."

"That might just work," agreed Autolykus, "but I suggest that we question Jerushan to try and find out what message she delivered to Caesar. We need to know just what they are attempting here."

"Who's going to question her? If she is a member of Tarelle's fanatic group, she's not going to be very willing to speak to us," frowned Ephiny.

"Why not let me and Iolaus have a go at asking her some questions," offered Toris, "We had some success with one of Caesar's soldiers a while back and, as Xena's brother, her reputation might carry some weight in your Amazon's thinking."

"Toris, I don't believe in torture," warned the bard with a touch of authority in her voice.

"Don't worry Gabrielle," the raven haired man assured, "she might have a hangover tomorrow, but that's about all."

"Very well then," agreed the young Queen, "I think we have a plan of action. Eponin, go and see what you can find out, and have Jerushan sent up to Ephiny's suite. Try to make it look like she was picked for a random task, perhaps get one of your trusted warriors to come with her so it doesn't look too suspicious. Oh and Ep," added Gabrielle as the Weapons master headed for the door. When the Amazon turned back to look she warned, "Say nothing about any of this to anyone .. including Malonda, okay?"

"My Queen," agreed Eponin formally, as she turned and left on her assignment.

No one took any notice when Autolycus excused himself and headed for the bathroom, all of them were concerned with ironing out any kinks and wrinkles that they could see in the hastily assembled plan.

Making his way to the large window, the King of Thieves, moved with confident purpose, having already studied every detail of the possible exits from the suite days previously. With practised skill, he stepped out onto the little sun balcony, slipped a small grapnel from his sleeve and swung it expertly by the strong thin cord, building momentum until he released it to catch over a hanging branch of a nearby tree. Without a sound, he swung himself away from the palace and down to the ground where he used the natural cover of shadows to proceed in hidden stealth. - *Good job I persuaded Eponin to pick me up some basic equipment!* - was his parting thought.

Chapter Fifty Five: Shadows in the Night

Eponin left the Queen's suite and headed off to the barracks trying to work out an effective strategy for weeding out the bad apples from her guards, and how to get Jerushan up to Ephiny's rooms without raising any suspicions. These were problems that she hadn't counted on having to tackle when this rescue mission was planned. Not only did they have to worry about hauling Xena out from under Caesar's nose, but they now had the difficulty of getting themselves out of Rome in one piece.

- *Anything to do with Gabrielle is never easy,* - she reminded herself with a wry smile.

It didn't take her long to get to the barracks and, in fact, she slowed down as she neared them giving her both time to continue thinking and to make sure her breathing appeared to be regular: the last thing she wanted was for the rebel Amazons to guess something was wrong. - *No this visit to the barracks must appear to be perfectly normal,* - she told herself.

Nodding to the guards as she passed them, Eponin entered the large building, checking the dormitories and finally the dining hall until she located the face she wanted. Then looked around for a couple of her most trusted warriors, "Kyana, Karrellie," she scanned the dining hall as if randomly selecting another warrior, "Yes .. and you, Jerri," she signalled, "Ephiny has a task that needs to be done and I think you three have the right skills between you. Get yourselves to her suite as quick as you can."

She watched as the women collected their gear and snagged Kyana's arm, as she passed by, to whisper some extra instructions that made the warrior's eyes widen before she nodded her understanding and called out, "Come on you two slugs. The Queen wants us and you dawdle as if about to go for a stroll through the park with your latest lover!" grinned the youthful Amazon.

That got some hearty chuckles and good natured ribbing from the rest of the occupants of the dining rooms, some of it so earthy that even Eponin felt some heat coming into her cheeks. She shook her head at her sister Amazon's and tried to remember some of the more outrageous cracks to tell Ephiny when she got her alone.. she definitely was not going to repeat them in front of Gabrielle!

that party, that was brought in from the country, stay in the palace unless I say otherwise. If any one of them attempts to leave here, I want all five of them locked up. Is that understood?" he demanded tonelessly.

"Yes sir," agreed Antonius.

"Take a head count .. one a day .. Antonius. It's your task to make certain that they remain 'safe'. Mars has given me the keys to victory, but I need to make sure that we don't lose them."

"What if the Amazons attempt to interfere, sir?" questioned the clever young officer who personally felt that the Amazon women were a far deeper menace than his commander was giving them credit for. And that silent slave they had with them, well there was just something about him that didn't quite add up and it had Antonius on edge.

"Amazon's are great warriors," Pompey told him, "But even their legendary battle prowess can be neutralized. They have only a hundred fighters, I have an entire loyal legion within easy access and there are even more troops available within Rome should it become necessary to subdue the Amazons." He smiled mirthlessly, "I suspect, however, that they will be far more valuable to me than half the senate, because I think that Caesar will be rather distracted by them ... especially their Queen, Ephiny. He could hardly keep his eyes off of her tonight, and I took a few minor steps to ensure his continuing interest. His wife, Pompeia, will be embarrassed yet again by her husbands lusts. It's just a pity he couldn't keep his lusts firmly focused on his groin and away from the political arena."

Antonius forced a 'natural' laugh at his commanders crude witticism, before seizing upon the opening that mention of arenas brought, "What of the Warrior Princess, sir?"

"Ah yes! .. Xena!" he almost purred, "You know, I really admire that woman. Her animosity for Caesar is so refreshing in this jaded city .. you could almost see it radiating from her in waves of heat. My dear friend, Julius, however," he barked with a short staccato laugh, "Would like nothing better than to prove his mastery over her between the sheets. Unfortunately, even with his .. ego .. he wouldn't risk that particular little foray. She'd rip his manhood off and feed it to him before taking him apart piece by piece."

Sighing heavily, Pompey stood up and moved across to the window to look out into the sculpted peacefulness of the palace grounds, "You know it's a real pity that she didn't just stick that dagger I gave her between Caesar's shoulder blades. Oh, I admit that her manipulation of Caesar was masterful and I really enjoyed watching him writhe when he realised that he was going to have to execute Crassus and that he'd lost both Verchinex and the Warrior Princess. But I could have forgone all that quite happily to have him dead."

"Wouldn't questions have been asked in the senate about your involvement if that dagger had been found in his back?" asked the tribune, who was politically astute enough to realise that although Pompey the Magnus was a magnificent general and leader of men, his grasp of politics had been called both a little petulant and naive at times.

routine was not likely to be settled here yet, as the guards had only just taken up possession of their new space. But the task was one they had now performed for many moons and a feeling of familiarity was almost tangible here.

The shadow watched for some time, maybe a candlemark, noting that never once did the six soldiers, that patrolled the pit area, move away from the lighted confines of their designated area. Approaching the pit - *Is*, - the shadow admitted, - *seemingly impossible*. - On an impulse, the dark figure picked up a smooth pebble and lofted it towards the grating.

The light 'ping' as the stone clipped a bar on it's descent into the hole, drew a grunt of surprise from the prisoner within, and immediate, alert attention from the six sentries, all of whom approached the hole with torches to ascertain that their captive was not attempting some impossible escape.

With attention firmly on the pit, the shadow slipped from it's chosen concealment and sped silently towards the palatial walls of Caesar's home.

Caesar felt buoyant after his triumph upon the steps of the temple, where he'd shown his mastery to Pompey and the senate, and had the satisfaction of having Xena humbled and beaten before the people of Rome. - *It has been an almost perfect day*, - he mused happily as his thoughts turned to the feast and the attractive barbarian queen who seem to promise a satisfying diversion from the intricate, and often deadly, politics of the Empire. He wondered how much of a chase Ephiny would lead him on, having absolutely no doubt of his ability to pursue and conquer the woman on a personal level. Of course having the wager with Pompey was an additional bonus!

Allowing an unpleasant smile to play on his boyishly youthful features, the conquering hero moved deliberately across the room he used as his day office and looked from the large window out onto the drill-yard where his prize captive had been housed. He'd had his people start constructing that pit, with this day in mind, just after she had left Rome the last time. He could, of course, have had Xena housed in his dungeons, but the ease with which she extracted herself and Verchinex had made him leery of entrusting her confinement to a place that she might well have plans laid for removing herself from.

Then again, he could have had her held in the gladiator pens of the coliseum. It would have been functional for training purposes with tight discipline and tighter security. None of the highly trained and deadly fighters that graced it's facilities had ever managed to escape from there .. but then again, none of them were the highly intelligent, infinitely resourceful and unquestionably lethal Warrior Princess.

- *No, Xena*, - he grinned as he looked towards her prison, - *I far prefer having you under my eye. I don't trust you too far away from me, and I want to know just what you're up to every moment of every day.* -

Having drunk enough wine for one day, he ignored the refreshment tray and sat down at his familiar desk, glancing through some of the more pressing of the accumulated paperwork that had been left for him by his secretary. His busy mind sorted through, digested and stored the

information as he mentally concocted lists of points that required immediate action or clarification.

Never having been a man who believed in wasting more than a minimal amount of time in the arms of Morpheus, Caesar worked long into the darkness, and it was past midnight when the sentry rapped at his door to announce the presence of Brutus.

"Send him in," he replied curtly.

Brutus stepped through the door. He looked tired and harassed, but still executed a smart salute and a confident tone as he spoke, "Welcome back, my Lord. I was delighted to hear of your victory at sea and trust you enjoyed your triumphal entry to the city." He approached his mentor, a man he had called friend for many years.

Caesar watched him coolly, "The Carthaginians were agreeable enough to provide some entertainment for Varanius. Xena, of course, took the opportunity to prove just how dangerous she is and I spent a long day and night adrift with her on the wreckage of a Carthaginian trireme." - *No point in not telling him about it, the rumours would be abroad soon enough.* - "However, that situation was rectified and the Warrior Princess is where she belongs .. a hole in the ground and under my dominion. Unlike a certain bard, thief and fool that I entrusted to your care. Just exactly how did you allow their escape?"

Brutus flushed redly and stammered, "My Lord, we were hit by a storm and the prisoners were washed overboard," - *Well it was close to the truth,* - grimaced the swarthy subordinate. "Not trusting to believe that the prisoners had drowned, I had men scouring the countryside as soon as possible .. but they proved to be far more resourceful than anticipated." He was aware of the anger in Caesar's intense brown eyes.

"I see," the powerful Roman Lord said softly. "And just how did three, chained, slaves manage to firstly survive being 'washed overboard' in high seas, and then managed to elude you and half the garrisons of Italy without you managing to retake them?"

"My Lord .. umm .. the thief, Autolykus, he must have found a way to remove the chains before they went into the sea," he tried to explain, knowing that Caesar was livid at the failure of what he perceived as a simple task.

"Ah, so they weren't so much washed overboard as much as they staged an escape," nodded the dark haired noble, seemingly understandingly.

"Yes .. ah .. no," squirmed Brutus, "The situation was very confused. The storm came up suddenly and everyone was forced to crew the ship, or risk going down with her on the reefs that we were close to. The prisoners were shackled to a ringbolt on the decking at the prow of the ship, and appeared to be safe enough .. no one could have assumed that they'd be crazy enough to throw themselves overboard in that high sea with rocks all around us," blurted Brutus desperately.

Caesar watched him with eyes blazing darkly in the shadowy room. What his aide said .. - *My friend, said* - he thought sarcastically to himself, .. was mostly true. The thief was a dangerous man to try and keep imprisoned, - *Almost as difficult as Xena, but in a different way*, - he conceded. - *I'll have to work out something special for him when I re-take him and the others. Either that, or I'll execute him as an example. Yes, that might well be the answer. It would be a valuable lesson to the bard and the others, and would really cause Xena pain.* - His smile was mirthless and chilling, making the swarthy, black haired soldier even more uncomfortable.

"What about the other two?" he snapped at Brutus, not yet willing to allow his **'friend'** to relax, enjoying watching him squirm.

"While searching for the escaped slaves," came the answer, "reports came in that the other two we were seeking had been seen in Pisae .. I had their descriptions circulated at the same time as I posted the news about the bard and the other two. It seemed likely that they might show up close to Rome at some point."

"Well at least you did something right," conceded Caesar watching the bearded man carefully as resentment began to flare in his eyes, "So why haven't you managed to lay hands on any of them?" he asked, pushing some more. - *Brutus has to understand that he can't rely on friendship to cover for his ineptness in this situation. A sharp lesson now may prove valuable later. Hopefully he won't make such glaring mistakes again .. if he does ...* - he allowed the thought to hang as he listened to what his second in command had to say on the subject.

Stifling his flaring feelings, he explained what had happened in a rigid voice that spoke volumes about his anger and embarrassment over the situation, "I had everything well in hand. My men were herding both the bard and her party, and the other two men, into a tight cordon where the trap could be sprung so that the whole bunch would be netted in one fell swoop." He began to get more animated as he related how troops loyal to both the senate, particularly Graccus and his supporters, and those under the command of Pompey, began to execute manoeuvres in the areas where he was forcing the prey into.

"I hadn't got the authority to deny access to either group, and men from either party could have picked up the fugitives, although I strongly suspect it was Pompey's men," he snarled, knowing that the action had caused this humiliation in front of Caesar.

Having shown the stick, it was time to surrender the carrot, "Take a seat, my friend," the nobleman invited, no longer inflicting his anger on the other man, "Indeed, I believe you are right about the good Pompey's involvement in my business. He seems determined to interfere where he is not wanted. I suspect he is going to try and use those 'charming' Amazons against us somehow," he deliberately used the word 'us' to let his friend know he was once more included in his own grand plans.

"Do the Amazons have any connection with the bard, or Xena? If they should join with Pompey against us could it prove to be a problem?" Brutus asked pertinently trying to relax after the grilling he had just endured.

"Yeah," agreed the thief swallowing, "Well, umm, you see I was, ah, just passing the city's treasury and .. ah, I thought, let's see what kind of security the place has." that last part came out in a rush as he found himself backed up against a very cold marble wall by a slowly advancing hunk of menace.

"So you thought you bring back some souvenirs," growled the demi-god his light blue eyes holding a touch of menace that Autolycus had rarely every seen, "Gods above, don't you realise that if you'd been caught we'd have been in even more trouble?"

Hearing the disappointment in the big man's voice, Autolycus tried to smooth out the situation, "Oh, c'mon Hercules! Do you really think Roman treasury guards could catch the King of Thieves?"

"You've already been caught once," he was reminded.

"Yeah, but that was because I'd got Joxer the Lame Brained along for the ride." He looked at his friend and felt a compulsion to try and ease his fears, "Look, Herc. There really wasn't any danger. I just took a quick look, pocketed a few coins for playing dice with ..." he looked at the two heavy sacks, "well maybe more than a few," he admitted, "and then came right back here. Harpies hairdo's! It was easier getting into the treasury than it was getting close to where Xena's being held," he blurted before he realised what he had said, trying to get through to the demi-god that he'd been perfectly safe.

He knew he'd made a mistake as soon as the big man whirled on him again, "Where did you say you've been?" came the forceful demand.

"Umm, to the Roman treasury?" he tried with a grimace and knew that he'd failed when he saw the demi-god's hands clench. Dropping to his knees, the thief held up his hand in supplication and cried, "Alright, alright, I dropped in at Caesar's to see what the set-up was with Xena and see if she could be broken out!" He closed his eyes, "If you're gonna kill me, make it quick, I can't stand the sight of blood .. especially my own."

When nothing happened, he opened one eye and squinted at the big form in front of him, "Am I still alive?" he asked cautiously, trying to judge the other man's mood.

"For now," Hercules replied, pulling him up to his feet, "But I want to know every detail of where you've been tonight, and exactly what you've been doing."

Pulling his tunic straight, Autolycus watched the demi-god start to precede him into the main room of the suite, "Sheesh!" he breathed, "I was going to tell you all about it anyway." He eyed the sacks in Hercules' big hands and amended, "Well maybe not all of it .. but all the important stuff!" His hands moved quickly to catch the two sacks that were lobbed at him, "Gee thanks!" he muttered sarcastically as one of the pouches split and spilled dinars all over the floor.

Chapter Fifty Six: Plots & Pots

Everyone except for Nebula, who was back on her ship making preparations to house her unexpected guests, met in Ephiny's suite for a long and informal breakfast. Nearly everyone looked tired, with the exception of Joxer who had snored his way through the whole night even though he'd intended to wait up and see what Autolycus had been up to.

The guards, in the hall outside, were Amazons that Eponin vouched for with her life. Berra and Turra would ensure that no one got close enough to the door to be able to overhear the conversation, even if they could manage to hear anything that was being said behind the thick wood panels.

They lounged on large cushions, around a cleared space on the floor which had been covered with plates and dishes that bore various products from Pompey's industrious kitchens. There was a pot of nutty cereal and bowls of honey for those with a sweet tooth. A wide variety of meats and cheeses were piled liberally on serving dishes and the freshly baked, warm bread gave off an enticing aroma. Fruit was abundant, including figs, dates and oranges as well as apples, pears and grapes. All in all there was enough to satisfy anyone's appetite, even the legendary one of a certain bard.

Iolaus, looking bleary eyed was giving a report on just what he and Toris had been able to find out from Jerushan, "We used the method that we'd worked out in Lugdunum for questioning the guard that we abducted. Once we got enough of the wine into her, Jerushan told us what she knew."

"Which was?" prompted Gabrielle, from her position at the head of the gathering, as she popped another date into her mouth.

"From what she said," Toris responded, "It was just a note from Tarelle trying to make contact with Caesar. She says she doesn't know what was in the note, but she told us that she was supposed to go back tomorrow evening so that she could make further arrangements with him."

"You might want to re-think that little bit of information and the accuracy of your examination technique," Autolycus commented wryly. All eyes turning towards the thief and he suddenly felt how a rabbit must when finding itself surrounded by predators. "Now look," he began in self defence, "I know I'm not too popular at the moment .. going off without a word to anyone like that, but," he countered their glowers and raised eyebrows, "I did it with the purest intentions."

"Pure gold intentions?" sniped Hercules pointedly looking at the bulges made by the purloined pouches under the thief's tunic.

"Yes," agreed the darkly handsome man. He caught Hercules' look and had the grace to flush a little, "My intentions were pure gold," he protested, "Look, we needed information. Our current position here is rocky to say the least, we need to know just what is going on amongst our 'friends' and enemies."

"Oh sure, chuckled Iolaus, "I bet you found out plenty in the Roman treasury."

"That," shrugged Autolycus uncomfortably, "was just a training exercise .. I need to keep my business hand in. However," he went onto the attack, "my other little visits were very productive and worth far more to us than all the dinars that they've got stuffed away in that vault of theirs."

He had everyone's attention now and a silence crept over the richly appointed room before Gabrielle sighed and asked, "Alright, Autolycus, tell us all about it."

The King of thieves chuckled and rubbed his hands together, "Well when Shorty's pirate friend," he got a quick couple of digs in a Iolaus for the fun of it, "dropped those lightning bolts on us, I figured we needed to know as much as we could about what everyone else in this game was up to. Now since I, by nature of my expertise, was best suited to finding these things out ..."

"Sneaking around and listening at doors," interpreted Iolaus annoyed about the cracks at his height and the nature of his friendship with Nebula.

"... I took it upon myself to find out what I could on our joint behalf," he brushed an index finger across his moustache, "even at the risk of my own life."

"Just so he could play the hero!" sniped the blonde warrior.

"Cut it out Iolaus or we'll be here all day," Hercules pointed out.

"Well most of us can't go anywhere else anyway," snapped the blonde man, who was beginning to get 'cabin fever'.

"Hey guys," Ephiny interrupted them, "Whatever Autolycus has to say could be important to us, so why don't we just listen for a while, huh?"

"Please go on, Autolycus," encouraged Gabrielle with a small smile, "but try to stick to the point. We all know how highly you value your own skills .. not that we don't value them too," she assured him as she saw him frown at the small dig she couldn't resist giving voice to.

The thief gave her a look before deciding that it wasn't worth the energy in defending his, admittedly, dubious honour when everyone else was likely to side with Gabrielle against him, "Yes, well .. hrmph. I dodged over to the Amazon barracks to check out just who the main suspects were, and decided that I'd snoop there a bit later when Eponin finished doing her thing. Being at something of a loose end, I just happened to see Pompey returning from that banquet thing you went to, so decided to try and find out what was on his mind."

"And ..." encouraged Ephiny when he stopped to swallow some fruit juice.

"And basically he's going to use the Amazons for all their political worth, while making certain that Gabrielle, Toris, Joxer, Curly and me stay put ... even if he has to lock us all up in his dungeons. Which he will do, by the way, if any one of us tries to leave this building .. conventionally at least." He then filled them in on exactly what had been said between Pompey and Antonius.

"So in a nutshell," Eponin summed up, "You're saying that Pompey has little intention of letting you, Gabrielle, Toris, Joxer or Iolaus go. That he wants to distract Caesar by using Ephiny as a blind, and will happily see Xena, and everyone of us, dead if it serves his personal vendetta against Caesar?"

"That's pretty much spot on what he was saying," agreed the thief.

"Well at least we know exactly where we stand with Pompey," muttered Hercules, who was beginning to appreciate the true value of what Autolycus had been doing in the night.

"Alright," said the bard before taking a bite out of a pear and chewing thoughtfully for a moment before swallowing and asking, "What did you do next?"

The King of Thieves grinned rakishly at her before continuing, "Well having heard Nebula say that Xena was taken to Caesar's palace, and as I was intending to head over there anyway, I thought I'd take a look at how difficult it would be to 'steal' her out from under their noses." He nibbled thoughtfully at a fig before continuing, "I gotta tell you, it's a whole lot easier breaking into their damn treasury than getting close to the Warrior Princess. I never even got a look at her. She's being held in the drill-yard ..."

"In the yard?" questioned Toris confused.

"Weeell," drew out Autolycus, "not so much in as under."

"Are you being deliberately cryptic?" demanded Gabrielle, "And I thought Xena was bad!"

That got a full, white toothed, smile from Autolycus, "Habit," he said apologetically, "always keep 'em guessing." That earned him a snort of laughter from the bard and a few grins from amongst the others on the floor. "Actually, someone had dug a pit in the centre of that parade ground and covered it with a very heavy looking metal grill. They've set up beacons around the pit that flood the area with light and there are six guards in that lit area who check on her every quarter candlemark or so to make sure she's just where they left her. On top of that there's twenty guards all armed with nasty looking pistol crossbows that shoot darts, which I guess would be coated with some kind of sleeping drug."

"They had those while we were in Gaul. I think Caesar would rather not kill her unless he has to," interrupted Gabrielle. Everyone nodded thoughtfully at this information.

"Well anyway," continued the thief, "any thoughts I had of busting her out were ended then and there, because there's no way to sneak past those guards without being caught." He allowed that information to sink in before he went on to detail what he had overheard Caesar saying.

"So he knows we're here, then?" questioned Toris slamming his fist against his knee in anger.

"Hey!" Joxer suddenly chirped up, "You guys know what that means, don't ya?" He hurried on without waiting for an answer to his question, "It means Caesar's got a spy in Pompey's household working for him."

Iolaus shook his head in mute disbelief at the wanna be warrior, "More likely a double agent," the blonde warrior commented, "Otherwise Caesar would know that we weren't in the cells."

"Well done, short stuff," snickered Autolycus giving him a soft round of applause, "You're smarter than you look .. of course that isn't difficult."

Iolaus was up on his knees about to make a lunge at the thief, when he was restrained by Hercules' firm grasp, "Calm down, pal. We're all on the same side here."

Yeah!" retorted the smaller man, "Well tell that to the prince of .. of .. pilferers over there," he snarled.

"Cut it out Autolycus. We've got enough problems without fighting amongst ourselves," insisted the demi-god.

"Yeah, well," the thief said as he settled back down in his place, "We have a bigger problem than shor ..." he caught Hercules' steely gaze, "Umm .. Iolaus' prickly feelings."

"Like what?" questioned Joxer with zealous interest.

"Like the fact that Caesar's got the hots for Ephiny and is likely going to be panting after her like a resident of Tartarus would an ice-cube!" he pointed out.

Ephiny, Gabrielle and Eponin looked at each other almost seeming to have a silent conversation, one which neither the bard nor the Weapons Master was very happy with, "Well," said the Regent at last. "I think that if I can keep Caesar chasing me, it might just keep him off balance enough for us to get this plan to work."

"You'd be taking a big risk, Ephiny," Hercules warned, worried about just what could happen.

Gabrielle laid a concerned hand on her friend's arm, "Eph, that man is dangerous .. even Xena is careful about him. There's something about his personality .. it's strange. Xena says it's like a moth and a flame, an he's the flame. The attraction he exudes is almost impossible to resist, even when you know you're going to get burned. I don't want you to get hurt .. and I know Xena wouldn't want you to either," she told her friend with worried sincerity.

"I'll be alright, Gabrielle. I'll make sure that I've always got Hercules or one of the Amazon guards with me whenever I see him, that way I'll be protected," the Regent tried to reassure her Queen with more confidence than she really felt herself, - *I've already felt that attraction, and it's going to be hard to resist him*, - she admitted to herself.

Hercules watched the edgy Weapons Master feeling very much out of place and helpless here. He could say nothing to get the severely agitated Eponin to calm down even if he hadn't, in fact, shared the same reservations about the scheme to keep Caesar occupied as she did.

He forced himself not to sigh, knowing that almost any sound emanating from him would not be in keeping with his cover, and he could feel someone's eyes watching him with a burning intensity. Squatting down next to a marble column, he leaned his back on it and tried to look around the impressive architecture like some uncouth, uneducated bumpkin, while in truth the surrounding magnificence meant nothing to him .. after the wonders of Mount Olympus, most buildings were just pale imitations. Oh, another time he might have admired the craftsmanship, but today his mind was fixed firmly on locating the person who seemed to be showing such an intent interest in him.

Eventually he found the interested observer, partially hidden by a colonnade up on the balcony that rimmed the foyer, giving entrance to the gallery for spectators who followed the Senate's deliberations. Taking very casual looks in the direction of the man, Hercules determined that the watcher had not seen many more than twenty summers. He appeared to be good looking and had very distinctive, chestnut coloured, curly hair. The demi-god was fairly certain he had seen the man around Pompey's palace.

- Obviously Pompey wants to know what's happening between Caesar and the Amazons, - he mused, - but why is he showing so much interest in me? - he asked himself, well aware that the observers eyes stayed pinned on himself rather than the pacing Eponin.

He pushed his deliberations into the back of his mind when he saw the Weapons Master stiffen and look towards the entrance portico as Caesar and his entourage arrived, attracting all the attention of the milling crowds. Hercules noted that Eponin made no move to approach the Roman, he knew that they were there. He would just have to come to them.

As Caesar approached, Hercules made an obvious ploy of looking in the Roman noble's direction before pushing himself up to his full impressive height. It was necessary for everyone to think that he had seen Caesar before moving .. his disguise required that he maintain the impression of deafness.

Eponin tried valiantly to erase the scowl from her features as she watched Caesar approach her with a tail of fawning, advancement seeking, men trailing after him. - *He is*, - considered the Amazon, - *the most arrogant, condescending, man I have ever had the misfortune to meet.* -

Applying a stone faced mask to her features that made her look far more menacing than normal, she greeted Caesar with flat formality, "Hail Caesar, I bring you a message from Ephiny, by the grace of Artemis, Queen of the Amazons, Lioness of Themiscyra, Daughter of the Moon." She handed over the letter that the Regent and bard had worked hard upon crafting, adding things and removing others until they had constructed what they believed to be a suitably amiable and flirtatious missive that would both encourage and intrigue the Roman.

It said:

My Lord Caesar

I so enjoyed your victory celebrations yesterday, I found it all so riveting. Is it true that everything Roman is always exhibited on such a grand scale? If so, that must keep the Roman population in a state of satiated exhaustion. How do you ever manage to pursue your conquests?

My Amazons have been keenly comparing the performances of your Roman ... gladiators ... to the men of Greece. They seem to think that the Greeks make up in stamina and endurance what they loose to the Romans in weapon size and technique. However, as I frequently have told them, it's not the size of the weapon, but the skill of the wielder that makes a great .. gladiator!

I find myself incredibly tied up with so many functions that I just must attend. I do so hope to be able to meet with you at some of them. I anticipate some lengthy discussions and look forward to hearing how well your training of the animal is going. I find myself looking forward with eager expectation to the match between your slave and my Heston, although we still have to negotiate the terms of the wager. Personally, I hope you drive a hard bargain and that we both gain some mutual satisfaction from this encounter.

If you are not too burdened by affairs of State, perhaps we could discuss more of these issues at Ambrosius' party tomorrow evening? Just let Eponin know your answer and I will adjust my plans accordingly.

Ephiny

Caesar's breathing seemed to quicken as he read the note and both Hercules and the Weapons Master noticed a predatory gleam kindle in his brown eyes. The Roman read the missive through a second time before casting an assessing glance at the demi-god, noting the 'concubines' sculpted muscular body and remembering the strength and endurance he had shown when fighting the Ethiopian, before tapping the letter lightly against his right thigh and telling Eponin, "Inform Queen Ephiny that I will look forward to our encounter at the house of Ambrosius, tomorrow night."

Poni answered with a short bow, and watched as Caesar disappeared towards the Senate door, still surrounded by a crowd of hangers-on that would have been ready to clean his boots with their tongues had he but asked them to. The Weapons Master's lip curled in distaste. - *Well whatever he's got, I seem to be immune to it!* - she sneered silently. - *What a goat sucking, pig fricking, asshole of a male!* - she crudely described him to herself.

As Caesar left them, Hercules' eyes had turned in the direction where the unobtrusive observer still remained at his post, carefully monitoring the exchange between the rival power in Rome and the Amazon's emissary. When he realised that he'd been spotted by the huge, silent man, the spy quickly ducked out of sight.

days ground on. Autolycus found relief by slipping out at night to keep track of what was happening in the enemy camps.

Ephiny and Eponin were continually at odds over the problem of keeping Caesar at a wide enough distance to insure the safety of the Regent. The Weapons Master thought two miles was too close, while Ephiny argued that Caesar's pursuit of her kept him enough off balance to avoid him starting to make awkward inquiries .. well that was what they hoped.

The rogue Amazons were contained in Nebula's ship and engaged upon useful activities there, keeping them occupied, out of harms way and out of a demon brew that was difficult enough to keep in the pot without everything boiling over anyway. It was an uncomfortable situation to say the least, and it teetered along for a full fourteen days towards the new moon before the pot got stirred hard.

Chapter Fifty Seven: Keep On Rockin'

Bend, search for a hold, hoist, shuffle ... shuffle ... shuffle ..., drop! Shuffle ... shuffle, shuffle

Xena moved back across the length of the parade ground and bent to seek another hand hold on one of the head sized boulders that lay in a pile there. Picking up the one closest to her she worked, without need to concentrate, upon her mindless labour.

There were two hundred and thirty eight rocks in the pile. She knew each one intimately as, for the past fourteen days, she had spent every afternoon since arriving in Rome moving the pile from one side to the other of the drill yard, under the full glare of the burning sun. The task was designed to keep her active and fit, occupied, and exhausted. It was mind numbing, endless, pointless, physical labour, devised to break her spirit.

Bend, search for a hold, hoist, shuffle ... shuffle ... shuffle ..., drop! Shuffle ... shuffle, shuffle

That first night in the pit had been one of mixed despair and tentative hope. Despair, because she felt helpless and totally without control. She hated that feeling with all her being. Not since the age of five, when Toris and his friends had ambushed her and locked her into a grain bin for an entire day, as retribution for some prank she had pulled on them, had she been in such a situation .. and she'd sworn at that early age never to be so again if she could do anything at all about it.

The misery and the despair was only staved off by the small shards of hope that seeing Hercules and Ephiny had created within her. She had friends working for her freedom and, - *If only I understood what Eph meant correctly*, - she'd told herself, - *then Gabrielle is free and safe!* - It was a warm ember of comfort that allowed her to pass her an uncomfortable night, huddled in one of the two, mainly covered, corners of the hole, under her two blankets.

Bend, search for a hold, hoist, shuffle ... shuffle ... shuffle ..., drop! Shuffle ... shuffle, shuffle

At first light, come morning, she was awoken by the sound of the locks being opened and the bolt drawn back on the barred grill. She roused herself and slowly stood as the trap door was

thrown back and a ladder let down into the hole, "Get you worthless carcass up here, slave!" had come Flaccus' unmistakable growl.

She could have forced them to come and get her, but self-preservation dictated that she cooperate .. she needed to get herself fit if she was ever going to wriggle free from Roman clutches. She had slowly climbed the ladder and, upon gaining the drill yard, stood docilely before the centurion, with her head bowed in seeming meek submission.

Flaccus was not fooled by the act. She knew it, and he knew that she was aware of it, but while she was being amenable, he was content to let things be, other than to warn his men about becoming lax, "Whatever face she chooses to display, she's still the same barbarian bitch that has slaughtered her way around the Empire! So for your own sakes, never .. ever .. relax around her."

Bend, search for a hold, hoist, shuffle ... shuffle ... shuffle ..., drop! Shuffle ... shuffle, shuffle

They'd taken her into the palace and down into the basements where baths had been built for the use of the household's slaves. Entry was via a thickly barred gate that was closed and locked as Xena, Flaccus and a guard of twenty passed it, leaving a further twenty men on duty on the far side, should they be required to subdue their charge.

Taking note of all salient facets of the facility, Xena was not surprised to find Patroclese waiting for her. What did, mildly, surprise her was that after the centurion locked the collar chain to her neck and a ringbolt set into the floor next to the bath, he proceeded to remove both her leg irons and the manacles along with the leather belt.

"Strip your trousers off, Xena, but leave your shirt on. I want to give the water a chance to loosen the dried blood before we attempt to get it off. I'd rather not have to deal with more bloody wounds than necessary," Patroclese told her.

She did as she was instructed, and slipped into the water, eager for the chance to remove the filth and grime that had encrusted itself on her body since her last bath in the river after the treaty agreement with Verchinex, - *How long ago was that?* - she silently questioned herself, - *Close on a moon ago*, - she calculated. - *Other than being doused with sea water after the flogging, I haven't been close to wash water. I must smell riper than a midden!* -

She was pleasantly surprised at the gentle warmth of the water and Patroclese noticing the look on her face, told her, "The baths here are heated by a hypercaust. Slaves don't get the full range of baths, but the tepidarium here is nice enough."

Sinking down into the relaxing warmth, she resisted the urge to wince as her assorted wounds stung from the water. She watched silently as Patroclese stripped down to his loincloth, selected a thin sharp knife from his kit, and slipped into the water, wading in behind her, where he began to delicately cut the linen fabric away from the crusted lash cuts.

He took his time, allowing the water to do most of his work for him, intent upon insuring that he did as little damage to the healing skin as possible. Xena sat motionless beginning to relax in the seductive warmth of the water, enjoying a small luxury in her Tartarus filled existence.

Finally, Patroclese finished easing the shirt off of her back and she was able to discard the garment to the side of the bath. She heard the healer splash his way out of the pool and turned when he called her name, "Xena, here catch," he said as he threw her a bar of strong smelling soap.

A graceful, golden arm, striped with blue and purple welts, snaked out of the water and caught the soap in mid flight, "Thanks," she grinned, and began to work on cleaning the collected filth from her skin and hair.

Bend, search for a hold, hoist, shuffle ... shuffle ... shuffle ..., drop! Shuffle ... shuffle, shuffle

She had been escorted from the baths, through the barred door and down another long corridor to a small windowless room containing a long marble slab table. Even on such a short walk, Flaccus had not relaxed his vigilance. As soon as she stepped out of the bath, the leg irons had been replaced. Patroclese had given her a length of linen to wrap around herself, and then the centurion had replaced the belt and the manacles, before releasing the leash and tugging her in the direction of the exit.

Once she had reached the small cell like room, the belt and manacles had been removed, "Get on the table, face down, slave," Flaccus had ordered.

She did as instructed, not speaking, not hesitating to obey. She needed to avoid more injuries if she was going to be in a fit state for escape and that meant putting the lid on her pride and stubbornness for a while. Once she was settled in place, the centurion secured the leash to a ring in the base of the slab, and used a chain already set for the purpose to lock to the links of the leg irons, pretty much holding her in place.

"Is that really necessary," Patroclese asked in a patient though already defeated tone.

"The room's not big enough for more than one guard in each corner," the centurion stated flatly, so the restraints should make sure she stays put ... at least until I can get enough men in here to secure her should it prove necessary." His hand shot out and grabbed a large fistful of her wet hair, turning her face towards his, "I'm watching you," he warned, "This sudden compliance doesn't fool me. You're up to something and I'm ready for it."

She kept her eyes cast down, refusing to look him in the eye knowing that, however else she acted, she couldn't disguise the fire that burned there. So she took shelter in silence and docility, aware that this 'new' tactic would probably have Flaccus on a razor edge of expectation, waiting for her to try something.

"That's enough, Flaccus," the healer told him sternly. "I have my job to do and there's much scheduled for the rest of the day. Let me get my work done so we can all get on."

Bend, search for a hold, hoist, shuffle ... shuffle ... shuffle ..., drop! Shuffle ... shuffle, shuffle

Patroclese had worked steadily for more than two candlemarks checking over the lacerations that scored his patient's back; adding extra stitches where they were required, using a biting cleanser to ensure that there wouldn't be any risk of infection, tending the lash weals over her arms and legs; applying salve to all the injuries and aloe to the blistered burns that still marked her shoulders and arms.

When he had finished working on her back, he'd called Flaccus in to release the lock on the leg irons so that Xena could turn over to enable him to tend the various injuries that ran down the front of her body. The centurion complied wordlessly, but made sure the restraints were secured once more before he allowed the physician to continue his work.

Bend, search for a hold, hoist, shuffle ... shuffle ... shuffle ..., drop! Shuffle ... shuffle, shuffle

After Patroclese had finished his ministrations, Xena was given a gray, thigh length tunic and a pair of under-britches, for modesty's sake, as well as having her boots returned to her. After being allowed, with the normal elaborate precautions, to dress once more she was escorted, fully shackled, back up out of the palace's cellars into daylight once again.

As she blinked in the bright light of morning, Xena felt better than she had in days and she knew that being clean played a part in that, although the thought of the close proximity of her friends definitely helped. A ghost of a smile almost played across her lips as she allowed the tug of the leash to guide her from the door of the cellars and across the drill-yard towards a different part of the palace.

Half way across the open yard, her good mood evaporated as she caught sight of a group of soldiers escorting a small woman with golden, honey blonde, hair down a colonnade away from her. Xena felt her heart clench, "Gabrielle," she whispered. And then, as the guard around her friend closed tighter and hurried the struggling woman away, she cried louder, "Gabrielle!" and took a lunge at the wall of soldiers surrounding her, trying to break through to reach the bard.

The guards swarmed around her. Flaccus retained a firm grip on her leash as she struggled to bypass the flesh and blood barrier that restricted her progress. Surprisingly, they didn't hit her. Just used their weight of numbers to bear her down to the ground and contain her there until she finished heaving.

"Gabrielle," she whispered again, despondency seeping into her with the knowledge that her hopes for escape were shattered.

Seeing the fight drain out of his captive, Flaccus ordered her to be hoisted upright. He indulged himself in a full-blooded slap that left the print of his hand emblazoned upon her left cheek. He noted, with satisfaction, the dull look of uncaring acceptance in her eyes, "Your outburst here will cost the bard five strokes of the strap tonight. I'll have them administered here in the courtyard after you're back in your kennel. If you give me any cause to reprimand you again, she will receive an additional five strokes,"

He recognised the brief flare in the blue eyes, but it was quickly extinguished, "All punishments you earn will be taken by the bard. Lord Caesar wants you fit and well to fight in the pits. What that means is, you behave or she suffers the consequences. Do you understand that?"

"Yes, sir," she answered flatly, and knew that she was once again hamstrung.

Bend, search for a hold, hoist, shuffle ... shuffle ... shuffle ..., drop! Shuffle ... shuffle, shuffle

The whole maniple had been assembled to escort her down to the Coliseum. There she was given into the care of the Lanista, Marius Sutones, who had been instructed to put her through the gladiator school training schedules from three candlemarks after dawn, until one candlemark after midday.

The Coliseum's training areas were mostly indoors and very heavily guarded. Even so Flaccus, and forty of his men, armed with pistol crossbows and drugged darts, remained on duty in addition to the normal gladiatorial guards that surrounded their charges.

Standing in the Lanista's office with Xena and six guards, Flaccus instructed, "Nothing too strenuous, at least to start with. She's got a lot of injuries to heal from. And she's not to get near any weapon of any description. She won't be fighting in the arena, Lord Caesar wants her for the pits."

Sutones considered the slave cautiously. His professional eye noted the quality of the shackles that bound her and the very unusual slave collar. He could see the sleek power of her muscular body and was very aware of the uneasy respect that the guards surrounding her were giving to their charge.

Walking behind Xena, he pulled at the neck of her tunic and looked down it to the mixture of raw and healing wounds that covered her flesh, "She looks like trouble," he stated matter-of-factly, "Any other instructions come with her?"

The Warrior Princess had closed her eyes and clenched her fists until her knuckles shone white through her bronzed skin. She had always borne a hatred of the principle of slavery and now, after experiencing the dehumanising process for herself, she had further reasons to despise it as an institution.

Noting Sutones's careful study of his charge, Flaccus approved of the Lanista. He was a man who knew his job and was businesslike in it's performance. As one professional to another, Flaccus knew the man would accept some advice without getting prickly about it, "No instructions, but if I were you I'd make sure that she only trains in closed, closely guarded, areas. Keep her in those fetters unless it's necessary to do otherwise, and if she causes any trouble get my boys to deal with it. They're used to handling her," he smiled grimly. "Oh, and one last thing. Don't ever make the mistake of thinking she's harmless, even when safely shackled. In the time we've had her she's killed twelve of my men and put another thirteen out of commission."

"So a real savage," breathed Sutones not in the least put out by the information, "Don't worry, we've had her type here before, I'm sure we can accommodate her."

Clenching her jaw tightly, Xena resisted the urge to make a scathing comment about the type of person that both the Lanista and the centurion were. She couldn't afford to provoke either man, although she longed for a time when such considerations became moot.

"Just a word of caution, Lanista. Whoever you've had to deal with before, if you multiply their capacity for causing trouble by ten, then maybe, just maybe, you'll get close to the danger she can cause you."

"She's that good?" questioned Sutones incredulously, finding it difficult not to doubt the centurion, even though he could tell that Flaccus was not the man to exaggerate.

"Took almost two hundred men to take her," acknowledged the centurion, "along with an awful lot of planning and a small grain of luck.

Marius Sutones nodded his head impressed as much by what Flaccus didn't say as by what he had, "Your men will be in close attendance whenever she's here?"

He received a curt nod in reply from Flaccus who then turned to Xena and, using the butt of his whip under her chin, lifted her head to look directly into her eyes that flashed dangerously for just a heartbeat, "You will obey all instructions given to you promptly. You will answer any question put to you respectfully. In fact you will behave as a model slave should, or ... well you know who will suffer if you don't, don't you?"

Glaring, Xena had responded, "Yes, sir."

Bend, search for a hold, hoist, shuffle ... shuffle ... shuffle ..., drop! Shuffle ... shuffle, shuffle

She had spent five candlemarks jumping rope, running sprints, lifting weights and hitting punch bags. If the trainers didn't think she was applying herself diligently enough, she was encouraged in her efforts by a stinging whip that flicked at her bare thighs, and all the while the guards from the elite maniple watched her like hawks, knowing that their lives depended upon her continued captivity.

The exercises had been taxing and close to exhausting in her current state of health, but she had completed each session to the specific demands of the trainers without feeling the sharp sting of the lash too many times.

She felt like an animal being put through it's paces.

Bend, search for a hold, hoist, shuffle ... shuffle ... shuffle ..., drop! Shuffle ... shuffle, shuffle

Upon return to Caesar's palace, she'd been escorted to a room not far from the kitchens, where she had been served an excellent meal of soup, roast chicken, three different kinds of vegetables,

bread and cheese, all washed down by a sharp wine. It was fairly obvious that Caesar wanted his prize fighter fit and healthy enough to take on all comers.

After eating she was taken back out to the drill yard where she had immediately noticed the huge pile of rocks in the far corner of the yard by the wall. Somehow she just knew that she was going to get to know each one of those rocks in intimate detail.

"Alright, slave," Flaccus had said, "Your task for the rest of the day is to move those rocks from where they are to the other end of the courtyard. If you've behaved yourself, like you have today, you'll only have to move them once a day. If I think your behaviour has warranted it, you'll move them back and forth until I give you leave to stop. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir," responded Xena trying hard to fight the dejection she felt. She knew the purpose of this useless task. It was designed to 'gently' break her spirit. There was no point to it, other than to emphasise her helplessness, to sap her morale and mental strength. It was an exercise tailor made to wear on her and she was well aware of it.

That first day had been one of agony for the Warrior Princess. It had taken her until close to dusk to finish her task. Her muscles had begun to protest every movement, her back once more felt lanced with fire, but she had completed what she had been instructed to do, and when she had finished she had been taken back to the baths where Patroclese waited once more to help her clean up, then tend her wounds and even massage some of the knots out of her protesting muscles.

When she was returned to her kennel, she actually felt human once again ... at least she did until Gabrielle had been brought into the drill-yard and given the promised five strokes of the strap. Xena had stood, helpless, below the grating, flinching with the sound of every blow as it fell and the anguished scream that accompanied it, imagining her friend's green eyes filled with pain, and knowing all too well that she was responsible for it.

Her eyes slitted to icy blue chips as she thought of yet another way to add to the growing list of how to kill Caesar and Flaccus!

Bend, search for a hold, hoist, shuffle ... shuffle ... shuffle ..., drop! Shuffle ... shuffle, shuffle

That first day had become the pattern that her routine was now based upon. Oh, there had been adjustments as the days wore along. With her back healed, Patroclese no longer ministered to her wounds, instead after her morning and evening bath, a masseuse worked on her body, toning the strengthening muscles and pampering Xena like the prize piece of property she was.

Her training at the Coliseum was also adapted to her growing fitness. Added to all her initial activities, sparring with the other gladiators in unarmed combat techniques now became a daily ritual, sharpening her skills to a fine degree, and distance running for stamina was included. This took place in the main Coliseum arena, on her own except for six trainers and Flaccus' forty guards who lined the walls, alert and ready for any sign that the Warrior Princess looked likely to try for an escape.

Her outbursts of temper and stubbornness became rarer and that had more to do with the sound of Gabrielle being beaten in the drill-yard on the evening of the occurrence, than the added time she was sentenced to spend lugging rocks from one side of the yard to the other .. an activity she was beginning to heartily loathe.

Bend, search for a hold, hoist, shuffle ... shuffle ... shuffle ..., drop! Shuffle ... shuffle, shuffle

As she picked up yet another of the head sized boulders she felt an ominous tingle and the hairs on the nape of her neck rose in warning. She knew he was there before he chose to materialise himself for her. She chose to ignore him, turning away from the pile that she knew he was sitting on and heading, determinedly for the other end of the parade ground where a growing, small pile awaited another deposit from her.

She saw the silver blue light from the corner of her eye as Ares materialised beside her, matching her shuffling gait as she continued with her task and ignored his presence. She could feel his hot eyes on her and could picture the smugly sardonic smile on his face .. she was after all very familiar with him. Dropping the rock, she turned deliberately so her back would be to him and started the long return to the other pile of stone, with Ares sauntering by her side.

"My, my. Is this really a suitable occupation for a Warrior Princess?" the God said at length, growing slightly irritated by her lack of acknowledgment.

Without bothering to answer, she hefted another rock and began to make her tedious way with it to the other pile. She was well aware of what he was there for, and he'd get around to it in his own time without her having to contribute anything to the conversation.

"You know, if someone had come to me and told me that Xena was happy to be lugging rocks around in a yard as hot as Tartarus, I'd never have believed it. If you'd told me you enjoyed this kind of thing, I'd have arranged for you to spend some quality time with Sisyphus rolling that Zeus be damned rock of his," he smirked.

Then scowled as she continued to ignore him.

She dropped the stone, and turned back to collect another. Ares tried a different tack, "Hey! Doesn't it make you all warm inside to know that one of your ex-lovers is doing so well for himself? I mean Julius, under my guidance, is setting himself up to be the conqueror of the World. Admittedly he wasn't my first choice for the job, but I'm nothing if not flexible ... when I have to be."

Xena ignored him, claiming a rock from the pile and turning back, for what seemed the millionth time, towards the far end of the yard, only stopping moving forward when Ares, having tired of speaking to a seeming brick wall, placed himself directly before her.

"Xena, why haven't you called me?" he asked with apparent concerned sincerity, "You know I'd have taken you away from all of this," he smiled gently waving his hand at the rocks and the guards who seemed to have frozen in time standing motionless in the heat of the day.

She looked him squarely in the face and, in a voice as cold as death, snarled, "Move!"

Ares smiled indulgently and stroked her cheek in a possessive gesture that reminded her all too readily of Caesar's touch. She closed her eyes and fought to control the mad surge of rage that erupted deep within her, "I'll move when you tell me why you didn't ask me for help," he answered, a caress filling his voice.

Drawing a deep breath she told him calmly in a tone that belied the turmoil that surged within her, "You are about the last person, man or god, that I would ask help from. I've paid my dues to you, Ares. I'm never coming back to you, so why don't you just butt out of my existence!"

"Oh, Xena, Xena, Xena," he shook his head in mock regret, "You really don't think it's that simple, do you? I'm part of you! You can fight it, but you can't deny it. And one way or another, you will be mine again."

"Get out of my way, Ares. I've got better things to do with my time than listen to you," she growled.

"Ah, I can see that, my dear," he nodded, biting his lower lip to prevent a grin from spreading over his entire face. "Look, why don't you just drop all this and let me take you .. yes and that pesky bard .. away from this mess you've got yourselves into? Mmm?"

Xena looked at him, seeming to weigh the prospect. Ares knew that she would be hard pressed to forego a chance of getting Gabrielle to safety, "Drop this?" she asked softly.

"Oh yes, Xena, drop it and come ..." he got no further as an excruciating pain throbbed through him thanks to the rock crushing his right foot.

"Forget it, Ares. I'm not interested. Not now. Not ever." She grinned impudently as the God of War did his best not to hop around clutching his sorely bruised toes. She stooped to retrieve the lump of stone and continued her shuffling passage across the drill-yard to where she dropped it once again.

"Xena, you're making a big mistake!" Ares threatened explosively.

"Going with you would be a bigger one," she replied as she moved past him on the way to fetch another chunk of rock.

"Do you think you're going to get any help from the Amazons? Get real, Xena! Most of them hate you worse than Caesar does .. at least he still has a lingering interest in ..."

"GET OFF IT, ARES!" roared the Warrior Princes, well aware that only he could hear her. They glared at each other for several heartbeats before she added in a far quieter tone, "Just get outta here. Don't you have some brown nosing to do with Zeus to make up for all your recent indiscretions?" she questioned with marked pointedness.

Anger and frustration waged war on Ares' handsome features as he glowered at *HIS* Warrior Princess. Now was not going to be the time to press his arguments as she was still no closer to being ready to listen to him, even with all that Caesar had put her through, "Alright, Xena," he snarled. "I can be patient. Eventually you're going to get tired of this and you will ask me for help. I'll give it too .. even after all the insults you've thrown in my direction since you got onto this goody, goody kick of yours ... but you will pay me for that rock! One way or another!" he warned as he vanished in an explosion of blue and silver light.

"Oh Hades!" swore the warrior as she saw the guards reacting in panic when they returned to motion to find that she'd vanished from the spot they were watching and was, in fact, some distance down the length of the yard. She dropped the rock onto the hard packed earth and squatted down, curling her body, hands covering her head, to make as small a target as possible as her six personal watchdogs descended on her, lashing out with the heavy batons they carried, the solid blows powered by the fear and anger they felt at having lost sight of her.

The junior centurion, Titus rushed onto the scene and demanded to know what had happened. The guards, calming down, finally, after having seen their prisoner was not going anywhere, stopped hitting Xena and one of them answered his officer, "Sir, we was watching her shift them rocks as we always does. Everythin' seemed like normal, but then one moment she was right in front of us an' the next moment she was halfway down the yard. She must have bin tryin' to make a break for it, but we managed to catch her afore she could get away."

Titus gave Xena's ribs a sharp kick, "Get up, slave!" he ordered.

Slowly unwinding from her protective huddle, the warrior stood, hiding the wincing she felt from the bruising her back had just taken. She stood calmly in front of Titus, her blue eyes meeting his brown ones as she waited to hear what he had to say.

"Have you got an explanation for what happened?" he asked. He thought it unlikely that she was trying to escape, the fact that one of the rocks lay beside her made the idea seem rather incongruous, but he could think of no other explanation.

"You'd never believe me," she told him flatly.

"Try me," he encouraged, ignoring, for the moment, the fact that she had failed to address him correctly.

"A god dropped by for a visit. He froze time for all of you and I continued working while he ..." she tried.

"Alright. That's enough. You just never learn do you?" he rasped, angry that she was trying to make a fool out of him.

Xena shrugged, "You asked what happened."

Titus glared at her, "Put her back in the hole, while I report this. I think the bard's going to get a few more stripes tonight," he commented, watching as the slave began to struggle and shout.

"No! You can't do that. I told you the truth ... get your hands off me!" she yelled as she fought against the guards.

Titus signaled for extra men to help the other six, and against increasing numbers, the Warrior Princess was inevitably forced down into the pit that acted as her cell. Titus looked down on the violently angry woman as the grating was locked firmly shut.

"Calm down and behave yourself," he warned, "You'll only make things worse for your friend."

Xena glared up at him, but her true ire was aimed at a black leather clad, bearded, God who managed to cause her trouble no matter what she did, - *Damn you to Tartarus, Ares!* - she cursed.

Chapter Fifty Eight: The Lays of Rome

Ephiny watched from a high window as Xena moved steadily from one side of the courtyard to the other carrying heavy rocks. The sight angered her, but it was tempered by the knowledge that at least her friend was fit and looked healthy once more. She marvelled at just how swiftly the Warrior Princess' body healed itself. Injuries that would have left almost anyone else as an invalid for many moons, if not crippled for life, were easily coped with.

She stole a look to her left. There set up on display like a trophy from the hunt, was Xena's armour, leathers, sword, chakram and daggers: a reminder to all visitors to Caesar's offices, that he had taken, subdued and held Xena, the Warrior Princess, Destroyer of Nations and enemy of Rome. Wishing she could take the armour and weapons with her when she left, Ephiny turned her attention back to their erstwhile owner.

Watching intently, the Regent, never-the-less, felt the approach of Caesar behind her, joining her to observe his prized possession, "Ah, I see you're watching my slave," he murmured as his hand slid over her shoulder in a soft, half touch, and allowed it to linger on her arm, "She'll be fit and well to take on you man in seven days as agreed," he smirked, "I hope you're ready to lose an awful lot of dinars on this fight. I don't expect my slave to lose."

Ephiny's skin jumped in response to his hand and she bit her lip to avoid making any sound. - *Oh Artemis! How can I hate this man so yet respond so to his touch?* - Her heart beat faster as he leaned closer to her ear, his sweet breath warm on her neck, made her pulse leap erratically. - *This is ridiculous!* - her mind protested. - *This man is brutal, callous and power hungry. He has brutalized two of my best friends and wants to rule the world which will, in the course of things, include the Amazon Nation. I cannot get involved with him.* - "We'll see who loses what," she responded with a smile, inwardly dismayed at how easy she found it to flirt with this man.

"Ah, a worthy opponent, I feel," his lips brushed her cheek in an intimate caress as his arms encircled her waist, "It is such a pity that you must return to your homeland so soon, but with time so short we must relish the opportunities we have."

She suppressed a shudder of growing desire at the thought and headed back to the window, hoping that seeing Xena being forced to endure the role of a slave would help her get her priorities in order. She soon picked out her friend at one end of the yard as she dropped a rock on the growing pile. Running her fingers through her mass of curly blonde hair, Ephiny continued to watch as the warrior moved back to the other pile to collect another stone.

"You really seem quite taken by my slave, my sweet," Caesar said smoothly as he slipped his hands around her.

Ephiny slapped him away as questing fingers sought out her breast. She was beginning to regain control of her senses and felt the first stirrings of real horror about what had just taken place, "She's special to the Amazons," she growled a little more tartly than she should have as she wondered how she was going to cope for the next seven days if Caesar believed he had made a conquest of her and expected a repeat performance of the exercise.

Both of them stood looking at Xena for long moments, then both blinked in shock as the woman suddenly disappeared, "Where in Tartarus ...?" yelled Ephiny as she registered the fact that Xena had vanished from the place she had been.

Caesar's eyes darted around wildly until he picked her out close to the smaller pile of rocks, crouching down, using her hands and arms to block the blows she knew would be coming in her direction as soon as the guards caught up to her, "How in great Jupiter's name did she manage that?" he demanded of no one in particular.

Ephiny had her suspicions, but she was damned sure that she wasn't going to share them with the enemy. - *How, in Artemis' name, could I have let him do that to me?* - her mind demanded as she watched the soldiers converge on Xena to administer chastisement for managing to escape their observation. She struggled not to wince as the batons descended time and again, - *That has got to hurt!* - she thought distractedly, before turning her unquiet musings back to what had happened with Caesar, - *How could I have encouraged him to do that?* - her mind wailed.

Her face froze as a very unpalatable thought sprang to mind. She was well aware that her body bore the frenzied marks of the passion that had been expended, - *How am I going to explain this to Gabrielle and Eponin? They're both going to see the marks and they'll know just what caused them!* -

She thought about that for a heartbeat as she saw an officer hurry to the disturbance in the yard and order Xena to be taken back to her cell. She couldn't understand why the warrior had suddenly started to struggle against her guards and create a rolling brawl until she was finally forced into the barred hole in the ground and locked in.

Ephiny's churning, turbulent, thoughts returned to Gabrielle, - *Well maybe she won't know what the marks mean .. I mean, alright she's been married, but one night of gentle love doesn't give her the necessary expertise to realise what these are ... does it?* - She gave herself a mental shake, - *Oh c'mon Eph! She's a bard for Artemis' sake, she's travelled for three years with Xena. She not the naive little girl you first met! Besides, I'm sure Poni and the men will soon let her*

know all about it. Maybe I could get Nebula to take me back home before they see me, - she thought miserably.

She was jerked from her thoughts as Caesar spoke to her, "I'm sorry, what was that you were saying?" she asked, mentally kicking herself for not paying attention to what was going on around her.

He gave her a quizzical look and then repeated, "I said, I'm sorry, my dear, but I fear I'm going to have to cut your visit short. I need to investigate just what went on out there. I don't like unexplainable little events like that taking place around me. The slave will know what occurred and I think I'll need to question her."

Ephiny's brain raced, - *Here's the perfect opportunity to make sure we don't get a repeat performance of the madness that just took place!* - her mind crowed. "I see," she answered her countenance filled with icy disdain and tone brittle with frigidity, "So some murdering harlot of a slave is more important than the Amazon Queen." - *Forgive me for that, Xena,* - she made a mental apology as she collected the remainder of her things and started for the door.

Caesar hissed in annoyance, "Ephiny, wait ..."

The Regent turned and gave him a chill glare, "That's quite alright, my Lord Caesar. If your tastes run to such a 'low' standard, you'll fully understand if I find it socially politic not to meet with you until the night of the match, here, in seven days time." Without waiting for a reply, she stalked across the large chamber and stormed out of the room, for all the world acting the part of the slighted lover.

Slamming a fist down on his desk, Caesar swore long and inventively over his blunder. Having ardently pursued the Amazon Queen for fourteen days, he'd at last managed to taste her sweetness, only to have it taken away from him again because of a disturbance caused by ... Xena! "Lucullis!" he yelled for one of the guards stationed outside of the thick doors.

The door swung open promptly and a member of his personal guard stepped through smartly, jerked off a salute and inquired, "My Lord?"

"Get down to the drill-yard. Tell whoever's in charge that I want the slave brought up here immediately," he snarled angrily.

"At once my Lord," accepted the guard who turned and left the room as quickly as was prudent. Caesar knew that as soon as the door closed the man would be running down to the yard as though a horde of harpies were on his heels.

Standing up, he made his way back to the window to watch proceedings.

Ephiny collected her guard as she swept out of Caesar's private office. Six Amazons, headed by Malonda, had accompanied her and had waited outside the apartment, whilst the Regent 'conferred' with the Roman. It only took a glance to realise that something more than 'conferring'

had taken place behind the closed doors and, by the look on the Regent's face, the blonde was not particularly happy about it.

"Ephiny? Is everything okay?" tried Malonda tentatively, throwing a glance back at the closed door and wondering whether she ought to pay a brief visit to Caesar and let him know that no one touched the Amazon Queen without retribution ... but then again, Ephiny hadn't called for help. "Eph?" she asked again.

"Let's just get out of here Loni. I've just about had enough of Caesar's company to last me a lifetime," answered the Regent sharply.

With Ephiny setting the pace, the group of Amazon warriors found themselves pushed to keep up. It was obvious that the blonde ruler wanted to put as much distance between herself and the Roman as possible.

"Ephiny where are we going?" demanded Malonda as she realised that the Regent was not heading back towards Pompey's Palace.

Pulling up short, the Regent looked around in something of a daze. She had been in such deep thought that she hadn't really been paying much attention to the direction she'd been leading her guard, but when she stopped and thought about it, she knew that she was heading towards the docks, "I think we'll pay a visit to Nebula. I want to see how things are working out there anyway." Having made up her mind, Ephiny set off once again at her bustling pace.

Rome's streets, as usual, were teeming with life as citizens and slaves hurried about their business in a never ending whirl of noisy, colourful, vibrancy that had taken the Amazons a little time to adjust to. After having been in the city for nearly a complete lunar cycle, however, they no longer found the sights and sounds strange. In fact, once the initial awe had worn off, the majority of the women had found themselves longing for the simplicity of life back at Themiscyra where they were surrounded by a natural world, not the deadly artificial life of an expanding city where every move was watched and examined for political implications, and stabbing your neighbour in the back, or spicing their meals with poison, was acceptable social behaviour.

In all the crush and rush of the streets, it was still noticeable, however, that the people of Rome made way for the body of armed Amazon women that seemed to be moving with implacable intent towards the upper docks. With the grim look on the leading woman's face, no one thought it politic to get in her way, let alone the seven guards that were hustling to keep up with her.

At the speed they were moving, it didn't take long to reach 'Wave Dancer' and Ephiny easily picked out the pirate captain on the maindeck as she chased her Amazon 'crew' around in the necessary chores that took up any crews time when they were at anchor in a dock.

With a practised eye, the Regent also found and identified half a dozen heavily armed Amazons who watched over the rest of the crew with eagle eyed intensity. Ephiny knew it wasn't a perfect solution to her domestic problems, but confining the suspect Amazons to the ship under the

guard of Nebula and a dozen warriors, that Eponin trusted without reservation, seemed to be the best of a selection of poor choices.

Once they had realised that they had more of a problem than just Tarelle and her band of confederates, the blonde Regent and Gabrielle had ordered an investigation into just who was over-friendly with the dissidents. The fact that Autolycus had joined in with the hunt for rogue Amazons, meant that they had unearthed a further nine women, along with Jerushan and Essaine, who appeared to be sympathetic to Tarelle and her views.

That's when the decision had been made to confine the women on Nebula's ship. Malonda hadn't been happy about the move, citing the fact that it badly split their forces should they need to fight their way clear of the city, but when Eponin had pointed out that having likely traitors running loose could be much worse, and that if it came to fighting their way out, a couple of dozen extra swords was not going to be much help against two or three legions.

Another decision had also been made, and that had been not to include anyone in their plans other than the men, Nebula, Gabrielle, Ephiny and Eponin herself. It was difficult excluding Malonda, but Ephiny and Gabrielle had decided that they couldn't afford to take any more risks than they had to and they knew that those they had named were beyond reproach in loyalty.

The Regent quickly ascended the gangplank and moved to greet Nebula who turned towards her with a smile, "Your Amazons make pretty good swabbies," she laughed.

"I'm pleased that they meet with your exacting standards," returned Ephiny, "Keep them busy and tired and they might stay out of trouble for a while."

"Well other than to inspect my very unwilling crew, what's brought you down here in the heat of the day? And were you mauled by a bear, or did Malonda let you get mugged?"

"Can we talk in private?" Ephiny asked, not willing to discuss what had just happened when surrounded by several, potentially hostile, women who would probably be delighted to use the Regent's problems against her. "Sure," agreed the pirate easily, "C'mon down to the cabin."

Motioning Malonda to wait on deck with her escort, Ephiny followed the tall, lithe, sea woman and descended down the companionway into the narrow corridor that led past the small cabins for officers and back to the much larger one that was the traditional abode of the captain.

Nebula opened the door and motioned for Ephiny to take a seat while she went to the wine cooler and poured two goblets of a sweet red vintage that she'd picked up locally. Passing one of the cups to the Regent saying, "Here you look like you need this," she rested herself against the edge of her heavy desk and raised an eyebrow that invited the blonde to speak.

Stalling, Ephiny took a sip of the wine and asked, "Had any trouble with Tarelle or the rest of them?"

Nebula shrugged, "Nothing that the guards couldn't handle. But that's not really why you've come here, is it? C'mon, Ephiny, out with it. How'd you managed to get .. those particular types of marks, and why are they worrying you?"

The Regent let out a long heavy sigh, "You know that Caesar's been making his attentions fairly clear over the last few days?"

"Stood out like a bald wolf in a pack," agreed Nebula, "The guy's got the hots for you." Her brows drew together and her eyes narrowed as she made a connection, "You telling me that he forced you?"

"No!" responded the blonde sharply, pushing herself out of the chair to pace the narrow confines of the cabin in agitation, "I mean yes .. well maybe it was both of us!" She stopped in the middle of the cabin, threw her head back and took a deep breath. "I went to see him .. more to get a look at how Xena was doing than anything else. She's looking pretty good, by the way."

Nebula said nothing, just crossed her arms and waited for the Amazon to get to the point of what had taken place, knowing that the woman needed to get it off her chest and sort it out in her mind before she went back to face the others.

"Caesar .. well, you know he exudes this kind of aura that draws women to him?" she saw Nebula nod in reply, "Well I've felt that increasingly for the last few days. I've known about it, and I dislike him so much for what he's done to Xena and what he's put Gabrielle through .. yet I've been increasingly drawn, or maybe pushed to him." She drank down the rest of the wine and set the goblet on the table before starting to pace again.

"This morning it was like I couldn't control myself. He touched me and I was on fire. Whatever happened my body was a willing participant in it, and now I feel like I've betrayed my friends and myself and, most especially, the memory of my husband, Phantes," she finished softly.

"What do you feel about Caesar?" the tall, dark skinned woman asked the smaller Amazon.

"What?" responded Ephiny, surprised by the question. Nebula waited, "I .. I can't bear him. I despise all he is and all he stands for, I always have. How could I have done that with him, Nebula? It makes me sick just to think about it."

The two women remained silent as they thought about what the Amazon had just revealed. Each pursuing her own thoughts as they tried to understand the implications behind the conflicting emotions and actions that Ephiny had just admitted to.

"You know, I'd almost swear that you were 'interfered' with by a god," mused Nebula having examined and discarded all other possibilities, including the one where Ephiny was denying her love for a man she considered to be an enemy. Mood swings like that just didn't happen naturally.

- *There's that plain stubborn reckless defiance .. again!* - she conceded to herself. But she'd kept the lid on her emotions for so long now, through all the indignities and humiliations of being kept like some animal in a hole, all to keep Gabrielle safe from the beatings that had been threatened, only to have Ares turn up and cause problems that were going to cause the bard to suffer.

- *Well enough's enough!* - she goaded herself. She stopped her pacing as a sudden thought slapped her between the eyes. She hadn't actually seen Gabrielle's face since she'd been in Rome and Ephiny had hinted that the bard was safe with her, - *Gabrielle hasn't called out to me once when she was being beaten, in fact she hasn't tried to speak to me at all! That's not like her. She'd have said something even if it was just to tell me not to worry about her.* - She felt like kicking herself for not seeing through the ploy sooner.

- *Damn! Have I been a prisoner under a false threat? Well it's time I damn well cleared up that question. What's the matter with your brain, O Great Warrior Princess. You beginning to get sloppy in your old age?* - she chided herself caustically. - *It's taking a chance with Gabrielle's safety if they have got her, but I'm willing to stake my boots that she'd safe with Eph.* -

Titus saw her stop pacing and the strange look that crossed her face, - *Oh Mars!* - he cursed silently, - *What's going through her brain now?* - He swallowed his trepidation and tried to sort the situation out before Flaccus appeared. He knew that he didn't command the same respect as the hardened veteran from either the men, or the woman that they were responsible for.

"Listen slave," he tried to imprint authority into his voice, "Get your sorry carcass up here before I have to start getting rough."

She looked at him. Her eyes had paled to icy slits and her voice was cold and menacing, "I want to see Gabrielle .. NOW!"

Titus was beginning to lose his temper, "Oh no! You don't get to demand anything, and you don't get to see the bard. But you'll hear her scream. You're building up quite a fund of punishment for your friend."

"That's not going to wash anymore, Titus," she snarled slipping into full warlord mode, allowing the anger and hate to wash through her. - *Gods! Gotta be careful here,* - she acknowledged to herself, - *this feels too damn good. I can't afford to let it take control of me again.* - She turned her attention back to the junior centurion, "I don't believe you've got Gabrielle, and I don't give a flying centaur's butt for anyone else."

"Shit!" Titus swore softly as he stood up and moved away from the hole. He looked around and felt relieved that Flaccus was heading across the yard towards him with the reserve guard falling in behind him. He decided that he'd better inform his superior of what had taken place and the demands that the slave was making.

"What's going on?" snapped Flaccus briskly, as Titus stopped him.

His junior officer quickly outlined the incident where the slave just seemed to disappear from sight, that they'd had to force her into her cell when she became aggressive, that Caesar wanted to see her immediately, and that she refused to come out of the hole, "Now she's demanding to see the bard. I think she's worked out that we don't really have her."

Flaccus wore a grim frown. He'd feared this situation developing, knowing that the warrior would not accept not seeing her friend indefinitely. In fact he'd expected the problem to arise sooner, although he'd hoped to make it through to the time of the pit fight against the Amazon's champion as Caesar wanted her in top shape for the match. Now they were going to have to fight her every step of the way.

Turning to the men behind him, he gave them a quiet order before heading over to the pit cell to confront the slave. What he found was the fully fledged Warrior Princess, full of righteous anger and indignant wrath. Gone was all pretense at docile tractability.

He looked down at her, locking his grey eyes onto her deadly blue orbs. They stood so for many heartbeats, neither willing to give an inch to the other. Finally Flaccus spoke, "Caesar wants you, and you're going to climb out of there quietly and behave yourself, or ..."

"Or what?" she sneered, "Forget it Flaccus! Unless you produce Gabrielle I'm not following any more orders, and I don't give a damn what you do to me or anyone else, for that matter."

The senior centurion glanced over his shoulder and saw his men hurrying back with the equipment he'd sent them for, "Open it up," he instructed two of the guards, and watched as the heavy grill was unlocked and swung open. "Last chance, slave. You come out or we come and get you."

"Try it," she sneered, and suddenly found a net smothering her quickly followed by a second.

"Get in there and secure her," he ordered six of his men, who quickly dropped into the hole with a rope that was swiftly wound around the struggling mass of net and woman.

"Alright, pass her up here," instructed Flaccus, something easier to say than do as Xena struggled against the hands that tried to hoist her up out of the cell.

Finally she was deposited on the dusty ground of the drill-yard where the centurion ordered the removal of the netting, while eight men used their weight and numbers to hold the warrior down. Two thick chains were attached to her collar, the long absent oak beam was thrust behind her elbows and guide chains attached to the rings while cuffs with long chains were fastened to each ankle. Once everything was locked in place, Xena was pulled to her feet. Any movement she attempted to make was easily controlled by the chains held by the six bodyguards.

Flaccus shook his head in mock disappointment, "I had hoped that we'd got past the need for these," he gestured at the extra fetters and wood, "but you're backsliding again."

"Where's Gabrielle?" she growled, jerking hard against the restraints, but the weight of six men held her secure.

"You will be respectful, slave," the centurion reminded her with a backhand slap that knocked her head sideways.

"You can go to Hades," she sneered back at him, "I'm finished playing that particular game. You either produce Gabrielle or, if you don't, I'll know you haven't got her. Then ..." she allowed the sentence to trail off. "Then what?" Flaccus felt compelled to ask.

She gave him a feral smile and ignored the question, allowing him to think whatever he wanted to. She tugged on her bonds and said instead, "Thought Caesar wanted to see me. You intend on keeping him waiting?"

Chapter Fifty Nine: For the Sake of the Innocents

Ephiny collected her escort and made her way, at a far less frenetic pace, back towards the palace. Nebula had helped her disguise many of the bites and scratches that had decorated various parts of her anatomy, but several still showed and she was acutely aware of them. She was also fully aware of the covert looks that she was getting from the guards ... it made her feel even more self-conscious.

Between her and Nebula, they had made up a fairly shallow cover story that would hold water about as well as a bucket with a large hole in it, but if she stuck to the tale no one could out and out call her a liar. Though once Eponin compared notes with Malonda the truth of the situation could well become much clearer. She sighed heavily and then hurried on before Malonda could question her about what was wrong.

Chewing a lip she held a silent conversation with herself as she tried to steer through the possible pitfalls that questions could throw up. All she succeeded in doing was making herself feel more miserable, and felt like some poor prisoner heading voluntarily into the executioners arms.

- C'mon now, Eph! - she silently chided herself, - Get a grip! You're a grown woman. So what if you took a tumble with a man? -

Her mind screeched back at her, - So what?! So what?! That .. that .. man's a monster in human form and has done nothing but hurt two of your best friends! That's what! -

She tried to temporize with herself, - It meant nothing. In fact I really don't think I was in control of anything there. -

- Oh so that makes everything alright, does it? - she sneered at herself, - You didn't have an option, so it's not your problem! -

Sighing and drawing a sharp look from Malonda, Ephiny continued to ignore her escort as she concentrated on arguing with herself, *- That's not what I meant and you know it. I couldn't help what happened, but I'll make damned sure it won't happen again. -*

- *How's that going to effect the plan?* - demanded her argumentative self.

A frown appeared on her face as she replied to herself, - *We'll work it out. It might work better in the long-run.* -

- *Oh yeah! And how are you going to explain the change in plan to Gabrielle and Poni?* - she pressed herself relentlessly.

- *I'll think of something,* - she replied uncertainly, - *I mean, Gabrielle's used to sudden changes in plan. Artemis' arrows! She's traveled with Xena for nearly four years! Of course she's used to plan changes.* -

- *But you're not Xena, and our Queen is not going to be intimidated by a cold look when you don't want to elaborate on your reasons for changing the plan, is she? Then of course there's Poni, who's going to take one look at you and know something's wrong, and that's without Hercules and the other men!* - her mind told her flatly.

- *Hera's Tits!* - she swore at the taunting voice in her brain, - *Can't you offer some constructive help, here?* - And was rewarded with deafening silence.

"Great, just great!" she muttered.

"Eph?" inquired Malonda tentatively.

"Forget it, Loni!" growled the Regent. "Let's just get back to the palace as quick as we can, huh?"

The rest of the walk through the Roman streets was completed in silence. Ephiny's clear preference to avoid conversation was respected by the members of the Royal Guard, who followed along with grim faces as the blonde Regent's mood of dejection settled over all of them like some creeping miasma.

Upon gaining the sanctuary of her suite, the Regent was relieved to find it empty; in all likelihood, Eponin was down with the other Amazons, probably drilling them to make sure that they were as ready as they could be should it become necessary to fight their way out of Rome .. somehow .. while Gabrielle had already told her that she'd be spending some time with the men to try and get them not to kill each other as their tempers became frayed with the forced inactivity .. not that it was doing the bard's temper much good either.

The blonde stood in the room, running her fingers through her, always, unruly curls, mentally debating whether she should tackle her friends first, or take a hot relaxing bath so she could scrub all semblance of **that man's** scent from herself. The idea of the bath won after another silent argument, especially since no one else was around.

- *What are you? An Amazon warrior or a chicken?* - came the goading demand.

- *Cluck!* - she told the voice firmly, and headed determinedly for the bathroom, where she ran hot water into the tub, never ceasing to be amazed at the Roman ingenuity that designed such wonderful luxuries.

Deftly, she sorted through a variety of bath fragrances that were contained in small stoneware pots and sniffed delicately at each until she found the woodland scent that reminded her a little of the forests at home. Sprinkling the crystals into the hot water, she quickly proceeded to strip off her leathers before turning off the water and easing herself into the large marble tub.

Scooting across to the cleaning implements, she selected a rarely used scrubbing brush that had harsh horsehair bristles and began to scour her skin with it, applying diligent pressure across every inch of her flesh, determinedly intent on erasing any possible lingering trace of Julius Caesar.

She had just begun the process for about the third time when Eponin came storming through the suite and into the bathroom, her face doing a good impression of a thunder head as she confronted her Regent who looked like she intended to scrape herself raw, "Dammit Eph!" she yelled, "What happened?"

The blonde Amazon guiltily dropped the brush into the bath and sank up to her neck into the foamy water, "Happened?" she answered flustered, "What do you mean happened?" she asked sweetly knowing that her, admittedly rather flustered, act wasn't fooling anyone, let alone the irate Weapons Master.

"Loni just reported in and said that you came out of Caesar's place looking like you were mauled by a bear and, instead of coming back here you went all the way down to see Nebula at the docks. Then when you came out, you'd covered up most of the 'injuries' and proceeded to stalk back here pouting and sighing all the way. Now I find you in the bath looking like someone's taken one of Vallis' metal rasps to you. So, I'll ask again, what in Hades happened to you at Caesar's?"

Eponin's voice had steadily risen through the monologue so that by the end the words had become a thundering roar that made Ephiny wish she could sink fully beneath the bath water and never come up, "It's not what you think," she tried at last, her voice soft and hesitant.

"And just what is it you think that I think?" demanded the dark Amazon pugnaciously.

The Regent cleared her throat and replied calmly and with what dignity she could muster, "I wasn't raped, if that's what you were thinking. And please try to lower your voice just a bit, or everyone in Rome will hear you."

"The thought did pass through my mind," growled Eponin, "and I'm sorry I shouted, but I was .. am angry." She took a deep breath and sat down beside the tub, "So just what did happen."

The blonde ruler looked at her friend for a long moment before deciding that telling her the half baked story she'd concocted with Nebula just wouldn't be fair on her .. - *Besides*, - she told

herself, - *She'd never believe that anyway.* - So she told her the sordid truth. She didn't go into descriptive detail, but she did make it plain that her body had been a willing, even eager, participant in the enthusiastic frolic, although her mind had screamed out that it was wrong and a betrayal of her friends, herself and, most importantly to her, Phantes' memory.

"Now you know, Poni," she said quietly, "Just don't tell Gabrielle ..."

"Don't tell Gabrielle what?" asked the bard smoothly from the place just outside the door where she had been listening to the entire account, having been attracted to the room by Eponin's yelling.

"What is this," muttered Ephiny irritably, "Is somebody selling tickets out there? I've had more privacy in a Council meeting."

The Queen of the Amazons ignored the comment and came in to sit next to Eponin, "Don't try to change the subject, Eph," she warned, "Besides I heard it all anyway .. so .. how are you feeling?" she asked concerned about her friend.

The Regent looked down at the water as she replied, "Like I've betrayed everyone and everything .. like I must have thrown all my good sense out of the door this morning .. like I have no business running the Amazons if I can't control my own passions .. like I'm going to lose some very dear friends who'll see me as a traitor for this," she answered miserably.

Gabrielle pursed her lips and nodded, making Ephiny feel like her worst fears were about to be realised. Eponin frowned at the bard but a small gesture from Gabrielle kept her silent as she turned her attention back to the blonde Amazon, "Ephiny, are you telling us that you want Caesar to keep Xena a prisoner?"

"No! Of course not!" objected the Regent a spark of her normal fire entering her tone.

"Are you going to hand me .. and Toris and the others .. over to Caesar?" she inquired mildly.

"Gabrielle!" came the indignant reply.

"So did you betray our plans to him in the heat of passion?" The bard watched as her Regent spluttered in frank disbelief that she could be asked such a question, "So then, what it boils down to is that you allowed Caesar's legendary attractions to effect you," she held up her hand for silence when the Amazon began to splutter again, "probably under the influence of one or more God." Gabrielle looked intently at her friend, "So tell me Eph, why do you think I'd blame you? If it was me in the same situation would you blame me? .. hate me?"

"No, but ..." the Regent tried to object

"No buts, Eph. I can't see any blame against you, here. I think you've been used, just like Xena was by Ares, and you should know that we're here for you if you need us." That got an affirmative nod from the Weapons Master's head as she agreed with her Queen. "Now I suggest

"Did you say something, Poni?" asked Gabrielle, nudged from her reverie.

"Nothing important," the Weapons Master answered hiding her scowl as best she could. She knew that the bard would never condone taking anyone's life in cold blood and, at that moment, her blood was like ice.

Both women looked up as the Regent joined them from the bathroom. Ephiny had wrapped herself in one of the long linen robes that Pompey provided for his guest's use. It hid all of the damning marks that decorated her lithe and muscular body, making her feel a little better about things. She gave her friends a weak smile.

"You okay?" asked Poni gruffly.

"Been better," admitted the Regent, "but I'll live." She took a deep breath, "Thanks for being so understanding about all this."

"That's what friends are for, Eph. We'll always be there for you." Gabrielle told her warmly.

In the large room of the men's suite, most of the occupants were trying to find ways to amuse themselves; the lengthening time spent in confinement was really beginning to wear on their nerves. Autolycus was amusing himself by trying to teach Toris the basics of lock picking, and was pleased at how quickly his pupil was picking it up, "You wouldn't be looking for an apprenticeship?" he quipped. "The life's full of excitement and you get to meet the most interesting sorts of people," he said looking around the room at the odd assortment congregated there, "You know, heroes, fools in tin cans short curly haired guys with no real use ..."

"Cut it out, Autolycus," warned Hercules seeing that Iolaus was about to retaliate and that even Joxer had taken offense at the thief's words.

Toris grinned, "Don't you think my sister might just get a little mad if she were to find out you were trying to corrupt me."

"Oh c'mon!" exclaimed the King of Thieves, "You're not afraid of Xena, are you?"

"YES!" came the concerted reply from all of the rooms occupants, even Hercules although he bore a wry grin as he said it.

"Sheesh!" Autolycus shook his head in disbelief.

"You telling me that you're not scared of her?" Toris' grin widened.

"Of course I'm not .. Xena and me have an understanding .. she wouldn't do anything to hurt me .. well not anything too drastic," he answered weakly, "Oh, alright! Yes I'm scared of her too. Does that make you happy to hear it?"

"Smart man," congratulated the raven haired brother of the Warrior Princess.

On the other side of the room, putting as much distance between himself and Autolycus as possible, Iolaus idly sat and threw a pair of dice, his mind on the young bard who had abruptly left the room when she heard the yelling coming from Ephiny's suite.

"Hey Iolaus. What did Gabby shoot outta here so quick for?" asked Joxer, a puzzled frown on his expressive face.

"Search me, Jox, I don't understand women," answered the smaller man.

The wannabe warrior gave him a disbelieving look, "You? Ya gotta be kidding. I thought all the girls loved ya. Nebula certainly seems to."

Iolaus' face reddened and he coughed with embarrassment, "Yeah, well, Nebula likes to play games," he caught the look of appreciation in the other man's eyes, "Not like that!" he protested, "She likes to tease, but there's never been anything between us, she's far too aggressive. Too tall," he mused a soft smile coming unbidden to his face, "I kind of like my women shorter ... yeah, with golden hair and green eyes," he said dreamily.

"Hey!" Joxer interrupted him with a frown, "That's my Gabby you're talking about."

The blonde man looked at him in frank disbelief, "Your Gabby!?" he chuckled.

"We're very close," protested Joxer. "I spend a lot of time with her and Xena and, and .. we got this understanding."

"Understanding?" questioned Iolaus beginning to show some concern.

"Well yeah. Not that long ago she was really crazy about me .. even called me 'Pooky'. It was true love." Joxer told him dreamily, relishing the memory of the bard willing to do anything for him.

"Excuse me, but does Gabrielle know that you're saying these things about her. And if she was so hot on you, why does she act as though you're something the dog dragged in?" demanded the blonde man, twinges of jealousy assaulting him, although he knew that what Joxer was saying couldn't be true.

"She was .. we were in love," the wannabe warrior assured him.

"Oh I get it. She must have been hit over the head and lost her memory ... her good sense .. her rationality ..." Iolaus rambled. sarcastically.

"No, she didn't get hit in the head .. not unless Draco did it while I was tied up." He thought about it, "Nope. I know Xena said Draco was treating her fine because he'd fallen in love with her too."

The shorter man had a look of incredulity on his face, "Draco? The warlord Draco? Oh c'mon, Joxer, everyone knows that Draco has the hots for Xena."

"Well actually, she was pretty hot for him. She even took my advice and took a cold swim to try and cool herself down," the other man explained ingenuously.

Iolaus snapped his mouth shut when he realised that his jaw was hanging open, "I don't believe this!" he said trying to shake himself out of the nightmare that he felt he must be having.

"Actually," Hercules chimed in from his place on the sofa where he lay reading yet another of Gabrielle's scrolls, "It's all true."

Shooting his partner a disbelieving look, Iolaus protested, "Oh, c'mon Herc. Get real. Xena in love with Draco .. Draco in love with Gabrielle ... Gabrielle in love with Joxer. Sounds like a farce, or something that Cupid would dream up." He shook his head, "Nah! Even Cupid wouldn't do that."

"Close, Iolaus. You nearly got it right. Gabrielle told me all about it. Seems like Cupid's son, Bliss, escaped with one of his bows and was shooting at random targets, with the resulting mess that you've just heard from Joxer," the demi-god told him.

The blonde turned back to his foolish looking rival and with a triumphant look on his face laughed, "Ha! I knew that she couldn't be in love with you ... well not under normal circumstances anyway."

"Oh like she's gonna look at you twice when you dangle Nebula in front of her all the time," retorted the sallow skinned man.

"I do not dangle .." snarled Iolaus angrily.

"Well, sure seems that way to me," sneered Joxer, adding, "An' I bet it seems that way to Gabby too."

"Joxer ..." started the small warrior.

"Don't you think you two better get off the subject," interjected Hercules, "before she walks in and hears you." The two men glared at each other before getting up off the floor and retreating to opposite corners of the room.

Autolycus looked up and gave a lazy smile, "I don't know what they're making such a fuss about .. I mean, sure Gabby's a cute kid, but a real woman, well that runs to tall, black hair, lots of leather and pure danger."

"Hey!" growled Hercules as he realised just who the thief was describing, "Back off buddy."

they met his. He had little doubt that she could have used the rock to deadly effect, unwieldy as it was, but if she could slip the guards so easily, she could have filched a dagger or some other, more serviceable, weapon to use.

"I doubt that it would have been much use to her, sir," answered Titus, "but when I questioned her about what was happening, she came up with some cock and bull story about being visited by one of the gods, sir!"

Caesar leaned forward in his chair and stared at her intently, "Which god?" he asked, fully aware of the burning blue light that seemed to kindle in his captive's eyes.

Unsure whether the Emperor was asking him the question, Titus elected to respond, "She didn't say, sir."

"Which god?" asked the dark haired Roman once again, his eyes never leaving the Warrior Princess'.

She offered him a dazzling smile, "Go howl!" she told him sweetly.

He sat back and studied her with serious regard before saying, "Oh no. I think it will be your little bard friend doing the howling," he informed her maliciously.

Xena took a half step forward before the guards tightened their holds on her restraints and halted her, "It won't work any more, Julius," she growled softly, "Unless you put Gabrielle in front of me so I can see her, I won't believe you have her .. and without her there's nothing you can do to make me obey you." She expected the series of heavy blows from Flaccus' staff, hiding any pain she felt and widening her smile into a savage grin that was an obvious challenge to her tormentors.

"Enough," ordered Caesar, not wanting to cause her too much damage; he needed her in prime condition. He tapped the fingers of his hands together thoughtfully, - *I need another lever against her*, - he decided. Locking eyes with her once more he spoke to Flaccus, "Senior centurion, how many child slaves between the ages of five and fourteen summers do we have in the palace at this time."

It wasn't really the grizzled veteran's place to know such information, but he'd familiarized himself with all the palace slaves for future reference, at Caesar's suggestion, when they had first returned to Rome, "Eight, my Lord," he returned promptly, "three boys and five girls."

"You wouldn't," hissed Xena, wrenching violently at her fetters, almost succeeding in pulling loose from her guards, before they managed to bring her under control once more.

"Oh, but I would .. and I will," he assured her contemptuously, "I've told you before that your emotions are your weakness. It's what's going to make you tractable." He leaned forward once more, resting his elbows on his desk, "Now, which god?" he demanded.

"Go to Hades," she snarled.

"Titus, round up all the children, in the palace, between the ages of five and fourteen and have them assembled in the drill-yard. Once you've got them all, give them each three lashes, compliments of the Warrior Princess," he instructed his tone quite emotionless and cold.

"Caesar," growled the raven haired warrior as she struggled against the men holding her, her incredible strength beginning to strain even all six of her guards resources.

Seeing his men beginning to falter, Flaccus kicked the woman hard in the backs of her legs, forcing her to her knees. He flicked a silent command to a guard at the door and half a dozen more men were quickly summoned to reinforce the hold on her restraints.

Long moments drew out as the protagonists waited for each other to back down, But it was Xena, knowing that her position was untenable and sure that Hercules and Ephiny had a rescue plan in motion, who forced herself to give in to him once again. She couldn't stomach the thought of children being flogged because of her, - *And I don't owe Ares a damned thing!* - she silently snarled. "Call him off Caesar," she growled, "I'll tell you what you want to know."

The smirking Roman noble stood and went to the window that overlooked the drill-yard. He waited until the sound of childish fright could be heard clearly by everyone in the room and then made a cutting signal to Titus. Occasional whimpers could still be heard, but there was no sound of the vicious lash striking out. Caesar turned back to face his slave, "Now I believe you were about to tell me which god visited with you."

"I want your word that those children won't be harmed," demanded Xena, knowing just how slippery her foe was.

"Oh, Xena," he answered shaking his head in disappointment, "Don't you trust me?" he smirked.

"You gotta be kidding!" she answered in disbelief.

He gave her a foul look, before waving his hand in a magnanimous gesture, "Very well, you have my word that the children will not be harmed." When she looked like pressing further he added sternly, "Don't push it too far ... slave!"

The Warrior Princess held his gaze for long moments before she dipped her head in acknowledgement and told him, "Ares came."

Caesar sank back into his chair with a glower plastered across his handsome features, "And just what did Mars want."

Her eyes twinkled mirthlessly and lips compressed into a hard line before she answered, "Just the usual .. swear your soul away and I'll get you out of this little fix and together we can rule the world! Same ol, same ol."

"Since you're still here, I take it you declined his offer," the Roman surmised.

Her face turned to stone and her icy eyes radiated pure, frozen, menace, "Believe me, Julius, there is nothing you could do to me here that would make me give myself back to him."

"Hmm. Well I'm sure that I couldn't do anything to further scar that soul of yours. But believe me, Xena," he said with total sincerity, "I can and will make your life a living agony .. yours and those children out there," he gestured towards the window, "If you give me or any of your guards trouble. In fact to impress this upon you, I think you can watch as Titus gives the little .. innocents .. those three lashes each, on your way back to the rock pile .. You can spend the night taking out your frustrations moving those stones."

"You bastard!" her dark voice rumbled with barely restrained emotion, "You treacherous, bastard. You gave your word!" She grunted with pain as Flaccus drove his fist into her jaw.

"You have so much to learn, Xena. But you really should have realised that the ruler of Rome's promise to a slave is meaningless. You have no rights or position here, other than what I choose to give you." He shook his head in mock sorrow at having to explain it to her.

Turning his attention to the senior centurion he said, "Flaccus, I suggest that you keep the leg restraints on her from now on when she's moving those rocks. A couple of men on each chain should discourage her if that was indeed an escape attempt. Now take her down to the drill-yard and make sure that she watches all of those slaves beaten before you put her back to work."

- *By the gods!* - raged Xena silently, - *One day .. one day I'll make you understand what it is to feel pain ... and then I'll kill you!* -

Chapter Sixty: Under the Glass Dome

"Julius!"

The sharp tone snapped his attention away from the scroll he was studying. He looked up and recognised his petite wife, Pompeia, as she strode into his office bristling with unsuppressed fury. - *Damn!* - he silently cursed, as he neatly rolled the scroll and forced a pleasant smile onto his face, "My dear. It's so nice to see you. Did you enjoy the visit with your mother?"

The auburn haired woman ignored his attempt at civility and launched into a stinging attack, "Just who ordered my poor Nicolette to be whipped?" she demanded, "The child is a quivering wreck and was barely fit to dress my hair this morning!"

"Nicolette?" he questioned innocently, guessing that the girl must have been one of the eight slaves used as an example for Xena.

"Yes, Nicolette Don't give me any of your innocent looks, Gaius Julius Caesar. You know full well who I mean. Nothing happens within the palace without you knowing about it. Now I want to know exactly why my personal body slave was whipped while I was not here ... You know the only reason that I didn't take the child with me to Mother's was because she was ill."

Caesar gave his wife a long look, - *The only reason you didn't take the child with you was because you didn't want to be bothered with a sick slave who wouldn't be able to attend your every whim!* - His mind retorted venomously. He gave his second wife a long considering look - *She's still a beautiful woman,* - he conceded to himself, - *Shorter than Xena's irritating blonde friend, but still stunning with her silky hair and those chestnut eyes flecked with gold .. it's just a pity the woman's such a harpy. If it wasn't for her wealth and family connections I would have divorced her years ago.* -

Seeing that Pompeia was becoming ever more impatient, Caesar sighed and explained, "It was an oversight on my part," he admitted. He stood up and moved across to the window, motioning the slight woman to join him. "My newest slave," he told her pointing to where Xena continued to carry rocks back and forth across the compound, now further hampered by the extra chains to her ankles that the guards held. The Roman had decided that Xena could miss training at the Coliseum for once. Spending last night, and all of today, hauling rocks around in a meaningless exercise, should at least impress upon her that she had no free will here.

"What has she got to do with my Nicollo?" demanded his wife impatiently. Then took a closer look. For all she had a fiery temper, Pompeia was not a stupid woman. "That's your barbarian wench, then?" she questioned rhetorically, knowing full well just who the woman in the drill-yard was. "Looks quite the ignorant savage doesn't she?" she sneered, not liking the fact that, even in chains, the slave had a beauty that surpassed her own and a bearing that made her seem like royalty, even in her present conditions.

"I'll grant you that she's a savage," Caesar agreed, "but ignorant? Hardly!" He shot a malicious look at his wife, knowing that she hated anyone who could be classed as a rival for beauty and intelligence, "Xena is fluent in at least seven languages and has a passing knowledge of at least five more. She is an accomplished healer .. her knowledge in that area easily putting Patroclese to shame and he's about the best in Rome. She is conversant in the laws of almost every land in our world, having broken nearly all of them in her time, and that's without mentioning her incredible military acumen .. nearly a match for my own .. and the fact that she is probably the most deadly fighter in the known world. Savage, undoubtedly, but never ignorant." He smiled at the growing frown on his spouse's brow.

Pompeia turned away from the window, "She seems just the type of whore that you like to bed, my dear," she told him acidly.

"She and I were lovers, once, many years ago." he responded almost wistfully.

"What happened then? Did the bitch try to kill you?" She had heard vague rumours about her husband's association with the woman in his youth, but had never heard his version and Brutus could not be cajoled to speak of it. - *Besides,* - she thought, - *the woman barely looks old enough to be the one .. if she was, she can have been little more than a child when they met.* -

"Oh, no. Xena was totally besotted with me. No," he told her remembering back over the eleven or more years that had passed, "I had her crucified and her legs broken. She was, after all, a pirate at the time and had the audacity to capture and ransom me," he informed her coldly.

Pompeia contemplated her handsome husband. She was well aware that their marriage had been politically motivated. Oh, at the start there was a fervent passion, but that quickly cooled as Caesar's natural inclination for fresh bed partners intruded upon their marriage. After her initial anger and jealousy over her wayward husband's philandering, Pompeia (good Roman daughter and wife that she was) coldly turned her attention to cultivating her ambitions, while turning a blind eye to her husband's amorous antics. The situation soon suited her quite well. She was free to indulge in her own 'discrete' assignations, while wielding the power that being Caesar's wife allowed her. The accommodation was comfortable for both of them.

"And she still escaped you? My, my Julius! Either she was very good, or you still had a lot to learn," she chided him malevolently, "But none of this answers my question about my poor Nicolette," she reminded him primly.

Glowering at his wife for the verbal barbs she had shot in his direction, Caesar sought to keep calm, "On the contrary," he replied casually, "She was the reason for it." He smiled lazily as she narrowed her eyes at him, but before she could demand an explanation of what he meant, he continued smoothly, "Xena is wild and uncontrollable, on two occasions already I've had her beaten close to death, and yet it makes little impression on her .. she's still as intransigent as when I first captured her in Gaul all those moons ago. So you can see she isn't like other slaves. However, she can be managed with the right persuasion."

"How does that concern my slave?" demanded Pompeia.

"Ah, I'm just coming to that, my dear," smiled her husband mirthlessly. "Up until Brutus managed to mislay her, I had the key to ensuring the Warrior Princess' co-operation .. an irritating little blonde bard that travels with our savage. However, without being able to use Gabrielle, I needed another form of deterrent to stop Xena from attempting to escape, or refusing to obey instructions. You see my slave has a weak spot for innocents. Therefore, should she get out of line, she now knows that eight child slaves will take her punishment."

"You used my slave for that?" demanded the small woman incredulously, "She's my property, Julius, not yours. You had no right ..."

"As I said, my dear, it was an oversight. Of course your slave won't be used in that manner again. I'll have Comodus go and buy a new house slave immediately to take your girl's place in the punishment line."

"Make sure you do," warned Pompeia, "Or I warn you, Julius ..."

"I fully understand, my dear. There is no need to threaten me," Caesar assured her placatingly.

"Very well then," she turned on her heel to go, "Oh, Julius," she smiled sweetly, "I thought you should know that the Governor of Reate looks like he could be going over to Pompey's side." Domestic disputes aside, Pompeia knew just where her interests lay, and Caesar knew that she was a very astute and clever politician in her own right. Keeping her husband safe from his political enemies ensured her own continuing power and so she used her contacts to keep abreast

"Just so long as that's all he picks up," commented Eponin dryly, knowing how easily the King of Thieves got distracted by sparkley, valuable trinkets.

Gabrielle grinned at her with something akin to childish glee, "Poni, you're so untrusting. He hasn't stolen anything since that first night when Hercules caught him, but he has brought us back some useful information."

"Yeah, yeah," muttered the dark haired Amazon unconvinced, "Just because none of us has caught him with the goods, doesn't mean he hasn't been collecting them. I just hope he doesn't get caught at it and end up bringing the roof down on top of all of us," she grumbled pessimistically.

Beginning to feel happier, Ephiny solidly hit her friend on her muscular arm, "Stop being such a grump, Poni."

"Ouch!" whimpered the Weapons Master pretending the Regent had hurt her and failing to elicit either an apology or sympathy from either of her two companions.

"Besides," smiled Gabrielle, "The only time Autolycus gets caught is when he wants to be," she assured the doubtful Amazon.

"Oh yeah? What about when Brutus caught him? And he wasn't even trying to steal anything then," Eponin reminded her.

Gabrielle blinked in surprise. She'd forgotten about that, but her agile brain soon had an answer that no one could refute, "That was the Joxer effect. When you have a dangerous, difficult, situation and you add Joxer to the mix, anything that could go wrong automatically increases in probability by about a factor of ten."

The two Amazons looked at her blankly for several heartbeats before Ephiny ventured, "So you're saying that when Joxer's around the chances of trouble increase?"

"That's right," agreed the bard firmly.

"You're saying that an individual person can multiply the chance of trouble?" questioned the Weapons Master.

"Absolutely," agreed Gabrielle with total confidence in her argument.

The two Amazons looked at each other before uttering in unison, "Oh Hades. Are we in trouble."

Looking from one to the other, the bard could see the twinkle of amusement in her friends' eyes, but didn't understand the cause, "Hey look. It's not that bad. Hercules is making sure that he stays out of trouble ..." she looked at them in bemusement as the pair started laughing, "Okay ... what's the big joke?"

"Well," grinned Ephiny as she took a sly peek at Eponin before getting a nod of tacit approval, "We fully understand your theory about the Joxer effect, because the Amazons have had a theory about the 'Gabrielle' effect and it's at least twenty times worse than the one poor old Joxer causes."

"Hey!" growled the bard in slightly more than mock disapproval, "I can't help it if things happen when I'm around."

"Of course not," chorused the Amazons with distinct smirks on their faces.

"Well it's not my fault if I'm in the wrong place at the wrong time .. or should that be the wrong place at the right time .. or maybe the right place at the wrong time," she considered and then scowled at the barely suppressed giggling coming from the other two women, "Cut that out," she ordered beginning to feel picked on.

"Yes your Majesty," grinned the Regent, jabbing Eponin in the ribs.

"As your Majesty commands," smirked the Weapons Master and suddenly grimaced as a thought struck her, "Hey! You know what that means?"

"What?" asked the other two.

"We're sitting here in enemy territory with probably the two greatest attractions for trouble in the known world!" Eponin told them gloomily.

There was silence in the room for many long moments as they absorbed that rather distressing piece of information, before Ephiny had to add morosely, "Hey, we've also probably got the third greatest attraction for trouble around too."

They looked at each other and said in unison, "Xena!"

Staring miserably at her companions, Eponin began to feel that if they didn't do something to snap themselves out of all this gloom and doom they'd soon be in real trouble, "Hey c'mon. Apart from Ephiny's little trouble with Caesar," she squeezed the Regent's shoulder reassuringly, "and our problem sisters, we've all been fine since we got here. We've just got to concentrate on the plan and make sure that we get it to work."

The other two nodded their approval and Gabrielle looked directly at Ephiny before saying, "Which kind of brings us to why we've invaded your privacy, Eph."

The Regent shifted uncomfortably, "Oh yes, what's that."

"Since Caesar is out of the city, we feel that you need to put in an appearance at Jovian's party tonight." She held up a hand to still the Amazon's objections, "Now I know you don't want to, but you really need to get out and mix with people, apart from it being necessary if this plan is

going to work. On top of that, there's no chance that Caesar's going to turn up, so we should make the most of the opportunity .. you need to be seen, Eph."

"I'm not ready, Gabrielle," protested the Regent who still couldn't make up her mind if she was raped or a willing participant in the proceedings.

The bard gave her a calculating look. She really was concerned about Ephiny and the effect that Caesar had had on her, but she didn't think the sympathetic coddling that the Regent had been getting from them was helping her put the whole thing behind her, so she decided that it was time for a little 'tough love', "Oh get over it Ephiny! What are you, an Amazon or some village milkmaid that needs protection because she can't look after herself?"

Outrage sparked in the blonde Amazon's eyes as she asked frigidly, "I beg your pardon!"

"You heard what I said," Gabrielle told her indifferently, hoping that the Regent didn't look over at Eponin who was doing an impression of a stranded fish.

"I am Regent Queen of the Amazons! Not some spineless peasant!" snapped Ephiny angrily.

"Well act like it!" returned the bard. "Since it happened, you've sulked in these rooms like .. like .. like ..." the bard grasped for words.

"A spineless peasant?" offered Poni, picking up on Ephiny's phrase, when she had caught on to what her Queen was trying to achieve.

"Too right, Ep!" agreed the honey blonde enthusiastically.

"A spineless peasant?" snarled Ephiny.

"Right," came the joint reply.

"A village milkmaid?" snapped the Regent her voice rising an octave.

"You got it!" agreed the other two.

Eyes flashing, Ephiny looked from one to the other of her 'friends' and came to a decision, - *Compare me to some pathetic woman who can't look after herself, will they!* - she angrily berated herself, - *I'm an Amazon, that's what I am. I'll show these two ...* - "Where did you say that this party was tonight?" she demanded in full regal mode.

"Jovian's place. We need you to try and become friends with him Eph, but more importantly with Graccus who we know will be there. He's important to the whole plan. He has to be there and willing to make an offer at the right time, or everything falls to pieces," explained the bard. "He already seems to like you. With Caesar out of the way you're going to have the chance to establish a real friendship with ..."

"Fine," broke in the Regent still snapping with anger, - *I'll show them!* - her mind continued to grumble.

"Pardon?" asked the bard, wanting to make sure that Ephiny really would do her part.

"I said fine. I'll go to the party, I'll talk nicely to Graccus and make sure that he's interested in the whole thing .. I'll play my part. Fine." returned the Regent as she quickly ticked off the points that required her attention.

Gabrielle tried a tentative smile, "Right. Then I guess Poni and I better let you get ready, you've only got a few candlemarks before you'll have to go." Getting no reaction from her friend, the bard made her way to the door, drawing the Weapons Master after her.

Ephiny watched them start to leave and was surprised to find her anger vanishing along with her morose, self-pitying mood. She wryly recognised what the bard had been doing. As Eponin put her hand to the door handle, she called out to them, "Gabrielle, Poni ... thanks."

Both women turned and smiled at the blonde Amazon, but it was Gabrielle who said, "That's what friends are for, Eph. See you later." And with that, the two women left the suite allowing the Regent to sort through her wardrobe to find something suitable to wear for the evening get together.

It was late in the afternoon when Flaccus received the summons. He'd spent a good part of the day watching the slave from a shady position by the wall of the guard's barracks, as she toiled ceaselessly carrying rocks from one end of the drill-yard to the other. He'd set up a folding campaign stool and table and was busily engaged in catching up on the maniple paperwork that had accumulated at an amazing rate since the elite unit had been formed. He grunted with satisfaction as he filled in the daily punishment record that pertained to his sole charge. She had earned the punishment plenty of times over and, with Caesar away, it had been decided that it would be safer if the woman did not leave the confines of the palace until her 'master' returned.

That suited Flaccus. For days now he had been feeling an itch on the back of his neck; his worry bump, the men called it. It always foretold of impending trouble, he'd never known it once to be wrong, and the only trouble he was currently aware of was six foot of black haired, blue eyed, slave whom he would swear held 'Trouble' as a title amongst the myriad that she had once owned.

His grey eyes narrowed as he watched her stumble, then somehow manage to regain her footing avoiding taking a heavy fall on the cobble paved yard. He'd had her hauling those rocks for two complete days and nights now, with only short periods off to water and feed her. She'd been allowed no sleep and her exhaustion was becoming apparent. Satisfied that she'd had enough for now, he was just about to have her taken to the baths before being locked up for the night, when the messenger had appeared before him.

"The mistress would like to see the new slave," the youth had told him simply. The lad might only be a slave, but his mistress was Caesar's wife, the wife of the de-facto ruler of Rome and a powerful woman in her own, and her family's, right.

"This slave is Lord Caesar's personal property," Flaccus answered tersely, "She is highly dangerous and needs to be kept under tight guard at all time. I think your lady might wish to seek approval from her lord before asking that this slave be brought before her."

Undaunted by the centurion's words, the youth answered, "My mistress said to remind you that she runs this house while her lord is away and that all within it fall under her dominion. She wishes you to bring the savage to the solarium so that she can inspect her properly." His message delivered, the boy turned and left without waiting to hear further objection from Flaccus, secure in the knowledge that Pompeia would protect him from any ire that the soldier felt.

- *Damn all women*, - swore Flaccus in silent frustration as he signalled one of the guards over.

"Sir," the legionary snapped to attention and waited for his centurion's orders.

"Dorphus," snapped the officer, "I want you to go and turn out the reserve guard and collect the collar chains and oak beam for the slave .. and be quick about it."

"At once, sir," answered the soldier and quickly sprinted off, remembering to salute before doing so.

"Gravis," barked out Flaccus to another nearby sentry. When the man presented himself, the centurion motioned to the two items of furniture and the paperwork, saying, "Take these things back to my quarters then get back here as quick as you can."

"Sir," saluted the soldier as he hurried to carry out his task.

Stretching unhurriedly, Flaccus winced at the cracks and pops his bones made as he straightened up and made his way across the parade ground to where Xena continued to toil under the hot afternoon sun. He stood and watched as she passed him carrying the last rock from the pile, down to where the others rested, accompanied by the four guards that held the long chains secured on her ankles. It was a boring duty for the men, so it was assigned to those who had to work off minor transgressions. Even so they were relieved every third candlemark, unlike the slave who was forced to carry on relentlessly until given leave to stop.

As she dropped the final rock onto the pile, Flaccus barked, "Alright, bring her over here."

In short order, Xena stood before the senior centurion. The exhaustion etched into her body was evident, even though she did her best to banish it as she came to a halt before him. She could feel Flaccus' eyes upon her and could sense his satisfaction at what he saw. Anger flared momentarily in her eyes before she smothered it ruthlessly. She had no intention of watching helpless children take another beating because of her pride and temper. So, she kept her eyes cast down on the stones beneath her feet and waited to hear what Flaccus had in mind for her next.

The light was beginning to fade quite badly and she put the embroidery aside with an impatient sigh annoyed that she was being kept waiting. She was about to send Andreas to discover just what was taking Flaccus so long, when she recognised the heavy tread of many soldiers' boots echoing down the corridor to the room where she awaited them. She frowned slightly. She expected Flaccus to bring the slave up under guard, but it almost sounded as if he had brought a century of men with him. - *Damn the man! I really don't want fifty or more dirty soldiers traipsing through the palace just for one barbarian slave. He's probably doing this as a way of getting at me for making him bring her here. Well he can just march them all back to their quarters! I won't have it!* -

Flaccus entered at the head of his sixty-six man guard squad. Quickly noting that there were four doors to the solarium, he ordered fifteen man squads to stand sentry outside each one. He glanced up at the high glass dome that gave the room the abundance of light that made it perfect as the palace's sewing room and judged that the slave would not be able to use it as an improvised exit whilst hampered by the chains that were securely held by the six biggest soldiers he had available.

He motioned the six forward and Xena responded obediently enough to the tug of the chains. She was beyond tired and beyond caring what this spoilt scion of Roman nobility wanted her there for. She halted, when the guards did, just in front of Caesar's wife. Fixing brilliant blue eyes on the woman, the Warrior Princess assumed a bored expression as she waited for the small woman to speak.

"You may take your soldiers and wait outside, centurion," instructed Pompeia sharply as her gaze took in the heavy chains and oak beam that were used to control the slave she had ordered brought to her.

"That would be impossible, ma'am," returned Flaccus stiffly, "Standing orders state that this slave must be watched by six men at all times day or night. She has too many skills that could help her break free if not closely observed."

"Come, come, senior centurion," the noblewoman soothed sweetly. I will be here to call warning should the savage," she fought the urge to swallow as the blue eyes went cold and deadly, "show any sign of trying to break loose."

My lady," Flaccus tried to explain patiently, his voice heavy with the suppressed urge to bark cuttingly at the woman, "I think you should know that it took two full centuries to capture this she devil. She's put more of my men into the healer's hands in the last few moons than the Gauls managed to in six. She doesn't need a weapon in her hand to be deadly, and there are many recorded reports of the ease with which she breaks loose of restraints. Apart from my orders from the Emperor, I could not in all conscience allow you to risk your life by being alone with this murdering savage."

Xena shifted her stance a little, her aching muscles protesting now that she had stopped moving, the long lengths of chain rattling and clinking at her slightest movement. She smothered the

crooked grin that crept onto her lips as she saw her guardians tense at her shifting, understanding that the centurion's little lecture had stirred up their own fears once more.

Tuning out the continuing dispute between the woman and the soldier, she allowed her gaze to drift up to the glass dome above her, - *If I was loose of these chains, it would be so easy to flip through that roof,* - she assessed, - *Hades, if I could just get loose of the guards I could do it anyway! Then a quick run across the roof, a drop into a quiet street and before they could organise a decent pursuit, I'd be well away from here. Just another slave in a city full of them .. if I could find a way to get loose from the shackles.* -

She was brought back to her present circumstances as her defences registered the movement of Flaccus' vine staff. Without conscious thought her defensive instincts took over. As she swayed away from the stave's path and, as the centurion overbalanced from not meeting the expected resistance to his blow, she whipped her body around sharply to punch him heavily in the stomach with the thick spar of wood that helped pin her arms.

When the centurion collapsed to his knees gasping for breath Xena cursed herself for allowing her attention to wander, - *God's dammit!* - she raged at herself, knowing that she had scant moments before the guards reacted with the heavy handed brutality she had come to expect from them

Formulating a desperately hurried plan of action, Xena powered herself into a backward flip, that spun her over the heads of her guards, jerking the lead chains out of their hands. Although her neck and ankles were wrenched by the restraints upon them, she pushed the pain from her mind as she used the wooden beam as a battering ram to fell her guards in rapid succession, leaving each of them writhing on the ground desperately sucking air, all in the matter of a few heartbeats.

Pompeia sat transfixed by the sudden burst of violence, her mind failing to register that she should be screaming for the legionaries to come to her immediate assistance. Only when she realised that the, supposedly, restrained slave had disabled her guards, did the Roman noblewoman find her voice. As Flaccus showed signs of forcing himself back to his feet, Pompeia screamed, "**GUARDS!**" only to watch in astonished disbelief as the heavily shackled slave shot, like a coiled spring, into the air, described a somersault that allowed her to smash her way feet first through the glass dome and land somewhere on the palace roof, before the first of the soldiers had managed to gain entry to the room.

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~ Destiny's Dominion ~

by Power Chakram

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[See Part 1.](#)

Chapter Sixty One: Up On the Roof

Autolycus had left Pompey's residence as soon as it was dark enough for him to slip away unnoticed. He thought that Gabrielle's concerns about Xena being removed from Rome were likely to be unfounded, but he was more than willing to check on the Warrior Princess if it would allay the bard's fears, especially as he often found himself worrying about the raven haired woman.

- Well there's nothing wrong in that, - he mutely assured himself, - Even the King of Thieves can be concerned about a friend. - He smiled to himself as he edged circumspectly along in the shadows, - Of course, when that friend has hair the texture of fine silk, and a body almost as perfect as my own. - His smile widened at that thought, - And then she has the most divinely kissable lips, and her eyes ... -

That brought him up short as he pictured a pair of dazzling, but very cold blue orbs that could skewer a fly at fifty paces. He swallowed hard and ran a finger around his collar. *- Well a little danger is worth a taste of the Elysian fields, -* he told himself with an uncertain chuckle before adding, *- Stop that, Autolycus. This isn't the time for those fantasies!* - he told himself soberly. But a little voice at the back of his mind answered, *- A man can dream, can't he? -* and it was enough to bring a quirky smile to the thief's lips.

It was just fully dark when he reached Caesar's palace. He found a secluded nook that he could watch the drill-yard wall from, wanting to make absolutely certain that the guard routine still followed the pattern he had previously established. He took his time, not willing to take chances here, finally being satisfied that all was the same and that he would once more be able to slip over the wall and into the parade ground without detection.

Preparing to move from his place of concealment, his progress was arrested as frantic shouts went up from within the building, the guards deserted the walls with indecent haste, heading towards whoever had summonsed them. To Autolycus, it appeared as if someone had just stirred up an anthill with a big stick.

"And I just bet I know who's holding that stick," muttered the King of Thieves as he sprinted for the now deserted wall and made a rapid ascent to the parapet, dropping over the top to the guard walk. Huddling into the dark shadows, his intelligent brown eyes scanned the central yard and

while, but with controlled patience she finally got it into a position where she could slip her right elbow around the end of the wood, freeing one arm except for the chain that still dangled from the end of the beam. Carefully she allowed the end of the heavy spay to drop to her feet, where she manoeuvred until she could slowly work the beam past her left elbow drawing the right hand chain through with it.

There was a loud clatter as the wood and metal fell onto the roof, but Xena couldn't repress the grim smile that leapt unbidden to her lips, - *Well one down. Only the leg irons, belt and manacles, collar and leg chains to go!* - she thought sarcastically, wondering where she was going to find anything like a useable tool to work on their removal.

To be honest, she wasn't even sure that her skill would be enough to pick those locks. She hadn't had a chance to practice against them, because Patroclese had found and removed her hard won toothpick, and then the shackles had been changed after she broke free of the original belt. She'd had plenty of time to study the locks on the fetters and she thought that they'd be something of a challenge even for Autolycus with all his bag of tricks.

Stiffening, she was suddenly on full alert as her hyper-sharp senses told her someone was sneaking towards her. Maintaining her calm, so as not to alert whoever it was to the knowledge that they'd been detected, Xena waited until the intruder was right behind her before turning with an impossibly fast grace and delivering a crunching head butt.

"Ow!" moaned a distinctly unhappy voice as the Warrior Princess' victim's legs buckled to lay him sprawling at her feet.

"Autolycus?" hissed Xena in contrite surprise, "What in Zeus' name are you doing here?" she demanded, as she knelt down to inspect the damage.

The King of Thieves slapped her probing hands away and hissed back petulantly, "I came to help you, and this is all the thanks I get!" he grimaced pointing at the fresh blood pouring from his bleeding nose.

"I'm sorry, Autolycus," placated the warrior grudgingly, "But you should know better than to sneak up on me like that." She raised her hands once more to continue her medical inspection, noting the gash on the side of his forehead and the scrapes and bruises elsewhere, "What happen to you?" she asked, surprise evident in her voice, "I sure as Hades didn't do all this damage." She could see nothing life threatening so she stood back up and carefully checked the surroundings for any sign of Flaccus and his men, "Well?" she insisted when the thief remained silent.

Autolycus rose to his feet, straightened his tunic and muttered something that to Xena sounded suspiciously like, "I had a fight with a wall."

"What?" she hissed incredulously.

"Well it was the only way to get over here .. Do you know the whole palace and grounds are teeming with soldiers and just before I got clobbered by you, I caught sight of a whole host more heading this way."

"Flaccus has brought in reinforcements .. elements from the VIIth Legion most likely. We've got to get out of here." she added, rather unnecessarily Autolycus thought.

"You're not going far in those," he told her pointing to the shackles, "Let me have a look. I should be able to get them off pretty quick."

Xena looked agitated, "I don't know .. I don't like staying too long in one place. It gives them more chance to locate us and close in."

"A moment or two won't hurt," insisted the thief, "Just let me look ..." He groaned in annoyance.

"What?" demanded Xena, becoming more edgy by the moment.

"Hang on," Autolycus responded and with deft skill, quickly removed the chains from her collar and those on her ankles used by the soldiers to control her. "There's a problem with the leg irons and your manacles," he muttered in annoyance. "They've got a really complicated locks and I need some of my more specialised tools. The only problem is Brutus snatched them when he captured me and Joxer. Without them, it's going to take time to spring the mechanisms."

Nodding thoughtfully as she curled up a length of the chain freed from her collar, Xena replied, "Thought as much."

"Hey what are you going to do with that?" the dark haired man asked as he eyed the metal in the warrior's hand.

"I'm improvising," she told him with a feral grin, "If Flaccus wants me he's going to have to bleed to get me. This," she said hefting the chain, "Will make a useful weapon for now." She glanced around, "We need to find another 'safe' spot so you can have a go at those locks. Did you see anywhere that looked promising on you're way here?" she asked.

"Uh, yeah," replied Autolycus, "Follow me."

The pair made their way with stealthy speed across the roof of the palace towards a spot, which the King of Thieves had noticed earlier, that would give them some cover and several escape bolt holes if necessary.

Lucas presented himself before Flaccus and saluted, waiting for the grim centurion's nod to continue before he spoke, "The third, fifth and eighth cohorts of the VIIth have just arrived, a compliment of fifteen hundred men according to their commander, he's awaiting instruction on how you want them deployed. Also the squad on the roof, who went up through the solarium dome, have sent a report that they've found a collar chain, both the leg chains and the restraining beam, but there's no sign of the slave."

was the plan, but the senior centurion knew better than to count on it working, which was why he needed his men to be alert and ready for any tricks that the bitch might pull.

"Alright," he growled, "light the torches and move out." He'd debated with himself long and hard about using the torches. It would probably attract unwanted attention from the city, but he wanted every chance of spotting the escaping slave, and there were too many black shadowy areas for her to hide unnoticed in, so he'd made provision for light and would answer any query with the standard response of it being a training drill.

They moved slowly making sure that they searched every nook and cranny where the fugitive could be hiding. Flaccus knew that they had the grounds covered and that no one was going to get through the men staking it out, but he wanted his men to retake what they had lost. He hated the thought that the palace guards, or the men of the VIIth would make the capture .. it was bad enough that he'd had to call them in for support in this matter.

"Over there!" shouted a man towards the end of the line near the roof ledge. Flaccus looked to where he was pointing and saw a black cloaked figure bounding agilely across the hazardously sloping roof, heading for end of the building facing the barracks.

"Yodelayhehoo!" came the almost impudent cry as the dark form leapt from the top of the palace over the wide gap and down onto the flat barracks roof, landing with a controlled roll.

- *Where did she get a cloak from?* - the thought skittered quickly through his mind as he shouted, "Take her down with your darts. She seems to be free of her shackles!"

As the squad began to turn and signal the other groups, a deadly figure rose up from the shadows, a warcry erupting from her throat, "Aiaiaiaiaiaia!" as she struck out with a chain and leather wrapped fist that sent an unprepared legionnaire screaming over the edge of the roof! "Aiiiiieeee!" the cry reverberated off the palace walls and was ended abruptly by the sickening thump as the soldier hit the paved ground below.

- *Got to get their minds off Autolykus!* - Xena had acted as she made the decision knowing that she couldn't accept her freedom at the cost of one of her friends losing theirs. Her fist lashed out smashing into another soldier's throat, killing him slowly as the blow destroyed his ability to draw breath.

"She's behind us!" shouted another soldier as he tried to defend himself from the blue eyed executioner that advanced upon him swinging a chain with deadly intent.

Flaccus looked from one shadowy figure to the other, before barking out the command, "Leave the one in the cloak! The boys on the ground will get him. We've got a slave to subdue. Narda," he growled to his Optio, "Signal the other groups that we've found her."

"At once sir," returned the junior officer, swinging his flaming torch in the pre-arranged pattern that would signal to the other squads that their quarry had been found.

As the soldiers tried to close in around Xena, the Warrior Princess deliberately backed off to the edge of the roof. She knew that they wanted her alive, and if they tried to dart her while she balanced so precariously, she would likely join the guard laying dead on the ground below. She allowed an evil chuckle to escape her as she swung the chain with skilled menace, keeping the growing number of soldiers at bay, "Come and get me boys!" she taunted.

"Don't use the darts!" shouted out an officer, "Just keep her surrounded."

When no one moved within range, she slowly began to move along the roof's edge, heading towards the place where she'd see Autolycus leap from. She doubted that they'd let her get that far, and even if she did, the guards below would have seen the thief's escape route .. at least she hoped he'd escaped .. and would have moved to block it off. Glancing across the swell of faces, she tried to pick out Flaccus. She had a deep score to settle with the hard bitten centurion and hoped she'd get her chance before this ended .. one way or another. Failing to see him, she pushed aside her desire to see him dead, and concentrated on keeping herself out of the soldier's clutches.

Flaccus realised what Xena was up to almost immediately. He left some hasty instructions with Narda and gathered up the first squad of men to reach them from other search areas, as it happened it was the group who had followed the slave up from the solarium, "You lot, come with me," instructed the senior centurion in a low voice, leading the group of thirty men away from the confrontation on the edge of the roof and down into the building below.

Grinning wildly, her eyes a blaze of azure blue in the light of the torches, the Warrior Princess continued her deliberate progress along the narrow ledge she had claimed, taking the occasional glance down to check her progress .. lashing out with the chain when one of the legionaries ventured too close. She'd already removed three more of her stalkers. One was nursing a broken arm, another was at least temporarily blinded having received a wicked slash across the eyes, while the third had had his neck snapped by the fast moving chain that was wielded with such power and accuracy. It hadn't reduced the odds she faced by much, but it kept them all wary and back away from her.

More Romans joined those penning Xena to the edge and soon they were thick about her so that further progress was no longer an option, "Give it up , slave," called Titus from somewhere in the crowd of faces. "You can't go anywhere .. except back to your pit. Don't make things worse for yourself."

Barking out a short laugh, Xena looked down once again, before making up her mind. "Roman, things couldn't be any worse if I spent an eternity in Tartarus."

"Enough games!" snapped Titus, "There's nowhere left to run, no more surprises left to pull. Just surrender .. NOW!"

She grinned at him, still swinging the chain to keep the legionaries back, "No surprises left, huh? Well, I'll bet this is one surprise you weren't expecting." So saying, she did a backflip off of the roof, twisting her body in mid flight so that it fell parallel to the building where she grasped the

banner pole that displayed Caesar's personal colours. As the soldiers rushed to look down from the ledge, Xena swung on the pole to build a little momentum before launching herself through a dark window, into the building and away from the pursuit.

Chuckling to herself, she moved as quickly as she could across the room, her eyes quickly adjusting to the gloom. Hampered as she was by her leg irons, she knew that she had to move quickly because it wouldn't be long before they could gather the forces to renew the chase. Even so, she wasn't quite ready to throw all caution to the winds. At the door she stopped and listened for anyone in the corridor beyond. Hearing nothing, the Warrior Princess slipped out into the hallway and made her way down the thickly carpeted passage, looking for a way out that would give her a chance at her elusive freedom.

"There she is!" she heard the cry from behind her as five soldiers rounded a turn at the other end of the corridor.

The whining buzz of a dart registered in her mind after her hand had reacted to snatch it from the air, followed by a second that she dealt with in a similar fashion. A quick look told her that the other three men were preparing to fire as well. Being close to the turn in the passageway at her end, she elected not to chance missing one of the drugged missiles. Flipping along the carpet was quicker than struggling with the constrictions of the shackles, and she reached the turn before the darts could be launched ... only to be buried under three nets by the soldiers waiting for her there!

- *Not again!* - her mind screamed, as she thrashed to find a way out of the prisoning mesh.

"A good chase, slave!" snarled Flaccus from close by, "One you're going to be sorry for," he promised.

"Go stick your head up your .." She never got to finish her jibe, because a heavy baton crashed down on her head, knocking her senseless.

Flaccus looked down on her, a bleak smile on his face, "Get those shackles back on her and get her back to her pit." He watched as the nets were untangled and his men worked to carry out his orders, "Oh and find a chain long enough to lock to her collar and the pit grill. Let's make it a little easier to get her out of there when we want her."

The senior centurion watched as the unconscious slave was dragged away and his mind turned to the report that he was going to have to write on the incident, - *First, however, I've got to see if the that damned intruder was caught and get rid of all the extra men we've got littering up the palace,* - he thought sullenly. - *I hope for their sakes that they didn't let the bastard get away!* - He turned on his heels and stalked from the building.

Chapter Sixty Two: Fall Out!

Five days had passed since Xena's abortive escape attempt. The 'guests' at Pompey's palace had been held captive by concern since Ephiny, Hercules and Eponin had arrived back, from the evening's entertainment at Jovian's place, and told them that there had been some major trouble

at Caesar's residence, with legionaries being drafted in to seal off the grounds, and the unusual sight of men, brandishing torches, moving around on top of the building.

Gabrielle's face was immediately cloaked in a worried frown, "It's got to be something to do with Xena," she said softly, almost to herself. "Oh gods! I hope Autolyclus didn't get into trouble," she added in a worried tone.

"What's that about Autolyclus?" demanded Hercules, realising that the swaggering thief was not there with them.

Gabrielle threw a look at the demi-god, then drawing a deep breath, standing straighter in her 'queenly' pose, and doing a good impression of one of Xena's 'looks', she answered, "I asked him to check and see if Xena was still at the palace. I needed ... need to know that Caesar hasn't taken her away somewhere ... or maybe killed her," she finished quietly.

"Hey, Gabrielle," Ephiny said moving to her side and rubbing her arm reassuringly, "you know that he's not about to kill her after all the trouble he's gone to capturing her and keeping her alive." She looked into her monarch's eyes and saw the uncertainty born of the knowledge that her best friend had already been close to death while in her enemy's hands. Ephiny told her firmly, "If he'd wanted her dead he's had plenty of opportunity ... for now he wants her alive. He might hurt her," she winced at the look of pain that flashed in the green of the bard's eyes, "but he won't kill her. She's far too valuable to him."

"Yeah," muttered Gabrielle, her confidence returning a little as she fingered the slave collar at her own throat. "That doesn't explain where Autolyclus is," growled Hercules beginning to pace back and forth in the room.

"Don't worry about him, Herc," grinned Iolaus from where he was sitting chatting with Toris, "You know that man's got more lives than a cat."

"Figure that turn out was for him?" asked Eponin as she flopped onto the sofa next to the blonde warrior.

Hercules stopped his pacing and looked at her for a long moment, "It could have been," he answered, worry tinging his voice, but I don't see why they would have been up on the palace roof ... not that I can see why Xena would be up there either," he admitted.

"He could have been chased up there," suggested Joxer from where he was sprawled on the floor with a pile of scrolls that Gabrielle had 'acquired' from Pompey's library. "Or he could have been doing some ... some thief thing and got caught at it,"

"Now that I could believe!" agreed Iolaus quickly.

"He wouldn't have," assured the bard although her confidence on the point seemed a little shaky.

"He would have!" said almost everyone else in the room in chorus.

Gabrielle threw her hands into the air, "Jeez guys! Cut him some slack will ya! He only went because I asked him to ... and he could be in trouble because of it."

Hercules stopped beside the small woman and gave her a hug, "It's alright, Gabrielle. We're concerned about him too."

"Speak for yourself, big guy," muttered Iolaus darkly and received a friendly punch in the arm from Toris, who frowned at the blonde, "Hey!" responded the warrior in mock annoyance.

"You know you don't mean that, so be nice," Toris told him dryly sounding so much like Xena that he drew all eyes to him. "What?" he asked plaintively.

Amidst much shaking of heads, the others turned back to their conversations, the uncanny resemblance between the innkeeper and the Warrior Princess impressed upon them yet again.

"How long has he been gone," asked Hercules, trying to judge whether there was anything to really worry about.

Gabrielle sighed and sat down on the unoccupied sofa with Ephiny next to her, "He left just after you did," she informed him.

Doing a quick calculation, the demi-god's brow creased with concern, "That's nearly six candlemarks. Apart from that first time, he's never been gone more than three before."

"Hey, quit worrying," Iolaus said again, but in a far less mocking tone, "I wasn't kidding when I said he's got more lives than a cat. If anyone can get out of that kind of fix it would be him ... you watch, he'll turn up before dawn like a bad dinar."

But he hadn't and the atmosphere within the suites, occupied by the group, became steadily more gloomy as they began to realise that the King of Thieves could have found himself more trouble than he could handle. Everyone felt helpless. They couldn't look for information on Autolycus without seeming very suspicious. They couldn't ask Pompey to, because as far as the Roman knew, the thief was safely 'detained' within the Amazon's private suites. If he found out that Autolycus had slipped away, then Gabrielle, Toris, Iolaus and Joxer would have found themselves locked securely in a dungeon. They were pawns in a battle for power and, knowing that, they had to keep the King of Thieves' disappearance to themselves.

They had spent the rest of that night waiting for Autolycus to return, and discussing how their tentative advances towards Graccus were going. Ephiny reported that the senator had been discrete in showing his interest to the oblique ideas that the Regent presented to him. It was clear that the erudite man felt no love or loyalty to either Caesar or Pompey, believing that both were destroying everything good within Roman society. However, he was far from foolish enough to make his opposition obvious, knowing that such a stance would likely prove to be suddenly very fatal.

Things were tense amongst the small group. Gabrielle fretted alternately between Xena and Autolycus, whilst the others worried similarly to an only slightly lesser extent. The little that could be accomplished, was being done by Ephiny and although that allowed her, Eponin and Hercules to get away from the tense atmosphere of the palace suites, more often than not, the demi-god elected to remain behind where he could act as a moderating influence on the tempers of his friends. Besides, within the sanctuary of their rooms was the only place that he could talk.

The evening torches had long since been lit, their steady flames casting long shadows around the sitting room of the men's suite. Gabrielle sat telling Ephiny, Toris and Hercules the story of Xena's affliction by the Furies at Ares' instigation, while Iolaus and Joxer sat throwing dice in a complicated game that they were inventing and refining as they went along to pass the time. Eponin was still with the warriors, sorting out guard rosters and making certain that weapons practice was being maintained to her rigorous standards. She would come up to the suite when she had finished.

- *All in all*, - thought Autolycus blearily as he stood unsteadily in the dark shadows of the bathroom doorway, - *quite the domestic little scene*. - He coughed loudly, unable to still the hacking assault that gripped him momentarily. Instantly all eyes flickered towards where he stood hidden by shadows.

"Autolycus?" questioned Gabrielle's sweetly concerned voice, moving quickly towards where he stood, but not quick enough to beat Iolaus, who had rushed to the thief's side and held him with a steadying hand.

"Thanks, Curly," the usually dashing thief said appreciatively, leaning heavily on the smaller man's shoulder, "I could use a 'little' support," he added weakly with a feeble attempt at his normally cutting humour. For once Iolaus didn't rise to the bait. The King of Thieves ... his sometimes friend ... was in poor shape and he needed help more than he needed banter. "Not going soft on me, are ya, shorty?" asked Autolycus, just before he keeled over unable to hold himself upright any longer.

Iolaus braced himself, using his surprising strength, to stop the thief from falling, then swung the larger man over his shoulder and moved across to the empty sofa and gently laid his burden down. Once into the light, everyone could see his puffy, battered face, the ugly gash on his temple and, most especially, the fletchings of an arrow that stuck out of his chest below the right shoulder, "Dammit, Autolycus!" swore the blonde. "What in Tartarus have you been doing to yourself."

"Hey! You should see the other guys!" he protested weakly, beginning to cough once more.

Gabrielle shoed Iolaus out of the way and laid the back of her hand against his brow, wincing at the fever she felt there. Taking a deep breath, she said, "Eph, I need that medical kit from our rooms, I think that's got everything I need in it. Hercules, I'm going to need you to push that arrow through ... I'm sure you know what to do. Iolaus can you find a poker to heat up ... use a torch ... get Joxer to help you. Toris can you get me a bowl of water and some linen that I can use for cloths and bandages."

Everyone went quickly about their assigned tasks as the bard and demi-god worked to get the thief's tunic off of him so they could clearly see what they were dealing with. "I thought I told you to keep clear of trouble," Gabrielle rebuked mildly trying to hide her wince as she viewed the heavy bruising across his chest, "What part of that didn't you understand?" she questioned.

"When did she get so authoritative?" Autolycus asked the big man beside him.

"Must be the queen thing," Hercules replied half smiling at the look of chagrin on Gabrielle's face.

"You didn't answer my question," insisted the honey blonde.

"I was being careful, Gabrielle. At least until tall, dark and deadly got herself into major trouble."

Toris returned with the water and cloth. The bard quickly began to wash the dirt and grime away from the arrow wound and the cuts and abrasions on the thief's face, "You can tell us all about it when we get though fixing you up," Gabrielle told him gently. "How's it going with the poker, boys?" she asked.

"It'll be ready when you are," Iolaus responded.

"Hey! ... Ouch! ... Mind what you're doing with that, it's hot!" protested Joxer.

Gabrielle looked at the demi-god, "I wish Xena was here. Not just because she's better at this than me, but she'd be able to take some of the pain away with that pressure point thing she does."

"It'll be fine," assured Hercules, his blue eyes showing confidence in her ability, "He's pretty strong ... a bit of pain won't hurt too much."

"Hey! That's me you're talking about. Me and pain don't ..." Autolycus gasped as the big man snapped off the fletchings of the arrow, "... mix" he finished as he lapsed into unconsciousness.

Hercules quickly pulled the shaft out from the exit wound and made room for Iolaus to apply the red-hot poker to cauterise the flesh. Autolycus writhed from the pain but didn't awaken. The bard took the time to apply a healing slave to the wounds then bound them firmly, before checking that his recently healed broken wrist hadn't received any further damage. Seeing that all was well in that area, she turned her attention to his injured face. With gentle hands she applied an astringent to cleanse the wounds and deftly inserted five stitches to hold the wicked looking gash together.

Autolycus began to show signs of coming around as she began to run her hands over his body checking for damage to his ribs, "You keep doing that," the thief mumbled with slurred words, "and I'll start to think you have designs on my body," he told her with a lascivious grin ... well one that he intended to be lascivious, it actually barely made wounded puppy dog! "Not that I can blame you," he added, "Ahh! The stories I could tell!"

"Be nice," Hercules told him.

"Don't worry," Gabrielle told him. "He's not the only one who can tell stories. Have I ever told you the one where Xena tricked him into stealing a lump of rock sugar, then hunted him down and caught him before he could escape?"

"Ah, Gabrielle ... I don't think they need to know about that," Autolycus responded, his voice beginning to return to normal as he recovered some of his strength.

"Or the time that Xena caught him disguised as an old woman after the golden statue of Pax was stolen ... or when he had himself captured and chained up so he could get a chance at stealing some diamonds from a mine," she continued with a twinkle in her eyes.

"Sheesh! Cut me some slack here. I'm an injured man. A victim of Caesar's goons Ow!" he finished limply looking for sympathy.

The bard patted him on the arm a mischievous smile playing over her lips, "I'll play nice if you will," she told him. "Look I'm going to mix you some herbs to help fight that fever and any infection you might have picked up. When you've drunk that, if you feel up to it, perhaps you can tell us what happened. We've been frantic with worry for you and Xena."

"Sure," answered the thief with none of his usual bravado. "I don't know a lot of the details, but I'll tell you my part of it and what I saw happening ... although I really could do with something to eat ... I don't think I've had anything in days."

Sending Joxer down to the kitchens for some broth, something that wouldn't cause any trouble because the palace staff had become used to the 'guests' requiring food at odd times, Gabrielle quickly put together a concoction that Xena had shown her how to prepare and got Autolycus to swallow it down, "By the gods! That's the most awful thing I've ever tasted," he complained.

"You should try some of Xena's other remedies. I don't think she believes they do any good unless they taste foul." the bard grinned. They waited for Joxer to return and allowed the thief to eat his meal in peace, before asking him to relate just what had happened two evenings previously.

Autolycus, relaxed as he lay back on the cushions that had been nested around him on the sofa, feeling comfortable and at ease for the first time in a couple of days. He replayed events in his mind before launching into his story, "I headed out for Caesar's and watched for my chance to get in. The guard routines were still in pattern, so I knew it would be an easy job to slip over the wall, same as I did before. I was just about to start when all Hades seemed to break loose and all the guards were pulled off the wall. It was obvious that something was going on, so I took the chance, climbed the wall and hid to get an idea of what was going down. The guards were spread all around the palace and it looked like someone had thrown a hornet's nest amongst them. The grate to Xena's cell was open and there was no guards there, so I figured whatever was going on must have something to do with her.

"I watched a while before I figured out that everyone seemed to be looking at the top of the building. It seemed like a dinar to a duck's feather that our Warrior Princess had slipped the leash and was up on the palace roof doing her best to avoid the Romans." He stopped his narration and took a long drink from the goblet of water that Gabrielle offered him, "Thanks I needed that. How'd you know?"

She shrugged, "I'm a bard. I tell stories ... a lot. I know how thirsty you can get."

"Sheesh! Should have guessed," grinned the thief looking more than a little tired.

"Hey, you okay? Do you want to leave this until after you've had some sleep?" Gabrielle asked solicitously.

He gave her a calculating look and swung a glance over the others who had been eagerly devouring his words, "Thanks for the thought, Gabrielle, but I'll sleep better for knowing that you lot aren't gnawing your fingers off with impatience."

"Very virtuous of you, I'm sure," the bard grinned openly at the relieved sighs from several of the others. "Just don't over tire yourself, 'kay?"

"My protector," smirked the thief as he settled back into his cushions and resumed his story. "Well with everyone's attention on the roof of the palace, I was able to slip along the wall and up onto the barracks roof. >From there I was able to get across to the main building's roof"

"Hey, that's a pretty large distance to get across without being seen," remarked Ephiny, visualising the layout of the drill-yard compound.

"Yeah, well ... I had to take a few risks and knocks," admitted Autolycus with a reluctance that didn't really fit his normal bravado.

"Oh, I get it," grinned Iolaus, "that's how you got those bruises."

"Only some of them, Shorty," the thief snapped in return.

"Well what happened?" demanded the blonde warrior, "How'd you get them?" He grinned, pleased to see that his 'friend' was looking better for his treatments.

"I ran into a wall," answered Autolycus almost too quietly to hear.

"You what?" pressed Iolaus, his grin getting wider.

"I misjudged the impact and hit the wall," snarled the King of Thieves, "Satisfied now?" he asked snarkily.

"Oh that's choice," laughed the short man slapping his knee in delight, "The professed King of Thieves running face first into a wall."

"It wasn't face first," protested Autolyclus, touchy about his prowess being questioned, "my feet hit first."

As Iolaus continued to laugh, Ephiny gave him a rather annoyed look and explained tersely, being the only one other than the thief to have seen the area, "The gap between the barracks and the palace must be, what? twenty feet?" she directed at Autolyclus.

"Twenty-five," he corrected uncomfortably.

"Right, so maybe a twenty foot difference in height between the two buildings," she asked and got a nod from the thief, "And a thirty foot drop from the barracks down to a lower roof?" Again she got a nod for the correctness of the estimate. Ephiny shook her head in disbelief, "So you swung across the gap?" Another nod, "You're mad!" she told him as the other looked on somewhat shocked at the thought of the velocity that he must have hit the wall at.

"I'm sorry," Iolaus apologised, "I shouldn't have said what I did."

"Hey, it's only what you heroes do all the time," smirked Autolyclus basking in their unfeigned admiration. "Anyway," he continued, "once I was up on the palace roof, it wasn't too hard to find Xena, although she very nearly plastered my nose across my face for my trouble," he groaned as he was reminded of the painful bruising and two beautiful black eyes he was sporting, and just thanked the gods that nothing had been broken and ruined his perfect looks.

"You should know better than to sneak up on her!" admonished Gabrielle.

"Hey! It was dark and I wasn't certain it was her," protested the thief. The quickly changed the subject back to his narration of events. "So, she'd already managed to get free of that wooden spar they use to restrict her, and we decided to move to a different spot, before the Romans located us, so I could have a crack at her shackles ... you know Caesar must have a really good locksmith working for him, because those were some of the hardest locks I've tackled."

"But you managed to get them open, right?" demanded Toris.

"Weeell," the thief waggled his hand from side to side, "I got one of the manacles undone, before Xena told me time was up. Someone had got the authority to call in half a legion, which meant they could surround the palace and mount an extensive search of the roof. With the leg irons still in place, she wasn't in much of a position to move fast, so she ordered me out of there."

"You didn't stay to help?" asked an incredulous Joxer. "Joxer the Mighty would never have left a friend in distress," he informed them proudly puffing out his chest, trying to look the part of the warrior.

"Listen, Master of Morons, when was the last time you won an argument with Xena? Any of you?" he challenged, then added an exclusion for Hercules and Gabrielle, "You two don't count."

"He's got a point," muttered Toris, scratching his ear, "I haven't been able to best her in any type of dispute since she was about five or six."

Still feeling proddy about the perceived smirch on his honour and bravery, Autolycus continued, "So I told her the plan, kissed her and got my butt out of there, because she was adamant that my getting caught would make things even worse for her."

"You what?" demanded Hercules incredulously with a dangerous glint in his eye.

"Got my butt out of there," replied the thief apprehensively, replaying what he had just said in his mind. - *Oh Zeus!* - he cursed as he realised what he'd let slip. He hadn't meant to mention that around the demi-god, - *He's going to kill me!* - "Umm, c'mon Herc. It was just a ... " he swallowed hard "...friendly kiss. Just to let her know she's not been forgotten."

Hercules glared at the thief for a very long moment, "We'll talk about it when you're feeling better," he rumbled ominously.

"Umm, sure, big guy." He swallowed again convulsively, "Anyway, I headed back out the way I came in. I figured to jump from the palace down to the barracks roof. I also tried to distract the search parties attentions by yelling as I went. Trouble was they're carrying these dart crossbows that carry some kind of knock out drug and when Xena realised that they were going to shoot at me, she let out one of her battle cries and began attacking them like a demon possessed."

"Whoa! Back up," interrupted Iolaus. "You jumped the gap between the buildings?"

"Well, ah, yeah. It was the quickest way off, and like I said, I wanted to distract the guards to give Xena a chance to get away."

"But you already got banged up crossing that gap once?" protested the blonde man, an unexpected respect beginning to kindle in his mind.

"Yeah, well, I was moving from higher to lower ... and I rolled on impact and only banged up my ribs a little bit more ... no big deal," he said with true modesty for once.

Gabrielle, leaned over and lightly kissed him drawing jealous looks for the thief from Iolaus and Joxer and, surprisingly, from Toris. "You know, Autolycus?" grinned the bard.

"Aw, don't say it, Gabrielle," winced the thief in embarrassment.

"You've got a good heart," she smiled gently caressing his cheek. "Now what happened next?"

The King of Thieves gave a nervous look around the room. Every man there was looking daggers at him, "Hey it's not my fault women find me irresistible," he protested with a slightly smug grin.

"Don't push your luck, Slick," advised Ephiny with a firm squeeze on his good shoulder, "Just get on with the story."

The thief smirked with his usual cocky arrogance until he caught the withering look he was getting from Hercules. Clearing his throat he continued, "There wasn't anything else I could do to help her, I saw her take down two or three soldiers, one fell off the roof. It was obvious she wanted me out of there so that I didn't get caught, and the ground troops were beginning to tighten the cordon. If I hadn't left then, I'd have never got away," he told them plaintively.

"S'okay, Autolycus," the bard assured him a sad look in her eyes, "You did what you had to do."

"Anyway, I had to cross the length of the barracks to the walkway and then over the wall. Nearly all of the guards' attention was focused up on the roof ... Xena was kind of doing a balancing act on the edge, daring the soldiers to come and get her. They couldn't dart her in case she went over, and anyone foolish enough to get close to her ended up dead real quick from the chain she was swinging." He gave the bard a sympathetic look as she blanched when he mentioned the balance on the edge of the building. He'd forgotten her fear of heights.

"Unfortunately, " he continued, "not all of them kept their eyes on Xena's show. I'd just made it to the wall, when some bas.... um, archer got a luck shot and winged me." He grinned at himself for avoiding the coarser language, "I made it down the wall, and scrambled away, but a squad of soldiers were hot on my tail. As I made a corner, I caught sight of movement on the roof and I saw Xena jump, but I couldn't hang around because the posse was just to damn close behind me." He gave a reassuring look to the bard, and hid the fear he had felt when he'd seen the Warrior Princess launch herself off of the building, "She'll be alright," he told Gabrielle with a certainly he tried hard to believe in himself, "She wouldn't have jumped without a reason. She probably had a way out of the tight spot on the roof ... you know what she's like."

"I know," agreed the bard softly, patting the injured man's hand, then changed the subject, "So what took you so long to get back here?"

Autolycus snorted with disgust, "That damned goon squad stuck to me like sh... , um, fleas to a dog," he adjusted nimbly. "I had to hole up in an a warehouse for a day ... I was hoping to get to the ship the next night, but they'd got the docks cordoned off and there was no way I'd have been able to slip past them with that arrow sticking out of me. So I spent that night and all of today in that warehouse, and slipped back here tonight, although it wasn't easy. There's a screen of Caesar's troops all around this area. They're being discreet about it but they're there. That's about everything there is to know," he concluded, taking a long drink of water and finally allowing the exhaustion to wash over him.

They discussed the news between themselves, and how it affected the situation, for some time. No one allowed themselves to think for a moment that Xena could have died from jumping off the roof ... rumour of that would have spread considering the animosity felt towards the dark haired warrior by almost everyone in Rome.

awaited them out in the drill-yard. The warrior's stomach knotted at the memory of the familiar event that she was powerless to prevent. She willed her fists not to clench, demanded that her body show no trace of the emotion that roiled within her gut. She knelt with apparent patient indifference.

After about half a candlemark had passed with no sign of the children, Xena began to allow hope to emerge, that their torment was over. Another candlemark passed and the Warrior Princess resisted the growing urge to shift her weight from her sorely aching knees, knowing that the guards would be heavy handed in their attempts to discourage movement.

It was now fully dark, the torches and braziers had been lit to illuminate the parade ground and still they waited. Unable to resist any longer, Xena shifted her position and received the expected blow from the baton in return. As if that had been a signal, life stirred within the doorway to the palace and Caesar appeared flanked by Flaccus and Titus.

He stood before her ... she ignored his presence, expecting threats or abuse from him. However, after closely examining her for injuries, he ... in his turn ... ignored her, turning to Flaccus and remarking, "She seems sound enough. You handled the situation correctly. See that she spends tomorrow with the Coliseum trainers. The whole day. The day of the fight she is to spend bathing and under the hands of the masseurs. Make sure she eats well, have her fed and watered by one of the kitchen slaves"

"Son of a bacchii!" swore Xena, "I can feed myself!" she growled not ready for that indignity and despising the way he spoke of her like an animal, some favourite pet to be groomed and cared for by handlers.

A casual backhand blow from Flaccus snapped her head to one side and left her spitting blood. Other than the blow, both Caesar and the centurions continued to ignore her as the Roman ruler outlined his plans to his subordinates, "We'll fight her for maybe another two years ... just matches against high quality opponents, and I'll give you a chance to break her between matches. When we finish fighting her we'll have her tendons cut ... that will ensure that she won't be able to run, then we'll see about breeding her. A few whelps from her and some good bloodstock should give me a decent stable of gladiators for many years."

Xena attempted to lunge forward, but was held firmly in place by her guards as Caesar swept back out of the yard and into the palace. Flaccus waited until his superior had left before turning back to his men and snapping, "See she's fed and watered, then put the animal back in her cage ... and make sure she doesn't get out." He watched as Xena was pulled to her feet and manhandled towards the kitchens.

- As soon as this fight is out of the way, slave, we'll see just how many sessions on the wheel it will take to break you! - he thought with anticipation.

Chapter Sixty Three: Party, Party

The next two days passed with incredible slowness for the detainees in Pompey's palace .. although Autolycus was able to play on the feelings of guilt that a certain bard entertained about

his condition .. at least until Toris pointed out that his sister might take a dim view of such blatant manipulation of her friend's feelings. The problem was, that they had done everything they could to further their plans and now they just had to settle back and wait for fruition, not something any of them enjoyed, since they were all pretty much used to a life full of action of one sort or another. The only person having any fun at all was Ephiny, and the Regent was getting a perverse satisfaction at rejecting and frustrating the amorous Caesar at every turn.

Sitting on the sofa in the women's suite, with her legs curled under her and busy fingers rummaging through the box of delicious sweetmeats on her lap, she told Gabrielle and Eponin, "I think he's getting desperate," she grinned smugly, "Since he's been back, I've avoided him like Zeus avoids Hera .. so he's resorted to sending me these," she held up the box of confections as illustration, and then gestured at the forest of flowers that had invaded the sitting room.

"Eph, if you keep stuffing those sweets, you're gonna need a front door wide enough for a centaur when we get home," pointed out Eponin wryly, snagging a marzipaned nut as the box whisked past her hand.

"Ha!" scoffed the Regent as she jerked her box away from the Weapons Master and directly into the path of Gabrielle's nimble fingers, "You've got room to talk, Poni. Don't think I haven't seen you sneaking in here to snaffle some of these for yourself .. Hey!" she yelped as she realised that the bard had managed to grab a solid handful of the prized candy, "Didn't your mother ever teach you not to steal from your friends?" she demanded with mock sternness.

The bard gave her a long look before poking her tongue out and crossing her eyes at the blonde Amazon, grinning mischievously and throwing a treat over to the widely smiling Eponin, "Here ya go Poni, I'm sure **her** mother taught her it was polite to share with friends!" she commented with a nasty smirk.

"You'll get stuck like that if the wind changes on you, Gabrielle," warned Ephiny with a feigned seriousness that was intentionally comical.

The Amazon Queen popped a sweet into her mouth, produced an ecstatic look on her face and replied, "Old wives tale, Eph .. or Poni would have been stuck with a face like a centaur having constipation, years ago." she grinned, ducking the cushion that was thrown in her direction.

"Har de har har!" growled the dark haired Amazon as she made another grab for the jealously guarded candy box.

Ephiny slapped her hands away, and huffed, "If you want more, go find your own Roman and get him to fall in love with you."

"I think I'd rather give birth to a centaur," grumped Eponin.

"Been there, done that .. and believe me, charming a Roman into giving candy is a lot easier and far less painful!" She thought of the wild afternoon of passion spent with Caesar, "Well mostly," she corrected herself. It went somewhat quiet for a few moments before Gabrielle filled the

silence with a quiet, "Ephiny ..." but got no further before the Regent and Weapons Master answered in unison.

"No!"

The Regent looked at her young Queen and, modifying her tone, explained yet again, "Gabrielle. It's far too dangerous. We'd have trouble hiding that damned collar, and all it would take would be for Caesar to recognise you and everything goes to Hades on a handcart."

The bard slumped back into her seat and pouted, "You have no idea how hard it is just to sit here and wait for news. At least you get a chance to get out there and do something!" She tried the puppy dog expression that usually got her anything she asked for, "I just need to see her .. see for myself that she's alright"

"Forget it Gabrielle," Ephiny told her firmly, hardening her heart against the pleading that she saw in her friend's eyes. "It's just too dangerous, so forget it and have another sweet," she offered forcefully jamming the box under the bard's nose. Willing to sacrifice even her precious candies if it got her some respite from the incessant pleading.

Across the hall, Hercules was beginning to lose his temper, "No way Toris," he told the tall raven haired man with finality. "You'd stand out like a sore thumb, and we can't afford anything going wrong at this stage of the game."

Whirling away from the demi-god in frustration, Toris stalked back and forth making angry gestures, before he turned back to face the adamant tawny haired giant, "Look! She's my sister. Surely if I'm disguised as an Amazon there won't be any problem? All I want to do is see her with my own eyes to make sure she's alright."

Hercules took a deep calming breath and counted to ten before explaining calmly and patiently, at least outwardly, that the other man going along to Caesar's palace would be utter madness. "Look at it this way, Toris, if everything goes as planned you'll be able to spend plenty of time satisfying yourself that Xena's fine on the trip back to Greece. Taking you into the enemies lair would be like putting a burning torch to a jar of oil ... Do you really want to risk everything for an early glimpse of your sister?"

Toris looked at him and wanted to loudly declare 'Yes!', but he knew that the demi-god was speaking sense and that he just needed to be patient for a little while longer. He ran frustrated fingers through his long black hair and replied disgruntledly, "I suppose you're right .. but you should try and see it from my point of view. She's my younger sister. I've never been as good at anything as she is, and I've never been a lot of use to her. She always tried her best to help me .. even when I didn't want her help. Now I can do something to help her, or should be able to, but I'm shut up in this mausoleum and it's driving me nuts!" He slammed his fist against the wall, "I'm no use to her, I'm no use to myself! How do you think that makes me feel!" he almost shouted.

Iolaus came up from behind him and put a comforting hand on his shoulder, "Hey buddy. Don't let it get to you. We're all feeling pretty useless right now. We'll get our chance to do something soon," he reminded his friend.

"Yeah, yeah," muttered Toris who had told himself the same thing many times over. It didn't help. For the first time in his life he had the chance of being able to help Xena, maybe earn some of her respect, and he was frustrated at every turn. He slumped down in a chair and stared moodily off into space.

"He's just got to be patient," shrugged Hercules, trying to understand the dejection that the other man felt.

Iolaus looked over to where Toris sat, "He knows. It's just ..."

"Just what?" asked the big man who really didn't understand the frustration being exuded by Toris.

The short blonde drew in a deep breath, "He feels he needs to prove himself," he said quietly.

"To who?" returned Hercules, although he presumed it was Xena for whatever reason.

Iolaus could see the lack of comprehension in his best friend's eyes, and so tried to explain it, "He wants to prove himself to Xena .. and to her friends. It's like he's got this larger than life sister who does things that no mortal should be able to do and walks through the world like some giant. In the past .. when she was doing the evil Destroyer of Nations thing, it wasn't so bad .. he could disown her and never needed to match himself to her. But now that she's this great hero, righting wrongs and performing superhuman feats, he needs to feel he can measure up to her .. have some respect in her eyes at least."

The demi-god looked at him blankly, "Oh c'mon Iolaus. Toris is a grown man, not some jealous kid."

"You know, buddy," the short warrior retorted, "Someday you ought to sit down with Iphiclese and ask him how he feels having a brother who's a legendary hero."

Hercules gave him an amused glance, "Iphiclese is just fine, Iolaus. He doesn't walk in my shadow. He's a king in his own right."

"By default," the blonde reminded him sharply, "Jason offered you the crown first, remember."

A frown descended upon the demi-god's brow, "Are you certain?" he questioned his friend, and winced at Iolaus' nod, "I suppose when all this is over, I could take some time and visit with my brother," he said glancing over at the dark haired man who sat brooding across the room from him.

her image springing easily to her mind, bringing with it, as always, a feeling of peace that she treasured for its rarity.

- Gods, Gabrielle, - she thought as she bit into the slice and chewed slowly, - I hope they're feeding you my bard. -

It was at this point that a hurricane of obsessed activity struck the kitchens. Xena observed the organised chaos that suddenly erupted with an impartial interest; she knew that whatever was causing the fuss was not going to be allowed to interfere with either her guards, or more especially herself. Caesar had made it abundantly clear that no member of his household had any jurisdiction over his personal slave or the men he used for her security.

- It seems they are expecting a visitation by one of the gods, - a small smile quirked onto her lips as she considered that concept, chewing another bite of the offered nutbread. - But, nah! It's far more likely to be a state visit by the mistress of the house, - she told herself as she tried to move her awkwardly restrained wrists enough to work some of the ache out of her elbows. When they had shortened the chains on the manacles it had left her unable to fully straighten her arms.

She was finishing off her mug of wine, when Pompeia swept into the kitchens on her tour of inspection, wanting to be certain that everything would be in readiness for the night's festivities. Xena slowly chewed on the remaining nutbread, as she caught glimpses of movement through the open door, and heard the variety of compliments and complaints that emanated from the volatile Roman matron. She had just polished off the last of her desert, and had taken a long swallow of water to wash everything down, when she became aware of the kitchen's sudden silence, but more especially another pair of hostile eyes upon her.

Ignoring the presence of Caesar's wife, Xena grinned at the kitchen slave and said, "Thanks Mattin, that filled a hole."

The youth grinned back after a nervous glance at his mistress who stood motionless in the doorway, "No problem, Xena," he whispered as he stood with the empty plate and collected the mugs off the table, "Hopefully I'll get you something good for last meal," he added before scurrying out of the room, moving carefully past Pompeia who appeared to glide in.

The small, elegant woman, stood before the fettered, unconquered, slave and glared at her until the guards yanked on the chains and forced Xena to stand before the mistress of the house. As Pompeia examined the Warrior Princess with a disdainful look on her face, Xena cocked her head to one side, arched an eyebrow and returned the inspection smirking disrespectfully.

"So ... I finally get to have a long look at my husband's infamous slave," sneered the green-eyed woman.

Blue eyes fastened on the Roman lady's conveying the icy cold of death and a barely contained menace. In a low, dangerous voice, Xena told Caesar's wife, "In his dreams!"

Folding her arms, Pompeia allowed her eyes to flick from the shackles binding the warrior, to the guards surrounding her, and reluctantly back to the blue eyes, "How then would you describe your situation, here?" she asked sarcastically.

Shifting her wrists slightly, making the shortened links clink together, Xena quirked a smile and answered, "How about unwilling guest?"

Pompeia scowled. She really resented this confident, dangerous and intelligent woman who so obsessed her husband's thoughts, - *Julius might not be bedding her*, - she admitted sourly, - *but it's only because he's scared spitless of what she'd do to him if he tried it!* - "I think, Slave, that you are merely denying the obvious." She reached out boldly and touched the body heated metal that was locked around the warrior's neck. "My husband defeated you and now you're nothing but a trained animal kept to fight on command ... like you will tonight."

Xena suppressed the burn of anger that she felt in the pit of her stomach and remained outwardly at ease, projecting a sense power and control that was at odds with her current situation, "He never defeated me. He set up an ambush and it took near enough two hundred men to take me and it will take more than he's got to keep me," she told the other woman with unshakable confidence.

After long moments, "What's that saying?" She paused for a heartbeat for effect, "Ah, yes .. All's fair in love and war! I think, slave, that your pride is keeping you from recognising your situation. I believe you need to be humbled."

Snorting in derision, Xena retorted, "Your husband has never loved anyone except himself, has never beaten me except for tricks and treachery .. and my pride? Well let's just say, there's not much in my life that I'm proud of, but at least I have the courage to admit it and face that .. unlike your **husband** or, for that matter, you."

A guard deciding that she was being far too disrespectful to his general's wife, hit her across the back with his baton. The warrior princess showed none of the pain she felt, merely twitching her shoulders as if to shrug the blow off .. she was used to it and worse, and she wouldn't give Pompeia any satisfaction in seeing her register the existence of pain anymore than she would have Caesar.

"You'll pay for that remark," the Roman woman told her with deadly intensity.

Xena grinned nastily at her, "You'll have to take a number and get in line for that," she laughed, "I think they're drawing lots who get's a piece of me first! Of course they'll make certain I'm safely chained before they try it .. I think they're scared of me," she smirked as she shifted her feet and had the satisfaction of seeing each of the guards grow extremely wary and grip their batons hard ready for immediate use, "What do you think?" she laughed without mirth.

Pompeia blanched white, acknowledging to herself that she too was scared of this woman .. and that made her angry! And it made her furious to realise that the slave knew she was scared. The insolent grin on the woman's face informed the noblewoman that she knew exactly what effect

she was having on her **owner's** wife, and just how little she cared for the realities of their relevant social positions. "I'll see you whipped!" Pompeia promised grimly.

"Been there," answered Xena with an aggravating grin, "And it won't be today. Julius wants me to fight for him tonight .. and I can hardly do that if my back has been cut to ribbons again, now can I?"

Moving behind the disdainful slave, Pompeia instructed a guard to lift the short grey tunic from where it was tucked into the belt and skirt she wore. A lattice of white scars, vivid against bronzed skin, was revealed. The sight was impressive, the Roman woman didn't think she'd ever seen a slave who had taken such abuse without it breaking them ... if they survived of course. She ran her fingers over the smooth flesh, watching as the warrior's muscles tightened and rippled away from her touch.

The feel of the skin elicited another frown from Pompeia. The bite of the lash always left hardened ridges of scarred material on the victim, yet this slave's skin felt silky and showed every sign of eventually healing so that it would be difficult to trace the marks. "When was this done?" she demanded of one of the guards.

He shrugged, it was a much considered topic of conversation amongst the maniple who found it disconcerting how fast and completely the woman could heal, "About a moon ago, your Ladyship," he answered. "The animal took fifty lashes on the ship from Gaul after she attempted to escape and kidnap Lord Caesar. The very faint lines are from the twenty lashes she took whilst in Narbonensis for attacking my lord just after she was taken, and another twenty-five that were given for an escape attempt in Gaul." He considered a moment, "That was almost two moons ago."

The Empress was stunned. The slave had taken ninety-five lashes, - *And who knows how many other beatings*, - she thought as she eyed the purpling flesh across the shoulders where she had been struck just a little time ago, and her spirit was still unbroken, "No wonder Julius has a fascination with you," she purred, motioning the guard to allow the tunic to drop as she moved around to stand before the taller woman again. "You, I think, are his ultimate challenge. He enjoys a challenge, you know, and I think you are going to afford him many, many long hours of pleasure as he amuses himself in slowly taking you apart."

Xena quirked an eyebrow at her, but said nothing.

"It will be interesting to see how long you can withstand the pain. I think I will enjoy seeing you broken ... you really are far too .. arrogant. But I think I may be able to help my husband to remedy that. Men rely much too heavily on inflicting pain. There are more subtle measures that I will suggest to him." She smiled dazzlingly at the warrior, "Purely the duty of a good wife helping her husband to .. umm, shall we say train? .. his property."

She watched her 'preys' face for some moments, then, getting no verbal or physical response from Xena, the mistress of the house swept from the room leaving the captive warrior alone with her guards, who were relieved that the strange confrontation was ended.

"Come on you," snapped the decurion, tugging on the collar chain he held, "Let's get you down to the baths."

Xena shuffled quickly to keep up with the pace of the guards, her movement hampered by the shortness of the chain between her ankle cuffs. - *Another enemy*, - she told herself, - *I really need to talk to Gabrielle about how to win friends and influence people*, - she mentally smiled. - *Then again, I'd settle for talking to anyone friendly .. even Joxer*. - She shook her head at that thought and found herself whistling his impossible theme song as she headed for the baths, leaving the surprised guards to wonder what had put their difficult charge into such a good mood.

Chapter Sixty Four: The Contenders

Ephiny, purposefully, timed her arrival, at Caesar's, to be verging on rudely late. She had absolutely no intention of spending more time within his company than absolutely necessary. The fact that it also added to her credence as the miffed lover did not hurt the situation either and would be bound to aid in keeping Caesar off balance for the evening ... - *Hopefully!* - she thought.

Eponin, Malonda and nearly all of the Amazon contingent attended her, along with Hercules, of course, which meant that if there was any trouble, or their plan went wrong, they'd be in a position to fight their way clear. Hakine had been stationed in the palace grounds ready to make a dash back to Pompey's and get the other's to the ship should the situation deteriorate, and Nebula had been warned to be ready for a swift evacuation.

The Amazon party, therefore, looked suitably impressive as they swept up the long marble steps into the huge hall that was functioning as a buffet dining room for the occasion. With Hercules on her left, Eponin on her right and a guard of six Amazon's trailing them, Ephiny signed the rest to disperse around the edge of the room and watch for any signals she might make.

Meandering around, Ephiny took tidbits from the trays of slaves as they were offered to her, and accepted a goblet of wine. The others of her immediate entourage refrained from partaking in any of the bounty that they were offered, making it very evident that they were there as guards, not guests.

Music played in harmonic reels from various hidden galleries. The gently soothing sound of rippling harps giving a solid background for the heavy buzz of conversation to lay against. Spotting one of the younger Roman Senators, that Ephiny tentatively liked for his cutting wit, the Regent glided over to engage him in conversation, seemingly oblivious to her ever present escort.

Caesar, it seemed, had waited until all of his guests had arrived before making his entrance with Pompeia on his arm. After a suitable delay, so that it appeared that he hadn't been waiting on the Amazon's arrival, trumpets blared a fanfare and the ruler of Rome and his wife entered arm in arm.

That was the signal for the dance between Ephiny and Caesar to begin. As the Roman tried hard to manoeuvre his quarry into a situation where he could engage her in quiet conversation, the

Regent used all her skills to ensure that the closest he got was to wishing her, "Good Evening," while she was part of a large group in the centre of the hall.

Senator Graccus, who was by nature an observer of human foibles, watched the dance with growing interest and respect for the skills that the Amazon 'Queen' was showing. - *It's not often,* - he chuckled to himself wryly, - *that I get to see the prey avoid Caesar with such nimbleness and grace.* - He could see from the participant's faces that the Regent was thoroughly enjoying herself, whilst Caesar was looking progressively broodier and far from happy with the situation.

After almost two candlemarks of trying, he finally cornered her, along with 'Heston', her head guard and the six bodyguards, by the indoor fountain that was spouting red wine in place of water .. only to be interrupted by his major domo making an announcement at a pre-ordained time.

"For the entertainment of all, The Great, Julius Caesar, presents to you his personal property and slave, Xena!" He waited as the woman was hustled into the crowded room by ten guards, six of whom held onto the restraint chains that controlled her movements. As she shuffled reluctantly forward, the major domo continued to recite his parroted lines, "Once known as the Warrior Princess and The Destroyer of Nations, this savage woman has been conquered and brought to heel by the Lord Caesar for the safety and glory of Rome."

By the time that the rehearsed speech had been finished, Xena stood before Caesar and Ephiny in a scene that parodied her own first sight of Verchinex. Her arms flexed against the restraint of the beam that it had been deemed prudent to use once again, and her eyes became icy fire burning all those who chanced to meet them.

Caesar threw the major domo a vexed look, before he recovered his suave charm and smiled at the Regent, "I believe you know my slave, your highness," he began smoothly, ignoring the deadly eyes that bore into him, "I thought it only fair that you should get a look at her now that she's fit once more .. after all, the last time you had a close view of her she hardly looked capable of giving your man much of a fight."

Xena threw a look at Hercules who's attention seemed to be fixed somewhere off in space. She returned her focus to Caesar as he continued to speak once more.

"Are you sure that you want to risk that huge sum in your wager?" he asked in a gentlemanly fashion, "She has never been beaten you know?" He lifted Ephiny's hand to his lips, only to have it snatched from his grasp at the last instant as the Amazon moved forward in a slow, considering circle of the chained warrior.

Suppressing the urge to laugh at the exasperated look on Caesar's face, Xena was struck by yet another coincidence linking this to the last time she stood in this room. Hiding the thought, and the laugh that was looking for egress, she focused her senses on Ephiny's slow perambulation until her friend stood before her once more.

The arena was excavated, fully twenty foot down from the spectator level, and measured in the region of twenty-five foot by forty foot. At each corner of the pit, on the gallery level, was a guard box each capable of holding two men, Ephiny's glance registered the presence of soldiers in the background armed with dart crossbows, obviously intended for when Xena came into fight. She also registered the fact that at least twenty more soldiers, carrying thick, heavy, batons, stood on guard at the back of the gallery.

Caesar watched as the Amazon Queen settled back to observe the combat being played out on the sandy floor of the pit. He knew her eyes had wandered over the security precautions readied for Xena, but then almost everyone else around the pit had too; the steps he's taken were unusual, elaborate and bound to attract attention, Ephiny showed neither more, nor less, interest than anyone else. Thinking of Pompeia's words once again, he made the decision to shrug them off. The punch the Amazon had delivered to Xena's jaw had been anything but friendly!

Allowing her eyes to drift back to the contest between two muscular gladiators, the Amazon failed to notice Caesar lean over, until he said softly, "Why have you been avoiding me?"

Ephiny fought the urge to shy away from him and shudder, instead she made her tone cold and hard, "You seem to have all your time occupied with Politics and that murdering savage you call your slave," she told him cuttingly, "I'm sure that I didn't want to get in the way of your passions."

"How could you possibly think that?" he asked with plaintive artfulness, "As a ruler you know that sometimes the affairs of state must take precedence over our personal preferences."

She turned and looked at him fully, "State duty is one thing, Lord Caesar ..."

"Julius," he prompted with a smile that made Ephiny's flesh creep.

Ignoring him, she continued, "... but an obsession with the Whore of Greece is something else again." She gave him a cold look, "Do you know why she's known by that name to the Amazons?" she asked him bluntly. He shrugged his shoulders and sighed, "I'm sure that you're going to tell me, beloved," he purred, although his spies had long ago furnished that information.

"Because she's laid waste to more Cities, villages and men, than any other woman in history. If she commands more of your attention than I do, especially when hot from our passions, I really see no future in continuing this liaison."

The crowd roared as the fight below them came to an abrupt conclusion. Ephiny had sent Eponin and two of her guards down to the gladiator cells with Hercules in preparation for the coming fight. Her four other Amazon bodyguards were posted outside the two entrances to the private box, alongside the Emperor's personal guards. The rest of the Amazon contingent were scattered amidst the guests with pockets of them close to the Roman soldiers in case there was any trouble.

Standing docily while the wooden restraint was removed from behind her arms, she moved, as directed, to the centre of the cell and sat on the straw covered floor whilst the centurion locked the lead chains from her collar and ankles into four separate ringbolts.

"That should hold you until it's time for the fight," he remarked looking down on her, "By the way," he added, "just in case you were thinking of throwing the fight, you better know that those young slaves will receive ten lashes each."

Intense blue orbs snapped up to hold his grey ones, "Thought you'd say that," she said quietly. "Besides I have no intention of losing to an Amazon," she filled the word with contempt, "concubine!"

"Just so long as you understand the stakes," Flaccus said in an offhand manner.

"How long until I get in the pit?" she questioned, as he turned to leave.

He seemed to consider whether he should discipline her for speaking out of turn before deciding to answer her instead, "There's six matches before yours .. depends how long they take."

She made a barely perceptible nod, before allowing her eyes to drift closed as the cell door shut blocking out most of the light from the corridor beyond. She'd take the chance to doze until it was time for her to perform.

Hercules, Eponin and the two Amazon guards were shown down to the gladiator cells by one of Caesar's personal guards. They were passed into the hands, figuratively speaking, of the elite maniple that had taken over the security of the pit holding cells.

"You can put him in this one," a decurion said, holding a cage door open for Hercules.

As the demi-god looked around the cell area in an unfocused way, Eponin took his arm and steered him to a bench next to the wall opposite the cage that the guard was motioning them towards, "S'alright, thanks. Heston, doesn't need to be locked up. He won't cause any problems. Fact is he'll sit here good as gold until the fight rolls around."

"He the deaf mute we bin hearing about?" the Roman questioned sneeringly. "Can't see how such a no-account freak of nature has managed t' survive this long when he walks around in a dream world all day."

"Heston can pretty much take care of himself," Poni assured him, wondering if all Roman's were such imbeciles and decided to change the subject before she got angry enough to deck him. She glanced down the wide corridor to where a dozen guards sat outside a heavy metal door. Jerking her chin towards them she asked, "That where you got the she-devil?"

"Yeah. Your retard is gonna get his ass kicked by her. I ain't never seen anyone or anythin' that can match her. That's why she's penned down in the secure cell. They got her chained to the

Flaccus was not amused, "Keep it up, animal, you're just storing up more pain for when this fight is out of the way with," he promised.

Sparing him a condescending look, Xena said quietly so only the centurion could hear, "Know what your trouble is Flaccus? You think that pain is something to fear. You should welcome it, because it let's you know that you're alive!"

Glaring at her, the officer replied in a gravelly tone, "Oh believe me, animal! You're really gonna know you're alive when we get through with you."

"Can't hardly wait, Flaccus," she grinned impudently. "You wanna stand around here talking, or do you want to get on with this?" she questioned.

Glaring at the raven haired warrior, Flaccus signalled his men to move out. Xena shuffled her feet quickly in the short leg irons, producing a kind of trotting gait that was far from comfortable, but which she had perfected with recent practice.

It was a relatively short distance down a pair of wide corridors to the pit entrance. Already inside, sitting on the sandy floor, Hercules waited for his opponent to arrive. He watched with mild seeming interest as Xena was escorted into the arena, and both of them were aware of the sudden increase in expectant conversation from the spectators above them.

The Warrior Princess looked up and scowled impartially at everyone there, although she reserved a particularly dark and threatening look for Caesar and, of course, Ephiny. The demi-god watched the performance and had to suppress the urge to applaud his friend, although he was well aware, that apart from Ephiny's case, it was not an act.

Flaccus came into the pit last and busied himself with unlocking the shackles that bound the dangerous slave. First he removed the chains and leg irons, before unbuckling the thick leather belt and unfastening the manacles. Finally he removed the chains leashed to her collar, before gathering in guards and leaving the two combatants alone.

Xena regarded Hercules curiously as the demi-god sat unmoving in the centre of the arena, his eyes focused somewhere above them, on a point that was probably located some distance above the roof of the palace. She walked around him slowly, easing the kinks out of her stiff muscles, even practising a few small flips, just to make sure that everything was working right. All the while she could hear the excited chatter and speculation from the packed galleries, and a glance at Caesar's box, revealed not only him there, along with Ephiny, but also some of the more prominent and favoured senators.

When she finally got back to her starting point, Hercules hadn't moved and she was tempted to sit down opposite him and just wait and see what the reaction would be. But then Caesar had stood and using his 'I-am-the-ruler-of-the-Empire' voice, had commanded, "Let the combat begin!" Which left her little choice in the matter when the vision of eight beaten children arose in her minds eye.

Knowing that Hercules was well able to take care of himself, she pivoted with incredible speed, catching the big man with a side on kick as he began to stand to engage in the battle. Her foot connected solidly with his ribs, and that, coupled with his upward momentum, unbalanced him and would have sent the demi-god sprawling if he hadn't converted the force into a forward roll that brought him to his feet some distance from the Warrior Princess. He turned, grinned, and wagged his finger at her.

She returned the grin with a lopsided one of her own, before swinging a right hook, that he easily ducked, followed immediately by a short left to the ribs that the demi-god failed to anticipate, eliciting a startled grunt from him that didn't stop him from delivering a backhand slap that cracked solidly against the raven haired woman's left cheek, spinning her around.

She turned to face him in a fighting crouch, shaking her head a little to stop the bells ringing, - *Steady on, Herc!* - she thought to herself, - *I could do with getting through this without major injury!* - A glint sparked in her eyes as she caught the surreptitious rub he gave to his side where she'd caught him with a punch. - *Well, maybe I should hold back a bit too if he's gonna feel those!* - her mind snickered.

Their eyes locked and a silent message passed between them as they moved forward to engage once more. In a dazzling display of attack and block, using all four limbs each, the pair managed to entertain the watching spectators without once landing a telling blow. Xena feinted with her left, only to find her fist snared by the demi-god's big hand and, before she could compensate, he twisted and threw an elbow at her gut that sent the air rushing from her lungs.

She staggered backwards taking deep breaths as she kept her eyes fixed firmly on her opponent as he moved forward. Screaming out her ululating battlecry, that eerily echoed around the enclosed arena, she did a back flip away from Hercules, bending her knees as her feet came in contact with the pit wall, before springing forward, over his head, landing behind him where she delivered a powerful, thrusting kick that propelled him into the stone wall in front of him.

Hercules had to bite down hard to stifle the groan that threatened to escape from him as he slammed, at some velocity, into the wall. He could swear that he bore the imprint of Xena's foot in the small of his back. Well aware that they needed to make this look as real as possible, he couldn't help wondering if his friend wasn't overdoing the realism just a tad. - *Damn it, Xena!* - he cursed, as he pushed himself off the wall to one side, just in time to avoid another stomping kick that landed just about where his head had just been. - *I kind of thought I was supposed to survive this little shindig so we could get together later.* -

Xena used her contact, with the pit wall, to spring back and land in the centre of the small arena. Chucking wickedly, she held her hands out before her and beckoned him on, "C'mon, big guy! Show me what you've got," she invited.

Advancing warily, Hercules was prepared for the sudden attack, but couldn't avoid an elbow in the ribs, before she danced away and stood waiting for him, bouncing on the balls of her feet to bleed off a little of the adrenaline that flooded through her in any combat situation, "Guess I'm too fast for ya!" she teased knowing that he couldn't respond to her playful taunt. She waited

until he started moving forward, before she let loose another blood curdling cry and flipped over him in a forward tuck .. only this time he was ready for her. When she landed she was met by a fist the size of a frying pan that slammed in hard under her ribs, doubling her up and allowing him to drop to the ground and swing his lower body to sweep her from her feet. She landed with a heavy grunt, but rolled away before Hercules was able to take advantage of her.

Climbing to her feet, the Warrior Princess smothered the grin that threatened to split her face, producing instead, an intimidating scowl. Not waiting for Hercules to complete his own rise to his feet, Xena launched herself into a handspring that landed a double footed blow to the big man's chest, knocking him back a few steps while she bled of the momentum of the impact in a flip away from him.

Rubbing the spot that he felt certain, once again, had taken an imprint of his friend's booted feet, Hercules watched carefully as the warrior sought to manoeuvre herself into a position to make the winning attack. When she threw a punch at him, he caught her fist in one of his large hands, then snagged the other in the same fashion. Falling into a backwards roll, he pulled the Warrior Princess off balance and catapulted her over his head, to land flat on her back, whilst using the speed of his fall to continue his roll, so that he ended up sitting astride the raven haired woman, with her hands still safely snared in his own.

"You're enjoying this!" she accused him in a hissing breath that disguised her words even though she doubted that anyone would be able to hear her above the roar that was being made in the gallery.

She jerked a knee up, slamming it against the demi-god's back, propelling him forward so that he lay over her and was close enough to her ear to whisper, "No more than you are!" he declared, "This wasn't supposed to be fun, Xena. By the way, Gabrielle sends her love, as do Toris and the others." He felt his control slipping, as the warrior jackknifed her body and then threw him off. He rolled to his feet ready to confront her again. As Xena came in with a crunching right fisted blow to his gut, he swung his arms wide and pulled her into a bear hug, once more giving them the chance to exchange a few words.

"Did Autolykus make it back alright?" she questioned concern clear in her tone.

"Don't worry. He's got more lives than a cat .. took a quarrel in his shoulder, though and didn't get back to us until the third night after," he told her quickly.

Xena groaned as he tightened his grip, "Hey, not so damned hard!" she growled.

"It's supposed to look real," countered Hercules.

Squirring her arms out of his grip, the warrior clapped them over the demi-god's ears, making him release her at the sudden intense pain that accompanied the action. As he bent over shaking his head, trying to clear it of the ringing that had taken up residence, Xena leapt, trapping his neck between her ankles as she used her bodyweight to flip the tawny haired man in a somersault that brought him crashing to the ground once more.

"You sure this plan's gonna work?" she asked receiving a nodded confirmation. "Well I guess it's about time we finished this off then," she told him as she gave a quick glance around to judge their proximity to the wall of the pit. Seeing that they were fairly close to the end beneath Caesar's box, she asked, "You ready?" receiving his nod as she rolled to her feet, allowing the demi-god to rise, somewhat shakily, also.

As Hercules staggered, Xena backed off, obviously preparing to administer the coup-de-grace. She launched herself at the big man, flying through the air, arms outstretched, her intent to plainly carry the demi-god back into a slamming impact with the wall and knock him cold in the process. But then everything seemed to fall apart!

With the Warrior Princess flying towards him, Hercules seemed to lose the contest to retain his balance, and kind of flopped to his knees, leaving Xena to fly over him, crashing head first into the unyielding stone wall, and crumple to the ground as her eyes slowly glazed over. Hercules struggled to his feet to see his friend laying unconscious, giving him the victory!

Chapter Sixty Five: Fall Out

"Way to go, bro!" shouted Aphrodite excitedly as she watched the outcome of the combat between Xena and Hercules. She punched the air with delight crying "YES!" as Xena crumpled into a heap on the sandy floor of the pit.

Her sister, Artemis, frowned at the Goddess of Love's exuberant display, as she carefully continued to watch proceedings play themselves out in the scrying bowl. As Hercules lurched a little precariously from the arena and Flaccus entered with his guards to claim the prone body of the unconscious, Warrior Princess, the Moon Goddess asked softly, "Dite, you do remember just what we're trying to do here, don't you?"

Aphrodite stopped her wild victory dance and gave her sister one of those 'Course-I-Know-What-We're-Doing looks accompanied by a, "D'uh! Getting Xena and Gabrielle out of mean and moody Caesar's clutches," she replied under the other goddess' intense stare. She looked closely into the scrying image at the Roman Emperor and a frown of concentration appeared on her fair features, "Hey! You know, Arte, If Caesar went blonde and had a pair of wings he'd be a dead ringer for Cupid, ya think?"

Artemis found herself considering the notion for a moment before she shrugged it off and tried to return to the matter in hand, "Oh for Zeus' sake, 'Dite! Can't you concentrate on what we're trying to do rather than playing the fool and acting like you just won a bet!" When the expected retort didn't fly hotly back at her, Artemis turned to face her sister to find her looking uncomfortably guilty. "What? Are you trying not to tell me you did win a bet?" she snapped.

The Goddess of Love shuffled her feet a bit and then muttered a few words that sounded suspiciously like, "Well sort of."

Staring at her flighty sister, Artemis pinned her to the spot and growled, "What!"

Lightly flushing at being caught out, Aphrodite jumped into the breach and explained quickly, running her words together in her haste "ItwasonlyalittlebetwithHermes!"

The Moon Goddess gave her an exasperated stare, "But you already knew the outcome, 'Dite!"

"I know!" agreed the blonde with a characteristic smirk, "but Hermes didn't and he was sooo sure that deadly, dark and dangerous would win."

"That is really low, 'Dite. How can you reconcile the love thing with such trickery?" snapped Artemis without really thinking.

"Puh - leese!" retorted her sister, "That's totally not true! No one ever said that Love was fair!" A malicious gleam appeared in her eyes, "And, like, Hermes is the God of Trickery amongst other things ... so like, what goes around comes around, ya know?" She smirked a bit and then asked artfully, "Oh yeah, sweet cheeks. What was that whisper I heard about some wager you had going with Apollo?"

It was Artemis' turn to feel the flush of embarrassment upon her cheeks, "Now that's different, 'Dite," she protested.

"As if!" snorted the blonde.

The lithely muscular goddess shook a finger and snapped, "Yes it is! Apollo's my twin and even though I love him dearly, he's got this blind spot about Hercules and really needed a lesson." She pulled herself up to full height and tried to look calmly dignified as she added, "It's my duty as his sister to offer instruction where it's needed."

"Chill will ya! I'm just saying that I'm not the only one here who likes to play .. besides I think half of Olympus was taking bets on the outcome." snickered Aphrodite. They both settled down to watch the exchange between Caesar and Ephiny in the bowl once more, "So when do we get to take a more active role, huh?"

"Soon, 'Dite, soon," promised Artemis as she proudly observed her Regent manipulating the Roman, "Where's Ares hiding himself?"

"Well, like he was real bummed out when Xena blew him off again, and there was like this major war going down somewhere," she shook her hand in a vague direction, "So he took off in a huff, figuring that once the warrior babe got fed up of being Caesar's untamed pet, he'd get a call from her to get her out of there and back to his side what she belongs .. go figure!" the blonde replied.

"With luck, then, he'll stay out of the way .. he did his part anyway, and if he hangs around he might blow this for us." grinned Artemis, not realising that her War God brother was at that moment observing his sisters in his own scrying bowl.

part? I had heard that Romans were sanguine about such affairs. I should hate to be disappointed in your generosity of spirit in this way." The words had tasted like ashes in her mouth, but she knew that they would force Caesar to, at least publicly, accept his losses in good grace. However, she could see his fertile mind working to try and minimize the extent of his defeat as any good general would.

"Not at all, highness," he had responded with as much gallantry as he could muster, "I was but disappointed that we could not see a natural outcome to such a fine match. I have no doubt that you will admit to as much disappointment as I that we did not see a true finish, merely some mockery of an accidental ending."

She had given him a bland stare for several heartbeats before she had forced an enchanting smile onto her face and replied, "Of course my Lord. A fight such as we have witnessed was far too good to have been ended in such a manner." She sighed with elaborate, fabricated, distress, "Unfortunately, a true ending is now denied to us and, for good or ill, my poor Heston has won his victory and my wagers!"

Caesar struggled hard not to glare at the Amazon, or shout angrily at her flippancy, "But surely, my love, we can arrange a re-match, perhaps a double or nothing wager to sweeten it? and maybe we can adjust those more private wagers to compensate for the sad ending of such a noble contest, too?"

Ephiny hesitated seeming to consider the Roman's offer for several long heartbeats before assuming a disappointed face and responding in a placating tone, "I'm truly sorry, my Lord, but unfortunately my time here is running short. My nation needs me home and my people and I will be leaving in a mere seven days .. and I'm afraid that my available time is fully occupied between now and then."

Caesar looked far from happy at that particular piece of news, "Ephiny, I had no idea that you would be leaving so soon ... we've had so little time to get to know each other," and the thought was clear to read in his mind, - *And I need time to arrange another match and win back those wagers!* -

"Parting will be such sweet sorrow, Julius," she got the name out without choking on it, "But I'm sure that you understand that I have responsibilities to my nation. Being a ruler, you must know how easily things can get out of hand," - *Never a truer word, Eph!* - she told herself, thinking of Tarelle and her cronies, "when you are not there to oversee things for yourself. I know the Amazon nation is small in comparison to your Roman Empire, but I'm certain that the principles are the same."

Caesar almost looked desperate, "But surely we can arrange a re-match before you leave!" he almost seemed to plead, clutching her hand as she withdrew it from his arm. Getting a grip of himself, the Roman had forced himself to a calmness he did not feel, "I would hate to think that we could not find the time to resolve the many issues that lay outstanding between us."

All four of the Amazon contingent watched as Xena's unconscious form was dragged, none too gently, past them and away to some unknown destination. Eponin had spat in the Roman's direction, clearly unhappy at the treatment of a woman she counted as a friend .. but luckily, the supposed animosity, between the Warrior Princess and the Amazons, was well known and the chuckles from the legionaries suggested that they approved of the Weapons Master's sentiments.

With the soldiers gone, and Hercules somewhat recovered, Poni had growled, "Let's get Eph and get the Hades out of here," stalking down the corridor in the direction she knew would lead her up to the main hall where she could join up once more with the Regent.

Three days had passed since then .. days of disguised activity as they prepared to flee the city with the prize they'd come after, "You'll be free soon, Xena .. you have my oath on it!" he said softly, as he stood up. He was delegated to carry the very heavy chest of dinars from the palace down to the ship. With his godly strength, he could make the chest appear to be full of little more than clothing.

When Ephiny had taken her leave of him, Caesar had sat and brooded about the culmination of events. His mind kept returning to dwell on the acidic words of his wife, Pompeia, "All is not as it seems. Your slave and the Amazon know each other .. there is something between them more than the hatred they pretend."

Shaking his head in frustration, he had hauled himself from his seat and, without bother to excuse himself from his guests, he had headed to the chamber where Patroclese' usually practised his medicinal arts upon the slaves; it was where they would have taken the injured Xena. He strode with an angry, purposeful step that had his personal guards scuttling to keep up with. He wanted to know exactly the extent of his warrior's injuries and satisfy the nagging doubt that told him he was being played for a fool.

It didn't take him long to reach the room which was heavily guarded by Flaccus' men, who were taking absolutely no chances with the Warrior Princess; they had learned the hard way not to accept anything to do with her at face value. The flogging of fifteen of their number after her last abortive escape attempt had seen to that. The door to the windowless chamber was opened hurriedly by one of the men standing sentry and Caesar had marched in without slackening his pace.

Inside the room was crowded with guards, a quick head count revealed at least twenty making the small room cramped and uncomfortable. Catching Flaccus' eye, Caesar snapped, "Get everyone out of here, except four guards and they can take post in the corners out of the way."

With the soldiers removed from the room, the Roman ruler was at last able to see that Patroclese was not yet in attendance, and that Xena had already been prepared for his inspection .. Flaccus taking advantage of the woman's unconscious state to have her stripped down to a brief loincloth, and then chained down on the marble slab table. Allowing his eyes to linger over her bronzed flesh, Caesar could see the collection of painful welts and bruises that she had earned in her latest fight.

Moving across to the table, aware of the guards and Flaccus watching, he ran his fingers over the soft, naked, flesh of his slave, feeling the heat of the damaged skin, examining the mottling colours that purpled and blackened as the bruising made itself more evident. Licking his lips he ran his hands across the woman's breasts aware of the stiffening flesh tightening responsively under his gentle touch .. he lingered there almost longingly, dreaming of that which he could not have.

Forcing his hands to move on he reached her face which sported a nasty looking contusion on her forehead that oozed blood from the scraped skin. Turning the slack head from side to side, he tried to determine whether the Warrior Princess could possibly be faking unconsciousness. Nothing from her responses betrayed her if she was, but then he was well aware that Xena had many skills. Flipping back an eyelid told him little, and he was just about to attempt striking her, when Patroclese bustled in through the door.

"I wouldn't do that, my Lord," advised the healer as he realised what his master was about to do, "If she has a concussion you could do serious damage .. maybe even kill her," he warned, knowing that the thought of losing his prized slave would stay Caesar's hand where other arguments would have failed.

Without taking his eyes from the woman before him, Caesar demanded, "I want to know if she's shamming, Patroclese."

The healer moved to his patient's side, annoyance showing in his eyes about the way Xena was being treated once more. Her leg irons were secured to a ring at the base of the table and her hands had been drawn above her head, secured to another ring. Placing his satchel, that carried his medicinal tools and compounds, upon the floor next to him, he felt for the pulse point in his patient's neck and identified the slow even pace that he normally associated with unconsciousness. However, having been exposed for some time to Xena and her phenomenal abilities, he checked the condition of her eyes, as Caesar had done, but recognised the unfocused, glazed, appearance for what it was.

"Out to the world, my Lord," assured the physician. "If you will just bear with me for a few moments while I check the extent of her bodily injuries, I'll bring her around for you."

At Caesar's nod, the young healer ran knowledgeable hands over the body he'd done more work on than any other since he had taken up his vocation. He knew every scar upon the muscular frame and it didn't take him long to come up with his diagnosis, "Heavy bruising to the abdomen and ribs, slight dislocation to three fingers of the right hand, nasty head wound that may have caused a concussion, which we'll know more of when I wake her up," he informed his audience as he bent down to rummage in his bag until he found the small bottle he'd been looking for.

Pulling a face as he eased the stopper off, he hastily held the container away from himself and waved it under the nose of the wounded warrior. Within a matter of heartbeats, Xena's face tightened into a grimace and her head began to roll from side to side as her unconscious mind sought to escape from the noxious odour. Finally she began to cough from the astringency of the fumes and her eyes flickered grudgingly open.

days more, helped disguise their preparations while keeping them totally in the open. They intended to make it appear that they were leaving the final stages of their packing until the day of their leaving, but nothing of true value had been left behind .. mainly things that had been purchased in Rome for the very purpose of ensuring that interested parties would not cotton on to the fact that they had planned a strategic withdrawal.

"Have you noticed that since Pompey left on his 'important business' .. no-one seems too worried just where me and the boys are?" Gabrielle had said casually, "We don't even get a headcount, and the guards aren't following us if we go down to the kitchens."

Ephiny broke her supervision of the final removal of the last of the huge load of dinars that she'd won betting on Hercules' fighting prowess, grinning as the big man himself hefted the chest without any apparent strain, "Yeah, I'd noticed," agreed the Regent, studying her Queen knowing that this was leading up to something.

"That means that the guys and me shouldn't have any trouble slipping out of here when it's time to leave," continued Gabrielle absently twisting a half filled scroll in her hands as she watched Hercules leave the room with his burden.

"And your point is?" asked Ephiny almost certain that the innocuous seeming line of conversation was guiding her towards something that she was definitely not going to like .. and that could mean almost only one thing.

The bard looked at her feet and nervously shuffled them as she went on, "The point is that we aren't going to have any trouble getting out of here. In fact, I think that if we were to use Amazon Warrior disguises, Me and Iolaus, Toris and Joxer could .."

"No, Gabrielle," interjected Ephiny forcefully.

The young Queen continued as if she hadn't heard her friend, " ... come with you to Graccus' and make sure that we get Xena away safely."

The Regent shook her adamantly, "Absolutely not!" the blonde Amazon growled, "We've been all through this before, Gabrielle, and the same objections still stand. It's too dangerous, you might be recognised, if you get caught Xena's chance of any escape is gone for good. End of discussion," she added beginning to turn her back on her friend.

The honey blonde bard raised her gaze defiantly. "That may have been true of the other times, Eph. I could see your point about needless risk. But this time we're going to get her free and I need to be there when you ... we do!"

The Regent slowly swung back towards her young Queen, "There is no need for you to be there, Gabrielle. The real need is for you to be safe."

Green eyes held brown in a struggle for control, "You're wrong, Ephiny. I do need to be there. Without me there, Xena may not believe that I'm safe ... the same thing goes for Toris and the

"Well whatever it is your body has, I wish I could bottle it for others less fortunate," grinned Patroclese as he dropped the tunic and tucked it through the thick leather belt at her waist, "If I didn't know better, I'd say those bruises were at least two weeks old, not just three days." When he finished straightening her garments he reached for her head and carefully examined the discolouration that was evident around the scabbing of the wound.

"Oh yeah, I'm really fortunate," muttered Xena half heartedly, although inside she was a bubbling cauldron of expectation .. with luck she would be free tonight and on her way back to Greece!

The healer gave her a sharp look. In so many ways he regretted his part in the capture and enslavement of the magnificent woman who sat on the table in front of him but, although his conscience bothered him every time he saw her, his logical and responsible thoughts assured him that this warrior was better off in custody for the safety of Rome and many of the peoples of the world, "If you just accepted your new situation, perhaps you could find contentment of a sort," he chided her gently.

The icy look from her azure eyes was anything but gentle, "Slavery's wrong, Patroclese. Not just for me, but for anyone. I could never accept being a slave, in any circumstances, let alone being Caesar's!" she almost spat with contempt.

"Tell me, Xena? Is your resistance worth being penned up like an animal? chained," he said fingering she shackles at her wrists, "unless being let off the leash to fight? Is it worth the punishment of those children for every time you balk? ... will it be worth their deaths, should you escape?"

Her glare intensified, pinning him with a coring light, "What exactly do you mean by that?" she demanded.

"I thought you knew. There are orders that should you manage to escape .. not just get loose, but actually escape .. not only will one in five of your guards be crucified, but those children will be too."

A faint look of anguish flickered through the warrior's eyes as the news sank in. - *That's so typical of him!* - she raged silently, - *He'd do it knowing that I'd hear about it, knowing that I'd care! But, Gods help me, what do I do now. If I go ahead with Ephiny's plan, those innocent children will pay the price. If I don't, Gabrielle will pay, because she'll never leave here without me.* -

It was a grim faced Warrior Princess who was led back to her cell to await the events of the evening. Her mind worked furiously as she tried to determine what her course of action should be.

Chapter Sixty Six: Let the Games Begin

Autolycus had watched with a self-satisfied smirk as his friends submitted to being decked out in Amazon clothing. He had some very vivid memories of the time he'd worn something very

similar, and Xena's life had been at stake that time too. He sighed, - *Sometimes it seems that the only way I get to see Xena is when her life is on the line.* -

Having time on his hands he took a slow perambulation through the rooms that they had occupied during their stay at Pompey's, to make absolutely certain that nothing of importance was being left behind. As he passed from the men's rooms to that of the ladies, he nodded to Tassi, one of the six Amazon guards still on duty there, and told her softly, "I'll be leaving shortly, don't bother looking for me when it's time for you to get back to the ship. I'll be making my own way there."

The short haired sandy blonde grinned and nodded in return, "Eponin said that might be the case .. you got anything that you want us to take with us when we go?"

"Nope got everything with me that I need," he returned.

"Well maybe you'll need some help stowing your gear later," she smirked appraisingly.

Autolycus allowed a charming smile to play around his lips, "We might want to take this conversation up on the way home," he answered suggestively as he brushed his index finger across his moustache.

"I'll count on it," agreed Tassi as she watched the thief stride down the hall and into what had been the Queens' suite.

Autolycus smirked happily to himself the trip back to Greece might just prove to be entertaining, - *Providing we can pull this off. Otherwise I can see several of us staying here a while longer.* -

He carefully searched through the women's apartments before deciding that nothing had been overlooked and that he could safely be on his way to his own appointment. To be honest, he'd been looking for a chance to slip away and perform this little mission before Gabrielle had cornered him and asked him for the favour. It was a task that he felt that only he would be able to perform, but he had the feeling that some of the others might have tried to stop him However, with the bard's backing, and both of them remaining tightly closed mouthed about his plans, the others never stood a chance.

-Ya know, - mused the thief as he swung open the balcony shutters, slipped over the rails and down the conveniently friendly growth of ivy, pleased to feel no adverse reaction from his recently healed wounds, - *If Gabrielle ever gets tired of being a queen, bard or sidekick, she'd make a pretty good junior partner for me.* - He grinned at that thought. - *Sooner or later I'm gonna have to find someone to train to take my place. Still she's a bit old to teach some of the finer techniques, but she makes a damn good front man .. woman .. person.* - As his boots touched the ground, he stealthily slipped away into the cover of the bushes and worked his way unseen, he hoped for the last time, away from Pompey's palace.

Upon reaching the street he had no intention of making his way directly towards his destination. It was still too light out, besides which this time he intended to go through the front doors. -

There's no point in climbing walls if I don't have to, - he told himself, as he moved smoothly through the late afternoon crowds, keeping as much to the shadow edges of the street as possible. - *Besides there are advantages in going through the front door .. nobody will be expecting it for a start off, especially with the disguise.* -

He took special care to avoid Caesar's spies, - *A really unimaginative lot that even Joxer could spot*, - was the thief's contemptuous thought, as he glided past the final post on his route away from the palace. Once clear of the watchers, he meandered his way through the city, giving into the occasional impulse to 'lift' a particularly obnoxious Roman's purse, browse the pie and confectionary stalls in the market place, dally with some of the ladies of dubious virtue on a street corner, before distributing a good portion of his ill-gotten gains amongst the street urchins that had big eyes and looked half starved.

- *Autolycus, you're going soft!* - he chided himself. - *It's a damned good thing that the others aren't here to see this, you'd never here the end of it!* - He ruffled one lads dirty, matted hair, before clamping his hand to his pocket, - *Why you little thief!* - his mind yelled. Watching the boy disappear into the milling crowd he couldn't stop the grin from etching itself onto his face. - *Boy's got talent. Good light touch, doesn't rush the mark, he deserved a reward for his skill .. almost no one else would have felt him, and it was only a little loose change .. not my main stash,* - checking to make absolutely certain that his ill-gotten gains were where he'd left them.

Whistling happily, he proceeded on his round-about way to a rather seedy tavern down toward the docks area. He scanned the barroom carefully as he entered and selected a secluded table that gave him the choice of three exits .. the front door, the back door or the window .. should the need arise for him to get out of there fast. Sitting with his back to the wall, he waited until he attracted the attention of a pretty, although harassed young barmaid who braved the usual assault of pinches, friendly slaps and amorous grabs, as she deposited ordered drinks and made her way over to where Autolycus sat.

Smiling delightedly, Jocsea's eyes sparkled as she squealed, "Steban! I didn't expect you tonight ... what's it going to be? Your usual?"

Keeping a charming smile on his face, Autolycus shuddered inwardly, - *How can such a pretty woman have a voice like a braying piglet?* - he asked himself yet again. "Jocsea .. my pet," he greeted her warmly, "I just called in to see and hear you, my sweet." He beckoned her forward, producing a golden coin as if by magic, her eyes mesmerised by the sight, "Are my things still safe in your room?" he questioned softly.

"Sure thing, Steban," she nodded enthusiastically, "Just like you left 'em. I ain't touched them nor nuffing!" she grunted a laugh that made the thief cringe.

"Well, my sweet," he smiled encouragingly at her, "I'll just go and collect them," he said dropping the coin between her inviting cleavage, "and you can any drink your like on me," he added as he brushed his lips across hers and dropped another four of the coins to keep the first company.

Jocea shivered in delight, "Oh, Steban, you're so good to me .. are you coming back later?" she asked boldly .. "We could have some fun, maybe?" her voice held a promise.

"We'll see my sweet," responded Autolykus in a husky voice, "but don't be too concerned if you don't see me for a while ..." - Yeah like ever, - his mind added, "... I have business to attend to tonight."

A look of disappointment crept onto the girl's pretty features and she looked about to plead with him, when one of the tavern's other patrons shouted out impatiently, "Hey Jocea! Where's my drink!"

She whirled and glared at the man and snorted, "Hold your britches Lycidas, I'll bring it in a minute!" She turned back to 'Steban' to entreat him to come back after she finished her shift, but the thief had already slipped away taking advantage of the distraction to do so.

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Xena had spent an uncomfortable three days where her mood swung between a quiet euphoria at the prospect of finally getting free from Caesar, and utter despondency at the thought of what the eight slave children would suffer if she did go through with her friends' plans. The thought of leaving eight innocents to suffer the cost of her actions was making her seriously consider giving up the idea of escape. She could just tell Hercules to get Gabrielle, the Amazons, her brother and the others all back to Greece and forget about her.

- *And of course they'd do that, wouldn't they?* - she sarcastically demanded of herself. - *Gabrielle and Toris would just say, 'Okay Xena, whatever you want,' and cheerfully leave you to rot here in his hands.* - She threw the pebble she was playing with to hit, with unerring accuracy, one of the guards on duty outside of her hole in the ground.

"Hey, who's throwing things," snarled the victim as he clapped his hand to his neck where the stone had stung him.

"Settle down," she heard a decurion order from somewhere out of her range of sight, "You're supposed to be soldiers, not a bunch of whining babies."

"Well something hit me," grumbled the legionary.

"Quit grousing Hirrix," muttered one of her targets' fellow guards, "or we'll end up pulling double duty."

"It's alright for you .. you weren't hit," muttered the aggrieved man.

"Shove over .. I'll change places with you."

Picking up another pebble, Xena bounced it around in her hand as she grinned at the grumbles she could hear above her. During her time in Rome, she'd worked out a variety of ways to torment her gaolers without them realising the source of their woes. Most of the games involved

small pebbles, of which she had an abundant supply in her earthen walled cell, and it helped her pass the time .. especially when she was, as now, locked up with nothing to do.

She squirmed around on her blanket trying to find a more comfortable spot and her thoughts returned to her problems. - *There is no way that any of them are going to leave here without me .. so if I don't go through with this escape plan, I'm condemning my family and friends to Roman slavery, because it's a dinar to a flying centaur's butt that Caesar will hunt them down and use them against me.* - A grin edged it's crooked way onto her lips as she thought, - *Though I damned well like to see him try and keep Hercules locked up when he doesn't want to be .. or Autolycus for that matter.* -

She sighed squirmed around a bit more being careful not to jostle the long chain that was fastened between her collar and the bars of the cell door. She didn't want to attract her guards' attention, that would spoil her game. She settled in place and her agile mind worked out the angles as she flipped her pebble cleanly through the grate to hit Hirrix in the neck once more.

"Gods damn it!" yelled the soldier, again slapping his hand to his neck, "If I find out who's throwing stones I'm gonna make them wish they hadn't been born!" he swore aggressively.

"Hirrix quit that bawling before I put you and your unit on report," snapped the unseen decurion. Muttered grumbles could be heard from the other soldiers standing guard around the pit all of them showing a distinct animosity for the luckless Hirrix.

Digging a pair of pebbles from out of the ground, the raven haired warrior turned her attention back to the question of what she was going to do about the slave children. - *If I can't avoid going through with the escape because it will endanger my friends, then I'm going to have to work out away to get those kids out of Caesar's clutches .. maybe we can take them back to Greece with us. The girls could go to the Amazons and I'll find a good home for the boys somewhere .. maybe Mother would take one or two of them in.* -

She bounced that idea around for a while. She knew plenty of good hearted people who would take in the children. They'd have a far better life in Greece than by remaining slaves in Rome .. especially given the shortened life expectancy caused by being remotely associated to herself. - *Alright .. so we get them out of here and take them with us .. just how in Tartarus am I gonna manage to bring that off?* -

Two of the guards shifted position, giving Xena a perfect shot as she winged the pair of pebbles to strike both men in the neck, - *Bullseye!* - her mind applauded as she drew the surprised yelps of pain from her targets.

"Damn you Hirrix!" shouted one of the fresh victims, "what you go and do that for?" he demanded belligerently, "We already told you it wasn't us."

"I didn't do anything!" protested the accused man, "Tell them Stephanos," he urged the guard who had changed places with him.

"He didn't fellas, I was standing with him the whole time," backed up Hirrix's friend.

"Yeah, you'd say that," growled one of the angry soldiers, "you two are always up to something."

"Hey you men!" shouted the seriously annoyed decurion who'd just about had enough of the bickering and sniping that had been going on. It was hot and the shift was due to be coming to an end. They had to get the slave ready to be taken across the city to Crassus' abode and now these imbeciles were looking for a fight and a taste of the cat because of it, "You're all on report ..now get back to your posts."

Xena couldn't see who threw the first punch, but within moments there was a major brawl taking place above her as hot, frustrated soldiers sought to let off steam totally ambivalent to the punishment they were going to be drawing down on themselves once everything was finally sorted out. A mirthless, vicious smile worked its way onto her face as she considered the prospect, - *Let's see how they like being on the receiving end for a change!* - she smirked, closing her eyes to try and picture the scene taking place above her. Almost immediately they flickered open as she became aware of the scrutiny of a pair of hard grey eyes.

Flaccus stood at the edge of the grate above her, glaring down with a knowing look on his face .. he had no idea how she'd accomplished it, but he knew the slave was responsible for the breach of discipline that had erupted in the drill-yard. He had a squad quelling the disturbance with fists and batons, but he was well aware that he couldn't touch the real instigator until this evening's fight was out of the way, - *But tomorrow will be different, slave.* - He made a mental promise, - *Tomorrow I start to break you, piece by piece.* -

Reading his mind, Xena flashed him a dazzling, totally cocksure grin that was enough to make the centurion's blood boil. He glanced around the yard and saw that order had been re-established. The men picked for the guard escort tonight were assembling ready to leave and his junior officers awaited orders from him.

"I want the names of the men who started this fracas by the time I get back .. each will receive ten lashes in the morning. One of you get the animal out of her hole so we can get started."

Graccus' home had none of the showy flamboyance of either Caesar's or Pompey's residences. - *In fact,* - Gabrielle decided, - *it's more comfortable and homely than palatial and ostentatious.* - She craned her neck trying to see past the wall of Amazon warriors that had formed a tight cordon around her, Iolaus, Joxer and Toris, who were following Ephiny's orders to keep the quartet hidden amongst them as much as possible.

It had been something of a nerve wracking ordeal getting out of their loose captivity in Pompey's palace. Admittedly the security surrounding them had become remarkably lax in the past few days .. they no longer had to endure the daily head count, and trips to the kitchens had been accomplished without the normal shadow of a couple of their host's soldiers. In actuality, it appeared that since Pompey had removed himself from the city, he had ceased to care whether his 'captives' remained within his custody or not. Yet even with this lurking in the backs of their

minds, it was something of a relief to clear the building's grounds, without the Roman General's men surrounding them and hauling them off into close confinement.

The trip through the city to Graccus' house had actually been a time of exuberance and enjoyment for Gabrielle and the men. For the first time in many days they had got outside the confinement of four walls and the sights and sounds, although vaguely familiar to the bard from her previous trip, were very new and interesting for her companions in captivity. To a certain extent, they were disappointed to finally reach their destination, as it meant once more relinquishing the open space of the outdoors to be enclosed (however temporarily) in a building. Yet, at the same time, the rising excitement of what they were here to do made them eager to get on with the show.

The home of Graccus was brightly lit and gaily caparisoned in readiness for the feast and entertainment arranged by the host and his wife. The soiree was packed with the neutral senators that favoured neither Caesar, nor Pompey, but would have preferred a return to the old system of rule under the senate itself .. they yearned for a return to the days of the true republic, away from the dictatorship of the military magnates who ruled with iron fists backed up by armed soldiers hardened in the service of the Empire. While men of this republican persuasion were in the majority here at this gathering, they had learned the hard way to guard their tongues and true feelings, for there were always those looking to cultivate patronage from either Caesar, or Pompey, by betraying a fellow senator.

The Amazon's arrival drew cheering from a good portion of the gathering guests, especially the younger set of both men and women. Although nearly all Romans considered the warrior women to be a backward and barbaric race, they still enjoyed the freshness that these visitors brought to a city that had become jaded with all the riches and sophistication that was common place to them. Gabrielle wondered just what these same people would think of the Amazon's after their evening's entertainment came to an end.

As Ephiny detached herself, Eponin, Malonda, Hercules and a guard of eight from the main bulk of her warriors, Gabrielle and the disguised men found themselves being discretely shepherded off to a quiet corner by about a dozen other warriors while the rest of the group dispersed into similar bunches around the hall, some engaging in polite conversation with the other guests, other groups assuming a 'back off' posture that kept any of the Romans from intruding upon their chosen space. Needless to say, Gabrielle's guards were one of the groups that 'demanded' to be left alone.

"Hey," hissed Joxer brightly, "any chance of getting something to eat and drink? I'm starved." his voice sounded oddly muffled behind the Amazon mask.

Iolaus scowled, even though the expression wouldn't be seen by his companion, "Knock it off, Jox!" he growled. "We can't eat or drink anything while these masks are down, and we sure as Hades can't lift them up."

There was a short silence as the wannabe warrior thought about that, "Oh!" he answered finally. "But can't we"

She laughed at him, "Oh please, Julius, the woman is little more than a savage .. I have absolutely no concern whether you rut with her or not," she sneered, "But I'm telling you that there is something between her and that slave of yours and I don't trust them. I'm looking out for your best political interests here, my dear."

Her husband sighed. They'd had this conversation ad infinitum over the past three days. No matter how many times he pointed out the battering that Xena had taking in the pit fight, she couldn't be shaken from the belief that the Amazon slut was conspiring with the slave to free her. He had gone over the fact that Ephiny had resisted his attempts at gaining a rematch between Xena and her man until his head spun from going around in circles and still she persisted in her stubborn belief. Angrily he turned on her and snapped, "The only thing that you're concerned about is your position as wife of the Dictator of Rome .. without me you are nothing! I think, perhaps you should remember that."

She glared at him, certain that she was right and he was wrong, but the more she pointed it out to him the more stubborn and hard headed he became about the situation. Finally, knowing that nothing she was going to say was going to make a difference she demanded, "Are you ready .. we're already late as it is."

"That's the prerogative of the ruler, my dear," he answered flashing his teeth at her. "Nothing can start until we .. I .. arrive, so I can take all the time I need." He checked himself in the mirror once more, brushing some impossible speck off of his robes before turning to his impatient wife and offering her his arm, "Shall we?" he invited.

Placing her hand on his, the pair exited the room and headed for the slave carried palanquins that would transport them to their destination.

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Autolycus walked with self assured steps as he approached the imposing edifice of Caesar's palace, getting barely a glance from any of the sentries on duty in the gathering gloom of the evening. Jauntily he trotted up the marble stairway and made his way confidently through the huge double doors clutching a scroll as if intent upon delivering it. No one thought to question his presence, messengers were a common occurrence here and the man was dressed in the uniform of the messenger corps.

Once inside, the King of Thieves made his way to the stairs that led to the upper apartments, where he knew he would find his objective. He moved with an arrogant assumptive air that spoke loudly of his unquestionable right to be there .. it was an attitude that had got him into .. and out of .. some of the most secure treasuries and vaults in Greece, and he was certain that it would serve the same purpose here. So when a voice called out to him, he did his best to ignore it.

"Hey! You .. messenger!" the voice insisted.

- *Get lost .. find something or someone else to bother!* - Autolycus' mind willed the man to go away as he continued his relentless march along the corridor.

"Hey! I'm talking to you!" insisted the voice again louder now.

- *Damn, damn, damn, damn!* - swore the thief who saw his only option was to swing around and confront the man, before he attracted too much attention.

Taking a deep breath Autolycus turned to face a tall fair haired young man wearing a plain white chiton. He had an air of authority about him, but was far from the standard military type he expected to see within Caesar's household, "Did you want me for something? I'm kind of in a hurry," the thief asked casually.

Blue eyes regarded the messenger somewhat suspiciously, "You're new here .. I haven't seen you before, yet your face seems vaguely familiar."

"Ah .. the curse of my family," responded Autolycus with a laugh, "Ten brothers and all of us looking close enough alike that everywhere we go we seem familiar to someone who knows one of us." He laughed and leaned a little closer, "Between you and me that little handicap has got me into more trouble than any that I could have got myself into. And I'm pretty good at finding trouble on my own."

The Roman stared at him, distrust still plain upon his face, "Where are you going with that?" He indicated the scroll that the thief was carrying.

"Orders to deliver it to the General's office and leave it on his desk," returned Autolycus smartly, "Actually, pulling this duty was a pain .. I only got it 'cause I was in the wrong place at the wrong time. I was supposed to have met my girl nearly a candlemark ago, but I had to wait around for the scribe to finish writing the damned thing before I could bring it over .. you know how it is."

The blonde man nodded reluctantly. Everything the messenger said seemed to be perfectly ordinary, but there was something about him that seemed to set warning bells off in his head, "Very well," he said finally. "I won't keep you any longer." He risked a tentative smile, "Your girlfriend will be getting concerned."

The King of Thieves felt a strong wash of relief sweep through him as he grinned an answer, "Nah, she'll be okay .. she loves me." With that, he turned on his heel and hurried off to Caesar's office, grateful that he'd prowled around enough to know the exact location. He was aware of the inquisitive Roman's eyes on his back until he turned a corner in the corridor.

- *Sheesh! The life of a thief gets more exciting every day .. and quite frankly it's the kind of excitement I could do without. Maybe I should retire?* - He thought about that for all of a heartbeat, - *Nah! I couldn't do that to all my adoring fans.* -

It didn't take him long to reach the door of Caesar's study, and once inside it was the work of a moment to pull the sack from, where it had been hidden behind his flowing military cape, retrieve his own clothes and change into them. - *Much better,* - he smirked, - *No wonder these Roman's are always in such a bad temper, wanting to pick fights with every other country. This*

such problems, but it meant that she was hardly going to be able to take things easy when she got home.

She moved across to a table that had a variety of bite sized snacks that the guests could nibble as an accompaniment for their drinks. The Regent selected something that looked like its main ingredient was fish, popped it into her mouth and chewed appreciatively, savouring the smoky flavour as she cast her glance over to where Gabrielle and the boys were being shielded by the protective huddle of Amazons. Turning to Eponin, who seemed to be attached to her by a two foot invisible string, Ephiny said softly, "Well .. everything seems to be going according to plan. No one has given our newest recruits even a cursory glance."

"The real test will be when Caesar gets here," reminded the Weapons Master.

"Don't worry about him," Ephiny told her bluntly, "he'll be so occupied in trying to get me into a quiet corner that he won't have time to look at my guards."

Eponin's face made a slight grimace of distaste, "Yuck! Rather you than me .. but it wasn't him I was really thinking of."

The Regent selected another morsel of food, while shrugging and asking, "Oh?" before popping it into her mouth.

"You know that's grossly unfair," muttered the other Amazon who, with her mask down, couldn't indulge in the proffered delights. She shook her head, before continuing with her more important concerns, "It's his wife .. Pompeia?" Ephiny nodded her head, "Yeah, well the woman's ancestor must have been a ferret. She's got more informants than he has and a sharp mind to piece that information together If she should catch sight of Gabrielle and the guys"

"Poni, she's never even seen Gabrielle," the blonde haired ruler reminded her, "and the fellas look more like Amazons than some of our girls do." She bit back a sudden urge to giggle, "But don't you dare tell them that I said that!" she admonished sternly. Ephiny just knew her friend was frowning under her mask and she could hear that frown in the irritated tone that accompanied the woman's next words.

"Don't underestimate that one, Eph," she warned. "I heard her warning Caesar that there was much more between you and Xena than mere hatred. The woman suspects something .. she's got Caesar's ear .. and that makes her dangerous to us and our plans."

"She may have his ear, but his heart .. or at least his lust .. is mine. If I keep him entertained for the evening, he won't listen to anything that Pompeia has to say." She thoughtfully snagged another snack and nibbled it delicately as she added, "If you're really worried, keep an eye on her, Poni. Try and make sure she stays away from our 'girls'." she grinned.

"Fine," agreed the Weapon's Master, "I'll ride herd on the wife, you entertain the husband, but Eph?" she said with more than a touch of concern in her voice, "Don't suddenly come on strong

extensive grin .. he just didn't understand why the situation hadn't fully struck him before. - *Just nerves, I guess*, - he thought. - *Everyone handles them differently.* -

Iolaus threw a look at Joxer who was slumped against the wall picking disconsolately at some of the feathers he was adorned with, and fought the urge to dig the other man in the ribs, "Joxer!" he hissed in his ear, "Straighten up. Amazon's don't slouch like that and you're gonna draw attention to us."

Joxer was bored and his sense of worth was as ruffled as the feathers he was picking apart, - *I'm Joxer the Mighty*, - he muttered to himself, - *What am I doing hiding in corners under a sack full of feathers?* - He pulled at one of the offending items, shredding it between his fingers. - *Mighty warriors do not hide behind feathers and women*, - he mentally grumbled. - *Mighty warriors should be out there battling the odds and freeing their friends from the clutches of domineering despots, taking the battle to them rather than skulking in the back ground.* - He savaged another feather then became aware of Gabrielle's eyes (from behind her mask) boring into him, "Ha-hmmm," he chuckled nervously, before getting the hissed rebuke from Iolaus.

"Hey look guys," he protested quietly, "I can't help it if I'm a ma ... er warrior ... of action. These fists are deadly weapons," he demonstrated by performing a few uncoordinated moves accompanied by some sounds that reminded his audience of a cat with a strangled hernia, "I was made to be in the thick of the action." The disapproving silence from those around him was enough to quieten him down, and everyone returned to their pensive observation of the Roman gathering.

"Hey it's not my fault if my body needs action," he whispered plaintively.

"Joxer," hissed Iolaus.

"Yeah?" he eagerly replied.

"Shut up!" came the firm order.

Gabrielle resumed her nervous foot-tapping, fairly certain that Iolaus would manage to prevent the 'boy blunder' from doing anything to foul up the situation. - *I should have had him go to the ship with the luggage .. he'd have been out of trouble there*, - she told herself. - *Who am I kidding .. he'd have figured out that I was trying to keep him out of the way, and would have found some way to get here to 'help'.* - Her foot tapped a little faster as a hidden grin appeared under the mask, - *I could have sent a message to Nebula to have him locked up til we got back with Xena.* - The thought was still tempting, but she finally scolded herself, - *That's not fair, Gabrielle. He's risked as much as the rest of us to rescue Xena .. he should be here when we get her.* -

Her whole body stiffened at the sudden blast of the triumphal fanfare to announce the arrival of the Emperor and his wife. As the strident sounds echoed through the high ceilinged room, Caesar appeared resplendent in Imperial purple, with Pompeia dutifully at his side in elegant white, and

- *Artemis!* - thought Ephiny, mentally rolling her eyes, - *this man is so arrogant. If he keeps this up I'm gonna puke! His touch revolts me!* -

Breaking away from the kiss, the Regent smiled graciously upon her would be lover, "Your promises fill me with longing," she told him.

- *Yeah, longing to get as far away as possible from you!* - she told herself.

"Yet, I think perhaps that we should hold our passions until after my champion and your slave have finished their combat," she smiled enticingly.

- *'Cause with any luck I won't ever have to have you anywhere near me again,* - she silently cheered.

"Perhaps we should have one final game .. a final wager," she suggested.

Trying to hide his disappointment, Caesar asked warily, "A wager .. what wager?"

Smiling seductively, Ephiny whispered huskily, "How about everything?"

"Everything?" he questioned, puzzled as to what exactly she meant.

"Everything," she re-affirmed. "All the money, and each other. If I win, you're mine to do what I will with for the three days before I leave for home. If you win, you get me"

- *Oh yeah, you get me, Xena, Gabrielle, Toris, Hercules and all the rest, because if you win, we lose everything.* -

"Are you sure you can afford everything?" questioned Caesar with a smirk pulling at his lips, he knew that Xena wouldn't lose this time, and he was fairly certain that Ephiny knew that, which meant she was offering herself for his pleasure, whenever and wherever he wanted her .. or at least that was how it appeared to be to him.

"I never make a bet that I can't honour," murmured Ephiny as she allowed her eyes to promise him the delights he'd been yearning after for so long.

"Then I accept your wager," he agreed readily.

"Well then, my Lord, I'd best send Heston down to ready for the match, and we had better return to the party before Graccus decides that I've abducted you for my own purposes," the Regent told him lightly as she slipped away from his embrace.

"Graccus would probably have a statue erected to you if he thought you could get me permanently out of Rome," he grumbled lightly, catching her hand and allowing her to draw him back into bright cheerful gathering beyond the relative quite of the secluded balcony.

things well in hand, and they would only act if an emergency erupted. Although they did have plans to initiate once the fighting stopped.

"What are you up to 'Dite?" questioned her sister as she watched the Goddess of Love sprinkle some sparkling substance over a young couple.

"Just catching up with some work," she grinned, "You know how it is, you get involved with some, like, real heavy gig, and before ya know it your in tray's backed up with petitions." Her sister frowned at her, "Hey chill, Arte!" she suggested, "It's not like we have a lot to do for the moment."

The Goddess of the Hunt gave an exaggerated sigh and moved towards the balcony where she had just seen Caesar and Ephiny disappear, "C'mon, I want to see what happens out there," she told her sister, grabbing her arm.

"You got it sweet cheeks!" answered Aphrodite, just as eager as her sister to see how the Regent intended handling the Roman, they vanished heading for the balcony.

They had avidly watched the scene between Caesar and Ephiny as it played out under the canopy of the stars and moon. "That went well," noted Artemis as the pair of pseudo lovers left their secluded rendezvous and headed for what they hoped was going to be the climax of the evening's entertainment.

"You know, that guy's technique is really slick .. pity he's wasting it following Ares. Wonder if I could interest him in a change of career direction? I mean, with a little personal tuition he could rock the world big time .. and have a lot of fun doing it," she gave a shiver of delight at the thought.

"Forget it, 'Dite, we have other more important work to do," reminded Artemis.

"As I said, Chill babe. It never hurts to mix pleasure with a little business," she giggled.

"Oh get real, Aphrodite," snorted the huntress, "The only thing Caesar cares about is war and conquest!" A sly look stole over her features unnoticed by her sister, "Besides, I've heard him say that love is only any good as a tool to use to divide a target's emotions from their sensibilities, and that anyone who wasted their time serving love deities was just asking to be "screwed over" ... his words, not mine," she assured her sister.

"Oooooooo!!!!" screeched the Goddess on Love in angry frustration, "He said that, did he?" She turned her glare towards the door where he'd just re-entered the chamber, "Delinquent loser!" she yelled, "That does it, I'm talking big time retribution here. I've a good mind to hit him with ..."

"Hold it 'Dite," yelled Artemis, grabbing her sister's arm, "Don't do anything that's gonna foul this up ... you can play with Caesar anytime. Let's get Xena, the boys and my Amazons out of here before you start another game."

Ephiny swung a careful eye around the gallery of the pit. Unlike Caesar's and many of the newer examples, this pit was just basically a hole, bordered by a railing. It had no fancy safety precautions for guards, making it very easy for her Amazons to get close to the soldiers on security duty, and there was no elaborate box for favoured spectators to take their ease in .. everyone just found a place to watch that suited them. All in all it couldn't be more perfect.

Her attention was drawn back to Caesar as he growled over his shoulder to Graccus, "When are these children's games going to be over .. I have a wish to see a real fight." He was certain that the old senator had arranged these fooleries to deliberately anger and humiliate him. He scowled at the thought.

Graccus smiled placatingly, "As soon as these 'fighters' are finished, my lord."

Scowling again, Caesar turned back to the spectacle with ill humour. He wanted this over so he could pursue a far more entertaining evening, with the Amazon Queen eager to service his every whim. He'd waited far longer, for the chance to properly bed her, than he had for any other woman. And now that the time was drawing close, he could almost taste her on his lips once again, and his blood sang in expectation.

Looking at Ephiny, who was glowing with mirth, he found himself stirring to an uncomfortable degree. She turned and looked at him with a raised eyebrow disturbingly reminiscent of his dark, dangerous, slave, "Soon my sweet," he promised, but whether it was an oath to the Amazon or to Xena, he would have been hard pressed to say.

"Oh yeah," responded the Regent with enthusiasm, but she had her mind on an entirely different scenario to his.

The dwarves finished their show and trooped out of the pit. Within short moments, Hercules entered the arena to be followed, shortly after, by the familiar, chained, figure of Xena and her guards. Ephiny's eyes swung towards where she knew Gabrielle and Toris were standing just behind her to her right, and she saw them eagerly crane forward to gain their first look at the woman in moons. She offered a silent prayer to Artemis that neither would do something rash, before returning her focus of attention back to the dark haired warrior, who stood quietly rubbing her wrists and stretching away the effects of the shackles.

When Xena looked up, she knew that there was going to be trouble. Her blue eyes blazed with icy hatred and determination. She shivered at the spectre of death that she saw there and felt, rather than heard, Caesar's sharp intake of breath. Then the woman's eyes had turned away, allowing her to breathe again. Worriedly, she checked on her Roman escort, - *Does he suspect something?* -

Thinking quickly, the Regent said softly, "That woman truly hates me."

Caesar turned to look at her, then cast a look down to where his slave limbered up, "Don't worry, my love. "She's not going to ever get anywhere near you. She might hate you, but she's in no position to do anything about it."

had kept hidden and banked whilst unable to find an outlet for it, but now they blazed with an intensity that the Regent had seen only once before and Caesar had learned to fear.

Cursing herself silently for giving him cause for concern, she returned her attention to stretching and limbering up her stiff muscles, wanting to be as ready as possible for the fighting to come. She was aware of Flaccus and his goons gathering up her shackles and leaving the pit, and she used those few moment to check on the positions of the sentries in the gallery and almost smiled to see the proliferation of Amazons gathered in strategic spots ready to take them out. Finally the noise within the small arena quietened down and Xena straightened up looking back towards Caesar.

The dictator addressed his fellow guests, "This evening you are privileged to see two of the world's greatest gladiators. Heston, Queen Ephiny's champion from Themiscyra, and my slave, Xena." That brought enthusiastic applause. "Enjoy the spectacle, for it will be some time before you see its like again, for Queen Ephiny and her Amazons return to their home in three days, obviously taking the noble Heston with them, and my slave will not be performing for a while ... she is in need of some long overdue attitude adjustment."

That drew hearty laughter from the Roman nobility. "Therefore, I suggest you enjoy the fight and have fun with your wagering on this contest, to make amends for the sorry sport we have so far had." He turned his attention to the pair in the pit as the spectators once more chortled at his wit, ignoring Graccus' frown of displeasure, "Now let the combat begin," he ordered.

Xena advanced on Hercules, and shot out a couple of soft blows, allowing him to pull her in close, "How do you want to play this?" she hissed, as he enfolded her in his huge arms appearing to squeeze her in a bear hug. Keeping his head well down he answered softly enough to be heard by her acute hearing, yet to be drowned else by the loud yelling around them, "When you're ready, let out a battle cry. That's the signal for the Amazon's to neutralise the guards, and I'll give you a boost up out of here."

She mimed a vicious pair of blows to his ribs, in fact barely touching him, but Hercules acted the part, releasing her and allowing her to flip away from him. They circled warily. Xena threw some powerful looking punches that actually had the impact of powder-puffs, appearing to double Hercules up, before allowing him to take an arm which he used to pull her over him as he executed a controlled roll backwards, then continued to roll backwards himself to land straddled across her waist.

"How are you going to get out of here?" she demanded.

"Iolaus has a rope," he whispered as he appeared to be trying to strangle her.

"It'll take too long. I'll boost you out of the pit .. it's no trouble for me to flip out of here .. it'll be safer for both of us that way."

"Xena ..." he started to protest.

"No! she hissed at him .. we do it my way." her eyes blazed in warning, before she broke his grip on her neck and slammed him in the back with her knees, shooting him back over her head.

They turned to face each other once more. Her eyes looked a question and he gave a nod in agreement. With a quick look around, Xena screamed out her battlecry, "Ai,ai,ai,ai,ai,ai!" but instead of hurtling forward to attack as everyone expected, Hercules charged her, lodging his booted foot into her cupped hand as she propelled him up and out of the pit. With another wild yell, she took a couple of quick paces and launched herself into a high forward flip that landed her just behind Caesar.

Two solid punches brought down the two closest guards, taken utterly by surprise, and before her main target could react and draw his sword, she'd jabbed her fingers into his neck cutting off the flow of blood to his brain, "Game over!" she snarled as she watched the blood begin to trickle from his nostril.

"Xena?" tried Ephiny, reaching out a tentative hand only to have it shaken away.

The Warrior Princess watched the progress of her 'pinch' confident that the Amazons would take care of the business of neutralising the soldiers, leaving her to watch Caesar die slowly and painfully from lack of blood to his brain. She estimated he had just under 60 heartbeats to savour his agonizing death.

"Xena!" tried Gabrielle as she came up behind her friend.

Without taking her eyes from her erstwhile tormentor, who glared back at her with defiance, the warrior answered with calm coldness, "No, Gabrielle. He has to die, or we'll never be able to live our lives in peace again."

The bard was about to protest when Toris stepped into the debate, "Xena, you once showed me that murder was not the path of justice. You've worked hard to leave the path he started you down .. by killing him he wins. You'll be the murderer he helped forge .. again. Please, for us .. but more especially for yourself, don't do this. He'll meet his just rewards eventually."

They could see the war raging in the Warrior Princess' blue eyes. She so wanted to snuff out the life of the man that had caused her such heartache and pain. Part of her was yelling that if she let him live they'd only have to go through this again and she really didn't want her friends and family to suffer because of her.

And yet!

And yet she knew that if she killed him things would no longer be the same with Gabrielle, with Toris or any of her friends. They would have seen her returning to type and would always wonder about her .. about when she would resort to the quick fix of killing to solve her problems .. and if one day they would be the problem that needed to be fixed.

Letting out a wild yell of anger, frustration and hatred, her hands flashed forward releasing Caesar for the 'pinch', letting him slowly collapse to the floor. The whole confrontation had just taken moments, and there was still a bloody struggle going on between the Amazons, the soldiers and Graccus' guests.

Delivering a sledgehammer punch to Caesar's temple to ensure he wouldn't be going anywhere too soon, she relieved him of his sword, and decided to wade into the fray. She had a lot of angst to work out and beating up on her Roman guards seemed as good a way of doing it as any. "Toris keep Gabrielle and Ephiny safe," she instructed before diving into the broiling mass of humanity, "And don't let Caesar go anywhere," she called back over her shoulder.

Chapter Sixty Eight: The Great Escape

With Xena's gear secured in a pack over his shoulders, Autolycus had slipped out of the window and nimbly along a narrow ledge that he had discovered in his previous visits to Caesar's abode. Grinning happily at a theft well executed, he barely had to concentrate on slipping past the few guards that remained on duty, - *Not like when Xena's here*, - he noted wryly to himself, - *The amount of guards around to make sure she stayed under lock and key would have been a challenge past the abilities of almost anyone .. anyone other than the King of Thieves, that is*. - he mentally patted himself on the back. Slipping out his mini-grapple, he attached it to the crenellation and slipped easily down into the street, retrieving his gadget with a practised flip of the wrist, - *Heigh ho*, - he sighed to himself, - *another notch in the belt, so to speak. Now I'd better get these weapons and armour down to Nebula's ship so that we're ready to go when everyone else gets there*. -

He picked his way through the still busy streets, unsurprised at the activity even though it was now deep into the long shadows of evening. Ever cautious, he took a circuitous route away from Caesar's palace, heading south east to pick up the Via Triumphalis before turning north west past the Circus Maximus, once he was sure he wasn't being followed, ending up in the Forum Boarium and then taking the street that headed west down to the docks where Nebula's ship awaited him.

By the time he made it to 'Wave Dancer' it was fully dark and he was completely satisfied that no one had tailed him there. Still being cautious, he slipped through the darkest shadows around the docks, avoiding any of Caesar's watchers that were still in place looking for him after his part in Xena's abortive escape attempt. He had decided that the best way to slip onto the ship would be to shin up one of the mooring ropes and enter through the hawser hole.

Checking carefully for hidden observers, he finally contented his innate caution and scurried quickly out of the shadows and across the open space of the dock, expertly shining up the rope, his added weight pulling on the slack in it causing the ship to move sluggishly in it's berth and bump softly against the stone of the dock. Within moments he was safely aboard the vessel and was about to breathe a sigh of relief, when cold metal pressed tight to his neck making him freeze in place.

"Well, well, what do we have here?" growled an unfriendly voice.

"Damn it Nebula!" he swore, beginning to lose his temper despite the close proximity of the knife. He was beginning to feel uncomfortable on his knees before her, and just knew there were a bevy of Amazons close by who were probably stuffing fists down their throats to stop themselves howling with laughter at his predicament.

"So if you're not a stowaway .. and you're not a spy," she said slowly as she drew the sharp blade over his exposed flesh, making him close his eyes and pray she had a steady hand, "that must mean you're a thief!" she growled, "and I hang thieves on principle!"

"Sheesh, Nebula! Cut me some slack here. I've just finished retrieving some goods from Caesar's palace .. at no little danger to myself, I might point out .. so I can do without the warlord/captive routine. Now are you going to let me up?"

"I just knew you were a thief," laughed the pirate captain, "Condemned from your own mouth and bound to swing from my yardarm."

"Nebula!" complained Autolyclus in mortification as the Amazons finally couldn't hold in their laughter any longer.

"Oh, c'mon Autolyclus," grinned Nebula as she finally let the thief up, "It was only a bit of fun."

"For you maybe," grumbled the butt of her joke. "But you weren't the one with a knife at your throat," he grimaced running a hand over his offended flesh in an unconscious act to check if it was still whole.

The pirate's grin just widened as she slapped him on the shoulder and demanded, "So just what have you been up to you thief?"

"Well I just went and collected some things that Xe..." he began but was interrupted by a shout from shore just as he registered the babble of childish voices.

"Hello the deck," called a voice that Autolyclus thought he recognised, but wasn't sure just from where."

Nebula stepped over to the rails and called down, "Yes? What can I do for you?"

Patroclese glanced cautiously around him, knowing full well that there was likely to be at least one observer in the area, "Can we come aboard? I'd appreciate speaking to the captain without having to shout myself hoarse."

Nebula thought carefully about the situation. The man obviously didn't want to shout his message so that just anyone could hear what he had to say, and he hardly looked threatening, - *At least not with a bunch of kids with him, he doesn't*, - she decided, "Alright .. you can come ahead .. but leave the kids down there. I don't need my decks messed up by them." What she really didn't want was to have to keep track of a bunch of inquisitive children.

Patroclese nodded and gave a few quiet instructions to Mattin. As he watched, Autolycus finally remembered that the young man he was watching was the same one that had accosted him in Caesar's palace earlier that evening. As he watched the young man quickly scrambling up the gangplank, he leaned over to Nebula and whispered, "He was in Caesar's palace earlier. He wanted to know what I was doing there."

"What did you tell him," she asked quietly.

"That I was delivering a message," he answered, and in truth he had been. Just not one that Caesar would have wanted.

"Let's see what he has to say," the captain, suggested as the blonde man was conducted towards her by an Amazon escort, "That can't do any harm." She turned her attention to the visitor, "I'm the captain of 'Wave Dancer'. What can I do for you?"

"My name is Patroclese," he began and saw the immediate stiffening of Nebula's posture, and saw the Amazons reaching for their weapons, why they hadn't recognised him he didn't know. He presumed it was bad light, or maybe no one had taken much notice of him at Themiscyra, "I see you've heard of me," he commented with wry self-deprecation.

"We have," growled a belligerent Autolycus, from behind the pirate captain's shoulder.

"Ah yes," the healer quirked a grim smile, "I'm sorry we didn't introduce ourselves earlier, Autolycus. Is the lovely captain the girlfriend you were referring to earlier?" He asked politely, seeing an amused look appear on Nebula's face and a chagrined one on the thief's. He hefted the staff in his and a little before passing it to the thief, "You forgot this when you collected Xena's possessions," he informed him, "It's Gabrielle's."

"Just what is it you want here?" demanded Nebula.

Taking a quick look around at the scowling Amazon crew members who were scattered close by watching proceedings with interest, Patroclese took a deep breath and told her, "I know what you're planning. I know you intend to break Xena loose tonight."

He was met by a cold silence, "Just what makes you THINK that?" questioned the dark sailor with quiet menace.

"Because I know the ties that she has to the Amazons .. through Gabrielle being Queen and Ephiny and many others being her friends," he told them, aware that he was in real danger, especially as he recognised the threatening movements from the lurking Amazons, the tenseness of the ship's captain and the King of Thieves. "I never told Caesar what I knew," he hurriedly put in, "but with Autolycus taking Xena's things tonight, and there was a strange feeling of .. expectation," he tried to explain what he had sensed, "around Xena. I knew that you would try to take her from Rome tonight."

"Why should we believe anything you say?" insisted Nebula coldly, "everyone here knows that you've already betrayed our friends once. how do we know that you're not playing your master's game again," she almost spat the words out with contempt.

"Because there'd be a legion swarming this area. Do you honestly think that Caesar would risk any of you getting away if he was aware of what was going on?" the healer asked plaintively, "All other considerations aside, he would have made certain that there was no ship ready and waiting to get Xena out of Rome should she manage to get away from his guards."

"He has a point there," muttered Autolycus.

Nebula considered for a moment, "Do you think you could slip off the ship and scout the around to see if any soldiers have slipped into the area behind you?" she asked the thief.

"Please!" he answered, a note of disgust in his tone.

"Don't get caught," the pirate admonished as she watched Autolycus retrace his steps and exit the way he had come aboard earlier. She noted that he didn't even bother to respond to her quip .. unless you could call an outraged groan a response. Grinning to herself, Nebula turned back to the healer, "What's with all the kids?" she nodded her head to the slave children waiting patiently on the docks.

"I found out that Caesar had ordered that many of them would be crucified if Xena should successfully escape at any time. He's been having them flogged for any transgressions in Xena's behaviour and I know he'll kill them, purely because he knows it will hurt her."

"Does Xena know about this?" asked the seawoman, her tone hard.

"I told her a few days ago." Patroclese swallowed, his throat tense and dry, "Look, I can't stand by and watch innocent children die a horrible death. You've got to take them with you when you leave or Caesar will kill them."

"When did your stomach develop this tendency towards delicateness? It seems to me you weren't so compassionate when you were involved in the capture of the warrior and the bard," snarled Nebula.

The healer drew a deep breath, "Look," he said, "I was wrong. All I knew were the harrowing tales of a demon in the form of a woman who was hungry to slaughter anyone who stood in her path. At the time it seemed that I was doing the world a favour. I thought that removing one more blood thirsty warrior was a good thing."

"How did you justify the bard to yourself?" asked the pirate her voice laced with heavy sarcasm, "Let me guess. Gabrielle was Xena's friend so she must have been as tainted by blood as the warlord?"

"Essentially yes," agreed Patroclese. "But when I met them and began to get to know them I started having doubts."

"Not enough to abandon your master's plan, though," sneered Nebula.

"No," agreed the young man honestly. "I have served Caesar all my life. I have never before even thought about going against his orders."

"So why now? Just because of a bunch of slave children?"

"They are a big part of it," he conceded. "They have done nothing to deserve such a grisly fate other than being slaves. Xena on the other hand has earned her execution many times over, and even Gabrielle .. for collaborating with the Warrior Princess, could justly be considered to have earned being crucified under Roman law." He paused before saying, "But" and drifting into uneasy silence.

"But?" prompted the captain.

Shaking his head slightly Patroclese continued, "But both Xena and Gabrielle have earned my admiration and respect .. particularly Xena who I have spent a lot of time with over the past three moons. I have tried hard not to think this, but I can't help believing that both of them deserve better than what Caesar has planned for them."

"So you're turning traitor?"

He gave the barest nod and confirmed softly, "I suppose that is what I am doing .. yes." A rather haunted look appeared in his eyes as he looked down at the children, "Just take them with you. I know Xena won't leave without them .. she wouldn't abandon innocents to suffer in her place. I'll return to my lord's palace and await my just punishment."

Nebula frowned at the young man ready to sacrifice himself for his ideals. She began to speak, but stilled her voice when she recognised the thief's return once more, "Well?" she demanded curtly.

"Unless Caesar's soldiers have learnt how to make themselves totally invisible, he's telling the truth."

Nodding as if it was no more than she expected, she turned back to Patroclese and told him, "Bring them on board, but don't you go anywhere. I want to see what the others say before I let you run back to your master." She flicked her eyes at a couple of the Amazons to accompany him, not yet willing to trust the healer. "What do you think?" she asked Autolycus as they watched him move down to the dock and gather together the band of slave children.

"Gabrielle thinks he has a good heart," responded the thief.

Nebula gave him a long look, "That's not what I asked."

Autolykus gave the healer an appraising look before allowing his eyes to sweep over the kids as they scrambled up the gangplank, "I think that if Caesar has indeed threatened the lives of some or all of those children, nothing will make Xena leave Rome without them." He sighed, "All we can do is keep them here until the others arrive. If we get them below and feed them, the Amazons can keep an eye on them." He thought for a moment, "We could also send a message to Ephiny to let her know about this turn of events."

The pirate nodded her agreement, "That matches my thinking on it .. so you're not just a pretty face," she smiled assessingly.

Autolykus returned her predatory look with a roguish grin, "As Xena would say .. I have many skills."

Leaning on her borrowed staff, Gabrielle watched the fighting with a critical eye. She knew she struggled to write good fight descriptions when she chronicled their adventures, but she really wanted to do this one justice. A glance at Ephiny and Toris told her that neither one was happy with their instructions, but the presence of Caesar soon drew soldiers into their proximity and gave both the Regent and her partner's brother more than enough hostile adversaries to deal with to keep them happy.

According to plan, a squad of twenty warriors under Malonda's direction had concentrated on rounding up the civilian spectators, herding them into a guarded pocket near the gallery's entrance. A further ten warriors had secured that entrance against anyone attempting to leave .. or join the fight. If things had gone well, Eponin would have left four warriors to barricade the door to the holding pens, frustrating Flaccus and his men's attempts at linking with the rest of their unit, while the remainder of her command would sweep the house and detain all other guests and slaves so that word of what was going on didn't escape.

Keeping an eye on the situation around her, as well as checking now and then to make sure that Caesar was still unconscious, the bard began to take mental notes on how the fight was progressing. She easily spotted the towering form of Hercules who had teamed up with a short looking Amazon that just had to be Iolus. Together they were wreaking sustained havoc, using their fists, wits and synchronised timing to bludgeon persistent soldiers into submission. She winced in sympathy when one luckless legionnaire was hoisted high into the air above the demi-god's head, and sent plummeting down into the pit below to land in a crashing tangle with a group of Flaccus' men who had found their exit from the holding area barred by a heavy, locked door courtesy of Eponin and her group.

"That's gotta hurt," she grinned as she watched the luckless soldier groan and collapse into the sand as his colleagues pulled themselves together and scrambled to their feet looking for a way to join the melee taking place above them.

Flaccus appeared below them and, efficient officer that he was, started to organise his men, sending several off on errands before standing and glaring up at the debacle taking place above him, "Legionnaires!" he bellowed, "Close formation! Find and protect the General!"

"Hera's heels!" cursed the bard as she saw his words begin to take effect and the disciplined Roman soldiers started to reform and attack in fighting wedges that the more lightly armed and armoured Amazons had trouble countering. A glance told her that Ephiny and Toris had been joined by ten Amazons determined to keep their Queen and Regent safe at all costs. So far they had managed to keep a tight cordon around Gabrielle and Caesar, but more of the Romans were trying to converge on the area and rescue their leader.

A frantic search showed that Xena was being hard pressed by soldiers as she stood over the prone body of an Amazon - *No. Not an Amazon*, - her mind informed her, "Joxer!" she said with quiet intensity.

When Xena had plunged into the chaotic fray created by her 'escape' from the pit, she had nothing in mind other than to work off the intense anger that burned within her, releasing it in her passion for battle .. it was either that or kill Caesar there and then! So she had plunged forward with her borrowed sword, performing her dance of death: spinning, twisting, bobbing and weaving while all the time the blade in her hand licked out injuring, maiming and killing any soldier foolish enough to stand against her.

Pent up rage fuelled her waltz through the enemy, cutting her off from the pain of the occasional scratch that made it through her defences for she knew that she could not afford to hold back the dark killer within her. These soldiers would not willingly surrender. The knowledge that should she escape meant that many of them would suffer death by Crucifixion for dereliction of duty, spurred them forward continuously: they faced death either way. Far better to die as a warrior than to be reviled and face the death of a criminal!

A familiar figure wearing Amazon clothing appeared in her line of sight. She had no trouble identifying the inept warrior as he did his best to prove his worth to his friends by helping with fighting .. a task he was supremely not cut out for. She saw him slip clumsily, luck taking him under the pointed thrust of his opponent, but before he could scramble away, the Roman forced him to his back and prepared to deliver the downward stabbing stroke that would be sure to end her friends life.

A wicked slash of her own sword tore out her opponent's throat and covered her with the hot stickiness of his fountaining blood. Without more thought the Warrior Princess threw herself into a dive that tackled the legionnaire, standing above the downed Joxer, shoving him back and away as he began his downward thrust with his weapon.

Xena felt the burning pain of the sword as it entered her back below her left shoulder. She had a moment to be grateful for the fact that the force of her body hitting the Roman's had thrown off not only the direction of the thrust but also the power. Instead of having two feet of steel shoved through her spine, she suffered a deep gash, painful and bloody, but not debilitating ... yet!

She felt the soldier pull the weapon back for another attempt at felling her and winced at the pain as she felt steel grate against bone. Not being in a position to use her own blade, she swung back her fist and smashed it into the soldiers jaw, her always thunderous blow given added impact

from the weight of the sword hilt she held. As the punch landed she felt the disintegration of the man's jaw and knew that this particular Roman would not be rejoining the fray.

As she heaved herself upright she heard Flaccus' bellowed orders while registering the fact that Joxer had managed to get tangled in a couple of bodies that littered the ground around them, "You okay?" she demanded, as she fended off another attacker.

"F..fine," he managed as he struggled to get up.

"Then get off your butt and go help Gabrielle keep an eye on Caesar for me," she snarled as she parried the lunge of a soldier and swayed to her right to avoid another attacker.

"S..sure thing Xena." He at last managed to extricate himself and turned to head for the bard's position, before he looked back and said, "Thanks for saving me. It's good to have you back again."

"Not now Joxer," she growled as she ducked an impatient slash, "Later."

Nodding his agreement, the wannabe warrior made his way to the cordon of Amazons around Gabrielle, avoiding getting skewered with a series of trips, slips and accidental spins that provided the perfect ungainly counterpoint to the Warrior Princess' graceful movement.

Hoping that Joxer would be alright, but not being able to track his movements due to her adversaries who were doggedly demanding her full attention. A lighting thrust and vicious swipe sent the pair clattering backwards until she could yell her own orders, "Amazons! Regroup around the Queen!" She threw a look across to the other side of the pit and caught Hercules' eye, "You and Iolaus hold that side and I'll hold this!" she yelled above the noise of the battle.

Preparing herself as the Roman's organised into small mobile wedges of five men, she was startled to find a tall Amazon standing at her shoulder .. - *No, not an Amazon!* - she realised, "Damn it Toris! I thought I told you to stay with Gabrielle!" she swore as she picked up the fight once more, refusing to give ground to the soldiers before her.

"You can't hold this side alone!" he grunted back at her as he engaged a Roman, "And Mother told me to bring you home safe!" He grinned at the incredulous look his sister gave him.

After that they had no time for more conversation as they battled against the frantic soldiers who were determined to rescue their emperor or die.

Iolaus was back at his partner's side fighting, and it felt .. comfortable, - *Yeah, that's the way to describe it. Comfortable and right.* - He'd missed Hercules in the time that he'd been running around Narbonensis and Italia. True he'd made a friend in Toris, - *Who'd have thought that?* - he asked himself as he ducked under a sword slash and retaliated with a straight right to the nose that sent the soldier stumbling backwards.

He'd nearly burst his sides holding in the laughter as he saw Xena catapult the demi-god out of the pit, and follow him out with one of her characteristic flips and a battlecry. He'd won several bets on that event, including one with Hercules who had insisted that he'd boost their friend out into a safe area and follow after. He had known that Xena wouldn't go for that, and he'd been proven right! - *Ooops! Concentrate Iolaus!* - he reminded himself as he felt the sharp graze of a sword slicing across his biceps.

He slipped back into the familiar routine of complimenting Hercules' power with his own speed and agility. With the Amazons snapping around the edges and the Romans disorganised and with no strong commander, they were making good progress towards bringing things to a speedy conclusion. It was at that point that a hard bitten, veteran soldier had issued loud, crisp commands to the men fighting along the gallery. There was a general disengagement as legionnaires reformed and advanced once more in organised formations that were proving difficult to counter.

He'd looked up when Xena had shouted out her orders and had seen Hercules nod his agreement. Then they were plunged into the thick of the fighting once again. The demi-god grabbed two of the closing soldiers, one in either hand, and swung them into each other in a clatter of armour stunning them, before hoisting them onto his shoulders and using their bodies to batter their comrades into submission.

Iolaus was not idle during this. Not having the brute power of his best friend, the blonde warrior relied on his speed and agility to duck blows, get out of tight scrapes, and deliver flashing attacks with fists, feet and if all else failed, his head. Between the two of them, they were making heavy inroads into their Roman attackers, with many of the vanquished soldiers being tossed over the edge of the pit into the growing numbers below.

Risking a glance across the pit, Iolaus saw Xena and Toris working together in bloody tandem as they fought with ferocity and uncompromising steel. The Warrior Princess was covered in crimson gore as she savagely pared down the ranks of the Romans. The blonde knew that most of the blood would be her opponents, but undoubtedly some was her own, yet if she was hurt it didn't show as her fighting skills remained undiminished.

Launching himself at three legionaries trying to break past them, Iolaus grabbed tightly to one man, while scissoring his legs around a second man's throat. He dealt with the one in the middle by the simple expedient of head butting him. "Ow!" he yelped as his forehead connected with the legionnaire's helmet, but the force was enough to daze the man. Keeping his legs tightly locked, he pummelled the first man into submission by repeatedly punching him in the face until he dropped unconscious. As he dropped the weight of his own body towards the floor, the blonde gave a sharp twist with his legs and sent the third man sailing out over the gallery railing into the pit below.

Bouncing to his feet, Iolaus couldn't help but grin. He enjoyed this and he hadn't had any decent action since his and Toris' little skirmish in Pisae. Thinking of Toris, he chanced another glance in the direction of the tall dark haired man and his sister. - *He's good,* - he acknowledged to himself as he saw Toris run an opponent through with an extended lunge, taking the Roman out

as he was about to get a free shot at Xena. - *They work well together*, - he decided as he watched, - *Xena takes most of the heat protecting Toris who works around the edges mopping up any danger to her. Seems to be a comfortable, well used combination.* -

"Iolaus! Look out!" yelled Hercules as a soldier charged him.

Without conscious thought, the blonde twisted to one side, feeling the blade score a shallow gash across his abdomen as he did so. As the Roman was carried past on the momentum of his charge and thrust, Iolaus crashed a fist into his armoured ribs and when the soldier doubled up, floored him with a double handed downward punch. "Thanks Herc," he acknowledged, shaking his right hand which he'd bruised on the soldiers armour.

"Anytime, pal," came the reply, "Now lets get this mopped up so we can go home."

"Sure thing!" agreed the blonde, launching himself back into the melee.

Gabrielle bit her lip as she watched the progression of the fight. She'd been relieved when Joxer had finally made it over to the relative safety of the Amazon redoubt around her and she'd even managed to get him to do something useful by tumbling any downed Roman into the pit below. She hadn't seen exactly when Toris had slipped away, but she picked him out as he'd approached and joined Xena, and had watched, with rapt attention, the familiarity they displayed with each other fighting side by side against the foe.

As more and more of the legionaries went down, Ephiny despatched a couple of hands (the bard had learned that an Amazon fighting unit of a hand consisted of five warriors) to throw the battle's debris into the pit, knowing that it would frustrate Flaccus' efforts in trying to get out of there to join the fight, while having the added benefit of ensuring that neither Xena, Toris, Hercules, nor Iolaus, stumbled over downed men.

All of the civilians were in a huddled, cowed mass and were causing no problems that their Amazon guards couldn't handle. Gabrielle noted the rather wry grimace on Graccus' face as he observed the riotous shambles that his party had become. She couldn't stifle a grin and she wished she could invite him to a real Amazon celebration so that he could see what a real riot was! There were occasional complaints from the more outraged members of that penned group, but nothing that Malonda and her cohorts couldn't handle.

She had seen Eponin arrive at the doorway and she had given the thumbs up sign to signal that all was secured and that they had managed to prevent anyone from leaving. She couldn't fail to see the wistful expression on the Weapon Master's face as she enviously watched the combat taking place before recalling her own duties and heading back into the palace to double check that everything was under control.

It was becoming more and more obvious that the Romans were beaten and Gabrielle heaved a sigh of relief, knowing that they were one step closer to achieving what they had set out to do.

But her intense interest in the fight going on around her almost led to disaster as she completely forgot about Caesar.

It sounded as if a swarm of bees was buzzing in his head as he slowly struggled back to consciousness. To be honest, he couldn't really believe that he was still alive. He'd seen and recognised the hatred and desire to kill in her eyes and had almost believed that his destiny had deserted him ... almost!

He cracked open an eye to try and get his bearings. From what he could see, from his prone position, his men were losing badly! The grunts and cries and howls that rang through the chamber made a tumultuous din that really intensified the ache in his skull, but he had little care for either that or his dying men as he wracked his brain for a way to regain control of the situation.

Looking up he recognised the presence of Ephiny as she directed her Amazons in several different tasks. She seemed more concerned with ensuring that her perimeter was secure than with watching over her prisoner, - *Which means that someone else must have that honour*, - he told himself.

Carefully turning his head he found an Amazon standing beside him leaning confidently on a staff. He tracked his eyes up the short muscular body to the back of her head .. her attention obviously on the battle around them .. and recognised the red/gold hair of the bard. - *Bad mistake, Gabrielle*, - he said to himself, - *You should never, ever, take your eyes off a dangerous prisoner!* -

Moving his hand slowly he inched towards one of the stiletto's he kept in his boots. Feeling a sense of relief when his hand closed around the hilt, he slowly pulled it from its sheath and prepared to move decisively. Once he had the blade pressed to the bard's throat he could call this farce to an end. Xena would be quickly put back in chains and the Amazon contingent could be dealt with. The thought of having Ephiny entirely under his control almost made him lick his lips in anticipation.

Judging that it was time for his move, Caesar tensed his muscles and forced himself from the floor, reaching for Gabrielle, knife ready in his hand. But as he gained his feet there was a dazzling flash of gold and green light and he found himself facing an intense seeming Amazon sighting down the length of a deadly looking arrow ready to fire at point blank range.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," she told him. "Unless you're looking to spend the rest of your life as a pig!" she quirked a mischievous smile, "Although that might actually be an improvement for you!"

Chapter Sixty Nine: The Games People Play

Gabrielle spun as she heard the voice and her eyes widened in recognition, "Artemis!" she breathed in amazement.

The goddess gave the bard a grin, "Good to see you looking so well, my Chosen," she replied making Gabrielle flush with embarrassment. Caesar started to move, only to be threatened again by the huntress, "Back off, or you'll be sorry," she warned.

"Just who do you think you are?" snapped the Roman angrily. "You have no right interfering between me and my slave."

He received a burning look followed by the cold words of the goddess, "I'm Artemis. Gabrielle is my Chosen and Queen of the Amazons .. my people," she informed him tartly, "So that gives me all the rights I need to justify my actions to the other Gods. I do not need to justify myself to you, mortal!"

"She's the Queen?" he looked at Gabrielle with total disbelief. "But I thought Ephiny"

Smirking smugly the bard informed him, "Eph's the Regent of the Amazons. She rules in my place while Xena and I sort out the scum of the earth .. like you." She got a glare for that.

"I suggest that you order your men to surrender before they're all killed," instructed Artemis. "I want this over so that my Amazons can go home."

The sounds of hard fighting still echoed through the chambers, although it had considerably lessened and a quick glance was enough to inform Gabrielle that Xena and her friends had almost crushed the Roman resistance against them. She wasn't certain that Caesar had realised that yet, but she saw a calculating look spring into the Roman's eyes, "By all means .. take your Amazons back to Greece. You can even have the irritating blonde. But Xena is mine and she stays here."

"You have guts, I'll grant you that. Spilling them could be fun!" she told him coldly, "I haven't had a good mortal hunt for a long while, and I might just indulge myself if you persist in trying my patience. Do you have a preferred animal form, by the way, or shall I pick one for you?" she inquired with cold menace. A hog might be fun! I haven't been pig sticking for a long while ... then again a good chase after a stag is always entertaining, especially when the hounds rip it apart at the end of the hunt!"

Caesar had turned a pallid white colour. He had little doubt that the huntress was being entirely candid with him and he could almost image the fangs of the dogs as they ripped his throat out. He swallowed hard. He hated to be threatened and his ego wasn't about to cave in just yet, "You can't do that to me ... I'm the leader of Rome! The rest of the gods would never stand for such interference."

She grinned maliciously, "Yeah, well it would be too late for you by the time they got around to yelling at me. I'd survive. You wouldn't."

"I'm needed here," protested the Roman shakily.

"Well Xena is needed in Greece and she'll be going home with the Amazons .. it's up to you whether you still want to be alive when she leaves." Artemis informed him pointedly as she sighted the arrow between his eyes.

"You have no right to interfere with Xena's situation. She isn't an Amazon and Mars has agreed that she's mine!" snarled back Caesar.

"Ares is not exactly one of our Father's favourites at the moment, and two goddess' outrank one god," retorted Artemis acidly.

Looking pointedly around area, the Roman sneered and answered, "I only see one of you."

Before the Goddess of the Hunt could respond a burst of pink and gold heralded the arrival of Aphrodite who greeted the situation with, "Everyone needs to chill out! This whole gig's become a real bust." She blew into her hand and a shower of glittering sparkles burst forth filling the chamber. "There!" she smiled with satisfaction, "That should take care of things."

Artemis glanced around and could see all the fight going out of the situation, not only amongst the warriors (who appeared to have ended their resistance anyway), but also amongst the grumbling, angry guests of Graccus who had suddenly found something else to interest them. "Dite? What did you do? I hope you haven't done anything to my Amazons?" the tone was mildly threatening.

"Don't be a muffin head, Arte .. I just laid a little lurve on the guys and Roman gals, ya know?" she giggled, "I didn't include stud muffin, here," she indicated Caesar, "but the rest of his toy soldiers are gonna want to make love not war for quite a while." The huntress gave her an amused look, "What?" Aphrodite demanded.

Taking a look around at what was going on, Artemis grinned wryly and answered, "There are gonna be some unhappy people here," she informed her sister cryptically.

Aphrodite shrugged, "Bummer! Not my problem."

"I'm making it your problem," growled a darkly threatening voice from behind her. "Un-zap my brother .. or else," snarled Xena, unamused that Toris had acquired a sudden urge to seduce and ravish any and all of Ephiny's Amazons. She held his neck in an iron grip ignoring his futile struggling.

"Sorry, sweet cheeks," smiled the Goddess of Love with reckless abandon, "Not part of the deal."

"Make it part of the deal, Aphrodite," growled a deeply masculine voice.

"Hercola," greeted the blonde goddess happily, "What's up?"

Moving into view, Hercules kept a firm hand on Iolaus' arm as his friend lusted desperately after the women around him, "Fix it!" he ordered flatly.

"Yeah!" snarled Gabrielle who was doing her best to fend off a very amorous Joxer.

"Aw! They look so cute! Especially Curly," she grinned at Iolaus.

"Aphrodite!" growled her brother warningly, while being deeply grateful that his demi-god status seemed to be protecting him from the 'affliction' conjured up by the Goddess of Love's power.

"Oh, that is so not fair!" she stamped her foot petulantly. "Try to do a favour and everyone ends up moaning."

"Just fix it, Aphrodite," commanded an adamant Hercules, noticing that Gabrielle was just about getting ready to brain Joxer.

Pouting, the Goddess of love blew sparkling kisses in the direction of Iolaus, Toris and Joxer. The first two blinked, shuddered, stopped struggling and were able to assure their respective captors that they were alright once again. Joxer, on the other hand, didn't stop his pursuit of Gabrielle until she struck him firmly on the head with her borrowed staff.

"Ow!" he complained, "What didya do that for?" he moaned as he rubbed the lump rising on his skull.

"Just knocking a little sense back into you," grinned the bard.

Caesar shook of his bewilderment at the latest turn in events and contemplated making a grab for the bard again. He fingered the hilt of his dagger, finding the metal a reassuring element in a world that had suddenly descended into madness. Everyone's attention seemed to be somewhere else for the moment, which meant that this could be his only chance.

"I wouldn't if I were you," growled Artemis, "I'm sure that you wouldn't like life in the sty!" She nodded to herself as she saw him relax, "Just accept you've lost and maybe you'll get out of this both alive and still a human." She made a motion of her head to Ephiny and the Regent assigned two of her Amazons to relieve the Roman of his dagger and hold his arms firmly. the Huntress relaxed the tension on her taught bow.

"You gods are not supposed to meddle in mortal affairs!" he snarled, frustration and anger blazing from him.

"Dah!" Put in Aphrodite, "Get a grip slick! That's, like, what we do! There has to be some perks to the job .. 'cause I'm telling ya that listening to endless complaints about love lives ain't no picnic!"

"Speaking of which," chimed in Ephiny with a frown, "I think you and I need to talk, Aphrodite."

"Later cutie. We've both got things to do now," squirmed the love goddess.

"Expect to hear from me," warned the Regent.

Ignoring the by-play, the raven haired warrior growled coldly, "Well, thank you for your help, ladies, but no thanks. We were taking care of this situation on our own and we didn't ask for you to interfere."

"Ex-squeeze me!" responded the pink clad goddess indignantly, "But in case you didn't realise, warrior babe, we just pulled your butt out of the fire."

"I think we managed okay without your help," came the Warrior Princess' retort, she hated owing anything to the gods.

"When? After you'd made shish kebabs of those guys and got yourself cut up in the process?" demanded Aphrodite.

"Like I said .. we were managing fine. Now if you'd excuse us, I've got some unfinished business with my old friend, Julius!" Her eyes were cold and uncompromising. She pushed past the loose fringe of Amazons and intended to brush past Artemis when the goddess' arm barred her way.

"Leave him Xena. It's not part of your destiny to kill him here," Artemis told her.

Glowing at the goddess the warrior snarled, "Forget it Artemis, I've let him run loose far too long. But I'll give him a sporting chance .. him against me in a fair fight to the death."

"Xena!" the bard interjected plaintively.

Not even looking at her friend, the dark brooding warrior returned, "No Gabrielle. If we leave Rome with him still alive we'll never be free of him. This way, his death .. or mine will finish things. It's the only way you and our friends are ever going to be safe."

"I can't allow this, Xena," Artemis told her calmly. "Many lines of fate are tangled here today. You cutting out one of the most important ones is not an option."

"I'm not asking for your approval, Artemis! Now stand aside, before I move you aside!" The warrior's tone had gone flat and cold, causing shivers to trail up and down many of the observer's spines.

"Herc!" hissed Iolaus urgently, "Do something."

Assessing the situation, Hercules considered what he could actually do here, and decided that he would have to wait for things to develop further, "Not yet," he told his friend, "Let's just see what happens."

Artemis turned and faced the Warrior Princess squarely, "Champion of my Queen .. you will obey my direction in this matter," she intoned firmly, allowing a faint glow to radiate from herself and engulf Xena. There was a feeling of compulsion as the glow touched the dark warrior's skin .. a feeling that Xena fought tooth and nail to shake off. "As Queen's Champion you are subject to my will in this matter," persisted Artemis, "and I will have obedience."

It felt as if a crushing force was being exerted upon her shoulders, trying to press her to her knees before the Amazon Goddess. Xena refused to submit to the pressure and beads of sweat decorated her brow as continued to stand and defy Artemis' will, "I am not your subject or plaything," gritted out the stubborn woman. "I kneel to no man or god .. not Caesar .. not you!"

On an instant the glow and the compulsion were gone to be replaced by a grudging smile on Artemis' lips, "By Zeus' beard, you're arrogant, Warrior Princess. My Queen chose well when she chose you as protector."

"I'm so glad I meet with your approval," snarled Xena sarcastically.

Aphrodite leaned over to her sister and whispered loud enough for all to hear, "Told ya she was stubborn!"

Frowning, Xena decided to ignore that and attempted to move past Artemis once more, only to be blocked by her arm again, "This is getting old," she muttered to herself, "What now?"

"We still can't let you waste the guy, warrior babe," shrugged the blonde goddess, "Not part of the contract."

Caesar laughed mirthlessly, "Well Xena! Looks like when these ladies go home we get to play again!" He grinned at her scowl, "You might want to think carefully about becoming a runaway slave, or for that matter killing me. I have left very explicit instructions about the execution of those children you were getting to know at the whipping post each evening."

If he was hoping that his information was going to faze her, he was sorely disappointed, "I already know about it, Julius," she sneered, "You're going to sign a document of ownership over to Ephiny for them .. you just lost them in a wager."

He shook his head, "What incentive do I have to do that?" he queried, "After all, you've already told everyone here that you intend to kill me."

"That's true," she agreed, pressing against the obstruction imposed by the goddess, "What I didn't say was how I'd do it! Your choice, Julius. It can be quick and painless or long and very, very painful."

"Tut tut, Xena! That vicious warlord you pretend doesn't exist anymore, really is never far from the surface, is it?" he asked rhetorically. "As I see it," the Roman continued smoothly, "they're not going to let you kill me anyway. So I'll ask again. Are you going to abandon those poor innocent children to their fate?"

"You're a cold blooded bastard!" swore the warrior, still having no luck at pushing past Artemis. Anger glowing from her icy eyes, Xena stepped back a couple of feet as if giving in to the goddess' will before, startingly, launching herself into a high forward tuck flip, that took her past the two goddess' and landed her directly in front of Caesar. "No more games, Julius," she growled, "You're mine!"

His eyes flickered with momentary fear before his gaze hardened on the sword she held menacingly, "Do your worst, slave, you'll live knowing that you condemned eight innocent souls to death with me."

"Xena! Don't!" pleaded Gabrielle, who could see the mad killing light in her friend's eyes, a light that she had last seen when the Warrior Princess had attacked the Amazon village.

"Xena," warned Hercules, beginning to move forward.

"For the love of Lyceus! Don't Xena!" tried Toris.

None of them made any impression upon the Warrior Princess who had finally convinced herself that for her family and friend's safety, as well as for the sake of the world, Caesar had to be stopped .. here .. now! For the good of all, even if the act sealed her own fate and condemned her to Tartarus forever. Before Artemis, or any other, could move the dark warrior raised the Roman's own weapon against him, intending to deliver a killing stroke.

Time slowed to a crawl as the blade began to rise. Caesar watched its blood-crusted progress, unable to believe that his destiny would lead him to his death at this time on the end of his own sword. - *It can't end like this!* - he railed to himself in silent disbelief.

Gabrielle closed her eyes unable to watch the blow that would ultimately result in the final loss of her friend's soul. - *If Xena does this now, we've lost her.* - She shook her head in misery. - *If the dark side, the destroyer, gains control here we'll never get the true, the good Xena back.* - A tear escaped to run down a blanched cheek.

- *Don't do this!* - Hercules pleaded silently as he attempted to lunge across the intervening space to stop her, knowing that he'd be too late to prevent her from completing her deadly intentions.

Toris shivered seeing his sister, for the first time, as the dark destroyer that so many people feared. This was the woman who had rampaged far and wide bringing death and destruction to all who stood in her path. This wasn't the little girl who had grown up with him, teasing him and competing with him. Nor was it the incredible warrior who risked her life time and again for others against the oppression inflicted upon them by warlords and tyrannical rulers. No! This was the Killer. The heartless warrior that his sister had tried so hard to leave behind. He shook his head numbly not knowing what to do or say.

With an ear-splitting scream of hatred, rage and loathing, Xena started the downward arc of the blade, aware of the indrawn breaths of all those watching her, knowing each face bore a look of helpless despair. Internally she fought a battle with her dark self for control and it was with almost superhuman effort that she pulled the blade at the last moment letting it shear across Caesar's armour raising a trail of hissing sparks in its wake.

Silence reigned throughout the chamber until everyone remembered to breathe!

"That was a mistake, my sweet!" gritted out the Roman. "I do believe you've gone soft. Believe me, you'll regret not killing me. Because you'll never have another chance."

The warrior swung her icy eyes back to his, "Oh believe me, Julius. I already regret not killing you! But you see, there are some things in this life that are sweeter than revenge and that's the love of your family and friends. That's something you'll never know because you live your life in the shadows of power and conquest, away from the light and the warmth. So although I regret allowing you to live more than almost anything I've ever done, I think that if I killed you, I would regret a return to the shadow world more."

"Very well said, warrior," applauded a voice that emanated from a cascade of silver and gold.

"Bummer," swore Aphrodite, "What's old egg head doing here? Did you invite her to the gig, Arte?"

"As if!" grumbled her sister as she turned her unwelcoming gaze upon the newcomer, "What do you want here Athena? This is none of your business."

"And you two have every right to interfere here?" questioned the tall, elegant goddess of wisdom and War, "I think not."

"Technically I have the right because Xena is Champion to my Queen and Gabrielle was abducted," retorted the Huntress.

"Like she says," giggled Aphrodite inanely knowing that it drove Athena mad. Then seeing that it wasn't going to do she added, "I owed Arte a favour. No big deal."

"What's your excuse, Athena?" demanded Artemis a trifle acidly.

"If it's any of your business, Xena falls pretty much within my sphere of influence," returned the brunette.

"What is this?!" demanded the Warrior Princess, "The Goddess' convention of Rome?!" She glowered at the three deities, "If it's all the same to you ladies, I can sort out my own problems." All three goddess' turned long silent looks on the dark warrior, who returned their stares with a 'look' of her own, which wasn't going down too well with any of them.

Gabrielle tugged on Xena's tunic and hissed, "There's three of them Xena. Even you can't take on three of them. Just let them get on with what they want to do so we can get out of here."

Iolaus sidled up and added, "I've been around these three before. They're really bad news when they stop bitching at each other. Listen to what Gabrielle's saying, and maybe we'll manage to get back home without any more disasters."

"Alright, already," steamed the dark woman throwing her hands in the air in frustration.

"Look, I'll try and talk them into sorting themselves out," offered Hercules. "Why don't you organise the Amazons into lowering the rest of our captives down into the pit out of our way, then perhaps they can help Eponin with the rest in the building and get them down here too."

"Sounds like a plan," agreed Xena moodily.

Ephiny nodded her agreement and set about getting things sorted out into some sort of order. Signalling her warriors to begin dumping the live soldiers down into the pit, and instructing Malonda to work out a way of lowering the civilians down there too. That left Xena, Iolaus, Gabrielle, Toris and Joxer to keep guard on Caesar. Xena began relieving him of all his other weapons.

"Is your life usually so full of gods?" drawled the Roman laconically.

"When it isn't filled with murdering warlords and scum out to rule the world .. like you!" she responded tersely.

"Don't you find it irritating?" he questioned as he watched the family gathering taking place a few yards away.

"What? The warlords or the gods?"

"Lets stick with the gods since they've graced us with their presence," he said conversationally.

"Yes," she returned shortly.

"Yes what?"

"Yes I do find them irritating! Like I find this whole situation irritating. Like I find you more than irritating. Now just shut your mouth before I cut your tongue out." she glowered, not in the mood for smalltalk with her enemy.

"Get out of bed the wrong side this morning?" he jibed.

"Hey!" interjected Iolaus.

"What?" snarled Caesar.

"Shush!" came the blonde's simple order.

Caesar looked about to deliver a scathing retort, when the godly meeting broke up and Hercules, along with his sisters, returned to a moody fractious group.

"Well?" asked Xena coolly.

"We'll tie him up," Hercules pointed a thumb at their main captive, "and leave him here. The rest," he looked down into the pit with some interest, "are going to be busy for quite a while .. thanks to Aphrodite's, shall we say gift?"

Everyone took a moment to glance down at what appeared to be an incredibly athletic scene that would, in time, give rise to more organised lurid occasions which would become known in history as the Roman orgy!

"They look like they're enjoying themselves," commented Gabrielle as she watched one very enthusiastic pairing, wishing she had a quill and scroll to hand to take notes. "Isn't that your wife?" she asked a glowering Caesar, pointing to a woman that might just possibly have been Pompeia, but from the angle it was difficult to tell.

"I'm not going anywhere until we get those children. I won't leave them here to be butchered by him," snapped Xena glaring at Caesar.

"Already taken care of," smiled Athena. "A young man escorted then to the ship some time ago .. they're just waiting for your arrival."

"How do you know?" demanded the warrior suspiciously.

"I was watching," smirked the goddess. "Now, since everything here has been settled ..." she gave Xena an inquiring look, "You really don't want to kill him in cold blood do you?"

Shrugging the warrior replied, "I'd have already done it if I was going to."

"Good. Then I suggest you collect Artemis' Amazons and head for that ship. We three," she gave her sisters a look, "Have an appointment with Zeus, so you're on your own now."

"That suits me just fine," muttered Xena.

"Pardon?" questioned Athena.

Gabrielle jabbed her friend in the ribs and the Warrior Princess 'repeated', "It's good to be ... going home, it's time."

"Very well." She leaned over and gave Hercules a chaste peck on the cheek, "Good to see you little brother."

"Athena," he acknowledged a little embarrassed, as he watched her disappear in a shower of silver and gold.

"Keep my Amazons safe, my Chosen," smiled Artemis at Gabrielle, before following her sister.

"Hey slick," Aphrodite addressed Caesar. "If I were you I'd watch your back .. especially around the Ides of March sometime!" She giggled before vanishing in a puff of pink and gold.

"And you wonder why I hate visiting the family," muttered Hercules to no one in particular.

"What was that all about?" questioned Iolaus, cocking his head to where Hercules and his sisters had been standing.

"Family argument over precedence," he answered throwing a worried look at Xena. "Believe me, you really don't want to know the details."

Xena quickly and efficiently bound Caesar's hands and feet and was ready to go when Ephiny signalled that everything had been taken care of. She approached Caesar once more. "I'd like to say this has been fun, but I'd be lying."

"I've enjoyed it," sneered Caesar. "I'm sure we'll be able to take up where we left off really soon."

"If I were you, I'd back off," warned Hercules. "You've got off lightly for what you've done. Next time I doubt you'll be so lucky."

"Just who are you?" demanded Caesar.

"He's Hercules," Xena told him and then bent close to whisper so that only he could hear, "The next time you threaten Gabrielle, or any of my family and friends, I will kill you!"

"Ready to go?" smiled Gabrielle.

Standing, the dark haired woman allowed her gaze to travel over the pit one last time. Not seeing the sexual antics of the occupants, but seeking out the faces of the soldiers that she had been surrounded by for almost the past half year. Their images had been imprinted on her memory, especially the tall grey centurion who heeled Caesar like a dog. None of them would be forgotten.

"Come on," She said at last. "Let's go home."

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Chapter Seventy: The River Runs

The streets of Rome had pretty much emptied as the Amazons formed up around their Queen, her champion, the Regent and assorted male friends. They moved hurriedly through the fluttering shadows, caused by the flaring torches that had been lit as darkness fell, drawing the occasional interested glance from working slaves who laboured to rid the pavements of the day's refuse. Moving at a smart pace along the Clivus Pullius and taking a right along the Via Sacra, they followed the long road past, eventually, the coliseum before turning left on the Vicus Tuscus which opened into the Forum Boarium, and from there it was just a short trek to the wharves where Nebula and Autolycus were anxiously awaiting their arrival.

Gabrielle threw one or two anxious looks at the stern countenance of her best friend's features. Her normally striking, bronzed good looks appeared pale and wan in the torch-lit streets, and she was sure that she detected a faint flicker of pain in the tall woman's eyes as she strode wordlessly along. "Xena? Are you alright?" she ventured in a soft whisper that she knew the warrior would hear.

Looking down at the anxious bard's face, she quirked her lips into what she hoped was a reassuring smile, "I'm fine Gabrielle. I just want to put as much distance between us and here as possible." She turned away to hide the flare of pain in her eyes as the wound in her shoulder throbbed with agonising intensity.

Biting her lip, knowing that something was wrong, the young woman tried another direction, "Xena? Did you get hurt in the fighting?"

The warrior sighed deeply. She couldn't lie to her bard, but she knew that her friend would worry about the injuries she'd received, especially the deep wound in her back, "Just a few nicks and scratches, Gabrielle. Nothing that won't keep until we get to the ship and are safely out of here." She could tell that her answer hadn't satisfied the bard, but she was beginning to feel light headed from loss of blood and she couldn't spend any more of her rapidly dwindling strength to convince her friend. "I'm fine Gabrielle," she repeated herself, "Let's just concentrate on getting out of here, huh?"

They were close to their destination now, so the concerned bard accepted her partner's answer, but promised herself that she would attend to all of the wounds that the Warrior Princess had garnered, just as soon as they were safely on the ship. - *The others can take care of getting us out of here. She's hurt and she needs attention ... even if she's not ready to admit it.* -

When they reached 'Wave Dancer' all was ready to cast off for a swift, darkness shrouded, trip down the Tiber and out into the open sea. Once aboard ship Xena pushed herself through the

She levelled a steely glare at him, "You are as of now, Curly, someone has to do it," she growled dismissively. "Herc, I'll need your help. I want to get 'Dancer' well away from here as soon as possible."

"Well we can use Iolaus then," the demi-god told her, "You know he's a good sailor."

"True enough," agreed the pirate, rethinking her dispositions as she remembered just how good a sailor that the blonde warrior was. "Alright Curly, you got a reprieve."

"That sucks!" grumbled Joxer, as Autolycus gave him a shove towards the companionway, knowing that they needed to get Patroclese to Xena as fast as possible.

"Sure it does, Master of Morons, but unless you can sail this ship, I guess we get babysitting duties for a while," growled the thief.

As they disappeared below they could hear the coordinated chaos required to get the ship underway. Autolycus led Joxer forward to where Patroclese and the slave children had been lodged in the ship's mess. They found a happy bunch that laughed and played together, free from the restriction of their positions within Caesar's household. The exception to this was Patroclese himself who couldn't stop himself from reflecting upon his likely fate once he returned to Caesar.

Autolycus moved over to the young physician and touched his shoulder lightly to attract his attention, "You're needed in the captain's cabin, Xena got hurt in her escape .. I think they need you to patch her up."

"Damn, can't she ever stay in one piece for more than a day at a time," he muttered getting swiftly to his feet before swearing again, "Damn! I didn't bring any equipment with me."

"Don't worry," Autolycus assured him, "I'm sure the ship has it's own medical supplies. Just go and fix her up .. oh and I think there will probably be a few Amazons and maybe a demi-god and his sidekick to take care of too."

"A demi ... what?!" exclaimed Patroclese in surprise.

The King of Thieves grinned, "Oh, you'll see. Now hurry, they'll be waiting for you." He watched the healer scurry off and then turned back to the room to find half a dozen young children bouncing on Joxer, laughing at his Amazon attire.

"The things I do for lo ... hem," he coughed stopping his soft mutter as he took Patroclese's place in the recently vacated chair.

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Toris had carefully laid his sister on the swinging box bed that was suspended from the roof beams of the cabin. Gabrielle had tried to insist that he go back on deck, but now that he'd finally found Xena, there was no way that he was letting her out of his sight until he knew that she was

going to be okay, - *Mother will kill me if I don't take care of her. She's only just got her back after far too many years of disowning her, and I won't let either of them down again ... ever!* -

Gabrielle shook her head as she watched Toris remove himself to the other end of the cabin where he turned his back to give the bard and his sister some privacy. - *He is so stubborn! Just like .. like, she is!* - She turned back to the warrior and wondered just where to begin. As the entire muscular body was covered with blood it was difficult to decide just what was Xena's and what belonged to the soldiers she had fought.

Sighing, she muttered to herself, "Well, I guess we better strip that clothing off and wash you down so that we can see what the problem is." She turned back to the silent man behind her and asked, "Toris, do you have a knife that I could borrow, and could you then go and get me a bucket of water .. she needs cleaning up so we can find what needs to be fixed."

"Here," said the intense, dark haired man as he handed over his dagger, "I'll be right back."

As Toris headed for the door, Gabrielle began to dextrously cut away the blood soaked garment and peel it from her friend's abused body. When the tall man reached the doorway, it was opened by the blonde healer, who gave Toris a wide eyed nervous look, before hurrying over to the bard, shaking his head at the sight and quietly asked, "What's happened to her this time?"

"Not sure yet," answered Gabrielle continuing with her task. "There was a lot of fighting ... she always heads for the thick of things."

The healer gave her a small reassuring smile, "Don't worry, she's tough .. and she's been hurt far worse in the past."

Gabrielle bit her lip before replying softly, "But how long can she keep recovering from injuries that mortals were never meant to bear?"

Patroclese turned back to the motionless body of his patient and began to wipe away as much blood as he could with the tattered remains of the clothing the warrior had worn, "We really could use some wat ..." he began, but was interrupted by the return of Toris with two buckets full of the requested liquid, along with Iolaus who carried a small chest, that contained the ships medical supplies, and a large bundle of cloth.

"Thought you'd be needing these," he told them as he put his burdens on the cabin table and resolutely averted his eyes from Xena's naked body.

"When I've finished with Xena, you might want me to take a look at that wound you've got," Patroclese told him gesturing to the gash across his stomach.

"This?" he questioned with raised eyebrows, "Nah! It's just a scratch. Cut myself worse shaving."

Patroclese shook his head as he returned to his inspection of Xena's wounds, "Warriors!" he intoned. "I'll check it when I get through here .. you don't want to get it infected."

Iolaus shuffled his feet a bit. "Ummm .. I gotta get up topside. Herc and Nebula need every experienced sailor we've got to get us out of port and away from here before the Romans realise just what's happened."

"But ... but I have to get back on shore. I have to return to Caesar," stumbled Patroclese, suddenly uncertain about being there.

Gabrielle laid a gentle hand on his arm, "Patroclese .. you have patients here. They need your help more than you need to give yourself over for Caesar to punish."

The healer looked at her, his eyes filled with pain and indecision, "But ... I should ... I betrayed his trust." He hung his head in dejection.

"Maybe," agreed the bard knowing that the man wasn't looking for absolution. He needed to work through what he perceived as a failure in himself, and realise that what he had done was for the greater good. "But you're a healer. It's your task to save lives .. not take them. Caesar would have killed those children out of spite. From the seeds of what you see as your betrayal, many lives will flourish .. is that so wrong?" she questioned him.

"Maybe not," he admitted morosely. "I'd do it again .. but I'd always planned on accepting responsibility for my actions. I meant to return to my Lord and beg his mercy."

Gabrielle wanted to tell him that Caesar had no mercy for anyone who crossed him, but she could tell that Patroclese did not believe that. Her hatred of Caesar robbed her of the words she should say and left her with those that she knew would not help Patroclese understand that his leaving was for the best. It was with some surprise, therefore, that she heard Toris speak.

"You know, some say that if you save a persons life that you accept responsibility for them. I'd say there was a whole group of children on this ship that you're responsible for, and who are going to need you .. your familiarity and your leadership .. to get them through the coming time where their whole world changes." Startling blue eyes bored into the healers as the raven haired man asked, "Where are you going to be of more use? With those children, and maybe tending to the sick in Greece, or gracing one of Caesar's crosses in their place?"

Patroclese held the other man's stare for some moments before he swallowed convulsively and dipped his head in acknowledgment of Toris' words, "You could be right," he conceded shakily, "but anyway, for now, I have a patient here who needs me and maybe some more besides her," he finished in a far more certain tone, pushing his concerns to the back of his mind as he concentrated on his patient. He had turned back to helping Gabrielle clean the blood from Xena's body, to reveal the assortment of injuries that she'd collected, when a sudden thought struck him. As he continued to work he asked intently, "You're her brother?"

"That's right .. I am," agreed Toris with a wry smirk.

The healer drew a breath, "You know what I did?"

"Yes," agreed the tall, dark haired reflection of the Warrior Princess.

"Then why do you care what happens to me?" demanded the young physician. He looked up from his task as the other man failed to answer.

Finally Toris replied, "I don't." His eyes flickered to his sister's face, "But she does .. and I've learnt to trust her judgment."

Patroclese bobbed his head in brief, nodded agreement, before returning his full attention to his patient, "Nothing much to show on the front here. She'll need a few of stitches in this one," he indicated a gash on her thigh, " and a couple in that cut over her brow, but other than that it's just nicks and scrapes. Nothing to cause her to pass out at any rate. Let's turn her over and clean up her back."

Where Xena had been laying on the cot, the bedding was heavily stained with fresh blood. Working quickly, Gabrielle and Patroclese cleansed her skin of the congealing mess and revealed a four inch gaping gash that cut deep into back below her left shoulder.

"Artemis!" breathed the bard as she watched blood pumping sluggishly from the wound.

"We need to deal with this quickly," the healer said brusquely. He wadded the bundle of cloth he was using and pressed it firmly over the wound. "Keep pressure on here while I sort through that medical chest and see if it's got the things I need," he ordered Gabrielle who nodded her head placing her hands where he indicated.

Patroclese crossed swiftly to the table where the chest sat, lifted the lid and started sorting through the contents, grunting with surprised approval at what he found there. He uncorked a flask and took a careful sniff, unable to suppress the gasp of amazement as he identified it as a very rare, very expensive, liquid that cleansed and protected wounds far better than the utilitarian vinegar wash that he was more familiar with. He carefully re-corked the flask and laid it with the other supplies he was going to need.

Having made his selections he returned to the cot, aware that the icy blue eyes of Toris had been watching everything he did. It made him a little uncomfortable to be under such close scrutiny, but he didn't detect any hostility from the man, just simple curiosity in what he was doing.

Motioning for Gabrielle to remove the cloth, Patroclese again cleared the area, around the wound of the crimson flow and, taking a long metal probe, began to feel about inside the gash for any debris that might cause infection once the wound was closed. As he worked he felt Xena begin to writhe against the pain and he called urgently to Toris, "Hold her shoulders down, I think that I felt a piece of metal in here."

With Xena firmly held, he began to probe once again and slowly eased out a sharp slither of the sword blade that had caused the damage, along with some tiny shreds of fabric from the garment she'd been wearing and a fresh gout of blood. Gabrielle sponged away the mess allowing

Patroclese clear sight of the wound which he continued to inspect and probe until he was certain that all of the loose particles had been removed.

Wiping his sweat beaded brow on his forearm, the healer then reached for the flask and liberally dosed the gash with the liquid inside. The cleansing fluid stung like fire causing Xena, even in her unconscious state to buck like a wounded bull and utter an ear splitting scream. It was only her weakened condition and the full strength of all three of them as they threw their weight onto the warrior's thrashing form, that kept her from doing any more damage to herself.

When the Warrior Princess settled down once more, Patroclese gave a weak grin, "That stuff stings like wildfire, but it's the best cleanser I know of and it should make sure that there'll be no infection. Guess I should have warned you two, though, that it might affect her like that."

Gabrielle scowled a little, "It might have been nice to know before we had to fight her. I kind of like to prepare for something like that."

"Sorry," shrugged the healer. He busied himself with preparing a needle with a piece of thread and proceeded to stitch the wound together with sixteen very neat and precise stitches that pulled the gash closed and stemmed the flow of blood to little more than a very weak trickle.

While the healer was busy with the stitching, Gabrielle took soap and a cloth and carefully washed away all remaining traces of blood from her back, revealing for the first time the livid white lines that cross-hatched it from the floggings she had received whilst in Caesar's hands. A small, sharp intake of breath drew Patroclese' attention away from his sewing, in time to see the look of outrage that flared in the bard's eyes and was echoed icily in the warrior's brother's.

Not quite knowing what, if anything, he should say, the healer turned back to his work and offered quietly, "She's lucky .. they should heal without hardly showing at all. Most men I've seen beaten like that had hard raised scars proclaiming their punishment to the world .. that's if they survived the experience. Truly, I've never seen anyone with her ability to heal so fully and quickly."

"I know one other person who does," muttered the bard, thinking of a certain demi-god as she ducked down to rinse out her cloth. But when she didn't elaborate, neither of the men cared to press her.

Patroclese finished with the stitches and dusted the wound liberally with a herb mixture, "I'm going to have to bandage this, it's still seeping a little and I want to keep it clean. I've also got a few stitches to put in on that cut to her leg and I want another look at the one above her brow. However, before we turn her onto her back, I want to clear these soiled blankets off the bed and put fresh linen on."

It was quickly decided that Toris would lift his sister, while Patroclese held a thick pad of cloth to the wound, "Careful," he warned as the bigger man straightened, "Don't break any of those stitches."

While the two men tended to Xena, Gabrielle stripped the ruined bedding off the cot and rummaged around the cabin until she found some replacements in a chest tucked into a corner. She quickly remade the bed, before laying a large piece of sailcloth over it to protect it from soiling whilst they finished their work.

Toris laid his sister back down, and once again Gabrielle used soap and water to finish the cleaning process, whilst Patroclese tended to the lesser wounds. When the stitching was completed, the healer carefully bound the injured shoulder and gashed leg, before they finally settled her, as comfortably as possible, under the sheets and blankets.

The bard allowed a tender smile creep onto her face as she gently brushed some stray wisps of hair out of her friend's eyes, "When are you going to learn to take care of yourself," she whispered too softly for the others to hear.

"I should go and see to anyone else that needs me," Patroclese said as he packed up the medical chest. "If you could help me with these things," he motioned at the chest, cloth and water buckets to Toris, "then I would be grateful. Gabrielle can watch over Xena for a while, and you can perhaps relieve her in a couple of candlemarks so that she can get some rest. It might be a while before Xena rejoins us ... she lost a lot of blood."

Toris nodded his assent and picked up the buckets and the cloth bundle, preceding the healer out of the cabin door and heading topside hoping to see the lights of Rome fading in the distance behind them, for the repairs to Xena had taken well over a couple of candlemarks, he estimated.

As Nebula watched the Warrior Princess being carried below, she asked Hercules, "How much time do we have before we can expect trouble?"

The demi-god wagged his hand from side to side, "Depends on how long Aphrodite's spell lasts," he told her.

"What?" she demanded, then shook her head and said, "Never mind. Tell me when we're out of this gods forsaken city!"

He gave her a rare smile and nodded his agreement moving back to the ship's wheel, while Nebula began to issue the orders that would see 'Wave Dancer' cast off and making its way down the Tiber away from the city wharves. Hercules watched the competent Amazon crew members as they hauled in the cables that tied them to the dock and swarmed into the rigging to let fall the sail.

As the night breeze stirred life into the canvass, the big man, felt the ship begin to move and signaled the Amazons to use the thick mooring poles to push the vessel away from the wharves and out into the wide current of the river, where there would be enough way on the ship to turn and head down past the port of Ostia, twenty miles away, and out into the open sea.

He watched Iolaus scramble up the ratlines, as agile as a monkey, and guessed that his friend would have a wide smile plastered across his face as he fell back into the familiar routines of

shipboard life. They rarely had the chance to spend time at sea and invariably, when they did, memories of their time spent with the Argonauts tended to flood back into their conscious thoughts. Hercules heeled the ship over and soon had the pirate vessel turned and headed away from Rome and back towards home.

"Nicely done," smirked a voice at his shoulder. "I still say you and Curly should give up the hero game and sail with me. There's fun to be had and wealth to be made and not a care in the world to concern you."

"Being crucified as a pirate is something that I would care about," pointed out the big man as he turned the wheel amidships and righted the ship as it gathered speed and sailed gracefully along on the river current.

"Every venture needs a little risk .. it's part of the fun," persisted Nebula. It was an ongoing game.

"Thanks .. but no thanks," returned Hercules firmly. "Sailing with you on the odd occasion is more than enough excitement for a peace loving man like me."

The pirate snorted derisively, "If you're peace loving, I'd hate to find a man who hungered after a fight all the time."

He glanced up at the set of the sails and shifted the wheel slightly, "Well things happen."

"Don't they just," breathed the woman as she moved across to the rail and checked their backwater to make sure that they weren't being followed. "So what now? We've rescued the Amazon Queen and the Warrior Princess, erstwhile Destroyer of Nations, Warlord, pirate and all around homicidal maniac. What happens next?"

"She's no longer those things, Nebula." The demi-god's voice had dropped into a low warning register. "She left those things behind and works for the good of the ordinary people. She has rare abilities and I'm proud to call her my friend."

"Yeah, yeah! I've heard the publicity. I've also heard the Amazons talking about her. Wasn't so long ago that she was looking to kill Gabrielle, was it? Can we really justify our actions in turning her loose on the world again?" she questioned.

Hercules took a deep breath, "As I understand it, the situation was pretty unique. I honestly think that Xena would kill herself before bringing harm to Gabrielle."

"But she didn't, did she?" insisted the pirate. "She just rode into town, busted up the Amazons pretty good and rode out again dragging their queen behind her."

"Nebula, she was under Ares' influence. You may have noticed that she attracts the attentions of the gods almost as much as"

"Almost as much as you do," she finished for him quietly. "Why is that Hercules? I mean most mortals run through their humdrum existence bowing to the right altars and never see a god in their life, although they might feel their influence. You I can understand .. family connections and all that. But why do the gods play with her life? What's so special about her?"

Hercules was quiet for so long she didn't think he'd answer her question. Finally he sighed and said quietly, "I don't know, Nebula, and I'm sure that it's something that she wishes didn't happen. But she doesn't have much say in the games that the gods play with her .. far less than I have, and Zeus knows that's little enough. Maybe it's her strength that attracts them. What she's done in these last four years has been amazing. How easy can it have been for her to turn her back on the success that she was .. to face the very people that she once terrorized and offer them protection with little hope of gaining their acceptance or their gratitude?"

There was silence between them as they thought about the enigma of the Warrior Princess. A woman full of contradictions who lived her life by a code of honour that could be harsh and demanding, yet left her able to forge a close clique of diverse friends that would risk everything to help her .. knowing that she would do the same for them without a moments thought.

Nebula finally broke the silence, "How long have you been in love with her?"

The demi-god toyed with replying with a flip answer, but instead settled for the truth, "It seems like forever," he sighed. "But she needs other things in her life. She needs to atone for the past wrongs she's committed, and she feels that it's unfair to saddle other people with her burdens."

"What about Gabrielle?" asked the pirate genuinely interested.

Hercules smiled, "Have you ever tried to say 'no' to Gabrielle? Xena did everything she could to stop the girl from following after her .. short of hog tying her and leaving her. But the little bard has the tenacity of a terrier and the big bad Warrior Princess just couldn't shake her. There's a bond between those two. They share something that lovers never could. They would give anything and everything for the other without thought. It's a rare kind of friendship that. Something to be wondered at .. something to be treasured."

He checked the wind once more before saying politely, but firmly, "Look. All of this is pretty personal. I really don't want to talk about it anymore, okay?"

Nebula nodded her head in tacit agreement, surprised that she had gotten as much out of him as she had. She turned to contemplate the water of the river speeding smartly along under full sails as the wind cooperated with their hurried withdrawal from the seat of the Roman Empire. "We'll be passing the docks at Ostia pretty soon .. you can see the lights just up ahead." she said after some time of quiet. "That's where we'll find trouble if there's any to be found." she warned.

"It's unlikely so soon. We should have at least until dawn before anyone can raise the alarm," replied Hercules with some confidence. "Unless something unforeseen happened back at Graccus' after we left."

Nebula continued to study the fast approaching port and couldn't see any sign of activity on the darkly shadowed ships moored there, "Looks like we might just get away with this," she muttered more to herself than the demi-god.

They slipped past the moorings with the only sounds heard being the distant merriment in some dockside tavern and the light gurgle of 'Wave Dancer's' bow wave as she cut cleanly through the river water. The sea was close now, just past the guard towers at the mouth of the Tiber.

Nebula barked orders to Iolaus and the Amazons to trim the sails to reduce speed as they neared the towers. This part of the river required careful navigation .. especially in the dark, as a large sandbar lay just beneath the water's surface and had been known to foul many unwary vessels.

Taking the wheel from Hercules, the pirate captain carefully noted the placement of the important landmarks, and turned the wheel a little to port to make certain that they gave the tricky obstacle a wide berth. Straightening the wheel, she held the ship firm heading for the river exit intending to pass closer to the watchtower on the left side of the channel. As they approached, they could hear shouting emanating from the tower and saw that torches were springing to life on both sides of the river.

"Have we got trouble?" asked Hercules softly.

Nebula shook her head a little, concentrating on her course, "Once we're past the towers and out into the open sea they'll have trouble trying to catch us. They won't know what route we took .. even though they'll know we're heading back to Greece. It'd be like looking for a needle in a haystack."

Almost level with the watchtowers, they could almost smell freedom and the fresh scents of the Greek countryside, "It'll be good to be home," acknowledged the demi-god, just as the ship ground firmly to a halt!

Chapter Seventy One: Turn About

As the ship stopped moving, a pair of startlingly blue eyes shot open. The traces of disorientation in them cleared rapidly and she stifled a groan as her attempt to sit upright led to a stabbing pain in her shoulder and the interior of the cabin swimming disturbingly! "Hades," she swore sourly as she closed her eyes to the unnatural swirling.

"Mmmm? What? ... Xena are you okay?" questioned a sleep befuddled bard.

The warrior sighed heavily, "Absolutely wonderful, Gabrielle .. but I need to get up."

"Oh no, no, no, no!" retorted the honey blonde wagging a finger in front of her friend's nose.

"You've just left most of your blood lying in Rome and there's no way, this side of Greece, that you're getting out of that bed. Right?"

"Gabrielle .." began Xena patiently as she struggled to get herself into a sitting position, fighting back the feeling of nausea and light headedness that she was experiencing.

"No, Xena ... we'll soon be away from Caesar's reach and while we're travelling by ship there's absolutely nothing to stop you from taking it easy and recovering from the whole ordeal." Insisted the bard trying to push her friend, gently but firmly, flat on the bed.

"Gabrielle .." tried the warrior a little more determinedly, resisting the bard's efforts at getting her to lay down and began to throw the bedclothes off as she struggled to get out of the cot.

"Xena, stop that. You'll break open your stitches and start that wound bleeding again. There's nothing urgent that Hercules and Ephiny can't deal with," the bard remonstrated.

"The ship's not moving Gabrielle," growled the warrior as she slapped her friend's hands away and gingerly eased herself out of the bed, holding onto it unsteadily as her world continued to spin. "Something's wrong .. we need to find out what the problem is."

The bard sighed in exasperation, "You get back into bed .. I'll go and find out what's going on," she temporized. She watched the warrior grudgingly sit back on the cot and she was half way to the cabin door when she thought to ask, "How do you know the ship's stopped, anyway?"

The Warrior Princess fixed her friend with a look that said, 'I have many skills', raised an eyebrow at the younger woman and told her smoothly, "I know about these things, Gabrielle. Trust me on this." She tugged one of the blankets around her nakedness as she watched the bard assimilate her words.

"Riiiiight!" she drawled out at length. "Wait here .. I'll be right back."

Xena grunted something that could have been taken as assent and waited a good two heartbeats after the door had closed behind the bard, before dragging her protesting frame off of the cot to poke around the cabin in search of something she could wear. - *I'll be damned to the lowest pits in Tartarus if I'll lay around .. at least until I'm certain that we're all safely away from Caesar and Rome!* -

Teetering carefully over to the table, the raven haired woman caught sight of the chest that Gabrielle had found the fresh linen in. It looked the most likely place to find clothing so, moving with slow careful steps, she soon reached it and a brief search rewarded her a shift that seemed about her size.

Bracing herself, she struggled into the garment, biting her lip at the burning pain that movement of her left arm brought. A feeling of accomplishment set in as she finally settled the shift into place. She leant against the chest to give her head a chance to stop its wild spinning, and chanced to notice the heavy burlap sack that lay mostly hidden beneath the cabin's only chair. It was almost as if the bundle reached out and pulled her, because without conscious thought, she'd moved to the chair and had tugged the awkward sack out into the open.

Fumbling with the knotted neck, she felt a rising of excitement as her superhuman senses told her what she knew could not be within the bag. Finally she had it open and she plunged her hand

into the rough darkness of the cloth, closing it around a cool piece of metal that felt so familiar to her touch.

Slowly she drew her hand forth gazing in intent elation at the silver and gold magnificence of her signature weapon. She knew in that moment that if she'd had to leave the weapon in Rome it would have meant abandoning part of herself .. a part that she was not always proud of, but one that she could never have accepted the loss of to Caesar.

She held the chakram up to catch the light of the cabin's lantern. Poor though it was, it was enough to sparkle on the honed edges of the circular metal that seemed to sing with life and power in her hands. It was back where it belonged, in the hand that it was destined to serve. It made her feel whole in some obscure way that she could never hope to articulate.

Laying aside the chakram, and drawing a deep breath, Xena tipped the rest of the contents of the sack onto the floor and allowed her eyes to scan the familiarity of her possessions. Sword, armour, daggers and leathers were all accounted for. She picked up the small breast dagger that she had taken from Gabrielle so long ago and allowed a smile to form as she breathed just one word .. a name, "Autolykus!"

Feeling rejuvenated just from the gift of her returned belongings, Xena shrugged her way into her leathers, returned the breast dagger to its traditional, snug berth and clipped the chakram to her waist before facing the cabin door to confront the return of the bard.

"Xena!" exclaimed the younger woman in exasperation, "You said you'd wait on the bed."

"No. You told me to wait there. I never agreed to anything," she smirked as she collected her boots from beside the bed and returned to the chair where she sat intending to put them on.

Gabrielle watched the warrior struggle with the need to bend and strain her tender back to lace the footwear on, before snorting angrily and moving to help. She batted Xena's hands out of the way and quickly snugged the laces tight on the right boot before tying them off, "You were right about being stopped," she informed the warrior, reaching for the left shoe. "We're at the mouth of the Tiber and ..."

"They've raised the chain to block off the channel," the dark haired woman finished for her. "Yeah, I guessed as much. I doubt that they did it to catch us though .. they won't hear what happened in Rome at least until dawn .. no it's because of the Carthaginians. A large part of their fleet is still at loose out there and the Romans don't want them sailing up to the heart of their city."

"Nebula said something about a chain," admitted the bard. "Just what is that, Xena?"

"It's a form of protection that can be used to control the traffic into and out of a river estuary like the Tiber. There'll be a couple of winches in the watchtowers that are used to raise and lower it when it's thought necessary," the warrior informed her as she pulled on her arm guards and bracers, savouring the feel of her missed accoutrements.

"Captain will be right up with 'em," drawled Hercules soothingly.

The harbour master waited impatiently as first Malonda, followed by Ephiny and lastly Nebula appeared on the dock. "Papers?" he demanded once more.

The tall, dark pirate captain handed over the documentation without a word and did her best to hide in the background. It was unlikely that anyone here would recognise her, but she didn't want to take unnecessary chances, and so had decided to leave the talking to Ephiny. As the harbour master scanned the papers, Nebula could see the Regent getting ready to present their case for right of passage.

"I am Ephiny, Queen of the Amazons," she drew herself up into an arrogant pose, brown eyes sparking with unfeigned annoyance. "By what right do you presume to stop the ship I am travelling on .. I have urgent business to attend to at home."

Royal indignation was usually enough to cause minor officials to quake in their boots. Amazon Royal indignation was enough to make most men quail and cry for their mothers. Marius Gessius was no exception to the rule. His face blanched white as he perceived the anger evident in woman's stance .. and news had filtered down from the city that this woman was Caesar's latest interest. However, the little man was also a stickler for protocol and was determined to take refuge behind the fact that the Amazon's ship had tried to leave the precincts of Rome, under cover of darkness, without the proper notifications from the officials in the city being sent down to Ostia.

Still he was not without some sense of self preservation, and attempted to grovel appropriately whilst sticking to the rules and regulations of his post, "Umm, most gracious majesty, forgive my humble self for my need to follow the dictates of my duty. I would not have stopped such an august personage as yourself if I had but had the required permits from the senate."

Brain whirling the blonde Amazon mentally cursed, - *Artemis' arrows! None of us thought about permits!* - "Well," considered Ephiny, prepared to act mollified by the petty official, "I'll refrain from making a complaint to Juli ... um I mean Lord Caesar .. if you drop your barrier and let my ship pass immediately."

"I .." the word came out in something of a squeak. The man was clearly petrified at the mere mention of Caesar's name .. especially her corrected use of his first name which intimated the closeness that Gessius had suspected .. however he cleared his throat and continued on gamely, "I'm sorry you majesty .. but I cannot lower the boom until either half a candlemark after dawn, or I get authorisation from the appropriate offices at the senate, or from Lord Caesar himself." A suspicious look suddenly edged onto his face, "Did Lord Caesar send such a permit with you?"

That had Eph groping for something to say, "Um actually .. err he said he was sending it down here by courier. He promised that it would reach here before we did," she defended strongly as her answer sprang to mind.

"Well then all we need to do is wait for the messenger with your clearance and as soon as it arrives we can lower the boom and let you pass," smiled the harbour master happily.

That was not at all what Ephiny had in mind. Waiting for a nonexistent messenger to arrive before the dawn would do nothing to get them away from the Tiber and Roman waters .. it also brought the prospect that a very real messenger with an entirely different sort of message might just arrive before they could leave. The Regent whirled back to Gessius and snapped, "That is not really acceptable, harbour master. I need to get back to my people in all haste. Anything could have happened to that messenger! His horse could have thrown a shoe .. or he may have been attacked by bandits!"

"Majesty!" objected Gessius with seeming shock. "We don't have bandits on Roman highways!"

Ephiny scowled bleakly .. she had no idea how to sway the pompous little man, "I need to consult with my advisor, a moment please." She turned her back on the portly official and signalled Malonda and Nebula to join her close enough to Hercules so that she could hear any advice he had to offer on the situation. In doing so she didn't notice that one of the soldiers had moved forward and had quietly imparted some information to Gessius, whilst throwing quick, excited looks over to where Nebula had waited, partially cloaked in shadow.

Conferring quickly the only thing the group could come up with was to use Ephiny's evident connection to Caesar .. and maybe the hint of a large bribe .. to try and pressure the harbour master into letting them pass. Toris and Iolaus, however, had watched the Romans with growing concern as they saw Gessius give whispered instructions to the soldier he was talking to, before the man edged his way back into the pack of guards and then tried to make an unobtrusive exit from the area.

"Something's going on," growled Toris to the blonde hunter, allowing his hand to drift down to the hilt of his sword.

"It might not be anything," muttered back Iolaus, but his own hand drifted to the comforting leather of his sword hilt in case they were required to fight their way out of an increasingly dangerous looking situation. "Don't do anything sudden, Toris, wait for the situation to clarify."

Ephiny turned back to Gessius a forced smile on her face, "My dear harbour master," she said, hating the oily tone she was employing, "I have given my pledge to Julius," she used the name deliberately, "to return to his .. hospitality as soon as I can. But I need to make certain arrangements within my territories at home before I can do that. I'm sure you understand. But I have no wish to see you and your men inconvenienced by my needs and the tardiness of a negligent messenger, and so I would be honoured if you would allow me to make a large donation to any appropriate fund you care to name."

Gessius appeared to be a man torn. Like most petty bureaucrats the mention of money could often bring about a change of attitude towards rules and regulations, but he had growing suspicions about this group .. and then there was the news that Regulus had insistently imparted.

With a disappointed sigh he told Ephiny, "I'm afraid there's really nothing I can do, your majesty, unfortunately we have no fund of the type you allude to, and I really must apply the rule of my office to this situation." He finished with confident finality.

- *His attitude has changed*, - Ephiny picked up the difference in tone immediately. - *What's happening here?* - "I don't think you know who you're dealing with here," she snapped testily. - *Oooop! That was a mistake!* - she acknowledged to herself as she saw the man stiffen perceptibly.

"Actually I think I do!" He snapped his fingers and his guards presented their weapons, "It seems that you are travelling with a notorious pirate, your highness. Until we can clear this situation up, I think perhaps you should accompany me to my offices." He turned his gaze to Nebula and her 'crew', "In case you should think of resisting, I should advise you that ballista teams have been notified of the situation here and have orders to reduce your ship to so much driftwood at the slightest sign of a problem here. For the good of yourselves, the ship and those still aboard it, I would advise you to surrender."

Chapter Seventy One: Turn About

Continued

Eponin nervously paced the deck in front of the wheel. She hadn't been happy with the decision made by Ephiny and the others to go ashore to try and talk them past their current obstacle, but that was mainly because she had been precluded from going by the neatly stitched gash on her cheek and the bandage that was wound tightly around a couple of cracked ribs; she'd taken a heavy thump from a guards spear butt during the fight to block the door that held the entrance to the pit area. She'd hidden the injury quite well until Eph had ordered her to get the gash stitched, which she'd put off as long as possible, knowing that the Amazon healer, Sheraya would fuss over her ribs, insisting she take bed-rest! Poni hated being forced to rest almost as much as Xena did! So she'd successfully avoided both Ephiny and Sheraya, - *Then that damned Roman quack had to go and interfere!* - she growled moodily to herself.

When Patroclese had come up from the cabin after completing his treatment of Xena, the first thing he'd seen was Eponin standing rigidly by the mast taking short shallow breaths while trying to hide the grimace of pain on her face. He'd quickly crossed to her side and started to examine her injuries, before the Weapons Master had collected herself enough to slap his attentions away, "Keep your Roman hands off of me!" she growled in a threatening tone.

"You're hurt," he responded, reaching for her once more.

"I'm fine!" she snapped testily, forgetting to keep her voice down.

"What's going on here?" demanded Ephiny who had been attracted to the altercation.

"Nothing," growled Poni, looking for a way to get passed the Regent.

"I suspect she's got some broken ribs and is in some pain," replied Patroclese to a pointed look from the blonde Amazon.

"They're not broken, just cracked," snarled Eponin, then catching the look from Ephiny, muttered, "Big mouth," but whether it was to herself or Patroclese was a moot point.

The upshot of the situation was that she'd been forced to accept medical attention and was banned from accompanying the party that went ashore. However, she had ignored medical advice and Royal orders both, with regard to resting, and now paced anxiously across the deck, nervously trying to figure out what was going on at the dock.

When Xena appeared from below decks, her face thunderously dark complete with a threatening scowl, clothed in her leathers and carrying her weapons, Eponin just knew that trouble was imminent. Stopping her pacing, she saw Gabrielle scrambling to keep up with the warrior as they headed in the Weapon Master's direction, "Problem?" she asked simply, not sure just how Xena was going to react.

'Could be,' growled the Warrior Princess as she stalked to the rail and glared across the river to the fitfully lit dock where their friends stood in evident negotiation with the local authorities.

Realising that she was unlikely to get much information out of the uptight warrior, Eponin slid across the deck to Gabrielle's shoulder and whispered, "What's got her leathers in a wad? Shouldn't she be resting and getting her strength back?"

"Like you, you mean!" snapped the bard angry at both women. An anger that was being further fuelled by her concern for their friends on shore.

Neither Eponin nor Gabrielle could see the wry quirk of lips that etched itself into a lopsided grin as the warrior heard the women behind her while maintaining her concentration on what she could see on the docks. She sympathised with the Weapon Master's dislike of 'resting' while recovering from injury - *Ares Balls! I have the same problem myself!* - she mentally chuckled.

She focused her attention back on the large group on the dock. - *Well at least they haven't been arrested straight away,* - she brooded. - *Eph must be talking up a storm .. we might just get away with this yet.* - Her eyes flickered to the watchtower on the harbour side, her ears picking up movement. She concentrated her senses in that direction and saw a brief flicker of light ignite into the steady flame of a torch that was waved back and forth conveying some message. Xena turned her head and saw the wavering flare of a return signal and quickly turned her attention back to the dock where she could see movement taking place. "Damn!" she cursed.

Gabrielle, who had been continuing her debate with Eponin about the total lack of good sense shown by warriors whenever they got injured, noticed the sudden tenseness that became evident in her partner's form just before she swore, "Trouble?" she asked softly, moving to Xena's side.

"And some," came the terse response. "Eph and the others have just been escorted off the dock, and the signalling in the watchtowers suggests that the ballista crews are primed to use us for target practice."

Gabrielle bit her lip as her hand strayed up to the metal collar clasped around her throat. She shut out images of a return to an irate Caesar's hand and swallowed convulsively before asking, "What are we going to do, Xena?"

The warrior turned and looked grimly at her bardic friend, "We're going to get our friends back and get the Hades out of here .. and anyone who stands in my way better be ready for a one way trip on Charon's boat!"

"Xena," Eponin growled in warning, "there's a couple of boats headed in our direction and they're full of Roman soldiers."

"Okay Poni," responded Xena thinking quickly, her mind working through several plans and discarding them before reaching the one she thought had the best chance of working, "Organise the twenty best archers you've got with you and get them up in the rigging and hidden anywhere that the Romans won't easily spot them. Once we get all those soldiers on deck I want them to take them out as quickly and quietly as they can .. make sure that they leave the officer alive, though. I'm sure he has orders to set up a signal to let those ashore know that they're in control."

"Sure thing, Xena," answered the Weapons Master with a wolfish grin.

"Oh, and Poni," the Warrior Princess called as the Amazon started to gather up her warriors.

"Yeah?"

"You're the one that's going to have to greet them when they come on board."

"Me," protested Eponin, "but I thought you or Gabrielle ..."

Xena fingered the slave collar at her neck, "These are rather unique .. and even if the officer didn't recognise it, slaves are hardly going to be in charge here are they? We need to make sure that those men aren't any more on guard than they would normally be in a situation like this .. so you're gonna have to do it. You won't have to say anything, just stand ready .. Gabrielle and I will be right behind you."

Poni nodded her reluctant assent, "Kay," she agreed, "Just let me get my featherheads organised!"

Turning her attention back to the two approaching craft, the warrior felt the tentative touch of her bard, "Xena?" came the soft enquiry.

Sighing, the Warrior Princess masked herself with a cold demeanor and turned to face her friend, "It's got to be done, Gabrielle. We can't risk either the shore or the watchtowers noticing the

Xena could see the optio tensing as his sub-conscious was busy trying to tell him that something was very wrong. As the Roman started to shout his warning to his men, the Warrior Princess shouted out "NOW!" and the deck was washed by a swathe of deadly Amazon arrows and the blood of Roman soldiers.

Fortunus fumbled for his sword, but found his wrist enclosed in the crushing grip of the dark haired slave's large, calloused hand. The grip tightened until he was forced to his knees from the pain, and the small slave bustled to remove his weapons. When he had been disarmed the vicious pain that lanced through his captured wrist lessened as the looming slave released her hold.

Terrified, Fortunus rubbed at his wrist and threw a panicked glance around the deck at the fallen corpses and groaning injured that were all that was left of his command, "Wha .. what do you think you're doing?" he demanded shakily, looking at Eponin. "You'll all be executed for daring to attack us ... for killing my men."

Ignoring the Roman, Xena turned to Eponin and ordered tersely, "Get Patroclese and Sheraya to see if they can help any of those soldiers. Treat them and then find somewhere safe to lock them up ... after you strip them of their uniforms." Poni nodded her agreement and headed off to do the Warrior Princess' bidding.

"Just who are you slave?" demanded Fortunus, his brown eyes beginning to show anger as he recover his poise and struggled to come to term with the situation. He flinched as the dark haired slave turned piercingly cold blue eyes on him.

"What signal were you supposed to give to let them know you took control of the ship?" she demanded.

Fortunus scowled, "Go fu ..." his crude retort was cut off by sudden pounding agony as he lost control of his limbs and felt the burning pain of oxygen deprivation course through his body.

Xena's hands had moved so swiftly they had defied the eye, "I've just cut off the flow of blood to your brain. You've got maybe thirty seconds to live. Do yourself a favour and tell me what signal you're supposed to use."

"A lantern at the mast head and on the port and starboard bows," he rushed to give the information, knowing that he didn't want to die .. not here .. not like this.

"What else?" insisted Xena, guessing there was likely something else in case the soldiers were overwhelmed by the 'pirate' crew during the long hours of darkness.

"Port and starboard lanterns are to be swung three times each at the top of each candelmark," he stuttered.

Releasing the 'pinch', the warrior allowed him to take one long shuddering breath before saying to him, "That wasn't so hard, was it?" as she delivered a power driven punch that turned his lights out. She motioned over an Amazon, "You heard that?" she questioned, receiving a nod of

agreement. "Get the lanterns set up, then tie him up and lock him somewhere safe .. after you get his clothes."

Leaving the Roman optio to the Amazon's care, Xena crossed over to Gabrielle, who had retreated to the rail of the ship. "What now?" questioned the bard.

"Now we go find Eph and the others," was the calm reply.

Chapter Seventy Two: To The Rescue!

"BOOM, BOOM, BOOM, BOOM!" sounded echoing through Graccus's house as Flaccus, and the few men he still had in any state to follow orders, attacked the door, that held them prisoned in the pit area, with a heavy wooden bench. "Put your backs into it!" he snarled, infuriated at the course of events.

"Wouldn't it be easier to climb up through the pit, sir, now that all the savages have gone?" asked a sweating soldier.

"It's not worth the risk of being infected with whatever the rest of the men have come down with," barked the centurion angrily.

"I wouldn't mind coming down with some of that," snickered a soldier who realised that his belief that he was far enough away from the officer was mistaken when the vine staff cracked hard across his shoulders.

"You want to explain that comment to the General?" growled the centurion, "My guess is that it would make you a prime candidate for the cross, Deccus! With that slave escaping we're all in the shit and you want to make it worse?"

"Not me sir, no sir! It just kinda slipped out!" replied the soldier hurriedly.

"Well stop the damn slacking and get that door down!" roared Flaccus.

The soldiers resumed their assault on the door with renewed vigour and the concentrated pounding from the bench finally did the desired damage as a crack split the wood of the obstacle. Within moments the split had grown and by throwing all of their weight into the impromptu battering ram, they were finally rewarded with the wooden obstacle sagging open enough for them to force their way through.

"Capullus, Tressis and Finallus search the house and see if you can find any other guards who aren't under the spell of this madness. The rest of you come with me .. we need to get to the General," ordered the centurion.

They moved through the mansion unhindered and Flaccus quickly led them to the doorway of the pit gallery, where they stopped to await further instruction. Within they could see Caesar still bound to the balustrade of the railing that surrounded the pit.

Hercules was not happy. He'd come to Rome to rescue his friends .. not to wind up in the same predicament! The truth was that he was frustrated. - *If it wasn't for those ballista trained on the ship we'd be out of here before they could blink*, - he snarled at himself. As it was he, Toris and Iolaus were locked in a cell that smelled of things he'd far rather not think about, while Nebula was locked up in the next one down the dimly lit corridor, and he had absolutely no idea where Ephiny and Malonda had been taken.

"It's no good fretting, buddy," remarked Iolaus from somewhere within the dim, dank cell behind him, "We can't do anything until we know that the ship is safe. I'm sure Xena will work something out and get us out of here."

The big man turned and faced into darkness and leant against the bars of their prison, "I should have seen that something like this would happen," he grumped moodily.

"Hey! You couldn't know that Nebula would be recognised! After all, she's spent all this time in Rome without anyone realising who she was," cajoled the blonde gently, trying to chivvy his friend out of his dark mood.

"I know that," agreed Hercules, "but I should have known that the harbour master wouldn't agree to lowering the chain for us. Our trip into the port was risky at best and definitely foolhardy. Something was bound to go wrong. I should have listened to Eponin and worked out a different way to get us out to sea."

Moving to the demi-god's shoulder, Iolaus stood next to him, leaning back on the bars as well. "Don't worry about it Herc. Knowing Xena she's already worked out a plan to get us out of this." He knew that was the wrong thing to have said when his friend sighed.

"She shouldn't have to. We came here to rescue her, remember ... not for her to get us out of a fix."

The shorter man grinned up at the large, "Fair's fair Herc. We rescue Xena ... she rescues us. No sweat .. we do it all the time, remember?"

"Trouble is," said Toris from the gloomy interior of the cell, "she's in no real condition to be leaping around at the moment. Fact being, she shouldn't be out of bed for at least a couple of days. She lost an awful lot of blood, Iolaus ... and before you say anything, yes I know how fast she heals .. but she's still in no shape to be heading a rescue party."

"She probably won't head it herself," Iolaus objected, drawing immediate looks of disbelief from the others. He tried again, "Look, she'd got Gabrielle, Eponin and Autolycus out there to help her," he pointed out patiently.

"Firstly," said Toris, "Xena won't let Gabrielle go into a dangerous situation without her."

"Secondly," put in Hercules, "Eponin's not in much better condition to be leading a raiding party."

"Hey look, Eph ... I'm sorry, 'kay? It's just that I get a bit strung out at the thought of our people having to be rescued by anyone. We're Amazons. We're supposed to be strong independent women, but if we keep having to be bailed out of trouble by **her** what does that make us?"

The Regent allowed a tight grin, "How about lucky that we have Xena to help us?" she questioned adroitly.

"She's not an Amazon, Ephiny," protested Malonda sullenly.

"As good as," retorted the Regent. She looked at the frown on the scout's face, "Look, Loni, Velasca once said that Xena was a true Amazon ... it's about the only thing the two of us ever agreed on. She may not be a part of the Nation in the purest sense, but she has the heart of an Amazon and we should be proud to call her friend .. for Gabrielle's sake, if nothing else."

Malonda could feel Ephiny's close scrutiny as she spoke those last words and sensed a building concern in the Regent over her trustworthiness. She gave an exaggerated sigh and a tight smile as she replied, "Then for the Queen's sake I will endeavour to restrain my hostility towards the ex-Destroyer of Nations."

The Regent continued to give the other woman a long hard look before finally relenting and returned, "You do that, Loni .. you do that."

Silence stretched for some while before Malonda once again broke it with the same question, "So, what are we gonna do?"

"We sit tight and wait." answered Ephiny as she stared into the night towards the ship once again.

The scout got up and joined her, "You know that the Harbour Master has probably sent a fast courier up to Rome to see what's going on, don't you?" The Regent nodded her head in agreement. "Then we can't afford to sit here for too long. We don't know if Caesar's free already and sending out people to find and stop us."

"The thought had crossed my mind," retorted the blonde dryly.

Malonda gave another sigh. "So if we're just gonna sit here, what do you think that Ep and the big bad warlord are gonna do?"

"Cut it out, Loni," admonished Ephiny tiredly.

"Sorry," came the contrite apology.

"If I were Xena, I'd be planning a way to take out the ballista, drop the barrier and find us."

"Think they can do it?" questioned the scout speculatively, as she squinted out into the darkness.

The Regent shrugged, "I wouldn't bet against it," she smiled.

Xena surveyed her troops. There were three groups all with different tasks to perform. The first group, in a way, had the hardest task to execute. At the head of an eight woman Amazon squad, dressed in the best of the uniforms taken from Fortunus' men, was Autolycus, attired in the optio's uniform and looking grim. She shook her head over his objections. In a way she knew he was right.

When the sharp slaughter had ended, Patroclese and Sheraya had moved among the dead and dying offering aid where they could. Once the Roman officer had been taken away to be locked in the ship's hold, Xena had sent for Autolycus to outline her plan to him.

"I want you to take a group of Amazons, disguised as Romans and find out where they've put Hercules and the others," she explained with an authoritarian note in her voice.

The thief didn't even hesitate before objecting to her orders, "I work best alone Xena. I can slip in there and find out where they are, probably get them out too, with less trouble and far less danger than if I cart a bunch of warriors along with me!"

"Not this time Autolycus," came the gruff reply.

Not willing to concede the point the King of Thieves persisted, "Be reasonable Xena. I can't take a bunch of feather brained women along with me. I need to slip in and out of places and having a whole lot of other people with me is not going to make things any easier."

"It will if you do what I say. With you and the Amazons dressed in Roman armour, you'll be able to gain access to the dungeons on the pretext of taking their prisoners to see whoever's in charge ... almost certainly the harbour master," the warrior insisted.

"See," pointed out Autolycus excitedly, "We don't even know who's in charge over there .. not with any certainty at least," he objected.

"I have faith in your ability to uncover the relevant information, and adjust to the demands of necessity as required." Xena assured him smugly.

"What am I supposed to do with those ... Amazons! while I'm doing that!" snapped the thief in frustration.

"I have faith in your ability to figure that out too," her voice growled, eyes beginning to blaze with the icy anger that sparked when her patience was being tested.

"But Xena!" complained Autolycus, not yet ready to concede her victory.

"Get off it, Autolycus," her voice dropped to it's lowest register in an intimidating growl. "You need backup in case any rough stuff breaks out or something unforeseen happens .. so just accept

it so I can get on with organising the attack. With luck, what the rest of us will be doing should draw attention away from you." She watched him open his mouth as if to argue the point further, before he quickly closed it at the predatory look in her eyes. "Get yourself into that officers uniform," she told him brusquely, satisfied that he wasn't going to dispute her orders further, "I'll talk to you before you set off."

"Yeah .. great .. thanks a bunch!" he muttered as she threw the clothing at him.

- *That had been relatively easy*, - she had almost smiled at the thought, - *compared to what had come next!* -

Having got Autolycus' grudging agreement to participate in his part of the planned rescue, she need to work out just how they were going to remove the threat of the ballista and get the chain boom dropped so that they could sail the ship out of the danger that would threaten them from all sides come the morning.

She snagged Eponin's arms and instructed tersely, "Sort out your steadiest eight warriors and get them to pick through the Roman uniforms for the ones that fit best and aren't covered in blood. They'll be going with Autolycus when he goes after Eph and the others."

The Weapons Master nodded and went about the task with quiet competence, leaving Xena to be ambushed by a concerned Gabrielle, "You're not fit enough for fighting yet," the bard had warned.

"I'm fine Gabrielle," she had replied tightly, "I heal fast, remember?"

The younger woman planted herself in front of her friend and gripped her arms firmly, "I remember," she said heatedly, "I also remember how you collapsed on the deck, due to loss of blood, the moment we set foot on this ship. You've got a nasty wound in your back and a stubborn ego the size of Mount Olympus! But however fast you heal," she poked Xena in the abdomen, "you haven't had time to replace all that blood yet. So do us both a favour and let the Amazons take care of the ballista, please."

The warrior gave her friend a hard look, "Like I said, I'm fine Gabrielle .. now move out of my way, please. I haven't got time for this."

"No!" answered the bard stubbornly.

"Gabrielle!" came the low warning growl.

"Not until you promise me to stay on the ship."

"Fine!" came the curt reply.

The Amazon Queen looked at the dark warrior in disbelief. Xena never gave in that easily, "It's the rig" she began, only to be cut off in mid-sentence as the Warrior Princess casually lifted her friend out of her path and proceeded to head across the deck to the prow, where she could study the two imposing targets that needed to be neutralized.

Her parting words to the dumbstruck bard drifted back, "I said I was fine, Gabrielle."

Xena chuckled mirthlessly to herself, - *It was a good job she couldn't see my face*, - she thought. - *Just exerting the strength and energy needed to lift her left me sweating and unsteady. I had to stand up at the prow and pretend to be examining the watchtowers, so that I could lean on the damned rail .. or she'd have known for sure just how weak I still am, as it was she made a pretty damn accurate guess.* -

She'd had to pull herself together when Eponin approached her, trailing the bard in her wake, "We need two groups of fifteen Amazons, Ep," she'd said coldly, drawing on her warlord persona like a well worn glove. "The group that comes with me is going to need to be made up of strong swimmers. You can take the other group in the second rowboat."

"Xena" Gabrielle tried to cut in.

Ignoring the plea in her friend's voice, the warrior continued with her instructions, "We need to take out the ballista to make certain that the ship is protected from attack. If we move quickly, the Romans won't have time to put up much of a fight or raise an alarm."

"What about the chain?" asked the Weapons Master, knowing that disabling the ballista was only a temporary measure .. they needed to get rid of the boom so that they'd be able to set sail.

"You concentrate on the ballista .. I'll deal with the chain. Now go get the attack parties ready. We need to get this show on the road, or at least on the river!"

Eponin, nodded her agreement, gave a slight grin at the attempt at levity and headed off to select the most able of her warriors for the coming mission.

She was aware of the bard's silent .. disapproving .. presence then, just as she was now. She had no way of explaining to Gabrielle how much she needed to be involved in this ... how she needed to prove to herself that she was more than just Caesar's animal .. his pet .. his creation! But she couldn't find the words that would allow her to express all of the doubts that had assaulted her since she had been in captivity. She needed to be involved in something that reinforced the meaning in her life .. she needed to strike a blow against Caesar, even if it was only this token gesture of finally regaining her freedom at her own hand, whilst helping the friends who had aided her.

"I want you to stay on the ship," she had told the bard tonelessly.

"No way!" came the anticipated response. "If you're going, I'm coming too!"

"I need someone here to keep an eye on things here. You're a staff fighter .. you're not cut out for the raiding party," she continued in her calm logical tone, refusing to look at the honey blonde woman, knowing the anger and hurt that she would see in the green eyes of her friend.

"Xena look at me!" the bard had demanded waiting several heartbeats before repeating her demand when the warrior didn't move, "Xena, turn around and look at me!"

Reluctantly the big warrior turned and leant back on the deck railings. She looked anywhere but into the face of the shorter woman, knowing that if she did, all her determination would be blown away by a pair of stubborn green eyes. Gabrielle was no longer a naive young woman that she could easily order around .. - *Well scratch that thought .. she's never been EASY to order around. It just used to be easier to find excuses that she'd accept.* - Now the young woman had grown into a self-assured individual who could rely upon herself in dangerous situations. She was a bard, the Amazon Queen and a warrior in her own right. She also knew all of Xena's weak spots.

"Look at me, Xena," the bard repeated in a softer tone, drawing the warrior's reluctant eyes to her. As Gabrielle searched her friend's face, she could see the doubt and uncertainty mixed with the rage and pain. She knew this woman almost better than she knew herself, her moods, her brooding, her anger .. yet seldom did she ever see the self doubt that was evident in those deep cerulean eyes. "You need to do this." It was a statement rather than a question, but Xena bobbed her head slightly in agreement anyway. "The I need to go with you .. where you go, I go .. remember?"

It was pointless arguing. Gabrielle would win this one in the end .. they both knew it. It didn't make the warrior happy that the bard would be part of the attack .. nor did it make the bard happy that the warrior would be exerting herself before she was recovered enough to do so .. it was a compromise of sorts.

"Don't think you fooled me when you lifted me up," Gabrielle said finally to break the silence. "I saw that stagger as you headed up here."

"Did not," retorted Xena almost gently, allowing her friend's gentle chiding to break through the high walls of her fears.

"You were trembling."

"I was cold"

"What about the sweating?"

"It wasn't much,"

"Ah ha! I knew you were still suffering from the effects of that wound," crowed the bard as if she had won a major point.

Silence settled between them for a drift of long moments before Eponin had called and told them all was ready. Both women straightened knowing that they needed to prepare for the coming assault. While Xena had told the Weapons Master just what she wanted her to do, Gabrielle began to remove her boots in preparation for the swim.

"Take your fifteen, Poni and the second rowing boat and head across to the far watch tower," ordered Xena, "Give it until the moon is about halfway to the horizon, then start your attack. We should all be in position by then and hopefully things will go off without a hitch."

"What about you ... how you gonna get to that other tower if Autolycus is taking the other boat?" demanded the Weapons Master although she already knew the answer to that question and couldn't think of another viable option.

"Swim," said Xena shortly. "That's why I wanted your best swimmers."

"Look, why don't you take the boat?" pressed Eponin knowing that Xena's wound shouldn't get wet, and that she was far from being up to full strength.

"Two reasons," the warrior told her calmly, "Firstly you have twice as far to go .. secondly, and more importantly, you swim almost as well as a rock!"

"I resemble that remark!" grinned back the Amazon. "Still"

"Don't worry at it, Ep. The tide's running out and there's a strong current that sweeps around to the point that watchtower stands on. It's just a case of keeping our heads above water and letting the current doing the work." Xena explained. "Now we need to get moving if we want to pull this off."

She stood at the railing watching Autolycus' crew pull quietly for the harbour. They needed to find a quiet place to land and then work their way through the port to the prison to release their companions as quietly and unobtrusively as possible. Even under the pale light of a waning moon, the rowboat was difficult to detect as it headed for the shore.

Gabrielle finished unlacing her boots for her .. she was still having trouble bending over, feeling dizzy against the strain of the wound. She kicked them off and checked her weapons. The chakram was clipped comfortably to her hip. She'd elected to take her sword, figuring that she'd carry it okay in it's sheath on her back. She had her breast dagger, but the ones that she kept in her boots would have to remain on board .. as would her armour. She'd wear her leathers, but the brass armour would be far too heavy from this expedition.

"Ready?" asked Gabrielle by her side.

"You sure your wouldn't stay on the ship?"

"Xena!"

The decurion snapped off a text book salute in response to the demand and braced himself at rigid attention under the close scrutiny of a man he perceived to be a superior officer. "Sir! What can I do for you, sir!" he barked with military correctness.

The thief nodded his head as though grudgingly impressed with the instant improvement in the junior officer's military bearing, "Much better!" he purred almost to himself. Getting down to business he used an officious tone and demanded, "The prisoners that were brought in earlier this evening! I have orders to take them back to Rome immediately for Lord Caesar to interrogate."

"Sir, I need to see ..." began the harassed officer of the guard, but was cut off almost immediately.

"If I were you, decurion, I wouldn't keep Lord Caesar waiting any longer than necessary. These prisoners stole some personal property of his and he's most anxious to have it returned. I can guarantee that any man who causes a delay in this matter is going to be made to be very sorry. If he's lucky, his career will be merely ruined, if Lord Caesar is still in his current foul mood I couldn't vouch for that man's life." He let his words sink in to the now perspiring soldier. "Of course should any man be responsible for the swift execution of the General's orders, then I'm almost positive that his career will soar ... Now where are those prisoners?"

Making a decision, the decurion barked an order to his men, "Valos, Marcus, get four sets of shackles and secure the prisoners so that they're ready to leave with the optio."

- *Four sets?* - questioned Autolycus silently, - *What's happened to the other two? Which two is it? Damn! Xena's not going to be happy about this!* -

"It won't take but a moment, sir to get them ready for you," announced the decurion, suddenly eagerly committed to helping the dashing looking optio who was obviously a trusted man in Lord Caesar's service. If you should have the chance to mention that Paolinus, Decurion Antonius Paolinus, was of help in this matter"

"What?" questioned the thief absently, before realising what the soldier was getting at and waving his hand in acknowledgement, "Yes, yes, of course Paolinus." - *Just where am I gonna find our two missing pigeons?* - he asked himself with a frown.

"Thank you sir," beamed the decurion. "Umm .. just what did these people steal that is so important to Lord Caesar? ... Sir?"

Autolycus snapped his attention back to the officer of the guard, "That's on a need to know basis, soldier, and you don't need to know!" he growled.

There was a rattle of chains as the three men and Nebula were led from the cells out into the custody of the King of Thieves, "Alright you roaches!" he had to suppress a vagrant grin that threatened to spread over his face as he studied Hercules and Iolaus fettered like felons! - *It's kind of nice to have the shoe on the other foot!* - he mused. "Let's move out!" he ordered. "We've

got a long way to go!" He turned back to Paolinus, "Thanks for you help decurion. I'll make sure your name is mentioned in the proper channels."

Executing another text book salute, the guard returned, "Sir! Thank you, sir!" and watched happily as his ex-prisoners were shoved between the ranks of legionaries and marched away from his jurisdiction.

No one spoke as they made the march to the exit and out into the night. They followed the King of Thieves' dictum that 'You look as if you have the right to be there and no one will question you!' It almost always worked.

When they were finally away from Roman observation heavy sighs of relief were made all around. Hercules found employment for his prodigious strength as he easily removed the shackles from his own, and the others', wrists and ankles, while Iolaus couldn't refrain from commenting, "What kept you!" to their rescuer.

"Hah!" retorted the thief with feeling. "You try talking a Roman decurion out of his prisoners without a single piece parchmented evidence to back you up!"

"You did great Autolycus," Toris told him gratefully. "We appreciate it."

"Anyone know where Ephiny and Malonda are?" asked the thief, knowing he hadn't yet completed his task.

"They know she's the Amazon Queen and they're treating her with due respect," Hercules told him.

"How did you four end up in the hoosegow, then?" asked Autolycus pointedly.

"Somebody recognized me," Nebula informed him, "and the guys were locked up because they were posing as crewmen for a pirate ship."

"What do we do next?" questioned Iolaus.

The King of Thieves drew a deep breath, "Nebula needs to get back to the ship and get it ready to sail. Xena and the Amazons are raiding the watchtowers to put the ballista out of action and drop the boom that's stopping us from leaving. I need to locate and liberate Ephiny and Malonda. I don't think that trick I just pulled to free you is going to work again, so I'll just have to rely on good old fashioned sneaking and steal them out from under the Roman's eyes."

"Ephiny's our responsibility," put in Hakine who was commanding the detachment of Amazons.

"You want to get her killed?" demanded Autolycus.

Hakine looked as if she might argue the point until Hercules gently interrupted, "We'll get her out. Large numbers might not be the best way to do it though."

"Speaking of large .. I can't take you either, big guy ... you're just not built for sneaking .. neither are you, Toris." apologised the thief.

Hercules gave him a look, "Well who do you intend to take?" he demanded.

a quick look around the group told Autolycus that he wasn't going to get away with doing this on his own. "I'll take Curly, he's got some fair skills and he's short .. I'll also take two Amazons," he said forestalling Hakine's objections. "The rest of you better get back to the"

He was stopped when Hercules held up his hand for silence, "What's that?" he asked, cocking his head.

"Thunder?" suggested Nebula with a puzzled frown.

"Horses!" disagreed Toris, "From the direction of Rome by the sound of it ... lots of them."

"Gods in Olympus! We're in trouble!" evaluated Hercules.

Chapter Seventy Three: Hooves, Harlots & Heroes!

Ephiny was awake instantly .. some sound out of the ordinary for her current environment had alerted her inner senses and she peered around the dimly lit room ready to protect herself should it prove to be necessary. She glanced over at Malonda who was also expectantly tense. Arching an eyebrow in query, the Regent saw her head scout motion towards the window with her head.

- So the noise had come from out there, - the blonde surmised, - Thought so! -

The both stood cautiously and edged across to the window, flanking both sides as they peered out into the night, looking for ... they really didn't know what, but were far from surprised to find an absence of four guards out there.

"Rescue?" questioned Malonda softly.

"That would be my guess," returned Ephiny, swinging open the shutters and nearly having a heart attack as a dark head popped into sight!

"Can I interest you ladies in a boat trip?" asked Autolycus impudently.

"Autolycus!" the Regent let out an explosive whisper. "You scared the Hades out of me!"

"Sorry about that," he grinned unrepentantly, clinging easily to the balcony as he exchanged words with her, "Didn't have time for social niceties!"

"Hurry up, Autolycus," hissed an exasperated voice from below.

Ephiny looked a question which the thief answered with, "Iolaus ... he's kind of worried about a large cavalry detachment heading this way from Rome."

"What?" demanded the Regent smothering her yelp just in time and turning it into a low growl.

"We figured that Caesar managed to get out of his bonds quicker than we gave him credit for."

"Autolycus!" came a frantic whisper from below.

"What?" called back the thief.

"That cavalry unit's heading here! Hakine's signalling that we need to move ... now!" came the tense reply.

"Ladies?" invited the thief as he produced a thin coil of rope and attached it to the balcony. "I think our welcome has been worn out."

Without further preamble, Ephiny swung herself over the railing and quickly lowered herself the three floor levels to the ground. Malonda was right behind her and, after retrieving his rope, Autolycus scrambled down the vine he had used and reached the ground just fractionally after the scout.

"Now what?" he asked Iolaus.

"Way I see it we've got two choices," the shorter man told him. "We can steal a boat and get Ephiny back to the ship."

"That's speaking my language," agreed the thief approvingly.

"Or we can go and join up with Herc and see if we can link up with Xena's group attacking the watch tower!" finished Iolaus.

"That sounds more like it," grinned Ephiny, much more interested in the prospect of a good fight than slipping away unseen.

"Now why'd you have to go and say that?" complained Autolycus to both of them, "when I could have found us a nice boat and got back to the ship." a stray thought struck him. "And that's what we should do I think."

Iolaus gave him a demeaning look, "Don't you ever think of anything other than stealing things and saving your worthless hide?"

The King of Thieves glared back at his companion, "Not often no! But in this case, O great warrior cum hunter cum sidekick, I think we should steal a boat so that we can pick up Xena and her crew and get them back to the ship. Didn't I tell you that they swam out to that tower?"

inch of hide off of your body, and beat each and every one of your friends to death in front of your eyes! -

Urging on his men, the cavalry detachment stormed through the sleeping city, waking many a light sleeper who rose to stick a careful head out of their shutters to see what was happening to cause such a commotion. The site of the long column of men thundering by on horseback was enough to draw many of the more adventurous out into the night, concerned about the unusual event.

Knowing his way around the port, Flaccus led his contingent directly to the harbour master's office and, with a tail of some twenty men, entered the building demanding to see Gessius, immediately, in the name of Caesar! He waited impatiently for the petty official to be summonsed while he paced tensely, eager to be getting on with his task.

When the portly harbour master arrived in his office he was distinctly unhappy to be confronted by the pacing centurion. "What's the meaning of this? By what right was my sleep disturbed!"

"By the right and authority of Caesar!" snarled Flaccus slamming his staff of office down on the bureaucrat's desk, glowering at the little man.

"You have no right ..." began Gessius huffily. He hated jumped up soldiers trying to order him around.

"Wrong!" snarled the looming centurion. "I have every right! You're just lucky that damn ship's still out there or you'd be gracing a cross by now .. that's if I didn't have you flayed alive!"

"But .. but ... that's the Amazons .. Lord Caesar's current favourites. I know the ship belongs to a pirate ... but." stuttered Gessius rattled by the soldier's anger.

"Those harlots helped a couple of very valuable and very dangerous slaves, belonging to Lord Caesar, escape and are trying to get away with them. The general wants them back .. and the Amazons as well as anyone else with them!" roared Flaccus.

The harbour master paled at the angry tone and tried not to flinch, "Actually, we have the pirate captain and three men from her crew locked in the cells here, and the Amazon Queen and a guard are 'guests' in one of the upper apartments." he soothed.

"Why didn't you say so earlier!" snarled the centurion. "Get the Amazons down here at once. We can use them as bargaining chips. Get a couple of sets of shackles for them too! I don't want them escaping. We'll use them to make sure that the bastards on the ship behave themselves."

Gessius looked happy to be able to do something to relieve himself of Flaccus' immediate ire. He sent one of his men up to the room holding the Amazons with instructions for the guards to escort the women to him immediately. The second he sent down to the cells to fetch the requested manacles. He returned, reluctantly to where Flaccus stood glaring at him, "It shouldn't

be long now, centurion. Maybe you'd like to take a seat .. some wine perhaps. You appear to have had a long, hard journey."

"No I don't want any damn wine," rumbled the tense soldier, "I want to know just what precautions have been made to insure that the thrice cursed ship is going to be safe out there until I'm ready to go aboard and reclaim Lord Caesar's property!"

"Um .. yes .. of course," tried to soothe Gessius. "Well the ship is held by the chain boom and that won't be lowered until we have permission in this situation." He was encouraged by what could have been a grunt of approval from Flaccus. "The towers have been notified to train all ballista upon the ship and will open fire on it at the slightest sign of trouble." He checked to see if the centurion showed any sign of objecting to the measure. "Finally, I sent out a squad to secure the ship as it is a known pirate vessel," he finished smugly.

"You did what?" demanded Flaccus .. the vein in his temple beginning to throb alarmingly!

"Um .. sent a squad out to the ship .. it's standard procedure," assured the harbour master.

"Saturn, Jupiter and Mars!" cursed Flaccus roundly. "The gods save us from imbeciles in the minor bureaucracy! Have you any idea just what is out on that ship?" he demanded rhetorically, "No! Of course you don't, but you've likely just consigned a squad of good soldiers to their deaths!"

"I really must protest!" objected the harbour master strongly.

"Protest all you want, little man," growled the centurion, "but it won't change anything and it won't save those men." He drew an angry breath, "And just where is the Amazon Queen!" he demanded.

Gessius spread his hands helplessly. There was obviously nothing he could say to placate the furious soldier and he was beginning to be concerned about the length of time it was taking for his men to get back. Of course, the women may have been sleeping .. but even so.

Just as he was about to suggest that he go and see what the delay was, Gessius spotted the return of his messenger and beckoned him forward quickly, "Well?" he asked in a harsh whisper, "Where is she?"

"Gone, sir," came the worried answer. "The room was empty."

"Dammit! What about the guards?" Gessius almost squeaked.

"The ones on duty outside the door didn't hear a thing, sir. I went to check on the outside sentries and they're all unconscious sir," responded the guard.

"Sweet mother of Jupiter!" swore the harbour master as he spotted his second messenger return with the shackles. "What took you so long, Tomas?"

"Take care of things here," Poni had instructed. "I'm going to see what's happening."

"Ummm ... Ep? Aren't we both supposed to stay here?" tried Tassi diplomatically.

"You stay ... I need to see what's happening," retorted Eponin grasping for a credible reason she added, "for strategic purposes!"

"Okaaaay!" drawled the sandy haired Amazon, "but aren't your ribs gonna make it difficult to climb the tower?" she asked reasonably, knowing in her heart of hearts she should keep her mouth firmly shut. She went on anyway, "I mean that was the reason you stayed here in the first place, wasn't it?"

Eponin's caramel coloured eyes hardened, "Do I look like I need a nursemaid?" she demanded heatedly.

"Um, no ma'am," Tassi conceded hurriedly. She'd stuck her head out quite far enough. She wasn't about to bring the wrath of the Weapons master down on her head if she could avoid it ... even if she did, privately, feel that at times like this Poni did in fact require someone to make her act sensibly. The trouble with that thought was that she only knew of three people who could achieve it. One was in Roman detention, and one was probably having as little success in keeping the third member of that select group out of trouble as she was with Eponin.

"Good!" growled the Weapons Master belligerently, "I'm glad we've got that settled. Stay sharp. I'll send someone back to keep you company."

"Sure thing, Ep," grinned the Amazon warrior weakly. "Whatever you say."

"That's right! I'm boss here and don't you forget it, young Tassi."

The other Amazon had to bite her lip from laughing .. she wasn't that many summers younger than the Weapons Master, but she doubted her observation would have been too welcome at that point in time. She watched as Eponin adjusted her weapons and took a couple of tentative deep breaths, before turning her attention to scaling the rough rocky wall of the tower. "Be careful," she whispered, knowing that the word 'careful' was not one that habitually graced the other woman's vocabulary.

Eponin began to climb, ignoring the shooting pains that pierced her chest and caused her to breathe in short sharp gasps. About halfway up, she began to mentally berate herself! - *Of all the stubborn, pig headed, centaur brained, dumb featherheads, you just about take the prize Poni! Couldn't wait at the boat, could you? Had to get in on the action, didn't you? Gods dammit woman, you're a Weapons Master not some young stripling who doesn't know better!* -

Poni continued climbing higher concentrating on strong hand and toe holds rather than the burning in her chest. - *I wonder if **she's** having this much trouble!* - the Amazon grumbled to herself thinking about Xena and just knowing that the warrior would be taking everything in her

considerable stride! She sometimes couldn't help herself from thinking that it really wasn't a fair distribution of skills and abilities that left Xena so far above ordinary mortals in so many areas.

- *Perhaps I should take up cooking?* - she considered, knowing all about the Warrior Princess' ineptitude in that area. She seriously thought about it as she dragged her protesting body up a few more feet. - *Nah! I'm almost as bad at that stuff as she is!* - she ran that around her head as she moved to within inches of the parapet, - *Can't even beat her at being the worst cook! And I can't even practice to be worse than her,* - she told herself as she pulled herself over the top of the wall, - *She's just too naturally talented in that area too!* - she grinned.

Taking a moment to catch her breath, the Weapons Master surveyed the progress her team had made, and all seemed to be preceding relatively well. There were a variety of oddly shapeless lumps laying in the shadow of the wall, - *Guards,* - her logic told her. - *They obviously dealt with a sleepy watch quickly and efficiently,* - she thought with burgeoning pride for the skill of her warriors. They'd heard no noise below at the boat, which meant that the assault had been executed with ruthless skill.

Eponin began to move with quiet stealth along the parapet walkway, stopping every now and again to check an inert body just in case a soldier was shamming! She noted, as she passed that the first of the ballista's had been disabled. Axes had cut the thick cables and damage had also been done to the windless mechanism which together drew the catapult's arm down for loading.

Pleased with what she was seeing, the Weapons Master continued along the walkway, when her innate senses kicked in to warn her that something was wrong. She looked up at the work detail that was tackling the final two ballista, nothing seemed amiss there. She glanced down at the courtyard below .. all remained quiet, none of the fallen legionnaires had stirred either. Her intense gaze returned to the catapults checking every detail of the process until she realised what was wrong.

"Karrellie! Stop them!" she shouted pointing frantically at the team working on the ballista, as she broke into a rib jarring run, trying to get to her fellow Amazons as quickly as possible.

The Scout turned to see the Weapons Master running excitedly towards her, gesticulating wildly at the catapults. Swinging around, a frown on her face, Karrellie immediately realised the problem, but was too late to do anything about it as the tension cables to both remaining weapons were cut, shooting the heavy rock, that each carried, high into the air in a curving arc heading for the defenceless hull of "Wave Dancer".

"Son of a bacchii!" she swore vigorously, as she rushed to look over the parapet to watch the two missiles fall towards their vessel.

Eponin joined her just as the first smashed into the deck of the ship, but were unable to assess the damage it caused. The second fell away from the ship, towards the harbour area, sinking a rowing boat that had been heading towards 'Wave Dancer'.

in a hurry, which will give us the time we need to get the ship out to sea and well away from here."

While Xena was explaining her orders to the waiting warriors, Gabrielle quickly unfolded a small oilskin pouch from which she took a fresh, dry, bandage and a thick pad of cloth. - *Nothing like being prepared*, - she thought. - *I just knew that she'd break open those stitches*. - She carefully eased the warrior's leathers down to her waist without interrupting anything that Xena was saying, and removed the wet, blood soaked bandage from around the wound.

- *Could be worse*, - she thought critically as she applied fresh salve over the area. - *Only three of the stitches tore out and the amount of blood looks worse than it is because of being diluted in the river*. - She applied the thick pad of cloth and then bandaged it tightly, her attention suddenly peeked by what the warrior was saying.

"We're gonna have to scale the wall of this tower" Xena told her troops.

"What?" hissed Gabrielle. "Xena you know I don't like heights."

Ignoring the bard, the Warrior Princess continued, "Once inside you take your warriors, Turra, and work on the catapults ... I'll find the barrier mechanism and destroy that ... any questions? Okay let's get going."

"Xena ... you know I hate heights," began the bard as the Amazons started scaling the tower wall.

"You can always stay down here, Gabrielle," the warrior told her calmly.

"No way, Xena. I told you that I'm going with you. Why didn't you tell me about this before we left the ship?" demanded the bard.

"Would it have made any difference?" came the shrugged reply.

"No," admitted the honey blonde.

"Thought you'd say that," sighed the raven haired woman. She bent down and picked up a length of rope left by the Amazons. "Tie it around your waist," she instructed the bard, as she began to fasten the other end around her own. "We'll climb together. I won't let you fall Gabrielle." she promised.

"I know that .. you know that," muttered the bard, "but has anyone made sure that the wall knows that!"

Xena hid the grin that threatened to bloom over her normally blank features and settled for giving Gabrielle some instruction in the art of climbing walls. "When we start climbing, we'll try and keep side by side so that I can keep an eye on you. There are plenty of hand and toe holds, you just need to look for them. I'll point them out for you as we go. Keep looking up as we climb .. concentrate on getting to the top and I'll be with you all the way."

The bard gave her friend a nervous smile, "Okay coach. Let's get this done."

They picked their way over the stoney shoreline where the Amazons were eagerly waiting the chance to get started. There was the prospect of a fight in the offing and all of them were ready for a little action. Xena shook her head and muttered "Amazons!" to herself, earning a dig in the ribs from Gabrielle who'd heard her. She arched an eyebrow at her friend, who returned the look with one of her own, before the warrior turned to the waiting women and asked softly, "Hear anything up there?"

Turra shook her head, "Not a thing."

"Alright," the Warrior Princess said, "Get up there as quickly and quietly as you can. Try not to get too enthusiastic. Just take out the Romans carefully and silently so you don't rouse the entire garrison."

"You got it!" grinned the Amazon leader happily.

"Don't say it," hissed Gabrielle in her ear as she watched Turra start her troops up the wall.

"What?" demanded Xena in quiet exasperation.

"You know," insisted the bard in a stubborn whisper.

The big warrior scowled, "Gabrielle ..." she began.

"You always say 'Amazons' in that exasperated tone of voice," persisted her friend.

"This isn't the place for this," the raven haired woman tried to point out, keeping her voice low.

"Well I'm an Amazon too, and I could learn to resent your tone. Now," she glared tugging at the rope that joined them, "haven't we got a wall to climb?" and set off to find a likely place to begin the ascent.

"Bards!" breathed Xena in perplexity.

"I heard that!" hissed the said bard.

Xena grinned.

Hercules and Toris, with the two Amazons accompanying them, ran almost silently through the sleeping streets of the port. The arrival of a host of horsemen from the direction of Rome could only be bad news and it was something that Xena was going to need to know about.

Ostia, however, was a confusing town full of winding streets that started in the direction that they wanted to go and then would seem to double back on themselves, making their progress slow

despite the fact that they were running as quickly as they could manage while trying to avoid drawing attention to themselves.

Finally, after what seemed forever, they had located the path that lead out across the harbour wall to the watchtower at it's end, which was built onto a rocky outcrop that jutted into the river. Keeping to the shadows the foursome darted towards the defensive watchtower on the harbour spit.

They realised that there was no way that they would be able to approach the fortification without an alert guard spotting them if they continued along the cobbled pavement, but they were relieved to find a dirt track that led down to the strand on the ocean side of the seawall. With the tide on the way out they were able to pick their way across the rocky foreshore without great difficulty and soon found themselves close to the seaward side of the watchtower. They hoped that the garrison had no idea of their presence.

"What now?" questioned Toris between panted breaths.

Hercules allowed his eyes to work their way up the imposing bulk of the fortification wall, "How good at climbing are you?" he questioned softly.

Toris looked where the demi-god had, noting to himself - *He's not out of breath at all! He's as bad as Xena.* - "Up there?" he returned sceptically.

The big, tawney haired man nodded, "Yup."

The innkeeper shrugged his broad shoulders took another look, thinking of a cliff face and a birds nest from long ago. "Piece of cake," he said with far more confidence than he felt.

Slapping the other man gently on the shoulder, Hercules smiled at the dogged determination he perceived in the dark framed face, "Follow me up. Use the hand and toe holds I use. Don't be afraid to take a breather if you need one, and above all don't look down."

Toris nodded his agreement, "Just what have you got in mind once we get inside?" he questioned putting off the start of the climb for a moment more.

"Find Xena and warn her about the trouble coming in from Rome." summed up the demi-god succinctly. "If you two," he said to the quiet Amazons, "get up to the firing platform you can warn your sisters of the new problem. Toris and I will find Xena. I suspect she'll go after the winch for the chain."

"Great," nodded the raven haired man as he rubbed suddenly sweaty palms together.

"Hey," Hercules said gently, "You okay with this?"

After getting a nod of assent from Turra, the pair had slipped down the stone steps into the dark courtyard below before disappearing into the sleeping buildings of the garrison making sure to move silently and keep to the shadows as much as possible.

The corridor they had chosen to explore in the hope of finding their way to the winch room, was sparsely lit making it easy for them to utilize the deep shadows to conceal themselves in, as the carefully checked each doorway looking for a way down into the cellars where the mechanism was surely kept.

In a small recess they found what they had been looking for. The stairway was brightly lit, but there didn't seem to be any guards around at the top of the spiral steps. Motioning for Gabrielle to remain silent, Xena drew her sword from the sheath hanging on her back and softly led the way downwards, lightly running the fingers of her left hand over the cold stone of the central pillar that the steps wound around.

Below them they could hear the rattle of dice and the occasional bark of laughter as hands scraped money off of a table. Loud snores punctuated the sounds of the gambling men and Xena calculated that there were maybe four men active in the dice game with, perhaps, as many again asleep. She shrugged her shoulders to loosen the tight muscles.

- *Eight men are going to be more than enough to handle*, - she decided as she felt the pain in her back spasm anew.

She turned and made a hand gesture commanding the bard to remain where she was. Gabrielle shook her head vehemently. The warrior repeated the gesture with a commanding glare and again got a negative shake of the honey blonde's head. As she glowered at the bard, the smaller woman shaped five silent words. - *Where you go I go!* - interpreted the Warrior Princess. 'Stay out of trouble' she mouthed back and got a grin for her pains.

They continued their stealthy way down the stairs stopping close to the bottom so that Xena could duck down low and peer around the last turn whilst keeping her body fully hidden. Her assessing glance took in the situation with the practised eyes of a successful commander and tactician.

Four soldiers sat around an oak table playing dice, drinking and telling tall tales. a fifth man stood watching them while four more slept in the cots around the edges of the vaulted cellar. Past them, closer to the wall, was the winch mechanism that controlled the raising and lowering of the chain boom that 'Wave Dancer' was caught up on. She needed to get past the soldiers, taking them down long enough so that she could study the winch to find out how to disable it.

Slowly easing back, she moved close to Gabrielle's ear and, in quiet whispers, informed her of the situation. Then told her, "There's a rack of spears down there. If you break the head off one you'll have a serviceable staff. Give me a chance to draw their attention before you come down, okay?" She waited until Gabrielle nodded her agreement before adding as a warning, "This is going to be messy, Gabrielle. I can't afford to take chances."

Again the bard nodded her understanding whilst swallowing the lump in her throat. She knew what Xena meant. She would end the fight as quickly as possible which meant the men in the chamber below would likely be killed. "Do what you have to," she whispered shakily.

Gliding down the steps like a vengeful shadow, Xena was almost upon them before she uttered her ululating warcry to freeze them for those vital moments that she needed to cut them down. She didn't want to play here. She was looking for the fastest way to take nine men out and she wasn't going to toy with them and try to knock them unconscious! She wasn't feeling up to a long session of creative fighting, the wound in her back pulled with every movement and she was functioning on maybe only half strength. She wasn't going to take any risks.

The first man was cut down where he stood as he turned to face the sudden menace, pulling her sword clear, Xena swung it backhand to decapitate a man rising from his seat, before being faced with two white faced soldiers who realised that they were going to have to fight or die a very bloody death. Both pulled their gladius, the short swords the soldiers of Rome favoured, and presented a unified attacking front against the death dealing mad woman who had descended upon them out of nowhere.

With the warrior fully engaged, and the soldiers concentrating entirely on her, Gabrielle was able to sneak into the battle area and make it to the rack of spears without being detected. She selected a likely looking weapon and had just managed to snap the pointed head off when one of the sleepy soldiers headed her way with a drawn sword.

Raising the 'staff' in readiness, she ducked a wild swing of the sword and struck out with rapid fire hits to the knees, hips, arms and shoulders, leaving her opponent not knowing what area to defend next! She finally knocked him senseless with a sharp move, cracking him across the side of his head, that she'd learned from Eponin's tutelage.

She glanced across at Xena and could tell by the way the Warrior Princess fought that she was favouring her injured shoulder. The two soldiers had got over their initial shock and were fighting in spirited tandem, seemingly forcing Xena on the defensive. The last man from the dice game had also joined the fray and between them they were beginning to force the raven haired woman back.

Xena watched her three adversaries with a calculating eye. The first man was a good strong fighter with a robust attacking style that tended to leave him exposed on the right. The second man was a defensive fighter with a good technique, and would probably be the hardest to despatch. The final soldier was over enthusiastic .. he was the one to take down first.

Making the injury to her left side appear as an obvious impediment, drew the over enthusiastic fighter ahead and away from his partners and with a quick, flicking slash of her sword, Xena sliced deep enough into his neck to sever his jugular vein. Blue eyes alight with feral fire, she quickly swung her sword back to block a lunge by the first soldier, and was quick enough, as well as good enough, to produce a thrust that had the defensive fighter scuttling backwards. She felt a blade slice across her biceps and realised that the first man had taken the bait and opened himself up for a slashing cut that ripped open his guts.

a quick glance told her that Gabrielle had taken down one man and was engaging two more with the final sleeper joining her last standing adversary. Not giving the newcomer a chance to settle, Xena launched into an attack thrusting with her long sword and impaling him through the chest. Unfortunately, the blade caught, probably on a rib, and was wrenched from her hands.

The defensive fighter registered, with a sudden gleam in his eye, that his opponent was unarmed and open to an attack from his sword. A rictus-like grin appeared on his face as he bore down on the Warrior Princess. As he aimed a classic thrust at the woman, he found her gone. a look of consternation replaced the grin and he turned, bewildered looking for his adversary, only to find her fist smashing with terrific force between his eyes. He crumpled like a half filled sack of turnips.

Xena shook out her right hand before clutching her left arm into her side. The flip over the soldier had cost her a lot of energy and an increase in the pain she was being plagued with from her back wound. Pushing it aside she turned her attention to Gabrielle who had finally managed to dump one of her opponents only to be in imminent danger of taking a sword thrust from the second. Without hesitation, Xena reached for her chakram and sent it winging into the Roman's back.

Pulling her sword free, the warrior moved slowly to her friend's side, "Did they hurt you?" she asked her voice filled with concern.

"Not a scratch," grinned the bard. "I think I should have asked you that question."

"I'll be fine Gabrielle," she used her stock reply as she retrieved her chakram.

"Not from where I'm standing," the younger woman disagreed. "Xena you can barely stand upright."

"You can fuss over me all you like once we're on that ship and heading home. I haven't got time to hurt now," gritted out the raven haired warrior.

"I'll hold you to that, Warrior Princess," the bard told her sombrely.

Xena quirked a wry lopsided smile. "You tie any of the live ones up while I check out the winch."

"Yes ma'am!" agreed Gabrielle readily, but she watched her friend as she walked with slow discomfort over to the winch to give it a close inspection.

When Gabrielle had finished tying up the three survivors, she moved across the chamber to where the machinery stood and grinned at the concentrated attention it was getting from the warrior. "Have you got it figured out yet?"

Xena nodded, "I just have to ..." she stopped in mid sentence and cocked her head to one side listening. "Get your staff ready Gabrielle. We've got company ... lots of it!"

Chapter Seventy Four: Between A Rock & A Hard Place

Joxer was feeling significantly peeved. Not only had the others gone off on a mission, but they'd left him on the ship with a healer, a group of Amazons and a bunch of kids. "I'm a hero!" he lamented feelingly, "They're all treating me like a baby!"

He brooded for a while, turning it all around in his mind as he worked out a more suitable slant on the situation. "I know what they've done ... they were so concerned about rescuing Ephiny and the others that they forgot to tell me that I was in charge of the ship until Nebula gets here!" He grinned. "Well that's alright. I can stand watch up at the wheel and the Amazons can rig the manning," - *Hmm! That's not right.* - he thought hard, "Oh yeah, man the rigging! That's it!"

Whistling happily, he left the children sleeping peacefully under the watchful eye of Patroclese. Their excess energy having been run off in the rambunctious games they had been playing with him for several candlemarks. He made a detour and found his satchel that held his leather trousers and a new shirt, thinking wistfully about his armour and helmet which he'd had sent back to Greece by courier when the others had insisted he wear something less conspicuous.

Dressed once more in masculine attire, and looking pretty sharp, if the looks he was getting from some of the Amazons were anything to go by, Joxer made his way to the stern, took a deep breath of sea air, before starting to choke. - Over did the breathing bit, - he thought as he thumped himself on the chest to knock out some of the cough. Finally, over the hacking bout, he surveyed his newly claimed kingdom before leaning casually on the wheel only to fall flat on his face as it turned under his weight!

Joxer scrambled back to his feet, pulling his shirt down as he glared around to see if anyone was looking. Satisfied that he was unobserved, and confident that the laughter he heard must be some obscure Amazon joke that they were telling each other, the wannabe warrior, cum pirate captain, tried to relax himself by trying out a new verse to his song!

Joxer the Mighty

Captain of the Seven Seas,

On the water he's so grim,

That's because he doesn't swim!

Sailing here and sailing there,

Being mighty everywhere,

All the women stop and stare!

Because he's Joxer,

He's Joxer the Mighty!

Feeling much happier with himself, the bumbling warrior patrolled the stern deck acting how he presumed a piratical captain would. He was enjoying himself immensely and was oblivious to the grins of the Amazon deck hands that stood guard around the rails making sure that the Romans didn't attempt a sneak attack.

Bound up in his fantasies, Joxer saw himself as leading the attack against a Roman trireme, he flourished his invisible sword and muttered, "Avast there, ya scurvy nave! Surrender and I'll spare you and your ship!"

He cocked his head to one side as he listened to the imagined Roman captain's declaration of fighting to the death, before he answered, "Very well, you dog. Joxer the Mighty knows how to deal with you!" Drawing a fresh invisible sword, having forgotten it was already in his hand, Joxer engaged his imaginary opponent in a duel full of verve and flourish as he acted out his daydream.

Forced onto the defensive by his foe, the Mighty Joxer, leapt into the rigging and grabbed a rope to swing across to the foredeck. He intended to beckon his Roman adversary to him and could just imagine the impudent smile that would grace his lips. He'd even worked out just what to say to goad the enemy into rashness.

Having fun, Joxer decided to enact the swing, for real, from the rigging to the deck at the bow. He scrambled inelegantly onto the ship's rail and reached for the rope that he wanted to swing on. As he made his first attempt to grab it, he teetered precariously on the rail, swaying wildly until one of the Amazons grabbed his belt to steady him.

"Thanks Rael," he grinned shyly.

"No problem, O Mighty one," grinned back the young Royal Guard.

"Think you could pass me that rope?" he asked, pointing to the one he'd been trying to reach for.

"Joxer do you think what you're doing is a good idea?" she asked, hesitating to aid the harmless wannabe warrior in something that could get him hurt.

"Oh sure!" he replied confidently, "I've done this kind of thing before. I once spent most of a day swinging through the trees while Xena and Gabrielle were fishing."

Rael looked extremely sceptical. Joxer was kind of an infant in warrior terms and most of the Amazons found him to be a joke and a thoroughly good source of amusement. They really didn't understand how the Queen and the Warrior Princess could be so fond of him. - *He's kinda cute, though.* - Thought Rael as she tried to decide whether to let him attempt the swing, - *In a kind of kicked puppy dog way.* - She grinned and handed him the requested rope. - *Maybe he'll need help with bandaging his injuries when he's done.* -

Taking the offered line, Joxer the 'Cute' proclaimed, "Now watch this!" With that he launched himself out of the rigging and swung across the deck to his intended place of disembarkation.

shared the fate of the row boat and sunk without a trace. As it was the heavy accoutrements hampered them severely and made scaling the ship's side a test of endurance in the wet gear.

Nebula scrambled up the side ropes, without any undue trouble, as soon as she was certain her companions were safe. She was immediately drawn to the concentration of Amazons around the foredeck and crossed to them with the easy stride of an experienced mariner. Pushing her way through the crowd she hissed in exasperation when she saw the crater like hole in the decking of her beloved ship.

"Are the children still in there?" demanded the pirate as she peered into the dark hole that opened up into the mess.

"Yes," came the tense voice of Berra who had been left in charge on the ship. "I've sent a group down to get in there and get them out." They could hear groaning now, and childish whimpering, as well as banging on the mess door.

"Anyone else in there besides the children?" demanded Nebula.

"The healer was in there, I think ... and Joxer followed that rock through the deck."

"I saw that," growled the captain. "Get a rope and a lantern .. I want to get down there and see just how much damage we've got and how many injured." From the time it was taking the rescue group to get in to help the injured, it seemed likely that the door had been blocked by the debris.

As Nebula waited for the rope and light, she cast speculative glances at the tower from which the missiles had come. All seemed quiet there now, so it seemed likely that either the Roman ballista crews had been subdued before they could launch further boulders, or there had been an accident up there. If it was the second case there were some Amazons with some serious explaining to do! - *Hades!* - she swore to herself, - *either way they've got some explaining to do!* -

The rope arrived and was quickly tied off to the deck rail. "Lower the lantern down to me when I call for it," she instructed as she carefully dropped herself into the darkness of the damaged mess. "Okay!" she called, reaching up for the light which rushed to fill the blackness with the soft glow that shone from it.

Nebula slowly swung her eyes over the demolished area of the ship. In the soft light of the lamp she found terrified young faces scattered around the edges of the room. She saw Patroclese wedged under a fallen beam that was also keeping the door tightly closed. Joxer was trapped beneath the boulder that had done the damage. Catching the eye of one of the older children she called softly, "What's your name, boy?"

"M..Mattin, mistress," had come the shaky reply.

"Just call me cap'n, son," she smiled encouragingly. "None of you are slaves any more."

"Yes mist ... umm cap'n," replied the boy with a nervous smile.

Now only Karrellie and four others remained within the fortification. The sound of clashing swords was sporadic and the Weapons Master could see no valid reason why the rest of her warriors had not rejoined those waiting below. She knew that she was being impatient, and that the scout would not endanger anyone unnecessarily, but that didn't make her any less fidgety.

She was just in the throes of contemplating climbing back up to see what was taking so long, when the last five Amazon's rappelled swiftly down the ropes with Karrellie shouting a warning, "They're coming out to look for us. Get ready to fight."

The warrior in Eponin took over and she quickly organised her troops, picking out eight sisters to use bows to cut down any Romans that were foolish enough to rush blindly around the edge of the fortification. The other eight, including herself and those with Karrellie, were to stand ready with swords until they got the chance to get safely into the boat and back to the ship.

Within moments of the scout's warning, the Roman's came running around the edge of the watchtower and down the sharply inclined slope to the jetty. The first five were cut down by a volley of Amazon shafts, but another twenty or so pressed on, carried forward by the momentum of their running and the steep path that they traversed.

Eponin and the others stepped forward to meet the onslaught, while the archers sought to pick off targets towards the rear of the Roman advance, intent upon helping their sisters as much as possible without endangering them with the prospect of friendly fire accidents.

The song of steel on steel soon engulfed the small landing area as the Amazons battled against the angry Romans. Always ready for battle, the Amazons fought with a joy that was alien to the dour regimented tactics of the legions that had served them so well against the peoples that they had conquered. The women warriors, however, were unlike the barbarian hordes that the soldiers were used to. Where the Celtic and Germanic tribes were a group of magnificent individual fighters, the Amazons combined brilliant individual combat skills with the tight cohesion of an army trained to fight as a unit.

The garrison troops, although they outnumbered the Amazons, quickly found themselves in major difficulty. Cut down on the flanks by a deadly rain of missile fire and assaulted from the front by death dealing swords, the Romans were soon forced to pull back, up the difficult slope, to await fresh reinforcements as the rest of the garrison slowly rumbled into action.

Taking short laboured breaths, Eponin watched the retreat and was pleased to note that none of her warriors were pulled into a pointless pursuit. Their training held and they remained a tight fighting unit. A quick glance around assured her that none of her sisters had been mortally wounded, although several showed evidence of taking hits.

Deciding that they should have enough time to get everyone aboard the rowboat before the Romans mustered the courage to return to the fray, the Weapons Master barked her orders, "All wounded into the boat now. As soon as they're safely aboard, everyone else retreat back to the boat in an orderly fashion so that we can get the Hades away from here and back to the ship!" She took a deeper breath and winced at the resulting pain, "Alright ladies! Move!"

With well oiled proficiency, the Amazon contingent carried out their commander's instructions, although Karrellie frowned when she saw that Eponin had no intention of including herself amongst the injured. Once the wounded were settled, the rest of the warriors swiftly withdrew, the Weapons Master and scout being the last to enter the boat.

"Let's get the oars out and pull for the ship, ladies!" instructed Poni, her eyes watching the Roman position carefully. She didn't like the way they had allowed them to withdraw so easily. "The quicker we're away from here the better," she muttered almost inaudibly.

As the boat began to move away from the jetty, the Romans came out of their cover and ran down to the water's edge, several carrying bows. They formed up on the river bank and arrows started to wing their way out across the short expanse of water seeking Amazon targets.

"The fornicating sons of Bacchii!" swore Eponin roundly, "Pull, damn you. Get us out of their range."

Soft thunks bore testament to the arrows hitting and embedding into the wood of the boat. Then there was a groan behind her as an arrow found its mark followed by another two yelps of pain. The Weapons Master glanced to see if any of the wounds were life threatening, but the injuries amounted to a grazed biceps and a winged shoulder and thigh.

Satisfied that all was well, Poni started to turn back to check on their progress away from the shore when she felt a burning lance of agony shear into her side. She had enough time to look down at the feathered shaft protruding from her body and swear softly, "Hera's tits!" before she keeled over to lay still in the bottom of the boat.

Iolaus and Autolycus wanted to lead the four Amazons back towards the harbour proper where they hoped to appropriate a rowing boat to get them back out to the ship. The trouble was that there was a lot of activity going on around the harbour master's building right then. The main street was filled with a five hundred man strong cavalry unit from the VIIth Legion, that was dismounting and organising into infantry units, with one in ten men being left to take care of their mounts.

"They're gonna bring those horses round into these gardens any time now," hissed Iolaus.

"Don't sweat it shorty," answered Autolycus, drawing a glare from the blonde warrior. "We can climb the back fence and circle around until we get down to the harbour. A detour won't hurt us ... unless you're worried about climbing over the TALL fence."

"Cut it out, Autolycus," ordered Ephiny before Iolaus could react. "We don't have time to play! And fighting amongst ourselves is suicidal!"

The thief contrived to look shamefaced, "Yeah, yeah .. you're right. Old habits, you know? Anyway, lets get the Hades back to the ship before we start having to explain to those soldier boys who we are and what we're doing here."

The King of Thieves led the way back to the fence that ran around the building's sizeable attractive gardens. The area had the well tended look of belonging to someone who enjoyed it as a recreational space. Autolycus doubted that it would be so pleasant after it had played host to five hundred horses! - *Mind you it should do wonders for the roses!* - he grinned to himself.

As it turned out, they didn't have to climb over the fence, someone had conveniently left a gate in a handy spot and it was just the work of a moment for the thief to pick the lock and let them all walk out without an undignified scramble over the high brick and wood obstruction.

"Knew there was a good reason for keeping you around," smirked Iolaus.

"In the words of a tall dark and dangerous friend of ours, I have many skills!" grinned Autolycus.

"I hate to break this up, fellas," whispered Ephiny, "but which way do we go?"

"Follow me," announced the thief, leading the way towards a narrow alleyway. Iolaus and Ephiny moved behind him, with Malonda, Hakine and the other Amazon bringing up the rear.

They soon found that they had to spend precious time dodging into dark, narrow, and frequently smelly, alleys as not only were there an abnormal amount of soldiers moving around in the streets, but many of the citizens, disturbed from their rest, were out trying to see what was happening.

Knowing how quickly rumour could spread in bored, jaded towns, especially about something as exotic as Amazons, Autolycus endeavoured to keep them to the shadows as much as possible, preferring not to risk an untimely encounter with any Roman .. military or civil .. in case of difficulties.

"This is taking too much time!" hissed Ephiny in the thief's ear.

"What do you suggest," returned the thief snarkily, "that we march out there and ask the nearest citizen, 'excuse me, but is this the quickest way to the harbour, and please don't tell anyone you saw us because your army is looking for us' ... I think that would work pretty well. It should get us locked up, chained up or hung up in double quick time."

He was shoved hard by Malonda, "Watch your mouth, thief!" she snarled.

"Leave it Loni," instructed the Regent. "He has a point. I might not like how he made it, but he does have a point."

"Look! The street's clear. If we make a quick dash we should be able to get over to that alleyway on the other side," offered Iolaus.

Autolycus took a quick look both up and down the road, "Alright everybody. You heard the man. Let's move it." The six of them sped quickly on silent feet and were safely within the embracing darkness without being spotted.

Hakine peered about her cautiously, "I think I recognise this one," she whispered. "We passed through here on the way up to the harbour master's building when we started the rescue."

Autolycus straightened up and looked around carefully, "You know I think you're right. It's just a hop skip and a jump down to the harbour from here." He gave his companions the once over. "It's time to play bluff the Roman's again," he announced. Three of us are still dressed as soldiers. We can form up around you other three, if any one tries to question us, I'll just try bluffing them and tell them that you're some of the escaped prisoners everyone's looking for."

"And if that doesn't work?" questioned Malonda.

"Then we start busting heads," grinned the thief.

"Sounds like a plan," agreed Iolaus tentatively. "Not a very good one," he held up his hand to still the thief's objection, "but the best we're gonna do at short notice."

"Can you guys pretend that your hands are tied?" asked Autolycus, "Just to make it look more official."

"How do you propose we do that? We haven't got any rope," sniped the hunter.

"I'm aware of that, shorty. Just pretend. If you hold your hands behind your backs, my troops," he grinned at the two disguised Amazons, "can get up close behind you to hide the fact that you're really free."

Ephiny jumped in before Iolaus and the thief could get into a debate, "Sounds workable to me. Let's get on with it."

They continued to keep to the shadows as much as possible, but on those occasions when they were forced onto the well lit streets they utilized their ruse and everything seemed to work favourably for them. Now the big problem was going to be finding a rowing boat that no one would immediately miss .. unless the longboat that Autolycus and his fake Romans had used was still where they had moored it.

Feeling a little more optimistic, Autolycus headed out for the slip where the boat had been left and offered a little prayer up to any listening gods that it was still there. With no more cover to be had, as they traversed the cobbled surface of the wharf front, their determined footsteps echoed far louder than they had dreamed possible and they had to fight against the rising anxiety that gripped them, certain that they would be stopped at any moment by their enemies.

Almost to the slip where the rowing boat was moored, they encountered a Roman patrol of eight men, "You there!" the decurion called. "Who are you? and who are those prisoners?"

"Urbansis of the Seventh," replied Autolycus smoothly, "And since when does a lowly decurion address an optio in such a fashion?" he demanded belligerently, hoping to bull his way through the situation by pulling rank as he had in the dungeons.

"I'll need your credentials, sir!" barked back the decurion, only slightly less aggressively. "There are imposters running around Ostia and I have orders to check out all unfamiliar personnel." He continued to approach with his men.

"Be ready," the thief threw back over his shoulder, "I think we're gonna have to fight our way out of here." He returned his attention to the decurion who was no more than a few strides away now. "I haven't got time to waste with such stupid trivialities," he growled. "I have orders to take these prisoners out to that ship and use them to secure our possession of it."

The young decurion drew his sword in a swift, smooth motion, "You're no Roman optio, Urbansis .. or whatever you name is. I think you, your 'prisoners' and your men are coming with us."

Autolycus smiled, "Big mistake, decurion!" he snarled.

"Oh I don't think so .. I think maybe I just got that promotion I've been dreaming of."

"Think again, junior," retorted the thief as he swirled his impressive red military cloak from his shoulders and flipped it over the Roman officer enveloping him completely. He threw his own sword to Ephiny, preferring to use his fists rather than steel, and waded into what was a short nasty scrap.

The Amazons worked together. Their first aim was to get Malonda a weapon, then they intended to use steel to end the conflict before it could attract enough attention to stop them from taking the boat and getting back to the ship. They were very effective in their intentions and soon pressed the Romans, from the local garrison troop, severely.

Iolaus did his usual. He ducked below slashing cuts, jumped over low aimed blades and generally frustrated the Hades out of the two men trying to end his participation in the fight. When he saw his chance, he did a quick forward roll, to get between and behind them, before coming up and delivering a powerful kick into the small of one man's back, propelling him into his officer who still struggled with Autolycus' cloak. Then dropping to the ground he swept the legs out from under the other soldier as he turned, felling him in a clatter of metallic armour. Taking his chance, the agile blonde hunter delivered a thumping right to the Roman's jaw, that put the man's lights out for the duration of the rest of the fight.

Turning to check on what was happening with the others, during the brief respite he'd gained himself, Iolaus saw Malonda cleave into a Roman neck with the sword she'd acquired somewhere during the fight, and also noted that three more soldiers were down on the ground, unlikely to rise again .. ever!

It was at that point that Autolycus spun one of his adversaries away in the hunter's direction and Iolaus joined the fight once again. Just avoiding the point of the soldier's lunging sword, the blonde warrior shook his finger at the man and said cheekily, "That wasn't nice!" before diving back into the fray.

through the troops who had absolutely nowhere to take cover. Not all, by any means, had been killed, but enough damage had been done to make them unfit for further combat.

Trying to contain the growing rage he felt as the situation seemed to be escalating out of his control, he attempted to concentrate upon the main task at hand .. namely recapturing the escaped slave, Xena, and, if possible, retaking the other slave, Gabrielle. The chastisement of the Amazons, and the male friends of the two slaves, would wait until Caesar arrived.

"Alright!" he snapped at his optios, "Get the men searching this fortification in groups. Make sure that each group has at least three nets in case they find the slaves. I want units two, five, six and seven with me ... and find someone who can show me to the winch room!" he snarled, knowing that if she wasn't there yet, that's where Xena would be heading to. "The rest of you make sure you scour every room in this place, except for you Petrus. I want you to take a third of the men and clear those damned Amazons off of the parapets!"

The optios quickly dispersed, one having the presence of mind to send a tower guard over to the centurion. None of the Romans wanted to draw Flaccus' wrath down on their own heads. The man was something of a legend in legion circles. He was known for being hard but fair, but if he became angered by something, or some luckless person, then they'd need the gods to protect them, because Publius Flavius Flaccus was merciless.

"What's your name?" demanded the centurion of the young soldier that appeared before him.

"Sertorus, sir," he answered a little shakily. "The optio said you needed someone to show you to the winch room?"

"Well?" demanded the veteran soldier, grey eyes narrowing.

"Sir?" questioned the boy at a loss to understand what the officer was getting at.

"By Jupiter's balls!" roared Flaccus, "Where is the room, laddie? Don't stand there pissing your pants .. just show me!"

"Umm! Right. Umm do you want to follow me?" answered Sertorus, wondering what had brought the wrath of Mars down upon his lowly head.

"Move, you worthless reject from this man's army!" thundered Flaccus who really had the bit between his teeth now.

Taking that as an invitation to run the young soldier sprinted off down the dimly lit corridors with the centurion and his chosen men in hot pursuit. They clattered along, boots slapping on the stone floor, the metal of their equipment jingling loudly as they exerted themselves.

Sertorus was breathing deeply when he pulled to a stop at the top of the stairs that wound down to the winch chamber. He opened his mouth to speak, but stopped when Flaccus held up a commanding hand. He stood silently as the centurion motioned him closer.

"Yeah," answered the other man very quietly, then added in a stronger tone, "Yeah .. just fine."

"Good, because we need to get moving. This place will become a hornets nest soon and we need to find Xena as quickly as possible," Hercules told him.

"A lot of soldiers, huh?"

"Oh yeah! Should make things real interesting," added the demi-god.

Toris grinned, "What are we doing standing here then?" he demanded, "Let's go join the fun," he said as he moved across to the exit from the room.

"Oh boy!" muttered Herc shaking his head a little in disbelief, "Just like his sister." He turned to find that Toris had already moved through the door, "Hey, wait for me," he called before moving quickly to rejoin his companion.

The two big men trod cautiously through the dimly lit hallways and corridors. Generally speaking the Roman garrison were settled down for the night, so they had little difficulty moving through the middle floors of the building. That's not to say that they didn't encounter any opposition. They were in fact able to mop up several small groups that they stumbled across. After the initial, short brutal skirmish, the pair had acquired Roman helmets and cloaks, as well as a short sword each, allowing them to approach their enemies openly, utilising their rough disguises, and ambush other men before they had a chance to realise that Hercules and Toris were not fellow soldiers.

Having worked their way to the stairwell, taking more time than they had hoped, the two tall men had cautiously moved down towards the ground floor, and it was there that they became aware of a large body of men forming up, and low orders being issued by an officer. They drew back around a corner, in the corridor, and Toris waited while the demi-god eased his head around to see what he could make out.

When he drew back he whispered quickly and quietly to the raven haired man, "That's Flaccus in charge out there."

"Flaccus? Are you certain?" hissed Toris angrily and looked ready to charge the Roman contingent for the chance of getting at the centurion who had so brutalized Xena. Visions of her scar laced back danced before his eyes.

Hercules grabbed his arm and had to exert a considerable amount of force to stop his companion from doing something foolish, "Stop that," he whispered in a rumbling tone. "If you run out there now, you'll be captured or killed and that won't do Xena the least bit of good."

Toris looked as if he might argue, his blue eyes deepened to almost violet in the passion of his anger, before he managed to take a deep breath and force himself to start relaxing, "You're right," he agreed grudgingly. "Any idea what's going on?" He questioned trying to impose some calmness upon himself.

"Good man," grinned Hercules. "I think Xena must be down in the winch room and they know she's there. Flaccus is going down to get her."

"Well what are we gonna do?" demanded a still agitated Toris.

"We're going down behind them. While they're busy with Xena in front of them, we'll take them out from behind," explained the big man. He saw the tense, worried look on the other man's face, "Don't worry, Toris. They want her alive, remember. They won't do anything that could kill her .. and remember, they don't have that luxury in return. Xena won't let them take her easily."

Getting a nod of understanding from the raven haired man, Hercules was about to check on what was happening around the corner when two Romans appeared before him. "What are you doing ..." began one of the men just before he felt a massive hand clasp him beside the head and ram it with stunning force into his compatriots skull.

"That was close," whispered Toris and received a nod agreement from the demi-god.

Taking a breath, the son of Zeus, once again, carefully edged his head around the corner and found that there were now just four men there, busily stringing a net trap to catch anyone trying to bolt out of the cellar. He eased back to where Toris waited impatiently, "Just four still up here, the rest are obviously on their way down to the cellar. We can take the four out up here and then go down after the others."

Blue eyes sparkled coldly as the other man grinned, "Sounds like a plan!"

Straightening their cloaks around their shoulders and making sure that their 'borrowed' helmets were settled correctly, the two large men, moved around the corner and marched over to the four working soldiers. They had two down with solid punches to the jaw before the other two realised what was happening and, after a brief, almost silent, scuffle, they managed to deal with the second pair.

Wrapping them all up in the nets that they'd been using to snare the entrance to the stairwell, Hercules gave each man an additional 'tap' with his fist to ensure that they wouldn't be moving any time soon and nodded for Toris to follow him down the spiral staircase in the wake of Flaccus and his men.

Chapter Seventy Five: A Fight to the Finish

"Autolycus!" shouted Iolaus as he saw his sometimes friend go into the river with the Roman decurion. Without a second thought he dived in after the pair, determined not to lose the thief to the water.

Ephiny and her Amazons quickly despatched the remaining soldiers and rushed to the stone steps that led to the little jetty where the longboat had been moored. Ignoring the boat for the moment, the Amazons peered hard at the water where the three men had disappeared, searching for any sign of them emerging from the black depths.

"There!" pointed Malonda to an eruption of bubbles that broke upon the river's surface.

They watched the spot intensely, but nothing else showed up. Frantic eyes scanned the area, desperately seeking any sign of their missing companions, but nothing further disturbed the glassy water of the Tiber.

"Centaur crap!" swore Ephiny as she readied herself to dive into the waters to search for the men. She quickly unlaced her boots, tugged them off and took a deep breath .. only to let it out in a half panicked squeak as something wet rubbed against her ankle.

Looking down she was greeted by a gout of river water spurting from between Autolycus' lips as Iolaus squeezed his chest hard. The water was followed by a weak cough and splutter and then a sharp intake of breath. Iolaus gave a sigh of relief as he tried to push the thief up onto the jetty.

"A little help would be appreciated," he mentioned a tad too casually it seemed to the Amazons; Iolaus was exhausted.

Immediately breaking out of the almost trance like state she had fallen into, Ephiny snapped some terse orders, "Get them out of there and into the boat .. and lets get back to the ship before any more trouble can find us."

Willing hands pulled the sodden pair out of the Tiber and helped them into the rowboat. The two men sat shivering in the stern as the four Amazons took the oars and started back towards the ship, glad that the current was with them as the heavy vessel was meant to be powered by more than just four warriors.

"What took you so long?" grunted the Regent as she swung her oar.

His teeth chattered a little as the hunter explained, "Took a while to get that damned Roman off him .. then we had to get him out of that armour before I could get him back to the surface." He shivered again. The water wasn't really cold but there was a chill in the night air now, "Thought I'd lost him for a minute. Damned Roman was choking the air out of him."

"Th .. tha .. thanks C ... Cur ... Iolaus!" shivered Autolycus. "Didn't think I was gonna make it back that time."

"S'okay Autolycus," returned the blonde, "You'd have done the same f .. for me!" came the response.

"May .. be," agreed the thief, "B .. but you def .. definitely did it."

Ephiny shook her head at the mutual appreciation that seemed to be going on between the two semi-friends. - *Wonder how long this will last?* - She mentally asked herself. - *I'll give it until they both get their brains warmed up enough to remember how much they hate each other!* - she grinned at that thought. She checked over her shoulder and realised that they were close to 'Wave Dancer'. "Ahoy the ship!" she called, "Someone throw us a line!"

An anxious face peeped over the rail and the Regent recognised Rael, "Hold on a moment," called the young warrior. Her head bobbed out of sight once again and she returned in short time with the requested line. "Coming down."

"Thanks!" called Ephiny as she caught the rope and secured the boat to it. She turned and gave the men a critical look, "Are you two going to be able to climb up to the deck okay?"

"No problems," answered Iolaus.

"Piece of cake," agreed Autolycus.

Both stood on shaky legs and moved to the ships side. Ephiny watched them for a heartbeat or two, before deciding that she wasn't willing to risk more trouble. So ignoring male egos she shouted up to Rael, "Send a couple more ropes down and get some of the others to pull these two up." She got some outraged looks from the two men, but she noted that there were no real protests .. at least verbal ones.

Once they were all on deck, Ephiny could see that there had been trouble in her absence. "What happened here?" she demanded grabbing young Rael by the arm.

"A couple of those catapults managed to fire off their loads before our people could deal with them," the girl replied. "One hit and sunk Nebula's rowboat as they were almost back to the ship, and the other crashed through the deck into the mess."

"The children?" asked the Regent sharply.

"They're all okay. Cuts, bruises .. one boy's got a broken arm another one had a split scalp, but nothing life threatening," reported the sandy haired warrior.

"But?" questioned Ephiny, sensing that there was more to the problem.

Taking a breath Rael told her, "Patroclese and Joxer are pretty smashed up. The healer got hit by a falling beam and trapped under it against the door. Joxer saved a little girl's life by pushing her out from under the rock that had landed on the mess table. As he got her out, the table collapsed and the boulder landed on his legs. Sheraa thinks they're both broken pretty badly. Nebula, Sheraa and some others are down their trying to get both of them out."

"Damn," swore the Regent in frustration. Things were falling apart and she wasn't sure what she could do to rescue all their hard fought for plans.

A hail from off the port bow of the ship drew immediate attention, "Drop us a line," came Karrellie's shout. "We've got injured down here and Eponin needs medical attention now."

Ephiny rushed across to the rail and looked down at the scout, "How bad is she?" she demanded, worry creasing her brow with concern for her closest friend.

A couple of warriors threw lines down so that the boat could be secured and Karrellie called up an answer, "She took an arrow just above the hip. Don't know how much damage it's done but she's bleeding pretty heavily."

"Mother of Zeus!" cursed the Regent, "What else can go wrong!" she muttered before telling the scout, "Get her and any other injured up here on deck. I'll get Sheraya."

Leaving the warriors, around her, to help the assault party back on board, Ephiny moved quickly towards the crowd that were still standing around the hole in the bow deck. She pushed her way, unceremoniously, through the warriors and peered down into the gloom, "Sheraya .. we need you up here ... now!" she commended, anxiety for Eponin overriding her normal courtesy.

"Whatever it is it'll have to wait," barked back Nebula's voice from somewhere behind the big rock that lay beneath the hole. "We have an emergency down here."

Ephiny glowered and pulled all the commanding authority of an Amazon queen about herself, "We have an emergency up here, and I need Sheraya now. Last time I looked she was an Amazon healer subject to my will," she informed the pirate with cold menace.

"On this ship, everyone is subject to my will!" the captain told her flatly, "And Sheraya is needed here."

"Actually I'm not," put in the Amazon healer in her quiet strong voice. She rarely raised her voice in any situation, but she had a will like iron and needed it amongst pig headed warriors. Most Amazons knew to tread carefully around the woman. "Until you get them out from under all the debris, I can't do anything to help them more than I already have ... so I'll go and check out the problem on the deck and you can call for me once they're free," she told Nebula. "Don't go moving either of them more than you have to." She turned her attention to Ephiny, "And you better not be wasting my time," she told her ruler pointedly.

The Amazon healer, with short cropped brown locks and strong brown eyes, quickly scrambled up the rope to the deck and headed for where she could see injured Amazons awaited her. Nebula watched her go before shaking herself and asking, "Is she always like that?"

Ephiny just shrugged. There was no way that she was going to be caught making a comment about Sheraya. The woman had ears as sharp as Xena's and a longer memory, if that was possible. She also had her ways of making you regret things that she disapproved of. "How's it looking down there?" she questioned changing the subject.

"Joxer and the healer are stable, but unconscious. We'll get them out of here as soon as we can. We're going to rig a block and tackle to get the rock off of Joxer's legs .. we might cause more damage if we try to manhandle it away. Patroclese just needs to be cut out from under what's pinning him down. Sheraya thinks he just took a knock to the head, everything else seems okay, although she won't know for sure until she can give him a full check over," answered the captain with full details. "What's happening up there?"

"Eponin's group has just come in. There are a lot of wounds to be seen to .. chiefly the arrow that Poni took that seems to be bleeding quite a bit," came the response.

"Ah .. I see. Not good, huh?" Nebula guessed.

"Looks pretty bad from what I could see .. Sheraya will know more." came the stoic reply that belied the Regent's concern for her friend.

Nebula looked around to see how the progress was going. The block and tackle had been rigged on a tripod of fallen beams above where Joxer lay unmoving. Most of the debris over Patroclese had been removed, with just the thick deck beam, needing to be cut through so that they could get it out .. it was too tightly wedged to do otherwise. "We'll be a while longer before she's needed here. Why don't you go and see how Ep's doing?" suggested the pirate sympathetically, having gotten over her anger at Ephiny's abrupt appropriation of the healer, now that she realised that it was for a true emergency.

"I'll send Sheraya back as soon as she's done with the critical stuff," nodded Ephiny a little stiffly her disquiet over the Weapons Master's condition obvious. She turned away from the hole in the deck and forced herself to walk back to where Eponin's party were congregated amidships.

She watched as the Amazon healer worked quickly, cutting the leathers away from her patient to get a better look at the entry wound where the arrow shaft stuck obscenely in the pale skin. "Get me some light," growled Sheraya, "and the rest of you stand back! this isn't some gods be damned show!"

The curious Amazon warriors backed off and Ephiny retrieved a lantern with a strongly burning candle holding it close so that the healer could see to work. At least by doing that she was helping and Sheraya couldn't tell her to back off. She needed to see for herself that Eponin was going to be alright. She seriously began to debate whether she had been right to risk the lives of the Amazons to save Xena and Gabrielle.

"Hold it a little closer," growled the healer as her hand probed beneath the Weapons Master's back to feel if the arrow had gone through. She could just feel a lump caused by the sharp point of the metal head as it pushed against the skin. "Easiest way out will be to push it through," she muttered to herself. "It'll cause more damage trying to bring it out the way it went in."

Picking through the instruments in the pouch that she carried on her belt, Sheraya extracted a thin, extremely sharp, knife and expertly cut through the shaft just below the arrow's fletchings. "Jade, help me turn her onto her side, then hold her shoulders so that she doesn't move too much. Lasca," she motioned to the young blonde haired warrior who stood watching with keen interest. "Sit on her legs and don't let her thrash about," instructed the brown eyed healer.

Once her helpers were positioned, Sheraya took a breath and used her deceptive strength to force the arrow, through the flesh in the warrior's back, using the heel of her hand as the driving momentum.

Eponin screamed and her body tried to convulse against the pain, but was too tightly held. When her shuddering had stopped, they were all relieved to see that the Weapons Master remained unconscious. It would make patching her up easier if she wasn't struggling and being difficult.

The healer carefully grasped the blood slick shaft of the arrow on the exit side of the wound and drew it through in a smooth powerful motion, again having to wait for Poni's bodily contortions to calm before proceeding with her ministrations. - *At least she didn't scream that time,* - thought Sheraya absently. A thought that was closely followed by another as she worked to stitch the wounds , - *Why didn't she scream?* -

As soon as she had finished with her needle, she checked Eponin's pulse and examined her eyes, looking for signs of trouble. - *Damn! What in Artemis' name is going on here?* - she demanded of herself as she realised that the Weapon's Master's heartbeat was fast and thready and that her eyes were not responding properly to the light.

"What's wrong, Sheraya?" demanded the Regent picking up on the signs that something was amiss.

"I think that arrow must have nicked something inside. I've done all I can for her. We just have to hope that she's strong enough to fight through it." - *That or Xena gets back here and knows something that I don't about what's going on here.* - the healer thought grimly, shaking out her short curls in frustration. "Get her carried down to the captain's cabin. She can use the cot there .. and I'll be down to check on her as soon as I can. Make sure she'd wrapped up warmly and keep her still. You, Jade, and you, Lasca, can have that task. Come and get me if there's any change in her condition." She watched them nod their acknowledgement and signal for some of their sisters to help carry Eponin as gently as they could manage. "Anyone else?" she questioned.

The removal of the arrows from the women who had taken them in the shoulder and thigh had not proven difficult and after applying salve and bandaging the wounds the two warriors had declared themselves to be fine and not in need of bed rest. "I want to see both of you in the morning to change those bandages," Sheraya growled, knowing that left to their own devices, Amazons did not always take proper care of an injury, thinking it showed how tough they were.

Ephiny watched the healer as she threw a glance over at the other watchtower .. the one that Xena had attacked. She guessed that Sheraya was wishing the Warrior Princess was back on board so that she could plumb the depths of her extensive medical knowledge.

The Regent looked across the water to the fortification as well, - *Where are you Xena?* - she asked her herself, before deciding that it was time to take the two rowing boats over to the tower and pick her Amazons and friends up. She had a moments guilt about the thought of abandoning Eponin while she was in such a critical condition, but logic reasoned that the Weapons Master would stand a better chance of surviving if Xena was around to aid in the treatment.

With her mind made up she told Sheraya, "You better get back and see what you can do for the men. I'll go get Xena and the others."

would just see it as splitting hairs. She had undoubtedly meant that the Amazons should descend the same way they had got into the fortification.

"Alright Amazons," she called their attention and grinned, "Time for some more fun."

"I think that might have to wait, Turra," Kaylee called, "Seems the Romans want to come up here and play!"

"Artemis' arrows!" swore the Amazon commander. "Alright, you excuses for warriors. Lets show the Roman pigs how to fight!"

Several of the Amazons gathered swords and spears from the fallen catapult teams and readied themselves to face the men from the VIIth Legion with the cold, excited yearning for a good fight. As Turra considered the fact that the Romans had to come up the stairs from the courtyard to get to them, she saw the potential of the disabled ballista, much as Eponin had.

"Hey, give me a hand!" she yelled a some of her warriors, "Let's tip this down the steps. At the least it's going to cause them a problem getting up here and with luck it will take out a whole bunch of them as well."

The rest of the Amazons shouted taunts at the soldiers, "Roman swine!", "Caesar's dogs!", "Legion lackeys!", accompanied by vivid hand gestures all aimed at making them angry enough to charge up the steps to get at the mere handful of women who were there.

The optio, Petrus, tried to hold his men back, but they were tired, from the long ride they'd just had, and angry about being sent out to hunt for a couple of escaped slaves .. that was not work for the elite cavalry of the VIIth Legion! So the taunts of less than twenty Amazon warriors spurred them into an immediate, reckless assault, before they had properly formed up for such an attack.

"They're coming, yelled Kaylee eager for the fray.

Turra, and those helping her, bunched their muscles and heaved at the heavy weapon, sending it careering down the stone steps into the tightly packed soldiers ascending them. The Amazons cheered with glee as the Romans were either tumbled from the stairway, or crushed beneath the heavy wooden frame of the catapult.

The Amazons sent a second one down directly after the first, hoping the bulky weapons would lodge and create an obstruction that would make it easy to pick off any Romans foolish enough to attempt to clamber over it. The only problem was that it effectively scuttled the plans for going down and finding Xena.

The Amazon commander bit her lip as she considered what she should do. - *While we're here, we can keep a goodly portion of the Roman force off of Xena's back. That's got to give her and Gabrielle more chance of getting that boom down and then being able to get out as well.* - She threw a look down into the courtyard to see how the soldiers were doing. - *Reforming for a*

concerted attack, - she grinned. - Well if we play with them for a while we can always withdraw once I think Xena's had enough time to get her thing done. Yeah, - she grinned, - that's what we'll do! -

"We can work four abreast on the steps," Turra instructed. "Teams of two warriors with spears and two with swords. Keep the sons of whores on the other side of the blockade and rotate at regular intervals with the other sisters so no one gets too tired. Any questions?" she asked keeping one eye on the Romans as she waited for a response that didn't come, "Okay then, ladies .. lets get to it!"

Her blood rising at the prospect of battle, Turra positioned herself just behind the front rank, so she could keep an eye on the progress of the fight and be there to ensure the proper rotation as well as well as lend a spear over the other warrior's shoulders should it be necessary.

They had just successfully repulsed the third attack, although at some cost to themselves. Three warrior's were down with severe wounds that had to be roughly field dressed, but really needed the attention of a healer, and most of the other women had gashes and cuts that could stand some attention.

Turra took a deep breath and looked down at the enemy. They had taken far more casualties than their Amazon opponents, and their officer finally looked about ready to concede the fact that he wasn't going to be able to force his way over the wreckage of the ballista any time soon.

A natural halt in the battle occurred and many of the women took the chance to take deep draughts from the water barrel, while others wrapped a field dressing around a particularly bothersome cut. The commander, however studied the actions of her opponent and realised that the Romans were looking for a different way up to the parapet. If they managed to find ropes or ladders to climb, as well as force the attack up the steps, she could never hope to defend their position with so few warriors.

Sighing softly to herself, Turra sent a thought out to Xena, - *I hope you're ready to leave, Warrior Princess, because we've done all we can here to help you.* - Reluctantly, she gave the signal to pull back. She and two others would maintain a presence on the steps until the others had got the seriously wounded down to the foot of the tower, and then they would follow. - *I hope someone remembered to send the boats for us, or we'll be in real trouble.* -

Sheraya scrambled down the rope, back into the destroyed eating hall of the ship. The Amazons had managed to free Patroclese, and so she was finally able to give him a full examination to determine the extent of his injuries. Working quickly and methodically, she ran probing hands over her young colleagues legs and grunted with satisfaction when she found nothing broken.

Carefully checking over his torso, she found evidence of heavy bruising that was going to make him stiff and sore for a while, but nothing requiring treatment, other than a liniment to help draw the bruising out. She discovered that he had a break in his left forearm, but she judged it clean and would be easily treated with a splint and would heal well so long as he rested it.

Finally she carefully examined his head, finding a large knot on the back of his skull that accounted for his unconscious state. She checked his eyes and guessed he would have a heavy concussion when he came round, but all in all he was not in as bad shape as she had feared.

Pulling out a pair of long splints from her equipment, she swiftly set, immobilized and strapped the blonde haired man's broken arm and then motioned to the Amazons that he could be moved, "Take him to the captain's cabin. Eponin's already in there. Clear all the furnishings out and set up as many cots as you can. I have a feeling we're going to need them before this night is over."

The warrior's nodded and gently lifted Patroclese out of the way, then let two more of their number clear the remaining obstructions to the door, so that they were able to take the unconscious man down the passageway to the designated hospital area without hauling him through the hole in the deck.

As Patroclese was moved, Sheraya could hear the squeaking of the block as the rock that had pinned Joxer was lifted smoothly off of his legs. The healer took a deep breath before turning her attention to the harmless young man who, from the excited accounts of the children, had saved a six winters old girl called Charis from being crushed and almost certainly killed by the rock. The reward for his act of heroism could leave him a cripple for the rest of his life.

She waited until the stone had been manhandled away with the block, tackle and brace that had been used to lift it, before settling down beside the prone, unmoving body of the wannabe warrior.

A quick check of his upper extremities told her that she only had to be concerned about the damage to his legs. Turning her attention there, Sheraya surveyed the injuries seeking a place to start her ministrations. She winced as she saw the white of jagged bone sticking through the man's thigh. Blood pumped sluggishly through the wound to pool around his legs.

Taking her sharp knife, once again, she slit the seams of his trouser legs from ankle to hip, so that she could get free access to the area she needed to work on. Signalling three of the warriors over, she instructed, "Two of you hold him down, while you," she said pointing to third member of the trio, "pull his leg out with a strong and steady pressure .. don't let go of it until I tell you. I need to stitch the wound before I splint the leg."

Watching carefully as the three women did as she bade them, Sheraya repositioned the hands of the leg puller so that they had a strong grip around her patient's ankle. "Alright. Remember, now, a slow steady pressure and hold it steady when I tell you to."

She carefully observed the operation, watching intently as the bone slipped back within the encasing flesh and grated against it's broken half until Sheraya judged it to be in the correct position, "Now hold it while I stitch his leg up," she cautioned.

Working as quickly as she could, she removed some tiny fragments of splintered bone from the wound, before liberally dousing it with the cleansing fluid that Patroclese had been so appreciative of when he'd found it in the ships medical kit. Her unconscious patient tried to

- *Hey I'm an Amazon ... If I can't climb a wall and peek over it, without being caught by some flat footed Roman, I deserve everything I get!* -

- *And what about the featherheads with you?* - she pushed herself relentlessly.

- *I'll leave orders that they're to head back to the ship if there's trouble!* - was the pious response.

- *Oh yeah! Like they're gonna row off to safety abandoning their Queen and Queen Regent!* - she snorted with disgust at herself.

- *Malonda would!* - she growled petulantly. Then allowed a puzzled expression to creep onto her face, - *Now where the Hades did that idea come from?* - she asked herself, although the argumentative side of her brain was ominously silent. - *Damn!* - she cursed as another worry forced it's way onto her list of concerns.

She jerked herself back to her present situation as the keel of the boat scraped over the stony strand that covered the area around the rocky base of the tower. She cocked her head to one side as a familiar sound drifted down from the parapet area and she recognised the clash of steel amid the battle cries and taunts of conflict.

"Malonda! Hold here while I check to see what the situation is up there," she ordered.

The Chief Scout frowned, "That should be my job, Ephiny."

The Regent stiffened and glared at the other woman, "You do remember how to follow orders don't you?" she demanded in a formal frigid tone. - *What the Hades has gotten into me?* - she chided herself. - *That's Loni you're dressing down like a raw recruit!* -

The scouts face froze as she stiffly replied, "Of course my Queen."

Ephiny sighed, "I'm sorry, Loni," she apologised, "I'm a little out of sorts and I shouldn't have snapped at you .. but I do need to see what's happening up there myself, so just bear with me, okay?"

Malonda looked as if she wanted to argue with her ruler, but after she too had sighed she finally conceded, "Sure Eph .. just be careful, huh?"

"You got it!" agreed the Regent with a grin, before she headed for the wall and began a rapid, nimble ascent.

When she clambered over the wall she was greeted with the naked steel of two swords. A pair of Amazon warriors stood before her, holding up a badly wounded sister.

"I didn't think I was that bad a leader," she chuckled when she recognised Kaylee.

"Damn, Eph! I think you about scared twenty winter's growth out of me!" huffed the Amazon. "I guess this means that the boats are here .. we were a little worried about that."

"What's going on?" questioned the Regent as her eyes flickered over to where another trio were heading towards them.

"Strategic withdrawal," came the warrior's reply .. It's time to get the Hades out of here .. we think the Romans are about to get inventive."

"Xena?" she questioned shortly.

"No sign of her or the Queen .. but Hercules and Toris are looking for them, and I can't see a few hundred Romans being able to stand up to the Warrior Princess and the son of Zeus for long."

"That many?" questioned Ephiny in concern.

"Probably not .. we thinned them out a fair bit with the catapults before they could get into the tower," she grinned. The warrior began tying a rope around her wounded sister, "Let's get the injured out of here. I'm not sure how much longer Turra will be able to hold them off."

"Alright. Get everyone down to the boats .. I'll go and give Turra a hand," announced the blonde ruler, heading off along the parapet walkway. - *And try to figure out what we should do about our missing friends*, - her inner voice insisted.

When she reached Turra's position, she could tell at a glance that there was no way that she could get down into the fortification from there. The courtyard was full of busy Romans as they readied for a four pronged assault using ladders, ropes and the blocked stairway.

Glancing over her shoulder, Turra caught sight of Ephiny and shook her head, "I've just called the retreat, Eph. Get out of here."

"What about you?" the Regent asked, not liking to leave any of her people there.

"I'll be right behind you," grinned the assault commander. "Are the others out of here yet?"

Ephiny threw a glance along the wall, "The last one's just going down," she replied.

"C'mon then! Lets get out of here before we have a load of Roman's down our throats!" suggested Turra.

The rearguard trio, plus Ephiny sprinted along the walkway and reached the point where ropes had been left for them to use in their descent. With skilled expertise, the quartet rappelled down the lines and were back at the boats before the Romans had even reached the parapet.

"Loni," the Regent began, "Take all the wounded back to the ship and tell Nebula that I'll hold a boat just off shore here and wait for Xena and the others. The chain will be down before they get

The centurion smiled condescendingly at her. He waved a hand gesturing to the soldiers lined up behind him, "I hardly think you're in a fit state to take on me and my men .. I doubt that in your present condition that you'd be capable of taking on just me."

"Try me!" she gestured invitingly weaving her sword in a complex pattern before her.

"Don't think I wouldn't enjoy it, slave .. but you're wanted back alive, so I'm afraid we'll just have to do it the hard way." He gestured to his troops, "Take them."

The soldiers swarmed past the centurion, seeking to take the two women down under the press of their bodies. Xena met them head on, dealing out death as her sword snaked out before her with a speed that belied the eye. Beside her, Gabrielle stood her ground and dealt out her own brand of punishment as her staff flew through her hands, cracking any man who got within reach, on heads, legs and arms.

In truth the sheer amount of Roman soldiers hampered their own efforts as the crush they caused amongst their ranks allowed the two women to work their dangerous magic whilst barely taking any damage themselves. After the initial rush failed the Romans began to pull back to rethink their options.

"Use the nets!" ordered Flaccus as he saw his men repelled by their quarry.

Even as he gave the order, he became aware that something was wrong behind him. While his men once more went onto the attack, he turned to see two tall men working their way through the rear ranks of his troops. The first he recognised as the tawny haired concubine of the Amazon Queen and the other could be no other than the slave's brother .. the likeness was remarkable.

Seeing a way to end the heaving struggle going on around him, Flaccus drew his sword and advanced on Toris. - *Take the man captive, and the slave is yours along with the others!* - he told himself.

Xena was breathing hard. Her legs felt rubbery and she couldn't have explained how she had remained standing under the mass of men that pressed her. She knew that she was almost done for when a net had descended over her. Muscles in her injured back were screaming at her for the abuse she was giving them, and her arms was so tired that her sword felt like it was ten times heavier than it actually was. If it hadn't been for Gabrielle stepping up to cover her, while she fought her way clear of the mesh, then she knew that the Romans would have had her.

Finally throwing off the net, she had taken a moment to check the progress of the battle and had seen two welcome faces above the seething huddle, hacking their way towards where she and Gabrielle were under siege. Taking heart from the sight, Xena waded back into the fray allowing the bard to catch her breath after her heroic exertions.

A wave of soldiers descended upon her as she over extended herself, losing her focus as she caught sight of Flaccus advancing towards her brother. "NO!" she cried as fists and clubs tried to batter her to the ground where she could be subdued and chained.

Seeking the dark strength that was locked deep within her, Xena roared out a primal cry and threw the Romans away from herself, giving her the moments respite that she needed to draw her chakram from her belt. With unerring accuracy, she let the screaming weapon fly to bounce off two of the chamber's walls before it spun to connect perfectly with the centurion's sword as he raised it to strike pommel down at Toris, driving the weapon from Flaccus' hands as the chakram spun on to strike a soldier's helmet and ricochet back across the centurion's throat before returning to the Warrior Princess' hand!

Time seem to stand still for the centurion as he watched the chakram careen from his sword, across a short space to strike a helmet and tear back towards him. He could do nothing but observe as the razor sharp weapon sliced deeply through his throat, drawing his life's blood with it's passage. Strength seemed to ebb from him with each pump of his heart, that spread his thick crimson life out in a small fountain as he stumbled unnoticed to the floor.

With the deadly disk clutched in one hand, and her sword in the other, the warrior renewed her battle with the Romans who continued pressing towards her with unabated fervour, no matter how many of their comrades she injured or killed. She didn't have the time to watch as Flaccus fell lifeless to the floor of the bloody chamber, there was still fighting to be done.

Gabrielle, struggled on too, uncertain how they were managing to prevail against so many. She could see that Xena was fighting on stubborn willpower alone, but she knew death was preferable to being returned to Caesar's tender mercies. She hadn't realised that Toris and Hercules had joined the party, until she saw where Xena sent her chakram flying across the crowded room. The sight of the two men gave her the heart and the strength to keep battling. - *With Hercules here, we're gonna win!* - she told herself as she rammed her staff into a Roman's gut.

She saw Xena make a little space for herself and once again spun the chakram into the fray. The spinning silver and gold disc, rebounded between Roman helmets, leaving the soldiers dizzy, disorientated and easy prey, before it spun away towards the mechanism for the chain boom, hit a lever and, to the whirl of machinery, returned once again to the warrior's outstretched hand.

>From that point is was only a case of mopping up the last of the Roman's before the battle was over. The four Greeks stood breathing deeply amidst the carnage. Xena bent at the waist and took gulping deep breaths, the agony of the fight telling on her overstretched reserves leaving her feeling weak and unsteady.

The bard moved to her side and put a steadying arm around her friend, "Good to see you guys," she gave a tired smile. "I thought we were in trouble for a moment there."

"We still could be," answered Hercules. "There's plenty of Romans around, and it's only a matter of time before they find us."

"Time .. to get .. out .. of .. here," panted Xena desperately trying to push her way through the black pain that sought to drag her into unconsciousness.

Hercules stooped and pulled a couple of cloaks free and then a couple of Roman helmets. "Put those on," he told them. Maybe we can sneak out of the front door. We can be injured soldiers going to get assistance ... Zeus knows that there's enough Romans with wounds around here to make the story plausible."

The two women slowly did as the demi-god suggested. Gabrielle, although uninjured, was feeling the effects of the heavy fighting and was almost as shaky as Xena. Once disguised, the four made their way cautiously up the spiral stairwell and moved slowly through the tower, searching for the exit. Remarkably enough, no one thought to question them and so it was with something akin to amazement that they found themselves outside of the fortification.

"Head along .. the strand," hissed Xena. "There .. should be a .. boat waiting." She staggered and was only prevented from falling by Hercules' strong arm.

"I think we'll make better time if I carry you," he said tenderly as he scooped her into his arms. "You've put your body through more than enough for one day."

The warrior didn't have to strength to argue with the big hero, and with his strong protective arms wrapped around her, she finally allowed the darkness to claim her. Hercules smiled gently down into her pale, beautiful face and moved with sure footed strides along the base of the tower towards where he hoped a boat awaited them.

Chapter Seventy Six: Tell Caesar!

Eponin lay unconscious in one of the twelve cots that had been crowded into the captain's cabin. Being the first to occupy the impromptu infirmary, Poni had been given a bed that stretched away from the stern lights (the window that took up the back end of the ship). There were three other beds there, the one to the Weapons Master's right, that stood in the corner, was conspicuously devoid of an occupant. To her left lay an equally unconscious Patroclese and to his left lay Joxer, who whimpered in pain as he began to come round.

Six of the other cots also held patients. In one was the boy, Mattin, who had collapsed on deck after all the children had been safely removed from the devastation of the mess. He had sustained a concussion when the rock had plunged through the planking, having been hit a glancing blow by a beam as it crashed down. Sheraa had decided to keep him in the infirmary until he had recovered.

Three other beds were taken by warriors who had been with Eponin's raiding party. Their wounds were more serious than any of them were willing to own up to and, although not life threatening, the commanding healer had made it clear that she expected the trio to remain in bed under her jurisdiction until further notice. Having had a tiring night, the warriors were soundly asleep .. this condition aided somewhat by one of Sheraa's potions.

The final two beds had the sleeping, exhausted forms of Iolaus and Autolycus, whom Sheraa had judged need to be kept under observation, after they had come so close to drowning earlier in the evening. The fact that Ephiny had asked the healer to keep an eye on the pair and make sure that they didn't try and pull any heroics and get in her hair might also have had something to do

with them being confined to the infirmary. But whatever the reason, both men were soon deeply asleep, betrayed by their exhausted bodies and the sleeping potion that the healer had slipped them.

The only other current occupants of the cabin were Lasca and Jade who had pulled nursing duty. Neither of them particularly wanted the task, but neither of them were stupid .. the healer had a blistering tongue and ways to make you feel like children rather than full grown members of the Royal Guard! It didn't help that Sheraya had delivered both of the young women and was not adverse to making them squirm with the stories of their birth's, or some of the less pleasurable antics of their respective childhood's that had often led directly to the infirmary and the healer's care. So the pair had accepted the job they were given and now watched over Eponin with increasing concern.

Lasca carefully swabbed off the perspiration that glistened unhealthily over the waxen skin of the Weapons Master, "She's getting worse, Jade," she muttered to her older companion. Concern showed in her brown eyes as she looked up at the other woman.

Running a hand over Eponin's brow to bush the unconscious woman's sweat soaked bangs away from her eyes she frowned at the heat that she felt burning there. The woman twitched beneath her hands, her lips moving in delirium as she struggled with the raging fever. "C'mon Poni," she softly encouraged, "You gotta fight it. You're not going to let a little old infection beat you are you?" A twinkle lit her unusual brown eyes that were adorned with amber flecks, "Xena wouldn't let something like this beat her."

The pair could almost sense the Weapons Master gathering herself to try and stave off the infection that had laid her low. If there was one thing guaranteed to engage Eponin's competitive spirit, it was mention of the Warrior Princess. The two might be friends, but the urge to best Xena in something .. anything .. constantly drove Poni to push her capabilities.

The young blonde, continued to bathe her commander, attempting to keep the fever from getting too high, "Think we should get Sheraya?" She glanced over to where she could see Joxer struggling to move, the pain gradually prodding him awake, "He might need something too," she motioned with her head towards the man. "Yeah!" agreed the older warrior, shaking her dark brown, curly hair. "I'll go get her. She was just checking over the last of the wounds that the others took in the fighting."

Throwing a quick worried look at Eponin, she darted across to the cabin door and was quickly gone on her errand, leaving the girl alone with the injured. She looked up from her task when she heard a noise behind her, "Shouldn't you be in bed?" she asked pointedly of Mattin.

"I just thought you might need some help," the boy replied. Lasca wasn't much older than he was, she couldn't be much more than sixteen summers, which made him wonder how she could be counted as a warrior in her own right.

The blonde looked at him with piercingly direct eyes, "Go back to bed, boy," she instructed him imperiously, "Sheraya will be here in a few moments and she'll take care of things .. besides she'll blister both our hides with her tongue if you're not in that cot when she gets here."

"You afraid of her?" asked Mattin, "I thought you were supposed to be a warrior?"

"I am a warrior!" retorted Lasca defensively, well aware of her youth and lack of inches .. in fact she and Jade were only slightly taller than Queen Gabrielle and very conscious of the fact that they were on the short side for full grown Amazons. "Go back to bed, boy, before I put you back." She snapped, hating it when her hard won place amongst the warriors was challenged in any way.

"Mattin," he told her calmly.

"What?" she demanded totally confused.

"My name is Mattin. Not boy. Not slave. Not any more. The captain said I'm free now." His face was white with strain and tension as he gently rebuked her. "So I'd like it if you called me Mattin."

Lasca drew a deep breath. With sudden intuition she realised that the boy, - *Mattin*, - she corrected herself firmly, might be as touchy about his situation as she was hers. "I'm sorry, you're right, .. Mattin," she told him with a slight smile, "But you still need to get back in your bed before Sheraya gets here, or you'll be sorry."

Smiling in return, the slim ginger haired youth, carefully made his way back to his cot, commenting, "She's a terror, isn't she? Not like Patroclese," he told her as he slipped beneath the covers and sent a concerned look at the Roman healer. "He's so kind and gentle."

"Hrrmmph!" snorted the Amazon contemptuously, "If it wasn't for him, we wouldn't have to be here, and Eponin wouldn't have been hurt," she told him, anger underlying her words.

Mattin smiled sadly, "But if it wasn't for Patroclese, I'd still be a slave in Caesar's house along with my friends."

Unsure of how she could reply to that, Lasca just looked at him and was saved from having to comment by the entrance of Sheraya. The healer threw a look in Mattin's direction and the lad scrunched down in his bed, feeling rather intimidated by the brusque woman. She nodded her approval of his action and moved across to where Eponin lay, trailed by Jade.

"How's she doing?" asked the healer gruffly as she felt the raging fever that the Weapons Master had developed.

Lasca shrugged. She wasn't a healer's apprentice and she knew little about medicine other than what she had been obliged to learn, in classes, about field dressings and personal care of wounds. "She's getting hotter," she ventured inanely. Sheraya's contemptuous glare silenced her.

"We've bathed her to try and keep her cool like you told us," Jade explained, "but her temperature keeps on climbing and she seems to be delirious now. She's been muttering about cooking, and you know how Ep hates anything to do with that. And she keeps twitching like she's trying to fight someone off."

As she listened to what the warrior was saying, Sheraya unwound the bandage and carefully inspected the injury which was puffy and showing definite signs of infection. Sighing deeply, the healer extracted her sharp knife from her kit and cut open the wound, allowing the putrid muck to drain from it.

"Hold her down," she instructed the two warriors, who bore similar looks of revulsion at the proceedings, particularly the stench from the wound. When the pair had a firm grip on the Weapons Master, Sheraya used a little more of the cleansing elixir that she had purloined from Nebula's medical supplies and grimaced as Eponin's eyes shot open and she bellowed in agony.

"Ares balls, woman! Are you trying to kill me? You ham fisted excuse for a healer!" she screamed before lapsing back into unconsciousness.

Jade and Lasca had fought mightily to keep the struggling patient pinned down until she passed out again. They passed a look between each other that clearly stated "How do we get ourselves into these things!"

As the healer once more bandaged the wound, she instructed, "Continue bathing her with cool water, Lasca. Jade I'm going to make up a tea and I want you to make sure she drinks it. It should help bring her temperature down and keep her from thrashing about too much."

"That's gotta help," muttered Lasca, who quickly averted her eyes when Sheraya turned her withering stare at the girl. "Sorry," she muttered.

The healer turned her attention to Joxer, walking over to the young man who had just about returned to consciousness. She checked his brow for fever and felt for his pulse, pleased to note a steady, regular rhythm. She thumbed an eyelid and nodded to herself as it's pair flickered open to inspect her. "How are you doing, Joxer," she asked in a gentle tone.

"Depen's" he answered groggily, "'m I dead?"

"Fraid not," smiled Sheraya.

"An'one get th'nummer of th' chariot tha' hit me?" he asked, trying to hide the excruciating pain he was feeling in his legs.

The healer patted him on the shoulder as his eyes slipped closed once again. Looking at Jade she said, "I'll mix up some herbs to numb his pain. It will most likely put him to sleep again, but in his condition that won't be a bad thing."

"How much should he have?" asked the warrior concern showing in her strangely coloured eyes.

"Get him to drink the entire cup and then try to get him to drink another of plain water. Keep an eye on him and let me know if there's any change in his condition." She checked the puncture wound in his thigh and was pleased to note that it seemed free from infection. Re-bandaging it, she told Jade, "If he starts to develop a fever let me know at once."

"I will Sheraya," she agreed, nodding her head and making her brown curls bob. She watched as the healer made a quick inspection of the other occupants of the infirmary before heading to the galley to brew the two separate herbal infusions for her most critically injured patients.

"Hey, Sprout," grinned Jade as she watched her younger friend tend Eponin when Sheraya had left, "I think you missed you calling."

Lasca's face darkened as she glared at the other warrior. Sprout was a nickname she'd been forced to put up with because of her youth and size. The other members of the Royal Guard called her it all the time and she had learned to accept it. But it galled her when Jade used it, especially as the woman was shorter than she was! a malicious twinkle entered her eyes as a fitting response sprang to her lips, "Just one of my many skills ... Tweaky!"

It was Jade's turn to feel annoyed, "What did you call me?"

"Tweaky," responded the young blonde with a giggle, "Cos I heard that you were always getting your ears tweaked for being in trouble!"

"Why you little brat!" growled Jade menacingly.

"Un, uh, ah!" grinned Lasca shaking a finger at her friend, "Not in the infirmary .. the patients need their rest."

About to ignore that admonition, Tweaky .. um, Jade .. felt a slight lurch under her feet. a quick glance through the stern windows confirmed her initial assumption. "We're moving," she grinned at Lasca. "Xena must have got the boom down."

"Lets hope that they all get back here safely then, huh?" answered the other Amazon.

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Malonda gave the signal to pull away from the shore and head back to the ship. She was reluctant to leave Ephiny, she was concerned that the Regent was taking too many chances for a cause that should have very little to do with the Amazons. She looked at the three critically injured warriors laying in the cramped conditions of the boat, and then at the four or five others with fairly serious wounds, - *Why should Amazons have to spend their lifeblood to help the Bitch from Tartarus! Amazons owe her nothing! And if our Queen wants to traipse around after the big bad warlord, anything she gets into is her own fault! Amazons can't afford to waste lives in this way!* -

She scowled belligerently back towards where she could see Ephiny's boat outlined in slowly lightening sky. - *We could lose a lot of sisters here .. all so we can set free a murdering bitch*

who was finally getting some of the justice she deserved! - She shook her head and concentrated on getting her boatload of responsibilities back to the ship.

- It's bad enough that Ephiny and Eponin want to fall all over themselves to help the heroic Warrior Princess, - she sneered to herself. - But when I look at these women and see the worship in their eyes for the bitch .. it just makes my blood boil! -

The bulk of the ship loomed over them before she realised, "Drop us a line," she growled, failing to hide her annoyance, although everyone thought she was frustrated with Ephiny staying behind. "Tell Sheraya with have injured here."

Once the boat had been secured, Malonda climbed powerfully up the ships side and swung herself over the rail. a quick scan of the deck told her that Nebula was beside the wheel, and she strode over to where the captain stood. "How's it going?" she questioned with a commanding air, flipping her long braided hair back over her shoulder.

The tall pirate gave the chief scout a dangerous look. "Fine!" she snarled, "We'll be ready to sail as soon as that chain is lowered! Where's Eph?" she demanded.

Malonda gave her a dark glare. She didn't like Nebula. Didn't like her assertiveness over Amazons, or the assumption that she could order even the highest ranking of them around. She had spent too long, and worked too hard, gaining her position to be happy with anyone, let alone a jumped up pirate, overriding her authority. "She stayed behind in case the 'Warrior Princess'," she said the title as though she were biting into lemons, "and the others, manage to get out of the tower and need a ride out to us." Malonda glowered back at the fortification, "She said to take your ship out of the river and they'd row out to it once she either had the others, or were sure that they weren't going to make it back.

"What are their chances like?" questioned Nebula reining in her dislike of the scout for the sake of maintaining the peace.

Malonda shrugged with irritating artfulness, "With the Destroyer of Nations and the son of Zeus in there, I'd bet on them against the Romans .. any sane person who knows of them would."

Nebula bit down on the urge to teach the Amazon a lesson she wouldn't soon forget. She knew that Malonda was good at what she did and was a trusted member of the women warrior's leadership group, but she found it impossible to like her. There was something about the scout that made the pirate's teeth itch. The woman was ambitious and believed in her right to command. Both normally good traits in a leader. But underneath the surface, Nebula could feel a current of ruthlessness that made her feel that Malonda might have more on her agenda than she was letting anyone know.

'All we can do is wait then," she growled, watching the sky as the false dawn lightened it significantly. It wouldn't be long before they were seeing the first blush of sunlight rising above the town to the east. "If they don't get that chain down .. and soon .. we won't be going anywhere for a long, long time ... if ever!"

She gave him a long look as he pushed his way through the shifting stones, "That was low," she told him.

"I know," he agreed, "but true."

Her green eyes hardened, "You do understand that I could quite easily manage this walk?"

"Of course," he acknowledged with a light grin, knowing that she would have struggled valiantly even if she'd been close to collapse.

"Just so long as we're agreed on that," she insisted.

"Absolutely," agreed Toris, working to keep a straight face.

"Fine .. then for Xena's sake, I'll let you carry me." Gabrielle accepted the situation, settling securely into his surprisingly strong, and comfortable, arms.

The tall, dark haired man felt strangely protective of the bard as she nestled into him. When he had first met Gabrielle, he had found her unrelenting cheerfulness in the face of adversity, irritating in the extreme. Yet at the same time he had recognised, within her, a natural courage and determination that he felt himself to be severely lacking in. He had envied her for it but, eventually, over time, as he got to know her through their occasional meetings and the many letters that she had sent to Cyrene (to keep his mother apprised of what was happening to Xena) he had come to respect and appreciate her uniqueness.

Toris felt strangely comfortable with the honey blonde head resting tiredly on his shoulder. The bard's hair gave off the soft scent of a summer flower garden that he had come to associate with her. He wished that she and Xena could spend more time in Amphipolis so that he could get to know her better. That thought almost made him stumble to a stop!

- *Why would I want to get to know Gabrielle better?* - he questioned himself, looking down at the bard's face. Her eyes had closed and she had that relaxed, near sleep look on her features. A gentle look stole over his face, - *She is beautiful.* - He gazed at the younger woman wondering what he could possibly offer her. - *She leads such an exciting life with Xena. She's a bard and an Amazon Queen. I'll never be able to compete with any of that.* - He shook his head at his own foolish musings. - *Still I can dream,* - he told himself as he clung to his yearnings.

He continued on, mindful of his precious burden, careful not to jar her in his struggle against the shifting shingle. Ahead he saw Hercules reach the end of the strand and he seemed to be peering out into the murky light of the false dawn, looking for their friends, whom they hoped would be waiting out in the river to come and pick them up.

For the first time since they had emerged from the watchtower, Toris sent his glance across the water to look for their ship and was almost surprised to see that it no longer rode the middle of the river, barred from exiting the Tiber by the chain that Xena had dealt with.

Moving to Hercules' side, the raven haired man asked quietly, trying not to disturb his sister or her friend, "Are we going to have to swim? I don't think either Xena or Gabrielle are up to it."

The demi-god shook his head, his tawny hair whipping about his face, "There's a boat coming in for us," he answered, nodding in the direction of row boat moving towards their place on the shore.

"That's a relief," sighed Toris. "Can you see the ship?"

Hercules gestured in the direction of the open sea to where they could both pick out a couple of lights on a dark shape, "It shouldn't take long to get out there to it."

"How's Xena doing?" he asked concerned about his sister. She'd collapsed twice, now, in one night and it worried him, having never seen it happen before.

"She's been pushing herself too hard," the big man told him. "She really should have stayed in bed after her wounds were attended. But you know your sister."

"Yeah! Stubborn!" agreed the other man with a grin.

A noise back along the strand drew their attention. Both men stiffened, turning to see that a contingent of Romans were hurrying across the shifting stones heading in their direction as quickly as they could manage. A quick check told them that Ephiny would be with them before the soldiers got there. However, getting the boat away from shore before the legionaries could get to it would be a close run thing.

As soon as the boat reached them, Hercules lifted the recumbent form of the Warrior Princess between the thwarts of the boat as Toris did the same with Gabrielle. "Get them out of here Ephiny," he told the Regent. "I'll hold off the Romans and swim out to you once you're clear."

"You can't do that alone," objected the blonde Amazon, as her warriors began manoeuvring the boat around so that they could pull away from the danger. "There's too many of them .. even for you."

"He won't be alone," Toris interjected grimly. "Just take care of Gabrielle and my sister, Ephiny."

"You sure," Hercules raised a questioning eyebrow at the other man.

"C'mon, no time to argue," replied Toris, stepping out of the water and engaging the first of the Romans to reach them.

"Hercules," growled the Regent clutching at the demi-god's arm. "Make sure you both join us safely .. I don't want to have to face Xena if we lose either one of you."

"Get out of here, Eph," the demi-god emphasised his order with a shove on the boats stern, that propelled it out towards the sea a fair distance. "We'll be with you before you know it."

Turning, he waded into the growing battle as Toris bravely battled the odds to give the Amazons time to get his sister away to safety. Grabbing a long piece of driftwood, Hercules charged into the fray from the side, ploughing the soldiers under in a show of brute strength and tenacity. A few judiciously placed blows cleared a small breathing space for the two men, and seeing that the longboat was well away from the shore, Hercules decided it was time for Toris to join the Amazon warriors. So taking him by the scruff of his neck and the seat of his pants, he launched Xena's brother in the direction of the women, knowing they'd pick him up.

"HERCULES! NOOOO!" yelled Toris as he hurtled through the air, over the water, to land with a solid splash no more than ten feet from the rowing boat.

As the demi-god watched in satisfaction, he failed to see a Roman sneaking up behind him with a lump of driftwood of his own. The soldier brought the chunky lump of timber down on the big man's shoulders with a solid, "**Thunk!**", expecting to see his victim slump unconscious to the ground. His jaw dropped when he realised it wasn't going to happen.

Hercules shrugged his shoulders a bit and turned to face his assailant, "That wasn't nice," he said in a disappointed voice, before unleashing a thunderbolt of a right, sending the man sailing back into his advancing comrades.

Deciding that it was time to go and rejoin his own friends, the son of Zeus threw a couple more soldiers into the growing scrum, tangling them into a hectic mess, before telling them in a loud clear voice, "Tell Caesar that if he messes with my friends anymore .. I'll be coming back .. and I'll pull Rome down around his ears!"

Having left his message the demi-god, waded out into the river, before diving fully into the water and, with strong powerful strokes, swam out to where Ephiny and her Amazons awaited him.

Chapter Seventy Seven: A Searing of Flesh

Nebula had backed the mainsail so that the pressure of the wind held them immobile against the force of the outgoing tide. With the sun cresting now on the eastern horizon, she was able to identify the longboat heading towards them through the choppy waters closer to shore. Her keen eyesight enabled her to pick out the easily identifiable figures of Hercules and Toris, but none of the women in the boat stood out from the others, and she was absolutely certain that she couldn't detect the unmistakable figure of Xena.

"Damn!" she swore, hoping that nothing had gone wrong. If Xena and Gabrielle had remained trapped in Roman hands then everything that they had done had been for nothing.

She glared moodily up towards the prow where a work team were busy trying to rig some repairs to cover the hole in the decking. The last thing that they needed was a voyage back to Greece with a gaping hole that was open to the elements letting water into the ship where water was never intended to run in any quantity.

So far they seemed to be doing a pretty fair job. It appeared that all Amazons were trained, in their youth and early childhood, in many skills to find out where their talents lay, and because of

such a broad education, each Amazon child picked up at least a rudimentary knowledge of many useful crafts. Once they reached their fourteenth winter, they were channeled into the career they best suited, learning their craft in far greater detail.

Nebula knew very little about the Amazon's training concepts, but she appreciated the fact that the warriors had the knowledge and skills to use some of the timber, kept for repairs, that had been hauled up from the hold for the job. By the time the longboat reached them, the damage to the deck would have been dealt with, and she would feel far more confident about facing the voyage back to Greece.

Glancing back to the rowboat, the pirate was pleased to see that it had made good time. "Get ready to cast them a line," she called to a couple of women. "Get everyone on board, and that boat hoisted and stowed as quickly as possible. I want to be away from here as soon as everyone is on deck. Topmen get aloft and be ready to set the sail when I give the order."

Seeing that all was in preparedness, the captain moved to the rail and watched as the boat came alongside. She could see two still forms laying between the thwarts and recognised both Xena and Gabrielle. - *Well at least we have them, - she told herself. - It remains to be seen whether we're taking back the living or the dead. -*

As the longboat bumped gently against the timbers of 'Wave Dancer's' hull, Nebula saw the bard stir, but the warrior remained unmoving. Amazons began the climb up to the deck, leaving Ephiny, Hercules and Toris to deal with the other two women. The demi-god lifted Xena's unresponsive body with casual ease, while the Regent steadied the boat as well as she could. The only way for the big man to make the climb with his burden, was to throw her over his shoulder, leaving his hands free to haul himself up with.

As Hercules began to make his ascent, Toris moved to Gabrielle's side. It appeared as if he intended transporting the bard the same way as her warrior partner was being moved, but the honey blonde had other ideas. She struggled, a little shakily, to her feet and faced Xena's brother with a grim look of determination on her face.

"I can do it, Toris. I was just a bit tired before, but I'm fine now," she told him firmly, although she added a smile to soften her quick words.

"If you're sure, Gabrielle," relented the raven haired man, his blue eyes unable to hide the flash of disappointment he felt. He doubted that he'd have a lot of chance to hold the bard in his arms during the voyage home.

"Positive," assured the Amazon Queen, but gentled the impact by telling him, "However, I'd be grateful if you could climb beside me. I'm not really keen on heights or climbing, and I still feel a little tired."

The radiant grin that Toris graced her with was worth the concession of her asking for his help. - *Besides, - she told herself, - it's true. I'm exhausted and climbing, even just the side of the ship, makes me feel kind of sick .. and being on the sea doesn't help that either. -*

When Gabrielle was ready, Toris moved to her side and slowed the pace of his ascent to her speed. He was ready to offer a steadying hand if she needed it and was happy to think that she'd been comfortable enough with him to ask his assistance in even this small matter.

Ephiny was able to allow free reign to the smirk that had forced its way onto her face. - *Gonna be an interesting ride home*, - she snickered to herself as she thought about Toris, Iolaus and Joxer all vying for her Queen's attention, while Xena had Autolycus and Hercules mooning over her. - *Not only that*, - she told herself, - *but I just know that there is going to be trouble in the infirmary*. -

Xena had never been a patient of Sheraya, and so two of the most indomitable wills she had ever met had never come into conflict before. - *I just hope Hercules remembers to remove all of Xena's weapons from within her reach!* - she struggled not to chuckle as she climbed the ship's side and swung herself over the railing.

As soon as the Regent was aboard, the Amazon deck hands set to work hauling the longboat up on deck to quickly hustle it away and stow it. While they were engaged in that task, the topmen, dropped the sail and re-aligned the rigging before hoisting the canvass once more so that 'Wave Dancer' could head away from the coast of Italia and Rome as swiftly as possible.

Ephiny watched as Toris and Gabrielle immediately made for the companionway that led down to the Captain's cabin .. now the ship's infirmary. She knew that their immediate concern would be to find out just how bad Xena's injuries were. She frowned as she realised that she hadn't had the chance to warn them about Joxer and Patroclese being hurt.

She sighed, - *Well, they'll find out for themselves in a few moments*. - She shook her blonde curls and headed towards where she could see Nebula and Malonda waiting for her. - *Is it me*, - she wondered, - *or did the temperature just drop to somewhere below freezing?* - She glanced at the two women all too aware of the frigid attitudes that they were displaying. - *Now what?* - she growled mentally. - *Don't we have enough problems without these two starting a war between themselves*. -

"How are things going here?" she asked with a smile, hoping to warm the atmosphere a little.

"Now that you're aboard we can set sail for home," the pirate answered flatly. Then seeing that Ephiny was attempting to cut across the coldness between her and Malonda, she softened her tone a little and asked, "Is there anywhere you particularly want to go? Or should I just set a course for Acanthus?"

The Regent considered. Going back to the port that they had set sail from was, in a way, the logical thing to do, it was close to Amazon lands as well as being reasonably near Potidaea. However, she was fairly certain that Caesar was aware of where she had sailed from, and may just guess that they'd return there. On top of that, she wasn't too sure that Gabrielle, or Xena would want to be too close to the bard's former home in case they felt duty bound to visit her parents .. something that was always fraught with tension, or so Ephiny understood.

Finally she queried, "Can your ship navigate the Strymon River?"

"I've done it once or twice before," admitted Nebula with a puzzled frown. "Why?"

Ephiny smiled, "I think the best place to head for is Amphipolis. It's as good a choice as any I know .. and I've heard that one of the inns there has this great cook."

Malonda shook her head and gave a snort of disgust before throwing a look at Ephiny and telling her gruffly, "I have rota's to arrange. With Poni out of action, I need to make sure our warriors keep their skills up to the mark."

The blonde Regent gave her chief scout a hard look, "You do that, Malonda," she replied firmly and with more than an edge of hardness to her tone. "We may still have some fighting to do and I want the warriors at their peak!"

"My Queen," answered the scout sourly, offering a formal bow as she withdrew.

The Amazon ruler shook her head in exasperation, "Damn the woman. What's gotten in to her?"

Nebula, who'd been setting course, allowed 'Dancer' to stretch before the wind. A racer off the leash and happy to run. As she turned the wheel a point to starboard, she said quietly, "Not too happy about getting Xena free, is she?"

A harsh retort was on the Regent's lips, but she stilled the words before she voiced a sigh (which she seemed to be doing a lot of lately) and looked at the pirate who had become a friend on this strange adventure. She shook her head slightly and, finally, answered softly, "No .. she's not. I hope that I'm not going to have a major problem with her when I get back to Themiscyra."

Not looking at the blonde, the other woman concentrated her attention on the fill of the sail and her course, however, she asked another very pertinent question, "You got a lot of Amazons who don't like the Warrior Princess' relationship with your Queen?"

Ephiny bit her lip wondering if she should talk about a subject that she hadn't even fully broached with Gabrielle and had said nothing at all about it to Xena yet, "More than I'd like. Not enough to be a major threat .. I hope," she replied, moving over to lean on the rail and watch Ostia fall behind their port bow. She squinted back at the river mouth, at the wide gap between the two watchtowers and stiffened as a cry came down from the top of the mainmast.

"Deck there!"

"What do you see?" shouted back Nebula.

"Sail ho!" reported the lookout, pointing back towards Ostia.

"How many?" demanded the pirate, a concerned look etched on her brow.

Sheraya looked up, from where she was administering a herbal medicine to Eponin, as the demi-god shouldered through the cabin door. Her attention went immediately to the unconscious woman that he carried and her eyes directed the son of Zeus to the empty bed in the corner of the room.

Carefully wiping away the residue of the mixture from Poni's mouth, Sheraya saw the big tawney haired man gently lay his burden down upon the designated cot, and smooth away her dark bangs from her face with a soft intimate gesture. It was obvious to the watching healer that the demi-god was exhibiting more than just friendship in his attitude and she had to fight a sentimental grin that threatened to crack her normally stern features.

As she stood, her musings were interrupted by the arrival of an exhausted looking Amazon Queen and Toris, who shot concerned glances to where his sister lay while keeping a careful eye on the young woman he was escorting. Their entrance was enough to stamp out the grin that had started to emerge and replace it with a sharp frown. Sheraya had work to do and she didn't need a lot of fussing relatives and friends gathered around her while she did it. Having Xena as a patient was going to be trial enough for her.

Drawing a deep breath, the Amazon healer used her firmest tone and told them, "All right. Everyone out so that I can get on with my job. There's no room in here for spectators."

"But ..." started three voices together, unwilling to be forced from the room.

"But me no buts," interrupted Sheraya uncompromisingly. "There's hardly room to turn around in here as it is without three more bodies taking up room, so out with the lot of you. I have work to do and you'll just be in my way! Go and find someone else to bother."

Although the men were visibly intimidated by the stern faced Amazon, Gabrielle told herself that she wasn't, - *I'm Queen of the Amazon's*, - she reminded herself firmly. - *I can overrule her, right?* - she questioned. - *Right!* - she answered herself, although she felt a distinct lack of confidence in her ability to command the healer in anything. However, she wasn't about to give up without trying, so she gathered her resolve, as she registered both Hercules and Toris retreating under Sheraya's rigid glare, and prepared to issue her declaration that she was staying right where she was.

"I said out," the healer told her sternly, before she could protest.

"But I can help!" pleaded Gabrielle, inwardly cringing at her lack of queenly resolve. She should have been commanding, not pleading like some child that wanted something an adult refused to give, "Xena's taught me a lot about healing."

Sheraya eyed her young monarch critically. She could see the dark rings forming around her eyes and the exhausted set to her shoulders. She was aware that the bard had substantial medical skills that she could use with all the patients that needed attention, but none of it would be any use unless she got some rest first. "Go and get some sleep, my Queen," she told Gabrielle in a tone

that brooked no argument, "Maybe after you've slept you can come back and help here. But until you've rested you'll be no use to anyone, me, yourself, or Xena and these others."

"But ..." tried the honey haired woman again.

"I said no buts," growled Shera in a tone that made the bard feel like she was six again and being scolded by her mother. "Get out of here and get some sleep ... now!" barked the healer.

Gabrielle found herself outside the infirmary door before she had time to even realise that her feet had carried her there of their own accord. She looked up and found Hercules and Toris looking quizzically at her, "What?" she demanded.

"Are all Amazons like that?" asked the demi-god after a few moments of stunned disbelief.

"You have no idea," muttered Gabrielle as she went to try and find somewhere to sleep knowing that she had no chance of getting back to her injured friend's side until she had shaken off some of her tiredness.

The two men looked at each other and shrugged before returning to deck to find out what was happening up there.

Shera watched the door closed then turned her attention to the unconscious Warrior Princess. Sighing, she wondered just how much of her patience was going to be frayed over the next few days with both Xena and Eponin as patients. She shook her head and cautioned herself to keep a grip on her temper.

Gesturing with her head, she beckoned Lasca and Jade over to her side and instructed, "Strip her out of all her clothes so that I can examine her ... and make sure that you get all of her weapons out of here and safely stowed somewhere out of sight. She's going to be hard enough to cope with without giving her unnecessary advantages."

Jade approached the unconscious warrior with distinct reluctance. She glared at Lasca who seemed to be hanging back letting her older compatriot get into the firing line first. Both young Amazons knew, only too well, just how painful it could be to approach an unconscious Xena.

It had been about a year after Gabrielle had become the Amazon heir. The warrior and the bard had been travelling, but were heading for Themiscyra after Melosa had invited them to the Festival of Artemis, making it clear in her invitation that non-appearance was not a viable option for Gabrielle. That, consequently, meant that Xena would be sure to attend as, with the trouble that they'd been having, the Warrior Princess was not about to leave the bard without her protection.

Therefore, the pair had arrived in the city some two days before the feast and festivities was due to start, and although the bard seemed happy enough to be there amongst her adopted people, Xena looked far from content about the situation ... and as all Amazons soon learned, an unhappy Warrior Princess was a disaster looking to happen.

They had been greeted by Melosa, who was gratified to see the young princess return and to note that she had matured, somewhat, since she had last seen her. It was very evident, however, that the raven haired warrior with her, was not full of festival spirit and the Queen had been seen to frown at the brooding presence of the ex-Destroyer of Nations.

Gabrielle soon got into the spirit of the festival, eager to learn all she could about her adopted people, and the Amazons were equally keen to teach her. All through the day after their arrival, the brooding menace of Xena hung like a cloud over the preparations for the festival. Finally, the bard had had enough and exchanged some pointed words with her friend.

"Xena, what's the matter with you. Can't you enjoy a little relaxation time? We've been chasing around sorting everyone's problems out .. don't you think we deserve a little vacation?"

"Gabrielle," growled her warrior friend.

"No. I'm being serious here, Xena. You've got to learn to relax a little .. try and enjoy yourself for a change." She scowled at the dark woman before her, and then tried a smile with the puppy dog, pleading eyes that she knew the her friend couldn't resist. "Please Xena.

For my sake."

Throwing her hands up into the air, the warrior muttered some choice oaths before telling the bard, "You know how much I 'enjoy' festivals!"

Gabrielle nodded her head. She did indeed know that Xena hated large crowds .. she also knew that the Warrior Princess hated anything to do with the gods, so there were two big strikes against this festival in her eyes. - Okay, - then she thought, - what does Xena like to do? -

A smile sparkled in her eyes almost immediately, "I heard Eponin saying that there was a really good fishing hole about a candlemark north of here."

"Really?" enquired the raven haired woman beginning to brighten immediately.

"Uh huh," affirmed the bard, "I also heard Ephiny saying that Poni really hates festivals too." She watched in amusement as Xena hurried off. "Hey where you going?" she had called after the retreating figure.

"To see a Weapons Master about a fish," was the returned answer.

It had of course been quite a funny sight to behold, to see a weakly protesting Eponin being almost bodily dragged from the city by an eager Warrior Princess who had made it pointedly clear that Poni WAS going to show her the fishing hole for the duration of the celebrations.

The gloomy atmosphere that had been hanging over the city immediately dispersed and everyone had devoted their time to preparing for some hard partying.

At this time, Lasca had still been a junior, although the time had been drawing close for her full initiation into adult warrior status. She had been unfortunate enough to draw duty as a helper in the infirmary during the festivities ... a fact that she hadn't been happy about ... but

she did get a ringside seat for the 'fun' when Xena had been brought in unconscious by

Eponin just when the festival's evening's feast was getting underway.

Jade had also been unlucky enough to draw duty. A young warrior, she knew that she was being considered as a candidate for the Royal Guards and so had not grumbled unduly at

having to miss out on some of the fun. Consequently, she'd been the one sent in to notify the infirmary, and the on duty healers, Iandi .. a young woman newly risen to the responsibility of a full healer .. and Gwynifor .. an elder healer who was rarely called upon for duty .. to expect a patient. Knowing who the patient was, Jade had elected to hang around to try and find out what had happened.

Eponin brought Xena in, draped over Argo's back, just after dusk. She immediately made for the infirmary and, if the truth be told, looked in little better condition than her unconscious companion. Willing hands had helped both women off their horses and to the healers, where

Eponin quickly explained about how they had ended up in their current state.

Apparently, when the fishing hole had proven to be non-productive of fish, Xena had dragged Eponin to an upper valley where a swift running stream had provided the missing element of their impromptu expedition. Upon the Weapons Master's urging, Xena was giving her a demonstration of how to fish bare hand, when the river had become a raging torrent due to a flash flood caused by heavy rain higher up the mountain fed river.

The Warrior Princess had been struck by an uprooted tree that had knocked her unconscious and dragged her under the swirling waters. Eponin had dived in and by some luck managed to drag her companion to the bank where she had forced the ingested river water from Xena's lungs. But the warrior had remained unconscious and the Weapons Master had felt it best to get her back to the city where the healers could tend her.

"Lasca, clean up Eponin's scrapes while Iandi and I attend to Xena's wounds," Gwynifor had instructed.

Muttering, the girl had collected what she needed from the dispensary and set to work on the Weapons Master, while trying to keep an eye on what was going on around the Warrior

Princess. She saw Iandi approaching the unconscious woman, a knife in hand to cut her clothing free, so that they could make a thorough examination for wounds.

"Hey!" yelled Eponin as the blonde girl had dabbed too hard at one abrasion.

"Sorry," came the contrite reply as she returned her eyes to her allotted task and in so doing missed the explosion of raw power that had shot Iandi across the room to slam heavily into the wall besides where Jade had been trying to stand unobtrusively. She turned her attention back to the other patient to find Xena sitting up, a dangerous glare in her eyes as she tried to work out where she was.

Drawing a deep breath, the Warrior Princess growled to no one and everyone, "Never approach me without warning," before collapsing back with one arm flung across her eyes as if they hurt.

Everyone in the infirmary had sighed with deep relief, and Iandi had proven to be no more than extremely shocked and very bruised, but the lesson hadn't been lost on the two young Amazons who now hovered near the end of the dangerous woman's cot.

Jade shot a glance at Lasca, who continued to hang back, "I thought you were an Amazon warrior, " she chided whilst making no attempt at getting any closer to the unconscious woman.

Lasca snorted derisively, "I don't see you rushing in there, oh great warrior."

Jade glared at her. She had to admit that she was far from looking forward to an airborne trip over to the other side of the cabin and she suspected that that was exactly what she was in for if she carried out Sheraya's instructions.

"I thought I gave you two a task to do," came the pointed comment from the healer accompanied by a sizzling glare that both young women privately thought might just be hot enough to fry bacon with.

- Then again, - thought Jade, - Just how bad can being thrown across the room feel? I kind of suspect that enduring a scathing dressing down by Sheraya might just be more painful. -

Swallowing hard, the young woman with the brown/gold eyes, moved slowly up the side of the bed, noticing her partner doing the same on the other side. Deciding that her best course of action

might just be to talk to the dark warrior and explain what they were doing, Jade began to murmur softly, "Hi Xena .. you probably don't remember me or Lasca, but we've met, sort of, in the city at home." She cautiously reached out to grasp the woman's wrist intent on unlacing the bracer and removing it.

She felt muscles stiffening under her fingers and released the arm hurriedly as she continued talking softly, "Ummm, Sheraya, our healer, wants us to get you out of your clothes so that she can examine you and dress your wounds. So if you'll bear with us, we'll be as quick as we can and then we can let you rest .. is that a deal?" she asked, reaching for the bracer again.

To her immense relief, the arm muscles had relaxed, and the two young warriors worked with almost indecent haste to get their appointed task completed and themselves away from the dangerous woman laying on the bed. They might admire the fighting abilities of the Warrior princess, but they were not anxious to get an up close and personal demonstration of them.

As soon as they had finished with the patient, Sheraya took over, assigning them other tasks to attend to which they hurriedly moved to perform, although both women couldn't help but hope that the healer might just encounter a defensive action from Xena during her examination ... it would have been a fair trade for the verbal lashings they'd received from the older Amazon. Disappointingly, though, Sheraya seemed to know just how to handle the Warrior Princess without calling down retribution upon herself. Lasca and Jade, grumpily busied themselves around the other patients.

Talking softly, the healer gently examined the volatile warrior, cleaning her latest collection of scrapes and stitching a deep cut that ran from her left shoulder to the cleft of her breasts. She checked the gash in her patients leg, satisfied that none of Patroclese stitches had torn loose, before re-bandaging the area and gently turning the warrior over so that she could inspect the dangerous wound in her back.

Sucking in a deep breath, she bit out a few very choice oaths as she saw that the stitching there had been ripped asunder. Blood leaked from the opening with sluggish persistence and the skin around it was hot and inflamed. Knowing that there was no way to re-sew the injury, she reconciled herself to having to cauterize the wound .. a procedure that was going to be both painful and dangerous for Xena in her present weak condition.

Placing a pad over the damaged area, and binding it tightly, Sheraya, moved away from the unconscious woman and whispered some precise instructions to the two young warriors that she had beckoned over. While the pair were gone, the healer drifted around the various cots checking on the condition of her patients. She made a list in her mind of those that she wanted moved out of the infirmary before she started work on Xena: The less people around at that time the better.

As soon as the cabin had been cleared of all those that it was no longer necessary to keep a careful eye on, including: Autolyclus, Iolaus, Mattin and four of the Amazons, Sheraya began her preparation of Xena.

She had assembled a team of strong Amazons whom she ordered to hold the Warrior Princess down. Even in her weakened condition, it took six of them, while Lasca and Jade secured the struggling woman to the bed with strong rope. Xena continued to strain weakly at her bonds, but Sheraya had made certain that she couldn't jerk around while the hot iron was applied to seal the wound.

She ordered the unnecessary Amazons out of the infirmary and turned her attention to the brazier where two short swords were being heated, "Keep her shoulders pinned down just in case," she instructed her two press ganged helpers.

Lasca and Jade looked at the glowing sword, then at each other, before pushing down hard on the injured warrior's shoulders, offering a silent prayer to Artemis that the ropes would hold and that Xena would not hold anything against them when she regained her senses.

Moving with careful determination, the healer advanced upon her patient and applied the heated blade to the upper half of the open wound wringing a screaming cry from Xena that would never have escaped her lips while she was conscious. Her eyes flickered open, unseeing, for a moment and the Amazons caught an unguarded glimpse into a depth of pain that far surpassed that induced by the hot iron. Limpid blue pools of a cerulean hue mirrored the guilt and loathing that layered her soul so deeply that pain was almost a relief for her.

When the orbs snapped shut, without the warrior rousing from the pit of unconsciousness, Jade and Lasca felt ashamed that they had witnessed a reflection of Xena's soul, feeling instinctively that they had trespassed on something intensely private .. a lonely burden that the warrior bore.

Sheraya returned to the brazier for the second blade, carefully lifting it and returning to her patient. With practised precision she sealed the lower half of the wound holding the hot metal to the golden skin as torn flesh seared beneath the heat, and the smell of roasting flesh permeated the cabin.

A second scream, longer and louder than the first echoed hauntingly through the ship, chilling those awake to hear it. Alone in her cot, Gabrielle stirred restlessly, her sleep filled with nightmares of blazing swords that cut through Xena's flesh like a knife through fresh butter. But exhaustion held her deep within its toils and she remained within Morpheus' grasp.

Having completed the cauterizing of the wound, Sheraya discarded the sword into a bucket of salt water, brought for the purpose, where it hissed and sizzled with its mate. "Get her to drink some of that mixture I made. Leave her tied for a candlemark, and then remove her restraints. The herbs in that sleeping draught should keep her still long enough to give her a chance to recover some strength."

*_

'Wave Dancer' stretched before the wind trying to make full use of the slender lead it had over the Roman biremes that trailed along behind it visibly closing the gap with the passing of each candlemark. The bigger ships were using both their sails and oars to close in on the ship they chased. Failure for them was not an option. They needed to take the escaping vessel and all who

sailed on her; particularly two slaves wearing unmistakable collars, and the Amazon leader who had been feted in Rome.

Using every inch of experience gained from her long years at sea, Nebula harried her inexperienced crew, whilst relying heavily upon the knowledge and abilities of Hercules and Iolaus .. who had recovered enough to help .. to bolster the Amazons in their efforts. Everyone upon the ship knew that their treatment, should they be taken by the Romans, would be far from gentle, and none of them wished to live the life of a slave.

Ephiny stood looking grimly astern at the dozen ships that clawed their way closer to the speeding pirate ship, "Do you have a plan?" she asked Nebula tensely.

"Keep ahead of the Romans," came back the dry reply.

"Besides that," snapped the Regent who wasn't really in the mood for wit. "Can we rely on a sea fog along this shore to hide in?" she questioned speculatively.

"You've been listening to too many of Gabrielle's stories," accused the pirate. "Things like that don't happen in real life, only in those great epics that bards tell."

"So what are you going to do," she saw Nebula begin to reply and held up her hand to forestall her, "and don't tell me 'Keep ahead of the Romans', because they're gaining all the time and, if I estimate it correctly, they're going to be on us within less than four candlemarks, long before darkness can hide us if that's what you're hoping for."

The tall captain took a glance behind her at the oncoming vessels and gave a nod of her head at the accuracy of Ephiny's assessment, "You're right. Four candlemarks is about all the time we have."

The Regent looked about ready to explode and she was aware of a queasy sensation in her stomach as her emotions roiled. "SO my question stands. For the third time, what are you going to do?"

Nebula squinted ahead of her trying to filter out the glare of the sun off of the blue water. A quick glance landward gave her exact knowledge of her location as she picked out familiar landmarks. "Ahead of us are a string of small islands that mark the edge of a large bay dominated by the city of Baiae."

"We're heading for a Roman city?" demanded Ephiny incredulously.

"No of course not," retorted Nebula with a disgusted snort. "We're going to play tag with those Roman ships around that string of islands until it's too dark for them to see us and then we're going to head out for home as fast as 'Dancer' can get us there."

"I see," said the Regent non-committally.

"It will be dangerous, some of the channels between those islands are going to be a tight fit, but that will stand us in better stead than the Romans as we have a much shallower draught than they do." explained the captain steadily.

"I see," repeated Ephiny once again, the nauseous feeling growing as she could see them landing between a rock and a hard place .. quite literally.

"If you can come up with anything better I'll be willing to listen," Nebula told her levelly as she studied the Amazon intently and got no response, "Right then ... I'll just get on with what I have to do then." She turned her back and took her station beside the Amazon at the helm as Ephiny chewed on her lip and wondered for the millionth time how association with Gabrielle seemed to turn bad luck into an art form.

Chapter Seventy Eight: In the Hands of Fate

The Hermit sat staring into the low embers of her fire. Her gaze appeared to be unfocussed as her inner-sight travelled the little used paths of what could and might be. At length she emitted a long sigh and allowed her senses to return to her physical form, where she remained seated, her eyes closed, as she pondered the implications of what she had seen.

"The time of trial has begun," she spoke softly even though there was no one in, or close enough to, the cave to hear her muted whisper, "O Artemis! Why do you allow your people to suffer so? Have the Amazons not suffered enough from the hands of fate? O mighty goddess, why have you forsaken your chosen people?" she implored to the empty space around her.

A flash of green and golden motes of light sparkled and faded leaving in their place the huntress leaning upon her mighty bow, "Even I cannot stand against the weaving of the fates, Acima."

"But why, my goddess, do the fates need to inflict so much pain and devastation on us?" questioned the Hermit, tears forming unbidden in her eyes.

Another dazzling array of light heralded the arrival of three more women. The maid, the mother and the crone appeared within the mystic's abode and looked at Acima with sympathy before speaking in their accustomed manner.

"What is to come," began Clotho.

"Is necessary," continued Lachesis. "The Amazons must suffer now,"

"For the world to survive," finished Atropos solemnly.

"Cannot another people suffer?" demanded the Hermit, knowing just how selfish that must sound. "My sisters have suffered greatly and for many years. Many of our people have become separated from us and their small tribes are withering from lack of connection with Themiscyra. How can this help to save the world? The loss of the Amazon Nation benefits no one."

The maid looked sadly at the impassioned mystic and noted how the Amazon's expressive eyes changed colour as her emotions flooded through her thoughts. The orbs settled on an icy pale blue, the intensity akin to the ex-warlord whose life had dominated so much of the pattern that Lachesis had woven since her birth.

"The Amazons will ..."

"Continue once this pattern ..." "Is completed," finished the crone. "What is to happen ..."

"Cannot be ..."

"Averted." the mother smiled sadly. "Strength and ..."

"Fortitude will be ..."

"Required by you ..."

"And your sisters in ..."

"The days ahead," finished Atropos as the three figures faded into the darkness of the cave.

The Hermit fought the growing despondency that gripped her heart and turned to her goddess, "Mighty Artemis, I must warn the Regent and the Queen of what is to come .. they must prepare for the coming trials."

The huntress sighed heavily, "Alas, child, that cannot be allowed. Some things are destined to happen, no matter what even we gods desire."

"But why allow me to glimpse this path if I can do nothing to prepare those who must travel it, my goddess?" demanded the short plump woman angrily, frustrated with a situation that constrained her to do nothing.

"Because when the time comes, Acima, you will have your part to play in the events that must unfold. Until then you will know without being able to act. As much as you will wish to, you will not be able speak of this until the time comes for you to do so." Artemis shook her chestnut locks and sighed heavily, "I am sorry that it must be like this, but truly, my daughter, this is for the greater good." She almost smiled as she invoked the phrase that had become the basis for a raven haired warrior's redemption.

"How long," demanded the mystic, shaking her head, her brown hair flashing with burnished red highlights as it caught the glow from the fire. "How long until I may speak and take a hand in this?"

Artemis turned flashing green eyes on the Amazon, "As long as the babes lay beneath their mothers hearts. When the births begin, you can begin to prepare." With those words the goddess vanished into a dazzling display of green and gold.

"Yeah!" laughed the hunter merrily, "It all comes down to greed and stupidity."

"Greed and stupidity?" repeated Ephiny densely.

"Uh huh," nodded Iolaus with a smile.

"I don't understand," admitted the Regent with a shake of her head.

"It's simple really Eph," he explained happily. "Their greed for that reward is going to make them stupidly attack us as if we were an easy push over."

The Regent ran frustrated hands through her own blonde curls, "Explain something to me Iolaus," she instructed.

"Sure, Eph, what?" asked the hunter with a puzzled frown.

"Those biremes," she said gesturing astern.

"Yeah," he agreed his puzzlement deepening.

"They carry a normal crew of what ... I don't know maybe a hundred men, not including the slaves?"

Iolaus nodded his head in agreement, "Yeah, sure it's a warship .. probably has more like a hundred and thirty at full compliment."

"Mmm hmmm," mused Ephiny. "And would it be a fair assumption that Caesar's got say another hundred soldiers on each ship?"

The blonde man waggled his hand from side to side, "Give or take, yeah," he agreed with her.

"Then please explain to me, O mighty mariner, how having two shiploads, of two hundred and thirty men each, coming along either side of us is going to work in our favour?" demanded Ephiny struggling to keep her voice from rising to a crescendo.

"Ummm ... well, the trick here is ..." Iolaus fumbled to explain his thoughts.

"I mean, my Amazons are good! And Artemis knows we can do them some damage, but if two of those ships catch us and men board, then we can't fight and keep the ship sailing which means we're going to be easy prey from the rest of the pack!" she growled angrily.

"Calm down Ephiny," came the soothing voice of Hercules. "Iolaus is right. Their greed and stupidity does help us .. we're just going to have to find the best way to make it work for us, though."

The Regent glared at the son of Zeus, "Got any suggestions?" she demanded unhappily.

She turned her back on the wannabe warrior and allowed her eyes to rest on the two young Amazon's curled up in a cramped corner. Jade and Lasca had worked hard throughout the long night and into mid morning before Sheraya had allowed them to take a nap on the hard deck. She'd heard them grumbling about not being allowed to seek out their own bed rolls, and doubting that they'd be able to get any sleep, but she'd had to grin when they slipped into Morpheus' arms the moment their eyes had closed.

The five Amazons that remained in her care also slept, which the healer counted as a good thing. Sleep aided the body's healing and, although none of the warrior's were in any current danger from their wounds, all had taken nasty injuries that would take time before their bearers would recover from them.

She avoided looking at the cot next to the cabin door and turned her attention back to the beds under the long stern windows. She frowned a little at the unconscious form of her fellow healer, Patroclese. The young Roman, should have shown some signs of recovery by now and his lack of improvement was beginning to concern her. She pinched the bridge of her nose with forefinger and thumb, trying to decide if she should use strong smelling salts to try and bring him around. Deciding that she would give him up to the end of the candlemark to awaken naturally, she turned her attention to Eponin.

The Weapons Master was making steady improvement, she was relieved to note. The fever had abated and, although she looked almost deathly pale, her breathing was strong and steady. - *With care, rest and a little luck she should make a full recovery,* - Sheraya assessed. - *Of course, getting Pony to rest after she's been injured is a task worthy of Hercules ... so maybe it's a good job that I have him to call upon! Especially as ...* -

Her gaze turned to the weakly straining figure on the cot in the corner. The potion that she had administered to Xena should have rendered her senseless, and motionless, until dark fell once more. She was well aware of the Warrior Princess' reputation as a patient and she was in no mood to have to fight with her to keep her in her bed until judging her fit enough to be up and about.

Unfortunately, as soon as the dark warrior had descended into a deep sleep, she had started to moan and thrash about, threatening to tear open the wound in her back again, as well as doing damage to those trying to care for her. Finally, after Lasca had been fisted half way across the room, Sheraya had ordered her patient to be bound to the cot once more, where she now strained at the ropes that held her and emitted occasional moans of varying volume.

For now, Xena was almost quiet ... if not in the restful sleep that the healer had prescribed for her. Shaking her head, the Amazon couldn't help but wonder how the fabled warrior had the energy to struggle even as feebly as she currently did. With the amount of blood she had lost, the woman shouldn't have been able to open her eyes, let alone move, for several days at least. - *Truth is, with the amount of blood she's lost, she should be dead!* - Sheraya reminded herself bluntly. - *I don't know what kind of healing system she has, but if we could find a way to bottle it's essence, then maybe other's could be helped to recover instead of ...*

She squeezed her eyes shut and stifled the sigh that threatened to turn into a sob. Turning, her eyes lingered sadly on the shrouded figure that lay on the pallet next to the door. Olan was a scout, - *Had been a scout*, - she reminded herself harshly. - *The woman had two daughters, the eldest fourteen, the youngest just nine. She would never see them take their Rite of passage now.*

-

Sheraya wiped away a stray tear impatiently. Her little sister would have been shocked to see her cry. She'd always thought the healer hard and unfeeling. They had never been close. There were too many years between their births and too much difference between their views on life. However, she made a silent vow to Olan, one she would die before breaking, - *I will raise Hynde and Willow as you would have wanted.* -

Her eyes snapped back to where a low rumbling growl was discharging from Xena. The Warrior Princess' head was thrashing back and forth and perspiration beaded heavily across her dark brows. The ropes that were tied across her body over the frame of the bed, pinning her within her blankets in such a way as to not further damage her flesh, began to creak and stretch under a sudden powerful attack as the delirious woman threw herself against them.

"I won't," panted the warrior as Sheraya hurried to her side, trying to pin her patient's shoulders back down to the bed. "Never, Julius .. do you hear me!" she cried, "**NOOOOOOOOO!**" she screamed before collapsing back onto the bed to begin muttering and twitching once more.

"Dammit, woman!" swore Sheraya, baffled by what she was witnessing. By right's this should not have been happening, "What is going on with you?"

"Have you given her sleeping drugs?" asked a voice from the end of the bed.

Sheraya looked up into the concerned eyes of Patroclese, who stood ashen faced and supported by Lasca and Jade, who were watching Xena thrash through sleep bleary eyes.

"Of course I did," growled the Amazon healer, aware that most of the other occupants of the infirmary were also now awake. "She needs peaceful rest."

"I guessed you had," Patroclese answered sadly. "She has nightmares if she sleeps too deeply," he told her. "They can be very dangerous for her and those around her."

"How would you know?" demanded Sheraya without really thinking.

The Roman took a deep breath and explained regretfully, "Caesar tried to weaken her through sleep deprivation. When she did sleep, she couldn't stop herself from slipping into a deep slumber where she was greeted by harrowing nightmares. She killed six men during one of those dreams. She started to refuse to sleep at all. I had to drug her to get her to rest enough to where she could control her sleeping patterns once more. It was not easy for any of us ... her or we who watched her."

The cabin was silent except for Xena's thrashing and fevered mutterings until Sheraya finally commented, "I see. So it was a mistake to drug her."

"You couldn't have known," consoled Patroclese. "I suspect that only Gabrielle knows the true depth of these nightmares that haunt her," he said gesturing in the warrior's direction.

"How in Artemis' name am I supposed to keep her in that bed long enough to get her to heal then," muttered the Amazon to herself as she bit at the side of her mouth in deep thought.

The Roman healer smiled when he heard the low comment, "Well you could keep her tied down ... she might not appreciate it, but it could be done. However, I think if you were to hand that particular problem over to Gabrielle, I think you might just solve it."

Brown eyes shot to blue, "You think?" she asked.

"Oh, almost definitely," grinned Patroclese. "That young woman is almost a match in stubbornness for your patient," He told his colleague as memories of a cell in Nemausus flitted through his mind.

"Fine. Jade and Lasca can keep her company for now and try to make sure she doesn't break free .. meantime you really should be back in your bed. You took quite a crack from that beam and you need time to recover."

Patroclese didn't argue with her. He felt weak and dizzy, so he was happy enough for her to assist him back to his cot, "What's happened while I've been out?" he asked. Then a worried frown crossed his face and he demanded, "Are the children alright."

Sheraya got him to lay back on the bed and told him, "All of the children are fine. We're out of Ostia and heading home." She drew a breath and told him softly, "We do have trouble though. It seems we're being chased by a few of Caesar's ships."

"How many," he asked in a quiet, worried tone.

"Twelve biremes ... and they're gaining on us."

"Gods!" he whispered.

"How far?" demanded Nebula, keeping her eye on the sails, whilst watching the Amazons get into position crouched down below sides of the deck.

"About three cables," responded Hercules, his eyes pinned on the two quickly approaching biremes.

"The others?" she demanded tersely as her eyes flicked over to where Toris and Autolycus stood close to the anchor cable ready to release it and noted that they had axes to hand ready for her second signal.

"Maybe four miles astern of them. Do you think we can pull this off?" he questioned, knowing that the dangerous manoeuvre was their only real hope.

The pirate flashed a dangerous smile at him, "We'll soon find out," she assured him. "I just wish we had a little more distance on the others." She glanced up at the three Amazons in the rigging with just their belt knives. One was all it would take, but if the Roman's had archers then it would pay to have back-up.

The demi-god shot an assessing look at the ten ships some miles back, "Actually, we've got more room than I thought we'd have. I think the other captains decided that our two friends," he gestured at the two biremes that were continuing to close the gap, "were going to make the capture and have eased off on their rowers."

"Take it to starboard a point, Iolaus," instructed Nebula trying to make it seem as if she were attempting evasive manoeuvres. The breme on that side responded effectively shepherding 'Dancer' back onto its original course. She turned back to Hercules, "Well, I'll take any luck we can come by. We've still got a long way to go and a lot of games to play before we're going to be free of this mess." She threw another look at the sail, "Watch your luff," she warned the blonde at the wheel.

"I know, I know. I was just about to make the correction," he muttered testily.

"Never doubted it, Curly," she grinned, the very picture of the competent, confident pirate she was.

With 'Wave Dancer' taking advantage of every morsel of wind to pull the Romans on an ever increasing chase south, they were improving their chances of evading capture with every moment. - *Only if we can pull this next manoeuvre off!* - Nebula reminded herself. - *Otherwise it's gonna be a quick fight with quick deaths for the lucky few, enslavement for most of those that are left and Crucifixion for those considered expendable ... such as an old pirate like me.* - She had to admit it gave her every incentive to make her plan work.

"How far?" she asked Hercules again.

"Maybe a cable ... probably a little less." he responded.

"Time to get to your post," she told him keeping a firm grip on the adrenaline rush that was bringing her to a peak of excitement. She watched him climb down the steps that led from the stern deck to the main one and move across to a long coiled length of rope that snaked its way up to the top of the mast.

"Are you sure even Herc's going to have enough strength to do that?" asked Iolaus quietly.

"If he doesn't we're dead ... or we'll be wishing we were," she told him coldly, "However, Toris and Autolycus will help him as soon as they're free and so will some of the Amazons once they run out of arrows."

"**AHOY THE SHIP!**" screamed a voice from the bows of one of the Roman biremes, "**DROP SAIL AND SURRENDER .. IN THE NAME OF LORD CAESAR!**"

Nebula swung herself up onto the stern rail and yelled back, "**BITE ME! YOU SONS OF BACCHII!**" She watched as the man who had been shouting leaned down and exchanged comments with someone she couldn't see, before straightening and yelling across the water filled distance that separated them.

"THIS IS YOUR LAST CHANCE! HEAVE TOO AND PREPARE TO BE BOARDED OR SUFFER THE CONSEQUENCES!"

Not bothering to respond, the tall captain jumped down and instructed her crew, "Be ready! They'll be alongside any time now!"

As preparations were made, with bows being strung with new strings that had been protected from the salt spray of the sea, Ephiny's voice could be clearly heard by every Amazon archer on deck. "Aim for the officers and those around the wheel, but only once they have begun the move to come alongside the ship. We need to take out the chain of command to confuse them and give the captain the time she needs to pull this off!"

Satisfied that all was ready, Nebula turned her attention back to the two biremes that were moving slowly into flanking positions about a hundred yards away on both sides of the ship. They could hear the high whining crack of the slave master's whips encouraging the rowers to keep in time with the deep thudding beat that was drummed out for them. Inch by inch the biremes were slowly overtaking them until they reached that pre-defined position just abreast of 'Wave Dancer' and altered their course just fractionally to converge upon their quarry, aiming to make the smaller ship the meat in their sandwich.

As the attacking ships narrowed the gap piece by piece, the pirate licked her lips in anticipation, waiting for the exact right moment to put her plan into action. Too soon and they would have time to counter her actions .. too late and they would be all over them like maggots on week old meat. Everything required .. exact .. timing! "NOW!" cried Nebula watching as the Amazon archers scrambled up from their concealment and started peppering the decks of the two biremes with withering volleys of deadly arrow. The anchor cable was let loose to drop the big heavy sea anchor to help drag them to a halt and she sent a quick nod to Toris and Autolycus as they grabbed for their axes in readiness for her next instruction.

Her anxious eyes swept aloft to where the women in the rigging sawed frantically at a rope which snapped with an audible '**TWANG!**' and she saw the great sail flutter limply towards the deck as she heard the rasping sound of the rope, that Hercules stood by, quickly paying out until the canvass settled and the demi-god had hold of the rope end.

The effect of all this was to bring 'Dancer' to a swift shuddering stop, that threw all standing members of the crew to the decks in the sudden change of motion, whilst allowing the two biremes to shoot past them in a flurry of oars and bewilderment. Not only that, but the two enemy ships were set on a collision course with each other, that might have been avoided if a

The child shrugged and looked worried, "It's okay, sweetheart," assured the bard, though she was far from sure that it was worrying the girl.

Reaching out a small, tentative hand the child placed a finger on that hated collar that remained locked around the bard's neck, while her other hand fingered the thicker, heavier iron band that hung loosely around her own, "You're like us?" she asked uncertainly. She was certain the collar marked Gabrielle as a slave, but she'd only ever seen one other slave band like the one the bard wore and she guessed that it made the adult someone special.

The young queen swallowed hard and wondered whether these children had been born into slavery or were the captured spoils of some war. "We're all the same," she told the child.

"All slaves?" came the small voice again.

Gabrielle reached out and gave her a hug. - Those collars have got to come off as soon as Autolycus or maybe Hercules has the time, - she vowed to herself. "No, sweetheart," she told her firmly, "No one on this ship is a slave .. especially not you and your friends." She looked from face to face, "What's your names?" she asked.

"I'm Kendra," she told her importantly, "and they're Embla," she said pointing to the oldest of the girls, a willowy fair haired child of maybe twelve summers, "She's a Norse savage," Kendra told her and received a grin and a friendly punch from the other girl, "And that's Milburga .. we call her Milly," she told her confidentially indicating a child standing just behind Embla, showing little than wide brown eyes. She seemed to be maybe nine. "And the little one is Cassie." she shoved a hand out and roughed the five summer old brown haired cherub's head. "She nearly got squished by a rock! Didn'tcha?"

"Well Kendra," the bard smiled, "I'm Gabrielle. Has anyone told you what's going on?" she asked carefully.

"Only that we're running away from Lord Caesar's ships and that we were to stay in here until it was safe," answered the child her green eyes serious as she shook her dark curls to emphasise her words.

"I see," said Gabrielle, chewing her lip thoughtfully, and not liking what she was thinking. "Well you be good girls and stay in here so that you don't get under any of the warrior's feet. I'm going to see what's going on and check on a friend of mine .. but I'll be back and I'll tell you all a story before you go to sleep, how does that sound?"

Four heads nodded enthusiastically, although they weren't too sure what a story might be .. none of them had heard one before. Kendra reached out a hand and tugged at the bard's skirt as she turned towards the door, "G'berell?"

Turning, the bard knelt down to be on eye level with the child, hiding a smile at the mangled form of her name, "Yes Kendra?"

"If we're all the same as the people on this boat ... why do only we," she obviously included Gabrielle with the other children, "have to wear collars?"

"Oh honey," the bard said drawing the child in to give her a hug, "as soon as we get away from those ships I'll get one of my friends to get those off of all of your necks .. I promise."

"Yours too?" questioned the child, concern in her eyes.

"I think me and my friend, who's got one just like this," she said fingering the metal at her neck, "will have to wait until we get home."

"Is your friend the animal?" asked Embla, "The one they used to make watch while they beat us?" she added softly.

"Why do you call her the animal, sweetheart," asked Gabrielle softly.

"Because that's what the soldiers called her. They said, 'The animal has misbehaved and you're to be punished because of her!' She always looked kinda sad kneeling before us as they whipped us. She didn't really look like an animal to me."

The bard drew a deep ragged breath, "She isn't an animal, Embla," she told her. "Her name is Xena, and she's the bravest, strongest, most caring person I know. I'll tell you a story about her tonight and maybe when she's well you can meet her properly."

"Is she hurt?" asked Milly shyly.

"Yes, sweetheart, she is. I've got to go and see her and make sure that she's going to get well. But I'll be back later, okay?"

"Kay!" came a chorus of four voices.

"Stay here," Gabrielle reminded them as she slipped out of the door and headed for the deck looking for someone who'd be able to tell her what in Tartarus was going on.

As she came up on deck, everyone was rushing around in a flurry of activity. A quick check of their surrounding showed her a pair of tangled biremes just falling behind in their wake, and some distance off a cluster of several more of the war ships. "Hades Helmet!" she swore.

Looking around she spotted a likely looking figure and snagged Autolycus' arm, "Hey!" exclaimed the thief turning around sharply to see who had grabbed him, "Oh it's you .. what do you want?"

"What's going on Autolycus .. why didn't someone wake me? What the Hades is happening?" demanded the bard.

"We're being chased by Caesar's ships. We didn't wake you because there's nothing you could do and you needed to sleep. And we've just managed to take two of the chasing ships out of the action, but we've still got ten more chasing us ... satisfied?"

"Dammit ... when are you all going to stop treating me like some little kid!" she demanded become steadily more angry that no one had considered it was necessary to let her know what was going on.

"Probably when you stop acting like it," came a quiet voice in her ear making her almost jump out of her skin.

"Don't do that Eph!" she growled when she got her beating heart under control. "And I don't act like a child!" she yelled stamping her foot as anger got the better of her. The Regent looked meaningfully at the deck and her foot and Gabrielle had the grace to colour with embarrassment, "Well not often. But dammit Eph! What do you expect. Something like this going on," she waved her hand at Caesar's ships, "and no one thought to tell me."

"Oh we thought about it," assured the blonde Amazon. "But there was nothing you could do so we thought we'd let you get some sleep so you would be fit to help where you are needed."

"Oh," snarked the bard, "And just where do you think that would be?"

***"TURN ME LOOSE!"** came an infuriated scream of rage from below decks at that exact moment.*

"How about there," answered Ephiny blandly.

"ARES BALLS! WHEN I GET OUT OF HERE YOU'RE GONNA PRAY FOR A QUICK DEATH!"

"Preferably before she kills out best healer," she added to Gabrielle's quickly retreating form. "Why are things never easy around those two?" she muttered, before turning her attention back to her own tasks.

Chapter Seventy Nine: Deadly Dancer

Gabrielle burst into the infirmary to find a scene from one of her nightmares. A young, blonde haired warrior, - *Lasca I think her name is*, - flashed through the bard's brain, crouched doubled up just inside the cabin's door straining to draw a breath. On the bed in the far corner, that she knew to be Xena's, there were a pile of bodies that struggled to hold the heaving mass that could only be the Warrior Princess.

"Hold her!" commanded the stern voice of Sheraya who also seemed to be embroiled within the pile.

"By the gods!" came the muffled voice of Patroclese, "Has anyone bothered to tell this woman that she shouldn't have the strength for this?" he demanded only partly in jest.

"Someone please snag her wrist before she manages to take my eyes out!" wailed an unknown voice.

"How do you suggest we do that, Jade?" grumbled another unknown voice, "She's got more limbs than an octopus .. and I can't believe she's doing this and managing to stay asleep!"

Gabrielle shook her head in disbelief, "Alright! Everybody get off her. NOW!" She moved quickly across to the cot and, with a surprising show of strength hauled one of the Amazon's out of the fray, while the others tried to disengage themselves.

As the weight was removed from her body, Xena seemed to spring up off the bed directly into the protective arms of the bard. One look into the warrior's haunted eyes, told Gabrielle that her friend was indeed still held in Morpheus' realm and was experiencing one of those terrifying visions that so often assaulted her dreams. Visions that she fought violently against in her torment, lashing out at everything as she sought her path back to the light.

When Gabrielle wrapped her arms tight around her warrior friend's frame, the haunted look almost instantly faded from the bright blue beacons of Xena's eyes. The tension that had been flowing off of the raven haired woman in crashing waves, seemed to evaporate, and with it went the strength that had enabled her to fight off the six people who had been trying to subdue her.

"It's okay," Gabrielle assured her softly, her tone comforting and soothing. "You're safe here. I'm here. Nothing can harm you now."

The Warrior Princess slumped heavily against her smaller partner her eyes drifting closed as the bard's gentle words surrounded her with the unconditional love and protection that she offered the stoic, often withdrawn woman whom she had chosen to follow and befriend.

"Alright Xena. Back to bed," the honey blonde coaxed, "That's it. Carefully," came the encouragement as she got her safely seated on the dishevelled cot. "Now lie down so that I can pull the covers up. That's it," she gently pressed the exhausted warrior back down and snugged the blankets around her, frowning heavily at the frayed evidence of the ropes that had been used, unsuccessfully, to bind the warrior to the bed.

Once she had her friend tucked in, she sat down on the edge of the cot, taking one large hand in her much smaller grasp, and lightly brushed the dark bangs away from her champion's closed eyes as the warrior allowed herself to drift fully into a restful sleep for the first time since she had been brought to the infirmary.

Silence reigned in the cabin, other than for Joxer's snores and the wheezing gasps of Lasca which were slowly being brought under control. Patroclese looked down at the two women and shook his head in wonder, "I have never seen anything like that," he said with studied disbelief. "How does she do that?" he said almost rhetorically.

Sheraya, who looked up from where she was tending to the gulping young Amazon, shook her head slightly and winced from the pain of the purpling bruise that had been raised on her cheek

just beneath her right eye which would, no doubt, induce the flesh surrounding the orb to turn black. "It can only be trust," she muttered, turning her attention back to the young warrior in case she had damaged more than her pride. Being on the receiving end of one of the Warrior Princess' fists could well result in a cracked or broken rib ... even if the said Warrior princess was far from capable of lashing out with her normal power.

Ignoring everything, except making sure that Xena was settled down enough to get some much needed rest, Gabrielle fought hard to control her rising temper. Not only had she returned to the infirmary to find her best friend fighting with the people supposedly caring for her wounds, but there was also clear evidence that showed the warrior had been tied down to the bed.

- The stupidity ... the idiocy of it! - she silently snarled. - Don't these fools realise just how badly hurt she is? - She had the grace to colour lightly as she heard the painfully wheezing Lasca being helped to her feet and led to where she could sit quietly on a chair to fully recover. - Alright, - the bard conceded, - Even out on her feet she's more than a match for most people. They could have come to get me .. she would have been alright with me looking after her. -

Gabrielle cracked a mighty yawn that even a healthy dose of angry adrenaline couldn't keep at bay. *- Okay, so maybe I wouldn't have been much use. But me just being here would have kept her calm. -* Seeing that Xena was resting peacefully, she carefully disengaged her hand from the warrior's larger one, soothing her softly as the injured woman looked about to start fussing, "Take it easy, I'm still here. I won't leave you again."

Satisfied that she would continue to rest, the bard stood, crossed her arms over her chest and moved across to confront Sheraya, "Just what in Tartarus was going on in here when I arrived?" she demanded.

The Amazon healer noted the rigid set of her queen's shoulders and the uncustomary scowl on the normally laughing face, "She was having a nightmare. I needed to stop her from thrashing about and opening her wounds again. Or would you rather I allow her to bleed to death?" snapped the older woman, her own personal pain and loss making her less than diplomatic in her reply.

Gabrielle's scowl was replaced by a frown. She knew that Sheraya had a reputation for speaking her mind and for taking no nonsense from any Amazon of any rank, but even she had never been this blatantly rude before. Something was upsetting the healer, making her more abrupt and more than normally vitriolic in her remarks. However, at the moment, it was Xena that concerned the bard and she replied with a cold anger, "No I wouldn't." She twirled the end of a piece of rope in her fingers, "Why was Xena tied down? Isn't that a rather unusual way to care for a sick patient?"

Sheraya's brown eyes became stormy, "It is when the said patient is thrashing around so much that she is a danger to both herself and her healers!" She touched her purpling cheek and saw the bard's eyes twitch away from her own. "However, even that precaution didn't seem to work with your champion, my Queen ... whereas your arrival worked wonders." She took a deep breath and ploughed on, "So I think it may be best if you remain in the infirmary ... that way my other patients might get some rest and I may be able to treat them all without having to hold down a ...

miles in an hour ... so maybe nine hours sailing, that should put those damned cays and rocky isles just about in sight. -

"Two points to starboard, Iolaus," she instructed her current helmsman, sparing him a long burning look as she devoured the sight of his compactly muscular body. - *Rrrrwwlllll* - she purred silently, - *Down girl ... time enough for that later when we're out of these waters!* -

"Aye, aye, Captain," agreed the blonde hunter, turning the wheel to make the course correction required, and felt the slow burn of a blush that radiated up his neck and made his ears glow, as he realised that the pirate's predatory eyes were on him once more. He decided to try and ignore it as best he could. Every time he'd objected to her scrutiny so far, he'd come off the worse in the verbal sparring that had ensued.

Nebula pouted a little as Iolaus declined to say any more and turned her attention to the ships chasing along behind them. Although they were closing at a consistent rate, they weren't attempting to race each other any longer .. obviously having learned their lessons from the earlier failure of the two defeated ships. - *No. This bunch intend to catch us en-masse, and not give us any chance to slip away from them. -*

She turned back to her study of the sea ahead .. - *Somewhere, just out there, is what I need to get us some leeway and time so that we can lose them in the night. All we have to do is get there with a little bit of a lead so that we can work some sailor's magic!* - she told herself.

"I'd appreciate it if you'd stop giving Iolaus such a hard time," said Hercules softly, having approached her so silently that she'd failed to register his presence.

Controlling her natural reaction, which was to jump out of her skin, Nebula responded as nonchalantly as she could manage, "Oh? I didn't think my presence was a cause for hardship. Besides, he's hardly a callow youth. If he has something he wants to .. say to me, well then I'm sure he's man enough for the job."

"Nebula," sighed the demi-god patiently, "this really isn't the time or place for this."

"For what, Hercules?" asked the pirate, batting her eyes innocently.

The tawny haired hero looked astern at the ships that dogged them, "With a substantial squadron of Caesar's ships and men after us, we don't have time for you to be flirting with Iolaus ... we're in too much trouble and we need your undivided attention on the matter at hand."

"Oh my mind is definitely on the matter at hand," she replied casting a smouldering look towards the ships wheel and the man in question. She saw the look forming on Hercules' face and sought to forestall him by saying, "Besides, I don't flirt!"

"Oh?" the son of Zeus looked at her with exasperation plain on his face, "And just how would you describe what you've been subjecting Iolaus to?"

"Subjecting? Oh no, no, no, no, no! You have that wrong lover. Iolaus was just caught up in my allure. He was enchanted by the rapture of my dazzling attraction. In short .. his desire is on heat, but he hasn't worked up the courage to do something about it yet Maybe by the time he does, I'll have lost interest. After all .. it's the joy of the hunt that's important. Being able to predict your prey's actions and reactions is often more fun than going in for ...," she sent a wicked, wanton smile in the blonde's direction, " .. the kill!" she finished.

Hercules shook his head in almost stunned disbelief, "Have you been hanging out with my sister, Artemis, by any chance?"

"Girl with a bow? Green eyes? Chestnut hair?" she asked.

"Sounds like her," agreed Hercules with a frown.

"Sorry ... never seen anyone like that in my life!" grinned the pirate irritatingly.

"Dammit Nebula!" swore the demi-god .. hating to be made a fool off. "Can't you take anything seriously?" he demanded.

"I'll tell you what I take seriously, Herc. I take the welfare of my ship seriously, because 'Dancer' gives me the freedom to live how I want, not how some would force me. I take the threat of those ships behind us seriously, because they'd take away my freedom and maybe my life. I take the pleasures of life today, seriously .. because there may not be a tomorrow. But until we reach those islets, or the Romans catch up to us, there's not a whole damn lot I can do .. so I seriously intend to have some fun. Iolaus is a big boy, Hercules. He can look after himself. Why don't you go and see how that Warrior Princess of yours is doing, and save us all some aggregation."

"Nebula ... leave him alone," warned the hero. "He needs to be focused on steering the ship when the time comes, not having his thoughts scrambled so that his reactions are slowed. It's going to be a long voyage ... you have plenty of time to play your games with him once we're loose from our chasing tail."

The pirate thought hard for a moment. It was true that she got a lot of enjoyment out of teasing the blonde hunter ... and sometimes she believed that it went beyond teasing on her part ... but what Hercules had said was true. Iolaus needed to have his wits about him for the coming dance through the rocky shelves and their attendant sandy cays and high barren islets where she intended to try and shake free from pursuit.

"Alright, Herc. I'll leave him be until we've ditched the Romans ... then he's fair game. Deal?" she asked.

"Deal!" he nodded in reply and turned away with a wry grin on his face. He suspected that on an even playing field, where Iolaus didn't have to split his concentration, he might just give the pirate a run for her dinars.

Tarelle sat on deck working at fletching arrows along with most of the other Amazons on board. An inventory of the hold had revealed several packs of arrow shafts, while a further search had produced steel, barbed heads and goose feathers that were perfect for the flights. The find meant that their concern over running out of arrows would no longer be a problem given enough time to tip and fletch the basic shafts.

Although a part of her resented doing a task that was for the benefit of their so called 'Queen' and her savage friend cum champion. A slightly more rational section of her mind constantly reminded her that falling into Roman hands at this time would not do her, or any of her comrades, any good whatsoever. - *The time when Caesar could have been useful by removing that centaur loving bitch, Ephiny, has long passed. I have no doubts that we're all tarred with the same ...* - she twirled one of the fletchings in her hand, - ... *feather as she, Queen Gabrielle and the Bitch from Hades are!* -

"Don't play with it, Tarelle!" snapped a watchful Malonda. "Keep working. We're gonna need all the arrows that we can put together before we get home!"

The red head scowled belligerently at the Chief Scout and returned her attention back to the work she should be concentrating on. - *This is all Jerushan's fault. How the idiot ever managed to get into the Royal Guard I'll never fathom! Perhaps she's got some leverage that she hasn't told us about!* - she snickered nastily, drawing enquiring looks from her clique of supporters, including the blonde Jerushan, which she quelled impartially with a fiery looking scowl.

- *All the stupid woman had to do was take a message to Caesar and get back to the barracks. But no! The brainless featherhead had to hang around to be spotted by the damned pirate and even Ephiny and Eponin aren't stupid enough not to work out that they'd got a problem.* - She idly stirred the glue pot as she drifted off into her train of thoughts.

"Dammit, Tarelle!" growled Malonda angrily, "do I have to tell you again. I thought you were a mature Amazon, not some fledgeling that can't do a simple job without a warrior standing over her the whole time!"

Allowing her well known fiery temper to get the better of her, the red head sprang to her feet, eyes blazing, "Back off, trail chaser," she snarled nastily, using the derogatory Amazon name for the scouts. "I was trained for higher administration and the law .. not to do mundane chores that any brainless steel swinger can do!"

"Listen you self righteous, swell headed, pen pusher! You'll do what you're damn well told to do, or I'll chain you up and stuff you in the hold for the rest of this trip ... which is where you'd be right now, if I had my way, for the stunt you tried to pull in Rome!" roared the irate Malonda in return.

"Alright ... break it up!" broke in Ephiny as she moved between the two angry Amazons. "We've got more than enough Romans to fight .. so what do my Amazons do .. they decide it's the right time to fight amongst themselves! So help me .. if it wasn't for the fact that we need everyone ... yes you included Tarelle ... I'd throw you both off the ship to cool off until the Roman's picked

you up! And so help me .. if you keep this up I might just decide that's the best way to deal with it. Now act like mature, Amazon women and get on with your jobs!"

The Regent frowned in irritation as she stalked away from her working Amazons over to where Autolycus lounged at ease against the ships rail, "Trouble amongst the troops?" he asked quietly, none of his normal jocularly showing in his tone.

"I don't understand Malonda sometimes," muttered the blonde mostly to herself.

"What's troubling you, Ephiny?" questioned the roguish thief as he continued to watch the group of women that had been causing the trouble. He frowned slightly as he thought he saw the red haired centre of all current Amazon problems, hide a quick, malicious smile.

"This whole thing with Tarelle," grumbled the Regent unhappily.

"And?" urged Autolycus, perceptively realising that there was something else disturbing the commanding woman beside him.

Drawing a breath, Ephiny wondered just how well she could trust the devil-may-care thief. Coming to a decision, the blonde ran her fingers through her curls .. a sure sign of tension. She needed to talk to someone and, with Eponin unconscious in the infirmary and Gabrielle's time taken up with Xena, her choices for confidant were limited. Beside, even though the King of Thieves presented an attitude of studied selfishness he had actually proven himself, on several occasions, to be a clever, astute and caring friend to Xena and Gabrielle.

"It's Malonda," she said at last, quite quietly. "She absolutely hates Xena .. she doesn't try to hide it ... but it makes me wonder just how strong her loyalty is to Gabrielle."

"Has she ever said anything about her? Been disrespectful?" asked the thief pointedly stroking his chin thoughtfully.

"Not that I've ever heard," admitted Ephiny. "But, Hades codpiece, Autolycus. I keep on thinking about Jerushan and the other disloyal guards. Someone had to have made it easy for them to get in on this trip ... and the there was that message to Caesar."

"So you think she's in with Tarelle's group?" he probed.

"Yes ... no ... I don't know! That's the problem." sighed the Regent in frustration shrugging her shoulders and raising her hands the allowing them to slap back down her sides.

Autolycus gave her a long look, his warm brown eyes filled with concern, "Ephiny, you've been under a lot of pressure out here. Having enemies in your own camp can't have helped matters. Don't let paranoia blind you to the good qualities of a loyal warrior." He could see she was about to speak, but he continued on before she could do so. "On the other hand, Malonda has been acting oddly, so it may just be that you need to keep an eye on her ... for your sake and Gabrielle's."

"Damn! I hoped I was making too much of it," sighed the blonde.

Autolycus shrugged, "It may be that you are. On the other hand, you know the old saying .. it's better to be safe than sorry."

Ephiny nodded thoughtfully. "Autolycus ...?"

"Aw, c'mon Eph! I'm a thief not a spy." he complained.

"I know ... but I would be really grateful, Autolycus. I mean it's not like you've got anything else to do while we're stuck on this ship .. and you might see something that was hidden from me," the Regent wheedled.

He tried to ignore the pleading look in her eyes. He tried to harden his heart and tell himself he was really the selfish, uncaring thief that his publicists made him out to be. But deep within the man .. not the myth of the man .. there beat a pure heart, that would always lead him to help his friends ... even while swearing he was only doing it because they forced him to. Autolycus, King of Thieves cultivated a reckless, wild and self-absorbed image .. but many were the poor people who had benefitted with a gift from his hand. As much as he liked to deny the fact, he was a good man.

"Oh ... alright!" he at last conceded. "But I'm not promising anything."

"Thank you, Autolycus. You're a"

He wagged a finger at her, "Ah, ah, ah! Don't say it. You'll ruin my hard fought for reputation," he admonished her. She smiled and would have turned to go, but he stopped her by asking, "You feeling okay, Eph?"

"Mmmmm?" she queried with a raised eyebrow. "I'm fine ... what makes you think I'm not?"

Oh ... nothing. It's just that I noticed you being ... um, you seemed to be having trouble with your stomach this morning. I wondered if you were alright. I thought there might be some kind of bug going around, or maybe the food was bad, because a lot of your warriors seemed to be having the same kind of trouble too," he told her, genuine concern in his eyes.

"No .. really I'm fine. I guess it was a little motion sickness. I'm okay now. Maybe it was just being back at sea. I'm usually okay once I've been on board a day or so," the Regent assured him.

The thief nodded, "Just thought I'd ask." Then he mumbled something suspiciously like, "Have to watch out for my friends." but he was gone before Ephiny could call him on it.

The Regent shook her corn gold curls and smiled. - *Autolycus ... you are definitely one in a million!* -

"Land ho!" cried a voice from aloft.

"Well, I was given the job and just nominated you as my assistant. You've got all the qualifications for the position."

"I have," asked the innkeeper in disbelief.

"Oh yeah. You're here, you're not doing anything else and you can swing a mean fishing line," grinned Hercules.

"I never said I could do that," answered Toris defensively.

"No but Xena did," laughed the demi-god.

"But ... but ... I haven't got a clue what to do with this thing,"

Hercules smiled, "Nothing to it. All you do is cast it away in front of the ship and let the line play out .. make sure you keep hold of the end though. As the ship catches up the line, gather in any slack and then count the knots as you pull it back in. If there's no slack then there's no bottom. The line's marked off in fathoms. Here watch me make a couple of casts to see how it's done," offered the hero.

"All yours," agreed the raven-haired man.

Hercules spent perhaps a quarter candlemark demonstrating and instructing Toris on the art of using the sounding lead, before his pupil was confident enough with it to perform the task with steady efficiency. They were only picking up readings of 'no bottom', but both men knew that would change as they came closer to their current destination.

"Are you ready, Hercules?" called out Nebula from her place on the stern deck. The demi-god lifted a hand in acknowledgement that they were, "Very well, gentlemen, start singing out those depths loud and clear," came the captain's instruction.

The monotonous chant of, "By the mark, no bottom," sang by two deep voices, filled the air as a tension began to grip the fugitives.

Nebula kept an ear on the chants of Toris and Hercules, while keeping her eyes on the following biremes, trusting Iolaus with the ship's helm, knowing that he had the experience to keep them from getting into too much trouble.

"By the mark, no bottom," called Hercules.

"By the mark, eight fathoms," answered Toris with his cast.

Nebula swung her attention away from the Romans who had made an effort to close the gap, belatedly realising just what the pirate was up to. Getting her bearings from the sandy cays appearing to port of them, the captain ordered "Bear up to windward, Iolaus, we need to find a rising shoal. We have a far lighter draught than those biremes, let's make use of it."

"Aye, aye, captain," agreed the blonde.

"By the mark, five," cried Toris.

"By the mark, four fathoms," came Hercules' answer.

All ears were attuned to the whizz of the line as it was swung to gain momentum and released to splash out into the sea before them. The short moments between the cast and the call seemed to have everyone holding their breaths, waiting for the report that would tell them they remained safe or were facing big trouble.

"By the mark, three fathoms," called Toris.

"By the mark, three," agreed the demi-god.

"What's the draught on 'Dancer', Nebula?" questioned Iolaus nervously.

"We're riding light, so no more than four feet, maybe just three. Those war ships back there pull six to eight feet ... I made a few enquiries while we were hanging around in Rome .. just in case .. you know?" the tall dark woman answered with a flashing smile.

"Remind me to thank you for that sometime!" he laughed.

"Don't worry .. I will," she replied wickedly.

"By the mark, two," came the chant from Hercules.

"By the mark, one fathom," answered Toris.

Keeping a firm course, the blonde hunter said as casually as he could manage, "Six feet is beginning to cut it fine, Nebula."

The pirate's answering grin reminded him of a shark, "That's the idea, Curly. This will sort the seamen from the landlubbers!"

"By the mark, one."

"Steady at one fathom," agreed Hercules.

"Keep it on this heading until we're past the sand bank on the port side, then wear her around on the starboard tack and head her out to sea," she ordered as she turned her attention once more to the following war ships.

Six were following nose to tail through the channel that she'd led them. Two had swung starboard, tracing their way along the outer edge of the dangerous area, obviously intending to find their way around and cut them off should they manage to get through the difficult channels

and shoals. Two more made their way along the port side intending to head them off in that direction should they decide to cut and run for the mainland once more. The trailing two biremes split away from each other, one intending to join the starboard squadron, the other the port.

"Well at least we've split the bastards up a bit," she muttered. "Now let's see what we can do to reduce their numbers altogether."

She watched intently, along with several curious Amazons, as the first three ships eased across the six foot shelf without mishap. The fourth bireme, however, obviously had more than a six foot draught because it suddenly came to a shuddering stop as the hull grounded and wedged with a jarring impact. As the fifth ship in the procession pulled out of line to go around, there was an ominous crack followed by the high tension 'ping' of overstretched ropes, and the mainmast fell majestically across the bows of the ship that had been following, fouling it with debris. The mess became worse as the final vessel plowed into the two ahead, effectively removing three ships.

The cheering on board 'Dancer' echoed back to the pursuing Romans, who hadn't immediately realised that their comrades had a problem. Nebula allowed herself a smug smirk before she bellowed, "ALL RIGHT! KNOCK IT OFF! We can celebrate later once we're out of this mess and on our way home!"

Silence returned to the ship punctuated only by the call of the leadsmen. "By the mark, two fathoms," sang out Toris.

"By the mark, three fathoms," called back Hercules.

A check back at the pursuit told Nebula that the Romans hadn't learned their lesson yet. They still pushed on quickly, trailing her wake as they pressed her to make a mistake so that they would have the glory and the rewards for the capture of Caesar's slaves and the fugitives who had 'stolen' them.

Taking a check on the wind, and making a careful check on the progress of the two squadrons picking their way around her playground. The pirate took her bearings once again as she planned her next strategy. She wanted to finish off the three behind her as quickly as possible, because if they could shake them off they'd be able to clear this scattering of islets with a good, clear lead over the rest of the Romans. If she could manage that, she knew that the fast approaching darkness of night would allow them to steal away and set a course that their pursuers would find difficult, if not impossible to follow.

"Put him on a port tack, Iolaus, and head for that island. If we're lucky they'll realise that there should be deep water around there and they'll think to use their speed again to take us on either side, with the third ship coming up astern of us to make sure we don't pull the trick we did earlier today," she explained.

"Er .. doesn't that put us in something of a bind?" he questioned, not sure what she was trying to achieve.

"It would do if it wasn't for the fact that there's only a narrow channel through a ring of jagged rocks that lay about three feet below the surface there." The sharks smile slid back onto her face, "When the ships try to come up on the side of us, they're going to achieve nothing other than to rip out the bottom of their hulls."

Iolaus shared the grin at first before a thought crossed his mind, "What about the galley slaves?" he questioned in concern. "If those ships sink they're gonna drown."

Nebula sighed, "Some of them could die," admitted the pirate reluctantly, "but the sea's pretty calm here and with no storms to smash the ships up, they have every chance of getting taken off of there eventually. Those biremes will probably settle onto the rocks and hang there until the first decent storm comes through here." "Probably!" returned the hunter flatly.

"Nothing's ever guaranteed in life, Iolaus .. you should know that," she told him harshly.

"Knowing it and liking it, are two different things, Nebula," he told her softly.

"You're right, Curly," she agreed. "But right now I'd see them all drown if it kept me and this ship away from Caesar!" She turned away from him. "Just keep it on the heading I gave you," she snapped.

"Aye, aye, captain," he snarled in reply.

The action played out exactly as Nebula had predicted. She had guided them to the narrow channel with a sure eye and she had skilfully managed to spill some wind from the sails, slowing them down just a little and making the Romans just a little more careless as they realised their prey was within their grasp. If the captains gave thought to why the pirate suddenly seemed to be making stupid mistakes, they were soon to find out.

As 'Dancer' slipped through the opening, closely followed by a trailing bireme, the two that had been overhauling them on either side, hit the hidden rocks with crashing impact that ripped into the planking of the ships and pinned the wooden corpses on their jagged teeth. Screams could be heard from the hulks; screams of both panic and pain. But as the ships settled they lessened as the crew and slaves realised that they were in no immediate danger of being drowned.

Amazon cheers echoed through the ship once more, but they now had a pressing problem. With the Roman bireme directly behind them, it appeared that the soldiers were assembling in preparation of boarding. Nebula guessed that the bireme's captain intended to ram 'Dancer' from behind, locking bow and stern together so that the soldiers could get on board.

"Eph!" yelled the pirate, "Can you do something about that?" she asked pointing towards the ship behind them.

"No problem, captain," grinned the Regent flourishing her bow. "Amazons, fire at will!" she ordered her archers, who proceeded to pour a withering rain of arrows into the soldiers and the sailors at the wheel of the ship.

Under such a punishing assault, with officers being the prime targets of the archers, the ship was forced to back off or face destruction as the other bireme's had. As 'Dancer' began to pull away from the warship, it appeared as if the Romans had decided to go back and see if they could help out the crews of the two stranded ships.

Amazon whoops of victory followed them as Nebula gave Iolaus new instructions for his heading. Once she was sure that the blonde hunter knew what was expected of him, she turned her attention to the distant ships that were working their way around the dangerous trap that this had become for them. Everything now came down to being far enough ahead of the remaining Roman ships when they left the cays and islets behind them. It was still a race.

Hercules and Toris continued to sound the lead, although the bottom never came close to being dangerous for 'Wave Dancer', and things settled down once more as Nebula guided them through the tricky seas. After what seemed forever, they finally seemed to be reaching the outer rim of the area, but all around the two men could see the tell tale signs of changes in the colour of the water, signifying a sudden shoaling.

Eventually it became clear that the pirate was heading them in the direction of a pair of sheer rocky islets that had a narrow cleft running between them. It was obvious that this was her chosen exit out of the dangerous area, but few were confident about their chances of making it through in one piece.

"I'll take the wheel now, Curly," grinned Nebula.

"Sure thing," agreed Iolaus trying to hide his eagerness to hand the job over to someone else.

"Don't worry," she told him. "It's a tight fit, but me and 'Dancer' have travelled this way before."

He nodded his head silently, and looked up at the rocky cliffs that seemed to discourage everything except the colonies of seabirds that nested there, their raucous cries hammering the senses along with the rumbling roar of the sea as it rushed through the dark cleft between the two representations of land.

With infinite care, Nebula guided the bows of the ship into the narrow opening and held the wheel steady allowing the action of the waves to carry them forward as the wind became fitful between the steep sides of the rocky channel.

"How deep is the bottom through here," asked Iolaus nervously as the walls slipped by on either side of the vessel, in some places close enough to be able to reach out and touch.

"At the shallowest point ..." she shrugged. ".. maybe three and a half feet."

"You're kidding!" exclaimed the blonde incredulously.

The keel chose that moment to scrape across the rocks beneath them. "Nope! I'm not," assured the pirate.

Iolaus swallowed convulsively, not trusting himself to speak after that. Everyone else on the ship seemed to feel the same, because they could have heard a pin drop if anyone had been careless enough to drop one. 'Dancer's' hull scraped across hidden rocks at least three more times before collective breaths were released when the ship finally cleared the exit from the cleft and emerged onto the open sea all relatively intact.

Nebula scanned the horizon and was pleased by the absence of Roman warships, but she was happier to note that it was less than a candlemark until the sun would set, which meant barring some atrocious luck on their part, 'Wave Dancer' should be safe on it's voyage back to Greek waters. - *How safe some of the passengers are going to be*, - she thought with a predatory gleam in her eye as she sought out Iolaus' muscular form, - *remains to be seen*. -

Chapter Eighty: Plain Sailing?

Nebula demonstrated her formidable sailing skills on the long voyage home. Using many of her repertoire of tricks and her knowledge of the seas they were sailing, she managed to avoid any further contact with Roman warships, and nearly all contact with any other shipping. The last thing she wanted was a chance encounter that led them to disaster! Her aim was to get her dangerous passengers back to Greece as quickly and quietly as possible.

However, twenty days at sea (allowing for a side trip to drop off four Amazons with instructions to collect Argo and take her to Amphipolis,) still allowed the pirate lots of time for relaxation and recreation, something she pursued with relentless ardour, figuring that she needed to make the best use of her limited time with a certain blonde hunter, while he remained her captive prey, so to speak. With that in mind she set her personal course to drive Iolaus to possible distraction, hoping that she might just get lucky.

Of course, the ship's captain wasn't the only person on board 'Waver Dancer' with an agenda in mind. Tarelle's little clique plotted and planned, their dark insidious little treasons, attempting to find the perfect way to overthrow Gabrielle and Ephiny's rule of the Amazons. Autolycus spent his time alternately mooning over the one woman who had captivated him beyond all others, while flirting outrageously with the women warriors who practically fawned over him ... at least when they weren't swooning in front of a demi-god who's mind was focussed entirely on a slowly recuperating Warrior Princess.

Toris garnered his own share of attention from nubile young Amazons and even drew the occasional lustful glance from Nebula, when she was busy tormenting Hercules' blonde sidekick. However, the raven-haired almost twin image of the Warrior Princess, had his attentions firmly fixed upon a honey haired bard who was spending way too much time in the company of his sister and, because of that, the heroically injured Joxer. That particular young man had been making the most of his situation to grab nearly all the attention that Gabrielle spared from Xena, making both Toris, and the tormented Iolaus, frustrated by the unfair advantage their 'rival' possessed.

Sheraya was determined that by the time they reached dry land and headed home for Themiscyra, every patient under her ministrations, was going to be recovered enough to be able to make their way to their final destinations under their own steam. Her goal was highly

laudable, if somewhat optimistic in the fact that she personally felt like doing serious injury to at least three of her patients .. the three most seriously injured as it transpired .. as well as her bardic 'helper'.

The first day after they had shaken Caesar's ships, had passed without too much problem in the infirmary. With Gabrielle there, it had been possible to keep Xena drugged to ensure that she got the peaceful deep rest that she needed to kick-start her recovery. With the Warrior Princess and Joxer heavily sedated, and Eponin only occasionally drifting awake as her body used all her available energy to heal itself, Sheraya had a pretty easy day taking care of the few Amazon Warriors that remained in her care.

With the recovering Patroclese, and Gabrielle, to aid her, the Amazon healer was able to dismiss her two unwilling helpers (Jade and Lasca) back to whatever duties Malonda could cook up for them. As Sheraya watched the two young warriors hurriedly depart from the cabin, she was sure that she'd never seen two happier women; they looked as if they had just received a stay of execution.

Generally speaking, the day after 'Dancer' had given Caesar's ships the slip, had been one filled with laughter, fun and merriment as some of the tension that had beset the ships company was leeches out of them with the thought that they were on the way home after a successful mission.

Two days later, as they sailed somewhere off of the south coast of Italy, things were not so happy, especially in the cabin acting as the infirmary. Sheraya and Patroclese had agreed that it was time to stop administering the sleeping draft to Xena the night before, and one very moody, out of sorts, Warrior Princess was awake with the first rays of the sun ready to make everyone's life miserable in a bid to escape from her confinement there.

By mid-morning the testy warrior had Sheraya ready to pull her hair out, had sent Patroclese running from the cabin in search of some peace and quiet, caused the remaining two injured Amazons to bury their heads beneath their pillows in strangled attempts to hide their amusement at seeing both Xena and their revered healer locked in mental combat, woken Eponin from her long slumber and had Joxer whining because he wasn't getting the attention of a certain bard who was just about ready to give a fractious Warrior Princess a strong piece of her mind.

"Alright, Xena! I've had it," snapped Gabrielle in total frustration as her friend tried for the fourth time that morning to get out of her bed. Placing her index finger in the centre of the warrior's chest she gently pressed forward forcing the, very much weakened, other woman back onto her pillows. "Did you, or did you not, promise me that you would remain in bed until you were fully recovered once we were free of Caesar?" she demanded.

"Yes, I did, but ..." tried Xena.

"Are you, or are you not a woman of your word?" persisted the bard.

Xena arched an eyebrow at her, disdainful to answer, knowing that she'd never broken a promise to her friend, and was well aware that the honey blonde knew that also. - *Besides, any response I*

give to that one will only dig me in deeper! - She opted for a different tack instead, "I'm fine Gabrielle. Everything has stopped bleeding ... I'm not even tired thanks to all that enforced sleeping I've been doing!" she threw a glare at Sheraya as she muttered that.

"And you're nowhere near fit enough to get out of that cot yet," the bard told her adamantly. "Hades, Xena. When I can force you flat on your back with just one finger, even you have to admit that you still have a lot of recovering to do yet."

"Alright, Gabrielle," she grumbled in a low, scarcely audible tone.

However, the young Amazon Queen was in full flow and intended to press her point, "After all that blood you lost it will take time before you replace it."

"Alright, Gabrielle," growled the warrior.

"I mean, even you can't expect to be back on your feet after just a few days. Not after all of the damage you've been taking over the last few moons," she insisted straightened the sheets and tucked the blankets around the Warrior Princess.

"You've made your point, Gabrielle!" snapped Xena with low menace.

"I mean, I know you Xena. The moment you get out of that bed you'll be up on that deck doing drills with your sword and putting your body through Tartarus again ... so I want your word that you will not move from there until Sheraya or Patroclese says your fit enough, and that once you do get out you won't start pushing yourself ..."

"Alright! That's enough Gabrielle!" roared an exasperated warrior, drawing all attention to herself, feeling six pairs of eyes bore into her, a feeling she was uncomfortably familiar with. It opened the gates to the frustration and feelings of helplessness that she had endured while in Caesars's hands. It was a reminder of something her mind wanted to squirm away from. Her brow began to bead with perspiration as the memory of constant scrutiny flooded through her body and soul, making her want to scream in rage and frustration. "That's enough," she panted in a far quieter, almost shaky voice.

Concern instantly creased the bard's brow as she knelt beside her friend reaching out a hand to check for fever, halting as she saw Xena flinch away from her. Gently she moved her fingers forward to stroke the warrior's flushed cheek, "Hey," she whispered soft enough for only her friend to hear. "It's okay, Xena. You just need to rest. You'll be back on you feet in no time."

The Warrior Princess turned her head away from the bard and stared blankly at the wooden wall of the cabin. She could feel the eyes of the other occupants of the cabin upon her and had to fight the desire to fling herself out of the bed and run from the infirmary, away from the eyes that watched her, that crawled across her skin, invading her privacy, violating her sense of freedom.

"Xena?" questioned a worried bard, her hand squeezing the calloused, larger one of the raven-haired woman, "Xena?"

"Leave me alone, Gabrielle," ordered the Warrior Princess. "I'll stay in the bed ... just leave me alone." She knew her voice sounded cold, but she couldn't help that. She needed to raise her protective walls as all of the hardships and pain that she had suffered at Caesar's hands seemed to come crashing down upon her as the realization that she would never be free of what he had done to her made her want to crawl away and hide from the world.

"But ...?" began the honey blonde, not understanding what was going on.

Sheraya had moved quietly to her queen's side and laid a gentle hand on her shoulder. As Gabrielle looked up at her, she shook her head and motioned the younger woman away from the pallet of the Warrior Princess. Then had moved over to the far side of Joxer expecting to be followed.

Gabrielle sighed. Biting her lip, she squeezed Xena's hand and then followed Sheraya across the room to where she waited beside Joxer. The bard looked down at her oft times comical friend and gave him something of a wan smile, which he returned with a beaming grin of his own before becoming serious.

"Is Xena okay, Gabby?" he asked softly, worry plain in his tone.

Nodding, the young woman marvelled that this man, so consummately unsuited to being a warrior, could have the have the courage and heart of the greatest heroes, - *Maybe even greater courage considering his blatant ineptitude!* - as evidenced by his unthinking act that saved a child's life while maybe having cost him his legs. Yet even with his own worries, he could rise above them to show his concern for a friend. "She'll be fine Joxer." She assured him, "You know Xena, tough as old boots. She just needs some rest."

"Sure?" he questioned, concern still evident.

She smiled a little more convincingly as she made a decision, "We'll make sure, Joxer, won't we."

His face brightened at being included by her, "You betcha!" he agreed, "She'll soon be up and around" he swallowed convulsively as his thoughts traitorously reminded him he wouldn't, and his eyes wandered over his splinted legs.

"You will be too, Joxer. Can't keep a good man down. Besides, we're gonna need you." And while Joxer was trying to combat his urge to blush at her words, she bent down and kissed him in a sisterly fashion upon the forehead, turning him into a brilliant red beacon.

"Aw Gabby!" he squirmed with alternate embarrassment and delight.

The bard glanced up in time to see Toris look hurriedly away from his position at the door where he had just entered. "Perfect timing," muttered Sheraya grabbing her queen's arm and steering her towards the door and motioning her to precede her.

Themiscyra. Not just the warriors, but the craftswomen, the farmers, the traders and the children ... one and all I've treated their hurts and their illness"

The honey blonde waited to see where the healer was going with this train of thought. Although she didn't know her well, she had heard enough about Sheraya to know that she rarely spoke about something without a valid reason. She chewed a mouthful of bread and schooled herself to patience.

"Generally, I only have to deal with physical ailments. It's not unheard of for an Amazon to have trouble keeping track of reality ... but it doesn't happen too often. It's something that happens in any society."

Gabrielle knew that that bit of information had nothing to do with Xena ... her friend's grasp on reality was as strong as ever, she'd have known if it wasn't ... she was sure she would.

"Then occasionally, we healers have had to deal with depressions that people sometimes get. Generally, it's a case of giving the person an ear to talk to and, as often as not, they'll work out what's wrong themselves and do something to change their lives so that they no longer suffer from whatever was causing the problem."

A puzzled look stole over the bard's face as she listened, - *Could Xena be depressed? I've never known her to be in the past. Guilty, maybe. She carries her guilt like a weight across her shoulders ... that could make her depressed. Is that what Sheraya's talking about?* -

"Then we get to treat the warriors. The one's that take bad wounds in battle that end their career's as fighters. Often, those women have never even thought of being able to do something else with their lives. Being a warrior, defending the nation and their loved ones, were all they ever wanted for their lives. When it's taken away from them, they feel unable to cope with their world. Many seem to shrivel up inside themselves and waste away, no matter what we try to do to help them. Not all, by any means ... not even most, but many."

- *Xena would never give in like that!* - the bard told herself firmly. - *Besides which, she survived all that Caesar could throw at her and escaped his clutches. There's no reason for her to doubt her self or worth.* - Shaking her head in bewilderment about what the healer was trying to say she demanded, "What has that got to do with Xena?"

"Just this my Queen," Sheraya began, "The Warrior Princess is a proud warrior. She has always been able to stand up to her enemies and defeat them on her own terms."

"As she did against Caesar," Gabrielle pointed out.

"No .. not this time. Xena had to endure whatever Caesar handed out to her because of her desire to protect you, my Queen. I'm guessing that when this kind of thing happens on your travels, she is able to find some way of extracting you both from the situation with her skills?"

"Yes," agreed the bard.

"This time, not only was she unable to keep you from all harm, she also had no part in rescuing you and, in fact, had to be rescued herself. All of these things would weigh heavily upon her sense of ability to be able to protect someone she loves and thus diminishes her view of her self worth ... particularly in her weakened state ... particularly as we have no real clear idea exactly what she suffered whilst in Caesar's hands ... do you understand?"

"Yes ... but" tried Gabrielle, unsure what to say or what she needed to do. A tear pearly in her eye.

"I think that your champion might just be feeling more than a little hemmed in. I'm guessing from what I saw in Themiscyra that she's not keen on crowds and isn't too comfortable around people for long?"

The bard smiled at that description, "I think you could say that," she agreed.

"So the fact that for about the last three or four moons she's been locked up, surrounded by guards and watched at all times has really got to be wearing on her," pointed out the healer.

"Now that you mention it, I'm surprised that she's been as patient as she has," acknowledged Gabrielle. "What can we do to help her, Sheraya? After what she's been through we can't just let her shrivel up inside."

The healer gave a brief smile and patted her queen's leg in a friendly gesture, "I'm sure that now we are aware there's a problem, we'll be able to work something out." She thought for a moment or two, finishing off her lunch as she did so, "I think that we'll clear the infirmary of all but maybe Eponin and Joxer this afternoon. Jaya and Farand are on the mend and will probably heal quicker in the open air now. The hard part will be to keep from fussing over your warrior, make her realise that she's not under constant observation. But I think you're going to have to try and find a way to convince her that she hasn't failed anyone .. you and herself in particular."

The bard nodded thoughtfully. She'd get through to Xena, somehow. A devious smile sneaked across her face, "Sheraya ... I've got an idea," she told the healer with a laugh.

When Gabrielle and Sheraya returned to the infirmary, they found that Patroclese was already there conversing quietly with Toris, the chess board and the small wooden box of pieces clutched in his hands. He smiled when he saw the two women, and when Gabrielle gestured to what he carried he said softly, "I thought Xena might like to play, but she's not interested in either chess or talking at the moment."

"Xena's had a tiring morning, Patroclese," answered Gabrielle loud enough for her friend to hear. "She needs to rest at the moment. Maybe once she's had some lunch she'll take a nap." The warrior showed no visible reaction to anything the bard was saying. "But you might like to teach Joxer how to play, he could do with something to occupy him .. and maybe when Poni feels a little better you can teach her too ... it might give her something else to think about other than giving us a hard time."

Again she got no reaction from the blue eyed warrior, but Joxer piped, "I already know how to play, Gabby, but I'd love to play a game .. just to pass some time."

"Sure Joxer. I'd be happy to take you on. I haven't had a chance to play for a while so you'll have to take it easy on me, okay?"

"No problems!" grinned the wannabe warrior, "been awhile since I played myself."

Patroclese crossed the room to the injured man's side, collecting a small side table on the way and began to lay out the pieces as the cook entered the cabin carrying a basket full of bread and dishes, while her helper bore a large pot of rich smelling broth.

"Ah, lunch," greeted Sheraya who organised meals for her patients, co-opting Toris to feed Eponin. while Gabrielle took a large bowl of soup and a small loaf of fresh bread over to where her uncommunicative partner lay.

"C'mon Xena, sit up and eat this while it's hot," she said cordially as she sat beside the bed.

The warrior didn't move, in fact she failed to acknowledge that the bard had even spoken to her, keeping her dull eyes firmly fixed on a knot in the wooden wall in front of her.

Gabrielle tried again, "C'mon Xena. You need to eat to regain your strength so that you can get out of that bed. Now let me help you up a bit so you can eat."

Still the warrior remained unresponsive. The bard wasn't even sure that she was listening. It was just possible that she had withdrawn into herself and was subconsciously blocking the world out while she drew her hurt, pain and perceived failure around herself like a shroud.

"Look, Xena," insisted the younger woman with quiet, controlled frustration, "either you snap out of this and sit up and eat this of your own choice, or I'll get a couple of the Amazons in here to sit you up and hold you while I spoon feed you." - *That got through to her!* - thought the bard smugly, as she watched her friends shoulders tense under the threat. "C'mon Xena, let me help you up so you can eat and then I'll quit bugging you for a while, okay?"

A soundless sigh passed through the muscular frame as she turned her head away from the wall and began to force herself up onto the pillows using her good right arm, while biting back against the throbbing pain it produced in her wounded left shoulder.

Gabrielle adjusted the pillows and made sure that her friend was comfortable, before picking up the bowl of broth, dipping the spoon in and offering it up to Xena's mouth. Her thanks was a bleak glare from the pale eyes, but the bard was determined and so the warrior either had to capitulate and be fed, or be forced to speak her protest. She chose to allow the younger woman to feed her, although she had to stamp on the spark of resentment that Gabrielle had fanned into existence.

Iolaus," she laughed as her blonde haired friend scowled, "rescued Prometheus from imprisonment and so saved mankind."

"Cor!" breathed Phillipos, his brown eyes wide as he drank in the bard's words.

"That's you friend, isn't it?" questioned Kendra right on cue. "The one the soldiers called 'The Animal'."

Symon, a rather sullen lad of the Israelite people remarked nastily, "She wasn't our champion! She got us beaten an I got the scars to prove it."

Gabrielle winced a bit at that. Not all plans were perfect and Xena would suspect a setup if all the comments had been sweetness and light ... which was why she had taken the chance and allowed this to be an impromptu airing of views, trusting that the good feelings would outweigh the bad and help to prove to her friend that even as a slave she made a difference.

"That wasn't her fault, Sy," refuted Mattin before the bard could intercede. "I know for a fact that it made her miserable that she couldn't stop the soldiers, and I also know for sure that she took far more beatings than any of us ever did, cos I got to see her back that day the mistress came down to the kitchens. I tell ya, it takes some kind of hero to take that and not give into the masters. I was proud to take my stripes. I mean .. what was three lashes compared what they did to her?"

"Yeah," affirmed another voice, "an did you see how afraid of her all them soldiers was. I heard Tellos, the stable master talking one day, and he was saying that 'that Xena woman was an example of how a slave should keep their dignity' an that's the truf!" insisted Fersan, a sprite like lad of no more than ten summers, who grinned at the general hilarity his impersonation of Tellos garnered.

"S'right," said Mattin again, wiping tears of mirth from his eyes. "I heard the cook saying that the only animals in the palace were them soldiers. She said that anyone could see that Xena had more honour and nobility than anyone there, even Lord Caesar ... but she said that last bit in a real whisper ... just in case."

Everyone nodded silently at that. They knew that such talk could get you whipped or maybe even your tongue torn out .. even the cook, because she didn't need her tongue to be able to cook for the master. You learned to talk real quiet and watch who you spoke to in a household's like Caesar's.

"G'brelle," piped up Kendra who had been quiet for longer than was usual for her, "When we gonna get to meet Xena? I wanna tell her that I fink she's a real hero, cos she gave lots of people back home someone to look up to ... and you know what I fink?" she asked seriously.

"No what do you fi .. umm, I mean think?" asked Gabrielle with a smile.

"I fink," said Kendra importantly, "I fink that we all ... all of us kids here .. owe your Xena our chance at being free." She nodded her head flinging her soft corn gold curls around, "Cos if she hadn't come to Lord Caesar's, Patrocluse would never hav had somewhere to take us .. like this boat, and we'd have growed up as slaves like ev'rybody else back there. That's what I fink, anyhow."

Rumbles of agreement came from the other children, the youngest joining in because it seemed like the thing to do, but the sentiment was enough to have the bard surreptitiously rubbing a tear away from the corner of her eye as she prepared to finally tell her story about how Hera captured and chained Prometheus, which removed his gifts to mankind so that people were dying from wounds that wouldn't heal, as well as losing the ability to create fire so that people couldn't be warmed or cook.

She told how Xena had gone to an oracle and by risking her life had found out what she had to do to release Prometheus from imprisonment. Fighting off Hera's warriors, the Warrior Princess had collected the Sword of Hephestus, and she had eventually joined up with Hercules and Iolaus, together fighting their way through Hera's traps to where the bound Titan lay.

"In all the fighting, though, brave Iolaus had been injured and as the heroes neared the top of the mountain where Prometheus was chained, he collapsed unable to go any further," she told the wrapped audience, which by this time included several lurking Amazons as well.

"Leaving him with Xena's companion, the two carried on, each determined not to allow the other to strike the blow that would free Prometheus, knowing that whoever did so was sure to die as the magic of the sword was released."

"But they're both still here .. what did they do, chicken out," sneered Symon.

"Well obviously not," pointed out the bard to her heckler, "as we are still enjoying Prometheus' gifts today. Now where was I? Oh yes. As they prepared for the final climb, Xena used the pommel of her sword to knock Hercules unconscious."

Wide young eyes swivelled questioningly to the demi-god, "What can I say?" he told them with a shrug. "She's good and she caught me by surprise."

"Ha!" gloated Iolaus, "Seems to me you should have kept your mind on the mission and off the kissin'!" he chuckled.

"Seems to me that you had your mind pretty much on a certain bard, buddy," the son of Zeus growled back.

"Hrmmpppphhhhh!" coughed the said bard unhappily. "Gentlemen ... the story?"

"Don't mind him Gabrielle," smirked Iolaus, "He has public intimacy problems."

"Ummm, sorry?" questioned the young storyteller, before shaking her head and hurriedly saying, "Forget it! I don't want to go there." All three adults blushed redly as the children tittered.

"Get on with the story, Gabrielle," suggested Hercules primly.

"Yeah. Right," agreed the bard, searching for the lost thread of the tale. "So the Warrior Princess climbed to the top of the mountain where she was forced to fight more of Hera's monsters. She was surrounded by them, and could have been in big trouble, if Hercules hadn't recovered as fast as he did and made the climb to join her. Spotting him, Xena threw her own sword to the hero and flipped away from her attackers, intent on rescuing Prometheus. Hercules had no option but to fight off Hera's creatures, while Xena pressed on towards their goal."

She had the kids totally enthralled in the adventure now and was revelling in her power to create bright images for her audience. "But Hera still had one final trick up her sleeve. As Xena ran towards the Titan, a giant eagle, one of Echidna, the Mother of Monster's, offspring, snatched her from the ground and flew high into the sky, bearing both Xena and the Sword of Hephestus .. the only thing that could free Prometheus .. away from the mountain."

The gasps of the children were rewarding in, and of, themselves and all the encouragement Gabrielle needed to continue, even without the pleading of young voices begging her to do so. "Xena knew that the eagle was intending to drop her to her death, but she outsmarted it by tying a rope around it's talon, so that when it released her she only fell the length of the rope. Then the eagle tried to get rid of her by flying her into mountain peaks, but Xena was able to spring off the rock up onto the eagles back so that she was riding it.

"It was a titanic struggle, but the Warrior Princess, rode that eagle and steered it back to where Prometheus was captive. When they were almost there, she drew the Sword of Hephestus and plunged it between the bird's shoulders, cutting through its spine. Then with a mighty shout, she launched the sword from the sky towards Hercules who lifted a boulder from the rock strewn ground and deflected the deadly sword into the chains that bound Prometheus, freeing the Titan and releasing his gifts to man!"

The 'Ooooo's' and 'Ahhhhh's' abounded as the children created the scene in their fertile brains.

"But Xena was far from safe," she told her listeners, "With the eagle mortally injured, the Warrior Princess was thrown from it's back down towards the mountain where she was certain to be crushed on the rocks. But Hercules saw her plight, and with his amazing strength, he caught the courageous woman and saved her, and she rewarded him with a passionate kiss."

"I don't remember telling Gabrielle about that ... and I'm certain that Xena wouldn't have said any such thing," grumbled the demi-god.

"Literary licence," grinned his sidekick. "Makes for the good end to a story."

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~ Destiny's Dominion ~

by Power Chakram

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Chapter Eighty One: Hanging Around

Iolaus reckoned the time could be little more than just a candlemark after sunrise. He shook his head a little in frustration, not looking forward to another day of avoiding Nebula and her suggestive teasing. Although he usually enjoyed her sexual sallies, on this trip he was finding them to be something of a trial. He gave a little sigh as he looked into the cloudless sky and pondered his predicament.

It wasn't that he didn't appreciate the attention that she was lavishing on him, - *I do*, - he admitted with a smirk, - *I really do!* - It was just that he wasn't at all comfortable with the essentially public nature of her pursuit ... - *Well that and the fact that being chased by a woman makes me feel Zeus-be-damned uncomfortable.* - admitted the blonde glumly.

Wondering where he could hide himself for a few candlemarks, he wandered across the maindeck and leaned against the mast as he continued his train of thought, - *This adventure has kind of changed my mind a little on pursuit of women*, - he grinned. - *That disguise that Autolycus got me into sure gave me another perspective on that issue.* - He shifted a little and frowned, - *Which reminds me .. I still owe him for that!* -

He glanced at the sun again and realised that it wouldn't be long before Nebula made her appearance on the quarterdeck, - *Where, short of Hades, can I hide where she's not going to be able to find me quickly?* - he wondered, still looking up. A smile brightened his face as the perfect place to conceal himself came to mind. With a lighthearted chuckle, he skipped across the deck and leapt nimbly onto the rail before scuttling with practised ease up the ratlines to the crow'snest. - *That should give me a while away from her*, - he decided.

When he reached the top of his climb, he swung his leg over the half barrel shaped basket and practically stepped on someone's head, "Hey!" came a gruff snarl from a voice he instantly recognised.

Frozen halfway between being inside the crowsnest and balancing on the ropes outside, he offered a hasty, "Sorry." Then added, "I didn't know that anyone was up here."

"That's the idea," came the grunted reply.

"Good idea," he agreed. "That's why I came up here." There was a moments silence between the two as Iolaus continued to remain in his somewhat precarious position, not sure whether he should just retreat or if he was welcome to remain for at least a while.

"Who ya hiding from," questioned the current occupier of his chosen refuge.

"What makes you think I want to hide?" he questioned as he let his eyes scan the deck for any sign that Nebula might be on deck yet. "Is that what you're doing?" he asked with a little laugh.

There was another silence followed by a short sigh before the answer came back, "I was looking for some place where I could be on my own and get some peace and quiet to think for a while ... away from prying eyes."

"Oh," he said softly, "I ... um ... I'll leave you alone then," he said drawing his leg back over the crowsnest rail.

The occupier thought about it for a moment before saying, "There's plenty of room for two here. You're welcome to stay." Then added almost inaudibly, "At least you won't be able to tell anyone where I am if you're here too."

Iolaus grinned and nimbly scampered up the ropes and into the wooden basket, settling down on the opposite side of the mast from the other person, "Thanks, Xena," he said with relief .. getting a grunt in answer.

Time passed quietly with the friends lost in their own thoughts. Eventually, Iolaus brought out a knife and a chunk of wood and began to work it, carving with skill as he deftly whittled away the excess wood to make the basic shape of the head and body of the doll he was fashioning.

The Warrior Princess watched silently, assessing the hunter's easy skill as he turned the wood shaving away at the shapeless block that gradually seemed to come to life under his skillful attention. Finally, she said, "You never told me who you were hiding from."

Without looking up from where he was shaping the outline of a hand he replied, "I never said I was hiding."

Arching an eyebrow at him and fixing him with an insistent 'look', Xena just waited until the smaller man looked up, uncomfortable under her pointed scrutiny. "Oh all right," he muttered.

"Nebula's got this ... 'thing' for me and she's been chasing me around for days making ... 'suggestions'!"

Xena smirked and covered her mouth with her large hand to prevent the bark of laughter escaping her. - *That's choice!* - she thought. - *The great ladies man, Iolaus, treed by a predatory female!* - She coughed to hide her mirth.

"You better not be laughing at me or I'll ..." he began.

She swung her cold eyes on him and asked chillingly, "Or you'll what?" she questioned quietly.

"Um ... nothing ... just I don't find it funny," he muttered.

She grinned and watched him set about the carving once more. It had been a long while since she'd carved, she realised. She'd picked the skill up from an old neighbour in Amphipolis when she'd still been just a kid ... and she'd practised it for many years, often carving to while the time away in the odd quiet moments of her life. "Why don't you just confront her on it?" she asked him referring to his problem with Nebula.

Iolaus shrugged dispiritedly and continued carving.

Xena gave him an exasperated look, "She's chasing .. you're running. Why not turn around and call her bluff ... become the hunter, not the hunted."

"Because I don't think it's a bluff ... that woman looks ready to eat me alive!" he complained. "Besides ... that would ruin any chance I have of ..." he blushed a vivid scarlet and clammed up.

"Ruin the chance of what?" asked the warrior innocently, guessing she already knew the answer. She'd spent another three days in bed, under the watchful care of Gabrielle, Patroclese and Sheraya, before she'd managed to slip out before dawn this morning and escape up here. However, in that time she'd been a witness to the rivalry between Iolaus, Toris and Joxer as they all vied for the attention of the bard. Joxer, being injured, was getting a lot of her company and attention, but that didn't stop the other two men from dropping into the infirmary under one pretext or another.

"Forget it," he muttered, focusing his attention firmly back on the doll he was creating.

Patting his leg in friendly sympathy, she told him, "Gabrielle doesn't expect you to be anything other than what you are."

He gave her an exasperated look, "Oh c'mon, Xena! Gabrielle has made it pretty clear she disapproves of me flirting with women. What's she gonna say if Nebula and I ... well if we ... Hades, you know! What's she gonna say then, huh? Something like, 'I like experienced men, Iolaus .. come and show me what I've been missing!'"

Xena had to grin at that. - *Nope! Don't think that would be the response,* - she admitted silently.

He sighed again, "I know I'm too old for her ... and I know that I've got a history with a few other -," he looked at her smirk, "Well alright, a lot of other women. But Gabrielle makes me feel different. It's like I want to protect her and keep all the menace of the world away from her. I think ... I think that ... maybe I'm in love with her," he said softly. "She's a very special person."

"Yes she is," agreed the warrior. She gave Iolaus a hard speculative look, "and I wouldn't want anyone messing with her affection ... that would make me real mad."

"Oh, Zeus! Xena," he exclaimed. "Isn't that just what I've been saying to you. Hurting Gabrielle is the last thing I'd want to do .. which is why this thing with Nebula is causing me such hassle," he complained. "Being cooped up on a small ship with an amorous pirate is a nightmare." He scowled as the warrior chuckled, "It's not funny, Xena!" he growled pointedly as her chuckle deepened, "I said it's not funny!" he insisted.

"Oh c'mon Iolaus. Ya gotta see the funny side of it," she told him as her laughter subsided.

"No I don't," insisted the blonde grumpily. He looked at her sideways seeing the lopsided smile on her face, "Well maybe a little," he admitted with a reluctant grin of his own.

Silence descended once more. Iolaus went back to his carving while Xena watched. Finally curiosity got the better of her, "What are you doing?"

"Carving a doll," he stated unhelpfully.

The Warrior Princess scowled, "I can see that," she growled, "Why are you doing it?" she wanted to know.

The hunter looked up and glared at her for a moment, before snapping, "No laughing?"

"Warlords honour," she replied with a mock serious look on her face.

"Hmmmph!" snorted Iolaus. He looked up again and saw her waiting for an answer, "It's for one of the kids," he said quickly.

"Pardon?" she questioned wanting a fuller answer.

"It's for one of those slave kids that Patroclese brought on board," he answered concentrating on the doll. "Those kids have either never had any toys or, if they did, it was before they were made slaves. I thought it would be good for some of the younger ones to have something to play with ... try to teach them to be kids again."

Xena nodded her understanding and watched as her friend continued to work on the wood. After some time she pursed her lips and looked at where the sun had climbed to, - *Almost a couple of candlemarks after dawn*, - she estimated. - *Any time now*. - she guessed.

Patroclese shook his head and scrubbed his face hard with his hands before standing up and stretching, "C'mon, Gabrielle. She's been in that bed for six days ... did you really think you were going to get her to stay there until we got her home?" he asked logically.

The trouble was that the bard was not feeling logical, "She's still not well. Just yesterday she was showing signs of a fever," she pointed out.

"Which disappeared by lunch time," reminded Patroclese, peering over her shoulder for some help from Sheraya.

"Don't look at me," the Amazon held up her hands to fend him off, "I told her yesterday that Xena needed to get some light exercise before she started chewing her way through the hull."

"You also said that she wasn't anywhere near fully recovered," Gabrielle reminded her pointedly.

"That's true," admitted Sheraya calmly, "but I also remember telling you that light exercise would benefit her recovery now."

"And I responded, if I remember correctly, that Xena has no conception of what light exercise is when it comes to herself," snarled the bard testily.

"You could have escorted her and kept an eye on her, my Queen," pointed out the Amazon healer.

The honey blonde had no good answer for that and whirled back towards Patroclese, "And you ... you were supposed to be watching over the patients, not falling asleep ... what's your excuse?" she demanded belligerently.

The Roman healer shrugged and grinned in a self-deprecating manner, "What can I say. I got tired; I took a nap."

Gabrielle wanted to hit him. - *Don't they understand that Xena isn't like other people? Unless I make sure that she rests, she pushes herself to her limits before she's well enough to do it. Well not this time! I've just got her back from Caesar's clutches .. I refuse to surrender her to Hades again!* -

A quiet voice from Eponin's bed attracted her attention, "Gabrielle, she can't go far ... she's on a small ship. The only place with enough space for her to do weapons practice is the deck .. but I think you'll find she just wanted some air. She's probably found a quiet spot up on deck to hide out."

"Why didn't she tell me, Poni," moaned the bard her anxiety evident.

"Because she knew you would have argued with her. Honestly, Gabrielle! You've been fussing over her like a mother hen with just one chick," explained the Weapon's Master with her usual unique brand of subtlety; unique in that she totally lacked any.

The Queen of the Amazons made a strangling noise deep in her throat before she regained her composure and calmly stated, "Well thank you for all your help with this matter, ladies and gentleman. If you'll excuse me, I have a Warrior Princess ... who is in serious trouble .. to find." She tugged assertively on the hem of the tunic she was wearing to straighten the fit, turned on her heel and stiffly stalked to the door and exited the cabin.

The anger that she'd been trying to control, with varying degrees of success, since she'd awoken, was now beginning to burn fiercely. When she reached the deck and could see no sign of her partner she'd yelled angrily, "XENA! Where in Tartarus are you! YOU PROMISED!"

She didn't really expect the Warrior Princess to show herself, she knew Xena of old. Sometimes the warrior got into a mule headed stubborn set and wouldn't listen to patient reasoning or logic ... - *Especially if it's for her own good!* - she silently moaned. "XENA! THIS IS NOT FUNNY! COME OUT AND LET'S SIT AND TALK ABOUT THIS!" she tried.

When after a couple of heartbeats no warrior appeared, - *Not that I was expecting her too,* - she admitted to herself. - *She's doing this to goad me into tearing around this ship to try and find her. Well I'm not playing her game!* - Frowning, she glared around the deck until she spotted Ephiny and about nine other Amazons hanging over the ships railing.

Intrigued, despite her anger and anxiety over Xena, Gabrielle made her way over to where her friend stood and gently rubbed her hand on the Regent's back in a comforting gesture, "Hey Eph?" she said with concern, "You okay?"

A concerted retching noise was made down along the line of Amazons before Ephiny straightened up scrubbing the back of her hand over her mouth. "I'm fine, Gabrielle. Just a little bit seasick." she answered.

The bard looked at her friend, very aware of her off-green colour as she began to feel the uncomfortable roil of her own stomach. She quickly jabbed at the pressure point that Xena had shown her and let out a shaky sigh as she felt the relief from it. Feeling substantially better she said, "Why didn't you say something? I could have shown you this pressure point thing that Xena taught me. You don't have to suffer from being seasick, you know ... just keep a careful eye on what you eat. This numbs the tastebuds, ya know." She grinned as she remembered where she'd learnt to use the method, "First time I used it I was eating raw squid."

The thought made her blanch as she recalled in vivid detail the squashy, slippery feel of the rubbery creature as she chewed enthusiastically at it. The sharp memory was enough to overcome the power of the pressure point and have the bard joining her friend in throwing up over the ship's side.

When both women had regained control of their stomachs, they looked at each other, misery plastered clearly across their faces, "Are you like this all day, Eph?" questioned the bard.

"Nah!" answered the Regent, "Only happens in the ... morning! Oh gods!" she whispered.

"What about the others?" asked Gabrielle in concern.

"Same thing," admitted Ephiny.

The Amazon Queen watched as a few of the ill warriors left to be replaced by others, "How many of them?" she wanted to know.

"Umm .. most," groaned the blonde, her sickness now having nothing to do with biology. She felt like crying. She felt like screaming. She wanted to die!

"I think you and the others better go talk to Sheraya," surmised the bard, "Just to make sure," she added.

Ephiny nodded in a distracted way, - *Oh gods!* - she raged. - *I'm pregnant. I'm having that bastard's child. He raped me and I'm gonna be left with his brat!* -

"Eph? ... Eph?" tried Gabrielle, knowing what must be going through her friend's mind, "EPHINY!" she yelled, finally drawing the other woman's attention. When she was sure that the Regent was paying attention she spoke slowly and clearly. "The child is yours. He has nothing to do with it except providing the seed. He's just a man and could have been any man. Forget him. Concentrate on YOUR child. Not his, but YOURS!"

The blonde Amazon nodded uncertainly at what the bard was telling her. - *Maybe Sheraya can give me something to get rid of it?* - she thought desperately. - *This can't be happening to me!* - her mind wailed.

"C'mon Eph, get a grip," encouraged Gabrielle, enfolding her into a warm embrace, "You can't fall apart, there's too many people who need you. I need you, dammit! Don't think of Caesar. Think of Xenan. He's going to have a little brother or sister. Hey if it's a girl, we'll have an heir ... that might help settle some of the unrest," babbled the honey blonde desperately trying to find a way to reach her friend who seemed to be in shock.

"I can't ..." murmured Ephiny, her eyes beginning to brim with tears, "Gabrielle I can't! Oh gods! Why did this have to happen. I can't have this child ... his child ... I just can't."

"C'mon Eph, we'll go and see Sheraya .. lets see if there's anything she can suggest ... maybe she'll have something to make you feel a little better so that you can think about this rationally." soothed the bard as she coaxed the Regent slowly towards the companionway that led to the cabins.

Catching sight of Malonda as she was moving across the deck with Ephiny, Gabrielle signalled the Chief Scout over and issued a few instructions about locating the absent Warrior Princess, wherever she might be on board the ship, and escorting her back to the infirmary, "I don't want any excuses from her," she told Malonda. "Just tell her I expect to see her back in her bed or else."

The bard failed to notice the malicious glare that flared in Malonda's eyes, as the Regent's panicked muttering drew her attention back to her friend at that moment. The scout really doubted that Xena was going to co-operate with the queen's instructions, which meant, if she followed the letter of the orders, she would be able to use force to carry them out. - *The Queen might quibble about the outcome, but she can't dispute that her instructions gave me the licence to manhandle the Warrior Princess if she gives any indication of non-compliance!* - she thought smugly. She set about rounding up her search party.

Nebula frowned distractedly. There had been no sign of Iolaus in any of his normal ship board haunts, - *It appears that Curly has gone and found a place to hide from me.* - That brought a grin to her face, - *Well if he's taking the trouble to hide, I must be really getting to him.* - The grin deepened to a toothy smile as she mused, - *I wonder when he'll stop running long enough to realise that we could have a lot of fun together.* - She sighed to herself at the thought of just what, and how much, fun they could have.

- *Oh well, no good daydreaming about it. But when short, sweet and curly resurfaces, he and I need to have a l-o-n-g chat about ... things.* - she sighed again with an almost imperceptible shiver of anticipation.

Casting her eyes over her ship, she saw Gabrielle escorting Ephiny down towards what had been her cabin, both women looking a little green around the gills. Malonda seemed to be organising some Amazon thing, as she gathered together a collection of warriors, and the deck watch seemed to be going about their business with the confidence of old hands. - *Definitely need to ask some of those women if they fancy a life at sea,* - she told herself.

Out of habit she swept the horizon for any sign of the Roman pursuit and was quietly pleased when she could see no other vessel within sight. The six days since they had left Ostia had been clear of any sign of Roman pursuit, but she doubted that Caesar's men would have given up that easily.

By the end of daylight, she intended to pull into a little cove close to the small port of Astakos. There she'd be dropping off four of the Amazons who, armed with a note from Xena, would make their way to the village of Tassos and collect a horse from someone called Kolianis and take it back to Amphipolis. It added a substantial amount of time to their journey, but the detour probably kept them off of the routes where they would be looked for.

A quick look at the sky to gauge the weather told her that the day was set fair for easy sailing and that she had no rough conditions setting in for at least the next few candelmarks. She smiled lazily at that as she let her eyes drift back down to the deck, - *Nothing like good weather for a peaceful cruise,* - she mused. Her gaze found and stayed with the tall, raven-haired brother of the Warrior Princess. - *Well, now. There's an easy sight for sore eyes, wonder if he's as much fun to play with as Iolaus?* - She allowed herself a low chuckle and a contemplative sigh.

That thought brought another on its heels. - *Maybe I'm going about this game the wrong way with Curly. Maybe if he thinks his .. interests are being threatened, he might stop being so backwards about coming forwards,* - she mused. A gleam came into her eyes, - *What can it hurt*

pursuing two interests? - she thought wickedly. - I surely do like a good chase, - she conceded. - But catching the prey can be fun too. - she smiled. - First I better make sure the watch rota's are set .. then we'll see if Stretch has got any of his sister's spark. -

Toris, at this time, was unaware that he'd just become a target for the pirate's games. He was concerned about his sister, - *Not that she's ever been one for staying in bed when she's recovering from an injury or illness, - he reminisced. He smiled at the thought remembering the innocent trouble that his precocious sister had caused as a child.*

- That time when she was five summers old and she had the fever that was plaguing everyone that spring. She was so ill and shaking so much she could barely stand! But it was Grampy's birthday, and she was determined to take him the present she had for him. - He chuckled at the memory of the pouch full of pretty stones she had painstakingly collected for him before getting ill.

- Damn little imp climbed out of her bedroom window, because she knew Mother wouldn't let her out of bed. How she managed to climb down the tree to the yard without breaking her fool neck in her condition, we never did find out. Mother was frantic when she realised that she wasn't in her room .. not that that wasn't an uncommon condition for Mother to be in, - he grinned. - Xena damned well gave her grey hairs long before her time! - He shook his head.

- It was Ly who knew where she was going. Mother, me and Lyceus scrambled out to Grampy's farm as quick as we could and sure enough the little rogue was there. Mother didn't know whether to scold her or wrap her up and cuddle her. When we found her she was drenched in sweat from the fever and shaking fit to come loose. She could have only just got there because Grampy was just opening the door. She just had time to hand the old man the pouch and wish him 'Happy birthday', when Mother swept her up in her arms. - A smile made a lopsided crease of his lips.

- Mother asked her father for a blanket and apologised for not staying and wished him a happy birthday, before bundling Xena up in the blanket and heading for home. I had to give Ly a piggy back because he'd got so tired. When we got home Mother made up a pallet for Xena in her room. There wasn't a tree outside her window and her door could be locked. Xena wasn't allowed out of that room for close on twenty days. - A speculative frown etched his brow. - That might explain why she hates being cooped up. -

He sighed and looked up towards the crow's nest, aware of the occasional shaving of wood that drifted down from there. - *Always did go for the high places to hide, didn't you Xena? - he asked his rhetorical question silently. - Well it's time to get back in your bed now little sister, - he thought, - or Gabrielle just might explode. - He was trying to get the courage to climb the rigging so that he could confront his AWOL sibling. The trouble was that he wasn't confident with heights ... something that Xena had taken unfair advantage of all his life. - Some things never change, - he sighed.*

Before he got the chance to act on his intentions, he felt a hand being laid upon his shoulder, "Hey stretch," husked a familiar voice. "Haven't seen you around for a while. You been hiding."

Toris tried not to tense up as Nebula moved to stand next to him, giving him a long appraising look. "I've been busy helping out in the infirmary," he reminded her neutrally. "Haven't had much time to be up on deck."

"That's a shame," smiled the pirate warmly, "a big guy like you needs room to move and fresh sea air to expand your .. horizons," she told him suggestively looking him up and down, allowing her gaze to linger just a moment longer than was comfortable on his waist and below. "Maybe you've been cooped up too long," she purred languidly.

"Lady, if you're trying to get a rise out of me, you're wasting your time," he shook his head as he spoke.

"Mister," she stepped closer to him so that he could smell the fresh sharp scent of her clear in his head, "if I was trying to get a rise out of you, you'd know it!"

As she began the line she moved her hand forward with every intention of gauging his manhood, only her hand never got to the target, stopped short by a vice like grip around her wrist. She looked away from Toris into a pair of blue eyes almost the man's twin ... only these wore cold confidence like an old friend and were lit by a savage fire that were alien to the male's.

"I believe my brother declined your advances," rumbled a low menacing voice.

Nebula tried to shake the hand from her wrist but the grip remained firm and perceptibly tightened, drawing a feral grin on the warrior's face. "What?" sneered the pirate frustrated in her efforts to break Xena's hold, "Is he such a mamma's boy that he needs his sister to protect him?" - *Damn*, - she thought anxiously as her hand started to turn numb, - *The only person I've met with strength to rival hers is Hercules, and she's not got his scruples about using it.* -

"Just keep your hands off ... my family is not something to mess with ... ya got that?" growled the raven-haired woman increasing her grip until the pirate thought her bones were going to grate.

"Yeah .. yeah, sure," conceded Nebula, ready to say anything to get her arm out of the vice.

"Good," smiled Xena, although no humour could be detected in her face. "Don't go forgetting it." She released the wrist and turned away from the pirate.

Reputation is a funny thing. The Warrior Princess carried such a big one that sensible people would seriously consider playing tag with a tiger before antagonizing the ex-warlord. However others, conscious of their own reputations, deemed it a matter of pride and honour to test their metal against the Destroyer of Nations and try and take her down. Nearly every attempt had proven to be a failure .. the exceptions being when someone, like Caesar, could muster

overwhelming force against her. Not for many, many years had anyone been able to best her in individual combat.

Nebula, was aware of Xena's reputed abilities, but she had a not inconsiderable reputation of her own to uphold, especially on her own turf, so to speak. If she allowed the Warrior Princess to get away with the stunt she had just pulled without at least attempting to take retribution, then she would fail herself in her own eyes.

So muttering a short prayer to the gods, she snarled, "Hey!" grabbing the warrior by the shoulder and turning her into a full fledged punch that rocked solidly into the other woman's jaw snapping her head to one side. As Xena slowly turned her head back towards her aggressor, the pirate shook out her fist wincing with pain as she realised, - *By the gods! That punch should have laid out an ox!* - She almost cringed at the cold flat look she was getting from the ex-warlord.

Xena allowed her eyes to bore into the pirate as she contemplated her. She could understand her reaction, it was just a question of where she should take the confrontation now. She resisted the urge to move her jaw around to see whether it was broken, she'd be damned if she'd give the captain the satisfaction of seeing that her blow had hurt.

The trouble was that she wasn't really in any shape to teach the pirate the lesson she seemed to be asking for. When she'd seen Toris come on deck, she knew he'd figured out where she was to be found and was just working up the courage to make the climb. Then when Nebula had accosted him, and seemed intent on extending her game with Iolaus to her brother, she knew that she needed to take some action ... Not that Toris wasn't able to take care of himself in most situations, it was just that she was fairly certain that her sibling didn't have the right experience to deal with the pirate's brand of predatory sexuality.

As Nebula had stepped in closer to Toris, she knew she needed to act fast. So without a lot of consideration, she flipped out of the crow's nest and down to the deck with a display of her usual athleticism. - *The troubles is* - she realised as she landed and her body screamed at her in protest, - *I'm not really ready for this stuff yet!* -

However, not willing to concede her body's current frailty, her hand had darted forward and locked like a vice around the pirate's wrist. She concentrated all of her not inconsiderable, if still far from total, strength and recognised the pain in the other woman's deep brown eyes. Her own problem was keeping the screaming pain from her back out of her own eyes, and to make sure that her legs didn't shake like a jellyfish giving her true lack of condition away.

Contrary to the evidence of the action, she had been prepared for Nebula's crunching blow .. which is why she had been able to ride it enough to remain standing, probably frightening the pirate more than when she'd nearly broken her wrist with the grip of her hand. That punch, though, had taken nearly all of her final reserves of strength to resist, and she wasn't in any real condition for a rough house brawl with the dark skinned woman. - *I need to end this now! But in such a way that she knows who's top dog here.* -

"That's one!" she growled. "I figure I owe you that one for the damage to your wrist ... but don't make the mistake of thinking you'll get another free-shot," she smiled with that feral cast to her face that was enough to scare grown warlords and Gods of War.

Whatever Nebula would have retorted was cut off by the loud arrival of Malonda and her search team. They gathered around the Warrior Princess, tense and ready to take their cue from the Chief Scout. "The Queen instructs you to return to the infirmary immediately," the Amazon growled with a cold smirk.

Xena gave her a flat look. There was something about Malonda that made her hackles rise whenever the scout was around her. So far she had resisted the temptation to explain the realities of life to the other woman, but the time was drawing close when a little Warrior Princess chastisement for manners would need to be administered.

Before she could speak, however, Toris stepped into the breach, recognising the fact that his sister was far from being as fit as she wanted others to believe, "Actually my sister had just agreed to allow me to escort her back there. She has had enough fresh air for today, and feels that it's time to let Sheraya check her recovery progress."

Nebula almost shook her head in disbelief, - *What is it with these two? They play tag team in each other's defence .. if one's hurt, does the other bleed?* - She could see that the situation looked as if it could turn nasty. She had no need to be involved; after all, she'd just had a head-on clash with Xena and Malonda got right up her nose. - *Yeah, but,* - she told herself, - *at least Xena plays by the rules. She could have stopped that punch, but she let it slide so I kept face as captain of this ship ... Malonda, well I don't think she knows what rules are.* -

Coming to a decision, Nebula added her two dinars worth, "That's alright, Malonda," she purred, "We'd just finished our conversation and were heading down to the cabin." She smiled broadly, "Toris here was going to show me a real good game."

Xena cast a baleful glare in her direction as her brother coughed and muttered, "Chess .. I'm going to show her how to play chess."

"Yeah," smirked the pirate, "Chess!"

"CHESS!" barked Toris, colouring redly around his collar, "The game's called chess!"

"You call it what you want, and I'll call it what I want," she retorted unrepentantly.

The Warrior Princess glared at both of them while reserving the greater part of her ire for the Amazon. She was annoyed at Toris for interfering, she wanted to remind Nebula to keep her hands off her brother and she really wanted to use Malonda's head for a deck mop and was struggling not to do so.

Seeing the budding evidence of explosion in his sister's tense stance, Toris carefully grasped his sibling's elbow and used his strength to get her started towards the companionway. Nebula grabbed her other arm and helped partially propel the fuming warrior off the deck.

"Now is not the time to confront Malonda," she said so softly that only Xena's acute hearing would have picked up the words. "She's looking for trouble and would delight in dragging you bodily back to that cabin. Now as I don't want to see the bitch get her enjoyment, why don't you do everyone a favour and act as if this is your idea, huh?"

Considering the words, Xena knew that the pirate was right. Malonda was spoiling for a fight, and as much as she'd like to oblige her, she really wasn't up to it. Relaxing between her two escorts, she ceased her resistance and walked as though willing to return to her confinement in bed once more. However she returned a soft whisper for the pirate's ears, "I think when I'm back to fitness, you and I ought to continue our discussion of a short while ago."

Nebula looked at her with stark incredulity, "What! D'ya think I'm nuts? No way." Both women grinned and were happy to lead the strange procession down to the infirmary, followed by Malonda and her warriors.

Once back in the cabin, Gabrielle took charge and the Warrior Princess was harried back into her cot which, if she was being truthful, she slumped into with infinite relief, leaving a frustrated Chief Scout, a bewildered party of Amazons (who weren't totally sure of what was going on) and a smirking pirate and innkeeper who were contemplating the intricacies of chess ... umm, ... chess.

Chapter Eighty Two: The Price of Love

Xena sat in her bed, her arms crossed over her chest defensively, a blazing glare lit her eyes as she swivelled them first to the left, then to the right. Two large Amazons stood guard. Neither looked at the Warrior Princess but all three women knew what they were there for: to keep a reluctant patient in her bed by order of the Queen.

- *Gabrielle you are going to pay for this!* - promised the raven haired warrior as she sat and quietly fumed.

When Nebula and Toris had escorted her back to the infirmary and delivered her up to the irate bard, she had made the mistake of chuckling at the tirade the younger woman had been delivering. Gabrielle's eyes had suddenly gone flinty and she had watched with silent anger as the warrior had slowly and carefully stripped off the tunic she'd been wearing, turning her back on the bard and everyone else in the cabin to hide her wince of pain as she did so, before lowering herself gingerly onto the pallet.

"Alright, Warrior Princess," hissed the bard, "if you aren't going to take your injuries seriously, I'll do it for you."

Xena, somewhat recklessly in the current situation, smirked at her friend as if daring her to do her worst. However, inwardly she was struggling to maintain the confident strong facade that she was presenting to hide the fact that she was exhausted and hurting like blazes from the damned fool stunt of jumping out of the crow's nest.

Gabrielle turned to the glowering Malonda, "Thank you, Malonda ... that will be all." As the Chief Scout turned to leave the Queen added, "Oh Malonda. Please have Ushanta, Ossian, Lesich and Raedwulf come down to the infirmary as soon as possible," she commanded without offering any explanation.

The injured warrior's frown darkened as she wondered just what her bard had in mind, - *You're up to something, Gabrielle*, - she told herself.

"Um," Nebula moved away from where she stood next to Toris, "I've gotta keep an eye on things up on deck," she told them reluctantly. She was beginning to enjoy the company of the good looking innkeeper, but she did have the running of her ship to see to. She smiled almost seductively at the warlord's brother, "But when I get time, I'm going to hold you to that offer to show me your chest," she said wickedly.

"Chess!" retorted Toris quickly. "It's a game called chess," he repeated, as much for the cabin's other occupants as for the pirate.

"Whatever," Nebula grinned wickedly, flashing her toothy smile, as she sauntered out the door, "Later, guys!"

Gabrielle transferred her scowl to Toris who shrugged helplessly. "She likes to joke," he told her, although he wasn't absolutely sure why he was desperate to explain his innocence in the affair. The bard continued to look blackly at him. "Ummm I promised I'd help Autolycus with er, with, um with whatever he's doing right now," he finished helplessly, bolting for the cabin door and exiting without a backwards glance.

"That wasn't nice, Gabrielle," protested Xena. "You're mad with me ... not my brother. Don't take this out on him."

The bard drew in a deep breath and turned her attention to her partner. She crossed over to the cot, where the Warrior Princess sat, her mind racing with all the things she wanted to scold her about. However, when she reached her side she could see the faint sheen of perspiration that beaded her friend's face and said in exasperation, "Xena, you promised!" as she laid the back of her hand against the dark fevered brow.

Shaking her head in admonishment, she pushed the stubborn warrior back against her pillows and swung her legs up onto the cot where she roughly drew the covers over the reluctant patient. "What am I supposed to do with you?" she demanded, caught somewhere between concern and anger.

"You could yell at me later," the warrior suggested with a mock pout. "I'm not well you know," she sighed insincerely.

"Oh no, Warrior Princess! You don't get off that easily," the bard retorted with annoyance. "Did you, or did you not, promise me that you would stay in bed until you were fully recovered?"

"We were under a lot of pressure, Gabrielle I may have said it" blustered the warrior, reluctant to admit the promise.

"Oh believe me, Xena, you said it," assured the honey blonde.

"Damn it, Gabrielle. You know I hate being cooped up," growled the raven-haired woman uncomfortably, knowing that she had broken her promise even if she did feel well enough to be up and about ... she also knew that she wasn't fully recovered.

"Oh. I know Xena," agreed the bard with forced amiability.

"How about we slip off the ship and go collect Argo ourselves?" asked Xena hopefully, changing the subject and trying for a chance of freedom.

Smiling sweetly at her friend as four hulking Amazon warriors came through the cabin door, the bard answered, "Not a chance, Warrior Princess. You were only up on deck a few candlemarks and you came back here exhausted. There are still bounty hunters looking for us, and you are in no condition to fight them off." She shook her head at the glare that she was getting from the icy eyes of her friend, "So we're staying on this ship for the entire journey and you are going to stay in that bed."

"Gabrielle!" protested the warrior, "I'm going crazy here. I need some fresh air. A walk on deck is good for my recovery. Shera told you that, and so did Patroclese."

- *Damn her hearing!* - snarled the bard to herself. It had been a private conversation in hushed tones while Xena had been asleep, - *Well obviously she wasn't asleep or she wouldn't have heard that, would she?* - Sighing, she decided to concede a point, "Yeah well maybe you do need some fresh air, once a day. But I think we'll take a couple of precautions."

"Like what?" demanded Xena suspiciously.

Gabrielle waved the four Amazons over, "Xena, these warriors are now your personal attendants." The bard grinned at the scowl that descended on her partner's face. She turned her attention to the four warriors. "Your task is to see that the my Champion remains in her bed except for a gentle walk around the deck for a candlemark each morning and again in the afternoon. You answer to no one's orders except mine, and your responsibility is to make sure that Xena does not tire herself during her recovery." She watched as the quartet nodded acceptance of their orders.

"Gabrielle," snarled the warrior patient, her voice full of simmering anger.

Ignoring her friend, the bard continued, "You will make sure that other than the two candlemarks she has for light exercise, she stays right where she is now oh yes, and light exercise does not include climbing, running, flips, rolls, fighting of any kind ... with weapons or without. There is also to be no jumping, arm wrestling, practice kicks ... in fact anything that requires more than a gentle walk or quietly sitting is out. Got it?" she demanded, looking at each of them and then at the raven-haired woman who was glaring at her.

"Yes, my Queen!" the four said in unison.

"Kill me now, Gabrielle," grumbled Xena in disgust. "I'm going to die of boredom!"

"No you won't, Xena. And it's for your own good. I know you. You always want to run before you can walk literally!" the bard told her.

Eponin chuckled from the next bed, "Look at it this way, Xena. As soon as you're fit enough, you can beat your 'attendants' into chopped liver. That way Gabrielle will know you're well enough to be out of the bed."

The four Amazon warriors looked at each other a bit dubiously at the thought, while Xena looked balefully at the Weapons Master, "Ya know Ep, you got a smart mouth!" she growled.

"Years of practice, Warrior Princess. Years of practice." crowed the Amazon. "The rate you're going, I'm gonna be outta here before you."

"Don't bank on it, Poni," chimed in Gabrielle. "Sheraya says you're going to need to take it easy for quite a while. So, if you start causing the same trouble as my friend here," she said tapping Xena's arm, "I'll just have to arrange some attendants to aid in your recovery, too. I'm sure there'll be plenty of willing volunteers for the job. I'm certain everyone would want to participate in ensuring your full recuperation."

The grins from the four big Amazon warriors let Eponin know that there would be no lack of volunteers for the task. She'd always been a hard taskmaster when it came to warrior training and taking care of the Weapons Master during her recovery would be perfect payback time for them.

Groaning at the thought, Poni demanded of the Warrior Princess, "Was she always like this ... or has she learned it being around you?"

"Nothing to do with me, Ep!" retorted an indignant ex-warlord. "It's being made queen by you Amazons that's done this. All that power has corrupted her."

"I've seen that happen before," admitted Eponin nodding sagely. "But people afflicted with this kind of thing usually end up getting paid back."

"And paybacks can be a bitch!" grinned Xena maliciously.

Gabrielle looked from one warrior to the other as they talked disparagingly about her, "That's right. Have your fun ... but neither of you are in any shape to do anything right now, so you will take it easy and obey the rules." She stood up and smoothed her skirt down. "Now since you both need to rest to get well, it's time for a nap for both of you."

"Gabrielle," hissed the Warrior Princess in warning.

"Hey! I haven't been anywhere," protested Eponin.

"You," the bard said, pointing her index finger at the Weapons Master, "need all the rest you can get. And you," she glared at Xena, "have pushed yourself too hard. You're both still replacing lost blood and you need plenty of rest for that. So either you take a nap like good patients, or I'll have Shera mix up something to put you to sleep."

The raven-haired warrior was ready to refuse when she saw the bard glance towards the hulking quartet of attendants. Her message was clear. She wouldn't put it past her autocratic partner to use her warriors' muscle to force feed a sleeping potion to her. Glowering angrily she settled back into her pillows, surprised at how tired she actually felt. Despite her intentions of just closing her eyes and waiting out her time, she actually drifted off to sleep quite quickly.

That had been five days previously, and true to her word, Gabrielle had used the warrior attendants to keep a strict eye on her champion. Xena didn't know whether to be infuriated or proud of the stubborn young woman who had risked the Warrior Princess' wrath in order to ensure that she had time enough for healing.

As she sat and thought about the situation, a grudging smirk swiftly crossed her lips before it was carefully hidden, once again, behind a coldly stoic mask, - *Gabrielle, I swear ... if it wasn't that I knew your heart was in the right place, and that you thought this was for my good, I'd paddle your backside until you yelled for your mother!*-

She listened to the sound of the sea churning behind them in a wake of white water as 'Wave Dancer' sped over the Aegean sea. A glance thrown over her shoulder through the stern lights showed her the island of Scyros falling behind them. Ahead of them lay the eastern reaches of the string of islands called the Northern Sporades, which they'd pass maybe around evening time. They'd made good time with no sign of Caesar's pursuit ships darkening their horizon.

Xena allowed her fingers to brush the collar that remained locked around her throat as she thought of the Roman. Hercules had tried his best to remove the thing even with her own not inconsiderable strength added to his, they didn't even strain the rivet that held the collar fast. She felt the start of a warm glow as she thought about the demi-god, but she reluctantly crushed it for the time being and kept her attention on the collar.

Anger flared deep within her, - *How in Hades do we get these things off,* - she wondered as she looked across at the bard who was talking to Joxer. It was bad enough that she was constantly

subjected to the reminder of Caesar, but Gabrielle didn't deserve to be marked by what was ultimately the stigma of her past failings.

Trying to shake herself out of that mood, she glanced across at Eponin to see if the Weapons Master felt up to a game of chess. The Amazon had proven to be an adept pupil and learned the game almost as quickly as Xena had herself. The Warrior Princess still won the games, but Poni's increasing ability was pushing her, and was proving to be a stimulating pastime for both of them. - *With practice, Ep may just beat me someday.* - She grinned wolfishly, - *But it will be a cold day in Tartarus if she ever managed to do it consistently!* -

She almost sighed with disappointment when she saw that the Weapons Master was asleep. Patroclese was off doing something with the children that he'd brought with him, - *We'll have to decide what we're going to do with them when we reach home,* - she reflected, accepting responsibility for their welfare. - *The girls can all be taken in by the Amazons ... I think they'll all be happy with that.* -

During her exercise periods on deck, she had spent some time getting to know the children, She snorted softly at the reason behind that, - *Not much damn choice with my 'attendants' dragging along with me.* - But the time had been well spent. She had noticed that the girls found the Amazon warriors to be fascinating. They were so unlike anyone the girls had encountered before. It had taken some time but she gently encouraged them to spend time with the women and they had begun to learn from them so that now, the girls tended to spend more time trailing after the Amazons than with the boys.

- *Those lads are another matter entirely,* - she conceded. - *I can probably get Mother to take a couple. Mattin would be a help in the kitchens,* - she smiled at the thought. She'd grown to like the young kitchen slave in the time she'd known him, and knew that her Mother would treat him well, teach him what she could and give him a safe place to stay. - *She could probably do with a stable hand to care for the guest's horses,* - thinking of cheerful Fersan. - *The inn is prosperous and even with Toris there, there is always plenty of work to be done.* - She thought about that for a moment, and the more she thought about it the better she liked the idea. - *Hmm, that might work.* - she conceded. - *But that still leaves five more of them to find places for.* -

She let her very active mind piece together possible ideas and destinations for the rest of the group. - *Well I'm sure that Hippocrates could use some apprentices. I'll see what Patroclese thinks. He knows the boys better than I do. The ones that are suitable can go with him to the hospice that Hippocrates runs. For the rest well, I'm certain Ephiny can talk Tyldus into taking them in. Failing that well, Autolycus wanted an apprentice.* - She grinned at that. - *Gabrielle would have a fit if I suggested that! Maybe Salmoneous needs an apprentice to help him?* - A bigger grin formed, - *That might be worse than letting Autolycus take one to train!* -

She sighed again, and looked longingly out of the stern windows. She was bored almost to tears. She hadn't had a visit this morning from Hercules or Autolycus and not even Iolaus had popped in to try and avoid Nebula and spend some time near Gabrielle. Toris seemed to be busy doing something else and Ephiny was curled up in a bed on the other side of the cabin recovering from the attempt to abort her unwanted child.

- *That had been bad*, - she brooded. She could understand the reasons why the Regent had wanted to be rid of the child. Gabrielle had told her the whole story about just how the pregnancy had come about. - *From the sound of things, there was definitely some foul play by the gods in that*, - she told herself. - *That probably explains why they couldn't abort the foetus. The hands of one or more gods are involved in this and if I had to put dinars on it, allowing for the fact they were taking an active part in other things that were going on, I'd have to say that this is down to Aphrodite and Artemis. Aphrodite because of the love aspect and Artemis because it's her Amazon Regent involved in this.* -

She scowled blackly at that thought. - *Damn all gods to Tartarus anyway!* - she cursed. - *Why can't they just leave us alone?* - she questioned, and then answered herself with bitter sarcasm, - *Because they wouldn't have anything to amuse themselves with. If they didn't interfere with humankind, they'd have no reason to justify their existence!* -

There hadn't been anything much that she was able to do to help Ephiny when the violent contractions, caused by the potion that Sheraya had reluctantly given the Regent, had wracked the Amazon's body with violent torment. However, when they had continued unabated for over six candlemarks without any sign of the foetus being aborted, Xena had tried to go to her side, only to be physically restrained by the two attendant Amazons. Fuming, she had called Sheraya over and suggested that she give the suffering woman an infusion of Sanicle, Serapias Tublith and Valerian.

The healer had quickly prepared the potion and had forced Ephiny to swallow enough to ease her painful contractions and to put her asleep for a full day and night. Since that time, the Amazon had withdrawn into herself, refusing to communicate with anyone as she battled with her demons and anguish. Three and a half days had passed like that, and Xena was beginning to think that it was time she took a hand with the Regent. The question was, how to achieve her aims while being burdened with her Amazon escort who were totally intent upon following their queen's rigorous instructions?

Gabrielle happened to glance over at that moment to see a black frown on her friend's face as she chewed in frustration at her thumb nail. She knew that this relative inactivity was gnawing on her warrior's nerves, but in the five days since she had imposed her will, it was clearly evident that Xena had recovered much of her lost health.

She pursed her lips, - *Maybe she could do with some extra time out in the air now.* - she thought to herself. - *A couple of candlemarks this morning and the same this afternoon?* - Making up her mind, she patted Joxer's arm and told him, "I'm just going to have a chat with Xena and maybe get some fresh air with her."

Hiding his disappointment, the injured man produced a weak smile, "Okay, Gabby. I'll just wait here for you. I won't be going anywhere."

"Thanks, Joxer," she told him. "I'll come and tell you a story in a little while ... I just want to make sure Xena doesn't overdo things up on deck."

"Oh great, Gabrielle!" he beamed. "Ummm....."

"What is it Joxer?" she asked, knowing that he had a request.

"Well ... if you could ... I mean if it's okay ... that is, if you don't mind me asking" he bumbled self consciously.

"What is it, Joxer," she repeated, trying to hide her amusement and the twinge of frustration at his beating around the bush.

"Well, if it's okay with you ... ," he saw her start to frown with impatience and dived in. "Could you tell the one about how Hercules got turned into a pig, please?" he finished in a rush.

Gabrielle laughed, "Is that all?" she chuckled.

Joxer looked slightly hurt, "Well I didn't want to impose in case you had something else in mind."

"It's okay, Joxer. I'd be happy to tell you that story. Get some rest and I'll be back in about half a candlemark or so."

"Okay," he agreed happily, pleased he had something to look forward to. If bed rest was chaffing Xena, at least she managed to get out into the air a couple of times a day. He'd been cooped up in the infirmary since he'd been hurt and, although he tried not to worry about it, he really was concerned that he'd never walk properly again.

- Gabrielle is never going to look at me other than as a crippled friend if I can't even stand on my own two feet again, - he silently worried, looking glum as she moved away from him and crossed the cabin to Xena's side. - I'll never get to have another adventure with them. I'll be laughed at and shunned ... a useless fool! - He gulped deeply to swallow the lump the was forming in his throat and blinked back the tears that threatened to spill.

Sheraya appeared at his side and checked his healing legs, as she did three times a day, to make sure that the splints weren't rubbing up sores. She had been pleased that the gash, made by the broken bone punching through the skin of his thigh, was healing well without any sign of infection and, from what she could tell, the bones were knitting satisfactorily.

Glancing up at his glum face, she patted his legs encouragingly and told him, "They're healing nicely Joxer. You'll soon be up and around, doing your mighty deeds again."

"Ha, ha!" he answered despondently. "I've never done any mighty deeds. All I've ever done is tagged along after Xena and Gabrielle when they'd let me. Now, I won't even be able to do that."

Sheraya gave him a vexed look. She'd just about had enough of the self-pitying morass that had afflicted her patients. What with Ephiny, Xena and, to a certain extent, Eponin, the last thing she needed was a despairing Joxer. "Alright, young man," she told him in a no-nonsense tone.

"Firstly, there's a little girl on this ship who thinks you are the greatest hero there is. You saved her life and she and the other children know it. Charis, or Cassie as they call her, has even badgered the Queen into teaching her the 'Joxer the Mighty' song!"

"Really?" he asked with some interest.

"Really," she told him bluntly. She didn't bother telling him that Cassie had just about driven her friends and everyone else mad with the tune, mainly because her young voice hit so many bad notes it was painful when she hit a good one. "Not only that, but these legs of yours are healing nicely. Give it another few days once we reach Amphipolis and the splints will be able to come off and you can start some exercises to get some strength back into them. It will be hard work, and exhausting, but if you work at it you'll be walking normally in no time."

"Really?" he asked again, not sure whether he could believe her.

"Really," repeated the healer, giving him a wry look, "I'm not in the habit of coddling my patients. I'd tell you if I thought you wouldn't walk again."

"Thanks, Sheraya," he said, gifting her with an enormous smile.

"No problem, Joxer. Just take it easy and stop beating yourself up," she told him, finishing her inspection of his legs and moving off to check on Eponin's wounds.

As soon as Gabrielle had told Xena that she could have extra time up on deck ... "For good behaviour," ... as she put it, the warrior was out of her sleeping shift and into the tunic and trousers she'd borrowed from Nebula, as her leathers fitted so snugly, it pained her injured shoulders to pull them on and off.

"I think Eph could do with some air, too," she told Gabrielle when the bard told her she was going to accompany her for a while.

"I'm not sure, Xena," the younger woman shook her head. "She doesn't seem to want company at the moment."

The warrior frowned, "Well, it's time she pulled herself together. Five days is way too long to brood about something like this. It's happened; she's pregnant. It's time she accepted it and got on with her life."

"How do you plan on getting her out of that bed, O still recovering warrior patient?" asked the bard, raising a questioning eyebrow.

In all truth, Xena had been intending to haul the Regent from her pit of sorrow if she hadn't agreed to come under her own steam, but she could tell from the look in her friend's eye that that was not going to be an option. "Og and Mog," she said indicating her silent shadows, "can bring her along if she's reluctant. You've got them trained well at that kind of thing." She couldn't resist the snide comment.

"Wulf and Ossie are only following orders," she told the warrior calmly. "If someone, not a million miles away, knew how to follow healers orders, then they wouldn't have to be here, would they?"

Xena snorted contemptuously. They'd had this argument at least five times every day since the four Amazons had become part of her recovery programme, as conceived by the bard. "Whatever their names," she said stubbornly, "they can help us get Ephiny sorted out, can't they? Or would you rather have your Regent eating herself up over something she had no control over?"

"What do you mean?" she asked the raven-haired woman quietly.

"Well, you suspected the gods might have been involved. Think about it, Gabrielle. Who turned up at Graccus'?"

"Artemis and Aphro dite!" she replied, beginning to see what Xena was saying.

"What god but Artemis is going to interfere with an Amazon? She'd never allow the other gods to play with her chosen people ... but what if she called in a favour, say for arguments sake, from Aphrodite because she wanted to produce an Amazon with a particular pedigree ... one that could be groomed for an important position in the Nation maybe even become Queen one day ...?" the warrior prompted.

"Then Aphrodite might just throw a little lust spell my way and cause that revolting union with Caesar!" snarled Ephiny, sitting up on her bed, her eyes blazing! "How could they!? What right do they think they have!?"

The warrior and bard crossed to their friend's side. "You know the gods, Eph," Xena told her quietly, "they don't need any right other than their own desires."

"What can I do, Xena?" asked the Regent, her eyes pleading.

"Nothing, Eph," the tall woman told her as she crouched down beside her and held the brown eyes with her cold blue ones that seemed to warm with the concern she felt for the Amazon. "Have the child then decide what to do about it. If you want me to take it to be reared away from the Nation, send for me and I'll arrange that for you."

The Regent looked long into the depthless blue eyes of the Warrior Princess for long moments before bobbing her head in acceptance of the proposal, "You know, I was certain that Aphrodite must have done this to me but I couldn't figure out why she'd risk Artemis' ire. It never occurred to me that my patron goddess would be behind the whole thing," she shook her head in disbelief.

Xena put a comforting arm around the Amazon's shoulder. "The gods will use any of us that suit their purposes," she said softly. "Never put your trust in any god."

"Cynic," answered Ephiny with a weak smile, "But I'm beginning to think you're right."

The young queen frowned, looking for a compromise, "How about if we designate your child heir apparent until such time I have a child of my own?"

Xena was getting bored. She wasn't really interested in the dynamics of Amazon domestic policies and, not being an Amazon, she didn't feel she had any right to contribute to this section of the discussion, so she stretched and stood and told the other two, "I think I'll take a stroll around the deck,"

"Okay, Xena," responded Ephiny.

"Just a walk," reminded Gabrielle.

"Yeah, I know," muttered the Warrior Princess. She walked away, picking up her shadows as she moved. Frowning, she turned back to the Royal Amazon pair, "If you want to keep these two here to make sure your discussion remains private, I'm sure I'll be able to find my way around the deck without them"

The bard smiled radiantly. "That is so thoughtful of you, Xena," she answered.

"Well, I try to be," answered the warrior, hoping that Gabrielle was going to let her escape her attendants.

"I know you do," agreed the honey blonde maintaining her smile. "I also know that as soon as you are out of their sight, you'll be doing drills and straining yourself when you still aren't fully recovered. So, I'm sorry, Xena, but you're stuck with them."

Glaring at the infuriating bard, the Warrior Princess turned on her heel and marched off, only to hear her friend's voice call after her, "A slow walk Xena ... nothing strenuous."

Muttering under her breath about stubborn bards and what should happen to them, Xena slowed her steps to avoid the indignity of being physically slowed down by Wulf and Ossie. She blew out a frustrated breath, knowing that although she could almost certainly knock the two Amazons from one end of the ship to the other, she was realistic enough to recognise that it would probably put her flat on her back again for days.

That was another frustrating part of this. She needed to start toning her body back up to its normal peak of fitness, and gentle strolls around the deck just weren't going to do it. She needed to push herself and somehow, some way, she intended to start that process immediately ... or at least as soon as she could ditch 'Og and Mog', as she called them.

She worked her way up towards the prow of the ship looking for inspiration, for not only did she need a distraction for the pair with her, she also needed to slip away unseen by the rest of the Amazons on deck, who would undoubtedly snitch on her! - *There must be something, short of setting fire to the ship, that will draw eyes away from me,* - she ruminated as she moved over to the rail, rather than climb up to the small foredeck.

A smile creased her face as she unexpectedly found what she needed as she looked out to sea. A cry from a lookout drew attention as it announced, "Whales off the larboard bow!"

- *Perfect!* - she thought as Amazons rushed from all over the ship to get a look at the massive leviathans of the sea. Even Wulf and Ossie pushed close to the rail to watch them, as none of the Amazons had ever seen the creatures before, merely having heard stories of them.

In the resulting crush, Xena was able to ease her way back as bodies pressed forward to take her place and get a better look. With nearly all attention fastened on the water, she took her chance and slipped through the hatchway that led down to the holds and storage compartments.

It was dark down there, but she found, by touch, where a striker, flint and candle had been left in a niche at the base of the ladder, and struck a light that allowed her to navigate her way to her intended destination ... the ship's sail locker where the spare sails were kept. There would be plenty of room there to do some careful exercises.

When she reached the door she was looking for, she lifted the latch and let herself into the confines of the compartment. Finding a safe place for the candle, Xena took a deep breath before starting with a few limbering up exercises, such as easing forward and touching her toes, swinging at the waist, and performing some gentle turns to loosen her spine up.

She hadn't got very far when she became aware of soft falling footsteps in the corridor outside. Freezing, she turned to face the door as the latch was raised. - *Ares' balls!* - she cursed, hardly able to believe that someone had spotted her departure from the crowd! - *I swear, Gabrielle* - she began to think, but stopped when the candle light illuminated an unexpected visitor.

"Can I come in?" he asked softly. "I'd like to talk to you while we're alone if I can."

Xena ran her fingers through her dishevelled, raven mane, allowing a welcoming smile to replace the scowl that had been fixed on her features a moment before, "Uh, sure ... of course you can ... Hercules."

He entered the compartment that suddenly seemed to be made smaller by the sheer bulk of his body. He carefully shut the door behind him before turning to her with an almost shy smile on his face. "You know, it's been impossible to get you alone since we got out of Rome. The infirmary was like a zoo, and anytime you came up on deck you always had" he made a gesture with his hand to indicate the presence of her Amazon shadows.

The scowl returned to her face. "Gabrielle's idea for protecting me from myself," she grumbled. "She doesn't seem to understand that I need to exercise to regain my strength."

"I saw you give them the slip," he grinned. "Pretty clever way of doing it."

"Yeah ... well, I needed some time to myself," she answered.

"You want me to go?" he asked, almost nervously.

"No!" she said, quickly ... - *Too quickly*, - she realised as she saw his smile strengthen. She drew a breath and repeated more calmly, "No, please stay I haven't had the chance to thank you yet for helping to get me out of Rome."

He took a step closer to her, aware of the chemistry that always seemed to bubble between them. He swallowed, his throat suddenly dry as she tilted her head, focusing the full force of her matchless eyes upon him. He watched them change from a deep azure to almost violet as she gazed up into his own. "I would storm the gates of Tartarus if you called for my help," he said huskily.

It wasn't bravado; she knew him well enough to know that he wouldn't have said it if he didn't mean it. The knowledge sent a feeling of warmth deep into her core and she struggled for words to answer him with, knowing what he was trying to tell her. "I ... I, could never ask you to do that, Hercules," she said softly, gently cupping his cheek in her strong hand as she caressed his skin with her thumb. "I deserve whatever comes to me ... even Caesar's treatment ... even should I spend eternity in Tartarus ... I will have earned every moment of it."

"Xena," he tried to protest, but she slipped two fingers over his lips to silence his words.

"Shhhh!" she told him, "I'm right. We both know it. I told you long ago that I had so much blood on my hands, they'd never be clean."

"I don't care," he declared vehemently. "You've changed you're not the mon- *person* you once were."

She smiled sadly at him, "You can say it, Hercules. I know I was a monster - a heartless beast." She took his hand and gently kissed his knuckles. "But, you laid the beast to rest ... gave me a chance to do some good in atonement for all the evil that blackens my soul. I love you for it," she told him, holding his hand against the soft flesh of her cheek, "and the love I bear for you will forever mean that we can only remain friends ... *close* friends, because I'll send myself to rot in Tartarus before I allow you to sully your good name by linking it to mine."

"Xena," he choked, the pain of her declaration tearing at his great heart, "I love you. I want to live my life with you ... have children with you, grow old with you. You stir me in a way that no woman ever has." He saw her about to protest, "I don't care about my name, my reputation ... or yours. Let the world think what it likes. You and I can be happy together." He pulled her into a loving embrace and crushed her lips with his own, deepening the kiss as she melted beneath him.

She felt protected within his arms, and could lose herself within his strength as she had been able to with no other man. Her desire for him was as strong as his was for her, and it would be so easy for her to capitulate ... to agree to his proposal, to become his wife. - *But I can't!* - her conscience whispered softly. - *It wouldn't be fair to him.* -

Breaking the kiss, she planted both hands in the centre of his chest and eased herself back slightly. "There would come a time, Hercules, when you would resent me and my evil reputation.

If it should tarnish your image and destroy your ability to help the people who truly need you, it would fester in your soul and I never want that to happen."

"It wouldn't," he told her, "It couldn't," he swore. "No matter what happens, my love for you would remain strong."

She chuckled sadly, "I would never doubt that, but it doesn't mean that you couldn't grow to resent me." She sighed a breath of loss and regret, "I think the time when perhaps we may have been able to be together was lost in the past. We have both moved on since then. We both have lives that are not really forged for a happy, settled family life. Maybe ... one day, if we're lucky, we can find the right person who will help us to create such a life. But you and I are perhaps too alike for such dreams."

"I love you," he said almost desperately. "Please don't turn me away."

She looked up into his pleading eyes, "As a friend and lover, I never shall but please don't ask me to risk your destruction. If I joined with you and you suffered for it, I could never live with myself." She lifted her hands and clutched at his tawney hair, pulling his lips down to hers, feasting upon them as he gently lowered her onto the pile of canvass sail. "I can love you, Hercules," she whispered as he blazed a trail of kisses across her throat, his hands gently divesting her of her clothing. "I can love you," she repeated, "but I can never be with you."

She groaned with longing as his caress awoke her hunger for him and she helped him out of his clothes until they both lay naked with a raging passion that demanded to be filled.

Outside the sail locker, Autolycus leaned his head against the wooden door as a silent tear carved a trail down his cheek. He had seen Xena escape from her Amazon shadows and had watched as Hercules followed after her. A dull pain had stabbed his heart as his imagination had played images of what they were doing through his mind, and he had resolved to find out if they were just flights of fancy or the truth.

He'd stood outside the door and listened, hearing some of the conversation, then the unmistakable sound of human passion as his 'friends' consummated their desire for each other with ardour and rapturous stamina.

He shook his head and wondered why he should care ... but he did. More than care. He, who had never loved anyone or anything other than his own inflated ego, was helplessly in love with the Warrior Princess, who saw him as nothing other than a friend if he was lucky.

- *Well Autolycus. I never thought you would plumb the depths of self-pity over the capricious nature of a woman's heart. Get over it. There are plenty of fish in the sea ... so to speak,* - he told himself callously. Yet a little voice in the back of his head retorted, - *But there's only one Xena!* - and it was a voice that refused to be silenced.

His head snapped up as he heard voices and saw a light moving towards him. He recognised an Amazon search party, and knew immediately what - or more precisely, who - they were looking for. Dashing his eyes dry, he moved quickly to intercept them. "She's not down here, she must be somewhere else," he told them confidently as he got them turned around away from the sail locker.

"Thanks, Autolycus," said one of the warriors. "If we don't find her soon, the Queen's going to be making us eat our feathers ... especially Wulf and Ossian, for letting her slip off like that," she chuckled.

"Yeah," agreed the thief, throwing a look back over his shoulder at the soft gleam of candlelight that was barely visible under the door. "I know what you mean." He followed them back out of the hold, trying to hold his wounded heart together.

Chapter Eighty Three: Sex, Drunks & Paybacks!

Autolycus sat staring into a mug of ship's grog that he'd been taking long swallows of for some length of time ... in fact he'd forgotten just how many mugs of the stuff he drunk. - *Not enough yet by a long shot!* - He told himself, wanting to drown his misery and finding it more difficult than he'd anticipated.

He scowled belligerently at his drink, barely noticing as the last of the Amazon group left the mess deck. Normally the friendly warriors would have sat with him and flirted, but his mood of the moment seemed to preclude any social interaction, instead driving the women out with his sullen moroseness when they'd tried to approach him.

As the oak portal closed behind the last of them, he raising his mug and tilted it slightly towards the door before calling out in a slurred voice, "Thanksh for the comp'ny! 'Preciate it!" He then took several deep gulps of the burning liquor draining the cup before slamming it back on the table, smacking his lips and demanding of the empty room, "Wha' do I have t'do t'get 'nother drink here?"

Lurching to his feet he wove his way a trifle unsteadily across the cabin to the locker where the hard spirits were kept. Even in his inebriated state it was little more than the work of a moment for the King of Thieves to remove the heavy padlock. He peered intently at the small kegs and bottles that were housed within the cabinet, shaking his head a little to try and clear the fuzziness that seemed to be doubling the image of what he was looking at. Finally seeing a bottle that attracted his attention, he extracted it and peered carefully at the label before smacking his lips and breathing, "Ah, port! Jus' the tipples to toas' the lady's happ'ness!"

Shuffling backwards in a rocking stagger, he complained loudly, "Shumone hold the boat, hic, shteady!"

He peered back at his bottle and carefully started to reach towards the cork when a very large hand reached over his shoulder and plucked the liquor away. He blinked foolishly at his empty fingers for a moment or two before exclaiming angrily, "Hey! Who sht ... who sht ... who took my booze!"

Autolycus swung around staggering a little as he did so, searching for the culprit, A noise behind him at the locker had him swinging back, on tottering legs, to see Hercules replacing the bottle, putting the lock back and then using his phenomenal strength to squeeze the lock mechanism into seizure, making certain that the only person going to be able to get in there was himself.

"What'sh the big idea!" demanded the thief full of pugnacious hostility.

"I think you've had more than enough, Autolycus," the demi-god told him. "Why don't you go and sleep it off? Then later maybe you want to talk about what made you want to get stinking drunk," he offered, putting a friendly hand on the thief's shoulder.

"Get your handsh off me," snarled the rogue belligerently, staggering away from Hercules' steadying hand. "I got nothin' to say to you!" He glared furiously at the big man, "Now jus gimme m'bottle and get the Tartarus away from me!"

"Sorry," apologised the son of Zeus insincerely, "Can't do that, my friend."

"I'm not ya frien'!" fumed Autolycus. "Frien's don't go sneakin' aroun' behind frien's backs."

Hercules looked totally bemused, "I have no idea what you're talking about, Autolycus. Did you hit your head?" he asked concerned, trying to get a look at the other man's head.

The thief slapped the big man's hands away furiously, his anger beginning to clear some of the alcohol fumes from his brain, "I said get your handsh off me!" he yelled. "Who do you think you are? Jus' cos you're Zeus' son doesn't give you no rights to touch me. Save it for shum .. someone who gives a damn!"

The demi-god shook his head in amazement, "What in Hades has gotten into you Autolycus?"

"Nothin'," growled the other man angrily. "Or maybe I'm seeing you for what you really are."

Hercules leaned back onto the oak table and crossed his arms across his chest, "And just what would that be?" he asked calmly.

The King of Thieves whirled on him. His brown eyes, that normally sparkled with mischief blazed with wrath, "You're a user, Hercules!" he shouted. "You use the people that you call your friends. They are an adornment to the brilliance of the son of Zeus. You play with us and get what you want from us and then like toys you put us back in our boxes."

"I have no idea what you're talking about, Autolycus. You've definitely had too much to drink." said the big man with a suppressed chuckle.

The thief stepped into the demi-god's personal space and poked him hard in the chest, "I'll tell you what I'm talking about!" he shouted, poking Hercules again.

"Hey! cut it out Autolycus," objected the tawney haired giant.

Poking the broad chest again, the thief continued, "I'm talking about the way you've had two wives and carelessly lost both of them to your godly family." He poked again harder.

"That's enough," growled Hercules, not liking what he was hearing. The deaths of Deianeira and Serena remained livid wounds scored across his heart ... even if Autolycus was the only one who could remember his marriage to the Golden Hind, thanks to their adventure with the Chronos Stone. The thief was playing with fire.

"Now," continued the dark haired rogue jabbing the chest once again and failing to heed the warning from the demi-god, "Now you're doing it again. You're exposing someone else to the wrath of Hera and Ares and the others." Another jab punctuated the sentence.

"I said cut it out!" rumbled the son of Zeus.

Autolycus was on a roll and his alcohol fuelled anger was pushing him past the bounds of good sense. He thrust his index forward into the chest of the big man again, "Well I don't intend to stand back while you get her hurt or killed."

He started another prod but his hand was caught and held in a vice like grip as Hercules' normally mild blue eyes bored into his brown, "That's enough, Autolycus. Sober up before you do or say something that's going to get you hurt."

The thief glared at him before jerking his hand loose, "I'm not scared of you, Hercules," he told the demi-god coldly. "I don't care if you are the strongest man alive ... what can you do to me? Kill me? Well somehow I think that would be a relief at the moment after what you've already done."

"Do you want to tell me what you're raving about before I knock you unconscious so that you can sleep this off? I'd just lock you up, but you have this knack of getting past locks," the big man tried to inject some humour to take the sting out of the situation, but he could tell the thief wasn't about to be cajoled out of his foul mood.

Autolycus ignored the weak jest and changed the focus of his tirade, "Are you going to marry her?" he demanded.

"I'm sorry? You lost me there buddy. Marry who?" asked the tawny haired hero innocently .. although he was beginning to guess what the problem was now.

"Jus' what I thought!" snarled the thief, "Use her then walk away. What a hero .. a real daddy's boy!" he sneered.

"You don't know what you're talking about, Autolycus," the demi-god replied, his tone low and dangerous as he winced internally at the jibe that likened his love life to his Father's sexual proclivities.

"Don't I?" questioned the rogue, his voice filled with contempt. "I know what you've been doing for the last few candlemarks, Herc ol' buddy!" he snarled angrily. "In fact you're lucky I knew where you were and what you were doing or you'd have had an audience of about ten Amazons." He glared at the hero who had the grace to look embarrassed. "So don't tell me that I don't know what I'm talking about. You're toying with the love of one of the finest women I know .. and I take great exception to that! Great exception!"

Hercules gave him a long look as silence settled heavy between them. The King of Thieves turned away from his rival and ran his fingers through his short dark hair, trying to get a grasp on his anger and frustration. He moved across the cabin and slumped heavily on to a bench and resumed his brooding, accusatory gaze at the demi-god.

At last Hercules said, "You love her?"

"Of course I love her, you moron! But that's not the point is it? She's in love with you .. so what are you going to do about it? Marry her?"

"No," answered the demi-god quietly.

"Gods damn you, Hercules!" swore the thief lurching to his feet and advancing towards the other man once more.

"I think they did that long ago, my friend," the hero said too quietly for the rogue to hear.

"I just knew you were using her!" he shouted, irate indignation plain in his words.

"It's none of your business, Autolycus," the son of Zeus told him coldly. "What happens between Xena and me is our private affair."

The King of Thieves gave him a look full of contemptuous loathing, "That's just it, isn't it. To you it's just a casual fling. Ships that pass in the night on occasion. Well listen, buddy boy," he emphasised with a stiff fingered poke again, ignoring the scowl that descended on his companion's brow, "while you're dangling her on one of your strings you're denying her the chance to find happiness with someone who doesn't come weighed down with a load of dangerous baggage."

Hercules grabbed Autolycus' hand again and squeezed, allowing some of the anger and frustration that was assailing him to escape, "I've asked you not to do that .. now I'm telling you!" he growled. He saw the pain register in the thief's eyes before adding, "Keep your nose out of my business, Autolycus." He shoved the other man back releasing his hand as he did so and turned for the door to leave, knowing that he needed to get away from the rogue, before more things were said and done that would drive a wedge into their friendship.

Anger raging out of control, the thief grabbed the bench he'd backed into and swung it with all the strength he could muster at the demi-god, hitting Hercules with a thundering force born of the pain and frustration of his unrequited love.

The heavy wood shattered across broad shoulders causing the son of Zeus to stagger forward and collide solidly with the cabin door. Any normal man would have been unconscious for many candlemarks from such a blow. However, the tawney haired giant pushed himself away from the door and shook his head slightly to clear his vision before turning to confront the thief, who was now completely sober.

"Oh Tartarus!" swore the thief softly as he registered the ire on Hercules' face.

The demi-god had smarted with the disappointment of Xena's rejection of his suit, and his conversation with Autolycus had opened some nasty festering sores that dripped burning acid on his conscience. Added to that was the knowledge that the King of Thieves was waiting around for the chance to pursue and win the woman of his dreams. And the sum total along with the thief's impetuous assault, led to one very annoyed big man ready to let off some steam.

Throwing one of the heavy tables across the doorway to ensure some privacy, Hercules rounded on his companion, "You asked for it," growled the hero angrily swinging a meaty right fist that the thief clumsily dodged away from.

- *Oh boy!* - Autolycus shook his head, suddenly very aware of what he'd done. - *Now I remember why I don't get drunk!* - he told himself.

He still wasn't too happy with the demi-god .. jealousy and frustration over Xena's affections ran rampant through him and they weren't going to be quashed by a little fear for his personal safety. He swallowed hard as he made a dive under the long mess table and popped up on the other side with it's reassuring bulk between him and Hercules, - *Well not totally anyway,* - he decided.

"You started this Autolycus ... now stand still and take what's coming like a man," snarled the angry hero. Hercules knew that he shouldn't be taking out his disappointment on the thief who, in his own way was hurting as much as he was. But Autolycus had pushed the issue and, since there wasn't any other way to vent his misery over Xena's rejection of his proposal, he was willing to use the situation to let off a little steam.

He had no real intention of hurting the rogue, just give himself a workout and run the alcohol out of the thief's system. The trouble was, Autolycus didn't know when enough was enough and continued to throw taunts at the big man, while bobbing and weaving away from his dangerous fists.

"You know, big guy! It's really not surprising that you can't keep a woman around you," baited the thief.

"Oh yeah?" snapped Hercules as he lunged at his tormentor across the table, but missed the nimble footed man who danced back out of reach.

"Yeah," insisted Autolycus, knowing that he was playing with fire but unable to keep a lid on his feelings. "You see not only do they have to face having to survive against certain members of your family ..." He grunted as he ducked frantically beneath the demi-god's fist.

Gabrielle was not happy. She glared balefully at Raedwulf and Ossian who stood before her with heads hung low at their failure to carry out their assignment. "I just can't believe that you neglected your orders just to watch whales!" she growled at them.

Ephiny stood behind her shaking her head. Both she and the bard had been just as guilty of succumbing to that particular distraction .. as had just about everyone else on the ship. For a somewhat isolated, land orientated people, the sight of the whales had been an undeniable draw and had provided the perfect cover for Xena to slip off by herself and indulge in whatever forbidden form of exercise she had chosen for herself.

That had been some candlemarks ago. Since then, groups of Amazons had been scouring the ship to find the AWOL Warrior Princess, with orders to return her to the infirmary to face a very unhappy Amazon Queen, whose only current available target for her frustrated ire were the two Amazons who'd allowed their charge to slip off. The fact that no trace had been found of Xena .. even in the crow's nest .. had not helped to improve the bard's temperament.

- Alright Xena .. I know you're making a point here. You've given the best warrior's the Amazons have got a lesson in avoidance and stealth in the confined space of a small ship. You, in your own sweetly unsubtle way, are telling me that you are more than recovered enough to run rings around Eph's warriors. - she mentally sighed realising that it was time to concede that her warrior was fit enough to be released from the healers.

Turning back to Wulf and Ossie she told them moodily, "Alright. Call off the search details. You aren't going to find her unless she wants to be found. I think we can safely say that she's well on the road to recovery, so you two and the others might as well report back to Malonda for regular duty."

The two warrior's saluted and left the cabin, relieved that they were finally being released from their Queen's presence. Gabrielle shook her head and started to turn back towards Ephiny when a very well known voice purred smoothly, "I'm glad you're finally seeing sense."

"Xena!" growled the bard, turning to find the Warrior Princess ensconced on her bed. She threw a look at the open stern light behind her friend and frowned, "Just where have you been?" she demanded, noting the healthy glow that seemed to radiate from the raven haired beauty. "And since when isn't the door good enough for use?"

The Warrior Princess stifled a rogue grin and hoisted a imperious eyebrow at her friend, "I've been ... taking in, um, the sights," she swallowed a chuckle before it could take hold, feeling in a ridiculously good mood for some reason. "As for the door, well it seems that there were these Amazons everywhere, and I really didn't want to spoil whatever they were doing .. so the window seemed"

"Alright Xena!" interrupted the honey blonde, throwing up her hands in defeat. "I get the idea. I'll stop the mother hen impersonation ... I know when I'm beaten." She wagged a finger at the smirking woman, "Just remember I was only doing it for your own good. You have a habit of trying to save the world when you're half dead and I'm not going to stand back and let you do it

any more." She shot an inquisitive look at the warrior, "Just what have you been doing all this time?" she asked, although she had a pretty good idea what she'd been doing and even who with ... the chance to make Xena squirm a little didn't come along too often and she'd be hanged if she was going to pass it up.

Xena knew that there was a slight tinge of colour forming around the slave collar that still graced her neck. Her skin was paler than normal after all the time she'd spent in the cabin, and blushes were more apparent. Gabrielle's eyes were firmly upon her and she knew that the bard's sharp eyes had detected the flush of pink that had briefly appeared. She tried an imperious arching of an eyebrow in the forlorn hope that the honey blonde would back off. When she had a brow arched at her in return she tried for offhand avoidance of the question.

"You wouldn't be interested," she ventured knowing that the bard would be very interested along with the very quiet occupants of their room. She was well aware of Ephiny and Eponin's direct stares, Joxer's bemused interest, as well as Sheraya and Patroclese's guarded attention as they sat in the corner going through their supply of medications.

"Try me," grinned the bard, not ready to let her warrior companion off the hook so easily.

Xena took a breath, "I've been inspecting ..um some of the ships spare equipment," she came up with what she thought was an inspired answer, knowing that she could give more detail if required.

Gabrielle nodded her head as if accepting the answer, but just as the warrior began to relax she asked, "Just what kind of equipment was that? .. Tackle? Spars? that kind of thing?"

The Warrior Princess gave the younger woman a sharp look. - *She knows! Or at least she thinks she does!* - Her eyes narrowed as she answered carefully, "Uh huh ... that and the spare sails. Canvass needs to be checked out occasionally. I figured that Nebula might be a little busy, what with a green crew and all, to do some of the more irregular tasks like that."

"Hmmm. That makes sense," acknowledged the bard agreeably. Well aware that Ephiny had slapped her hand across the Weapons Master's mouth to stop Eponin from making any side comments about this rather odd little conversation. She swallowed down a chuckle that was threatening to force itself out and concentrated on the defensive posture that Xena's body language and eyes were assuming. - *She thinks I know what she's been doing,* - she grinned mentally. - *Well I know that she knows that she thinks I know that I think I know what she's been doing. Heh! Paybacks are such a bitch!* -

Smiling sweetly she asked, almost from out of the blue, "What did Hercules think .. about the condition of the canvass?"

Xena swallowed convulsively and shot a warning look that promised death to the two Amazon's two her left. Ephiny was struggling to hold back the laughter that was threatening to engulf her, while she maintained her 'gagging' of Poni who looked about to go into convulsions. "Hercules?" she tried to ask nonchalantly although it came out more like a guilty growl.

Gabrielle nodded while biting her lip as she struggled to maintain her control, "Uh yeah. Hercules. You see as he went missing .. oh around about the same time as you .. I kind of guessed that you might be .. um inspecting equipment .. together."

That was too much for Ephiny who erupted into gales of laughter, releasing Eponin to do the same. Both Amazons had tears of laughter rolling down their cheeks and both the healers on the far side of the cabin were laughing right along with them. When Joxer asked, "What's so funny about inspecting equipment?" the laughter just intensified and even the baleful glare emanating from the ex-Destroyer of Nations did nothing to quell the mirth.

"Gabrielle!" she growled tensely as the bard's own tears of laughter streamed down her face, "It's not funny!" snarled Xena.

Struggling to control herself, the bard leaned forward and between the bursts of uncontrollable hilarity she said softly, "Remember Menassos?" she asked with a wicked grin. She saw comprehension dawn in the warrior's eyes as her memory replayed the image of an embarrassed bard trying to explain why she'd been talking to herself in the midst of a crowd of people. "Told ya I'd get you back."

"Just remember, my bard, that my memory is long and there's plenty of rivers and lakes out along the road," she grinned wolfishly.

"You wouldn't," stated Gabrielle unconvincingly and swallowed when Xena's grin broadened into a humourless smile.

"Xena!" came a worried voice from the cabin doorway, that immediately cut through the humour of the moment. Eyes turned to an agitated Toris, "You better come quick. I think Hercules is going to kill Autolykus!"

Toris had been enjoying some quiet time up on deck. Nebula had taken up her pursuit of Iolaus once more, and the Amazons were going frantic looking for Xena. The tall raven haired innkeeper knew from personal experience just how difficult that particular task was. He smiled at that thought and resisted the temptation to delve into his fund of memories, just shaking his head at the times he had threatened to tan her hide for causing him so many problems.

He had kind of guessed what was going on when he saw Hercules appear some moments before his sister's dark head had made it's way cautiously above deck. He'd had to hide his grin as he watched how easily she'd managed to slip past hunting Amazons and head for the stern before disappearing over the side and lowering herself down to the cabin, sending him a sly wink as she did so.

Shaking his head he had to stifle the urge to laugh out loud, happy with the knowledge that his sister was once more fit and well. He spent some more time watching the Amazon's increasingly frantic searching, before deciding to head to the mess for the chance of grabbing a drink, and maybe passing some time with Autolykus, who he'd seen heading in that direction some time before.

Xena gave him a dour look as she observed the scene of an obvious fight. She sniffed ostentatiously and raised a disapproving eyebrow, "Have you been drinking?" she growled, not making any motion to move farther into the room.

"No!" answered Hercules hurriedly, wanting to make it clear he was not guilty of that offense. "Autolycus has been and he's a little .. drunk."

"Uh huh," nodded the warrior sceptically. "That why he's passed out?" she asked, knowing the answer to that already having seen the big man throw the punch just as the door burst open.

Hercules looked down at his feet, "Um, no ... not exactly."

Xena looked intently at her friend, "Want to tell me what happened here?" She remained in the doorway, the demi-god guessed to prevent anyone else from entering the room. He could hear several voices outside in the passageway and guessed that a lot of people had been assaulted by a case of overwhelming curiosity.

"Not particularly," he answered eventually.

The Warrior Princess looked over her shoulder, "Get everyone out of here Eph, would ya?"

He could hear Ephiny chivvying her Amazons away from the scene while Xena continued to look assessingly at him, "Alright, show's over. Back off all of you. C'mon, you've all got stuff you should be doing; now get out of here."

As Ephiny cleared people out of the companionway, the raven haired warrior finally allowed Gabrielle to squeeze past her, and the little bard immediately made her way over to where Autolycus lay sprawled. She tried to push behind the table, but it was heavy and not easy for her to move, especially with the thief's weight added to the mass.

"Um, Hercules?" she asked. "Would you mind?" she made a few pulling motions.

"Oh! Sorry Gabrielle ... here," he said as he pulled the table forward with impressive ease. Of course this also released Autolycus from his pinned position and the King of Thieves slipped bonelessly to the wooden plank floor with an audible, "THUMP!" Hercules looked a little sheepish as he said, "Sorry."

Xena moved away from the door and was followed into the room by Toris, Ephiny and a worried looking Iolaus who had been drawn by the activity taking place. "What's going on, Herc?" he asked, concern evident in his voice and eyes as he surveyed the damaged mess.

"Just a slight disagreement, Iolaus .. nothing to worry about. It'll be fine when Autolycus sleeps it off," answered the demi-god grimly.

"Slight disagreement?" questioned the blonde sidekick as he looked again at the devastation done to the mess room again. "Buddy, I hate to tell you this, but it sure looks like more than a slight disagreement went on here."

"Drop it, alright Iolaus," Hercules warned him.

"Hercules ..." tried the small man again only to be cut off by his friend.

"I said drop it. It's no one's business except mine and Autolycus'. If he wants to talk about it he can tell you when he wakes up," growled the demi-god. "Now, if no one has any objections ... I need some fresh air." He brushed past them having no intention of discussing what happened with any of them .. least of all Xena.

"Herc .." Iolaus made as if to follow his friend, but Xena's strong hand stopped him.

"Let him cool off a bit, Iolaus. He'll talk to you later if he needs to," She cast a look after the retreating hero, "He needs some time to himself just now."

The blonde stared searchingly into the strong face of the Warrior Princess for a tense moment before nodding his agreement. He gave a concerned sigh and asked, "You want me and Toris to take him down to the infirmary?" he nodded in the direction of Autolycus.

Xena looked over at Gabrielle and quirked an eyebrow, "He'll have a bruised jaw and a whale of a hangover, but I should think he'll be fine otherwise," the bard answered the silent question.

Turning to Iolaus, the warrior shook her head and told him, "You and Toris take off. I can manage him from here." She watched as the blonde man headed for the door with her brother at his shoulder, "Iolaus," she called, stopping him just before he left. When he turned to face her she said, "Keep an eye on Herc ... but don't push him. He might be a little low for a couple of days."

She saw him bob his head in acknowledgement as her mind chirped up, - *A little low! That's an understatement. He really didn't take it well when I told him I wouldn't join with him. I love him .. I always will. But he's not the man I want to settle down and raise a family with.* - She shook her head at the thought. Her gaze wandered over to where the thief lay and she had to suppress a smile of amused affection. - *What did you say to rile ol' Herc up like that, Autolycus? Even drunk I thought you had more sense of self preservation than that!* - she smirked.

"Alright Gabrielle, stand aside. I'll take him down so that Shera and Patroclese can check him out," she told the bard as she moved across and lifted him easily from the deck.

The honey blonde gave her a vexed look. "You don't have to strain yourself Xena. I'm sure Eph and I could manage him."

The warrior gave her friend a version of 'the look' and told her flatly, "Get off it Gabrielle! I'm fine. And I'll take care of Autolycus .. okay?"

"You go guy!" she grinned at him.

"Right, where was I?" he muttered, "Olympus .. back break .. handsome .. athletic ... oh yeah. Hmm!" he cleared his throat again, " ... even though I'm crippled and an outcast from the family, I feel like I'm the luckiest god alive, because I have your love."

"Awwww! You're so sweet," she smiled pinching his cheek in delight.

"Now I know I've told you that you can ask me for anything .. and I'd willingly give you anything I have or can make."

"I know .. and I like so love you for that," Aphrodite hugged him.

"But just what in Zeus' name do you want some of my tools for?" he asked with total incomprehension.

She gave him a peck on the cheek and then explained, "Well you see, I kind of want to lend them to Herc for a few moments. He can use them to get those way uncool collars off the warrior babe and her bardy friend, ya know?"

Hephestus nodded at last understanding the request that had so puzzled him. "You're right. The combination of my tools and Hercules' strength should be more than enough to break open those collars ... but you won't be gone long, will you?" he asked with a note of pleading in his voice.

A flash of blue and silver announced the arrival of Ares before he growled, "She won't be going at all."

"Ares!" snapped Hephestus angrily. "What do you want here? Those weapons you ordered won't be ready for another moon, as agreed .. and I don't believe I ever issued you an invitation to pop into our home unannounced."

"Save it hop-a-long," sneered the God of War, "I've got business with the ditsy blonde, not you."

"Damn you Ares!"

"I've got nothing to say to you, Ares," Aphrodite told him coolly, moving to get between him and a very annoyed Hephestus. Her man was strong and powerful, but he was hampered by his lame leg and Ares would beat him to a pulp in a fight.

"Ah well that's where you're wrong sis. See you're about to interfere with Xena .. again. And well, as I see it, my Warrior Princess could do with a healthy dose of humility at the moment, and that slave collar serves to remind her that she's not as invincible as she thinks she is. In fact over time, it might just serve to remind her that without me she's just another fighter who can be taken down .. get my meaning?" he raised an eyebrow at her to emphasise the point. "So the collar stays on."

"What?" screeched Aphrodite incredulously, her fists coming to rest on her hips. "In your dreams leather boy!"

Ares looked at her calmly and smirked smugly, "Do I need to remind you about a certain bet made over a certain fight?" he asked her.

Aphrodite shuffled her feet a little, knowing all too well he was referring to the bet with Hermes on the Xena and Hercules fight, "Ummmm," she hedged.

"I'm sure you know that Hermes, being the joker he is, would be likely to exact his own brand of retribution?"

"Okay, okay! So no giving Hefhy's tools to the Hercster! I got it!" sulked the blonde goddess.

"Not good enough, sis!" grinned Ares. "I know you too well. I want your godly oath that you will not give those tools to Hercules, Xena, or anyone else aboard that ship!" He thought for a moment before adding, "Or anyone in Amphipolis either .. or I let Hermes know you were betting on a rigged fight."

"Oh! That is so not fair!" screeched the goddess stamping her foot.

"That goes for Hephestus too .. no getting him to deliver them either .. or any of our family," he added.

"You are so mean!" she told him unhappily.

"Do we have a deal?" he demanded.

"You give your godly oath never to mention that bet again?" she sulked.

"You have my oath as God of War," agreed Ares satisfied with the deal.

"Then you have my oath as Goddess of Love," she answered grumpily.

"I'm glad we have that settled. See ya in a moon for those weapons, Hephestus," the darkly handsome god grinned as he left the cavern in a flash of blue and silver.

"Oh Hefhy!" wailed Aphrodite as she turned into her spouse's firm embrace and sobbed on his shoulder, "Ares is so uncool!"

"Don't worry sweetheart. Hercules and the Warrior Princess are sure to work out a way to get rid of those things eventually," he told her, hugging her gently.

"But it's so not right! I had everything planned," she pouted. Then a smile suddenly lit her sullen features. "Hefhy? did Ares say anything about a mortal taking your tools to Hercules?" she asked.

"Umm, no. He said that we couldn't give them to anyone on the ship or in Amphipolis or get any of the family to take them .. but he didn't say anything about other mortals."

"That's what I thought!" she grinned.

"Dite? Just what are you up to?" questioned Hephaestus carefully.

"No time to explain now .. gotta bail!" she told him. "Later!" and she disappeared in a cloud of pink and silver shimmers.

Chapter Eighty Four: Homecoming

Standing on the prow of the ship, Xena allowed the familiar sights of the Strymon River's banks wash over her senses as "Wave Dancer" pushed slowly up stream. She would have offered Nebula her vast knowledge and experience to pilot the vessel up to Amphipolis, but she knew from her own experiences that being the captain of a ship was something you took rather personally, and she very much doubted that her offer would be appreciated.

Pulling her eyes away from the wide river, the Warrior Princess cast a look back towards the deck of the ship where her friends were scattered individually and in groups. Gabrielle and Ephiny were deep in further conversation about the domestic crisis that the Amazons were currently experiencing. Iolaus and Toris were laughing about something and casting careful glances at Nebula who was too busy concentrating on her navigation tasks to notice. Hercules had taken a solitary post on the starboard bow, while Autolycus was prowling the port bow.

She sighed softly. The thief and the demi-god had not come to terms about their quarrel. They studiously avoided occupying space closer than fifteen feet apart, and neither of them would talk about what the problem was. The Amazons seemed bemused about the sudden rift in the tight group of companions that had set off to rescue the Queen and her champion, but Xena, Gabrielle and, by association Ephiny, were fairly sure just where the problem lay ... so to speak.

The dark warrior shook her head in perplexity. - *How do I end up with these problems?* - she asked herself. She was willing to admit that she was flattered by the attention, regard .. - *And, alright, dammit! Love!* - that the two very different men offered. But she knew that she was far from ready to settle down with anyone. - *I have too much to do .. so much to atone for .. and okay, I'm too restless to stay in one place for long. Being a wife and maybe .. a mother,* - she swallowed hard as guilt brought the familiar grief associated with the loss of Solan. - *Maybe one day .. but not yet! No! Not yet!* -

She would be glad to get to Amphipolis. The tension on the ship was palpable, what with Hercules and Autolycus, the Amazons and their problems, along with the game that Nebula was playing with Iolaus and her brother, Xena guessed that all it would take was some little spark for them all to explode like a barrel of Greek fire! That consideration aside, she was also anxious to see her mother.

She knew that Cyrene would be worrying about both her and Toris and the Warrior Princess felt guilty about subjecting the long suffering woman to more anguish. It had been several moons

since her brother had left Amphipolis and none of the rumours about her fate, that were bound to have reached home, would have done anything to allay the innkeeper's fears. So Xena knew that for her mother to be satisfied that all was well with her daughter, she would have to spend some time at the inn.

It was not something she was going to particularly enjoy. She desperately needed time on her own, away from the prying, invasive eyes of others .. even if it was the concerned eyes of friends. - *Well alone except for Gabrielle*, - she acknowledged. There would be no possible way that the bard would agree to be separated from her for the foreseeable future after all that they had been through. And to be honest, she thought that it would be likely that Caesar's bounty would be withdrawn, so there was no real reasons for Gabrielle not to be at her side.

Her thoughts turned to the Roman and the light in her eyes hardened making her countenance grim. Her old nemesis had added much to the account between them and she was determined that he would pay in full when the time came. The bounty, that had started this last little chapter in their history, would surely be withdrawn because Xena was almost certain that Caesar would need every dinar he had to plough into his dispute against Pompey.

It seemed to her that the Roman's conflict was certain to escalate now. Caesar had had too many victories and was gaining too much ground with the senate. If Pompey didn't act soon, he would lose what support he had, which would result in Caesar gaining pre-eminence and total domination in the city and lead, ultimately, to Pompey's death as a rebel or a traitor to Rome .. whatever trumped up charge that Caesar could contrive.

- *No Pompey has to act very soon*, - she told herself. - *Which means that Caesar will not have the money to waste on tracking me or Gabrielle down, so we should be free from Roman interference in our lives ... at least for the time being.* -

Her thoughts returned to Amphipolis. - *We have to stay there at least until those Amazons bring Argo there*, - she mused. - *It might not be too bad. The Amazons at least will head back to Themiscyra .. well except for Poni and most likely Sheraya. Ep's going to need more time for healing before she travels far, and I don't imagine Sheraya will abandon her patient.* - A rather annoyed look creased her brow at the thought of the stubbornly insistent healer being around her for longer than necessary, but it gradually faded as she told herself, - *Yeah but as soon as those Amazons get there with Argo, I'm out of there*, - she smiled beatifically, - *While Poni has to put up with Sheraya until they get back to Themiscyra!* -

"That is a particularly evil look you have in your eye, warrior," growled Gabrielle as she moved beside her friend.

Xena gave her an arched eyebrow and then asked, "Finished your royal discussions with Eph?" knowing that it would not divert the bard in the least.

"Yes .. and the Amazons will be heading home as soon as we dock. I don't think Amphipolis and your Mother is ready for a major Amazon invasion .. you're always enough of a shock to them!"

tweaked the younger woman, getting a mock punch in the arm for her temerity. "Hey!" she objected rubbing her arm with injured pretense.

"Ahhh!" came the return with a notable lack of sympathy from her warrior partner.

Playing the game Gabrielle gave her a manufactured glare, "So just what was it that brought that evil glint to your eye, O great Warrior Princess?" she demanded.

Xena grinned, "I was just thinking that Ep's not going to be in any state to travel for a few days at least."

"Yeah, Eph was just wondering if Cyrene will mind having a wounded Amazon warrior for a guest. I told her it wouldn't be a problem .. especially as she can pay for the room with good Roman gold acquired in those fights that Hercules won!"

The dark warrior chuckled, "Have you seen the size of that strongbox? They'll need all those warriors just to get it back to Amazon land safely. I think your treasury, your majesty, is about to get a major boost!"

"Yeah, well," grinned Gabrielle, "It'll give the Amazons some security for a while. It takes the pressure off the harvest and means they can buy essentials, or even a few luxuries, should they need to." She gave her friend a quizzing look, "However, you still haven't explained that gleam you had in your eye, and Poni staying at your mother's inn isn't the whole story."

Xena grinned at her, "You're right there. I was just thinking about the fact that Sheraya isn't going to abandon a wounded Amazon in Amphipolis .. I presume she'll be staying there too?"

"Naturally," affirmed the bard, raising an eyebrow of her own as the warrior chuckled once more. "What?" she demanded.

The Warrior Princess gave her a wicked look, "Oh I was just musing over the fact that Ep's gonna have Sheraya all to herself .. I almost wish I could see it!"

"Xena, you are so bad!" admonished the younger woman trying hard to keep the grin off her own face.

"What?" demanded the raven haired woman, "You mean you don't think it's a fitting repayment for all of the snide comments, digs and flat out taunting I've had to endure from her while you and that Amazon gorgon had me confined to that bed!"

"That's not nice, Xena," admonished the bard trying not to laugh.

"Nor is the Amazon gorgon!" pouted the warrior. "It's bad enough being bullied by you"

"Excuse me!" interrupted the honey blonde, "All I did was hold you to a promise you made me. It's not my fault that you can't be trusted to look after yourself!"

The Warrior Princess couldn't resist grinning at her friend as she continued to tease, "As I said, bullied me!"

"Xena!" complained the bard delivering a backhand slap to her warrior friend's muscular stomach.

"What?" growled the other woman grinning impudently, before drawing her friend in for a quick hug and saying softly, "Did I ever thank you for being a bully?"

Gabrielle relaxed in the unexpected and unusual display of affection from her friend. Xena tended to be very economical with her hugs .. oh she'd gotten better over the seasons, she no longer shied away from the bard's gentle touch and could be cajoled into giving a hug when the younger woman was in need of comfort, which was a relief for Gabrielle who willingly admitted to being a touchy feely type of person. Then, sometimes .. when the mood struck her .. the warrior would reach out and just give a hug to let her partner know that she loved and appreciated her for all of the sour moods she took in her stride and for caring enough to remain with a 'moody, psychotic, half mad and all dangerous ex-warlord' as she often described herself. It was something that made the bard feel everything was worthwhile.

"Nope!" she finally replied, "You never did."

The warrior smiled gently and kissed the top of her friend's head before saying quietly, "Thank you, Gabrielle. Thank you for caring enough about me to bully me into taking the time to get over my injuries. Thank you for being my friend and partner ... and thank you for not deserting me to Caesar's mercies, even though I deserved nothing more."

The bard sighed and allowed herself a moment more in the protecting arms of her friend before twisting out of them to confront her with a sad stare, "Xena, when are you going to forgive yourself? You have changed .. you're not the person you were and no one ... no one, not even the Destroyer of Nations, deserves to be left in Caesar's hands," she admonished.

The warrior turned away and looked across to the bank of the river, remaining silent for so long that the younger woman didn't think that she was going to get an answer. Finally the raven tressed warrior shook her head and said softly, "It's too soon to abandon the guilt I feel for the deaths of the people who fell at my hand and the hands of my army. For the people who died because they couldn't survive after their men were killed and their stocks plundered."

She held her long fingered hands up before her and stared at them seeing something that no one else could, "I once told Hercules that I had so much blood on my hands that I'd never get them clean .. and that was so true."

The bard reached out and closed her friend's hands with her own, willing the blue eyes of the Warrior Princess to look at her and once they did she told her firmly, "That was another person, Xena. YOU have changed. You just have to accept that."

The warrior looked deep into the greenish blue eyes of her bard, "I don't think I can do that, Gabrielle. I'm not sure I'll ever believe that."

The younger woman fought her emotions to stop a tear from sliding down her cheek. The depth of self inflicted pain that the Warrior Princess carried around with her was so immense that she sometimes wondered how she could bear the weight of it. Instead of crying she smiled, her face full of confident assurance, "Don't worry!" she told her partner, "I have enough belief for both of us."

Xena gave her a wry smile, "Of that I have no doubt, bard." She reached out a hand to cup the honey blonde's cheek, before sliding it down to gently finger the silver collar, a match for the one that encircled her own neck.

"Are we going to be able to get these off, Xena?" asked Gabrielle, a worried note creeping into her voice.

"We'll have some time once we get into Amphipolis to work out a way to get rid of them. Hercules will help. We can't go anywhere until your Amazons turn up with Argo," came the reply.

"Lasca and Jade are good warriors," assured Gabrielle. "I know they're young, but they're eager to help and they've got Karrellie and Hakine along with them to keep an eye on them. They'll get Argo back safe and sound .. they'll be here before you know it."

"They better be," grumped the Warrior Princess unhappily. "I would have still preferred to collect her myself ... and if they don't take good care of her" she left the threat unfinished.

The bard shook her head in exasperation, "Xena you know you weren't fully recovered enough to go and get Argo! She'll be fine .. and don't go frightening the Amazons .. we have enough trouble in that area without you adding to it .. right?" she poked her partner in the ribs.

"Right!" grumbled the warrior unconvinced.

"C'mon," Gabrielle tried changing the subject, "Lets go pack our gear .. we'll soon be in Amphipolis."

Xena looked quizzically upriver and nodded her head in agreement, "Fine," she said. "Let me get into my armour ... I want to make sure that I look presentable when I get there."

"Fraud," chided the bard good naturedly, "You just want to make sure that the entire town knows it's you!"

The dark warrior grinned, "Busted, huh?"

"Yup! Big time," agreed the Amazon Queen as they made their way below deck.

"Friends! Friends!" grinned the trader, calling attention back to himself, "I'm sure the gentleman's wife is a far better cook than she's given credit for ... and if she isn't, well a sip of 'Hippocrates' Health Tonic', before and after the meal, is just the thing to make it seem like a kings feast!"

That got their attention and one helpful person asked just the question he was looking for, "Just what is this Hipp .. Hip .. Hoorum," coughed the woman, "Health tonic? And what's it made from?"

"Ah, dear lady. This special elixir is made from a secret recipe known only to the great healer Hippocrates and a few other select people. It's said that Aesculapius himself whispered the secrets of the formula to the great healer and entrusted him to see that it would benefit mankind," he told them confidentially.

The excited murmuring that accompanied that piece of information buzzed around the crowd in muted whispers that made the trader certain that he was going to have a very, very good day of selling here. He could almost count the dinars as they racked up in his mind and he just hoped that he had enough stock on hand to cope with the demand. He frowned as a voice from the back of the crowd yelled something to dampen the spirits of his buyers.

"How do we know it's safe to drink?"

The bearded trader saw grudging nods and concern on many people's faces. Smiling easily, having experienced the suspicious nature of peasants before, "Choose someone from amongst you that you all trust and then that person can pick a container and I'll drink from it," he assured them. "There is nothing to harm you here, my friends."

An old woman was picked and she pointed to a jug no different from the ones that surrounded it. Invisible sparkles flew from her finger tip and coalesced around the container before seeping into it through the cork, "That one," croaked the crone decisively.

Smiling, the salesman lifted the jug with a flourish. He pulled the cork, cutting through the silent expectation with an audible "POP!", and took a long swallow of the liquid inside. Smacking his lips with unassumed relish .. the stuff was after all quite tasty .. "There, my friends ... absolutely wonderful .. what more can I say?" He noticed some worried looks from the crowd. "What's the matter?" he asked.

"Is your hair supposed to do that?" asked a young woman.

"Do what?" he asked mystified, putting his hand up to feel his head and bringing it away clutching a thatch of his hair. "Ah ... hmmm ... errr," he huffed beginning to panic.

"It's all a con!"

"Looks like it backfired on him!"

"Serves him right!"

Came the comments from the people as they walked away from the stall snickering nastily as the trader's hair and beard pooled around his shoulders. The luckless man stood there staring in disbelief at the jugs, - *What in Hades just happened?* - he wondered to himself in shocked awe, running tentative fingers over his bald pate.

"Don't sweat it studmuffin!" came a very familiar voice from the lips of the crone who had remained standing alone before the stall.

"This is a nightmare," muttered the man. "Any minute now I'm going to wake up in my nice warm bed and find out I've been dreaming." He said slapping his hand over his eyes knocking loose his eyebrows.

"Betcha won't slick!" grinned the old woman toothlessly.

Spreading his fingers apart, the salesman gave the woman a hard look before whispering, "Aphrodite?"

The figure morphed into the delightfully nubile image of the Goddess of Love in her habitual pink negligé, "Got it in one, Sal!" she giggled.

Salmoneus groaned, looked up at the sky and wailed, "Why me?"

"Because I know I can trust you to do me an incy wincey favour," she wheedled.

He looked at her incredulously, "You've got to be kidding! After what you've just done to me?"

Aphrodite pouted at him, "I can make it worth your while," she told him.

"How?" demanded the portly salesman as he hurriedly started to pack up his merchandise.

"I can give you back your hair," she grinned.

"Which I just lost because of you," he answered her snidely.

The goddess draped herself alluringly over Salmoneus' table, "I could rock your world, Studmuffin!" she told him leaning forward so that her breath tickled his ear.

The salesman looked at her with almost uncontrollable desire, but his thwarted financial instincts were putting up a valiant rearguard action. "I .. erm .. I .. uh!" He took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and said in a squeaky voice, "No! You just lost me a fortune here, Aphrodite."

"That's way harsh, Salmoneus .. I did that for the best reasons," she pouted.

"Best reasons!" his voice raised an octave, "Best reasons? Making my hair fall out was for the best reasons? Alright, O great Goddess of love! What reasons?" he demanded as he stuffed the last of his inventory into a large pair of sacks that he then hefted across the back of a donkey.

"Your friend, the warrior babe, and her tag along bard .. well they got into some way uncool mess with some Roman dude called Caesar and have spent the last three moons or so as his personal property." she explained.

That brought the salesman to a stop and he softly exclaimed, "Xena!" before shaking his head sadly, "I can't do anything to help them .. I'm a merchant, not a fighter .. go find Hercules. He'll rescue them."

"Done deal, slick!" the goddess told him smugly.

"What do you need me for then?" asked Salmoneus, intrigued in spite of his determination not to be.

"Well while Caesar had them, he had these slave collars put on them that even Hercola can't break open. It's a real bummer!" she sighed.

"Must be if Hercules can't do anything about them," he agreed, worried about his friends.

She grinned at the look on his face knowing that the hook was set. "There's a way to help them," she told him. "The Hercster just needs to borrow a couple of Heph's tools and with his strength and their forging he'll be able to like junk the hunks of tin around their throats."

He gave her a sharp look, "Then why don't you just give them to Hercules?" he questioned.

"Weeell," she shrugged, "Ares wiggled out on us and made me and Heph promise not to give the tools directly to Hercules, or Xena, or anyone with them."

"Ares!" the chubby man exclaimed. "You want me to go against Ares? Have you lost your mind?"

"Chill mortal or we'll be talking big time retribution here!" she warned him.

"Okay, okay," he tried to placate her, "Don't do anything hasty!" He gave her a careful look, "So what's with Ares anyway?"

Aphrodite shrugged uncomfortably, "He had something on me and so got a promise from me .. but it didn't include getting an unconnected mortal to take the things to the guys!" She could see that he remained to be convinced. "Look. All you've gotta do is give the things to Herc. I'll set you and your," she looked hard at the donkey, "your friend down just outside Amphipolis"

"Amphipolis, but that's miles from here or anywhere!" he complained.

"I'll even erase the memory of the people here so you can do your selling thing when you hit town again," she promised.

"You're forgetting something," he prompted scratching his chin meaningly.

"Yadda, yadda!" she acknowledged with a wave of her hand restoring his hirsute finery, "So will you do this itsy little thing for me, studmuffin?"

Salmonius gave her a long look before answering, "No. I won't do it for you," he told her with a shake of his head. "But I will do it for Xena and Gabrielle."

Aphrodite didn't quite know whether to frown or smile at his acceptance of her task, so instead, after she had handed over the tools of Hephestus, she settled for a wave of her hand that sent the travelling salesman on his way to Amphipolis in a cloud of pink sparkles. She grinned at the thought of the fifteen mile walk he'd have to make to get to the town, "That'll teach him to mess with me!" she mock growled as she took a quick look around the square before announcing, "Later!" to no one in particular.

"Wave Dancer" docked alongside the small but functional wharf that Amphipolis boasted and the process of unloading all the passengers, their equipment and the large chest of Roman coins, that Ephiny had acquired, got underway. Xena had only her immediate personal possessions; her leathers, armour, sword and chakram, courtesy of Autolycus. - *Still haven't thanked him properly for getting them back for me*, - she mused, allowing a somewhat vexed look crease her brow as she thought about the problem between the thief and demi-god for what seemed the hundredth time.

Xena sighed and cast a look over to where Gabrielle seemed to be stuffing an endless supply of trinkets mixed with a fair selection of pots and pans into a knapsack. Her frown became something more of a glare as her eyes narrowed and she told herself firmly, - *If she thinks Argo's going to lug that lot around she's got another think coming!* -

The bard caught her look and gave her friend an artfully contrived smile, "I know what you're thinking," she told her, "but don't worry, most of this stuff I'll give to your mother ... but I want the frying pan and the cooking pots as a backup, because a certain Warrior Princess I know has a habit of destroying cookware faster than I can acquire it!" she mock frowned.

The dark warrior bent her head down to hide her grin knowing that her younger partner was quite right on that point. As Gabrielle continued her packing, her thoughts returned to the problem of Autolycus. There was something about the thief that pulled deeply at her .. something that made her keep him at arm's length in a way that she never had with Hercules. Her thoughts skittered back to a moment on a night-shrouded roof in Rome when the King of Thieves had brushed past her defences, gathered her into his arms and kissed her deeply and unexpectedly. She could still feel the static buzz on her lips, when she thought of it, and her fingers drifted towards the spot almost involuntarily.

"You okay?" questioned Gabrielle, noticing the far off look in the warrior's eye.

Xena mentally shook herself and offered the bard a smile, "Yeah, just thinking."

The bard could tell that her frequently taciturn partner didn't really want to talk about what she'd been thinking, so instead she announced, "Well I'm packed .. time we went and put your mother's fears to rest." Nodding her agreement, the warrior reached for the bulging knapsack, intending to swing it over her shoulder, only to have her hands slapped away by her friend. "You may be fit enough to be back on your feet, Xena, but that wound in your shoulder still hasn't fully healed. It was really a bad one and I don't want to take any chances that it will open up again." She could see the larger woman was about to protest, but put an end to the argument with a firm, "Humour me on this one ... please?"

The Warrior Princess threw her hands up into the air with a resigned sigh, "Just don't come complaining about an aching back because you've packed everything into that bag including the ship's bath tub!"

"The ship doesn't have a bath tub," answered the bard a little confused.

"I know," breathed Xena with a grin eyeing the sack.

She earned another backhand blow to her stomach and a growled, "Funny, Xena, very funny!"

Smiling, and exchanging insults, the pair made their way back up on deck where Toris was waiting impatiently for them, "How long does it take to pack a few clothes?" he demanded.

"Ask her majesty here," the warrior pointed to the bard, "I've only got what I'm standing up in." She eyed her brother judiciously, "Thought you might have gone to tell Mother that we were here," she stated.

Toris nodded his dark head and looked at her with those blue eyes that were almost a match for her own, "Thought about it," he admitted, "But decided that if she saw me without you two she might get the wrong idea."

Xena returned his look before slapping him on the back and acknowledging, "Good call. Don't want her any more worried than she probably is." Her look strayed to the wharf that was beginning to be crowded with Amazons, before shifting across to the grass verged street where it appeared the local militia was assembling. She arched an incredulous eyebrow, "Just what in the name of Hades do they thing they're doing?"

Her brother turned his attention to where she was looking, "Give me strength!" he hissed, "Let me go and talk to them and just let them know what's going on, okay?" He gave his sister a warning look, "Don't do anything ... outrageous."

"Me?" she inquired innocently.

"Yeah, yeah!" he answered with a tight smile, "Save it for someone who doesn't know you."

"I am so misunderstood," she grumbled lightly, grinning as the bard elbowed her in the side, "What?" she demanded.

"The problem here is that we understand you all too well, O Warrior Princess of flamboyant intimidation. Just behave yourself and let Toris sort things out, okay?" Gabrielle instructed firmly.

Xena sighed, rested her arms on the railing and watched as Toris ran down the gang plank, pushed his way through assorted Amazons who were starting to look defensively at the Amphipolis militia, and strode purposefully up to the man in charge. - *Why is it never easy coming home?* - she asked herself wistfully.

As they waited, Hercules and Iolaus came over and joined them, "What's going on?" asked the blonde sidekick.

Waving a hand in the direction of her brother the warrior answered, "Seems like the militia is getting a little bit worked up by the amount of Amazons suddenly appearing on the wharf. Toris has gone to calm things down before it gets out of hand."

"Why did Toris get the job?" asked Iolaus confused, thinking that Xena's impressive reputation would be far better to back up assurances that the Amazons were just passing through and heading for home.

A quickly smothered, pain filled look swept across the Warrior Princess' eyes before she answered the question, "I .. am not well .. thought of here at home," she told her listeners. "We have a truce, of sorts, but ..." she shrugged, "there's an awful lot of old hatred for me here."

"But this is your home .. you have family here, they know you!" protested the blonde, who despite their rocky history had managed to fully overcome his animosity for Xena and counted her both as a friend and someone who could be relied on in times of trouble.

"That's the problem .. they KNOW me. What I was .. what I did. I doubt that anything I do will ever be enough to reinstate people's faith in me here ... well not everybody's. That's okay. I'm used to it, and I earned their hatred fair and square," she told them emotionlessly, her warlord mask firmly locked into place as she informed them of the facts as she saw them.

The two men exchanged glances while the bard tucked an arm around her friend's biceps and told her softly, but with firm resolve, "It's not okay, Xena. Not with me ... and eventually even the people here will see and understand that you've changed. When that time comes, they will forgive the sins of the past." She looked up into the warrior's carefully blank features, "You may not believe it, but that's okay. I told you I've got enough belief for both of us."

The Warrior Princess looked down at the Amazon Queen and gave her a faint, affectionate lop sided grin before she told her, "You have enough belief for the world, my bard."

The raven haired man smiled mirthlessly, "Indeed I do, Prax .. and in that time that we were growing up, do you happen to remember my little sister?"

The other man's Adam's apple bobbed up and down convulsively, "Y..yes," he admitted, beginning to get some idea where this was going.

"Of course you do," agreed Toris affably, "She's the one that regularly beat the crap out of all of us! And you know what, Prax?" he asked conversationally.

"Wh .. what?" stammered the other man, wondering just why he let the head man talk him into this folly.

"She's a hundred times better at kicking butt now!" answered the tall innkeeper, struggling to keep a hint of pride out of his voice.

Screwing his courage to the sticking place, Praxedes drew himself up to his less than impressive height and looked up into the other man's burning blue eyes, "Damn it Tor! That's the whole point isn't it? We can't afford that bitch of a sister of yours to come charging in here like she owns the place. We got burned by her once .. never again."

Toris threw his hands up into the air! "Of all the mule headed, backwards thinking, brain numbing stupidity!" He stopped suddenly and skewered the town baker with a piercing look, "Prax? Just who in Hades came up with that idea?" he asked knowing full well that the pompous little man wouldn't have thought of this himself and so it was logical to presume someone else had put him up to it.

"It's my duty as head of militia" began the baker once more.

"Yes, yes .. I've heard that already .. now just who gave the alert?" demanded the tall, suddenly menacing man.

"Umm .. well .. ummm Tomas said ..."

Slapping his head in mock disbelief, Toris was almost ready to take on the militia himself and send them packing, "Tomas? TOMAS? What in the blue blooded blazes of Hera has he got to do with anything?" he yelled.

"He's head man here now, Tor! Was elected while you've been gone!" retorted Praxedes beginning to get angry himself, "So if he says get the militia out and arrest the bitch from Tartarus and clear off the harlots, then that's what I have to do!"

Above their shouting came the unmistakable ululation of Xena's battlecry replaced almost immediately by a soft thud as she landed gracefully next to Toris. With ice blue eyes flashing dangerously, she asked in the deepest, coldest voice she could muster, "You gonna try and arrest me, little man?"

The baker was close to peeing his pants. She could see the undiluted terror in his eyes as he struggled to say something .. anything! A distinctly feral grin lit her features as she swept a deadly look over the rest of the men in the militia and it deepened as they involuntarily took a step back away from her. "You wanna tell me what's going on here?" she returned her gaze back on Praxedes.

Finally summoning the courage to speak to the dazzlingly beautiful, but frighteningly scary, warrior before him, "You can't bring your Har" his voice stopped suddenly as a hand squeezed his throat.

Still smiling coldly, Xena told him, "They're Amazons ... remember that!" she hissed before releasing him.

The stout man grabbed at his throat as he drew in a couple of long deep breaths before finishing hurriedly, "You can't bring those ... Amazons in here. I have orders to arrest you if you do."

Taking a deep breath, the Warrior Princess growled, "The Amazons will be heading home more or less immediately. I and a few friends will be visiting with my Mother for a few days. I'll vouch for the Amazon's good behaviour while they are here."

"Yeah?" sneered Praxedes, "And just who is going to vouch for you?"

She smiled as she identified a small group approaching behind her, "I'll vouch for her," said a familiar male voice.

The little baker looked up at the giant of a man who had approached with a smaller blonde man and the more familiar looking bard that had been seen in Amphipolis with Xena before, "And just who in Hades are you?" came the almost expected demand.

"I'm Hercules," returned the reply complete with a shrug of the shoulders.

That caught the attention of all the militia. Praxedes struggled with the identification before stuttering, "You .. you're .. um, I mean .. you'll make sure she doesn't get into any trouble here?"

"Oh yeah!" he agreed off handedly. "I'll keep her in line."

"I'll get you for that, Hercules," breathed Xena almost too quiet for even the demi-god to pick up.

"In that case .. erm," Praxedes shuffled trying to reconcile his orders with the latest turn of events.

"Just send the lads home, Prax. There's nothing for them to do here." Toris told him quietly.

The baker moved uncertainly, throwing worried looks at the group before him and the Amazons behind them, "C'mon lads .. let's get back to work," he said at last.

Breathing sighs of relief, the militia dispersed, leaving the group alone on the wharf road. Gabrielle approached a glaring Warrior Princess and gently rubbed her arm, "Hey?" she questioned, "You okay?"

"Jerks," muttered the warrior glancing after the retreating men. She glanced at the bard and added, "Yeah I'm fine."

"Eph says she'll meet us up at the inn. She'll come up with Poni, Joxer and Sheraya. Why don't we go and see your mother?" she suggested.

Quirking the ghost of a lopsided smile, Xena nodded her head, "Um, Herc? Can you bring Eph up .. just in case of trouble?"

"No problem," smiled the demi-god, "We'll see you in a while."

"Thanks," she told him, before she, Gabrielle and Toris headed up the street towards the town's best inn.

The walk through the street was executed quickly. There were few people to be seen around .. obviously nervous about the intimidating presence of so many Amazon warriors .. not to mention a certain home grown Warrior Princess. The trio didn't speak, but their eyes noted the wary looks they were getting from the few people that had braved the streets.

When they reached the inn, Toris entered first and found his Mother waiting anxiously beside the bar. As her son approached she held her arms open and pulled him in for a hug. "I've missed you," she said, "Is everything alright?"

In answer she heard her daughter's tentative voice, "Mother?"

Drawing away from Toris she looked across the room to where her tall, powerful daughter stood waiting by the door, still uncertain of her mother's welcome, knowing there was still so much past pain laying between them. Smiling, Cyrene started across the room, picking up pace the closer she got and was enfolded in a strong pair of arms as she reached her destination.

"Oh, Xena! I've been so worried. Welcome home little one .. I'm glad you've made it back safely."

Chapter Eighty Five: Home Free

Amphipolis breathed a nervous sigh of relief as the Amazons quickly disembarked and marched out of town heading for home. Only a small contingent had remained in Amphipolis; Ephiny, Sheraya and a guard of ten .. who had carried Joxer and Eponin up to Cyrene's inn on a pair of hastily constructed litters .. accompanied by Nebula who was in search of a new crew after the Amazons had declined her offer of a pirate's life.

The Amazon Regent had managed to pry the innkeeper away from her son and daughter for long enough to arrange accommodation for Eponin, Sheraya and two guards, insisting on paying even

though the grateful Cyrene was adamant that she would be happy to host the Amazons for all they had done to help rescue her daughter and Gabrielle.

"Really Cyrene, I wouldn't dream of it," Ephiny told her firmly. "Amazons pay their way in the world."

"Especially since the Amazon treasury has just come into something of a Roman windfall," commented Gabrielle from the table where she sat with Xena and Toris, drinking cold mugs of cider.

"But" the elder woman started to protest.

"We're grateful for the offer, Cyrene," the Regent assured her, "But Queen Gabrielle is right. You run a business here and we're more than happy to pay for your hospitality." She gave the woman a considering looking, recognising the stubborn set to her jaw, realising exactly from whom Xena got her tenacious willpower and decided she had better come up with a compromise, "However, should some Amazon be in need of a meal and a roof at some time, I would be grateful for any aid you see fit to extend," she said with a warm smile.

"But of course," the innkeeper enthused strongly, realising that she was being offered a way to accept the situation without being seen to back down .. a compromise of sorts. "Any Amazon that passes through Amphipolis will always be welcome here."

Ephiny smiled warmly at Cyrene's declaration and extended an invitation, in return, "Should you ever venture towards Themiscyra, know that you will always be well received there." The Regent then turned towards the two women seated at the table, "I'd like to say that this adventure has been fun, but on the whole I think I'd rather deal with a string of domestic conflicts than have to deal with any of that again." She rested a hand lightly on her stomach, "I have a lot to think about resulting from this .. I hope you will both be able to be with me for the birth, I'll send you a message when it's time."

Gabrielle stood and threw herself into a fierce hug from her friend, "Thank you for coming after us, Eph. It really means a lot to me .. to both of us .. to know that we can count on you."

"Anytime, Gabrielle," answered Ephiny returning the hug in kind, then added in a whisper, "Just try keeping tall, dark and deadly out of trouble for a while, huh? There's only so much excitement us poor Amazons can take."

While Gabrielle and her Regent had been saying their farewells, Xena had risen and moved around the table to stand at the bard's shoulder, "I heard that Ephiny," she said wryly, startling the pair out of the hug.

"Good," returned the blonde Amazon with a laugh as she released Gabrielle and turned her attention to the dark warrior. "Maybe you'll give it a try then," she said as she held out a hand ready to clasp her friend's arm in a warrior salute, almost squeaking in surprise as Xena took it and pulled her into a brief hug.

"I always try, Eph ... but I have this little bard who seems to attract all the trouble going," she quirked a lopsided grin.

"Hey!" growled Gabrielle as she threw a light backhand into the warrior's arm, "I resemble that remark," she smirked.

"Keep in touch. We won't be able to see you until the child is due ... as long as there aren't any complications," she told her making it clear that if she was needed that exile or no, she would come at her friend's call. "But write and let us know that all is well. I'll be there to make sure that you and the baby come through the birth okay?" she told the Amazon warmly.

"I can't expect you to do that, Xena," Ephiny told her seriously, "The council would have a collective fit, and I don't know what they would, or could, rule if you should break the exile order," she grinned, "At least until I have time to look it up in the law scrolls."

Returning the serious look with one of her own the warrior told her, "Hey we'll cross that bridge when we come to it. If the pregnancy goes well, then my period of exile will be over and I'll be able to be there to deliver the baby ... Can't have someone else bringing Xenan's little brother or sister into the world now, can I?"

Not knowing what to say, the Regent contented herself with a grateful look, "You take care of our Queen .. and yourself, you hear me? I don't want to tell Xenan that his favourite aunts" she left that unfinished and the Warrior Princess could see a suspiciously moist gleam in the Regent's eyes.

"Take care of yourself, Eph ... watch your back," she warned, not liking the situation building amongst the Amazon factions.

"No problems," agreed the curly haired blonde with something of a grimace, before she gave Gabrielle a final quick hug and headed for the door with a wave.

Xena and the bard exchanged looks. Both were concerned about the Amazon situation. They knew that ordinarily, Ephiny was, normally, more than capable of handling it .. especially with the capable help of both Solari and Eponin .. however, with a large percentage of the loyal guards returning in a state of pregnancy, and with the Regent herself expecting, things might become more than a little tense back in Themiscyra.

"Do you think" began Gabrielle.

The warrior shook her head, "She knows to call us if she needs help ... there's not a lot more we can do for now .. you need to trust her to cope with this."

"I do!" protested the honey blonde indignantly, "It's just I can't help being worried .. I'm Queen and a lot of Eph's problems stem from me."

"Why don't you .. go and talk to Autolycus for a while."

The blonde frowned, "Why would I want to talk to Autolycus?" he grumbled.

"Because I asked you to," the son of Zeus told him levelly.

"You asked ..." he started as Hercules cocked his head towards the miserable looking man in the bed, "Oh yeah .. right. Well I do need to ask him .. um .. yeah ask him about that .. um .. tavern up in Philippi .. yeah that's it," he fudged uncertainly.

"Well?" asked the demi-god.

"Hmm?" responded his sidekick with a lost look on his face.

"Autolycus?" prompted the hero, gesturing towards the door.

"Oh. Yeah. Right," he mumbled. "I'll see you guys in a bit."

Hercules watched as his friend left the room muttering under his breath as he did so. Once the door closed behind him, the big man turned his attention back to Joxer who lay back on the bed staring moodily at the well kept plaster covering the room's ceiling. Drawing a breath, the demi-god gathered a chair, from where it stood against the wall, before taking it to where he could sit alongside the bed. The silence dragged for a while as he thought about how to tackle what was wrong with the injured man.

Selecting and discarding several ideas, the big man finally decided that the direct approach was probably the best option, "You want to tell me what's bothering you?" he asked.

At first he didn't think that Joxer was going to answer him as he continued to stare up at the blank ceiling. "You'll think that I'm being stupid," he said at last, "Not that you probably don't already .. everyone else does. Joxer the Mighty ... what a joke!"

"Hey!" barked Hercules, drawing the injured man's attention to him, "I happen to know that man saved a child's life not so long ago .. I don't think he's a joke, neither does the girl and nor do his friends."

"You're just saying that," answered Joxer, flatly.

Hercules shook his head in perplexity, "Look Joxer, what's really up with you? I know it's not this hero stuff, because you've been around long enough to know that we all care for you more than that."

The other man looked at the demi-god with soulful brown eyes, "It's just that ..."

"Yes?" questioned the demi-god when he realised that the injured man wasn't going to continue.

caught up in it, and adding comments of his own as the story touched upon areas he had lived through.

Cyrene sat through this mixed up in an emotional turmoil of distress at what had happened to her daughter and her partner; she needed to know, but at the same time it pained her to hear what they had endured .. and she could tell that much was being left out of the recital. Once she had Toris alone she would get him to reveal the details that were being kept back.

The bard managed to get half way through her recitation of events, accepting and incorporating the occasional comment from Toris and Iolaus, and was aware of both the tense anxiety on Cyrene's face and the stoic mask assumed by Xena, when they were interrupted by the arrival of Patroclese, Nebula and the ex-slave boys (the girls having left with the Amazons to start their new lives). She gave them a wave as they gathered over at another table and were served food and drink by Tryphena the inn's waitress.

As Gabrielle turned back to her tale, she missed the entrance of a large group of men on the heels of their friends. However, she didn't fail to notice the stiffening of her partner as the men marched purposefully up to their table, the leader glaring hatefully at Xena who merely arched an eyebrow in return.

"What do you want here, Tomas?" demanded Toris a tinge of anger in his tone.

"Her!" snapped the tall, painfully thin man with a pock marked face, staring balefully at the dark warrior.

"For what?" growled Cyrene protectively, "She's done nothing"

"Oh really? Just because old Garrick let her come and go, heedless of her past crimes against this town and it's people, doesn't mean that I will," he stormed.

"Xena isn't like that anymore," interjected the bard noticing that both Nebula and Patroclese were approaching and that Autolycus had come in through the kitchens from wherever he'd been lurking.

"That doesn't make any difference, girl .. it's time she paid for her sins. Besides as head magistrate it's my duty to take into custody runaways when they're found in the precincts of Amphipolis!" he sneered, reaching out a hand to finger the strange collar around her neck.

His hand never made the contact, "Keep that to yourself .. unless you want to lose it!" advised the dark warrior with a dangerous growl as her hand closed crushingly around his wrist, squeezing until he felt his bones beginning to grate together.

Tomas was unable to stop his yelp of surprise and pain, not having even seen the lounging woman move. He tried to draw his hand free and found it held immobile in a vice like grip, "Let me go, dammit!" he swore struggling.

Xena quirked a playful smirk and enquired, "You want it?" feeling the town headman increase his attempt at pulling his hand free. When his somewhat under developed muscles were fully employed she released him saying distinctly, "Ya got it!" and watched as he smashed himself in the nose with his own fist propelled by the force of his straining muscles. It didn't hurt as much as it would have done if Xena had punched him, but it was far more humiliating for him.

As soon as he'd recovered, he wiped the blood away from his nose, smearing it across the back of his hand, "Don't just stand there," he told the men behind him, "Arrest her .. and the girl!"

The fifteen men moved forward a pace, a couple of them brandishing manacles. Xena felt an irrational clenching of her bowels as she saw the irons and a low growl began to emanate from deep within her, "If you want to keep your arms attached to your bodies .. BACK OFF!" she snarled.

Seeing the dangerous woman's eyes alight with a dark fire, the militia men immediately took one step back, none of them anxious to face her ire, many of them still had memories of the lumps and bruises that she gave them when they were children. She had garnered an impressive reputation as a child, and that had simply grown along with her over the years.

"I said arrest them!" seethed Tomas, who also remembered the thrashings he'd received at the young Xena's hands, particularly one that had left him with broken bones after he'd dared to say something far from complimentary about her mother. That beating still rankled after all these years and he was not above using his new power and position in the community to finally exact his revenge.

"Tomas," interrupted Toris, in a tone that told everyone that he was trying to keep his temper in check, "It's not going to happen. Xena doesn't want any trouble and she'll be leaving town in a few days time. The past is the past, and those collars belong to a Roman dictator .. and as far as I remember the writ of Rome does not run in Greece, or even here in Amphipolis. So why don't you and the others just ... GET THE TARTARUS OUT OF MY MOTHERS INN!"

There was stunned silence from everyone in the bar room as the dark haired man's voice seemed to haunt the rafters with a threatening echo. Tomas looked like a goldfish gasping for air as his mouth opened and shut with nothing emerging. To say he was stunned would be a gross understatement. He'd always considered his childhood friend, Toris, to be somewhat spineless and easily ignored, but since he'd come back to Amphipolis, the first time and even more so on this second return, he appeared to be exhibiting a commanding disposition that had hitherto been more associated with his Ares cursed sister.

When the silence had dragged on for what seemed candlemarks rather than a few heartbeats, a low purring voice filtered into the tensely hung atmosphere, "I'd do like he said boys," the dark warrior advised. "You all remember me. You don't want to make me mad, do ya?" It was a mildly asked question, but it had the desired effect of having the militia men scrambling for the exit, leaving their erstwhile leader alone facing a potentially hostile group consisting of a mixed bag of heroes, rogues, medics and a few sundry others ... including one irate mother who was having to be restrained by a bard.

Tomas finally found his tongue, "Have a care what you do, Toris," he warned. "Your Tartarus spawned bitch of a sister won't be able to protect you if she's locked up or has been thrown out of town!"

"You have no warrants, so you have no right to detain her," snarled Toris angrily. "You also have no right to TRY and chase her from Amphipolis. Given my sister's reputation are you really sure you want to threaten either her or her family?"

"She won't stay here for long," jeered the head man. "You can't count on her 'protection'," he all but spat the word.

Before her brother could issue a retort, Xena stepped menacingly in front of him, "That's enough!" she snapped. "If you have a problem with me, that's fine. I can fight my own battles, and you're right .. I won't be here long. But if you're going to threaten my family, I may have to take steps to protect their security when I leave, you get me?" she demanded her eyes boring menacingly into his.

"Xena!" Gabrielle and Cyrene spoke together in concern.

"I asked if you understood?" growled the raven haired woman, ignoring her mother and the bard.

Tomas looked into feral blue eyes that crackled with icy anger. His arrogance and desire for vengeance had sustained his meagre courage up until this point .. that and the fact that it was widely reputed that the Warrior Princess had changed and softened. But looking into her cold eyes, he saw the wolf that lay barely leashed. His bowels turned to water and it was all he could do not to pee his pants as he stood there willing himself not to shake. Finally, when it looked like she was running out of patience, he stammered, "Y-y-yes! I understand."

"Good," she almost purred, "Oh and don't even think about causing them trouble when I'm gone because you'll regret the day you were born if you do .. you got that?" she demanded.

He nodded shakily, wanting to be away from the woman he was rapidly remembering to categorize as being a homicidal maniac. Without his militia to back him up, Tomas was like all bullies .. a coward when confronted by something or someone who could stand up to him.

"Alright," she sneered at him, "Now get your snivelling carcass out of here."

He backed up a couple of steps before turning to run after his men. Xena resisted the gnawing temptation to add a boot to the seat of his pants to hurry him along, although she really wanted to take out some anger on someone. With the inn returning to something like normalcy, she decided that some time alone, - *Maybe in a nice hot bath*, - might just do her the power of good.

"Mother, while Gabrielle finishes filling you in on things, would it be alright if I used the bath house?" she asked turning around to face Cyrene.

"Of course, little one," smiled the elder woman gently, "I'm sure your brother will be happy to help you with the water and I'll bring you in some fresh linens in a little while."

"Thanks, Mother," responded Xena appreciatively heading for the kitchen to start preparing the hot water that the bath would require.

The dark warrior relaxed gratefully into the steaming water that almost lapped the edge of the tub. As the heat worked gently to relax tense muscles, she found her thoughts drifting back to the innocent days of childhood. - *How often did I do my best to try and avoid getting bathed?* - she mused as she took a bar of her mother's soap and lifted a long leg to lather. - *Gods! I never knew what I was trying to pass up.* - She grinned faintly as she pictured a wild five year old running through the inn trying to escape her mother and her bath, howling with frustration as she was caught, stripped and dumped unceremoniously into the water. - *How Mother ever had the patience to raise me, as well as Ly and Tor, I'll never know!* -

Finishing up by soaping her hair, she ducked under the water to rinse off, then rising and relaxed against the back of the tub, allowing her eyes to close as she relished the feeling of being clean, free and home .. even if only for a short while.

Unconsciously, her hand drifted up to her throat to finger the hated collar. She almost desperately hoped that she and Hercules would be able to work out some way of removing the detested reminder of her enemy's power over her, - *I'd suffer anything to be rid of it,* - she told herself, then grinned wryly, - *Short of cutting my head off, that is!* -

She lost track of just how long she'd been soaking, but the water was beginning to cool noticeably when she heard the door creak open and sensed her mother's quiet entry with the linen. Breathing in the familiar scent of lilac and lily's that always seemed to cling to Cyrene, she allowed a wry quirk of her lips as she heard the other woman pad softly across to a table where she laid down her burden and turned to regard her daughter.

"You're going to prune if you stay in there much longer,"

Xena chuckled as she straightened up without thinking, but a soft gasp reminded her of the white lattice of fine scars that decorated her back and she cursed herself for revealing them to her mother, "Don't worry," she tried to reassure, "They've healed .. I'm fine."

Cyrene wasn't ready to accept her daughter's assurances and she moved to the edge of the tub, firmly pushing Xena forward from where she had leaned back against the wood in an attempt to remove the injuries from the other woman's sight. "Mother, I'm fine," protested the warrior, feeling like a child as her arguments were ignored in an almost perfunctory way. - *Dammit!* - she grimaced as she felt Cyrene's hands easing gently over the remarkably smooth skin. - *I didn't want her to know about those.* -

Releasing a wretched sigh, the older woman asked quietly, "How many?"

"I'm sorry," asked her daughter, confusion evident in her voice.

"How many times did they use a whip on you and how many lashes did you take to end up with these markings, Xena?" her mother asked sadly. "You see, I know how well and quickly you heal, my daughter. For your body to be showing this kind of damage you must have taken some wicked punishments."

The Warrior Princess detected the quiver in her parent's voice as she spoke and again cursed herself for failing to think! "Mother .. really .. it's over. Both Gabrielle and I survived. Please don't worry over it."

"They did this to Gabrielle as well?" Cyrene's voice began to harden into anger. She was fully aware that her daughter was able to absorb incredible amounts of pain and still act almost normally .. the bard however did not have the warrior's formidable fortitude.

"No!" Xena told her firmly, realising that her mother's protective streak was rearing its head. - *Damn! If she gets angry she's capable of marching on Rome herself!* - A wry smile flickered across her face before she admitted, - *Hades ... what am I thinking? I'd pay good dinars to see Mother take a broom to Caesar's backside!* -

"Well just what did happen to Gabrielle, young lady?" demanded Cyrene, standing with her hands on her hips in a fashion that was very familiar to the warrior who had seen that stance on many occasions when she'd been scolded.

"Mother ..." began Xena. She swallowed a couple of times before she tried again, this was not a subject she really wanted to discuss, "She took a few stripes with a belt .. because of me."

Realising that Xena was exuding anguish "I'm sure that in that situation it could have been worse," Cyrene tried to soothe, knowing that she had just inadvertently raked over her offspring's insecurities.

"Yes it could," agreed the warrior coldly, "But the fact remains that if it wasn't for me she'd never have been in the position to get them. Guess I can add some more to the blood on these!" she said holding up her long fingered, calloused hands and looked at them with loathing.

"Xena! You stop that!" ordered the older woman in frustration, remembering all too well her unpredictable child's mood swings. She placed her own hands into her daughter's much larger ones and said, once she was sure that she had her attention, "Gabrielle is a grown woman. She's capable and well able to make her own decisions. From her story, you deliberately left her with the Amazons to protect her and she chose .. CHOSE, Xena, to come after you in the hope of warning you about Caesar's trap." She could see that the warrior had forced her closed mask onto her features and felt vexation rise in her.

- *How can I reach her .. make her understand that she can't take the blame for everything?* - she worried.

Before either woman could say anything more, Gabrielle came into the room, "Umm .. Xena," she said in something of an excited tone. "Salmoneus has just turned up and he wants to see you and Hercules and me."

"Salmoneus?" growled Xena, "What, from the depths of Tartarus, brought him here?"

"Salmoneus?" questioned Cyrene.

"A friend ... of sorts," explained the bard.

"Just don't buy anything from him," warned the dark warrior as she rose from the now tepid water that cascaded off of her long, toned body, catching the towel thrown by Gabrielle who had crossed to the table.

"Why would I buy something from him?" asked her mother getting confused.

The bard chuckled, "Salmoneus is a salesman .. it's just that his goods aren't always ... um ... reliable."

Xena stepped gracefully from the tub and wrapped the linen sheet around her body as she crossed to collect another with which to towel her damp locks, she suppressed a snigger at her friend's description of the salesman's products, "Mother, he once sold Talgamite weapons and belt buckles to a warlord .. who then lost a battle because it started raining leaving his soldiers with ruined weapons and trousers around their ankles .. Talmadeus was not a happy man!"

"I'll say," snorted Gabrielle, "We had to pull Salmoneus' butt out of the fire when Talmadeus wanted to spit-roast him!" Her chuckles faded as she remembered more details of that particular adventure. "That was the first time I thought I'd lost you, Xena," she said quietly.

The warrior gave her a meaningful look and said with quiet reassurance, "Don't go there, Gabrielle. The past is past .. we're both here and safe."

"Quite right," agreed Cyrene pointedly, while privately determined to get the full details of that particular story out of the bard before she left. Giving Xena a level look she added, "The past is just that .. past! And you can't live second guessing what happened there. Leave the past to the past and aim to move forward."

That little speech had the honey blonde wondering just what conversation the warrior and her mother had been having before she came into the room. - *There has to be a way to get that out of Cyrene before we leave*, - she considered, knowing full well that she had more chance of getting blood out of a stone than information on this out of Xena. "How long are you going to be," she asked the warrior failing to curb her natural impatience.

"Just let me get some clothes on, Gabrielle and I'll be right with you," came the assurance.

"Okay .. I'll tell them you're coming," answered the younger woman and headed back to the bar of the inn where their friends were gathered.

When the bard left, Cyrene turned to her daughter and cupped the younger woman's strong face in her lined and work scarred hands, "Little one," she said gently, "Please learn to forgive yourself ... you have grown so much away from that dark, evil person that you once were. You have much to offer a world that needs all the heroes it can get. Don't allow your guilt and remorse to overwhelm you. You are no longer the Destroyer of Nations. If you were you wouldn't have that collection of friends you have gathered .. you wouldn't have the friendship, companionship and love of that remarkable young woman that just left here ..." she drew a deep breath before adding, "... and you wouldn't be welcome here. In the last few years I've come to realise and rejoice that I still have a daughter .. a strong, capable and difficult woman that I can be proud of. Don't let your brooding chase her away ... please?"

Xena looked hesitantly down into the greyish blue eyes of her mother and felt at a loss to know what to say to her. Forgiving herself was not an option that she was comfortable with .. she had so much in her past to atone for it would be a long time before she considered easing up on herself. But the brooding over it, maybe that was something she could try to change.

"Mother .. I ..," she struggled, knowing sensitive words and talks had never been her forte, "I'll try," she conceded finally.

"That's all I can ask, little one," replied Cyrene, relief evident in her voice. Her hands slipped down to the silver collar and tears prickled as she stared at the Latin inscription 'RES FAMILIARES HABET GAIUS JULIUS CAESAR'

"Don't worry at it, Mother. Hercules and I will find a way to get them off," she gave a lopsided grin. "I have no intention of parading round Greece as a walking advertisement for him!"

"Oh Xena," the older woman shook her head and tried to smile.

"Hey .. c'mon! Let me get dressed, or Gabrielle will be back in here scolding me," the warrior told her, throwing the linen towel aside and shrugging into a fresh shift that her mother had provided.

"Your leathers needed cleaning, so I brought you in some trousers and a tunic of your brother's."

"What?" questioned the warrior with mock incredulity, "Are you trying to shock the good people of Amphipolis into insensibility?" she grinned. Than added in a gentle tone, "Thank you Mother."

"Anytime, little one," came the response, "And nothing you could do would shock Amphipolis any more!" was added with an impish smile.

The innkeeper laughed at the pretty colour that the blonde sidekick achieved and told him, "You'll have to come up with something more inventive than that to embarrass me, young man, but I wouldn't advise practising here." She stopped dead in her tracks and sniffed ostentatiously. "What is that dreadful smell?"

There was another round of chuckling as Salmoneus looked at the handsomely mature woman who had just entered and rather shamefacedly admitted, "That would be me, ma'am."

"And you would be Salmoneus? Is that correct?" Cyrene deduced.

"That's right, miss .. um .. madam .. er ma'am," the salesman tried to get a handle on who he was addressing, "Er .. are you the owner of this fine establishment?" he took a wild guess.

"Why yes I am," agreed the matronly woman affably.

"Ah a business woman," he said smoothly and was launching into a sales pitch with practised ease, "Have you ever thought of modernising your fine inn .. importing a floor show, dancing girls, bards, comedians ..." he was so engrossed in his growing ideas that he failed to notice the entrance of the dark warrior.

"Salmoneus! Leave my Mother alone .. she's quite happy with her inn the way it is."

The bearded salesman did a double take between the two very different women. "Your mother? This is YOUR mother?" he asked incredulously.

"Yup!" acknowledged Xena, "Why?"

Salmoneus swallowed and blurted out, "But she's so .. um I mean she's not .. ah, that is," he realised he was digging himself into a hole, "Er is the bath house free? Hmm?"

"Is that smell you?" the warrior asked, arching an eyebrow.

"Long story," he excused, "I'll tell you all about it after I have a bath. But first I have a delivery to make, courtesy of Aphrodite." He reached down by his feet and hauled up a heavy sack which he swung onto the bar with an audible 'THUMP'.

"What's in there?" asked Gabrielle.

Hercules opened the sack, reached in and pulled out a weighty looking hammer and an extremely sharp and effective looking bolster, "Looks like Hephestus has loaned us the tools to remove those collars that are gracing yours and Xena's necks," smiled the demi-god.

"The stable has an anvil," suggested Toris, "That would probably be the best surface to work on."

"Mother, could you keep everyone here?" requested the Warrior Princess. "I think Gabrielle and I would prefer it if we could have some privacy when Hercules tries to take these off again."

hoping that Mother will take in Fersan as an apprentice, and maybe Mattin to help in the kitchens too."

"Sounds like a good idea," agreed Hercules. "It's a big place for your Mother to manage .. I know she has Toris, but good help is always an asset to a business and those boys look able."

Silence descended on the trio once again. They were all reluctant to face another failure to remove the hated collars, and were all aware that if Hephestus' tools, coupled with Hercules' strength didn't achieve the results they hoped for, then they had nothing else that would.

Finally, the big man spoke, "You ready to give this a try?" he asked, looking from one woman to the other.

"Guess we're ready as we're ever gonna be," conceded Gabrielle nervously, "I mean .. what have we got to lose? If this doesn't work, we're just in the same position as we are in now," she gabbled on.

"Gabrielle ..." Xena tried to get a word in edgeways.

"I mean .. I'm sure that we can make them appear like jewellery, somehow."

"Gabrielle ..." the warrior tried again.

"It's not as if they are your normal type of slave collars .. they're much more dainty and the metal is really rather pretty."

"Gabrielle, do you"

If it wasn't for that inscription then it wouldn't be quite so bad."

"Do you ..."

"Maybe we can get someone to find a way to destroy the wording?" the bard rambled on.

Throwing her hands up in defeat, Xena knelt next to the anvil and swept her long raven hair out of the way, allowing Hercules to position the metal in the best position for him to hit the joint. Gabrielle had her back to them, talking aimlessly on about possible ways of disguising the metal.

"You ready?" asked the demi-god softly.

"Do it!" hissed the warrior decisively.

Hercules positioned the bolster into place and hefted the hammer in his hand. Narrowing his eyes onto the head of the bolster, he focused his strength and aim and struck down hard and fast, a metallic 'CLACK' singing out through the small forge room.

The bard whirled around and saw Xena kneeling by the anvil and Hercules beginning to straighten up, "Did it work?" she demanded. "Xena?" she questioned as the warrior remained unmoving. "Hercules ...?" she tried, taking a step forward.

Slowly the warrior straightened and put her hands to the metal around her throat .. felt the warmth of it, heated as it was by her body. Taking a firm grasp at each side of the collar Xena exerted her strength and wrenched the metal open, and away from her neck, leaving a red ring where it had chafed.

Breathing hard, the Warrior Princess stared at the hated object in her hand before flinging it into a scrap metal bin beside the forge, "Thank you Hercules," she said simply as she rose gracefully to her feet and motioned Gabrielle to take her place.

Grinning delightedly, the bard swiftly knelt beside the anvil flipping her golden hair aside so that the demi-god could position the collar and bolster. Again he swung the godly tool and brought it down with a thundering 'CLANG' splitting the sky metal slug that had been used to secure the joint. Xena stepped behind her partner and reached down to wrench the metal apart and toss it into the bin with the other one, glad that they were both finally free.

Gabrielle clambered to her feet and twisted around to give the warrior a bone crushing hug. She felt lighter than air and hadn't realised just how much that small piece of metal had weighed her down mentally.

"Hey!" Xena growled, although when the bard looked up she could see a lopsided grin on the warrior's face, "I might need my ribs later .. so if you're through with them ...?"

The honey blonde squeezed tightly once more before releasing her friend, "Sorry," she said with a smile. "It just feels so good to be rid of that thing."

"I know what you mean my bard," agreed the warrior, gently patting the smaller woman on her back. She turned to the son of Zeus who stood watching them with a fond look, "Thank you Hercules ... that .. getting rid of those means a lot .. to us both."

"No problem," he smiled. "You can call on me anytime you need someone to swing a hammer .. or a fist .. for you." Gabrielle threw herself at the gentle hero and hugged him tight to show her appreciation, "See what you mean about the ribs," he smirked.

"Yeah .. she doesn't know her own strength," teased Xena, ruffling her friend's hair. When Gabrielle released the demi-god, the warrior stepped forward herself and gave the son of Zeus a hug of her own before lifting her head and accepting a soft, but passion filled kiss from the man. When they finally broke the tender moment, she said, "Guess we should go and let everyone know that it worked, huh?"

"Sure thing," agreed the demi-god, with a tinge of regret in his tone. He knew that there would be no repeat of their afternoon of passion on Wave Dancer ... not for the foreseeable future at least. Xena had made that clear to him at the time.

Together, the trio headed back to the inn and the friends and family that eagerly awaited them.

Hate filled blue eyes watched as the two heroes and the bard left the stable. As soon as they were safely back in the inn, the figure detached itself from where it was hiding and, using the shadows slipped into the building and found it's way to the forge room.

Some quiet searching and rummaging eventually uncovered what the figure was looking for and a hand snaked out to secure the two discarded collars. Allowing itself a twisted, malicious smile, the figure tucked it's find into a belt pouch and slipped away from the building and Amphipolis with silent stealth.

Special thanks to Lasca for the Latin translation of 'Property of Gaius Julius Caesar'

Epilogue

Xena allowed a brief quirk of her lips as she watched Argo, and her Amazon escort, enter the stable yard. The four Amazons were mounted on good looking horseflesh, but the Warrior Princess had eyes only for her magnificent golden mare as she trotted along behind on a long lead rope. She breathed a satisfied sigh and stepped off of the kitchen porch eager to greet her beloved friend.

"What took you so long?" she growled to Karrellie, the nominal head of the group.

"Well gee, Xena," muttered the scout testily, "It's good to see you too." They had not had an easy journey and Argo had been uncooperative to say the least.

The warrior frowned fiercely at Karrellie having clearly heard her comment. She knew that the scout was not one of her greatest fans, but was staunchly loyal to Gabrielle .. that was the only thing that saved her from being dumped in the water trough.

"Xena," called a voice from the recently vacated kitchen stoop, "I hope you're not baiting my Amazons .. especially after they just did us a favour," warned the bard, although there was a smile plastered over her face. The Warrior Princess muttered something darkly before adding a grumpy, "Thanks," and then nodded towards the stable, "There's plenty of room and feed in there for your horses and you can get something to eat in the inn."

The scout grunted her acceptance of the offer as she slid out of the saddle motioning the others to follow suit. As Xena hurried past the Amazons towards her horse she ruffled Lasca's blonde hair and muttered, "Good to see ya Sprout," and offered an almost friendly grin at Jade before throwing her arms around the golden mare's neck and whispering, "Did ya miss me girl?"

The warhorse 'whuffled' her greeting and lipped at the warrior's shoulder affectionately, sharing an almost silent communion with the human she shared a bond of affection and loyalty. The horse was not happy that she had been left by her human for so long, but she could tell by Xena's demeanor that it hadn't been her idea .. and then there was a strange red mark around her friend's neck that hadn't been there when she left and seemed to speak of pain and suffering.

Gabrielle watched the reunion with a gentle smile. She knew that she held Xena's soul, but part of the warrior's heart would belong to her noble steed forever. She couldn't begrudge Argo her place in her dark friend's affections because she knew that the warhorse had been the Warrior Princess' only friend and confidant long before the bard had arrived to claim a part of the raven haired woman. What did occasionally irk her, was the fact that Xena would often spend more time talking to the horse than her human companion!

- *Still it's good to have Argo back*, - she readily conceded. The warrior had been on edge waiting for her horse. - *Of course that hasn't been helped by the attitude of Tomas and his cronies .. I really am surprised that Xena's avoided pounding them flat!* - she mused as she watched the Amazons lead their mounts into the stable to tend to their needs before their own.

The bard watched with growing amusement as her warrior friend debated with herself whether she could get away with a quick ride on her horse. The blonde knew that the warrior's restless nature had felt stilted for too long, what with her captivity, the enforced bed rest on the trip home and then the wait for Argo to be returned to her. She could almost see the craving for solitude and the peculiar freedom that she only achieved racing the wind in tandem with the warhorse.

"Why don't you take her for a run," she suggested innocently.

Xena shot her a wry look, "Am I that easy to read?" But her eyes twinkled happily as she patted her faithful steed's glossy neck.

"Only to me, my warrior," laughed Gabrielle gently, "I know you too well."

"Tell Mother I'll be back before the noon meal," assured Xena as she leapt readily into her saddle and urged the horse into an easy canter as soon as they cleared the gate leading to the meadow behind the inn.

The bard shook her head as she heard the triumphant whoop of joy come from the direction her friend had taken and could see in her mind's eye the pair easing into a gallop that she could only describe as a wild form of poetic motion, warrior and beast become one as they melded together in the pursuit of speed. - *I'll see if I can scrounge Argo an apple or two for when they get back .. she deserves them for bringing a sparkle to Xena's eyes.* -

It wasn't long before Karrellie and her three cohorts appeared from the stable and she motioned them over before leading them into the inn through the kitchen. Seeing Cyrene showing Mattin around the cupboards and larders, the bard stopped a moment and explained, "Xena and Argo have gone for a ride."

The innkeeper snorted, "To let off some of that pent-up restlessness, more like," she answered knowing her daughter all too well.

Gabrielle grinned, acknowledging the older woman's insight, "Yeah, well she said he'd be back for the noon meal .. that's only a couple of candelmarks away, so she shouldn't get into any trouble."

"That child of mine could find trouble in an empty room," admonished Cyrene but with a laugh in her voice that told the bard it was only partly serious.

"No arguments there," smiled the blonde.

"Of course, since she met a certain young bard from Potidaea she seems to find more trouble than ever!" laughed the older woman with a twinkle sparkling in her gray eyes.

"I'd argue the point with you," smirked Gabrielle, "but I have a feeling I'd lose that one," she chuckled along with Cyrene. "Any chance of some food for four hungry Amazons?" she asked, knowing the answer before she asked.

"Of course. Get them settled in the common room and I'll have Tryphena bring them some venison stew and fresh bread that came out of the oven not a candlemark ago," the innkeeper told her.

The bard turned around to see three of the four Amazons with eager expressions of anticipation on their faces. The fourth, and youngest member of the newly arrived group, Lasca, was gazing with undisguised interest at the new apprentice cook, Mattin. As Gabrielle looked between the two, she could see that the young warrior's intent gaze was being reciprocated by the boy, whose neck and ears turned a startling crimson colour as he became aware of the attention they were getting from the others in the room who had also turned to see what was interesting the bard.

With a cough, the boy scurried off to the walk in pantry and gained some respite from the looks that naturally turned to Lasca, who now found herself blushing deeply under the scrutiny of her elders.

"What?" she demanded guiltily.

"Just how old are you, Lasca?" questioned Gabrielle.

"Going on fifteen winters," returned the girl promptly, puffing out her chest and attempting to stand higher than her 5'6" frame.

"Uh huh," smirked the bard, throwing a look at Cyrene. The innkeeper inclined her head to acknowledge her understanding and as the honey blonde ushered her warriors out into the inn's common room she drew Lasca to one side and told her, "I have a job for you, young warrior .. one that I think you are really suited for"

With the warriors settled and Xena terrorising the local wildlife from horseback, the bard decided it was time to catch up with her thoughts over the last few days. When in Rome, she had taken to recording important happenings and her own impressions in a journal that Ephiny had acquired for her in one of the market places. She had been quite taken with the parchment bound between a cover of thick leather that could be secured with a small lock when she had finished with it.

On the ship she had had plenty of time to keep it up to date and suspected that when she came to make a story out of the events that had taken place, - *If I can ever turn this into a story*, - she amended in her mind, then the notes she had made in the journal would be an invaluable aid to her. However, since they had arrived in Amphipolis she had not found the time to spend to work on it ... she was determined to make that time now. Unlocking the clasp, the bard tucked the key away inside a small pouch which she returned to a pocket in her skirt, opened the journal and quickly scanned over the last things she had written. Uncapping her ink bottle that stood before her on the table and picking up her quill she began to write:

So much has happened since we arrived home in Amphipolis .. although many of the people here have made it clear that this can no longer be considered to be Xena's home. She is tolerated here .. nothing more, and even that just barely. Amphipolis has not yet forgiven its infamous daughter .. maybe it never will.

Trouble started almost as soon as the ship docked at the town's wharf. The militia had been called out to make certain that the Amazons were not going to cause any trouble, although what thirty ill trained men thought they would be able to do against one hundred fully armed and highly skilled warriors was anyone's guess! As it turned out it, was Toris who actually managed to diffuse the situation, although he did require a little muscle in the form of Xena and Hercules to back him up. We thought that would be the end of the matter, especially as the Amazons, or most of them were leaving immediately .. but Xena's past continues to come back and haunt her.

For the past eight days, while we have been waiting for Argo to be brought here, she has been forced to undergo a series of slights and provocations, all instigated by the new Headman, Tomas, and designed to force a situation where he will be able to either have her arrested or at least driven from the town. He's playing with fire and doesn't realise just how lucky he is not to have been stuffed head first into a water butt at the very least! On several occasions I have watched her fight the urge to crack heads. I'm proud of the fact that she resisted the impulse, but it has been at the cost of her temper which has been foul most of the time we have been here.

Xena has tried to keep busy and out of the townsfolk's way. She has spent a great deal of time hunting and fishing in her old childhood haunts and I don't think Cyrene's larder's have ever been so well stocked!

Our friends, who gathered so gallantly to come to our rescue have gradually left to go about their own business. The first to go was Ephiny and the majority of the Amazons. They took with them all of the girls that were rescued from slavery and certain death at Caesar's hands in retribution for Xena's escape. The girls will be allowed to find a true place within Themiscyran society and, over time they will discover whether they are more suited to a warrior's life or perhaps become artisans, cooks, farmers, or healers. Whatever they become at least they will be free. I can see little Kendra becoming a warrior and maybe Milly will become a healer. I think she has the ability if she can overcome her shyness.

Ephiny will have a lot of hard work to settle down Tarelle's faction. Her group was already making noises about protesting their treatment to the council when they returned to Nation land.

I don't envy Eph the problems that she has on that front, but she's a strong ruler and she should be able to keep the dissidents in line.

As for the Amazons who have remained in Amphipolis, well the two guards give no trouble .. they're merely here to protect Eponin and Sheraya, and I suspect to keep a wary eye on my safety, as if having the best warrior in Greece as a personal bodyguard wasn't enough!

Eponin is making fine progress in her recovery. That's an easy diagnosis to make and can be recognised by the prolonged shouting matches that keep erupting from her room. She's almost as bad a patient as Xena is .. and my warrior isn't helping the situation by winding Poni up every chance she gets. She spends a couple of candlemarks a day in with my Weapons Master, ostensibly playing chess with her .. but it's noticeable that after each visit that Eponin gets more fidgety and determined to be out of her bed before Sheraya thinks it's advisable. It's gotten so bad that Xena's been banned from the room for the last two days, and that's just made Ep's moodiness even worse!

I think that Sheraya intends to remain in Amphipolis until it's time to remove Joxer's splints and then maybe a day or two after to ensure that all is well with him. That will give her time to get Eponin started on a programme of light exercise before they head for the Nation, and also make sure that Joxer doesn't overdo things with those exercises that Hercules showed him ... it also means that Xena and I can leave here with guilt free consciences, knowing that Joxer is in capable hands. The hostility and relevant inactivity is really grating on her now and she's eager to be away from here.

In regard to Hercules, well he left three days ago along with Iolaus and Salmoneus. They offered their help to Nebula to crew 'Wave Dancer' down the coast to Pagasae to pick up a new bunch of potential pirates! She's managed to attract very few men from Amphipolis and those she has, have the look of rogues about them, so I suppose they'll make good pirates! Hercules will help keep them in line until they reach Pagasae where Nebula should be able to pick up some good seamen to bolster the scourings that she's bound to get as well.

Both Xena and I gave her our profound thanks for all that she had done to help us. She reminded us that she was getting paid for the trip in good gold, but as Xena said the payment didn't include all of the help she gave in Rome and that if she ever had need of a beat up ex-warlord all she had to do was yell. I think that kinda took the wind out of Nebula's sails for a heartbeat or two, but she recovered quickly and turned on that impressive smile of hers .. the one that makes me think of sharks .. and responded lightly, "Seems I'm collecting favours ... what with Hercules and Iolaus owing me and now the famed Warrior Princess."

Xena gave her a long hard look, but there was a glint in her eye too, and she told the pirate in that low growl of hers, "Yeah, well just don't make a big deal of it." Then she offered Nebula her arm in a warrior's clasp and I could see the mutual respect between the two of them as they looked each other in the eye.

Saying, "Goodbye," to Salmoneus is always a relief tinged with sadness. The man has the heart of ... well I don't know, but I'm sure if we opened him up it would look like a dinar! He also has

the bravery of a chicken, but despite that he's been there for us almost as often as we've had to haul him back from the brink of death. Despite his short comings, of which he has many, I have to admit to liking him ... I'm just glad we don't bump into him too often!

He shipped out with Nebula because she was heading to Pagasae. Apparently, that's where Aphrodite found him, just as he was about to make a fortune in his latest scheme to misappropriate dinars from the local populace. He'd told us all about the tricks that the goddess pulled on him to mess up his deal, but she'd promised to erase the memories from the locals, so Salmeoneus thought he might as well go back and fleece the suc ... um, sell to the customer base there.

Farewells to Hercules and Iolaus are another kettle of fish entirely. I wish I'd had more time to spend with Iolaus on this trip. I still feel a deep connection to him and I'm certain that he returns my affection. Sometimes I wonder if he's been my tree in the forest all along. I think that over the years we have been so afraid to test those waters that it has put a wall between us. The rocks in that wall are made of so many different things. He thinks he's too old for me, I worry about abandoning Xena .. again. He worries about not being there for Hercules. I'm concerned that my love life is truly jinxed. It's painful to admit but nearly everyone I fall for winds up dead! I'd hate to think that I was responsible for Iolaus' demise ... of course he has already died before so maybe that would let him escape my curse.

I can only hope that the fates will be kind to us and if our union is meant to be, then hopefully it will happen in good time. In the meantime I seem to be acquiring other would be suitors! I really should find a way to let Joxer know that although he's very dear to my heart, he'll never be more to me than a brother The trouble is that every time I try to tell him he misunderstands my intentions. Then again, he always manages to be there for us when we need him. As a warrior he may be incompetent, but he's loyal and would defend both Xena and I with his last breath, as he has proven that in the past and on this adventure. I don't want to hurt him ...I want him to have the chance to find love and happiness .. but he's never going to find that while he chases after me!

Then of course there's Toris. He's been very discreet, but I've seen the looks he gives me when he thinks he's unobserved. I have to admit he's handsome and he's changed a lot since I first met him when we stumbled across Cortese. If I ever decided to give up the life I lead with Xena, I could do worse than settling down here with Toris.

Hmmm ... well that just got me totally off track, didn't it? So where was I? Oh yeah, saying "Goodbye" to Iolaus and Hercules.

I said my farewells to Iolaus and had a really warm hug with him and exchanged a soft kiss that turned into something a little more passion filled ... I don't think I'll be writing that into a story any time soon, I'd like to keep some things private! Anyway, the kiss left me a little shaky, so being enfolded into the big guy's arms was kind of like finding a port in a storm! It's almost the safest place in the world .. well it's a toss up between his hugs and Xena's .. I mean, you can't get much safer than the two greatest heroes in Greece, now can you?

Xena and Iolaus are really funny together .. even after all this time. They tend to tread around each other like they're on eggshells or something. Xena has this guilt complex about what she did to Iolaus and he's still torn between infatuation (which most of the men in the known world suffer from) and feeling hurt by what she did. Yet despite this they have forged a friendship and like each other. Maybe one day everything else will be forgotten. Anyway, they took their leave of each other with a warrior's clasp, that was less tentative than those I've seen in the past.

However, the big guy enfolded Xena in a bear hug that seemed to go on forever and then they shared one of the most scorching kisses that I have ever been privileged to witness .. it made me go all weak at the knees again and so I was glad of Iolaus' steadying arm around my waist. Xena and Herc are an almost total match for each other, but I think that's the reason why they will never finally join. He's too used to being the strongest guy around and, although he seldom flaunts his power he's used to being listened to and obeyed. And Xena? Well .. she was the most feared warlord alive and commanded huge armies where her word was law. The power struggle in such a match would not be pretty.

So, anyway. Our friends left, leaving us with just Autolycus to keep us company while we waited for Argo. He's been strange ever since his falling out with Hercules on the ship. I thought he would have been one of the first to leave .. you know, temples to rob, the wealthy to pillage, but surprisingly he's still here. He's seldom actually with us .. just for meals, and occasionally he'll sit in and listen to the stories I tell in the evening to Cyrene's customers, so what he does during the day I don't know, although I'm beginning to have some suspicions.

As I've already noted, Xena's been really moody .. but once or twice I've come across her around the inn, with this really odd smile on her face and as soon as she saw me it would disappear and her hands would disappear behind her back. She's also started collecting flowers for her room! I mean this is Xena we're talking about. Asking her to stop and smell the flowers is like asking the sea's tide to come back later because it's gonna spoil the sandcastle I'm building! Besides, she's barely been out of the inn, other than to hunt or fish and she didn't bring any flowers back with her then! ... so

Guess that's another case of wait and see what happens.

Patroclese left yesterday with two of the boys. They were heading for the hospice that Hippocrates has set up at Pella. It will take them some time to walk there, but it gives the boys a chance to start learning from him and learn about being free. Three more of the boys will be taken in by Tyldus' centaurs. Ephiny sent word that he'd agreed to foster the boys and so they will wait until Eponin is fit to travel and go back with the Amazons.

Cyrene has taken in Fersan and Mattin, as Xena suspected she would. The boys seem to be settling into their new home and routine. They're both good boys, hard working and eager to learn. They'll get a chance to make a home and a life for themselves here .. something that just a few moons ago, neither would have thought possible.

Well that more or less brings me up to date. Argo and her Amazon escort have just arrived, which has made Xena happy and she's taken off on a reunion ride with Argo. I guess we'll be

mother, was shaping up to be one ... and she felt guilty about it! Spending time with Argo allowed her to think through her problems and get a rein on the rampant emotions that she wasn't equipped to deal with. The routine of brushing out the golden mare, with rhythmic, soothing strokes, worked wonders for her, as did being able to talk her concerns through to her faithful steed, who offered no opinions or arguments that could further confuse the warrior.

As she swung open the door to the stable, she stiffened almost imperceptibly .. aware that there were others within the confines of the building's walls. Heightened senses reached out to assess and prepare for danger but, without hesitation, the tall woman advanced into the shadow hung space and moved confidently down the line of stalls to where Argo waited. As she moved, she examined and eliminated all potential hiding places for the intruders, finally .. in the matter of mere heartbeats .. narrowing down the location to the hayloft.

A wry grin quirked her lips as she identified not one, but two personages up there. A soft rustle, a wisp of chaff falling, a nervous breath ... these things, subtle though they were, told the warrior that she had nothing to fear from her hidden companions. She was pretty certain who was hiding up there, and was content to leave them be ... at least for a while.

Reaching Argo's stall, she allowed the grin to broaden into a fully fledged, rare smile as she tenderly rubbed behind the mare's ears, getting a 'whuffle' of appreciation. Speaking softly enough for only the horse to hear she said, "They been up there long, girl?"

Argo snorted and stamped her hooves with dull thumps on the muffling straw of the stall, then bobbed her golden head up and down as if answering her mistress in the affirmative.

"That long, huh?" responded Xena. "Gabrielle's not going to like that ... they're young, but they're old enough to want to know and experiment ... we just have to make sure that things don't go too far .. right girl?"

The mare snorted her approval and lipped at the dark warrior's hair making soft, nickering noises before butting the tall woman with her head, inducing the required response when Xena scratched her long nose affectionately.

"Yeah, yeah ... I know. I missed you too," she told the horse giving her a pat on the neck before reaching for the curry comb and starting the familiar process of giving the warhorse a well deserved grooming. It was a task that she found soothing and gave her the time and peace to think.

She had almost finished her task, when a slight noise caught her attention, and she looked up sharply towards the door that led into the small forge room. As she watched the door slowly and silently opened giving her a glimpse of a familiar figure. Holding a finger to her lips, she pointed up at the hayloft and then held up two more fingers to indicate that she was not alone. The figure nodded once before it slipped through into the shadows.

Satisfied that the visitor was safely hidden, Xena turned her attention to the two youngsters, deciding that it was time that they were made aware that their presence was known and that they should get back to their respective tasks, before anyone came looking for them.

Silently placing the comb on the stall divider, the Warrior Princess moved out of Argo's box and sank into a crouch before using her powerful muscles to spring upward in a graceful flip that landed her soundlessly behind where the two youngsters had settled back into a nest of hay to enjoy some fevered kissing and inexpert groping.

"I think it's time you two got back to the inn," she said in a low purr as she leaned lazily against a support beam.

Lasca and Mattin jumped up as though scalded and turned to face the warrior who had successfully surprised them in their youthful assignation where they thought they had been clever enough and quiet enough to fool even the famed Warrior Princess!

When Xena had left, Gabrielle spent some time checking over their gear, making certain that they had everything ready for an early start in the morning. With everything stowed away, it was just a question of picking up some fresh supplies from the kitchen so that they'd have some food, just in case the impossible happened and Xena wasn't able to hunt them up something to eat.

"All packed?" inquired Cyrene as the bard sauntered into the inn's kitchen.

"Yeah .. I just need a few things if you can spare some .. emergency rations, you know in case of ..." she shrugged, "an emergency," and laughed.

Cyrene smiled, "I thought you would, and since Xena's packed my larders I have plenty to spare. Just what do you want?"

"Well mainly dried goods," Gabrielle told her noticing the quickly erased spark of unhappiness that gleamed for just a moment in the older woman's eyes. "Xena pretty much manages to catch what we need on a day to day basis. But there have been odd occasions when we've had to fall back on what we were carrying because of lack of game, or fish .. or just plain being too tired to hunt."

Moving across to the door to the cellar, Cyrene lit a heavy candle left there, for just this purpose, and led her daughter's friend down the steps into the store room. They rummaged through sacks and along shelves as Gabrielle picked out what she wanted, including a small wheel of cheese, some trail biscuits (that Cyrene kept in stock for travellers who needed stores for the road), a large joint of smoked ham that would be good for use in a thick soup with the pulses she had picked, or to eat with the trail biscuits, and finally the luxury of a small jar of honey and a bag of apples.

"That should keep us from starvation," grinned the bard, once they were back in the kitchen, seated at the table and drinking tea.

Why couldn't he have picked a good war story? - she moaned silently as she continued with the flowery passages. - Better yet, why didn't I just ignore Lasca when she pleaded with me to sit in here for a couple of candlemarks? -

"Hey! Can you read that bit again?" asked Joxer suddenly.

- Damn! - thought Jade, trying to hide her scowl. *- I thought he was asleep! -* "Which bit?" she asked reluctantly.

"The bit just before loss of manliness," grinned the injured man.

Jade cleared her throat and checked over the page for the relevant quote.

"For we are lovers of the beautiful,

Yet simple in our tastes,

And we cultivate the mind without loss of manliness."

"That's good you know? He really knows how to describe the inner feelings of a man .. of a warrior .. great warriors," Joxer babbled happily.

- Gods spare me! - Jade swore silently while plastering a false smile on her face. *- I wonder if I could get away with killing him a little bit? I could claim justifiable homicide. Justifiable because he's driving me absolutely crazy! -*

"Read some more, would ya?" asked the object of her homicidal fantasies.

Lifting the parchment, the Amazon glared at the patient over the top of the scroll before seeking out her place and continuing her recitation. *- If Lasca doesn't get her butt back here soon, I am personally gonna kick it all around the practice field just as soon as we get home! -*

She managed to read some more before she was interrupted once again, "Go over that bit once more," Joxer requested.

Jade couldn't stop her heavy sigh, but the wannabe took it as one of enthusiastic enjoyment for the writings. Gathering up her fraying temper, the Amazon re-read the piece.

"To a woman

Not to show more weakness than is natural to her sex

Is great glory.

And not to be talked of for good or evil

Among men."

"Kind of like Xena, you think?" he asked staring up at the ceiling and not seeing Jade clench her fists to stop herself from reaching for her belt knife.

- *Arrrrhhhhhh!* - she screamed in her mind. - *How much longer is Lasca going to be!* -

Joxer sighed contentedly. "Hey!" Joxer looked at her with a perplexed frown on his face.

"Um yeah?" answered the Amazon trying to keep the annoyance from her tone.

"There's a scroll over there of love poems written by some Roman guy called Virgil ... Greek translations of course. Wanna read some of them?" he grinned.

- *No!* - she yelled silently as she pushed a gritted smile onto her glowering features. - *How about I ram these scrolls where the sun don't shine, buster? I'm a warrior not a nursemaid!* - she demanded mentally, although what she actually said was, "If you want."

"Hey?" he said again as she stood to collect the required scroll.

Jade turned and said through clenched teeth, "Yes?"

"If you'd rather stick with the scroll ya got, I don't mind .. you seemed to be enjoying it, and it was kind of selfish of me to want to change," he apologised.

Jade counted slowly to ten before daring to answer her patient, "Whatever you want, Joxer .. just let me know." He smiled, a big goofy grin that always appeared so boyish, "Well in that case the Virgil, I think ... unless," he stopped short as the door opened, both acts which saved him from the likelihood of more broken bones! "Oh hiya, Gabby ... it's good to seeya!"

"Joxer, I was only in here a few candlemarks ago," the bard told him patiently looking from him to his Amazon attendant, and scowling when she realised it was Jade there and not Lasca. "I thought I gave instructions for Lasca to be attending to Joxer," she said keeping her annoyance in check by dint of willpower.

"Um yeah," agreed Jade wondering just what she'd got into now. "She asked me to sit in for her for a few candlemarks ... no biggie."

"Did she happen to mention that I told her specifically that she was to remain within this room, or Eponin's, until you all left for Themiscyra? Except for mealtimes, of course."

Jade shifted uncomfortably under the firm, green eyed stare of her queen. - *Lasca .. I'm gonna get you for this!* - she promised herself. "Um .. actually .. no, she didn't."

"I see," said the bard, a touch of anger colouring her tone. She softened her voice a little as she said to the Amazon, "Would you mind staying here just a little longer, Jade? I need to find Lasca

trot off out of the yard, he had something far more important on his mind and eagerly headed for the stable where he hoped to find his Amazon Warrior.

The two met inside the doors and suddenly became shy in each other's company. They offered each other nervous smiles and felt awkward as their tongues seemed to cleave to the rooves of their mouths and they struggled with something .. anything, to say to each other.

"Um ... hi," Mattin finally got out, as he dragged the toe of his boot across the dirt floor of the building.

"H .. hi," Lasca almost squeaked in return. Then grasping her warrior courage she said in a rush, "I'mgladyoucame."

He grinned at her, "Me too." He leaned forward to kiss her, but she turned her head at the last moment so they ended up banging foreheads with a painful crunch.

"OW!" they said in unison before bursting into uncertain giggles.

"Can we try that again?" asked Mattin, not looking the Amazon in the eye, fearful of rejection.

"I'm willing if you are," she said softly as she leaned forward, her eyes drifting closed as she waited for his lips to meet hers.

Wiping sweaty hands on his tunic, the boy licked his suddenly dry lips and then, screwing his courage to the sticking place, he leaned forward to press his lips to hers.

The silky feel of her soft skin sent a startling buzz through his body, his mouth opened in a silent "Oh!" and a warm tongue invaded bringing with it a taste of spices and femininity that he was sure he wanted more of.

Lasca's hands reached up to his head as the kiss deepened and Mattin counter attacked pushing his questing tongue into her mouth, running it along her teeth, greedily exploring as his body reacted with an untutored naturalness and his hands began to wander across her body.

Gasping for breath, the Amazon broke the kiss and stepped away from the young man. Her eyes were smoky and her voice husky as she gasped, "Not here."

Confused and desperate to renew contact, Mattin stammered, "Wha .. um ... huh?"

"Not here," repeated Lasca firmly, if a little breathlessly. Then she took pity on him and pointed to the hayloft, "Up there," she told him.

"Up there?" he asked, struggling to unscramble his brain which seemed to have disconnected during that kiss.

"Uh huh," agreed the Amazon, grabbing his hand and pulling him towards the ladder. "No one will see us should they come into the stable then."

"Oh gods," the boy mumbled as he followed the insistent tug of his hand.

Once into the hayloft the pair made a nest in the hay and after several moments of hesitation, they resumed their investigation of each other's mouths, finding that their hands soon joined in the exploration of the other's body and each felt flushed with fevered fumbling.

It can remain uncertain as to just how far their youthful lusts would have taken them, if it hadn't been for the creak of the stable door. It was enough to interrupt their frantic groping and a nervous peep over the edge of the loft was enough to quiet their raging passions. Being caught by the Warrior Princess was the last thing they wanted.

Flushed from desire, they were forced to curb their raging hormones, knowing that Xena's legendary hearing would be sure to pick up even the softest of their groans. It was frustrating, but as their senses cooled they were able to think logically and, their heads told them it was for the best. They waited until they could hear Xena start grooming her horse then, cautiously settled back in each other's arms, content with gentle kisses and the comfort of each other's embrace.

As time passed they began to feel a little anxious. It was quite likely that someone would miss them at some point and the longer they remained in the stable, the more certain that likelihood became. Yet while Xena remained brushing Argo, there was no way they could leave undetected.

It was something of a relief, as well as a shock when the warrior suddenly appeared behind them and said in that low dangerous voice of hers, "I think it's time you two got back to the inn."

The pair of them shot to their feet in surprised confusion, wondering how in Tartarus, she'd known they were there. They gaped at her not knowing what to do or say, and saw her cock her head to one side as if listening to something that only she could hear.

"I'd say that you're both about to get a serious lecture from my bard. I'd get out of here," she said whilst plucking some loose hay from their hair, "before she finds you in incriminating circumstances." They looked at her like startled chickens, totally unsure of what they should do. "Move!" she growled and was rewarded with the sight of the pair of them scrambling down the ladder and out of the stable.

Glancing out of the hayloft door, she saw Gabrielle standing by the well in the yard, pinning Fersan against the wall with a glare. The boy was holding a package out defensively and was grateful when the bard looked away from him as she saw Mattin and Lasca come scuttling out of the stable like the hounds of Hades were after them.

Xena chuckled as she heard her friend order all three youths into the kitchen, obviously primed and ready to give them a ringing lecture about duty, responsibility and control. She shook her head at the luckless trio, but was glad that they were going to keep her bardic friend occupied for a while.

"Kids, huh?" said a voice from behind her.

She knew he was there. She'd tracked the sounds of his stealthy movements as he'd swung easily into the hayloft before the kids in question were halfway down the ladder. She'd followed his movements across the loft, not with her hearing, for he made no sound, but her other senses had followed him and she could have pinpointed his exact location at any given time since he entered the building.

Smoothing the smile from her face, she turned slowly, almost seductively, to find him standing just inches from her, as she had known he would be. "We were all kids once," she told him softly, gently, her demeanour far from that of the hard, deadly, ice warrior of legend.

"No," he breathed .. his voice almost a whisper as he allowed the unique scent that was her to infuse his thoughts and wrap around his desire. "I believe you're all woman and always have been."

She was tempted to laugh at him, but there was a vulnerability in his brown eyes that told her that to do so would have been a mistake. Instead she smiled a little hesitantly and shook her head and told him seriously, "You're wrong ... I'm just the same as everyone else. I was born, I stumbled through childhood and into adulthood, just like those two were doing. I've made terrible mistakes and done worse acts, but have been lucky enough to get a second chance at life. I'm not a fantasy woman, Autolycus. My life has been real, hard and bloody, so look somewhere else if you're looking for the perfect woman."

Brown eyes stared into blue as he searched for the words to tell her what was in his heart. "Xena, I have spent almost my entire lifetime in pursuit of the most beautiful and perfect." He laid a finger on her lips to stop her from speaking. "I have looted temples, stolen from gods, kings and the wealthy not only for the sake of money .. well that had a lot to do with it," he admitted honestly due to the look she gave him, "but also because I wanted to own this so called beauty and perfection ... and you know what?" he asked, continuing when she shook her head, "I've never found perfection. Everything, gem, statue, work of art .. everything always has some flaw ... and I think that's true of people too. I gave up looking for perfection a long while ago. What matters to me now, when I hold something beautiful is simply that it is beautiful .. flaws and all ... like you are beautiful."

"Autolycus ..." she started to protest.

"No," he stopped her. "Let me finish ... I've been trying to say this for a long time .. almost since we first met, even if you did sucker me," he grinned wryly.

"Autol"

"Hear me out," he pleaded and waited for her nod of agreement before continuing. "I love you Xena ... I think I always have," he said softly. "Even before we met, it was like I was waiting for the right woman to come into my life. You're that woman. I know that I'm no Hercules .. or even a Draco or Caesar." He saw her grimace at the last name. "I'm a thief ... the best there is," he said with no false modesty, "probably not a real match for a Warrior Princess. But I know I could

time they took with each other the previous afternoon had made sure that the worries and concerns had been addressed, and Xena's promise to return home as often as she could had allayed many of Cyrene's fears.

It was hard for Toris to see his sister, and the woman he was attracted to, leave while he sank back into the obscurity of being a small town innkeeper. Xena's quiet words, praising his help and bravery on their behalf had gone a long way to healing old wounds, and it had been good to realise that his strong, many skilled sister had appreciated his efforts.

Gabrielle had also been fulsome with her praise and had even gifted the tall innkeeper's son with a gentle kiss that had made him tingle from the inside out. He sighed inwardly and wished that he had the courage to tell the bard exactly how he felt about her But he could be patient .. there would be time in the future, he hoped. Finally Xena appeared. Tight hugs were shared as they made their final farewells and the warrior brushed away a tear as it fell down her mother's cheek. "Don't cry .. we'll be back before you know it," she promised.

"I know, little one," sniffed the innkeeper. "Forgive me."

The raven haired woman quirked that lopsided grin of hers and said quietly, "There's nothing to forgive." She threw a glance at Toris. "Take care of him, don't let him get into any trouble."

"You just make sure you keep clear of Romans, brat!" he responded to her jibe.

She laughed and turned to the bard, "Time to go Gabrielle," she smiled, looking forward to the comfortable solitude of just the two of them .. although part of her yearned to return to a thief's embrace.

They waved to Cyrene and Toris and headed out of town, turning their backs to the rising sun and headed west into the mountains. The two women walking side by side with the great warhorse trailing behind them.

"Where are we heading?"

"I thought we could make our way down to Potidaea. Your parents must have heard the rumours about us by now .. I thought you might want to put their minds at rest."

"Thank you," smiled the bard. "I'd like to look in on an old friend while we're there. Before this thing with Caesar came up, her parents sent me a letter saying they were worried about her." "Oh yeah?" returned the warrior, "What's her name."

"Seraphin."

The End

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