

~ Conqueror and Amazon ~

by romansilence

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Disclaimer 3: This is a work of alternative fiction, i.e. subtext is maintext, based on the notion that there's more going on between Xena and Gabrielle than a chaste and hands off friendship. So, there are rather graphic scenes of consensual sex between adult females. There also are some elements of BDSM as well as allusions to non-consensual sex, sexual violence, and child abuse (none of them graphic). If this is offending to you: Go away, now! If you're under age: Go away! (and come back later!, besides there are a lot of great general stories on the web.). If it's illegal in your part of the world: Move!

Disclaimer 4: Timeline, well, technically speaking there is none, but there are references to adventures and background stories happening during the first four seasons of the show. It's basically a Xena: The Conqueror-story, but it has to do next to nothing with the Conqueror depicted in Hercules: Armageddon Now I & II. I really like the Big Guy, he's cute but I always felt that he gets way too much credit in Xena changing her warlord ways. So I began to play around with Xena's past and past conquests and suddenly had to deal with a Conqueror, weary of ruling and on her own way to redemption.

Disclaimer 5: This is my first attempt at fan fiction and my first story written in English, so please be kind. A special thanks goes to Tiara, my attentive beta; I would have been lost without her.

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Conqueror and Amazon: Towards a New Life Part I

By romansilence

Chapter One: On the road

A banging sound roused her from bed in the middle of a moonless night. Still half asleep, she reached for her clothes and shoes, and fastened the sturdy copper plaited leather belt around her waist. When the middle-aged woman finally answered the harsh knocking on her back door and opened it cautiously, two soldiers of the First Order rushed in and quickly closed the door.

Rude behaviour was something she expected from the soldiers of the Conqueror, but never before had she been molested in her own home, her house was officially off limits - obviously 'was'.

A thousand equally rude comments flashed through her mind, but the instant she opened her mouth one of them handed her a scroll, firmly knotted with a leather thong adorned with the seal of the Conqueror.

"What does she want this time? It's nearer to dawn than dusk, and there's no one left she can threaten me with. It better be worth the lack of sleep." The irritated woman snapped in an attempt to hide her curiosity and fear.

"The Conqueror is dead, venerable Cyrene. We were ordered to see to your safety. Right this instant the council is in meeting to decide upon your fate."

"Dead? That's impossible, there was no war and no single fighter would even stand a shadow of a chance against her fighting skills. This can't be true." Cyrene said disbelievingly.

"Please open the scroll; it will answer some of your questions. But hurry, we probably don't have more than two candlemarks before the order is given to kill you, all other relatives, friends, and servants who may still be loyal to her."

The woman took a small knife out of her belt, severed the leather thong and opened the scroll. It said:

Mother!

These are two of my most trusted soldiers, Theodorus and Palemon. They saved my life more than once and now they are responsible for yours.

The governing council just has received my letter of resignation. The government will remain stable, and though the members of the council don't trust each other, they are not stupid. They all cherish their wealth far too much to risk a civil war by fighting each other openly.

I don't know if they decide to tell the truth or if they find it easier to proclaim my death, and I really don't care. Whatever they decide to do, their first step will be to eliminate everyone too closely connected with me. That's why you need to leave the city as soon as possible.

Some time ago, I prepared two secure harbours for you, out of reach of my enemies: one in Chin at the imperial palace, one in Albion with the clan of Boadicea. Palemon has all the details.

Palemon and Theodorus are now under your orders, they are experienced fighters and leaders. You're the one in charge, but please follow their advice, trust them!

The Conqueror will never return but your daughter still loves you.

Xena of Amphipolis

"You know the content of this letter?" Both men nodded. "So my first order is, explain! What happened?" She said, impatient irritation colouring her voice.

"I will, but not now. It's a rather long story, and I can't say I fully understand the General. My priority is to get you out of town and to safety." Palemon answered. He stood just short of six feet, broad shouldered and muscular, but his discomfort was plainly visible. There was something in the voice of this woman that clearly reminded him of the one who is not to be disobeyed.

There was a long moment of silence. Cyrene's thoughts were running a mile a minute. Finally she answered. "I understand. Go to the kitchen and grab some provisions, I'll get a travel gear together."

Both men were visibly relieved. They had already envisioned carrying the woman out of town squirming and bound, against her will, and neither of them were thrilled at the thought of facing the wrath of their general at such an act.

Initially Cyrene had hated the house she was forced to live in for the last two and a half years, but now she felt a twinge of regret abandoning it. Half a candelmark later, everything was ready. Over the years, she had been forced to experience too many manipulations and traps by the Conqueror. The letter shouldn't have convinced her and wouldn't have, except for the last two lines:

Her daughter was the Conqueror, it simply made no sense, and for almost ten years, the woman she had born hadn't mentioned her place of birth. The Conqueror of all Greece and Rome was ashamed of being nothing but a mere village girl, she'd always presumed. This time, however, she was surprised to find herself yet again longing to trust.

The three guards at the great front gate of Corinth simply nodded when they passed by some three candelmarks before dawn. In her peripheral vision, Cyrene could see that they openly followed her and her protectors to a small house just outside of the gates where some horses were awaiting them. After helping her to mount one of them, they all rode in silence in the direction of the setting sun for about five candelmarks.

Cyrene knew she should be frightened or at least feel uncomfortable surrounded by these fighters, instead there was a feeling of relief and security she couldn't explain. She also knew she should mourn the death of her daughter or rejoice the death of the Conqueror, one of her greatest enemies, but she couldn't. Her heart never would accept the death of Xena, just like she never managed to hate her for becoming the Conqueror. And at the time, she really had tried to hate her, but the ruthless warlord she hated and the little girl she had raised, cherished, cared for, and protected, were never the same person in her mind. The current situation did nothing to diminish the confusion she always experienced when trying to make sense of the conflicting emotions she harboured towards her daughter.

When they finally stopped, Cyrene was exhausted and sore from the long ride. The five men she started with and the eight others they had met along the way began to make camp and set sentinels in the parameter. Soon there was a fire going and some rabbits roasting. Her body longed for sleep but her mind needed answers.

"What's next, Commanders Theodorus and Palemon?"

"Before we came to gather you, venerable Cyrene, we alerted the other members of the First Order and some of her other loyal soldiers and servants to the change in government. We were the Conquerors personnel guards, the General is concerned about our safety too; some of us have been with her almost since the beginning. We will meet with most of the men here during the day. This place can be easily defended because there's only one way in visible, and it can be evacuated as easily due to a secret passageway. When everyone's arrived we will divide forces, a few of us will escort the civilians, and the bulk of our forces will see to your safety. Then it's up to you to decide. We will escort you to Chin or to Albion, and then we will try to find new lives for ourselves." Palemon replied.

"I hope you understand that I cannot make any decisions about my future without knowing what really happened."

"The General's orders were unambiguous. She said, 'Once you're out of town and safe enough, my mother is the one in charge. She is my voice and my hand. Follow her orders.' So, I will tell you, venerable Cyrene."

"Stop calling me 'venerable', it's Cyrene, just Cyrene. By the way, that's an order. The way you talk about your 'General'.... Xena is still alive, isn't she?"

"The Conqueror is dead, but Xena is alive."

A sigh of relieve escaped the silver haired woman. "But how? Why?"

"The official report will say that the Conqueror was killed by a wild boar while hunting alone - at least that's what our spy in the council's chamber said, but Xena now is living in an Amazon village at our north-eastern border."

"But she can't just stop being the Conqueror; that's not possible."

"But that's what she did, Cyrene. I don't understand all her reasons, but I know that she didn't like being the Conqueror. She's a fighter, a warrior from head to toe and an inspired general, but she hated the court and she hated to rule. In the beginning, it was necessary. She needed Greece as a stronghold; the army needed the provisions and the reinforcements to fight the Persians and the Romans, to fight Caesar and his legions of slavers. During the last year and a half, she tried to take back some of the bureaucratic structures and administration levels, but it didn't work out. I'm sure she often was frustrated and lonely. She never talked about it, but you could feel it

during our sparring sessions. Some days there was so much dark energy around her; no one dared coming near her. On these days, more than once, she easily defeated three or four scores of her best soldiers in less than a candlemark, sending most of them to the healers. And there were days she obviously didn't have the slightest interest in fighting, as if it just wasn't worth the effort." The man fell silent, seemingly losing his gaze in the flames of the fireplace.

"Please continue; why is she staying with the Amazons? They have every reason to hate her as far as I know."

"Theodorus, my friend, come here. Make sure I don't miss out on any details." Like Palemon Theodorus was about six feet tall but his slim waist, oval face and handsome features let him appear slightly taller than his companion. He seated himself on a log near the fireplace, half an arm's length away from his friend. Then Palemon continued.

"About two moons ago the General received an urgent message from one of the frontier posts. It said that a group of Amazon warriors attacked and killed half of the men. The council voted for a punishment operation against the Amazons. To teach them respect, they said, but in reality, they just wanted to wipe out the whole tribe - and add the destruction of the Centaur village nearby to the list of the Conquerors victories. All over the last year," Palemon continued after having received a signal from Theodorus, "the palace was bustling with rumours about the Conqueror's need to expand her influence, to occupy Gaul, and Albion, and Persia, and Egypt, and even Chin.

"I'm pretty sure you heard these. But there was nothing to gain but personal pride and glory in going to war with any of them, so our General told the council more than once. Greece was secure, and that's all that was ever of any interest to her. No, there was a time she definitely wanted more but it isn't true any longer. Anyway, the General just listened. And when they were about to issue gathering orders to the troops, she stood and said, 'No!' They looked at her as if she hadn't been there all the time. They even were bold enough to demand an explanation. During the last moons, she hardly interfered with the government, so they were more than surprised. She said, 'Queen Melosa knows that she doesn't stand a chance against my army. She's not a fool. There has to be something else going on. There will be no military intervention! The peace treaty with the Amazons will be honoured by me and my army! We will just have to find out the real reasons behind these attacks. The sitting is terminated for today!' She turned and left the room. The next day she ordered one score of the First Order to escort Gabrielle and herself to the north-eastern border."

"Stop, Commander. Gabrielle, who is Gabrielle, her body slave?"

"The general never had a slave and never will need one. You - of all people - should know that, she even tried to abolish slavery but at the time the army needed the support of the wealthy merchants, so her plans didn't work out." The tall soldier tried unsuccessfully to hide his annoyance.

"Who is Gabrielle then?"

"Gabrielle... Two seasons ago, at the beginning of winter..."

The Conqueror and four members of her First Order were on their way to Kyros, a former fishing village, which had lately developed into a large scale trading port, where she was to meet with representatives of the merchants' league. She knew there would be an endless flow of complaints and lamentations about taxes, security, trading regulations, currency exchange, and the like to sit through. She never had been a person to patiently listen to what she considered nothing other than selfish rambling and petty bickering. For the life of her, she couldn't understand why it was so important that she personally listened to all that boring stuff instead of the council members who in the end would have to deal with it. So Xena was rather reluctant to fulfill this particular duty. However, having already postponed it twice she had run out of good excuses to do it a third time.

So, she wasn't in the best of moods when she and her entourage started out. The week's ride southeast of Corinth allowed her to relax some and soon she found herself enjoying the ride and the company of her soldiers.

They spent the first three nights outdoor, hunting for dinner, laughing and remembering some of their campaigns, and sleeping on the ground curled up in their bedrolls. For the first time in moons, she really felt free. On the fourth day about a candlemark before dusk, they passed a middle-sized village and Xena decided on booking rooms at the local inn. The bedrooms on the first floor were small but clean, there was a bathing tube with steaming water, and she really was quite comfortable with her journey.

The central room of the inn held about fifteen small tables and it was dimly lit with only two torches. The evening crowd filled the room, the usual mixture of merchants, town's people, some mercenaries, young folk, and elders. Her men already had taken over one of the tables in the back facing the door, thus allowing her to have the whole room in view. The uniforms of the First Order were recognised and Xena noted the furtive glances cast at her every once in a while. As always, when travelling only with a small retinue she also had put on the famous blue, silver, and black leathers instead of her trademark brass armour, and sported the insignia of a captain. No one would have dared to bother the Conqueror but it seemed easier this way.

The food was good, and two mugs of ale made her lower her guard slightly despite the growing noises of the crowd. Palemon was talking about a new training schedule he planned on establishing with the Palace Guards. His ideas were sound and certainly would work out nicely. She was just about to voice her approval when her keen hearing picked up on the conversation at the neighbouring table.

"I got twelve; already well broken in, well, make it eleven. One of them is nothin' but trouble, but I had to take her in to get all the others. Have to get rid of her somehow but not here. They say these damned laws are really enforced here. Really don't know why this goddamned bitch has to put her nose in other people's business."

A wave of anger flashed through Xena and her body went rigid with tension. She knew they were talking about slaves; so she made a mental note to alert the reeve and the militia to deal with these slavers before continuing to Kyros, but there was something in the voice or the words of the man to keep her listening.

A second voice was heard. "Easy there, watch your big mouth, will ya! There's some of her pet soldiers over there, saw them comin' in."

"Yeah, yeah, don't be such a chicken shit. Let's go back to business. Take a look at them; some of the gals do have remarkable skills in the horizontal department, you know. The recalcitrant one even knows how to read and write but I doubt it's worth the effort to beat her into submission. She really has an acid tongue that one."

"So cut it off, spares a lot of screaming, too. It doesn't pay spending too much time on these stupid troublemakers, but on the other hand there's always a buyer thrilled by the challenge ahead."

Xena's knuckles went white with strain while she tried not to explode with pent-up anger. Slavers always did this to her mind set, but this time it was more personal, unexpectedly hitting home.

"Sounds like a good idea. Are you up to a short inspection? T'morrow in the afternoon there also will be two other buyers, now you would have the first pick. They're in a barn just outside the town."

"No, not now. First thing in the morning though. Never buy merchandise by torchlight, that's the one and only thing my father was ever right about."

Her first instinct was to run and search every barn in town. The rage boiling in her veins told her to beat the crap out of these slavers, and her guts were telling her that not only were the slaves subject to severe ill-treatment but also that they were probably illegally enslaved in the first place. To become a slave one had to be a criminal or a prisoner of war, no exceptions made. She would have preferred to abolish slavery in all aspects but this was as far as she was able to push the point with the merchants' league. Anyway, she had to be sure before springing into action. Ill-treatment was enough to financially harm the man considerably but owning and dealing in illegal slaves would put him completely out of business. So she had to bide her time, and she hated waiting.

In consideration of her obligations in Kyros, it would be more sensible to alert the local authorities but Xena convinced herself that she first had to make sure that they weren't in league with the slaver. Only reluctantly, she admitted to herself that there also was something else fuelling her decision. From the very first moment the man had mentioned the trouble making slave the tall warrior knew without the shadow of a doubt that she had to get to her, that she had to help her, personally. It was as if she were irresistibly drawn to this unknown woman beyond rational thought and reason. When not fighting Xena usually didn't act on instinct alone, this time, however, she simply had to follow her gut feeling.

After a night engaging in solitary sword drills to get rid of the ever growing tension crushing her heart, she followed the two men to their destination, her own soldiers in tow. They disappeared into an old but solid barn at the outskirts of town. It stood isolated on top of a hillock and was heavily guarded by at least ten men, so it would be very difficult to approach it undetected. Calling an attack or even raising suspicions would only get the slaves killed to destroy the only evidence.

She crept away and found her way to the town's reeve who at first was not at all pleased to be disturbed at his leisurely breakfast, especially by mere soldiers, First Order or no First Order. But when the elderly, over-fed man found a strong hand threatening to crush his windpipe he all of a sudden morphed into an incarnation of helpfulness.

The barn had been sold to a foreign merchant about two seasons ago that had wanted to use it as interim storage area. There never had been any problems with the merchant or his men. The reeve insisted on knowing nothing about slaves in his town, he even had the guts to point out that he needed ample evidence before legally pursuing the barn owner. Xena longed to simply knock him into next week but a part of her knew that he was right. One of her most important policies was to possibly not interfere with the local governments, regardless of how she loathed to, and how much easier it would be to solve the problems at the point of her sword.

About one candlemark later, the Conqueror of Greece and Rome was dressed in a black skirt descending almost to her ankles with a crimson bodice accentuating her hips and breasts. Three of her men and all of the town's militia were positioned in the forest nearby awaiting her signal, and Xena confidently approached the mercenaries at the front door. She claimed being in search of new body slaves for her critical and demanding husband. The piercing blue eyes of the raven-haired woman didn't rouse any suspicions and she was easily admitted, followed by Palemon who acted as her bodyguard and the reeve's son who would bear witness of the condition the slaves were in. The young man had only recently returned from three years of apprentice ship in Athens and thus wasn't known to the slaver.

They were greeted by the man from the inn, and Xena arrogantly listed the qualities 'her husband' requested his future slaves to possess in abundance. The slaver however was cautious, accustomed to doing his business with other petty slavers like the one at the inn who didn't find the merchandise to his liking or by testimonial.

"Good work earns you a good reputation, man. And I really don't like my household equipped with foreign scum."

The man was more than a head shorter than Xena, the gold in his mouth gleaming in the torch light whenever he opened it, his eyes impudently locked at her chest, her anger rising with every heartbeat. "I don't have the patience dealing with your fears, little man. Obviously, this reputation of yours isn't worth a dinar. Let's go."

She turned and half a heartbeat later heard a sound halfway between a squeak and a pain filled shout. The knowing smile on her face changed in an expression of utmost boredom as she turned again. The slaver was on his knees, his right hand being painfully twisted by Palemon.

"Never again! No one tries to touch my mistress without her permission, you worthless pigeon's poop. " Palemon sneered at the slaver who writhe in pain under his crushing hold.

"He's not worth the effort, get him on his feet. We'll go to Athens for the merchandise."

"No, please wait. I'm sure..." Three of his guards burst through the gate and two others emerged from the hayloft. "No, it's all right, just a misunderstanding. Go back to your duties. I apologize, ma'am. Please reconsider your decision. It's a long way to Athens and I have all you need. My stock is small but it's good quality, and you won't run into any language barriers. They're all young, skilled, and eager to serve. Just take a look at 'em." He nervously blurted out.

"We'll give it a try, little man. As I already said, three body slaves, fully trained, and a scribe able to fill-in as a body slave. No barbarians."

"They're all good stock..." The slaver began to babble, motioning her to the back part of the barn. Xena could almost see the greedy glint of dinars in his eyes as he detailed the qualities of his merchandise.

The meagre light of a single torch only produced some sort of twilight but it showed more than enough to get him arrested for ill-treatment. Some of his 'slaves' were barely more than kids, their features clearly testifying their Grecian heritage. Xena almost could smell their fear but there was more. It was the familiar scent of blood that led her to the darkest corner of the barn. On a pile of dirty hay was... someone curled up in a ball.

"Oh, you already found her. She will be the perfect scribe and her experiences as body slave are ample. But she has to be warmed up to her new master. She needs a firm hand and whipping on a regular basis to keep her in line. As you see she's well acquainted -..."

In the blink of an eye Xena's right fist connected with his nose, there was the distinctive sound of bones breaking and he slumped on the floor. She and Palemon took a defensive position in front of the slaves, and the Conqueror let loose her battle cry. The militia and her men had to fight their way in while the defenders took out four guards foolish enough to approach them. The mercenaries were quickly subdued, and Xena somehow managed to keep a lid on her temper long enough to take primary care of the slaves.

All of them were obviously undernourished and displayed different kinds of lash marks, and only three of them were strong enough to walk on their own two feet unassisted. The militia quickly transported them to the local healer and Xena sent Theodorus to keep an eye on the badly injured scribe, and then started to literally tear the barn to pieces.

"Never before had I seen her this mad." Palemon continued. "Yes, the General has a rather volatile temper, and it doesn't pay to get on her wrong side but she never loses control. She sometimes make believe she does but it's nothing but a game to get her what she wants. In the middle of a fight when battle lust incites her to do things nothing short of impossible, her eyes are gleaming with energy, dark and raw. I saw her eyes when she re-entered the barn. They were almost black but there was nothing human in them, only an aimless hatred and most of all there was desperation. I heard the sound of a sword thumping against wood. She was shouting. When she finally reappeared, two candlemarks later, her dress was torn but her eyes were once again familiar. We went to the inn where she changed into her uniform and burned the dress. I expected her to question the prisoners and to tell the reeve what she wanted him to do. But she didn't. She sent me to deal with the reeve and went to the over crowded healer's hut."

Theodorus tugged Palemon's left sleeve and started a long sequence of hand signals.

"Theodorus wants you to know that I'm wrong. The General's eyes were not as they usually are. There was a sadness visible that he and I only have seen once, when she went to the Centaur village to sign the peace treaty with Centaurs and Amazons. The General entered the healer's hut and didn't leave it for the next five days."

"Stop, Commander. Tell me, why doesn't he speak?" Cyrene asked, her curiosity finally getting the better of her. "I never before saw this kind of communication."

Theodorus gave Palemon an almost imperceptible nod. "When the General destroyed the Persian Empire some years ago Theodorus was taken as a captive, they questioned and tortured him, and when he didn't tell them what they wanted to know, they cut his tongue out. He was badly injured by the time we finally were able to set him free, and even the General wasn't sure of his chances of survival. Eventually his body healed but his soul did not. He almost died in the first battle after his recovery." Another set of hand signals. "He reminded me to tell you the whole story. He tried to get himself killed that day. The General saved his life, and then step by step she developed this language. At first, we only used the signals of hunters but it wasn't enough to really talk. So, she invented a hand signal for every letter and together they elaborated signs for day to day stuff, greetings and so on. By now every single soldier of the First Order knows to use them."

"Do you really want me to believe that the Conqueror of Greece and Rome, the person personally responsible for the deaths of thousands of people and the suffering of even more took the time necessary to invent a whole language just to keep one single soldier happy? You must be kidding, Commander."

Palemon obviously was hard pressed not to act on his anger. "Believe it or not but that's what she did, Cyrene. I know that you and the General don't get along too well with each other but to most of the people in this camp, she is family. There's nothing we wouldn't do for her because there's nothing she wouldn't do for us. In fact her sta..."

Palemon was silenced by another signal from the blond warrior, thus being saved to tell the older

woman that her daughter not only had accepted being a slave to the Amazon nation, but also insisted on a trial held to balance the scales between them, - a trial liable to end with... No, he couldn't afford to think about this right now. His mind was going in wild circles at the thought of losing his General and friend to Amazon law, especially now when she had found happiness and love for the first time since fighting the Centaurs.

He took a deep breath and refocused his attention to the older woman. "In fact what she did for Theodorus isn't this singular or exceptional, she cares for her men. She told me not to argue with you but there's more to her than what you are willing or able to see. She's a conscientious and caring soul, Cyrene, though she does her very best to hide it. - I'd better continue telling you about Gabrielle."

Most of the slaves were released from the healer's hut after a day or two of treatment. Every one of them had been held illegally and so the reeve had them escorted to their respective hometowns. The slaver was sentenced to six years of hard labour and his mercenaries to two. As soon as it was obvious that the young scribe wouldn't be able to travel any time soon, Xena sent one of her guards to Kyros ordering the merchants to present all their requests, complaints, and pleas on parchment. A second was dispatched to Corinth to prepare quarters in the palace adjoining her own. The following days she spent in the healer's hut, riveted to the bedside of the young woman.

The scribe's condition was worse than she would have ever thought possible. Every square inch of her body was covered with lash marks, most of her ribs were bruised and there was internal bleeding in the lower abdomen. She constantly drifted in and out of consciousness, and the local healer didn't even try to save her. Once every three candlemarks the Conqueror made her swallow a tea designed to stop the bleeding and finally her patience seemed to pay off.

Xena ordered a chariot with a cargo area large enough to accommodate a stretcher and took her back to Corinth. The whole journey she kept the young woman sleepy to give her abused body the chance to heal of its own accord. And even though she tried to tell herself that she was solely acting out of compassion and that she would have done the same thing for every other slave as badly injured as the scribe, she couldn't help to admit that she cared for her, deeply. There was a time she wanted to rule the world but now the world seemed a small goal in comparison to the health of a small, undernourished blond woman.

What was more, Xena found herself surprised not just to want to bed the woman as she had done with others numerous times in the past, deriving pride and pleasure out of seduction. From the very first moment she almost drowned in the intense sea green eyes of her charge, the Conqueror longed for her confidence and friendship. She knew it wouldn't be easy to gain but it proved to be a greater challenge than anticipated. The young woman had no reason to trust her, she was known as a ruthless murderer and her bedchamber reputation also didn't any good. So, Gabrielle - and it took Xena two days to get her to tell her name - was frightened, cautious, and defiant all in one.

Four days after her arrival at the palace the young scribe was well enough to leave her room and take a walk in the gardens. "So all this beauty is for you alone, Conqueror?"

"No, everyone in the palace is allowed to spend as much time in the gardens as they like and every other day they are open to the public. But there's a part of the gardens no one but me ever goes to. To me it's the most beautiful part. I'll show it to you if you're not too exhausted yet."

"I'm fine."

They changed direction and soon were in front of a stone wall overgrown with ivy and grapes. The Conqueror divided the green veil and both stepped through. A big old apple tree dominated the view and all around it was a meadow with poppy, foxglove, dandelion, and lots of other healing herbs. In summer, they would be more clearly visible, now only an expert could identify them. The inner parts of the wall served as support for various kinds of wild roses and in the silence following their entrance, the gurgling sound of a very small river was heard.

"You were right. It really is the most beautiful part of the gardens. Outside the trees and flowers, the well kept paths, the benches and little bridges are beautiful but this is alive. It is as if it was meant to be this way. Thank you, Con... Xena."

"You're welcome, Gabrielle." Xena offered her a big smile for being called by her name.

"Corinth was the first big town I took, more than eight years ago. The palace and the gardens were in ruins but my advisers convinced me that I needed a permanent stronghold in order to conquer the whole world. They made the plans for the gardens and right here in the centre they wanted to create some sort of private theatre for court members only. I told them to leave the place as it was."

"Why did you hide it behind those walls?"

"I didn't. A summer later when I returned from a rather long campaign the wall was in place. The chief gardener told me that this unruly part of nature was not suitable for a great ruler and that it interfered with the general design of the gardens' greatness. At the time, I was foolish enough to believe him. Whenever I want to be alone, whenever I need time to think or to meditate, I come here."

"Meditate? What's that?"

"Meditation is something you do to relax. You loosen up your muscles, sit down on the ground, sort of cross-legged, and all you think about is the rhythm of your breathing. Sometimes it takes longer than other times but eventually all the pressure, anger, fear, and sorrows you have go away - at least for a while. A friend in the far-east taught me how to do it. I'd be glad to teach it to you."

"It sounds good. I'd like to learn it but there won't be enough time. I have to leave as soon as possible. I don't want to run in any of my former owners."

"There's nothing to fear, Gabrielle, you're free. If you don't want to stay in the palace or in Corinth, I can arrange an escort back to your hometown. It's entirely your decision."

"I'll think about it. Can I stay here for a while?"

"Of course. I'll wait outside 'til you're ready. We'll have to change the bandages at your back in about three candelmarks." Xena turned to leave the enclosure.

"No, don't go, please. Can we sit by the tree?"

They made themselves comfortable, sitting side by side but keeping a distance of more than two feet. Xena tried very hard but without great success to keep her eyes from lingering on the young woman who herself seemed totally oblivious to this attention. They both were dressed in leather trousers and thick wool tunics accompanied by a fur-lined cloak to keep the cold of the winter afternoon at bay.

Gabrielle's blond tresses were glittering in the pale sunlight, every once in a while highlighted by glints of red. Xena drank in the outlines of her face, and found herself perfectly content just to sit here and watch. But she also didn't miss the tension permeating from her body testifying of some sort of inner turmoil, and suddenly the raven haired woman had to fight the urge to scoop her up in her arms and protect her against her own fears.

One and a half candelmark later Gabrielle decided on breaking the silence. "You're wrong, Xena. I'm still a slave by right and law. I'm a slave without a master but as far as I know, every single of my former owners has the right to lay a claim on me. I'm still nothing but property, that's why I have to go away as far as I possibly can."

Xena stared at her, wide-eyed, and was utterly unable to pronounce a whole sentence, "Explain!"

Gabrielle's eyes found the piercing baby blues of the Conqueror, her voice intent on not betraying any emotion: "Four years ago, when I was sixteen my parents sold me to a slaver. The slavery laws didn't yet exist, and so it was a perfectly legal transaction."

"Why?"

"I refused to marry. They had my marriage arranged when I was nine. I liked the boy but I didn't love him and I never would have learned to love him. My father said that he would get the bride price one way or the other. - Becoming the wife of a farmer and sheep raiser wasn't what I wanted anyway. I wanted to learn about other people, to tell stories, and to see the world, and somehow my wish was granted. I spent time in Persia and in Rome, in Ephesus and in Lutetia but I had to do it with a slave collar around my neck. By the way, where is it? I'll have to put it back on now that you know the truth."

"It was destroyed. I cut it to pieces with my sword, together with all the other items in the barn."

And you will never have to see anything like that again. I can't understand how pa... At the time, it may not have been illegal for your parents to sell you but the laws I established make it illegal to own native slaves sold when they were under age. There's no need for you to run away or to hide. You are free, free to do whatever you fancy to do, free to travel all around the world if you want to."

"You're serious?"

"Yes, Gabrielle."

"Promise that I never will have to see a slave collar ever again."

"I promise I will never confront you with one but as long as there are slaves in Greece chances are that you'll see those collars. Unfortunately there's nothing I can do about it."

"I'm really free?"

"Yes, Gabrielle, but before you set out to conquer the whole world on your own we have to change the bandages on your back. Come."

A big smile was plastered on the young woman's face, and it didn't go away, not when they entered the palace and not when she slightly flinched under the tender ministrations to her back.

"An apple tree? You sure about this?"

Theodorus answered with a series of gestures that immediately were translated by Palemon. "I think this tree and the roof terrace above her bedroom were the only places in the palace the General really felt at ease in. She said the garden bit was a patch of a time past and therefore not touched by evil and darkness."

"There was an old apple tree at the edge of Amphipolis. She used to play there with her brothers, mostly with her younger brother, Lyceus. When the boy was killed during Cortese's attack she burned the tree to the roots." There was a long moment of awkward silence before Cyrene was able to snap out of her memories. "Please continue your story. I still don't understand why this slave girl seems so important to the Conqueror."

The windows looked east, and when Xena opened her eyes, she found the familiar view of the predawn sky, the first glimmer of light at the edge of the horizon. The rest of her surroundings were less familiar.

She was sitting in a chair both hands securely wrapped around another, smaller hand. She still wore her formal evening attire constituting of a long, dark crimson robe, held by a silver plated,

black leather belt, her favourite dagger with ebony hilt and silver sheath emphasising her waist. Despite the rather uncomfortable position she must have spent the night in, she found herself surprisingly refreshed and in a good mood.

Gabrielle was still fast asleep, with a small smile at the edges of her lips. She looked incredibly young and innocent, and the Conqueror of Greece and Rome had a hard time letting go of her hand. The younger woman slightly stirred and tucked her hand under her chin, thus enhancing the impression of childlike innocence.

Xena finally went to her own bedroom and changed into trousers, a wool tunic and her armour. The daily sparring session with some of the First Order soldiers this day barely captured her mind. Her body reacted practically of its own accord while her thoughts still were with the young scribe.

The merchants she originally was supposed to meet with in Kyros had obviously decided to force the issue, and had arrived in numbers at the palace the day before. The council found it necessary to hold a welcome dinner, so Xena spent the evening listening to complaints and exploits, bargaining and bartering stories, knowing she would have to sit through hours and hours of more of this stuff the following afternoon.

It was close to the beginning of the third watch when the tall warrior entered her study to check on the young woman sleeping next door. As the nights before, she was suffering from a nightmare, whimpering and moaning, with fear and pain clearly written all over her face. Perhaps it was because of the confidence Gabrielle had shown her in the garden but unlike the previous nights, she didn't content herself with a compassionate look.

She quickly closed the distance to the bed and took her protectively in her arms, whispering soothing words and gently stroking her hair. Finally, the moaning stopped and her body quieted down also, but moments later the young woman's muscles suddenly tensed and she pulled away from the embrace. Xena saw the fear and the horror in her eyes and carefully positioned her hands where the other woman could see them. She tried to smile at her, to reassure her but Gabrielle's face told her it would be in vain.

"You had a bad dream. I'd better leave now, rest well!" She said in a quiet voice and went to the door. When she already was crossing the threshold, Gabrielle called her back.

"I'm sorry, Xena. Please, stay. I have to explain, you have to understand. It had nothing to do with you."

Xena was back at her bedside and sat down in a chair. She longed taking her in her arms once again, instead she said. "There's no need to explain, Gabrielle. With all the things you have probably heard about me, you had every right to react the way you did. Over the years, I built a reputation being some sort of sexual predator. I took what I wanted and from whom I wanted it, and I still do though it's been moons since the last time. It's part of who I am, so it certainly will

happen again, but I promise I will never do it to you. You're off limits. I don't know much about your life but you have suffered more than enough. I just want you to get well and be happy."

The Conqueror was as surprised by her words as the young woman but she knew them to be true. All of her considerable emotional defences just seemed to crumble to dust regarding the blonde. When she once again tried to leave, Gabrielle's right hand found her left.

"Xena, please, sit down. There's a lot of gossip in this palace, and I heard a lot about you, that's true. There's also a lot of talk about your bedroom adventures but they all say that you only take what is freely given. They say your violence is for the battlefield only. I'm not concerned about this. I'm truly sorry my reaction hurt you, and I cannot promise that it will never happen again. It really had nothing to do with you personally. It is... One of my former...."

"You don't have to talk about it if it hurts too much, Gabrielle. It probably will take a lot of time before the shadows of your past have left your soul. I will always be there to listen and to care but you don't have to torture yourself."

"I don't know why, but I want you to know, Xena." Gabrielle left her hand in Xena's but her eyes were fixed on the blanket. "One of my former masters was a travelling merchant between Lutetia and Rome. He owned many slaves and had a house and office in several of the towns along the road. He loved to travel with a great retinue, with mercenaries, cooks, servants, and slaves. He purchased me as a body slave but when he learned that I could read and write, he only used me as one of his scribes. At first, I couldn't believe my luck, and I shouldn't have to. The first moons we spent in Rome and I was allowed to learn Latin. I wore beautiful clothes, was well fed and free to go everywhere in his house, garden and fields. If it hadn't been for the collar around my neck, I would have forgotten that I was a slave and not a servant. When he began travelling though there was no way to forget it."

Xena gently put her other hand on top of Gabrielle's and gave her an encouraging squeeze. "During the journey I had to stay with the scrolls, day and night. When we stayed at an inn, I was next door to his bedroom and when we made camp, I slept in a small tent next to his. One night, after about ten days of travelling, he entered my tent in the middle of the night. He was drunk. When I awoke, I found his arms securely wrapped around my body, his mouth only inches away from mine. He was breathing heavily and his mouth came nearer. I panicked. I knew he had every right to do with me what ever he fancied, but still... Somehow, I freed my right hand and slapped him hard across the face. He pulled away and left the tent without saying a word. I was afraid but eventually I went back to sleep."

The young woman's voice now barely was above a whisper. "The next morning I found myself naked and spread-eagled between two trees at the other side of the camp. The whole staff was standing there, and when the master came to me, I could see my handprint at his cheek. There was sadness in his voice but his eyes were blazing with anger. He said. 'What you did last night was really disappointing, my young slave. You attacked your master, and your punishment should be a painful death or at least I should cut off the offending hand. But I'm not in the habit of damaging worthy goods. Without your hands you won't be able to write and without your life you won't be able to bear witness of my justice.' He then gave a signal to someone behind me; I

heard the slashing of a whip and felt the burning pain consuming my whole body. I soon lost my bearings but I know the whipping must have continued. When I regained consciousness, there was a leather cuff around my left ankle fixed to an iron ring in the floor of the wagon. Bandages were wrapped around my upper body but every breath sent a bolt of pain through my body. The next night we stayed at an inn. I was asleep as soon as I was left alone, and when I opened my eyes to the light of a flickering candle, I once again felt his arms around me. This time I did what he asked me to do. He didn't come every night but often enough to let me dread going to sleep, and always it started with an embrace and a kiss."

Gabrielle raised her head and found the tear-filled eyes of the older woman. "I'm not afraid of you, Xena. I reacted to his touch, his breath, his demands; I was lost in bad memories. Please forgive me. I probably can't help it but I don't want you to be afraid of my reactions."

"I won't ever let anything like this happen to you again. You're free to make your own choices but if it does anything good to you I'll have all of your former slave masters arrested. None of them had the right to ill-treat you. Justice now is in your hands."

The still injured woman obviously was tempted by Xena's offer. She searched the Conqueror's face for signs of dishonesty or falsehood but found none. "No, don't do it, Xena. It wouldn't be justice. It would be vengeance. It won't change my past, nor my memories, nor my dreams, my nightmares. They all thought they had a right to do what they did, and I thought they had the right to do so also. Now I know better, and I thank you for rescuing me."

"It was my pleasure, Gabrielle."

"Would you please stay until I'm asleep? I don't want to be alone right now."

"I'll hold your hand, so you won't feel alone."

The young soldiers' sword missed her head only by a quarter of an inch; had it been a more seasoned warrior she certainly would at least have been injured. She disarmed him with the next two strikes and called an end to the sparring session. When she turned to find her bathroom, she found the sparkling green eyes of her patient waiting for her at the far edge of the training grounds.

"The last one got pretty close, Xena. I hope you didn't do this on purpose."

"No need to worry, Gabrielle. My body knows how to protect itself. How long were you watching?"

"Long enough to know that your head was leagues away. You should take care of yourself better than this. I don't want you to get hurt."

"Why is this? You certainly don't owe me. If I would have been able to abolish slavery you never

would have been in need of my help."

"I would be dead by now, Xena, and this you know better than anyone. I talked to one of your commanders, his name's Palemon. He told me that you stayed in the healer's hut for days without a break to save my life though the local healer would have let me die. So, yes, I owe you, and yes, I care about you, but I don't know why. I learned the hard way not to trust easily but I can't help it with you. It just feels right, despite everything."

"Thank you, Gabrielle. It's been a long time since someone cared about me, and I'll try to be less thoughtless in the future. I'd like to take a walk through the gardens with you but there's a bunch of merchants already waiting to bore me to death with their petty arguments about profits and stuff."

"Trading agreements are important not only for the merchants, Xena. I'm sure you know this. It's much harder to bargain for things the farmers can't produce themselves without them. I know, sometimes they are really boring but usually it's worth the effort. Would you mind if I come and listen?"

"I would be delighted to have you at my side, Gabrielle. But only if you're sure you're already up to this kind of activity."

"I'll only have to sit and listen. It beats staring at the ceiling all day."

"Very good. I'll take a bath, and then we can grab some lunch and meet with the merchants. You just saved my day."

Chapter Two: The journey

"From this day on Gabrielle only was on her own when the General was out practising with the army or the First Order, together they attended council meetings and court sessions and Gabrielle was able to convince the General more than once to change a decision for the better. It simply was impossible not to like her; her smile is utterly disarming and her voice reminds of the gentle lapping of water at the border of a small lake. She conquered the whole palace in a matter of days but only some of them knew of the price she paid every night for her sunny demeanour. The nightmares seemed to get stronger as time went by, sometimes she was screaming at the top of her lungs without ever waking up. The General began to spend the better part of the night sitting by her bedside and holding her hand thus trying to hold the dreams in check. The nightly vigils though began to take their toll. She was injured during a sparring session and now Gabrielle didn't leave her bedroom. And she learned about the General's nightmares that also could be held at bay by a simple touch of her hand. So they decided to sleep together, and there were no more bad dreams for either of them."

"So they became lovers?!"

"No, Cyrene, not right away. I don't know exactly when they became lovers but it was at least one and a half moon after their first night in the General's bed."

"Why does a soldier, even a trusted one as you obviously are, know so much about the private life of his commanding officer, Palemon?"

"The private rooms of the General are guarded by the First Order, Cyrene. We're only human, we talk about the things we see and hear. The General is more than capable of taking care of herself but we had to make sure that all the courtiers and nobles kept out of her way. Unfortunately, to ensure her privacy from the rest of the palace she lost some of it to us. I don't think she ever cared about our presence, at least not until Gabrielle captured her, heart, soul, and body."

Xena never had been fond of sleeping, even as a child she didn't like to stay in bed after sunrise, not even in winter. After the battle with Cortese, after the death of her beloved younger brother, sleeping for her soon turned into another word for having nightmares. She closed her eyes and barely a candlemark later she once again was wide awake, her covers drenched in sweat, her mind's eye still seeing the dead blood stained body of her brother. Physical exhaustion was the only way to control the dreams. Only after a full day of fighting, riding or drilling was her body too worn out to react on her mind's commands, and the dreams didn't disturb her slumber. After Caesar, her heart was totally dead, and she didn't dream any longer but as the years went by the nightmares returned, slowly.

The first one still was burned in her memory. It was after she stopped the war against the Centaurs and began to lead her army through half of Greece to conquer Corinth. Once again, her hands were covered with blood when she held the battered body of a dead man in her arms. This time fighting and killing did nothing to end the dreams, and so she learned to live with them. Over the years, they became as much a part of her as her battle cry or her sword.

The first night she spent with Gabrielle, sitting in this chair, and holding her hand, was the first night without those dreams, the memories of blood and carnage, burning houses and screaming villagers, of lost friends, and lovers, and.... She didn't know it then, and it took ten more days and Gabrielle to point the obvious out. When they finally decided to spend the nights together, sleeping side by side, for the first time in almost fifteen years Xena began to look forward going to sleep.

But soon the Conqueror of Greece and Rome was facing a problem of a different order. The first nights the young woman was careful to keep her distance, only her hand touching Xena's. The warrior's keen senses took in the blonde's scent, her breathing, and soon found their breathing rhythms surprisingly matching one another.

The fifth day a slight tickling brought her to her senses in the middle of the night. Gabrielle practically was wrapped around her body, her head resting on Xena's shoulder, her right leg loosely draped over the larger woman's thigh, her right arm stretched over her abdomen. To her

utter surprise Xena found her own right arm comfortably resting at the small of Gabrielle's back, while her left hand was on top of the other woman's hip. She couldn't recall a time a living being had managed coming this close to her without her body automatically defending itself. Gabrielle's hair still was tickling her nose but she didn't want to disturb the young woman by brushing them away. So she kept still and marvelled at the peaceful and seemingly deeply content expression of her younger companion. The next morning, when Xena woke to the predawn glow creeping through the two large windows, Gabrielle was gone. Xena found her in the library immersed in a scroll.

The scenario repeated itself for the next half moon. Xena awakening with Gabrielle safely tucked around her, their chests rising and falling in the same rhythm. The mornings found her alone in bed, and Gabrielle already up and reading. The tall warrior couldn't help but feel a growing sensation of loss every time she found herself in bed without Gabrielle, and during her waking hours, she found her eyes following the scribe around ever so often, taking in her beautiful features.

One night she felt the younger woman slowly creeping away from her about a candlemark before dawn when the night is at its coldest and darkest. She began to move her right hand soothingly over Gabrielle's back and whispered. "Don't go. I'd love to wake up with you in my arms."

The young woman didn't stay and Xena also wasn't able to stay in bed any longer. She got up and took her golden maned war horse Argo for a long run before heading to the training grounds only slightly behind schedule. And once again, things repeated themselves

Ten days later Xena couldn't stand it any longer and followed Gabrielle to the library. They had to talk about it. The Conqueror knew what she felt for the younger woman was far beyond friendship and equally far away from sisterly devotion. She had captured her heart but now her body also longed for the presence of the blonde. Part of her dreaded the inevitable conversation; she didn't look forward to hearing that there only was some sort of convenient companionship coming from Gabrielle but in all her life she never had run away from possibly hurtful situations.

When Xena entered the library through the main doors Gabrielle looked up, a sad smile on her face. "I knew one day you would follow me but I don't want to talk about it. I will leave the palace as soon as possible."

"Why?" Xena had been prepared for a lot of things but not for this kind of quiet determination. "I don't want you to leave. What did I do to scare you away? Tell me what it is and I'll stop doing it. Without the fire in your emerald eyes my world once again will be nothing but darkness."

As before when speaking to Gabrielle Xena found herself saying things she otherwise never would have even thought but nevertheless she knew them to be true.

"You can't change who you are, Xena."

"I see. I should have known that your pure heart couldn't stand the nearness of a cold-blooded murderer like me for long. Palemon will see to it that you have enough money and provisions to

take you far away from here."

"Xena, wait."

She heard the sound of a chair crashing on the stone tiles and footsteps following her. She stood but didn't turn around. Gabrielle's body was barely an arm's length behind her; they didn't touch.

"Wait, you've got it all wrong. I don't care about your reputation. You have a gentle heart, Xena, you care for your people but you don't want to show it. You're funny, and the most beautiful woman I've ever seen. Never in my life have I been as comfortable with anyone as I am with you. Never in my life have I felt as safe and as cared for as with you. I want more than your friendship, and I know this can't be. That's why I have to go. I don't want to hurt you but there is no other way."

Xena turned around and found the younger woman's eyes fixed to the floor. "Gabrielle, look at me."

Silence settled on the shoulders of both women like a heavy weight, and finally Gabrielle's eyes found the blue orbs in front of her. Xena's voice was husky with emotion.

"Please, don't go."

They stood motionless for what appeared to be an eternity, blue eyes lost in green and green eyes in blue. Xena had to remind herself to keep on breathing, and when Gabrielle suddenly closed hers for two long heartbeats, she knew she had lost.

"I'm sorry, Xena."

Gabrielle turned and left the library almost running through the side door leading to Xena's bedroom. The tall warrior didn't try to call her back; she didn't follow her either. She just stood there, in the middle of her library, alone, barely understanding herself. Some candledrops later, she exited the big room, cancelled the sparring session, and began to climb the stairs to the roof terrace overlooking the whole city.

In the past, she would have stormed to the training grounds and kept on fighting until none of her soldiers were left standing. But now she wanted nothing more than to turn back time, to undo the conversation with Gabrielle, and keep on pretending. Surprised by her own reactions, she still was sure without her storming into the library Gabrielle never would have felt compelled to leave.

When she entered the rooftop it was still dark outside, and she lighted the wind and rain protected candles near the walls. She opened a hidden compartment high in the western wall and lowered herself to her right knee. She closed her eyes and prayed.

When she was on her feet once again, the rising sun was already warming her neck, and she was pretty sure why the young woman felt the need to leave. She had to try and talk to her to

convince her otherwise.

Gabrielle already had left the palace, taking nothing with her but the clothes she was wearing. The startled guards at the palace's front gate told Xena which direction to follow and she quickly made her way to the southeastern gate of Corinth.

Halfway there she heard an angry male voice, menacing and mean, and a frighteningly familiar female voice, obviously scared and at the same time angry. She already was running but now she picked up even more speed. Her fist impacted on his chin when he tried to tear apart the scribe's tunic while her momentum took both of them off the body of the now unconscious woman, his neck breaking when they hit the ground.

Gabrielle had a nasty bump on her right temple but otherwise seemed unharmed. Xena cradled her in her arms and carried her back to the palace. She stayed with her the better part of the day and soon the blonde slipped from unconsciousness to a deep healing sleep. Xena lost herself in the peaceful features of the younger woman, and knew without a shadow of a doubt that she would do anything to make her stay. She never had felt so vulnerable and so at peace with anyone else before. Placing a gentle kiss on the sleeping woman's cheek, she sat down in a chair and whispered. "I love you, Gabrielle."

The Conqueror woke from the distinct feeling of being observed, and found herself facing a pair of piercing green eyes. "You saved me, once again. Thank you."

"I never should have let you go in the first place. You need to learn how to defend yourself first."

"I don't like swords, and I have to leave the palace as soon as possible, now more than ever."

"We will find a way, Gabrielle, but first I want you to drink this and go back to sleep. The headache will be gone when you reawake."

"It's late afternoon, Xena. I already slept the whole day." She closed her eyes for two long heartbeats. "I can't stand being near you and not being able to touch you. I have to leave."

For the longer part of a heartbeat there was a flicker of wonder and delight at the young scribe's confession running through Xena's eyes, and for at least as long she thought about confronting the younger woman with her deductions here and now but finally she decided against it.

"It's your decision, Gabrielle, but however I will make sure that you are protected. Either you stay and learn to defend yourself, and there are more ways to do that than using a sword. Or I'll give you a bunch of my soldiers for protection."

An expression of utter disbelief appeared on Gabrielle's face, tinted with a sparkle of anger but the Conqueror chose to ignore it.

"You're far too precious to me to let you go unprotected, Gabrielle. I want you to be safe and

happy. You obviously can't be happy with me but at the moment, you won't be safe without me. You are free to stay here in your old room; you don't have to spend the nights with me if this is what's scaring you. You won't even have to see me except for your self-defence classes. Please, don't leave."

"I'll stay, Xena."

"Good, your lessons will begin tomorrow at noon. We'll meet at the training grounds." Xena didn't wait for an answer, she just left the room, silently berating herself for not having the courage to speak to her about her feelings as openly as she did to herself earlier while praying.

It was late at night when Xena returned from her hideout in the palace gardens. Passing Gabrielle's room, she could easily distinguish the sound of a rather hefty nightmare. All her instincts as well as her heart screamed to her to go in there, to soothe her pain, and take her in her arms. But she didn't, she meekly returned to her own bedroom, sure once again to be hunted by her own nightly demons.

Candlemarks later she still was on her back and staring aimlessly at the ceiling, half lost in self-deprecating thoughts. The sound of her guards suddenly coming to attention accompanied by soft footfalls in the hallway roused her to full alertness. Soon after the door slowly opened and someone hesitantly found the way to her bed. Xena could feel the mattress shifting under the additional weight, and a small linen clad body snuggling next to her.

"I know you're not sleeping, Xena. No one can come this near without you knowing it. I know it can never be more but I need your touch, as a friend, please."

"I was afraid of sleeping without you, Gabrielle. In case you don't know it by now, I want you to be my friend and I want you to be my lover but I'm ready to keep a rein on my desire as long as it takes to make you feel comfortable. I know you're afraid and given my reputation, you have every reason to be frightened. I promise all we will hopefully ever do together as friends and as lovers, we only will do with your consent. You will lead the way and set the pace." Xena knew she never would be able to say the following face to face so, despite the darkness in the room she closed her eyes and said. "I love you Gabrielle. I had many lovers, or bedmates, in my life but never before was I in love. I can't afford to mess this up. What ever will happen, it has to be your decision."

The smaller woman didn't answer but the next morning, when the first hints of dawn were announcing themselves, Xena found herself still wrapped under her. It took all of her willpower to slowly inch her way out of bed without awakening her companion and to start her day as usual with a sparring session.

After the midday meal, she met with Gabrielle. Before the young woman had a chance at saying anything about the night, she casually tossed her a fighting staff. Gabrielle caught it in mid air and Xena began to test her reflexes.

Surprisingly fast, they settled in a routine: sparring sessions with the army, lunch, Gabrielle's classes, administrative, juridical and council meetings, dinner, some candlemarks of paperwork, and finally a night of blissfully undisturbed sleep. While Xena was sparring or doing her paperwork, Gabrielle spent her time in the library or talking to the staff or some of the soldiers.

"Are you really sure about this, Cyrene? This country can get pretty dangerous in the course of the next few moons. We were instructed to escort you to a safe harbour."

"You also are bound to obey my orders, Commander." The older woman said in an all too familiar voice, and then there was an unexpected softening in her tone. "I know you're not comfortable with my decision, Palemon, but to me this isn't a question of security. My daughter and I have to talk. After all the big and small things you told me I simply have to know more about her, I have to look in her eyes, I have to make sure. Besides, Xena may be a brilliant strategist but I really doubt she could have anticipated the situation you and your men are forced to face now, Palemon. What are you planning to do with all these civilians pouring in our camp? You can't leave them without protection. A journey to Chin or even to Albion certainly would require the better part of your armed forces. What I want you to do only requires some of your men. I have to see her."

The tall man couldn't help being astonished by her words. They more than made sense, they also were strategically sound. The soldiers certainly could fend for themselves, but the civilians the General had warned them about needed protection. She had told them to expect about two to three scores, but now he had to deal with at least three times more, their number steadily increasing every day. He really hoped that she would get the chance to know how many were loyal to her, not to the government. Following Cyrene's orders he could dispatch the better part of his soldiers to protect the others and lead them to the safe harbour the General had prepared for them, an island with steep cliffs on three sides south-east of Corinth. There were far too many villages and military look-outs on the way to the next harbour to get this many people through undetected. So Cyrene's suggestion, or rather her order was more than tempting.

"You're right, Cyrene, it wouldn't be safe for these people to go without being protected as well as possible. We also may encounter more of the General's faithful on the way. It will take another day to organise our resources but then Theodorus and I will take you to the Amazons."

"Thank you, Palemon."

Gabrielle, to the surprise of the civil and the military staff, was more than talented in handling her fighting staff. She grasped the basic movements after one demonstration only and was able to adapt the more advanced moves very quickly adjusting them to her lower fighting angle. Xena was convinced this had to be accounted to the younger woman's heritage, the Conqueror was not ready to disclose to her yet.

The fifth day of this new arrangement, Gabrielle asked. "What you said a couple of days ago, were you really sincere?"

"I was and I am, Gabrielle. What ever will happen it's yours to control. And if there's something you want to know about me, just ask. I would never lie to you. Sleep well."

"You're still sure that it's me who should set the pace, Xena?" Gabrielle asked some days later when they had lunch under the apple tree.

"Yes, I'm sure, Gabrielle. It feels like the right thing to do. In the past when I gained this reputation of mine, when I still lived up to it, sex had nothing to do with love. I used my body to get what I wanted. It was a weapon as dangerous as my sword. I used sex to gain and maintain power, to buy allies and to control potential enemies. More than once, I spent the night with someone I killed the next day. Sex was a means to an end, and when it wasn't, all I cared about was my own satisfaction. I commanded in bed as I did on the battlefield. It was nothing but a physical act, and I didn't care what it meant to them. Some of my bedmates were deeply hurt when I tired of them. I had sex with more men and women than I care to remember, and it was always a question of dominance and control. Giving up this control would make me vulnerable and weak, well; that's what I believed then. There was no trust because I didn't have a heart to take part. Now, I have a heart. I'm in love with you, Gabrielle, and I'm not afraid to show you that this makes me vulnerable but it doesn't make me weak. I want you to be comfortable in my company, and that's why I want you to be in control."

As a rule, Xena wasn't a woman of many words but to Gabrielle she said more in one day than to her staff in a whole week. And once again, Xena was surprised by her own words; with Gabrielle, she was completely unable to hide behind her usual mask of cool emotionlessness. It was as if the sea green eyes were able to penetrate all her carefully built defences

"I'd like to kiss you, Xena."

Sitting cross legged on the ground Xena turned her upper body slowly to the right and lowered her head to the small blonde. Gabrielle almost imperceptibly flinched and the Conqueror froze in mid-motion.

"I'm sorry, Gabrielle, it's difficult to set aside old habits. I'll lie down on my back. It should be easier for both of us." Gabrielle smiled this small smile of hers, equal parts gratitude and wonder.

Her face inch by inch came closer, and stopped when she was only a hand's width away. Xena was more than ready to drown in her beautiful eyes.

"Please close your eyes. They are too distracting."

Xena obeyed without even thinking about it. She could feel the warm breath once again coming

nearer, lips lingering directly above her own. Relinquishing control was far more difficult than she thought; it took a considerable amount of self-control not to lift up her head in anticipation. Lips touched lips, briefly. Gabrielle's head snapped back, and Xena tried to smile reassuringly. The next touch was longer, despite its lightness sending shivers all through Xena's body. And when finally a tongue began to repaint the outlines of her lips the tall warrior couldn't help moaning.

Even through closed eyelids, Xena believed she was able to see the smile on the blond woman's face whose tongue quickly demanded entrance in her mouth. At first, there only was a gentle and tentative probing, but when Xena's tongue hesitatingly answered, Gabrielle became more adventurous. Never before a simple kiss had had such an extreme effect on her, Xena literally felt dizzy and soon lost herself in the feeling.

Her fingers clawed in the hard ground below her in an effort to control the reactions of her body that was more than ready to take over. This fight she couldn't afford to lose. The dark haired woman tensed all over while trying to reign in the expression of her raging desire, at the same time reveling in Gabrielle's touch who had begun to run her fingertips up and down her face and neck.

Too soon her lips were left alone and she felt two feather-like kisses on each of her eyelids. Gabrielle's voice was much deeper when she whispered. "Open your eyes for me."

She did and looked directly into sparkling green with a hint of gold flashing through it. Her gaze was fixed to these eyes, unable to even blink, and when soft lips once again found hers, when her tongue gently was sucked into the younger woman's mouth, all she wished for was for the time to stop instantly, to live an eternity in this blissful feeling.

Now it was her turn to explore, and she did, thoroughly and gently, anchoring herself on the still winter hardened soil, her arm muscles straining with the effort to keep her body's demands at bay. To slow her own ragged breathing she broke the kiss and began to nibble on Gabrielle's lower lip, never losing contact with the mesmerising eyes above her.

The scribe intensified the kiss, their tongues mercilessly teasing each other. Xena could sense Gabrielle's body as tense as her own, and she was quite sure it wasn't from fear.

Gabrielle withdrew, jumped to her feet, and whispered a barely audible "Thank you." She bolted away never hearing Xena's, "You're welcome," nor seeing the shadow of a blush colouring the warrior's cheeks.

When they met about half a candlemark later at the training grounds, neither woman talked about the kiss, nor did they during dinner. But Xena who prided herself in her ability to shut out unwanted thoughts in order to concentrate on the task at hand couldn't take her mind off the incredible experience and also couldn't hinder her body tingling from head to toe at the memory alone.

It was way in the middle of the night when Xena finally gave up pretending to do her paperwork and entered the bedroom. Gabrielle already was asleep but immediately snuggled closer when the mattress shifted under the older woman's weight. Xena savoured her scent, the smile on her face and the way the moonlight was playing with her hair. What she felt now wasn't desire or arousal, it was contentment, even happiness, a feeling as unfamiliar to her as anything.

The next morning before preparing for her sparring session Xena placed a feather-like kiss on Gabrielle's lips and was rewarded with an adoring look of two very green and still very sleepy eyes.

"Xena, kiss me!"

"You're sure?"

"Kiss me!"

Xena lowered her head and gently kissed the younger woman on the forehead, which made her grunt in disappointment. She descended to the right temple, down the jaw line to the neck, from the collarbone to the middle of the throat and kissed her way up to the chin. When her lips finally met Gabrielle's both breathing rhythms definitively were accelerated. Slightly parted lips enticingly invited her in but before she answered the challenge, she made sure Gabrielle really was sure about this by demanding permission with her eyes. She slowly continued yesterday's exploration and was surprised to find strong arms circling her waist and pulling her closer.

Her kiss became more demanding, and Gabrielle's tongue answered with growing enthusiasm while two sets of fingers were travelling up and down her back. The warrior balanced the weight of her upper body solely on her left arm thus freeing her right hand to find Gabrielle's breasts. The young woman's body suddenly tensed, and Xena stopped her movements as well as the kiss. She looked up into tear filled eyes.

"I'm sorry, Gabrielle, I got carried away."

"Don't be sorry, Xena. It's not your fault. It's mine. I'm so messed up; I can't even stand a simple touch." Gabrielle said, turning her head away in shame.

"Please, look at me, Gab. It's not your fault, not at all. Being touched revives many hurtful memories. You didn't have a say in what the slavers and your former masters did to you and made you do. By touching you without your consent, I once again took away your freedom. Please forgive me. I love you, and I don't want to hurt you. Would you give me another chance after dinner?" The young woman only nodded and Xena left the room.

This day they didn't come together for lunch. Xena preferred to continue the sparring session with the newly recruited soldiers, Gabrielle chatted away the midday meal with the kitchen staff. Gabrielle's self-defence lesson was cut short by urgent messages arriving for the Conqueror, and both women were grateful for the interruption because neither could help to worry about their

after dinner date. There was a council meeting in the afternoon Xena paid absolutely no attention to, and she was forced to have dinner with some local military governors. The whole time her mind was miles away and feeling Gabrielle's presence at the end of the table didn't help either.

After dinner, Xena entered her study to catch up on some paperwork, she found a note on her desk.

Xena!

Come to the bedroom, now!

G.

A reflex developed in fifteen years of fighting on her own, fifteen years of telling others what to do and when to do it, told Xena to go and teach this girl whose head didn't even reach her shoulder who really was in charge. But when she was more than halfway through the door, she suddenly retreated and sat down behind her desk. She stared down at the small piece of parchment, this morning's incident replaying in her mind. When she finally got to her feet, she still wasn't sure if she really would be able to pull this through but she was more than convinced that she at least had to try, for Gabrielle's sake as well for her own.

There were candles scattered all around the big bed, leaving the corners of the room where usually four torches were burning completely in darkness. The sound of a person's breathing told her that Gabrielle was sitting in the big chair near the entrance to the library.

"I'd like to see you naked, Xena. Please come to the other side of the bed." Gabrielle's voice was soft and inviting, and contrary to her trepidation, Xena didn't find it hard to obey.

Xena moved slowly, first removing the pin that held her long hair in a tight bun. Next, her ebony handled dagger was placed on a small table sitting between the two windows. She opened the carefully knotted dark red silk cloth around her waist and slowly undid the threefold wrapping, negligently tossing the scarf on the bed. Her wide black pants instantly dropped to the floor leaving her naked up to the hips. She stepped forwards to get free of them completely. From the hips upwards, her long torso was clad in a closely fitting top made of white dyed deerskin. Brass buckles on each side strapped it to the body and she slightly turned to the right when she opened the second set to show off what she was doing. Pulling the smooth material over her head it fell next to her trousers.

Three long heartbeats she stood motionless, fully aware of the eyes wandering up and down and exploring her body. Xena completed her half-turn, bent down and unlaced her boots. Her keen hearing picked up Gabrielle's slightly quickened breathing, so she took her time before stretching to her full height and once again facing the still seated woman.

She attempted to take another step forwards. "Stop, don't move."

Xena froze, utterly unable not to do what the quiet voice requested. The hands at both sides she stood still, trying not to think of the reaction of anyone accidentally coming in there right now.

The thought persisted, and a heavy blush began to colour her cheeks. She held her position but couldn't help her own breathing getting faster. She unconsciously closed her eyes and heard bare feet touching the hardwood floor. She could smell the blond woman and feel her breath on her own chest.

"Xena, I want you to undress me."

The tall woman's eyes flew wide open at the request and were met by dark green ones. She held the gaze for a heartbeat, suddenly knowing that she probably never again would be able to deny them anything.

Gabrielle wore an oversized tunic Xena recognised as her own and a simple leather belt. Both were quickly discarded. Caring for her in the village and during the journey to Corinth the Conqueror had seen all there was of the younger woman's body but still the sight she was now confronted with took her breath away. She dropped to her knees, the thought of possible intruders forgotten, inching down the thin breeches and helping her to step out of them.

Sitting on her heels, she savoured every inch of Gabrielle's body from the ankles upwards. Her eyes rimmed to the soft blond curls in front of her she couldn't help the heat concentrating between her thighs. She longed to kiss what now was so close, her head already moving towards her goal when she was once again stopped in mid-motion.

"Don't, Xena, please." Her head jerked back and her eyes dropped to the ground almost automatically. Time stood still while a part of her mind refused to understand her actions. Never before had she felt compelled to do another person's bidding. Everyone who ever tried to command her quickly ended regretting it, her eyes alone could dominate whole armies, and now she seemed to react to this soft voice without conscious thought.

Xena felt lips on the top of her head, and when the voice commanded her to "stand up", she did without raising her eyes from the ground.

"Don't move." She could feel Gabrielle's gaze almost like a touch on her skin. Her heart skipped a beat when she heard the young woman slowly moving around. Close enough to feel her breath but too far away to touch.

"You're the most beautiful woman I've ever seen."

"I'm but an old warrior with too many scars on body and soul. It's you who really is beautiful, your perfect form and smooth skin mirroring the pureness of your soul. You are the most beautiful woman I've ever seen, Gabrielle."

"You don't have to lie to make me feel more comfortable."

"Please look at me, Gab." When the smaller woman was standing in front of her Xena said. "I don't tell lies, I never did and I never will. Sometimes I don't tell the whole story but I don't lie. Today there would have been more to say. I wanted to tell you how much I love to see the play

of your muscles when you're handling your staff, the glinting in your eyes when you were able to execute a new move to perfection and the slight colouring of your cheeks. I wanted to tell you how wonderful your hair looks with the sun highlighting the few red strands and how mesmerising it appears in candle light. I wanted to tell you how I long to shower every inch of your body with my kisses, how I long to caress your breasts and gently suck your nipples and how I wish to drown in your gorgeous eyes. But I didn't tell you for fear to put pressure on you. This has to be your decision."

Xena fell silent, her eyes still locked with Gabrielle's. She tried to keep her breathing even, not wanting to show too much of her desire. Countless heartbeats later, a cool breeze made the curtains flap and brought both of them back to reality.

"Please kiss me but I don't want to be touched."

Gabrielle positioned herself in the middle of the bed. Xena followed suit and knelt next to her soft body. She could feel the tension radiating from the younger woman and knew that she had to be very, very careful. Lying on her back the young woman was totally at her mercy, helpless and vulnerable. The situation probably brought back cart loads of bad memories. It took a lot of courage to do this but most of all it was a sign of trust, and Xena never ever wanted to betray this trust.

She slowly bent down, placing a tender kiss on Gabrielle's forehead, kissing her way down to the left temple, along the jaw line to the collarbone, sliding slowly to the middle of the throat and ascending to the mouth. The smaller woman's lips were slightly parted but Xena took her time gently sucking the lower and upper lip before accepting the invitation. The tips of their tongues began a slow and gentle dance, gradually becoming more sensual.

None of Xena's former experiences prepared her for what she was feeling now. Yes, there was lust; she could feel the heat throbbing between her thighs but it was lacking the urgency she usually felt. Her senses were concentrated on the body beneath her. Her own needs fading almost into non-existence in comparison to the bone deep necessity to please her companion.

When their lips reluctantly parted for need of air, their breathing had become heavy and fast. Xena slipped from her kneeling position to lie on her right side, facing the younger woman. Her lips softly nibbling Gabrielle's ear, retracing its outlines with the tip of her tongue and sucking at the earlobe. She began to whisper.

"Do you know how smooth your skin is, Gabrielle? Feeling it touching my lips is intoxicating. Kissing you takes my breath away. I want to feel your touch on my skin. I want to hold you in my arms, chase all your fears away. I want you to enjoy being with me, I want to bring you pleasure like nobody else before did. But now, just lying here beside you, smelling the lavender oil you put into your bath and still being able to sense your own sweet scent makes me happier than I've ever been. Just being near you gives me joy, please don't leave me."

The smaller woman rolled to face Xena and began another passionate kiss, slowly increasing the

pressure on the other's body thus pushing Xena on her back. When she broke the kiss, she was answered with a groan of disappointment.

"Please place your hands behind your head. There's something I want to try."

Xena did as she was told without hesitating for even a fraction of a heartbeat. She swallowed hard when the scribe began to imitate her earlier actions by kissing her forehead, and her heartbeat really picked up when Gabrielle finally arriving at the middle of her throat didn't search her mouth but continued south to her breasts.

Her already hard nipples tightened further, her back involuntarily arched closer to the mouth while Gabrielle continued her journey to the tip of Xena's left breast. Tremors run through her whole body when she felt teeth grazing her hardened flesh. A tongue was slowly flicking while a soft hand was kneading the other side. Xena's pectoral muscles flexed in response and she didn't mind moaning Gabrielle's name. She could feel the green eyes studying her reactions but was way beyond caring.

With the young woman's mouth now firmly planted on her right breast while her hand was kneading the left she felt at home. For the first time in her adult life, she really felt safe. Until then she found her pleasure in controlling the release of her mates but now she joyfully surrendered. Gabrielle's movements became faster, her grip firmer, and Xena's body unconsciously answered. Suddenly all movement stopped.

Xena lifted her head; Gabrielle was kneeling beside her, tears pouring down her cheeks. She sat up completely, all her high-pitched desire was gone, and began to kiss the tears away, careful not to touch her but with her lips. The salty drops continued to flow in eerie silence.

"Gabrielle, please let me hold you in my arms."

As only answer a body came nearer, a face was hidden at her chest. She cradled the smaller body almost as one would do with a child and rocked both of them slowly to and thro'. Xena could literally feel her anguish and she knew words never would be able to soothe her. So she began to hum an old lullaby her mother used to put her and her brothers to sleep when they were ill. She even remembered the words and felt Gabrielle's body gradually relaxing. She repeated the song twice. The tears finally subsided and Xena placed a tender kiss on Gabrielle's soft hair.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome, anytime, Gab. I'll hold you whenever you think you need it and as long as you like me to. You're safe with me. Perhaps it would be better if we tried to get some sleep now."

"I'm so afraid; please keep on holding me, Xena."

And so she did. They sat together for a long time. The tall warrior gently rocked the blond woman, now and then placing a kiss on top of her head. Humming another lullaby, she

soothingly ran the fingers of her left hand up and down Gabrielle's right arm. She feared Gabrielle would once again and irrevocably hide inside herself if they didn't talk about it now; still she dreaded what the possible outcome could mean to both of them. So her question was fuelled with equal parts of determination and fear.

"What are you afraid of, Gabrielle?"

There was no answer, at least not immediately. At first the younger woman's body tensed, then she snuggled closer to Xena's chest as if hiding in her strong arms. When she finally spoke, it took all of Xena's exceptionally sharp hearing to make out her words.

"I want to touch you, I want to feel your reaction to my touch, and I want you to touch me, Xena. No one ever asked me what I wanted to do, not even my younger sister. No one ever did what I liked to do. It was always me who had to obey. You're the first person in the world who ever paid attention to me. I'm safe in your arms, and when you smile, it is as if the sun rises for the second time a day. My heart longs to be taught what it means to be loved and to love in return but my body betrays my heart. My body perceives your touch as a threat and it perceives touching you as a threat. It paralyses me. It scares me."

When Gabrielle fell silent Xena wanted desperately to push her further, she wanted to ask questions able to help the younger woman to understand what exactly was happening. She didn't, instead she reassuringly pulled her body closer still and let her take her time.

"The last slaver was an exception. He beat me harder than any other ever did. Most of the masters called me a trouble maker, and I was punished often." She continued hesitatingly. "But they also took great care not to damage their property permanently. I usually knew in advance when I was due to a punishment, the anticipation was sort of part of it. I feared the pain and the humiliation it would bring, and my body reacted as it did today. My body became tense, my breathing faster, my nipples erect, and there was a strange wetness between my thighs. It always went away after the punishment. Perhaps you should do what the others did. Perhaps it goes away when I'm whipped or caned."

Xena's face in rapid transition was a study in anger, sadness, and fierce protectiveness. But she knew she now couldn't give in to these familiar feelings, she had to try and heal the younger woman instead.

"Gabrielle, my love, please tell me how my body reacted when you kissed me."

Silence.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Please, Gabrielle, just try it. Close your eyes and recall what my body did. Describe it, my love. What did you feel when your fingertips travelled down my right side to my breast?"

Silence, and a low sigh.

"The muscles under your skin were hard to the touch. You were tense as if you were ready to explode in action the very next moment."

"What about my breathing?"

"It was faster and not as deep as it usually is, as if you were doing something very exhausting." Gabrielle stopped talking, and Xena once again had a hard time not to rush her in any way. "You also were wet between your thighs. - Your body reacted as mine did, but you couldn't have been afraid. You're strong and independent. No one could ever harm you, and so I'm sure you weren't afraid."

"You're wrong, my love. There are a lot of things I'm afraid of. My body may be stronger and faster than most other people's but I can be hurt emotionally as easy as anybody else. I just try and don't show it. But you are right also. My body didn't react to fear. I know it may be difficult to believe but please trust me in there. The human body only has a very limited amount of ways to communicate, especially when dealing with strong emotions like fear or hate or love or desire. What you saw was desire, sexual arousal. At first sight, it looks the same but if one takes a closer look there are subtle differences. The first difference is the scent, fear and arousal smell totally different, and the second is in the eyes. Two days ago, when we were kissing under the apple tree, there was a moment when you looked into my eyes. Try to compare it to the way my eyes are looking during a council meeting or something. The signs are there, you just have to learn how to read them properly."

Silence.

"The pupils were larger than usual, I think," Gabrielle said, "almost begging me to come closer. The blue all around was much darker and it was sparkling like the water of a mountain lake in sunshine. Inciting me to drown in their depths."

Silence, once again. Gabrielle began to extricate herself from Xena's protective embrace. When they were sitting face to face, she continued. "I know what desire, lust, pure arousal looks like. It's as if there's a fire burning in the eyes, consuming everything else. Yes, there was a fire in yours also, two days ago as well as this evening but it was tempered by tenderness. Your eyes didn't show lust; they showed love. I didn't believe you when you said you loved me, now I do."

"I love you, Gabrielle."

"Please make love to me. Show me how to make love to you. I never learned how to satisfy a woman."

"There's nothing to learn, my love, just follow your heart." It was Xena's time to fall silent, reaching a conclusion she continued. "If you are really sure about this, I first will tell you what I intend to do:

"I will kiss your forehead and your eyes, my mouth will slowly taste your sweet lips, my tongue will dance around yours. I will place small kisses following the jaw line to one of your ears, and I will thoroughly clean it and nibble your earlobe. I'll kiss my way down to your shoulder and further down to your fingers, my lips barely touching your fingertips. I will press my cheek in the palm of your hand and gently suck your thumb. Your hand will guide my head back to your lips. Countless heartbeats later, my tongue will whisper in your other ear. I'll find my way to the other shoulder and arm. This time I will kiss my way upwards on the inside of the arm where the skin is even smoother and more sensitive. Three quarters back up I will stop, raise my head and ask your permission to kiss your breasts. You will order me to do so and I will obey.

"The kisses will be very light at the beginning, my lips slightly touching the soft flesh. My lips teasing them slowly, I will feel my own nipples getting harder than they already were. I will feel my clitoris throbbing and wetness pouring steadily out of my centre. My laboured breathing will match yours, and when I can't stand it any longer, I will suck your nipples one after the other like a newly born child does her mother's. They will get harder to the point of hurting. I will continue to shower your beautiful hillocks with kisses for a long time. My mouth will continue southwards but before relinquishing your breasts my eyes will beg for my hands to touch them while I kiss my way to the soft blond curls between your thighs. You will nod. I'll soon sit between your wide spread legs.

"My hands will knead your breasts in a slow, gentle rhythm. I will kiss your pubic hair, intoxicated by the scent of your arousal, the scent that is yours and yours alone, sweet with a hint of saltiness and musk, flowing freely but never enough to completely quench my thirst. I will once again look into your eyes, just to make sure. My tongue will begin to explore the folds of your nether lips and I will eagerly lap the spicy fluids. I will feel your muscles tense even further, your hips arching from the mattress. My tongue will circle around your clitoris that's pulsating with need. The moment the tip of my tongue begins to flick the swollen bud, we both will come. Our interior muscles will relax and then suddenly constrict, once, twice, with every slow stroke of my tongue. And when our bodies finally go limp, I will take you in my arms and hold you tight, and it will be the first time in my life that I didn't have sex but made love."

Gabrielle's eyes were locked with Xena's, and both were sparkling with desire. The younger woman's voice was hoarse and barely above a whisper when she finally could muster the strength to speak.

"Please make love to me, Xena."

There were surprisingly few awkward moments and as the night drew on the Conqueror found it more and more easy to put Gabrielle's pleasure first. They fell asleep just before dawn, and it took all of Xena's self-control not to cancel the sparring session to stay in bed with her for the rest of the day to more thoroughly explore her new lover's body. From now on during daytime, there always was a hint of joyful anticipation in the air whenever the two women were together. In the nights, Xena continued to serve the younger woman, reading the language of her body and the messages of her eyes, slowly coaching her beyond her fears - and then more than two quarter moons later there was the night when Gabrielle reciprocated for the first time.

Chapter Three: Night watch

The tall blonde Amazon found her right arm blocked in an iron like grip when she was about to strike the face of the girl in front of her for the second time. She turned her head, and hissed between her teeth. "This is none of your business, slave, back out or you'll regret it!"

Xena smiled, one of these smiles capable of chilling even mighty kings to the core of their bones, and then she said with the sweetest of voices. "Why don't you play with someone your size, 'Amazon'?"

Just as the former Conqueror of all Greece and Rome had anticipated, the woman drew her sword with her left hand and aimed for Xena's side but found herself shoved irresistibly backwards, clearing almost half a body length between her and the girl, and like the right the left wrist also was held captive with unbreakable force. Xena still smiled, and the fierce determination of her opponent began to falter.

"What by Artemis' bow is happening here?" The strong voice of Queen Melosa came from the opposite side of the training ground. Xena released both arms but still made sure to stay between the angry Amazon warrior and the young girl who was about five feet tall, slim with only the faintest hints of developing womanhood, her chestnut eyes looked frightened, irritated, and also grateful.

"This slave attacked me, your majesty. I knew from the beginning it was awfully wrong to accept this murderer and her scum in the village. I was about to install a very important lesson of discipline in my young protégé here when this abomination of the gods tried to kill me."

"Xena?"

"Queen Melosa," the dark haired warrior answered, her face showing the slightest hint of amusement, and kneeled graciously before the Amazon Queen, "if this were the case, she would be counting her dinars to cross river Styx by now. As you know, I was assigned to repair the stone wall in the back of the training ground. This 'warrior' and the girl had a sparring session, staff against sword, obviously for the first time. After about two candelmarks, she deliberately began to break the defences of the girl. She executed a set of moves more appropriate for graduate class than for beginner lessons, and the flat of her sword hit the girl hard, deliberately. To me it sounded like at least two ribs cracked but she didn't stop the lesson. Then she ordered her to bring a coup of water. The girl visibly was in pain and drank herself before returning to her 'teacher'. She then backhanded the injured girl in the face; her second blow was blocked by me. I'm rea...."

"Najara, I want you to wait for me in your hut, we need to talk. Xena, I will accompany Thania to the healer's hut. They will take care of her ribs and of the swelling in her face. Prepare to be punished."

Xena nodded, rose and went to the Queen's hut; there now would be no more threats to the girls security, and Anara was a very accomplished healer but nevertheless she longed to tend to the girl herself. Melosa carefully helped the young girl to staggering feet while the angry warrior still stood motionless, glowering, and only reluctantly followed Xena to the central part of the village where all the individual and communal sleeping quarters were located, a look of unconcealed hatred in the eyes.

Xena entered the central room of Melosa's hut; it was a large square room with a well aired fireplace on the right side of the door, the hide of a great dark brown bear in front of it and many randomly distributed cushions. Two large windows dominated the left wall, capturing the sun from midday to sundown. Between them, a large desk with scrolls and other smaller pieces of parchment and a single chair dominated the room. In the back were two doors, one leading to the Queen's bedroom, the other where Xena now was headed opened to a small chamber with nothing but a bed, a small dresser and a chest secured by a large iron padlock. She sat down on the bed, took off her boots, and peeled herself out of her leathers. Aside her slave collar she now was completely naked.

Then she closed the door from the outside, and went to the right corner in the back of the central room where she knelt with her back to the door; so she would immediately be on display for everyone entering the hut. Xena resigned herself to a long period of waiting but merely five candledrops later the Queen entered her quarters.

"Please, turn around, Xena. I don't think that humiliation should be a part of punishment."

"I try to see it more as a matter of trust, mistress." Xena answered while turning around after hesitating imperceptibly.

"Why did you interfere?"

"The last four days, since I'm repairing the stone wall, I had the opportunity to cast glances to the training grounds. I'm a warrior more than anything else, and there's a part of me, longing for sword exercise or any other kind of drills. I know that's not possible now but... Sorry, I'm deviating... Najara and her apprentice always choose sparring hours not requested by any others and she never allowed her to participate in group training sessions, they always were alone on the ground, and so I had glimpses of her 'training techniques'. I don't know much about the traditions of this tribe but I also don't think that screaming and swearing should be the usual teaching tools. This warrior, Najara, she never was gentle or even understanding to this sensible girl; there's a part of me that easily can understand such behaviour, during a fight there's no time for being nice, but today she plainly overstepped my limit of tolerance. The girl, Thania, she was very brave for someone her age, she can't have more than eleven winters, considering her injuries and what I had to witness the past few days, praise would have been more adequate than punishment."

"Next time you find the slightest thing out of line with your perception of Amazon rules or conduct you will tell me immediately. This time you were right to interfere but next time you

probably won't, so talk to me, trust my experience. What you did was the right thing, nevertheless I'm forced...."

"I know, mistress, and I knew when I decided to interfere. I'm guilty of disobedience. Your orders were unambiguous: 'Don't interact with any of the warriors or other Amazons without explicit clearance.' I regret, it was necessary but I will not apologise for doing it. I'm ready to receive the punishment you, Queen Melosa, find adequate." Xena answered, and slowly lowered her eyes back to the floor.

"You really are a woman of contradictions, Xena. But I suppose I won't get any more answers any time soon, so we better get this done with now. I have another warrior to reprimand. For disobedience, you will receive ten strokes on the back and ten strokes on your bottoms with a leather strap. Do you want to be restrained?"

"No, mistress, this won't be necessary."

"Come here, get on your knees, we will begin with your back." Xena did as she was told, and Melosa loosened a one and a half inch broad leather strap from her belt. It was moons since she had to use it on any of her subjects. The weapons' master usually dealt with discipline failures but Xena was her personal slave, so there weren't any excuses. The first stroke marked the right side of Xena's broad shoulders.

"One. Thank you, mistress." Xena said, loosening the grip on her thighs, and bracing herself hands flat, arms outstretched for what was to come.

"There's no need to thank me, I just do what I have to do, and there's no need to count either, unless you really want to."

The moment Melosa released her tenth and last stroke the main door burst open: "My Queen, the punishment of this slave should be public. She offended a renowned warrior in the open; she should face the consequences in the open. My honour is at stake, your majesty."

"Xena, get your clothes, and check on the girl, take your time. Come back when you've finished, knock on the door but remain outside. We will then finish your punishment." Xena rose without giving the slightest indication of even acknowledging the presence of the other woman, and went to the back door. Less than ten heartbeats later, she left the hut, imperceptibly bowing towards the Queen.

"My orders were more than clear, Najara, you were to wait in your hut."

"Your majesty, I learned that our short encounter at the training ground did have witnesses. The actions of this slave offended my dignity, this can't be. I demand complete satisfaction."

"You're right and you're wrong, Najara. Making Xena's punishment an official and public affair also means making your punishment an official and public affair, both being recorded in the

history scrolls of the Amazon nation."

"My punishment? But majesty, I did nothing wrong."

"Nothing wrong?! Self-deception won't help you, Najara. Thania was your responsibility, it was your mission to teach her what it means being an Amazon, proud, and strong, and fierce, and free, and full of love and compassion. You failed; you fell short on your mission. An apprentice is not to serve your vanity but to remind you of your own mortality, and to assure the future of the whole nation. The young ones will live whether or not they know about our roots and traditions. We are not to spoil them but we're also bound to protect and to serve the next generation. Every punishment has to be justified and I don't consider backhanding an injured child only because she tried to quench her thirst appropriate behaviour. Less than one and a half moons ago, I issued a warning, and obviously, you didn't listen. So, for you there are two possibilities, either you submit to all of my orders or I will have to reconsider your assignment."

Najara regarded her superior for what seemed like a lifetime. She didn't move nor speak but surely, she was more than on the edge of losing her composure.

"This is your last chance; you can make your decision in the servant's room. It will not be easy for you to regain my confidence and my trust but it still is possible, so decide wisely." The Queen then turned her head to the scrolls on her desk, seemingly oblivious of the tall warrior.

About one and a half candelmarks later Xena knocked on the door though she felt more like bursting it open and kill this so-called warrior inside with her bare hands. When the door was opened, it took all of her willpower not to charge at the woman bend over the desk obviously to receive her share of punishment. Melosa could feel the tension and the anger emanating from Xena, and now she began to understand why nobody easily dared to second guess the Conqueror.

"What happened, Xena? What took you so long? Is everything all right with Thania?"

"I made a promise to her. I told her that everything will be fine, and that there's nothing to fear anymore. But there's no way for her to forget any time soon." Xena's voice was slightly trembling with anger and sadness at the same time, she took a deep breath. "I'm sorry, Queen Melosa, I just wish to be the Conqueror again, long enough to gut the bitch in your hut with her own sword, and then slowly slice her throat."

"Sit down, and tell me what happened." She indicated a carefully smoothed and chiselled tree trunk that served as a bench in front of her hut.

Xena took her place at the right side of the Amazon Queen; she closed her eyes and sighed.

"Thania was abused, physically and sexually for at least the last six moons."

"How did you find out?"

"When I came to the healer's hut there was a rather heated argument going on inside. Thania was

almost hysterical and strictly refused to take her clothes off. Anara already had tended to her face but the ribs still had to be wrapped up. It took some time to convince her but eventually she calmed down. There were a lot of injuries."

Xena fell silent and once again closed her eyes, when she finally continued her voice was toneless and devoid of any emotions.

"Two broken ribs and a lot of bruises all over her body. Deep gashes on her back like whip marks but Thania said they were made with a cane. Two of them are infected, intentionally, by putting ashes in them. Her breasts each have several cuts made with a knife, and there were traces of heavy nipple clamps. The pubic zone also is totally bruised and sore from being penetrated with a phallus. Her buttocks are stripped with too many gashes and lash marks to count."

Another deep breath.

"Thania told us that this is part of being a warrior, to be able to fight even when your whole body is aching, to be able to serve another warrior in any way, to face the consequences of disobedience and mistakes. She said she deserved this treatment for being too strong headed and not to be trusted, and that before commanding a weapon one should be able to submit one's will and dignity, to learn respect for the weapon. She's merely more than a child, and yet she had to live through things...."

Melosa didn't bother to hide the disgust and anger this description had aroused. She sat motionless on the log and regarded her hands when Xena's voice finally trailed away. She wanted to close them around Najara's throat, crush her windpipe, and then slowly break her neck.

"Queen Melosa, I promised that she never again has to fear her."

"No, she won't, never again. I'll tell her myself, now! You're waiting here, outside the house. If she is stupid enough to come out of there, you're allowed to render her unconscious but you will not harm her in any other way."

"I will comply."

Melosa crossed the central place of her village in a beeline for the healer's hut. Aside Gabrielle, Thania at the moment was the only patient. The Amazon Queen knelt at the right side of her cot, the eyes of the girl suddenly flew open, and for the fraction of a heartbeat, she looked like some exhausted and frightened fawn.

"Thania, you're secure now. She will never harm you again. I promise. It is my responsibility to prevent such things. I'm sorry; I failed you. From now on, you will be my apprentice because what Najara did to you is not the proper way to train warriors. You're a very brave girl, and I'm sure you will make me a very proud tutor. The first thing I want you to do is to take your time healing of all of your injuries, and when you need a shoulder to lean on or to cry on I'll be there

for you as well as Xena and Anara and Gabrielle. From now on I won't let anything bad happen to you."

The young Amazon looked at her wide eyed and slightly overwhelmed. It took her a few candledrops to regain some sort of composure. "I will work very hard, your majesty, I promise. Please don't hurt Xena, she only wanted to...." Her voice trailed off, and she was fast asleep due to a tea combining painkillers and sleeping herbs Anara gave to her moments before the Queen's arrival.

Melosa turned to leave the hut when the healer called her back. "Your majesty, please wait. It's about Xena."

"Anara, you should know better. Xena committed a deliberate act of disobedience; I don't have a choice here."

"It's not about the punishment, Xena already tried to explain it to Thania. She said not being punished for her transgression would hurt far more than all the strap marks she will receive. She said that it gives you no joy punishing her or anybody else, and that she doesn't have to worry. No, that's not what I want to talk about."

"Til today I saw Xena as an accomplished healer but only for the body. Now I know she not only has the skills of a healer but also the heart. Without her help, I never would have succeeded in tending to the girl or even get her to speak about what happened. She knew how to touch her without being menacing; she knew how to talk to her and to soothe her soul. I learned a lot today about healing and about the former Conqueror."

"It was Xena's voice that initially calmed her down. She hesitantly accepted my ministrations on her upper body but her whole body tensed when I tried to put some salve on her pubic area. Xena simply said. 'It's okay, little one, no one will touch you if you're not comfortable with it. This salve, its smell is rather repugnant but it will help ease your pain, I promise. You can put it on yourself, we'll help, and that's all.' Thania nodded almost imperceptibly, and with a smooth, catlike motion Xena was seated behind the girl, and supported her back. The girl still is frightened to the bone but Xena... I don't know.... Please tell her she did a really good job here."

"I will, Anara."

When Melosa entered her hut she found the Amazon warrior in exact the same position she had left her but now the woman was unconscious. Xena almost casually leaned on the wall close to the door, a picture of relaxed boredom belying the angry tension still rushing through her whole body.

"If you judge her according to Amazon law she will die but a trial would force Thania to relate all her experiences in detail to the whole tribe or at least to the council. She has to talk about it but I doubt doing it in front of everyone would do her any good."

"You're right. What would you do if it were your responsibility? Apart from killing her on the spot, that is."

"She can't stay in the village any longer; her presence alone is susceptible to hurt the girl. Perhaps you could offer her a choice: expulsion or a trial ending with a death sentence, Queen Melosa. It's not exactly honest but I'm sure she won't call the bluff, she's too arrogant to even consider Thania's feelings."

"I'll give it a thought, Xena. Please leave us now, return to your assigned task. Your punishment will be completed after sundown."

"Yes, mistress." Xena left the hut, silently thankful of being alone, and able to spend some built up aggressive energy on the stone wall. She worked without a stop until the fading light made it difficult to place the great stones properly, and then she washed up and passed by the healer's hut before facing the remainder of her punishment. The girl due to the healing tea was still asleep, and Xena spent some peaceful candledrops with Gabrielle.

The Queen's hut was empty when Xena finally returned, so she built a fire in the fireplace, and prepared some bread, cheese, and a pitcher of cider on a tray next to the bear rug, as she did every evening. Then she discarded her leathers in her small room and knelt in the same corner as earlier this day, now facing the entrance.

Two very long candlemarks later, the Queen finally returned. She seemed exhausted and bonelessly slumped into the chair in front of her desk. Protocol commanded a slave, and especially a slave doomed to be punished, to wait for a word or a signal of her mistress before moving. Xena didn't care; she filled a goblet from the tray with cider and handed it to Melosa, then she once again lowered herself to her knees and began to unlace the boots. Only then, the Queen reacted.

"What do you think you're doing, Xena? I told you more than once, I don't need a servant."

"I apologise, mistress, I only wanted you to be more comfortable. I suppose your afternoon wasn't all too pleasant. I didn't mean to interfere in your personal sphere, although I'd like..." Her eyes sank to her lap.

"Xena, look at me. I appreciate your concern, and I will answer your questions concerning Najara but first there is a punishment term to complete."

"Of course, mistress, but you also should consider a supplementary punishment because what I just did also is against Amazon law. I suppose it should be considered as presumptuous."

"Presumptuous, no, I don't think so. You're a very caring person although slightly over protective. Such behaviour is by no means expected from any slave. I certainly will not punish you - or anyone else, for that matter - being a compassionate human being." The Queen sensed Xena's upcoming protestation, and changed the subject. "Now please, place your upper body on

the surface of the desk."

About half a candlemark later slave and mistress were comfortably seated in front of the fireplace, both wearing oversized sleeping shifts and sipping some cider.

"So she left the nation for good?"

"So I presume. I sent her to another village about five days of fast travel north of here with orders to begin a new apprenticeship as a weaver and to forego her weapons. I also gave her a sealed scroll with information for the leader of our northern village. It contains a description of the latest events and her crimes as well as a set of instructions designed to tune down Najara's aggressiveness and to subdue her pride. But I don't think she will even try to atone. My orders are rather severe, and I let her read the scroll before I sealed it; I probably was too severe but I saw the fear in Thania's eyes, and I'm afraid I didn't think very rationally then. Questioning Najara was frustrating; she simply didn't acknowledge her guilt..."

"To her, what she did is the way things are done, the only way possible. She didn't think twice abusing Thania for her own sexual pleasure. It's the strong who decide and the weak who have to obey. I know she's a good fighter, always in the front rows, never retreating; killing is what she lives for. The sound of her sword slicing flesh and bone, the coppery scent of blood, this is her delight but I doubt she ever made a good leader. She only feels alive on a battlefield. Fighting for her is like swimming in a refreshing spring of dark energy.... I'm sorry, Queen Melosa, I didn't want to hold a lecture."

"You are welcome, everything you said is true. When we last fought off one of these petty warlords with more ambition than brains, she was close to uncontrollable. We defeated them easily but when they finally put their weapons down, she continued fighting and killing. Eponin had to knock her out. Still, what she did to Thania, I never would have thought possible. How did you know?"

"I didn't know about Thania, and I'm angry with me for not knowing immediately but I believed her darkness being limited to the fighting. I was wrong. I knew the first moment I laid eyes on her what kind of fighter she is. Her eyes gave her away, there's no life in her eyes, that's how I knew."

Although she was sure not to get an answer Melosa still had to ask because she really wanted to know more about this enigmatic woman before the trial started, deciding about her living or dying. "Did you have many people like her in your army to know them so well?"

At first, there was no reaction but then Xena's eyes found the grey brown ones a few feet away, and after what seemed like hours to the Queen turned her gaze to the flickering flames. Soon there was a sad smile on her face.

"No, there weren't many, Queen Melosa. Usually they are loners; they don't obey orders willingly. So I never accepted them. There was only one, more than ten years ago: myself. -

Being dead inside made life bearable. I lived for the fear I could see in the eyes of my opponents during battle, and the pain I felt myself every day was eased by the pain I inflicted upon others. Bloodshed and hatred were all I lived for, all I craved."

"What happened? The Conqueror never was a ruthless bloodthirsty monster, not even during the hardest time."

"You're wrong, your majesty. She was and I still am. This monster is still there, right under the surface but it no longer is in control. Over the years I learned to cage and to tame it but it's still there. You saw it during the fight. What happened?! A woman I tried to kill one day saved my life the next. She made an almost imperceptible hairline crack in my heart but I didn't know it then. It was the beginning of a slow, gradual change. It took almost ten years to understand what was going on inside of me, and the death of many innocent people. If you don't mind, Queen Melosa, I'd like to go to sleep now."

"Yes, of course, sleep well, Xena."

The black haired woman now knelt in front of the Queen. "Would you please fasten my restraints, mistress?"

"I don't think this will be necessary any longer, Xena."

"Please, mistress. I have to be reminded of my station in life; the slave collar simply isn't enough. You're far too generous a mistress, and I too eagerly make use of your kindness. My life isn't mine anymore but it's not enough just to know this, I also have to feel it."

With the fluid movements of a good fighter or dancer Queen Melosa rose to her feet, there was a hint of sadness in her eyes, and her voice was calm and gentle. "Perhaps, you're right. Follow my lead, slave."

Some candelights later, she returned to the fireplace and poured herself a new goblet of cider. Xena's unexpected revelations certainly gave her a lot to think about but she still didn't understand why this proud ruler and warrior suddenly had decided to become a slave. Her mind flashed back to this day less than half a moon ago.

All during the last season small detachments of soldiers wearing the colours of the Conqueror intruded Amazon territory thereby violating the peace treaty. Her letters of protest were not answered, but from their outlooks in the trees, the Amazon guards had no difficulty in killing them or scaring them away without taking risks themselves. This time there were much more men, a small army of seven or eight scores just outside of shooting range in front of the forest, threatening to burn down the woods if the Amazons weren't to come out for the fight. Her warriors immediately went to meet the challenge. They were outnumbered two to one. Then from the east where a two-days-ride away the frontier fort of the Conqueror is situated a group of riders emerged. In the lead were two women riding double on a golden war horse, followed by

twenty heavily armed soldiers. They rode directly between the lines, their backs towards the Amazon warriors.

"What in the nine levels of Hades do you think you're doing? No one wearing my colours and insignia is to attack the Amazon nation without facing my discipline."

There were no answers but a bolt released from a crossbow. The imposing figure with the brass armour snapped the bolt easily out of the air, brought it to her nose, and threw it disgusted on the grassy ground.

"Poison, only cowards use poison. In my army is no room for cowards. So, you better put your weapons and your uniforms down immediately, and then I may consider sparing your miserable lives."

The soldiers attacked, and Melosa saw twenty men of the First Order and the Conqueror of all Greece and Rome fighting their own army. Soon the Amazons joined the melee, and Queen Melosa fought side by side with someone she always had considered an enemy to the nation. It was the first time she had the opportunity to witness the fighting skills of this famed woman whose sword easily sliced through three opponents at a time while never letting the blonde woman on her right out of sight.

When the numbers of attackers and defenders about one and a half candelmarks later began to even out, the Conqueror stopped an arrow merely a hand's width away from Melosa's throat, and gutted a man trying to attack her from behind without even looking. Then she threw her chakram to intercept another arrow aimed at the Amazon Queen.

Thus distracted she wasn't able to hinder a spear piercing the right shoulder of her companion. The blonde who until then showed a respectable level of staff mastery went down. The Conqueror froze in her movement, and a sword thrust against her armour. A cry only just resembling a name escaped her lips, and a wave of energy seemed to wash through her whole body.

With the still silvery shining round chakram in one hand and the blood stained sword in the other, she now hacked her way through the enemy soldiers, and soon not one was left standing. The battle was over within candelmarks. But not before one of them managed to kill a horse who collapsed on top of the blonde woman and impaled the spearhead even further.

The Conqueror was oblivious to everything and everybody but her injured friend. Somehow, she managed to get her out from under the horse's corpse. Tears were running down her face, she shook her head, and began gently touching the right side of the woman's body. There were many fractured bones as far as Melosa could see but being no healer herself, she was certain the woman was dead.

The fearsome warrior reached for a pouch between the folds of her battle dress, and fed the blonde some drops of a thick greenish liquid. She sliced the spear's shaft with her chakram

careful not to move the tip, and then she took linen straps soaked them with another liquid and pressed them slowly around the iron tip still impaled in the woman's shoulder. Only then, the Conqueror raised her head and took record of the extent of the disaster all around her. Some of her men were obviously dead, all the others injured, and only about ten of Melosa's Amazons were in any kind of condition to tend to the wounded.

She turned around, lowered herself on her left knee and addressed the Queen. "Queen Melosa, I apologise for the breaking of the peace treaty. It happened without my knowing and consent but nevertheless it was my responsibility. I, Xena, hereby resign my rule of Greece and Rome and surrender to the Amazon nation. You may regard me as your prisoner but there's one condition: Help me to save the life of those of my men that still can be saved, and let them go unharmed when they are well enough to travel." Her eyes moved towards the motionless woman. "Help me save her life, and then I will do whatever you fancy."

"I demand your weapons and your armour as signs of the honesty of your intentions, Conqueror. Then my healer and her apprentice will tend to the wounds of your men as they do to my warriors. But I'm afraid; there's little we can do for the young woman at your side. You will need a new body slave some time soon."

A cloud of anger darkened the features of the tall warrior and her face changed into an unreadable mask, suddenly she was towering over the Queen, her voice was quiet but cold.

"Her name is Gabrielle; she is as free as any of your women, Queen Melosa. It probably will take moons to heal all of her injuries but she will survive. At the moment, there's nothing I can do for her. There seems to be no internal bleeding. Once her bones are realigned, she can't be transported safely for the following weeks and if I were to remove the spear now she would die for loss of blood. The only real danger is the poison; I gave her something to countermand the effect. I'm not sure it will work, so her condition has to be monitored."

"You speak with the assurance of a healer, Conqueror. As long as any of your men is in danger I grant you the freedom to move unrestrained in the village."

Xena simply nodded. She took a middle-sized sack out of the saddlebag of her golden horse and went to kneel next to one of the Amazons. A young warrior with a dislocated shoulder. Two of her fingers quickly hit a spot between collarbone and shoulder blade, she pulled and twisted the upper arm at the same time making the girl scream, and then she made a makeshift sling out of the woman's belt and once again hit the same spot.

"The insignia you wear say you will be a healer's apprentice next season. I know your shoulder hurts but I really would appreciate some help. What's your name?"

"Chulapa, Conqueror." The young woman stammered. She was about five feet five with long curly hair and hazel eyes.

"Chulapa, so you are a descendent from the northern Amazons. It's good to know that some of them have survived. Please call me Xena. I want you to help those of your sisters who are still on

their own feet to help themselves. And I want you to check on my friend over there every five candelmarks. If her breathing begins to slow, or to quicken, or to flat, you call me. If she's dreaming or sweating or moving, you call me."

"Yes, Con..., Xena."

It took about two candelmarks before the healers from the village arrived, and meanwhile Xena proceeded in small slowly widening circles to tend likewise to Amazons and soldiers. Not one of them ever doubted her authority or her knowledge. When the reinforcement finally reached the battlefield, she took a break - only to shed her weapons and armour, and lowly speaking to her horse.

The battle had started just before noon but it was short of sundown when finally all the litters and stretchers needed to transport the badly wounded were ready. Xena worked tirelessly, and though Anara at first was more than grumpy about the decision of the Queen she soon learned to appreciate Xena's healing skills. The group arrived at the village when the moon was at its highest. Melosa had tents prepared in a clearing near the village to accommodate the men, and the young blonde named Gabrielle was transported to the healer's hut.

Chulapa continued to monitor her condition but there was no change. About a candelmark before sunrise all the others were cared for, and Xena and Anara began the laborious task of tending to Gabrielle's multiple injuries. It took the better part of the next day to remove the spear and reset all the bones, and they could call themselves extremely lucky not to be interrupted by an emergency of sorts.

Melosa somehow did manage to take a nap between the return of the fighting force and the meeting of the council of elders in the morning. None of the women were happy with her decision, and after over four candelmarks of inefficient discussions, she made it a royal prerogative but then Xena managed to surprise her for the third time in less than two days.

Having finished her task in the healer's hut, washed up, and changed in a dark blue tunic Xena requested a meeting with the council of elders, the leaders of the army and the royal guard, the scribe, and the Queen.

"As you all know by now I surrendered my weapons to Queen Melosa. I grant that she will honour the conditions of my surrender concerning the surviving members of the First Order.

"I'm by all means alone responsible for the intrusions the nation had to suffer during the last moons. I didn't pay enough attention to this part of the realm. This is one reason why I resigned the rule and administration of Greece and Rome. I will send two of my men to Corinth as soon as possible to let the administrative council know that I will not return. My reign has long fulfilled its purpose. Since we put an end to the war with Rome, there's no threat to the security of my home anymore."

Saying what she did to the Queen had been a spur of the moment decision but it also was the right thing to do, for Greece that no longer needed a an Emperor-like Conqueror, for herself who now was freed from the boredom of ruling and for Gabrielle who would be able to live in peace and security with the Amazons. So, it was easy to take another step in the right direction.

"As most of you certainly will remember I also am responsible for other crimes committed against the Amazon nation and single Amazons, and therefore must be considered an enemy. There's not much I have to offer but I know the Amazons have a long juridical tradition with a great sense of justice. So, I submit of my own free will to an Amazon trial as a public evaluation of the extent of my crimes, the spirit in which they were committed, and the damage done to nation and individual alike. I suggest a public trial with a jury of representatives of all crafts, ranks and ages. I will not question the verdict, and I will accept your sentence without contradiction.

"I only request that the trial will be postponed until my friend Gabrielle is able to attend the session or sessions. She has to witness what and who I really am. Until then, to make all of you more comfortable it would be the best thing if I live amongst the nation as a slave held by guilt."

"Do you really think only one of us could possibly believe that there is even a remote chance to atone for all of your crimes? A trial will only end in a death sentence; it would be easier to kill you now, Conqueror." One of the elders said.

"You're right. It would be easier, it's what the Conqueror would have done only a few moons ago, and no, I don't think that even an eternity in Tartarus could rectify all my crimes. Atonement isn't an option. I'll await your decision in the healer's hut."

Now in the middle of the night, Xena's words to the council for the first time began to make some sort of sense but Melosa knew that there still was much more to it. It just wasn't discernible yet. She knew she should go to bed but she also knew sleep would elude her. So when she heard the sounds of one of Xena's nightmares, her thoughts drifted back once again.

The council meeting continued for the remainder of the day, and when Queen Melosa finally entered the healer's hut the sun was long past its descent. She found Xena fast asleep, leaning uncomfortably against the frame of the bed of the blonde woman, one hand protectively closed around her left biceps. She decided not to disturb her but to check instead on her injured subjects. About half a candlemark later Xena stirred in her sleep, moaned, and only a couple of heartbeats later was wide awake, breathing roughly. Her self-control was quickly reaffirmed and she followed the Queen. They left the infirmary part, and retired to Anara's private rooms in the back of the hut.

"Did the council agree?"

"Yes, they did but before we deal with details, I really like to know why you felt compelled to do this. You more or less in the council chamber forfeited your life. Yesterdays agreement would have been honoured under all circumstances."

"There are a lot of reasons why I did what I did, Queen Melosa. I'm not ready to talk about all of them now, and I probably never will be. It has nothing to do with you. You're a ruler with integrity and honour, this I will never doubt but your people need to know for sure that I no longer pose a threat to the nation." Xena closed her eyes. "And as long as I submit consensual to Amazon law, they will be more at ease accepting Gabrielle in the nation after the execution."

For five long heartbeats, the Queen was speechless. "Gabrielle is really good with a staff; she must have had some renegade Amazon teaching her, but being an Amazon has to be earned. Anyway, I doubt she willingly would be part of a nation responsible for your death."

"It will be a hard time for her. That's for sure. After the court sessions, she at least will understand your need for justice, and eventually will learn to like her new family. And you don't have to adopt her into the nation; she already is an Amazon, by birth. She is marked with the branding of an Amazon princess on her right thigh. I showed it to Anara to make sure someone else knows before we immobilised her in the bed. For Gabrielle it's just a birthmark, she doesn't know what it really signifies. At the moment, there's no more information about how she came to live with simple farmers. - Could we now address the 'details', please?"

Melosa still couldn't understand what prompted Xena to engage in such a self-destructive behaviour but considering the body language of the taller warrior, she also knew that for now there would be no further explanation.

"The trial will be held as soon as Anara gives the permission to proceed, depending upon Gabrielle's physical condition. Only then the jury will be prompted consisting of the elders of every craft, the leaders of the regular army and the royal guard, the weapons' master, three randomly chosen representatives of the apprentices, and, of course, the Queen. There also will be delegates from the neighbouring villages to bear witness of the trial. As soon as the official announcement of time and date of the trial is made, the charges against you can be filed. They will serve to establish a thorough preferral of charges. According to Anara Gabrielle will at least need one and a half moon to be able to attend a daylong court session. - The council also agreed to your request being a slave." Queen Melosa continued.

"The traditional proceedings with slaves held by guilt are to serve the whole village. In the past, every adult member of the tribe would have the right to order you around or even to issue a punishment term. This proved highly inefficient because there was no real chain of command and it was too good an opportunity to act out on personal grudges. You will serve the nation under my command as my personal slave. Tomorrow morning, past sunrise, there will be a meeting of the whole village to let them know about this decision and to bear witness of your acceptance of your slavery. I will pose a slave collar around your neck, and you will receive five strokes with a single tail leather whip. The strokes will be harsh, they will hurt, and they will mark your back but our weapons' master promised not to break your skin."

"As far as I remember your regulations ten strokes would be more appropriate, you also didn't mention the manacles and ankle restraints. I knew what I got myself into, there's no need to make exceptions."

"I didn't, these laws were changed when I took the Queen's mask, Xena. The restraints originally served not to remind their bearer of their slavery but to hinder any attempt at escape from it. It's difficult to climb trees and run through forest and undergrowth when you can't move your limbs freely. But it's been generations since an Amazon was forced to be a slave held by guilt. It was always a voluntary decision, as it was with you. Even the Amazons legally sentenced to slavery had the choice to instead leave the nation. So there's no point in wearing additional reminders apart from the slave collar. That's also why I reduced the number of strokes. Your primary obligation the upcoming days and weeks will be to tend to your soldiers and also to Gabrielle. - I know you are still concerned about her, about the poison but you'd better try to get some sleep. Tomorrow won't be a stroll through the woods."

The collaring ceremony saw no unpleasant surprises but when Xena some candlemarks later tended to her men, Chulapa burst through the tent's flap and called her to the healer's hut. Rushing through the dense forest at breakneck speed, she found Gabrielle white hot with fever due to the poison on the spear's blade. Anara's face told her enough to know that there was little left to be done.

Gabrielle's whole body was covered with sweat, she was shivering, her hands and feet were ice cold, and her face was burning hot. Her breathing was laborious and ragged; the whole area around the spear wound was inflamed. She was wrapped in dripping wet blankets in an attempt to reduce her temperature but to no avail. The healing tea Anara somehow had managed to pour down her throat didn't kick in, and every breath she took seemed to be weaker than the one before pushing her more and more away from life. Xena knew she was running out of time.

"Anara, is there a shaman in the village or nearby?"

"No, Xena. I'm sorry; you did a great job with her leg and shoulder. You better say your good-byes to her."

"I can't let her die, Anara. I need a room where we can be alone; I don't want to endanger anybody else. And I'll need a brazier to burn herbs and spices. They have to be newly harvested, I'll be back soon."

Xena left the room before the healer even had a chance to give voice to her reservations; all she could do was to follow the instructions and summon the Queen.

"I don't care about your fears, Amazon Queen. There's only one way to save Gabrielle's life, and I'm more than ready to pay the price requested to do so. She has to live."

"But you're no shaman, Xena, and also no priestess. You're a warrior and a healer, and there's

nothing you can do."

Xena took a deep breath to fight the urge of just breaking through the door the Queen was blocking with her body. She had to stay as calm as possible. Her rational mind knew that she now was the Queen's responsibility, and that the woman needed an explanation. So she decided to let her heart speak, unable to keep a note of desperation from her voice.

"Queen Melosa, please try to understand. There's nothing a healer can do to help her, or even a priestess. Gabrielle has to fight the fever all by herself but her mind is drifting in unconsciousness, so she now is not able to communicate with her body. That's what I'm attempting to change. I'll have to slice through the veils covering up her life force. I know that we both could be trapped in this world between life and death but I simply can't afford to lose her. Gabrielle is my light and my salvation; she owns my heart and holds my soul." The Queen looked at her as if she saw her for the first time. "I'm no shaman but I have to try. Over the years, I learned many things. I know what must be done."

Melosa finally nodded her consent.

"It's not unheard of that an evil spirit of the other-world takes possession of the shaman's body, especially if the shaman is badly prepared. So, you better place some of the archers around the hut. Should this happen to me, they will have to kill me. Take no risks, use the execution poison."

Melosa nodded once again and took a step to the left to let Xena pass by when a voice said.

"Wait, Conqueror. You will need an assistant. Someone has to take care of your body while you're trying to save the wandering soul of your friend."

Xena turned and looked in eyes so black one couldn't tell the iris from the pupil. She was old, six maybe seven decades, with silvery white hair. "No, it's too dangerous, venerable elder, but I appreciate your good intentions."

"The danger for the assistant is only to her life not to her soul. I'm old; sometimes I'm weary of life. I'm willing to take the risk, and you will accept my help. Let's get started."

The old Amazon exuded an aura of authority not even the astonished Queen dared questioning her further.

Aside Gabrielle's bed and a second cot nearby, the infirmary was empty, all the other patients temporarily having been moved to the dining hut. Xena tossed the now damp blankets covering Gabrielle's body on the floor and stripped her as far as the broken limbs allowed. She took off her own clothing and positioned the brazier at the foot of the bed. Soon some of the freshly harvested herbs were burning in the fire; she added an assortment of roots from Anara's supplies and prepared a tea with some others, which she gulped down.

Sitting cross legged on the empty bed, she closed her right hand over Gabrielle's left and put her left on top of the young woman's heart. Xena closed her eyes and consciously slowed down her heartbeat while the silver haired Amazon for the first time ran a sponge dripping with herb flavoured water all over her body to prevent it from drying out. The journey really began with Xena's upper body slowly rocking back and forth, her mouth forming silent words. Then her eyes flew open.

The former Conqueror found herself sitting on a rough plain with grass more yellow than green. There were no sounds at all, not of man, not of animal. There was no wind, and the light was somewhere between dusk and nightfall conveying the impression of timelessness and imminent danger. The heart in her chest was pounding fast, and she knew this was her guide to get to Gabrielle.

She started walking and her heart accelerated its pace. Soon her body was covered with sweat, the heartbeat now reverberating in her ears. She continued on. She began to stumble, and fell, and resumed her walk, once, twice. She was exhausted and thirsty, and every muscle in her body was aching, reminding her of the day she had to run the gauntlet.

'Don't go there,' said a voice familiar and strange at once. 'Fulfill your destiny, Warrior Princess.'

For the third time she scrambled to her feet, her stiff movement fuelled by willpower alone. And then she saw it: a tent decorated with the old language of mankind, the language taught by Prometheus and forgotten for hundreds of generations, unknown even to the most powerful of shamans and priestesses. She somehow knew it was a warning but she also knew that she still had to enter.

Gabrielle's arms and legs were chained to the pole of the tent. Her eyes were wide open but there was not a shadow of recognition in them. Xena tried to talk to her but couldn't find the words. A wave of fear and desperation washed through her and the ground beneath her was shaking.

The voice came back. 'Fighting your emotions will only lead to defeat. Embrace them or they will swallow your soul, Warrior Princess. Remember: To control others leads to power but controlling....'

Xena knelt in front of Gabrielle's body and hugged her, her head fitting nicely under the breast of the younger woman. She soon felt chains against her knees, her waist and crossing her back, pinning the two bodies together.

'Xena, no, go away. Break the chains as long as it's still possible. You have to be free, go.'

Gabrielle's voice was in her head and in her heart, so she was all but surprised when her own voice also didn't come from her mouth.

'I am free, Gabrielle, as long as I am with you my heart is free, as long as I am with you my soul is able to bear its burden. I need you, my love; you're the air I'm breathing. Come with me.'

Blue eyes and green eyes met, fear muted to love and the chains were gone, the tent was gone. They were alone on the endless plain. Xena still was on her knees; Gabrielle bent her head and pulled her in a kiss.

When Xena regained consciousness she was curled on the bed, covered with a blanket, her right hand still in Gabrielle's left. She got to her feet, willing her trembling legs to steadiness, and found the fever much lower than before. The breathing still was heavy but had settled in a regular, almost normal rhythm. Gabrielle was safe, and Xena's lips escaped a relieved sigh.

A water skin was held in front of her. "Drink, Warrior Princess."

Xena took it and gulped down half of it in one take. "Thank you. It's been a very long time since someone called me thus. Please don't use it; my actions disgraced the name long ago. Call me Xena. Besides, what's your name?"

"Everybody here calls me Grandma but my name is Akyra."

"I know it won't be of any importance to you but you have my gratitude for your assistance, Akyra. I know I would have failed without your help. I owe you."

"It was a most remarkable experience, Xena. It was my pleasure, and yes, to me it counts. You better get your clothes back on, so I can call in the others. The Queen and the healer without a doubt are still pacing outside."

Xena nodded and then asked. "It's near sunset now, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is. You slept about one and a half candlemark after you brought her back."

Xena left the hut to breathe in the evening air and Anara checked on Gabrielle. Some candlemarks later, the Amazon Queen joined the tall warrior. To her own great surprise, Melosa was relieved to see the angry and desperate tension gone from the face of her former enemy.

"You did a great job, Xena. Anara is positive that Gabrielle will fully recover from her injuries, and Akyra really is impressed. She said, you were a great surprise and it takes a lot to surprise her."

"Thank you, Queen Melosa, but I simply was lucky, and without Akyra I wouldn't have succeeded. Thank you for letting me do it."

"You're welcome. Anara tended to your men. Two of them have recovered enough to be very anxious. They don't seem to be too happy about your decision. I told them to be patient until tomorrow morning. Go back in the hut, stay with Gabrielle. I'm sure she can feel your presence. Try to get some sleep."

"Yes, mistress."

"No, use my title. You're my personal slave but you never will be my body slave. 'Mistress' is only to be used in things dealing directly with your condition. Did I make myself clear?"

"Yes, you did, Queen Melosa. Thank you."

It was almost mid-day when Gabrielle finally came to her senses; she looked up in hazelnut eyes belonging to a young woman with her left arm secured in a sling. She didn't know where she was and a growing feeling of panic was added to the heavy pain that initially did cause her waking up.

"Hello Gabrielle. Everything's all right. You're saved. My name is Chulapa and you're at the Amazon village. We're in the healer's hut."

"Where's Xena?"

"She'll be back soon. She's with her soldiers at the moment. Please, don't try to move, you were badly injured out there. Anara, our healer has to be told that you're awake."

At this moment, the door opened and Xena entered the room with the Queen. Gabrielle tried to sit up to greet her.

"Stay put, Gab. Moving now is a really bad idea." Xena knelt next to the bed, taking the blonde woman's hand in her own, her commanding voice now as soft as drops of summer rain. "I'm so happy to see your beautiful eyes again. I'll tell you what happened. What's the last thing you remember?"

"I was hit by a spear. I went to the ground and I could see the blue sky above. There were the sounds of the battle and I could smell the blood. Did you know it smells like sweetened copper? And then there was pain all over. That's all."

"The battle was at its end when the spear took you down. I'm sorry I wasn't able to protect you. There was poison on their arrows and spearheads. You still are a little feverish because of this but it won't do you any harm. Your shoulder now is healing fine. But... One of them killed a horse and it collapsed almost on top of you. Your right arm is broken at the wrist and a second time halfway up to the elbow. There are also three cracked ribs and many bruises. That's why it's hard for you to breathe. There won't be any problems with this either but the horse shattered your right leg. No, baby, it's all right. It will get as good as new. I promise. But to do so you will need a lot of patience. It's not to be moved or strained in any way for the next moon at least."

Xena saw the strain in the face of her lover when a wave of fierce pain raged through her body. "I'm sorry, Gab, from now on there will always be some kind of painkiller available for you. I don't want you to hurt but the less you'll take the faster your bones will knit together."

She now planted a gentle kiss on each of the green eyes. It was then that Gabrielle saw the slave collar, and the loving sparkle in them turned to an angry glow pushing aside even the pain. "How dare you touch me with such a thing on? You promised I wouldn't be reminded of these years any more. You lied to me."

The furious woman tried to turn her head away but found her eyes locked in the saddened blue ones less than a foot away from her. "I want you to be safe and happy, Gabrielle. I never intended to hurt you but you were injured because of me. I'll do anything to make sure you're safe and cared for. The slave collar has nothing to do with your past but for me it was necessary."

There still was more anger than understanding in the forest green eyes. "Do you remember the day we talked about redemption, one week before we left the palace? You said, everyone should get the opportunity to change their ways of life and how important it is to balance the scales of justice. This was my chance to do so. I have a debt to the Amazon nation, Gabrielle, and the slave collar is but a part of it. Soon a trial will be held about all the things the Amazons had to suffer because of me, and I intend you to witness this trial. I want you to know what I really am. I want you to decide for yourself if I'm really worthy of your love."

The expression of the young woman's eyes changed to gentleness. "Until the trial starts I'll be a slave to the Amazon Queen but it has nothing to do with the kind of slavery you know. I swear."

"Are you sure that there won't be any...?"

"Yes, love, I'm sure. Amazon laws and traditions are very different from what you've experienced. I'm what they call a 'slave held by guilt'. I'll do chores for the community as soon as you and my men are better. I'm not allowed to wear or handle weapons but that's about it. The collar is merely more than a symbol."

The light filtering through the windows indicated less than two candlemarks to dawn, too late to go to sleep and too soon to alert the guards by leaving the hut. There was some paper work to do, there was always some paper work to do, but she really wasn't in the mood. So she once again allowed her mind to picture the past.

It took the rest of the day to fill Gabrielle who was drifting in and out of consciousness in to the details. She was all but comfortable with Xena's decision and more than frightened about the possible outcome of the trial but she also knew that Xena was convinced to do the right thing.

At sundown the funeral pyres for the eight Amazons and ten soldiers were lit. Apart from the scouts and outposts and the hunting party all the warriors and artists and crafts women were attending as well as most of the children and as many of the wounded Xena and Anara were comfortable with. The mourning ground near the Artemis' temple about a quarter of a

candlemark walk east of the village was almost crowded.

As the Queen, Melosa also was the priestess of her tribe and it was her duty to perform the funeral service. The drums began a slow and steady beat, like a heart healthily pounding, symbolising the life of the Amazon nation. A roar of grief resounded throughout the whole forest, and the pyres were lit. Melosa invoked the power of the goddess to guide the souls of their fallen sisters and their male allies to a well-deserved resting place. She implored Artemis to welcome them in her forest and bid them farewell.

Then a slim curly-haired red head took her place next to the Queen. Ephiny was not only a good archer and a fine lawyer but also one of the best singers of the nation. Her clear voice filled the clearing with the traditional mourning song, rising easily above the rearing flames. It was the last good-bye to the warriors, an attempt to honour their courage and dedication to the nation, an offer of comfort for the loved ones they left behind.

When her fair voice finally began to trail away and literally seemed to mingle with the flickering fire another voice was heard: a woman's voice, deep, and full, with a timbre somewhere between velvet and silk.

She sang of the love of a warrior but not to a woman or a man, not to bloodshed and violence, not to the simple pleasures of life. The song told about the love of a warrior to his home and his family and about the things the warrior had to do to protect them. His heart grew heavy and heavier with every new enemy killed but he knew that this was the price he had to pay, and that in the end the scales would be balanced and the Elysian Fields awaiting.

All but several heartbeats after the song's end the Queen realised that it was Xena's voice they'd heard. The pyres had burnt low by now, and one by one the women returned to their huts taking special care of the wounded. Soon Melosa found herself alone with her new slave.

"Thank you, Queen Melosa. You made the men very proud by allowing them to participate in your sacred ritual."

"Your soldiers died defending the Amazon nation. The very least we can do is to treat them with respect. Your voice is breath taking. One day I'd like to hear it in concert with Ephiny, the young woman who sang before you."

"I hope it didn't interfere with your traditions, Queen Melosa. If it did I'm ready to take on the consequences. The men went into this battle of their own accord, I asked them to do it but it wasn't an order, and when Palemon asked me to sing I couldn't refuse. It's been years since I last sang for my men. I long ago lost the purity of the heart necessary to do it the right way; I hope Ephiny will preserve hers."

Xena's face told Melosa that she wasn't ready to really open up and tell her more but she still couldn't hold her tongue. "No, it didn't interfere, Xena, it completed the ceremony. This song, that's how it all began, isn't it? You were trying to protect your family."

"That's how it all began but the end doesn't justify the means, Queen Melosa. I'll better go and check on Gabrielle, she really was pissed off at not being allowed to attend to the funeral. I'll be in your hut as soon as possible. I know that a personal slave has to spend the nights near her mistress. And I guess you didn't change this part of the law."

"No, I didn't but I also didn't count on having a personal slave at all. I don't even have a servant. There's a servant's room next to my bedchamber I used to store things in. It will be yours as soon as all is ready. But as long as Gabrielle needs you, you'll spend the nights in the healer's hut, and you won't leave it without my permission."

"Yes, mistress. It's a good temporary substitute for the night restraints."

"How did you get to know so many details about our laws and traditions, Xena?"

A sad smile adorned Xena's features. "About ten years ago I lived as a guest of the Northern Amazons and I learned a great deal. Queen Cyane asked me to stay and become one of them. In return I killed their leaders one by one, Queen Melosa. - If you don't mind I'd like to return to the village."

Melosa was utterly unable to do more than to give a brief nod. She was baffled and speechless. She knew ten years ago the Northern Amazons were destroyed by Xena's army but the children and elders who over the years found their way to other tribes and villages apparently didn't know any details or were reluctant to share them. One more reason to speak to Akyra.

When Melosa was on her way back to her hut, she saw Xena leaving Artemis' temple.

The Conqueror was said to be Ares' chosen, so why did she spend time in Artemis' temple? One of the many questions Melosa still was unable to answer about her slave. She went there every evening, stayed for about a quarter of a candlemark, and then returned to the village. But she found herself reluctant to question Xena about it.

During the last ten days she had learned a lot about her; first of all, that she still had some difficulty seeing her as slave. Xena was a rather self-confident woman who never shied away from a task and attended to every single one of them as if it was the most important thing of the world. But there were also moments when the former Conqueror of Greece and Rome - and to her surprise Melosa also didn't see her in this role any longer - was sad and almost self-despising, notably when compelled to speak about her past.

[To be continued in Part II](#)

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~ Conqueror and Amazon ~

by romansilence

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Conqueror and Amazon: Towards a New Life

Part II

By romansilence

Chapter Four: Preparations

Dawn now was near enough not to startle the guards, and so Melosa decided to go for a run with Xena. Solari, the captain of the royal guard, gave her a hard time when she first included the slave in this part of her drills but finally she gave in. Her captain still was limping from the sword thrust in her left thigh she'd received during the battle, so she wasn't able to follow them herself, but she at least tried to monitor their steps by making sure to have members of the royal guard posted throughout the trail on a more or less regular basis. Melosa changed into her running leathers and opened the door to Xena's room.

Two candlemarks later before going off to her own duties Melosa revoked the order not to interact with the other women and assigned Xena to sort through all the stuff Najara left in the hut and to bundle up the personal belongings of Thania.

As every morning Xena brought a breakfast tray to the healer's hut and set about to exercise Gabrielle's limbs. She didn't want the muscles to wane away from lack of use, so she made her to contract them as far as possible, even the right leg which reduced the blonde woman to tears every time but it had to be done.

"You're doing fine, Gab. Just one more time, yeah, that's it. Good, now go back to sleep. You look tired. Didn't you take the sleeping tea Anara prepared for you?"

"It's all right, Xena. I drank the tea but Thania was having nightmares. Perhaps you should give her some of this stuff too."

"Sorry, baby, but I can't. The nightmares are one of the ways her mind is dealing with what happened to her. If we stop them now she never will be able to live a normal life again. It will help if you try to talk to her or better get her to talk."

The sudden undeniable fear crossing Gabrielle's eyes made her to turn her head away. Xena's

hand gently steadied her chin. "Talk to me, love."

"I can't get my mind off what happened to her, Xe. She's just a kid. No one should hurt a child like this; no one should ever hurt a child. What does one gain by doing such things, by abusing and ill-treating and humiliating." There now were tears in the beautiful sea green eyes, and Xena lovingly held her tight. "It hurts to think about it, Xe, and I..."

"I know love, you can't help remembering. Whatever one can say to try to explain why this woman and others of her kind did what she did, their reasons or explanations aren't important. What's important is that it's wrong, and that they have to be stopped. I'm sorry you had to live through this nightmare, love, and I know it hurts badly and it will for a long time to come. But I also know that you're strong, love. I know you can do it. Try to think of something nice when the memories get too much for you. I know you'll be fine, Gabrielle. I just wish you wouldn't have to go through all of this without me. I wish I could spend my days talking to you and looking in your enticing eyes. I wish I could spend my nights easing your pain. I'm sorry that I can't be there for you all the time."

"I love you, Xena. You know, Queen Melosa and I, we talk, a lot. I can ask her to let you stay in here. I'm sure...."

A long finger immediately was on her lips. "Please don't, Gab. The Queen's already more than bending the rules on my behalf, by letting me be here with you at all, giving me the freedom to come and go. When the trial begins she will have to answer the jury about my behaviour. I don't want to make this any harder on her than it already is. I'll be all right, love."

Xena was about to leave the infirmary when she heard the faint sound of a blanket being slowly pulled away and in her peripheral vision she saw Thania trying to get out of bed. She turned around and cast her an inquisitive glance.

"Thania, do you need something? Can I help you?"

The girl looked at her and then sighed. "I don't want to be a burden. Your mate is suffering because of me. I'm not worth suffering for. I'll go back to my mistress."

"You're wrong, Thania." The blonde woman answered. "What you're trying to do right now proves that you would be worth suffering for. But you didn't cause my pain. My heart is bleeding for what was done to you and this is reawakening some really bad memories. It's not your fault. It's nobodies fault, really."

The young Amazon tentatively smiled at her while Xena once again tucked her in. "Najara left the village, Thania, didn't the Queen tell you? She won't hurt you ever again. She's gone."

"So, it's really true?"

"Yes, it's true, little one."

"And it's true that I will be the Queen's apprentice?"

"Yes, it's true."

"And that I will be allowed to wear the Queen's collar?"

"Yes, Thania, it's all true. All you have to do is to get well soon, then the Queen will teach you how to be a true Amazon warrior. Don't you worry!"

"It's true."

The face of the girl held a look of utter wonder that quickly disappeared when she heard Anara's voice obviously trying to calm down another woman drifting through the open windows.

"Xena, please wait. The healer said she would check on me when she comes back. I'd rather you do it."

"Anara is a very good healer, but if it makes you feel better, I'll do it, little one."

"There you go, Thania. You won't have to stay in here very long. The younger one is the faster their bodies are healing. You'll be up in less than eight days. Gabrielle has some scrolls from the library to pass the day, I'm pretty sure we can find something nice to read for you too."

"I'm not very good at reading, Mis... she always told me that fighting was more important and reading only means wasting precious time. She caned my back when she caught me reading the last time."

"So she didn't tell you that a good warrior not only uses her body when fighting but also her brains. Sometimes, when your opponents are much stronger or you're outnumbered you simply have to be smarter than they are. And the brain, your mind is a weapon that has to be well maintained and trained to be on top. I know the Queen never will punish you for reading or for asking questions."

"Did she punish you? I asked her not to."

"Yes, she did. She had to, little one. I know she didn't like it. Try to see it this way: As an apprentice, it is your duty to learn, and as long as I'm a slave it's my duty to obey, and the Queen being my mistress has the obligation to punish me if I don't. Punishment isn't meant to subdue people selfishly. It's a sign that you did something wrong and that you're ready to take responsibility for what you've done. Do you remember the stories they told you about Artemis' childhood?" The girl nodded. "Do you remember the story when she and Apollo played some nasty tricks on mortal children, some very nasty tricks?"

"Yes, they were living with her grandmother Gaia and she spanked them and they were forced to

live as mortals for a whole season. It is said, that Apollo didn't like it one bit but Artemis came to live with the Amazons and that's one of the reasons why she now is protecting us. One of the pictures in the temple tells this story. So, sometimes there are good things coming from punishment."

"Yes, little one. So, you see, the Queen had no other choice. It hardly hurt, I swear. I have to go now but I'll be back with some lunch for you too."

When Xena finally arrived at Najara's former hut, she found the weapons' master in the main room trashing the table with the remnants of a chair. Chains and whips and canes, a leather harness, several dildos, and lots of similar stuff were scattered on the floor. Eponin's eyes were red rimmed with unshed tears and she was breathing heavily.

"We should go for a walk, weapons' master. There's a small clearing about half a candlemark south. Queen Melosa told me it's rarely frequented. How about a sparring session? I'm not allowed to weapons but we could do some wrestling or hand to hand. You need to spend all this pent-up anger and energy."

To Xena's surprise the Amazon warrior didn't argue, she shrugged her shoulders and followed the taller woman. Eponin had lots of energy to spend, and both women soon were covered with sweat. Xena was late for lunch.

It took her the rest of the day to restore the hut to a semblance of order. She burnt the canes, whips and other toys along with the destroyed furniture, two blood stained mattresses, a worn out blanket, and some linen shifts. The belongings of Thania consisted basically of two partially torn sets of leathers and three sleeping shifts. She scrubbed the floor and the walls, and finally placed a brazier in the middle of the room scented with spices and herbs. All the other blankets and sheets were bundled together, and re-transferred to the village's storage hut.

She found the scroll in the bedroom, and what it said was more than enough to unsettle her completely. Until then, she had been able to keep her temper at bay, together with her memories, but now... Now she could use a good workout, a hard workout, or better a really good fight. The scroll was squeezed between the bed and the wall, and it detailed every punishment inflicted upon the girl during the last two moons, every whipping, every thrust with the leather phallus, everything.

Xena was boiling with white-hot fury, and it took all of her will power not to wreck the whole place completely but she had to do something. The last time she did feel so angrily helpless was when she'd found Gabrielle. She had literally reduced the whole barn to ruins and not even Palemon had dared to come near her during this bout of frenzy. Her hands were shaking, her head was spinning, and all she could think about was the pain and anguish the young Amazon had had to endure, and now she understood Gabrielle's feelings.

Her feet found the way to the barn, after dropping the scroll on Melosa's desk; brushing down

Argo probably would help to calm her down because a slave running rampant around the village really wouldn't do. But when she breathed in the scent of hay she knew it was a futile attempt. It was all too familiar. Xena snapped.

A rock pillar about two feet thick held the main structure of the barn. She attacked it with her bare hands, pounding against it until her fists were thick with blood, and then she knelt on the floor silent tears running down her cheeks. Xena wept - for the third time in more than fourteen years.

When she finally regained some self control it was well after dark but instead of paying her daily visit to the temple or saying good-night to Gabrielle she now began in earnest to brush down her golden mare, after having wrapped her bleeding knuckles with a make-shift bandage. The moon was already half ways through its journey when she opened the door to the Queen's hut. It was empty but on the desk was a piece of parchment, it said:

Xena,
I will spend the night with a friend.
You will find the keys for your night restraints on top of the chest in your room. Suit yourself.
We'll talk tomorrow.

Melosa

Xena was unable to sleep not only because her hands were badly hurting, every time she closed her eyes she saw the battered body of the young Amazon and the fear in her hazel eyes; she saw the words on the scroll offering more details than she could ever have bargained for, the painful memory of the first look at Gabrielle, and all of the rage and anger and fury these slavers had sent her in resurfaced. She saw the piercing coldness of Najara's eyes. And she saw all the horrible and heartless things she had done herself over the years. The baby boy crying in the arms of his dead mother, murdered by her fault. The look of sadness and disappointment in.. No, she couldn't stand it, but this time her sense of guilt and responsibility were far stronger than the urge to beat someone up.

She undid the chain confining her to her room and slipped through the window. Avoiding the guards proved barely challenging and she soon arrived at the temple. It was empty. The greater part of the Amazons had their own statues to worship their patron goddess; there even was a small one in Melosa's hut near the fireplace. So the temple only was frequented during festivals and other celebrations.

Every Amazon village had its own Artemis' temple, of course. The goddess of the hunt and the moon long ago had made the Amazons 'her' people, it was she that kept them strong, gave them their laws and customs, taught them how to live from the land, and blessed their joinings. This particular temple was larger than average, its marble structure shining through the forest trees, disguised only by the tree matching green of the roof. A row of columns protected the entrance, large windows near the ceiling afforded constant illumination and the walls were adorned with

picture stories about Artemis' life and youth. Xena bowed shortly in front of the marble statue of the huntress, and circled to the back. There she lowered herself on her right knee, she opened the double door of a small compartment in the lower half of the statue and lit two small candles.

There was a small statue made of polished wood. It was the statue of a woman with broad hips and an ample chest, her face missed the clear lines of the Greek gods but as always Xena was utterly convinced that it must be the most beautiful face she'd ever seen. The tall warrior placed her hands on her upraised left knee and began her prayer. It was a long prayer, much longer than usual, and for the first time since she had left the palace of Corinth she allowed herself to get lost in prayer. Letting her guard down this far was something she didn't feel comfortable with, this night however she just couldn't help it.

About two candlemarks later she was back in the village. She knew sleep still wasn't an option and so she sat down in front of the fireplace to manufacture an apprentice's collar for Thania. Nowadays the collars usually were used at festivals of sorts only but she had a feeling the young Amazon would wear it daily, and with pride.

There was a small basket of leather straps and thongs, many-coloured guts and needles she could use. Xena cut out a strap of deerskin that would serve as a base and lined it in with even softer leather. Every movement of her fingers sending a short stab of pain from her abused knuckles to her brain, and she found herself unexplainably grounded by the sensation. She even found a buckle to close it in the back of the neck because in contrast to a slave collar the apprentice collars could be opened every time thus indicating that the apprenticeship was voluntary. The adornments would be more difficult. Tradition demanded a four-tailed braid and the personal symbol of the mistress as well as tribe markings. With every step of the training the mistress would add a bead. But first things first.

She decided on two braids on either side of the throat, every tail another colour, every colour symbolising one of the qualities any Amazon should possess: courage, faith, loyalty, and prudence. The braid on the right side was meant to be rather flat, clearly presenting the different colours, while the thongs on the left one were designed to give a rope-like impression thus showing off the strength one gained by combining all these qualities. The tribal markings in this case were easy: the outlines of a shield and a sword. One was sewed next to the flat braid with gut of a gleaming dark brown, and another next to the rope braid with a fine silvery gut. The night was at its darkest when Xena was ready to put on the Queen's symbol. Instead of turning to the official seal Melosa used for treaties, she chose her personal seal: a staff and an arrow intertwined crowned by the drawing of a squirrel. To emphasise its owner she used the royal green to stitch it on which was a shade darker than the green in the braids. By the time she was finished the first hints of dawn appeared but she found herself unwilling to move.

"No, don't, don't touch her, you promised..."

A slap on the left cheek broke her nightmare. Xena still was sitting on the bear rug in Melosa's hut, her back against the fire place, a blanket tucked around her and her front covered in sweat.

She slowly took in her surroundings, the sun already was high, and the Queen was kneeling in front of her.

"You're all right now? Must have been a Hades of a dream, not like the others. If you're ready to talk about it, you're welcome."

"Thank you, Queen Melosa, but it's in the past, there's nothing to talk about. I'm sorry for causing such inconvenience."

"You didn't, now go to bed. Try to catch up on some sleep."

"Thank you, but the stone wall isn't finished yet, I'd rather go to work, - after the punishment I'm about to receive. I didn't spend the night chained to my bed as it should have been, mistress."

"No, you didn't but my orders were deliberately unclear. 'Suit yourself' is not really an order. So, this time there will be no punishment. - I just had a meeting with the council and Anara..."

"Gabrielle's not able to walk around yet, not even with crutches but she's well enough to follow an all-day court session. She's healing faster than I ever would have thought possible and it's no longer dangerous to move her around. I suppose it will take about a quarter moon to get the dignitaries of the other villages here, it's the time for summer solstice. So it would be best to begin the trial right after the festival."

"That's the schedule the council agreed upon, Xena. They also agreed to cut the festival short a day. The elders see it as a sign of respect for your help with these soldiers."

Melosa wanted to tell her that she didn't want her to go through with the trial. She wanted her to grab Gabrielle and leave the village for good. The woman in her hut, the woman caring for others and obviously adoring the blonde was not her enemy, she was not the Conqueror, she didn't want her to die. But she didn't tell her; Xena never would act on it.

"Please pass by the healer's hut before going to work. Gabrielle is concerned about your absence this morning, and Thania still doesn't like to be touched by Anara."

Xena nodded and already had reached the door when she remembered the collar.

"It's beautiful, Xena. I never would have been able to make it myself. Thank you. You really have many skills. Thania will just love it. I'll give it to her after dinner, and I want you to be there when I do." The tall warrior turned and rapidly left the hut, and Melosa was sure that there was faint blush on her cheeks.

"No, my Queen, no. I would be more than honoured to take her defence but I won't be the procurator."

"I could make it an order, Ephiny."

"Please, Queen Melosa, don't do it. I don't want to be forced to disobey my Queen. After the battle, Xena saved my second mother's life, if not for her Solari would have died out of blood loss. I owe her, though she doesn't want to hear about it. It's hard to stand aside but I will not willingly contribute to her death. Please."

"Your request is granted, Ephiny. Try and save her life but Xena certainly won't make your job any easier."

"Thank you, my Queen. I don't think she will but perhaps her determination to get herself killed will be the best defence."

The young woman definitively knew the law, she was cunning and able to captivate and influence her audience. Melosa was glad Ephiny had volunteered for defence. But now she had to find a replacement. When dinnertime was nearing she still was empty-handed. Even the few survivors of the Northern Amazons simply refused to take this singular opportunity for revenge. So all she could do was sending a request to the neighbouring villages and hoping for the best.

Usually new apprentices were taken in at the harvest festival during fall solstice but the circumstances didn't allow waiting as long as this. There had been a heated debate in the council because in the past Queen Melosa as most of her predecessors shied away from the additional burden of having an apprentice. But finally, they had to concede to her wishes, and sent two representatives to witness the act of adoption. Eponin, Solari, and Akyra served as additional witnesses.

The Queen fastened the collar around Thania's neck and asked her if she was ready to accept her tutelage. A simple confirmation would have been enough but the young Amazon instead choose a form of commitment much older. She kissed the Queen's hands and cradled her face in the palms. Melosa kissed the top of her head and the council witnesses left the healer's hut.

"You know, you'll only have to wear the collar at festivals?"

"Yes, I know. Do I have to wait for your permission to wear it, mistress?"

"Please use my name or my title, Thania, I'm not really comfortable with being called mistress. First of all I'm your teacher and when we get to know each other better I'll be happy to be your confident, your friend. And no, you don't need my permission; it's entirely up to you. But now I want you to take it off and tell me what you see."

The girl did as she was told. "It's smooth and soft and yet firm. It would be impossible to tear it apart easily. Is this how it is supposed to be, Queen Melosa?"

"Yes, Thania. The collar is meant to be solid to symbolise the connection between tutor and pupil and to symbolise the connection between an Amazon and her tribe. If it would be easy to tear it apart, its purpose would be invalidated. Why?"

There was a long candledrop of silence, and when Thania finally spoke her voice barely was audible. "Mis... She tore it apart every time she punished me. She said that I'm not worth wearing the collar as long as I didn't learn how to obey."

The Queen again was baffled but Xena somehow sensed the girl's need to be reassured. "No one, not even the gods can promise that Queen Melosa will never have to punish you. But if she has to, she will do it with care and love, not out of anger and frustration. The collar is a badge of honour, wear it with pride, and you can be sure the Queen also will be proud of you, little one. Soon you will be like this, a real Amazon."

Xena's fingers touched the rope like braid. "Yes, I'll work hard to be proud and independent, fierce and cruel."

"Amazons can be fierce warriors if need be, Thania, most of us would do anything to protect the nation, and in order to do this sometimes we also have to have the courage to be cruel but it's nothing you should strive to be." Eponin quietly said. "The colours stand for courage, faith, prudence, and loyalty."

"Courage is symbolised by the black tail to keep in mind that there's a difference between courage and foolishness." The Queen continued. "Green is the colour of the forest offering to us all we need to live. It stands for faith, and as much for faith in your own abilities as in the Goddess. The red one signifies prudence to remind every one that you probably will have to pay with your life's blood if you don't use your brain as well as your muscles. And the last one, the blue one, is the symbol of loyalty to your tribe, to your nation and to your own heart. What else do you see?"

"The one in the middle is your personal symbol, my Queen. I know that staff and bow are your weapons. The ones on the left and the right are the tribe markings but I don't understand why they are of different colours?"

"We'll just have to ask Xena, she designed the collar."

"Brown is the colour of the earth and silver stands for the moon. Both colours symbolise the nation's relation to its gods."

The Queen shot her slave an inquisitive look, as always amazed at the extent and depth of Xena's knowledge about Amazon customs and traditions. The tall warrior choose to ignore the unspoken question but Akyra who lingered against the wall found not only one of her suspicions confirmed by her words but also her resolve strengthened to take part in this trial in her own way. Her preparations were made; all she had to do now was to wait.

The stone wall bordering the training ground on three sides was more sturdy than ever when Xena finished her work at noon two days later, and Queen Melosa ordered her to take the rest of the day off. So, the lunch with Gabrielle and Thania was drawn out much longer than usual.

When Solari came in and tried to bring Xena to speak with Ephiny about possible charges and a defence strategy the former Conqueror decided to make herself unavailable and go for a swim in the nearby river. She knew two members of the Royal guard followed her but it didn't bother her.

Xena chose a usually quiet spot she already had frequented more than once preferring the river to the communal bathing area in the village. She found it occupied by four Amazons handling fishing gear on either side of the river. They were so intensely wrapped in their task, Xena couldn't resist the temptation to try and stir them up a bit.

She backtracked about fifty paces where the river's bed was bending slightly and slid soundlessly in the water. She ducked under the surface and swam over. Hooking the lines together was almost too easy. Now she only had to get out of the water, take a front seat and wait. It didn't take long.

One of the women on the right riverbank felt a light tucking at her line, she cautiously pulled and found a lot of resistance. She increased her effort and was met with more resistance. Soon she was jerked into the water, taking her unsuspecting companions with her. At the other side, all of a sudden four women were thrown to the hard ground when their prey stopped its struggle and simply vanished. Xena couldn't help but laugh aloud at the sight of their faces reflecting anger, astonishment, disbelief, and amusement. The unfortunate four in the river decided they wouldn't be the only ones getting wet and attacked their colleagues now rubbing their sore buttocks. The anticipation of what without any doubt soon would follow made Xena laugh even harder.

Too soon, she heard the familiar footsteps of Queen Melosa nearing her vantage point. She knew one of her guards had taken off to get their sovereign when the tall warrior executed her little stunt. The steps were hurried at first but when the Amazon Queen came in full view of the riverbanks and her fishing expedition, they immediately relaxed. She sent the guards to stop the two groups of tearing one into the other, and not even trying to hide her amusement, she asked.

"You don't happen to have anything to do with this mess, Xena?"

"Their lines must have become tangled, Queen Melosa, somehow." Xena answered with a flourishing smile.

"I was told there was a big, big fish in the river not too long ago."

"They definitively failed to catch this fish, not even when it was practically breathing in their ears."

"No, they didn't catch it - but I did."

"Yes, Queen Melosa, you did; and I know about the consequences of my little prank. Some of your warriors could be offended being duped by a slave, some of them even could feel humiliated, and my punishment has to take their reactions in account, mistress."

"You never cease to amaze me, Xena. However, this time there's not only the two of us involved,

so the council has to take part in any decision concerning your punishment. The fishing detail was important to get enough supplies for the summer solstice. No one will go hungry because of this but the village of the Queen has to maintain a certain standard, meet certain expectations. I'm not sure I can dissuade them from a public punishment. But what you did also showed that we are too careless within our borders. You shouldn't have been able to come as close to them as you did without them noticing your presence. You caught them totally unaware. This also will be held in account."

"I'm sure your fishing party could use a rest. Why don't you let me try and catch some of the fish you need while the council decides about me, mistress?"

"So it shall be. We'll leave a pole and the baskets, and I will send the guards as soon as the sentence is pronounced. Whatever the outcome, Xena, I really would have enjoyed seeing them tumble into the water."

"I'll try and arrange something, next time, Queen Melosa."

About three candelmarks later Xena was standing in the slowly flowing river tossing a big trout into one of the big baskets when six Amazon warriors were approaching. They were walking in pairs and appeared at the sandy riverbank when Xena was catching another smaller trout. She regarded it thoughtfully and threw it back when one of the guards called her name.

Eponin was leading the escort. "Xena of Amphipolis, slave held by guilt to the Amazon nation, personal slave of Queen Melosa, you were found guilty of public nuisance, disrespect, and abuse of public property. Your sentence will be pronounced in the council's hut after dropping your catch at the dining hall. Take the basket and follow our lead."

"I can carry two of them but I could use some help with the other four, weapons' master."

Eponin just nodded to her fellow warriors, well aware of the fact that Xena had obviously managed to catch more fish in a few candelmarks than the whole fishing detail would have been able to haul in in two or three days. So, instead of delivering the catch to the cook she made the escort presenting it at the council's hall. Disciplinary matters only were decided upon by the Queen and the council of elders, so the weapons' master wasn't privy to their decision - but an escort of six seasoned warriors in her eyes didn't bode too well.

The verdicts of Amazon justice weren't revocable, the sentences were. When the elders saw the baskets and were assured that the slave really did make the catch without any help they reconsidered their previous decision. So, Xena and her guards spent another half candelmark waiting in the village square.

"Xena of Amphipolis, you were found guilty of public nuisance, disrespect, and abuse of public property." The Queen was standing in the centre of the round council's hall, the elders four paces behind her in a close knitted row with enough room for the missing members of the crafts, guard and army. Xena knelt in front of her mistress as if they were alone in the Queen's hut. "Do you have anything to say to your defence?"

Xena just shook her head 'no'.

"Stand up and hear the sentence of the council of the elders." The former Conqueror did as she was told but refused to raise her eyes from the floor thus still signalling her submission to the law.

"Now hear your sentence: for abuse of public property you will do two times the deed you interfered with, which you already did - so justice is satisfied. The disrespect you showed the voluntary fishers would be balanced with five strokes of a cane, accounting for the fact that your actions also pointed out a major security leak. But public nuisance earns you ten more strokes with the cane. Elder Akyra will bear witness of your punishment and it will be executed by the weapons' master."

Elders and guards quietly left the hut. "Xena, please remove your leathers. There's a table near the back wall. I want you to place your upper body on top of it. Do you want to be restrained for the punishment?"

"No, mistress. It won't be necessary."

"I know you probably are aware of the consequences but I have to make sure."

"Yes, I know what will happen if I move while not being restrained, mistress."

Gabrielle's whole body was shaking with laughter when Xena described her little joke to her and Thania. She kept asking about details long after Thania's initial laughter was replaced by a worried frown.

"What is it, little one? Do the ribs still bother you much?"

"Anara said they're doing well. It's healing pain she said. Our village is famous for its fish dishes at festivals. The Queen couldn't have been pleased about your interference."

For a heartbeat, Xena contemplated to ignore the implications of Thania's remark.

"She said she would have loved to see them tumbling in with her own eyes, but you're right, Thania. I didn't know how important the fishing detail was, else I probably wouldn't have done it."

The former Conqueror took a deep breath and avoided studiously to look in Gabrielle's direction.

"While the Council of Elders decided upon my punishment I managed to catch enough fish to make up for the loss, so there was no real harm done. The weapons' master caned me. The marks will be gone the day after tomorrow."

"So, all is well."

"Yes, little one, all is as it should be."

Xena felt the tension building in the blond woman's body, and when she turned an apologetic look towards her, the outburst of anger was inevitable.

"All is well, no, nothing is well. This stupid trial obviously isn't enough for you, Xena, isn't it? It isn't enough that they probably will kill you soon, no, you go and do your damned best to let them also degrade and hurt you. Why? Were some candledrops of laughter worth the pain? Why, Xena?"

The first wave of anger expelled, there now were tears glittering in the beautiful green eyes. Xena's hand of its own accord moved forwards to brush them away. She should justify her actions, she thought, instead she simply said.

"I'm sorry, Gabrielle, I didn't want to upset you. I love you too much; please don't be angry with me. I try not to let anything like this ever happen again. I'll try my very best but please try to understand that no one in the village will share your concern. The punishment reflected what I did and not what I am. The Commander of the Royal Guards would have met the same fate. It's one of the most important rules here that one has to face the consequences of one's decisions. I knew this. I followed my heart and I don't regret it. Please don't make me regret it."

"I love you, Xena. It's just ... sometimes I wish we never would have come here. In Corinth I never had to worry about your safety and your well-being."

"Oh, Gab, in Corinth I was worried about your safety all the time. The guards intercepted two assassins and someone tried to get the cook to poison your meals. I suppose a council member was afraid of your influence on my decisions. With the Amazons you always will be safe."

"Why didn't you tell me then, Xena?"

"You had enough to deal with as it was, your memories, the assault, your father, teaching the palace's children... I know, it was wrong. I once again valued my judgement more than yours. I wanted to protect you - - and I was afraid you would leave me if you ever felt threatened in the palace." The last words were spoken calmly but Xena refused to meet Gabrielle's eyes.

The injured woman's left hand found and steadied Xena's chin, making sure to look into the eyes of her lover. "After the first night we spent together in bed I knew I was in love with you, and after our first time making love I knew I would follow you to Tartarus and beyond. Why didn't you trust me?"

The woman who was said to get rid single-handedly of ten enemy soldiers without even breaking a sweat found herself as usual at a total loss when compelled to deal with her feelings for Gabrielle.

"I'm sorry," she stuttered, "I never loved before, there never was someone to care about what I did. Please forgive me, I love you so much."

"Love you too, my big dumb warrior. Please don't do it again. You conquered my heart when I first lost myself in the deep, blue pools of your eyes. But still..."

Pointing to her slave collar Xena asked. "You're still unnerved about this, aren't you?" Gabrielle nodded and Xena sighed.

"Perhaps I should have explained it better from the beginning but in the Amazon Nation things that have the same name as in the rest of Greece don't necessarily also have the same meaning. In big cities as in Athens or Corinth being, an apprentice means that you work with a craftsman and learn his trade by doing so. On rare occasions, there exists a bond on a more personal level but most times; it's just a working relationship.

"For an Amazon," she continued after a quick smile to Thania, "it should be an honour to have an apprentice. An Amazon mistress is not only to teach a craft, be it weaving, or warfare, or hunting. More important than skills and knowledge is to help the apprentice to build up her self-esteem, to teach her the virtues of a true Amazon. That's why there are always two apprenticeships for every young Amazon. One to learn how to defend herself and her tribe, and one to learn a craft. Apprentice and mistress not only share the work, they share each others lives, and sometimes a mistress can even become a 'second mother'."

"So, what Najara did, wasn't right, it was against the law and against custom."

"Yes, little one. It wasn't right. The Queen will be good for you."

There was a long moment of silence.

"Xena, before you continue, please tell me, what's a 'second mother'?" Gabrielle asked.

"Do you like to explain it, Thania?" The girl's face lit with a smile as bright as a torch at the request.

"Many Amazons are warriors, fighting is part of what they are deep down in their hearts. They risk their lives on a regular basis and so the blood mothers do not always have the time to be with their children, to care for them or to teach them. That's why the communal huts exist and apprenticeships. A second mother however is more than just a mistress or a teacher. She offers friendship and understanding and love, a shoulder to cry on or a firm hand to spank with if need be. It's common procedure for the bond mate of the mother to become the second mother of a child, but sometimes it's the other way round, sometimes a woman finds herself enchanted by a child and asks the mother for the privilege to be named second mother. There are even stories about the two mothers subsequently becoming joined."

"You told me that you don't know your mother, but do you have a second mother, Thania?"

"No more, she died of a fever three winters ago. She was a weaver, sweet, and kind, and while she worked, she always told stories about Amazon history and great fighters and lovers and adventures. I'll always miss her but when I last was allowed to see her she told me that she will always be with me. She told me that the dead can hear our thoughts and she told me that one day when I'll need her most my blood mother would come to be at my side."

The girl's voice was a strange mixture of genuine grief and un-abatable hope. She quickly closed her eyes and then tried to look at Gabrielle and Xena at the same time.

"I know it never is the child's to choose but both of you have become very important to me. After the trial would you and Gabrielle consider to become my second mothers, Xena?"

The question found Xena totally unprepared and she really didn't know how to phrase her answer when Gabrielle gave her some time. "We would be honoured, Thania, but Xena and I aren't no Amazons, and so it hardly will be possible. I'm sorry."

"Gabrielle is right she and I would love to be second mother to you, Thania, and as soon as Gabrielle is well enough to ask, I'm sure Queen Melosa will grant her request. But as long as I'm a slave, I won't be even allowed to ask. I'm sorry. There's only one thing I can promise, I will always be there to protect you, to guide you and to love you as long as you want me to - and if I'll ever loose this collar and you still want me to, I'll make the pledge to the Queen, little one, that's a promise."

Thania was smiling but Gabrielle still seemed puzzled. "So outsiders can become second mothers?"

"It doesn't happen very often, Gab, but it's possible. It even isn't unheard of that an Amazon becomes second mother to an outsider's child."

"Really? How do you know?"

"I'll tell you but it's a secret and you have to promise not to mention it to anyone else, especially the Queen isn't to know, not yet. You also have to promise, Gabrielle..."

Xena was just finishing her story when Akyra entered the healer's hut to tell her that the Queen requested the presence of her slave. The tall warrior decided to risk another punishment and answered she would come as soon as possible. Akyra only nodded, her mind still contemplating the story she had overheard and now more sure than ever that her plan would work. Telling her lover at least part of the truth was an important step for the usually silent raven head.

"Let's get back to our starting point, an Amazon slave. The differences between an apprentice and an Amazon apprentice are small compared to the differences between a slave to the Amazon nation and an outsider's slave. With the Amazons, there are a lot of rules and traditions involved, and some of them serve to protect the slave. It's true that a slave isn't allowed to do what she wants. She has only to do what her mistress orders her to do and will be punished if she fails to

do it or acts on her own accord.

"Being a slave means losing personal freedom and privacy but, Gabrielle, you were wrong when you said earlier that I wanted the Amazons to humiliate and degrade me. This never can happen. Slavery here is about authority and obedience not about dominance and submission.

"Don't get me wrong, there's always the possibility of a mistress to abuse of the power given to her but it's the slave's decision either to go with it or to take her case to Queen or council. The laws do not take ill treatment lightly, be it by corporal punishment or else because it means treating a woman the way women usually are treated by men. To an Amazon every woman is a sister of fate.

"The more so with sexual matters, sexual violence has to be consensual, if not its considered a rape - and rape, murder and treason are the only charges to warrant a death sentence. There's one other difference. At the Amazon nation, no one ever was a slave for her whole life. It's always limited to a certain amount of moons, seasons or years. The time completed the Amazon will return to her former life and position in the nation. Today I acted without permission. I was defying the Queen's authority and the punishment was the only way to officially reassure my obedience, Gabrielle."

"I think I understand now, Xena, but I still don't have to like it. Perhaps it would be better for you to leave now. The Queen's patience probably isn't without limits."

Xena took her leave from both of them and turned to the door. "Xena."

"Yes, Thania?"

"What Najara did to me was rape."

"Yes, little one."

"I understand. Good night, Xena."

"Good night, little one."

Xena was too edgy by the conversation to face the Queen right now, so she took another detour - to the temple. Once again, she opened the compartment in the back of Artemis' statue and lowered herself to her right knee. The evening had brought back many memories she wasn't ready to deal with yet, and she also was concerned about the deductions and conclusions the two others would be led to by her revelations. Once again she lost herself in prayer and when she arrived at the Queen's hut most of the village was already asleep.

The central room was deserted. The fire was banked for the night and a single torch illuminated the large desk at the other side of the room. On it was a small jar and a piece of parchment. It said.

Xena,

I requested your presence to put some ointment on the cane marks. I hope you'll manage for yourself. Akyra told me that the conversation you just had was very important to the three of you. While I'm writing this my guards, tell me that you're on your way to the temple, so I decided to check on the night shift at the outlooks.

However, your punishment for not answering my summon will be a night and a day of fasting. You're allowed to water but not allowed to eat. I hope this satisfies your exaggerated sense of discipline and order.

Don't forget to close in your restraints when you go to bed.

Melosa.

Xena left the jar at the table, took the torch, and passed to her room, slightly nervous about what Akyra possibly had overheard, or even worse already told the Queen. It would only complicate matters further. Despite these worries, she soon fell asleep after having linked the chain dangling from the backrest of her bed to her slave collar.

The next morning shortly after dawn the Queen returned, unlocked the chain, and sent Xena to an already waiting group of Amazons composed of about half the members of yesterday's fishing detail, some royal guards, some hunters, and the weapons' master. She was to teach them how to catch fish with their bare hands. The combination of keen senses and fast moments required to do so made sure that at least some of them would be utterly frustrated by the end of the day and she was surprised to find that only four of them really didn't get it.

So foremost the day was great fun. When they took their midday-break in the first candlemarks of the afternoon, a splashing feast started that quickly turned in an all-out water fight leaving them all completely soaked and efficiently chasing away the fish. So, they decided to lie down on the sunny beach and relax. When two candlemarks later three of the kitchen helpers came to take away their catch they still were pleasantly soaking in the summer sun, stark naked. One of them full of reproach looked at their meagre two and a half baskets of fish but Eponin just shrugged her shoulders, not even bothering to get up and said that they had been sent out to learn not to empty the river of its content. She added with a glint in her eyes that she didn't want to be disturbed in her serious and exhausting business of drying their leathers. Another one of the kitchen staff mumbled that they had expected at least another four baskets but didn't dare to confront the weapons' master directly.

Half a candlemark later Xena whispered in Eponin's ear and the Amazon warrior sent her sisters back to the village. Xena stood and walked in the water not bothering with her still damp leather dress. She began to toss fish after fish to the weapons' master. Soon two more baskets were filled and Eponin insisted that now it was her turn. She caught the content of one basket before Xena once again took over. Their leathers now were dry enough not to be too uncomfortable, they delivered the four baskets to a flabbergasted cook, and Xena made a visit to Gabrielle before returning to the Queen's hut.

"Tell me again why we have to make this detour to Amphipolis, Cyrene."

"It may be more than two years ago but I had a stock of dried healing herbs hidden that still will be of use and also some plantations in the forest where we can harvest fresh ones. We may need them on our way, and it only will take us a few days."

The tall warrior couldn't help but think that a few days may just make the difference between life and death for his general but Xena had been more than adamant about Cyrene not getting to know the conditions of her stay with the Amazons or about the forthcoming trial. His silence began to catch her attention so he said.

"I should have known the General learned her healing skills at a young age. She'd always told us that the battles she was in taught her all she had to know but she's just too good to be nothing but a battle field surgeon."

"Xena's a healer? You're kidding, Palemon."

"The General is a woman of many skills, Cyrene. Most of the men here could tell you a lot of stories about the General saving their lives with her healing skills and her determination, sometimes against all odds. After a full day of fighting more often than not, she spent the night trying to save our lives. She trained the army healers and when dealing with severe injuries it's her everyone looks for. She went for days without sleep to save her soldiers, and every death was a lost battle in her eyes. She fought as hard in the healer's tent as she did on the battlefield."

Palemon saw the look of disbelief the gray haired woman gave him but he knew that slowly his words were taking root in her heart and that she began to at least contemplate the possibility her daughter could be more than just a heartless killer.

"I can tell by the frown on your face that you don't believe him, Cyrene," one of the older soldiers suddenly said, "so I will tell you a story, a true story because I happen to have lived through it. My name is Meleager, I'm fighting with the General for more than nine years now. I began as a soldier and became her supply master after being injured in the war against the Persians. One of their spears cut open my guts and I was sure to die when my insides began to spill out. All I could do was trying to press them back inside while I was lying on the ground and staring at the blue sky. I knew I soon would have to pay Charon but suddenly there was a shadow shielding me from the sun and a voice ordered me to continue and take one breath after the other."

"She said. 'You're not allowed to die, Mel. It will get worse before it can get better but I need you.' The next thing I know it that I was looking into these incredible blue eyes of hers, still filled with worry and the voice said. 'Don't you dare to die on me, Meleager.' I sank back into oblivion and when I regained consciousness, the blue orbs were still watching over me. She could have patched me up and leave me to the Fates but the General not only tended to my wounds she also cared about me."

"I felt safe in her care and that's what gave me the strength to get well again. Later on, when I

was well enough to move around a bit, I was told that she not only spent several candlemarks to tend to my wound but that she also fed and bathed me more than once while I was recovering. And that's not the only time I owed my life to her."

"So she cared for an experienced fighter who certainly was an asset to her army. What's so special about that?"

"Well, that's what she always wanted us to believe but she couldn't fool us and you obviously don't want to understand, Cyrene. The General had the Persian wounded found on the battlefield in the same tent and she tended to them with the same dodged determination. To her it didn't count if one was an enemy or a friend, a seasoned fighter or a young lass on his first campaign. She tried to give all of us a second chance. It wasn't a question of a sword more or less to her army.

"There's more to her than she herself wants to acknowledge. I know you probably still don't want to believe me but there's a way to convince you once we're in Amphipolis. One of the Persians she saved back then is now running the inn. His name is Tarik and he was nothing short of a boy when we fought them. We became friends while recovering from the Persian campaign. He took an arrow through his right shoulder and shattered his leg from a fall. I'm sure once he knows what happened he will be with us for the trip to the Amazons."

"Meleager, I really hope that you are right about your general but for the last decade or so, all my daughter showed to me was a heartless murderer and warlord, only interested in her own good, so please try to understand that I'm still reluctant to share your view."

"Tarik and Shirin will convince you, Cyrene, you'll see."

All in all Xena had had a most pleasant day - and she really was looking forward to dinner. In the central room a fire was blazing, Queen Melosa was sitting in front of it, wearing a white, sleeveless gown going down to her ankles, delicate leather sandals and a leather headband adorned with Artemis' moon. Tonight she wasn't the Queen, she was Artemis' Priestess, and Xena bowed to her befitting her social standing.

"Sit down, Xena. I'm sure you know that the festival of summer solstice only really begins with the offering to the Great Huntress, at moonrise on the first evening. There's partying before and lots of after but this ceremony is what it is really all about. It celebrates the time Artemis chose the Amazons as 'her' people. To mentally prepare for this celebration the priestess is required to spend the fourth night before the festival at the temple in prayer and silent vigil. In the past I always did this on my own but tonight I want you to go with me." Registering the expression of shock on Xena's face she relented. "This isn't an order, Xena, I just would appreciate your company."

"I'm honoured, Queen Melosa," the warrior answered choosing her words carefully, "it would be a pleasure to be at your side tonight. I'll willingly share the vigil and wait for you here or at my

room but my presence at the temple only would insult the Goddess. My actions in the past certainly have, and more than once. I'm surprised she hasn't struck me down yet, she has ample opportunity when I'm at her house praying."

"I disagree, Xena. Two nights ago, I had a dream. I don't remember all the details but Artemis knows that you're on your path to redemption. She knows that you try to right at least part of the wrongs you did in your life. I'm sure she won't be insulted by your presence as she isn't insulted by the fact that your prayers are not directed to her. - There's something to eat on the dresser in your room, serve yourself if you choose to stay here. On your bed, you'll find something to wear when you're coming with me. You have half a candlemark to make your choice."

Xena silently stood, bowed once again, and closed the door to her room. She heavily leaned against it and released the breath she unconsciously had been holding.

On the bed there was as white tunic, a braided leather thong to put around the waist, leather sandals, and a two inches broad leather band to fasten around the left biceps. One had to look very closely to see that it wasn't plain but had on it a moon outlined with small holes pierced through it. It was the official outfit of a priestess' assistant. She closed her eyes and made her decision.

The next morning they left the temple at the first rays of dawn and Melosa asked. "You're up for a run? The long way around the ravine?"

They returned to the village in silence. The Queen and Priestess knew that the moon Goddess had visited Xena in a forceful vision and she was pretty sure that the dark haired woman now had a lot to think about.

After the run and a large morning meal the tall warrior asked to be allowed to do some repairs at the detention hut she would have to spend the nights and spare time in during the trial. At first, the Queen declined the offer, the thought of someone repairing one's own prison was plainly odd, but Xena insisted. In the end, Queen Melosa sent the two craftswomen who just were preparing their tools to another assignment Akyra recently had talked her into.

The walls of the rarely used detention hut were still sturdy but some of the bars at the window were missing and the interior was in dire need of restoration, the two bolts closing the door also had to be replaced. In the afternoon while searching the supplies of the blacksmith for replacement material Xena came upon an oddly looking cart standing in the far corner of the backyard and an idea began to form. Later she asked the Queen for a quill and some pieces of parchment and started to sketch.

Soon the detention hut was as good as new and the neglected cart had been transformed into something resembling a chair but with wheels instead of legs. Around midday, Xena came into the infirmary. She didn't carry a lunch tray as she usually did but simply picked up her lover, carried her outside and gently lowered her onto the chair. At the back were handles to push it around but as Xena had hoped for Gabrielle quickly was able to move it around on her own. By

aligning some small wheels and chains in a rather complicated looking pattern the tall woman had made it possible to handle the wheelchair one-handed, Gabrielle's right arm not being strong enough yet to be strained and her wrist still in a splint. It was strenuous but she now no longer was confined to the healer's hut all the time and she would be able to take part in the festival.

Together they went to the dining hut, Gabrielle was at her side when she put the last finishing touches to the detention hut and also stayed with her when she met with Ephiny. The day after the vigil she reluctantly had agreed to answer her lawyer's questions.

Chapter Five: The Festival

"Damn, damn, damn."

"What's wrong, Ep?", the Queen asked when the cursing warrior entered her own hut.

Eponin froze in mid-motion. It seemed weeks since Melosa last entered her hut. In fact, only a few days ago the Queen did spend the night with her but only to calm her down and keep her from killing Najara. But this wasn't exactly what she longed for. When the whole story with the former Conqueror began they both agreed consuming their sexual relationship would only lead to more conflicts and complications. So, they decided upon a period of chastity, but here she was, casually leaning against the backrest of the warrior's bed, and looking every inch the predator Eponin desired with all her heart.

"What's wrong, Ep?" The Queen repeated her question. "No, don't tell me now. Now there are more serious matters to attend to. Come here, and pleasure your Queen."

Within less than a heartbeat, one of the finest warriors of Amazon history was on the bed, on her knees between the widespread legs of the other woman. She pushed the leather skirt aside, and began to trace the muscular legs right and left of her with tender fingertips as if she soon wanted to sculpture them by the force of her passion.

"No, clasp your hands behind your back, you're only to use your mouth. Feed of me."

When the last wave of Melosa's climax finally subsided, she found herself in the warm embrace of her lover.

"Thank you for serving me."

"You're welcome. I missed you, my love." Eponin's voice was only a hint above a whisper, still raging with her own pent-up desire.

She tried to regain some self-control and finally said. "You better hurry back to your hut, Melosa. Your dinner and your slave are wait..." She fell silent in mid-sentence. "I'm sorry, I know there's nothing to be jealous of. Tell me what to do to atone, my love."

Melosa's head rested in the lap of the Amazon warrior, and so she had to stretch to reach the woman's cheek with the palm of her hand in a reassuring gesture.

"There's no need, Ep. It isn't easy for me either. I told Xena to spend the night in the healer's hut. I told her she should see it as a gift for the good work she did with the detention hut and I tried to convince myself that she simply should have the opportunity to spend some quality time with Gabrielle. Thania was moved the Anara's quarters. With the summer, festival and the trial this will be their last chance of being together. But while I was sitting here, waiting, I realised that I also did it for me. I couldn't stand being without you any longer. I longed for your voice whispering in my ear, your touch dancing on my skin. I couldn't stand waking up without your arms holding me tight, your scent in my nostrils. Yes, I know, even without Xena, this will always be a dream but tonight I need to forget all about the Queen, tonight I need to be your woman. Please."

Eponin's head bent down placing the most tender of kisses on Melosa's forehead. She stood up and slowly took off her leathers making sure to put on a show for her lover. She knelt next to the Queen on the bed, with the tip of her tongue brushing the outlines of Melosa's lips without actually kissing her. Her tongue descended to the chin following the jaw line to the neck. The almost imperceptible touches gradually were getting stronger near the pulse point. Eponin continued her teasing journey to the right shoulder where she unbuckled the straps of Melosa's leather top. Meanwhile the hands of the Queen tried to get a hold on Eponin's firm breasts but were stopped short mid-way.

"No, don't. I spent many sleepless nights dreaming about this, dreaming about playing with your beautiful body. Keep still, grab your right wrist with your left hand, and lower them just over your head. Don't straighten your arms; make yourself comfortable. Don't move. I will do all the work." The warrior's voice was gentle and low but there was no doubt who was in charge.

Melosa's whole body was tense with anticipation and desire when the dark haired woman began her teasing all over again, this time sliding down towards the left shoulder. Her tongue now retraced the outlines of the top, with her teeth unlacing the strap in the middle holding the two parts together. The leather triangles fell apart, revealing two round breasts erect with arousal. Eponin marvelled at the sight, and felt her own nipples harden even further. Her body craved for release but she resumed the gentle touches circling the right breast slowly narrowing the circles but never touching the nipples.

She withdrew, restarting her task on the left side, and when she once again withdrew Melosa moaned with need arching her back up from the mattress to prompt her lover to action. Eponin kept her distance not moving a single muscle until the Queen had repositioned herself on the bed. She bent forward lowering her upper body with her nipples touching the breasts of the other woman.

Once again, her tongue teased Melosa's lips and a moan escaped. After what to both of them seemed like a lifetime, Eponin for the second time completed her breast circling and then sucked

vigorously on the left bud. Her own body now began to ache with need but she valiantly stuck to her plan. She concentrated her ministrations on the right side, gently scraping the sensitive skin with her teeth.

Melosa's breathing went ragged, her body once again tensed, and she whispered. "Take me now, take me hard, I need to..."

Her mouth efficiently was sealed with a demanding kiss, Eponin's breasts once again brushing against her taut nipples. Melosa looked at her lover with the eyes of a pleading puppy dog when she abruptly broke the kiss.

"You're so beautiful, my love, breath-taking, unique. You're worth waiting for, two-quarter moons, a year, a lifetime but you really need to learn patience. Tonight you're mine - mine alone. Don't move, don't speak, don't try to take over." The gentle voice gradually was getting colder and more commanding. "If you do so, only once, this game is over, then there will be no release for me, and you will be in my bed all alone." An expression of undisguised horror crossed Melosa's face. "I don't want you to come, not yet. You will wait for my order. Are you able to do this for me?"

The Queen swallowed hard, and formed an almost voiceless 'yes' as only answer.

"It will be easier for you when your hands and feet are restrained. Do you want to be immobilised?"

"No," Melosa answered, her voice still barely above a whisper, "I don't want to belittle your gift, 'cause now I know what you're trying to do tonight, my love. From now on, I will have a better grip on my reactions. I will humbly take all you are willing to give to me. You are the owner of my heart, my soul, my body. I'm yours, all yours."

Eponin closed her eyes to regain her composure, when she spoke her voice was husky with emotion. "I proudly accept your submission, Melosa. Please close your eyes, there's much left to explore, and now we have to start all over again."

Melosa, by her promise, was now more tightly bound than by leather straps or heavy chains but she had a hard time not to cry or beg when Eponin true to her words journeyed from her lips to her neck to her chest and finally resumed the careful nibbling on her swollen nipple, the right hand fondling the left breast. The warrior then proceeded downwards to the further exploration of Melosa's body with the tip of her powerful muscle while her fingers continued to play with the aching breasts.

An eternity later, she withdrew one of her hands to get rid of Melosa's skirt. She positioned her own body between the wide-spread legs of the woman she loved, her tongue teasingly sliding on the outside of the right leg, circling around the kneecap, continuing down to the toes and painstakingly sucking and licking all of them. To re-ascent on the inside of the limb she took even more time, stopping short of Melosa's pubic zone, carefully avoiding the very area the Queen's soul silently begged to be touched at. Starting with the belly button, she repeated the

delicious torture with the left leg and thigh, spending some quality time with the royalty branding. Each of her thumbs almost casually, randomly flicking against a proudly pointed nipple.

Only then, Eponin began to explore the folds of Melosa's visibly throbbing centre. She used her right hand to part the nether lips, and hungrily attacked the clit - and for a fraction of a heartbeat lost her, self-control. The blood pulsating through this bundle of nerves heightened her desire, and two of her fingers found their way in the dripping wetness of the Queen's sex. A third was added thrusting to and thro' carefully avoiding to create any kind of rhythm.

The muscles around her fingers tightened, Melosa definitively was on the edge. Eponin pulled them out, and felt the shudders coursing through Melosa's whole body. She posed her pubic bone on top of Melosa's, clitoris touching clitoris, her own wetness drenching her lover. Her upper body carefully was lowered over the Queen's torso, breast touching breast, and her hips began a slow rhythmic grinding movement. Her mouth found Melosa's who now was tasting herself on the other woman's lips. When they finally broke the kiss to catch their breaths, the Amazon warrior whispered.

"Now, come for me, come with me."

Melosa's arms flew away from the pillow and grabbed Eponin's shoulders, her fingers clutching into the soft skin below, her own back arching high while waves of pleasure run through every part of her body, only candle drops later beginning to ease off. When her senses slowly reaffirmed themselves, she once again found herself lovingly surrounded by Eponin's strong arms, her head resting against the chest of the warrior. Peace and contentment filled Melosa's heart when she slowly drifted in Morpheus' realm.

The weapons' master didn't sleep; she draped a blanket over the sleeping body and relished the moment. She eagerly drank in the features of her lover, astonished and delighted at the change sleep always brought, the strained lines in the corner of her eyes relaxed almost into invisibility and a genuine smile slowly reshaped her lips. Soon the woman in her arms again would be her Queen, burdened with the duties of leadership; and a Queen - Eponin was convinced - has to be independent. The tribe, the nation had to take precedent over personal feelings and emotional longings. A Queen simply couldn't afford being distracted.

Lost in her aimless musings the weapons' master missed the slight change in Melosa's breathing, and nearly jumped at the sudden question. "What were you cursing about, Ep?"

"It was nothing, love. Just miffed at myself, rather silly, really. No need to make a big fuss about it."

"Spill it, Ep."

"I had to cut short the sparring sessions because of the festival preparations. There was nothing to do for me, so I took a long bath, and then decided to work on my whipping techniques. A

strap, birches or even a cane are okay but with this single tailed monster I always feel sort of self-conscious."

Melosa realised how difficult it must have been for the proud warrior to admit to these insecurities, even to her lover. "You did a good job on Xena, the welts were gone after less than two days."

Eponin smiled. "I know, Xena told me so, but I also know that they hurt a great deal. And I'll have to do it again at the beginning of the trial; it's only three days 'til then. I tried to find a move or a twist that leaves marks but inflicts less pain."

"Did you come up with something?" Melosa asked, silently pleased with the friendly bond the two warriors were developing.

"Not really. I used the dead tree trunk north of the training grounds as target when Xena passed by. She can handle a whip probably better than anyone else. Never before, I saw such proficiency, and she taught me a great deal. I now know how to skin one's back with just a few strokes, how to break the skin with every blow, how to curl the tail around a target, making an impact on the whole body and still only leaving a tiny mark in the middle of the back. It all depends upon angle, speed, and wrist flexibility. But I really hope that I don't have to put any of this to use. There's this stroke she demonstrated, it doesn't leave a straight mark like all the others but something resembling a half-circle. It looked easy enough when she did it but I just didn't get it right. When she left to tend to Gabrielle two candlemarks later, I kept on trying but it wasn't any good. That's what I was cursing about."

"I'm sure next time you will get it right, love." Melosa answered and continued with mock severity. "And so the weapons' master of the Amazon nation let a slave get away with using a whip, a whip still is considered a weapon, isn't it?"

The slight banter in the Queen's voice was completely lost on Eponin. "It wasn't used as a weapon, my Queen, and we didn't have an audience either. I'm probably guilty of irresponsibility but please don't punish Xena."

"I was joking, Ep. But knowing Xena, she by now certainly has prepared a report about this little session. She always tries to hide the gentle and selfless things that seem to come so natural to her but she is more than severe regarding her occasional shortcomings or transgressions. I don't have to do it on a regular basis but when I really have to met out a punishment, it's always amazing to watch."

"I remember. At the ceremony, when she refused to be tied up, I thought she was arrogantly overestimating her willpower. I was wrong. Her whole body seemed to relax just before the impact of the stroke; she didn't even flinch though it certainly aggravated the throbbing of her cracked rib. Her pain barrier must be extremely high."

"I never saw a back that scarred. She must have been through a lot. I asked her how she got them after the collaring ceremony but she didn't answer."

"The day we were fishing, I asked her about them, when the others were gone and she was catching fish with these fluid movements of hers, one can see the muscles moving underneath her skin. I asked her what she did to deserve such a punishment. She said that every time she misjudged someone she'd paid for it with her blood. I didn't understand, so she told me that about five years ago her second in command had decided that he would be better suited to run her army and most of the men agreed. They made her run the gauntlet, Melosa."

"She survived a gauntlet? That's more than astonishing but I shouldn't be surprised. Sometimes I think that if she really wanted to there'd be nothing that she couldn't accomplish. She's hard to read; I really don't know what fuels her actions now. Four years ago when we met to sign, the peace treaty at the Centaur village there was a relentless energy surrounding her, a jumpiness. It was as if she were always on the edge, always on the run. This Xena is different. It may sound crazy but I think the slave collar makes her feeling free and contend. There still is a great deal of dark energy ready to come to life every moment. It was almost tangible when she told me about this whole mess with Najara."

A sudden wave of white-hot fury washed through Eponin's body hearing this name but it quickly subsided when the Queen protectively put her hands on top of her tightly closed fists.

"When I see her in the village, interacting with the others, from time to time she is really hard pressed holding her temper and it must be awfully difficult for her but when she kneels in front of me, there is a confidence around her as if it were the most natural thing in the world. It must be difficult to follow orders instead of giving them but she does it with grace. I don't want to condemn her to death, Ep."

The Amazon warrior hugged Melosa closer and kissed her on the forehead. "I know, love, and I don't want to be her executioner but we will do it if the jury so decides. I don't say that I really understand why she submits to this trial but I know for sure that we have to respect the path she has chosen. She saved Thania and without her fighting skills and the men of the First Order, there would have been a lot more casualties on the battlefield. But perhaps in due time we will find another solution. As long as there is life there is hope."

"Warrior philosophy. No, I will have to find a very good reason for not killing her. It will be relatively easy to deal with the infringements of the peace treaty. Helping us out against her army and tending to our wounded should scale these balances. But today, coming from another village, multiple murder and profanation of holy ground was added to the list of charges. There weren't any details but even Ephiny will need nothing short of a god given inspiration to get her out of this alive. I have to find a way. I can't understand why she wants to die."

"Xena loves Gabrielle, body and soul, she doesn't want to die, but she has to go through with the trial out of self-esteem. She has every reason to live but she also knows that she cannot start anew without dealing with her past first. To conquer one's self is to know the way, I heard her saying to Thania the other day. I think that's what she's trying to do at the moment. And all we can do about it, is to hope and to wait."

Eponin easily could feel the grim determination of the Queen to somehow save her former enemy, and to lighten the mood of her lover after some candledrops of shared silence she asked while nibbling her left earlobe. "Are you still mine, Melosa? Are you ready to play, love?"

A smile crossed the face of the Queen, a callused finger slid up and down her left biceps leaving goose bumps at its passage. "Is there something special you have in mind, my warrior?"

"The nights were rather long and boring without you, my love, so: yes, I do. The question is: Are you up to it, beloved? It probably will be more demanding than last time."

"Stop being condescending, Ep. Not so long ago I had the impression it was you who lost control and began to rush things up. So yes, I'm up to it."

When she saw the feral grin of her lover, she knew she was busted, stumbling open-eyed in her trap. "You asked for it, you'll get it, love. - Turn around, stretch your arms above your head, grab the bars of the headboard, and don't let go. Spread your legs, wider, that's it, close your eyes."

The surface of the bed shifted when Eponin stood up and went to her dresser, there was the scraping sound of wood on wood as drawers were opened and closed. Bare footsteps returned to the bed whose surface once again shifted.

"Please don't regard it as a matter of distrust, I know you can keep your eyes shut," Eponin whispered in her ear when she blindfolded her with a piece of soft fabric, "but you will need all your other senses and all the considerable power of concentration I know you possess. You can't afford being distracted, love." Trepidation and anticipation likewise showed their heads in Melosa's mind. "We will begin nice and slow with a simple back rub."

The mattress once again shifted, and Melosa knew that Eponin now would settle herself between her legs, the knees tightly pressing in her thighs. She tried to open them wider, only to find herself straddled, Eponin's weight partly resting on her own knees, partly on the buttocks of her lover. A cold liquid was now dropping on her back along the spine. She waited for powerful hands kneading her muscles but nothing happened. The oil slowly seemed to heat up creating a tingling sensation not wholly agreeable. A second line was added crossing from shoulder blade to shoulder blade, intensifying the odd sensation. Eponin's words obviously were no idle threats.

When the hands of her lover finally touched her, it was with the delicate, yet firm pressure the crafts women use to create the Amazon masks. The thumbs slid from her lower back towards the neck, where the two lines crossed they began a mirrored circling motion. A set of fingers on either side of her body meanwhile flexed and relaxed, flexed and relaxed matching her breathing. The circles slowly grew bigger and soon Melosa lost track of what exactly her lover was doing. She only knew that her whole back was consumed by a sensuous flame sending a line of fire to her sex. Fingertips brushed the sensitive skin under her armpits and a voice whispered. "Come for me, now!"

Melosa released the breath she unconsciously had been holding and the flames rushed from her

back right to her centre letting it explode with a powerful thrust of her hips still blocked under Eponin's weight. She slowly relaxed and her muscles went limp when the hands adopted a more soothing pattern.

"This was the first course of your dinner, my beloved. What do you want me to do now?"

"May I have the second course, mistress?"

"So be it, now you may spread your legs a little wider, as wide as you can and still be comfy."

Eponin knelt between the thighs of her lover. Her knees two fingers away from Melosa's skin. Once again, she felt oil dripping on her skin, coating both of her buttocks. She waited for the warmth and the odd tingling but it didn't come. Instead, the cool liquid grew even colder, and inadvertently the whole set of her gluteal muscles cramped. A firm hand landed on her behind, leaving it stinging, and she let loose.

"That's my girl, relax; take your time."

Eponin's hands now traded feather-like touches with firm kneading, the rhythm once again matching her breathing. Imperceptibly coldness changed to warmth, and then turned to heat, her breathing quickened. Another sharp slap landed on her cheeks.

"Relax, love, stay in line. This isn't a race, it's a journey."

The hands resumed their ministrations never changing neither the rhythm nor the movement but instead of lulling her to sleep, her already hard nipples became stone and her blood once again rushed to her centre. She suddenly felt empty. Her inner muscles clenched, and the effort to relax them only made her tighten her back cheeks. Three stinging blows were the only answer, inducing her to relax. Eponin's hands returned to her task, and when the tension became too strong, Melosa lost her composure.

"Please, mistress, may I come? It's unbearable; I can't stand it any longer. Please, let me come."

"Not yet, love, you're doing fine. It won't take much longer, trust me."

The weapons' master continued her game of firm kneading and teasing touches. After what seemed to Melosa like a lifetime the touches stopped and the kneading was increased in intensity and pace. Her bottom was on fire but her centre was blazing and all her rational thoughts were gone. She was bursting with need. The hands abruptly came to a stop, she felt the blow of a strap, and at the same time, the one word she desperately, endlessly had waited for. "Now!"

The first wave of release hit her with unique force; a second stroke with the strap brought forth a new wave before the first one had had even the chance to subside. She arched her backside literally in the third blow and another forceful outburst of juices drenched the blankets. Two more made her cry with pleasure and pain, tears soaking the blindfold. She felt Eponin's wet

mound on the now over sensitive skin of her bottom, her weight on her back and taut nipples pressing against her shoulder blades, and there was a low, soothing voice slowly penetrating the fog of her consciousness.

"I'm proud of you, so proud, my love. You took all I had to give. I'm so proud, my beautiful, calm down now, calm down while I wash away the sweat, and put some aloe on the strap marks. I love you."

"Love you, too." Melosa managed to whisper. Eponin returned with a cloth soaked in warmed water, ran it all over Melosa's body, and dried her up with an extremely soft towel. She gently and cautiously coated her backside with aloe salve to reduce the stinging and speed up the healing process.

"Turn around now, love. Grab the headboard. I will wash your front side."

And so she did, the slight touches of the towel hardened her nipples all over again. When Eponin finally had finished her task, she felt the renewed wetness between her thighs and was more than ready to ask for more but her voice betrayed her. The weapons' master offered a water skin to her and supported her shoulders when she insisted on keeping her hands on the backrest.

"Thank you, mistress. May I also have the third course?"

"Third course for you, sweets for me. I want to break your soft skin with my teeth, I want to mark you as mine and mine alone. I need your permission to do this."

"Yes, mistress. I'll wear your mark with pride. Please do it when I'm at the peak of a climax, so my pleasure will be heightened as it was before."

"That's what I had in mind, love. And now I will touch you with my voice."

Eponin's voice dropped lower, by this alone adding an undercurrent of sensuality. The usually silent and stoic warrior expertly described in loving detail what had happened earlier this night, painting Melosa's aroused body with adoration: the way the muscles under her soft skin shivered with need, her eyelashes fluttered, her nipples trembled, and her clitoris pulsed. Soon it was more than a memory, it was what she had before her eyes.

While further arousing her lover she made the final adjustments to the leather harness she wore and strapped a phallus on. She coated the leather-clad wooden stick with some lubricant and in a smooth movement filled Melosa's sex, slowly gliding in and out. She maintained the pace until Melosa's throat escaped a sound halfway between moan and purr. She could feel Melosa's body trying to arch into every thrust but she just continued her controlled movements. Her right arm steadied the hips of her lover while her left hand was teasing the Queen's breasts. Eponin felt the tension building in the trim, evenly muscled body beneath her. Both of her hands now guided Melosa's hips, her own body barely moving, and all the time she described to the still blindfolded woman what she was doing and seeing.

Melosa meanwhile was far beyond rational thought and more than ready to let go. The low, sensual voice of the weapons' master suddenly stopped, the movements of her hips were halted with incredible strength, the phallus slowly removed almost to the tip, and the whispered order "Come!" finally brought her over the edge. When the aftershocks of her first climax began to subside the phallus resumed its grinding movements and she was swallowed by a second wave. Her whole body now was covered with the body of her lover, a tongue demanded and was granted entrance in her mouth, a forceful kiss followed and once again she heard the command: "Come!"

And so the Queen did. Eponin continued pumping in and out, immediately building up another climax. The moment it hit the mouth found a proudly protruding breast and bit hard, bringing her over the edge in a powerful explosion of sensations, a hair's breath away from sensual overload. She barely managed to pull the phallus out and quit the harness before collapsing next to her lover.

Melosa rolled over and planted a tender kiss on Eponin's lips. "Thank you, mistress. Thank you, my love. I like you being in charge, we'd better try this more often." Then they snuggled together, legs and arms intertwined, and mere heart beats later they were fast asleep.

Eponin and Melosa awoke to the sound of a village bustling with activity, the sun already well up in the sky. Everybody from the elders to the children was busy to lay a last hand to the festival preparations. Gabrielle was sitting in her wheelchair with Thania nearby and helped the younger children to make flower chains for the evening's ceremony. Xena and half of Melosa's royal guard were stacking logs near the fire pits for the celebration afterwards and were arranging the tables and benches for dinner.

When the scouts announced the imminent arrival of the first guests Melosa took Xena to her hut to change. The tall warrior assisted her in putting on her royal leathers and helped fastening all the beads and feathers mandatory to Amazon regalia, the mask, and staff were waiting on the desk. While Melosa was fussing with her hair Xena took off her leather dress and changed into plain Amazon leathers, a skirt ending mid-thigh and a top leaving very little to the imagination, matching dark brown wrist bands and braided thongs for the upper arms completed the outfit. Instead of boots or sandals Xena, choose to go barefooted. The leathers displayed her muscles and when they went to the council's hut, she got more than one admiring glance.

They entered only candledrops before the first guests. The council of elders and the military leaders were present as well as the representatives of the crafts. The Queen took her seat on the dais erected in the middle of the hut. As tradition commanded Xena knelt at the left side of the Queen, eyes fixed to the ground.

With the first group all passed as it should have. Xena played her part and seemed completely oblivious of her surroundings while the leader of the delegation exchanged formal greetings with the Queen before being escorted to the guest quarters.

"What do you think about them, Xena?"

"A mountain tribe, hunters, horse breeders, they're as tough as their little horses. The leader is very young for her position. I suppose she was named weapons' master no longer than three moons ago, nevertheless I'm sure she has earned it. She's self-confident but lacks the arrogance of the untested. She was nervous and didn't know what to expect of a Queen who holds the Conqueror of Greece and Rome as a slave without restraining this enemy with heavy chains. The two guards are older and more experienced than the weapons' master but they respect their commanding officer. They try not to judge any of us without having more information but are somewhat intrigued as are the two elders. I suppose they don't know what happened here. Perhaps it would be a good idea to call a meeting as soon as all the guests have arrived and give them the details."

The Queen nodded and the next group entered the room consisting of four warriors and an elder. The guests bowed and went down on their right knees.

"Greetings and obedience to you, Melosa, Queen of the Amazon nation, venerable leader of the Greek Amazons and Priestess to Artemis, the Great. I, Novalia, leader of the eastern coastal village, humbly demand your hospitality."

"Greetings and protection to you, Novalia, leader of the eastern coastal village, honoured for her courage and perseverance. I, Melosa, Queen of the Amazon nation, willingly grant hospitality to you and your warriors." Melosa left the dais, pushed back her mask, and pulled the older woman in a heartfelt hug. "I'm happy to see you again, aunt, it's been too long. I know you don't like to leave your village during the winter season but you also missed the spring solstice. I was worried."

"I'm well aware of your concern, Melosa, but my messages should have reassured you. We had some trouble with pirates. They sported the Conqueror's colours but I know her obsession with quality and she never would have someone this stupid and sloppy pilot one of her ships. There were about twenty ships but only three of them showed decent sailsmanship, however it took some time to hunt them down."

Meanwhile one of the warriors had slowly made her way towards Xena who still seemed to ignore her surroundings. Suddenly there was a flicker of movement; the warrior fell on her back and a dagger clattered to the ground. The Amazon scrambled to her feet and had her hand at her sword while Xena had assumed a defensive stance.

"Stop it, Silea, immediately."

"But, Novalia, it's my right to take her life. Two years ago she offended my honour, it's my right to get satisfaction."

"Tell me, Silea, did you ever record your claim? Was it ever confirmed by an Amazon jury?"

"No, my Queen, she isn't an Amazon, so it wasn't necessary."

"She's a woman, so it would have been necessary. When she offended your honour, did she draw your blood?"

"No, Novalia, she didn't."

"No. - Well in this case no jury would have granted your claim. Your actions have offended our hosts and you will apologise to Queen Melosa."

The young woman nodded and knelt in front of the Queen. "Queen Melosa, I apologise for my behaviour and will gratefully accept every punishment you see fit."

Melosa turned to Xena who reassumed her earlier position. "Xena do you think that I have to be offended by her actions towards my slave?"

"No, mistress, no harm was done."

"The Queen accepts your apologies though I don't believe them to be sincere. Disciplinary authority goes back to Novalia."

"Silea, your actions embarrassed me in front of our tribe leader, so all shall know your punishment. You're assigned to maintenance duty of our quarters for our whole time here. You may go now."

"Thank you, Novalia, I humbly accept the punishment." The warrior gathered her dagger and left in the company of her three colleagues.

"Xena, tell me about this incident. What did you do to offend this Amazon's honour?"

Xena exchanged a quick glance with Melosa and answered the older woman's question.

"Venerable Novalia, I honestly doubt that Silea would appreciate my telling of this story. It's something that didn't occur within the boundaries of Amazon territory and it only regards her and me. So, I'd rather not answer your question."

"Considering your knowledge of Amazon pride and honour, did you do anything to offend her?"

"I'd really prefer not to answer this question either, Queen Melosa."

"So, I have no choice. Novalia please tell the warrior Silea that she is free to present her case as a charge in Xena of Amphipolis' impending trial."

"I will, my Queen."

The next group was expected in about one and a half candlemarks and so they decided to get something to eat. Xena went in search of Gabrielle who had yet to see her new attire; Melosa and

her aunt retired to the Queen's hut. They ate in silence.

"The Conqueror has changed."

"Yes, she has. She isn't the Conqueror any more. I forgot that you know each other. You joint forces to fight the Persian navy some years ago, isn't it?"

"That's what the Conqueror told her army leaders when we got back but it isn't the truth. The truth is she saved our hides with one of the most amazing sailing manoeuvres I've ever seen or will ever see. We were outnumbered and on the run when she attacked and turned our flight in a full-out attack. She saved the day and our lives."

"What makes you think, she has changed?"

"Five years ago Silea would have died from her own dagger in her heart. And I'm sure Xena knows that she has the law on her side. Even a slave has the right to defend herself. I could see that she had some difficulties to stay calm but the dark energy permeating from the Conqueror has gone."

"What do you think happened between her and Silea, Nova?"

"I don't know for sure but it certainly had to do with the Conqueror's campaign against Rome. At the time, we had a lot of problems with Roman slavers, and when the Conqueror needed archers for her ships, many of the younger warriors volunteered. The ones who came back did so with lots of Roman gold and many stories. Silea was one of them but she never talked about her time with the army. She definitively has a problem to keep her temper. What ever happened I sincerely doubt that she will press charges."

There was a knock at the door and one of the guards let them know that the next group was bound to arrive.

The last group arrived three and a half candlemarks before sunset. When the older of the two women began to speak unnoticed by the others the Queen saw Xena's body tensing. After the formal greetings, the younger woman spoke up.

"Queen Melosa, my name is Chandala. I was a warrior's apprentice to the weapons' master of Queen Cyane's tribe. I humbly ask to be named prosecutor in the trial against Xena of Amphipolis. I want to see her die for the things she did to my sisters and I will do everything in the law to achieve this goal."

"Look at me, young warrior." Melosa studied her face closely whose expression hardened whenever her eyes found Xena. "I am grateful for your offer, Chandala. To you this is obviously a personal issue thus; the law demands that one has to be an experienced lawyer. Do you have any juridical experience?"

"No, Queen Melosa, I don't but Theano does. She has been a lawyer for more than 30 summers. She offered to act as my adviser and partner during the trial should you grant my wish. She said she would try and balance the hate I have for the Conqueror."

"Theano, do you also think that Xena has to die?"

"I don't know yet, my Queen. The trial will shed light on her actions and she will rightfully die if found guilty of rape, murder or treason. I don't have any personal ties to the Conqueror but you have to know that I'm a friend of Xena's mother Cyrene. I've known Xena since she was a little girl and I don't want to see her die."

"Can you sincerely say that your personal feelings won't influence your perception of the facts, Theano?"

"I will be as objective as humanly possible. Chandala and I will balance each other and together we should be able to do the job."

"So be it. Chandala, I grant your wish but Theano has the seniority and you will act as her assistant."

"May I have a word in private with your slave, my Queen?"

"Yes, I won't need her for the next two candelmarks at least. You may retire to my hut."

Xena stood, bowed to the Queen, and left the council's hut without meeting the older woman's eyes. They entered the Queen's quarters and the tall warrior led her to her room where she made her taking a seat on the bed. "Talk to me, little one. Let me see your eyes."

Twenty-five years older than the former Conqueror, Theano stood about five foot seven tall, the different shades of gray the only sign of her age while her slender but muscular body bore witness to the fact that she still could hold her own in a fight.

Xena shut the door, knelt in front of the Amazon lawyer, and buried her face in the older woman's hands. Her eyes were closed when she many heartbeats later raised her head. She opened them slowly to see tears glistening in Theano's eyes. "I missed you, Xena."

"The child you loved is not back yet, perhaps it never will be. What I did merits death a thousand times over, and I'm ready to pay this prize though now I have every reason to live. You always told me that one day I would find the one person my heart belongs to. Now I want you to meet the woman whose spirit illuminates my soul and whose love gives me the strength to go through with all of this. This trial is basically for her. I want her to know what kind of woman I am, what I am capable of. I want her to know that I don't deserve her love."

"You never take the easy way out, don't you?"

"This is the easy way out. It's the coward's way out because in all probability I won't have to live with my guilt any longer, Theano."

"I'll make sure that you get the punishment you crave, little one, but I'll also do everything I can, not to see you die. Whatever you did, you're no murderer. I know you better than this and I'll get the jury to see it too. Do you remember the last time we met?"

"Two summers ago. You were visiting with mother, I had to replace half of the palace guards after you were able to sneak into my private rooms."

"I wasn't able to sneak up to you, however. But that's not what I'm talking about. I was afraid that your desire for revenge would not only endanger the campaign but also your life. I was ready to kill you to save your soul. I'm glad I was wrong."

"You weren't wrong and it was your duty to try and stop me. When Caesar challenged me to single combat, the army already had occupied the city, the war was over, the senate had surrendered. A complete victory. It would have been easy to get him arrested and to put him on a cross just like I said I would all these years ago. But when I faced him I suddenly knew that the whole campaign wasn't about him and me but about the security of Greece. Rome was a threat just as the Persians were, a threat that had to be eliminated. There was no hate left in my heart."

"A single combat? I heard Caesar was killed by his fellow senators."

"I answered the challenge but his skills were more in commanding than fighting. He overbalanced a side sweep and stumbled into the ranks of his peers. I'm not sure why they did it but when he tried to get up to resume the fight, they stabbed him. So, I didn't murder Caesar but I'm still responsible for a lot of deaths and a lot of pain, Theano. I don't deserve your concern but I appreciate it. Please let me introduce you to Gabrielle. She will need a friend after the trial."

After sundown most of the adult members of the tribe went to the temple while Gabrielle, Xena and some others stayed in the village with the children and apprentices. The children who over the last quarter moons had become accustomed to her stories soon surrounded Gabrielle. While she lanced herself in the first story, Xena's mind drifted back to the day she learned that the blonde scribe in reality was a very skilled storyteller.

Some days after they became lovers Gabrielle was late for lunch and Xena went in search of her. The servants directed her to the communal kitchens. The young woman was sitting on a bench, seven children at her feet and all the adults eavesdropping.

She told a story of a boy who saved the children of a dragon and subsequently also saved his village. Xena listened to the story from behind a thick pillar and couldn't resist the enticing voice shaping words into living images. The Conqueror loved to listen to these stories that taught the children about honesty and friendship and loyalty and love.

One day, about half a moon later, she decided to open up her library to the palace's children, and Gabrielle was thrilled to teach them how to read and write. In the afternoons, Xena sometimes sneaked up on them and contentedly observed the flush of concentration on the young faces and the inner glow coming from Gabrielle.

A voice brought her back to the here and now. "I'm sorry, Theano, I was thinking, no, daydreaming. What did you say?"

"Gabrielle just asked why the celebration of summer solstice is so very important to the Amazon nation and I told her that it commemorates the time Artemis decided to become the patron goddess of the Amazons. I want you to tell this story to her and to the rest of us."

"This story should best be told by an Amazon. And I'm not sure I remember all the details. Why don't you do it, my se... Theano?"

"Don't think, just do it, little one. We both know that there's nothing wrong with your recollection. You know the story can only be told tonight."

Xena nodded, not quite sure why the older woman was this insistent. "I'm not as good at telling stories as Gabrielle is but I'll try my very best. It's a rather long story so you all better get comfortable."

"Many, many generations ago, when the Amazon nation still was young, they prayed to Gaia, the mother of the earth and the sky, mother of humans and gods alike. Artemis also was still young and Zeus just had named her the Goddess of the Hunt because that's what she loved doing. She spent her days hunting and her nights waiting for her lover but more often than not she was waiting in vain. Artemis was very much in love with Athena, her older sister, and Athena loved Artemis with all her heart but the Goddess of Wisdom and the Arts of War had a strong sense of responsibility and thus was very scrupulous in fulfilling her duties. So, the two lovers couldn't spend as much time with each other as both of them desired. They were gods but they weren't free to do as they liked and their time together was measured in candlemarks.

"Artemis had a hard time to accept Athena's commitment to duty and sometimes their quality time was wasted with endless arguments and tears instead of love and joy. One night they had a very heated discussion and the young Huntress ran away, shouting that she never wanted to see Athena again. She raced through the forest blinded by her own tears. At the break of dawn, she stumbled with exhaustion and finally collapsed under an old oak tree.

"A female voice roused her from her sleep. It said. >Hello, my name is Pallas. Do you need any help?< Artemis looked into her eyes but she didn't know what to say. No, that's not right, she wanted to answer that she longed to go home and that she was wrong to argue with her lover and that she wanted to feel her in her arms again - but she had no voice. Her lips moved but there was no sound and she began to get very frightened.

"The strange woman took her by the hand. A simple leather thong held her long brightly red hair; she was almost as tall as Artemis herself, she carried bow and quiver, a hunting knife tucked in her belt. Her eyes were of a warm dark brown and she was smiling. The smile reassured the goddess and she followed her. It was early in the morning when they began their journey and the sun was setting when they reached the village.

"Pallas knelt in front of her Queen and was granted permission to offer hospitality to the strange silent woman who looked at her surroundings with a mixture of awe, curiosity and something bordering to fear. When Artemis was sleeping in Pallas' bed next to her hostess, she had a dream with her lover and her grandmother standing side by side, telling her that she now was a mortal and that she had to live a mortal's life and love in order to learn her lesson.

"The next morning, Pallas prompted her to write down her name and she was more than tempted to give her the real name but when the quill touched the parchment the word 'Temi' appeared instead.

"Artemis wasn't a goddess any longer but she still was a very skilled hunter. Almost unbeatable at reading tracks and finding her prey. Her arrows always found their target, they died fast, and no animal had to suffer unnecessarily from an ill-placed shot. In the past, she'd always hunted alone but Pallas taught her the sign language the Amazon hunting parties had developed. Thus, she soon was able to do at least some talking with the other women.

"The former Goddess of the Hunt rather easily settled into her new life and the dream about the lesson to learn soon was forgotten. Temi and Pallas shared their days and nights, they became the best friends. The until then restless Amazon hunter found herself looking forward to their quiet evenings in front of the fire place when soft touches and gentle kisses became their language of choice.

"At first Artemis tried to resist the physical attraction she felt for her beautiful friend but as days turned into half moons she had to admit to herself that she not only reacted to her perfect body but also to her soul, and she remembered the dream telling her that she had to live a mortal life and mortal love. She still was deeply in love with Athena however; her sister filled a part of her soul and probably always would. Her body ached for the knowing touch of the raven-haired goddess but at the same time she was completely satisfied by the attentions, she received from her Amazon lover. It took her a whole season to come to term with these emotions but finally she accepted that her feelings for Athena were in no way harmed or diminished by what she now was experiencing with Pallas and vice versa.

"One day her marksmanship brought Temi to the attention of the Amazon Queen. The Queen insisted that she changed posts from the hunters to the army; she was to improve the archery skills of the warriors and to teach them how to fight from the tops of the trees. Pallas unsuccessfully tried to be transferred to the warriors also. From now on the two lovers had to cope with totally different schedules and weren't able to spend as much time with each other as both of them desired. Artemis painfully was reminded of her arguments with Athena.

"This time it somehow never occurred to her that she simply could sneak away from her duties to spend some quality time with her lover as she had suggested to her sister many times. This time she also was to blame for ruined dinners and missed dates, and sometimes both of them were too exhausted to do more than snuggle together and enjoy each other's nearness.

"Temi accepted her new responsibility as did Pallas though neither of them knew that the Queen was reacting to a real threat to the nation in intensifying the hunting and the drills. They had to prepare for a war against an army that outnumbered them more than two to one. This army was well trained and well led by a man named Cantor who could call himself Ares' Chosen.

"The night before the battle Artemis once again had a dream but this time it was only Gaia talking to her. She said. 'My child, you've learned that love and duty can go together even if the time with your love is cut short. You've learned your lesson, why do you still stay amongst these mortals?' Artemis answered. 'Grandmother, I've learned the lesson, that's true, and I miss Athena badly but I am bound by love to this mortal realm. I was selfish not to feel the depths of Athena's love and I was selfish to feel threatened by her dedication to duty. Someday I will regain her trust but if I leave now, I would act towards Pallas as I did towards Athena. I'm sorry.' Gaia asked if there wasn't something else bothering her. And Artemis answered. 'You were always able to see right in my heart, grandmother. This warlord, he is said to be Ares' chosen, I'm worried about my Amazon sisters and I would gladly challenge Hades himself to keep them all safe. Would it change the end of this war if I reclaimed my godhood now? If not I'd rather fight at their side as a mortal among mortals.'

"Gaia's voice was sad when she told her that nothing could stop this war and that some of her friends and sisters would die the next day, no matter what. She said. 'Though the fates weave the threads of life even they have to obey the pattern of life itself when cutting, creating or intertwining them. Whatever you choose to do, remember, if this mortal body dies before you decide to go back the goddess also dies. Choose well, my child.' The voice of Gaia gone, Artemis found herself back in the arms of her mortal lover and her decision was made.

"It was the longest day of the year and Temi readied herself for battle, the third day in a row, leaving the precarious shelter of her tree top bivouac. The day before they'd managed to put the enemy's assault forces to a halt, Queen Hippolyta's hit and run strategy finally paying off. Cantor's men began to retreat to a big clearing just outside of Amazon territory and began to hole themselves in. The Queen tried to challenge Cantor to single combat but he backed off. The archers kept firing and the Amazon sword fighters were slowly advancing when they suddenly found themselves surrounded by Cantor's reinforcements, realising too late that they had walked into a well-prepared trap. Pallas alerted the royal guards with a birdcall but the Queen already was attacked from three sides. The two lovers were in the middle of the fight, having discarded their bows in favour of swords, fighting back to back with the Queen. Cantor pushed his advantage and tried to isolate Queen Hippolyta from the rest of the Amazon fighters.

"Suddenly Temi's senses picked up the distinct hissing of a crossbow-fired arrow and reacted on pure instinct. Her blade reflected the first bolt and she caught the second with her left hand. A third found its way in her right shoulder causing her to drop the sword. Something knocked her to the ground when a fourth was only inches away from her heart. She hit the ground with her

injured shoulder and a wave of pain washed through her body. There was blood everywhere and a familiar weight was pinning her to the ground. It was then that she realised where the blood was coming from.

"Pallas had shielded her from the forth arrow with her own body. Her breathing was shallow but there was a smile on her face when she looked into her eyes. Temi held her lover tightly while the arrows continued without finding their target. With her last strength, Pallas whispered. 'Love you so much, protect them.' Temi placed a gentle kiss on the cooling lips of her mortal lover determined to do all in her power to keep the warrior women save, and when she looked up she saw Ares himself a crossbow in his hands. A wave of white-hot fury washed over her and she began to cut her way through the enemy soldiers towards her brother, oblivious of the hits she received herself.

"A voice all of a sudden was next to her, it said. 'Grandmother is waiting for you, my love. You have to live to protect them, Ares is mine to deal with.' Artemis' mortal body collapsed and she found herself at the edge of the clearing, protectively wrapped in Gaia's arms. The Amazons who now were easily dispatching the remnants of Cantor's army saw their Queen finally facing the warlord himself. They didn't know at the time that this wasn't a battle mortal against mortal. Ares now was fighting in Cantor's body and Athena in Hippolyta's.

"Sister was fighting brother and for the first time in history a god was fighting a god in earnest. Ares soon had to admit that he was largely outclassed. Every single one of his thrusts and strokes was deftly redirected against him and though he used a mortal's body, he certainly could feel the blows. The God of War was no match to Athena's speed and superior swordplay. He was swept from his feet, a sword pierced his heart, and he felt the anguish of dying. When Ares regained consciousness, his sister was looking down at him. She said. 'Dear brother, if you ever interfere like this again, I'll use your own sword to gut you. What you did was without honour and the act of a coward, not of a god. Get out of my eyes before I forget the promise I made to father and kill you right now.'

"Ares disappeared in a blue flash and Athena turned to Gaia and Artemis. The Goddess of the Hunt made a tentative step towards her and quickly was enfolded in strong arms. The voice that only moments before had been icy and filled with contempt now was deep and soft, loving and caressing. Though Pallas' death had left a blank space in Artemis' heart with her immortal lover, she once again felt whole and safe.

"The funeral ceremony for the fallen warriors took place the next day. Both goddesses were there when Pallas' pyre was lit. Athena chose this instant to give a present to her lover that reaffirmed the unbreakable bond between them. She told her that from now on her name no longer would be Athena but Pallas Athena to commemorate the love and the courage of Artemis' mortal love. Artemis then appeared in front of the mourning Amazon nation and vowed to always guide them and protect them against mortals and gods alike, and since this day she watches out for the nation and every single Amazon."

When Xena ended, her public took some time to regain their composure. Finally, Theano said with a smile Gabrielle later on would describe as proud.

"Thank you, Xena, the story was well told, and you finished just in time for the party to begin."

"Thank you, it always was one of my favourites."

Chapter Six: Family Reunion

Xena sat cross-legged on the floor in her room facing the door. She was dressed in a thin white tunic, designed to be opened at her shoulders, and additionally belted at her waist. So, it could be easily put down without her being completely exposed. There were sturdy leather cuffs at her wrists that soon would be fastened together during the court session. Her eyes were closed and she rather unsuccessfully tried to meditate. Her thoughts constantly kept drifting back to things past, things she really wasn't eager to think about now. So instead she concentrated on last night when Melosa once again had sent her to the healer's hut instead of restraining her to her bed or the detention hut as some of the guests had demanded.

She'd spent the night holding Gabrielle's body in her arms, studying every detail in her beloved's peaceful face, painfully aware of the fact that this could easily be the last night they ever would spend together. Her mind kept on wandering to other nights she lay wide awake while Gabrielle was sleeping peacefully, especially to one night - a night following the day the Conqueror had opened her library to the children of the palace.

Xena dropped in the comfortable chair behind her desk where more than two scores of scrolls were awaiting her attention. Having spent all afternoon and the better part of the evening listening to the numerous complaints brought before her, she wasn't in the mood to read the tax reports and supply lists in front of her. And though she had missed Gabrielle's calming presence, she couldn't really blame her for preferring the company of the palace's children to boring court sessions.

Especially after the incident with the blonde-haired woman's father who really could count his blessings for leaving the palace unharmed. Xena would have killed him for what he had done to her young lover, for what she had had to live through because of him but Gabrielle had stilled her hand, and he left Corinth with all limbs still attached. At first, the green-eyed woman didn't speak about it but Xena knew that she was deeply shaken and more vulnerable than ever.

Xena surrounded her with care and tenderness and love to make her beloved forget the hateful words, and slowly the smile returned to her face and her eyes once again were sparkling with life.

Half a candlemark earlier the Conqueror had excused herself from dinner with the members of her council telling them that that she had a lot of paperwork to attend to. Presumably, Gabrielle still was at the servant's quarters telling a goodnight's story to the children. So, there was no

rational excuse for Xena not to at least begin to make a dent in the piles of scrolls littering her desk.

She mentally readied herself for some candlemarks of boring work when her eyes were drawn to the centre of the desk. There should have been a square piece of parchment giving details about her schedule for the next three days, instead there was a small scroll sealed with her personal crest.

Only one living being was bold enough to use it without her knowledge. So, she wasn't surprised to find Gabrielle's clear handwriting inside. There were no rhymes and no rhythm but it undeniably was a poem.

Falling asleep in misery and pain
I opened my eyes to a sea of blue
Living in darkness and fear
I found myself bathed in sparkling light.

I vowed never to love
So my heart would be save
Encased in ice.

Blue fire melted the icy prison.
Your eyes warmed my heart.
Your arms carried me safely through the night.
Your soul quietened my fears.

But I never said: Thank you.
Never told how much I love you
More than words can say.

I'd like to show you instead
Tonight.

G.

Suddenly the night was full of possibilities, and Xena had a hard time not to hurry her steps towards the bedroom too visibly.

When Xena opened the door Gabrielle immediately was in her arms, greeting her with a passionate kiss. She was led to the bed where the young woman quickly shed her sleeping shirt and began to slowly undress her taller companion. Xena didn't try to help her or to return the kisses. She knew from experience that Gabrielle had to go at her own pace to feel really save. She gently was pushed back on the mattress and the blonde retraced her abdominal muscles with hot kisses.

Gabrielle definitively knew her lover's body and she played it well. Desire rushed through Xena,

heat accumulating between her thighs. Her breathing became ragged but still she didn't move.

The kissing stopped and green orbs seemed to burn a hole in her eyes. Gabrielle only whispered but what she said made the tall woman tremble with arousal, announcing a dream come true.

"Don't hold back any longer, my love. I want to feel your hands on my skin when I touch you. I want to make love with you - not only you making love to me and I making love to you. - All these nights I saw you fighting to control your desire. I want you to let go of this control. I'm sorry for ignoring your needs."

The only answer Xena could think of was to silence her lover with a kiss. Their tongues began an intricate dance, for the first time not only exploring but also playing with each other. When they finally came up for air Gabrielle's eyes were dark with arousal, the golden speckles within glinting with a light of their own.

Gabrielle was lying on top of Xena, her wet centre pleasantly coating the taller woman's lower abdomen. She shifted slightly and gently introduced her left thigh between the other woman's legs. Her hands resting on Gabrielle's hips she slowly sat up until the blond was riding her thigh. Her eyes never left Gabrielle's, waiting for the smallest sign of discomfort. One of her hands found its way to the young woman's breasts and began to play with her already hard nipples.

Gabrielle understood the invitation and kneaded Xena's globes with both hands, every squeeze and stroke sending another wave of heat to the taller woman's sex. She finally broke eye contact and descended on Xena's breasts like a hawk attacking its prey.

Xena's hips began to establish a rocking rhythm. The hand at the younger woman's hip inched its way downwards to further stimulate Gabrielle's clitoris while her left thigh was copying the syncope of Xena's hips and was robbing over her centre. Both women were in a sensuous haze when their bodies one after one succumbed to orgasm.

Gabrielle's eyes found Xena's and the touch of their tongues brought forth another mind-shattering climax.

They held onto each other, their breathing gradually slowing. The blonde comfortably was nested in her arms and Xena whispered.

"Thank you, my love."

Gabrielle's answer was all it took to rekindle the flames of desire. "We're not finished yet, my warrior."

Soon they were lying side by side. Xena facing Gabrielle's centre and Gabrielle next to Xena's. At first, there was an almost awkward distance between them. Then Gabrielle planted tiny kisses on the other woman's thighs, and Xena mirrored her movements.

The blond woman's tongue flicked over Xena's clitoris, circling it, making contact for the fraction of a heartbeat, and retreating immediately. When she finally began to suck more thoroughly the taller woman already was lingering at the edge of another climax. Somehow, she managed to focus at least a part of her attention on lavishing her young lover.

They once again were in sync, driving each other to new heights of desire, and bonding in a way none of them would have thought possible. They came at the same time, and they came hard.

After the spasm had died away, both of them still were wrapped in a feeling of bliss and wholesomeness that stayed with them not only throughout the night but for moons to come.

Xena gathered the former slave in her arms, held her tight and revelled in the feeling. Now, she not only knew for sure that she loved the young woman but she also knew that they belonged to each other. There now was an unquestionable bond between them, so strong it was almost tangible, something she always had believed only being possible in dreams or fairy tales,

Xena had to shake herself out of these memories. They had taken her mind away from the trial but also had awakened her body in a way not suited to stand in front of a crowd. To calm down she began to think of the beginning of this day.

The trial was scheduled to start three candlemarks after dawn, to give everyone the chance to sober up after yesterday's celebration. Shortly before dawn, she reluctantly got up to mentally prepare herself for the things ahead and ran into Anara when leaving the infirmary.

'I already told her yesterday but please remind Gabrielle that I need some time alone before the trial starts.'

'I'll tell her as soon as she wakes up. I suppose you want to resume this warrior's mask of yours.'

'I don't know what you're talking about, Anara.'

The healer smiled and answered. 'I'm talking about this inscrutable face that slips away every time you look at Gabrielle and every time you talk to Thania, that face you hide your feelings behind, your heart and your soul, that face that no longer can fool me.'

Xena tried to look stern and disapproving, rather unsuccessfully. 'Go ahead. We'll take care of Gabrielle. Eponin and Solari volunteered to put her in the chair later on, and Thania will make sure that they're very careful, so don't you worry.'

The tall warrior gave Anara a heartfelt hug, to her own utter surprise, and quickly fled the room.

Tunic, cuffs, and sandals were waiting for her when she entered her room after a short visit to the empty temple and the equally deserted bathing area.

Recalling Anara's words, she knew that the healer was right. Her demeanour was a mask but it also was part of whom she was, it was a part of her as was her sword, her battle cry, or her chakram. She could try and deny it as she successfully had done with the more caring parts of her personality all these years long even to herself. Yes, it had become increasingly difficult to do so, even before the final victory over Caesar or the peace treaty between Amazons and Centaurs but it was Gabrielle who really taught her to accept every part of herself, the many dark plains and caves and ravines as well as the few and small light spots.

Her musings were abruptly stopped by Queen Melosa rushing through the door almost two candlemarks early.

"Remove the cuffs, Xena. The trial will have to be postponed. The northeastern outpost reported an enemy army headed towards our village. At first, they thought that they were only passing through but now there's no more doubt. We'll have to face about two hundred men, and they're using some civilians as a shield. I'll gather all the warriors I can rouse to fight them. I want you to take care of Gabrielle and the children and get the infirmary ready."

"I will do as you wish, mistress, but please consider taking me along as your body guard. I know, it's against the law, and I know I haven't earned this privilege but you'll probably need every sword you can get. Please, Queen Melosa."

"The Amazon nation will be honoured, Xena. Open the chest, it holds your armour and weapons."

There weren't as many warriors as Xena had hoped for, even though the festival and the impending trial had brought more Amazons to the village than ever before. Last night's celebrations really had put a lot of them out of commission, basically as a consequence of the drinking games they all were so fond of playing. So half a candlemark later short of five score heavily armed Amazons were ready to go, and if one of them was surprised to see the former Conqueror fully armed in their midst, they didn't give voice to their objections. Leaving another one and a half score of seasoned fighters to protect the elders and the children and get them to safety if need be, they took to the trees to speed up their journey and shortly after mid-morning they reached the tree line near the enemy encampment.

The front line was formed by close to fifteen kneeling hostages, tied together by bids of rough rope. Behind them was a tall dark haired man, hands bound in front of him but standing. 'Damn, what by Ares' boots was he doing in Greece?' The soldiers were lined up in a basic battle formation obviously expecting a frontal assault. Xena's trained and experienced eyes didn't miss out on the ill-kept armour and weapons, the difficulty they had to hold their lines or the crest floating in front of them.

"Darphus," Xena's voice was barely audible with repressed anger and Melosa shot her an inquisitive look. "Some years ago he was one of my lieutenants. We still have some personal issues to settle. He's over-confident, impatient and he hates me more than everything. We will need Hades of a distraction to keep him from killing the hostages, and we will need time."

The brass armoured warrior once again did what came natural to her, standing at the edge of the forest, in full view of the enemy army, she took control of the situation. Soon the greater part of the Amazons was on their way and the five soldiers of the First Order able to fight also had their orders. All Melosa and half of the royal guard could do now was to wait for their enemy to take action.

The last time Xena felt as anxious as this about waiting was right before the battle against Caesar. Finally, a child, about six or seven years old, began to make its way towards the line of trees carrying a crumbled piece of parchment. It was a boy with dark blond hair and blue eyes. He stood about ten paces away from the forest line where the Queen was waiting, so Xena left Melosa's side and knelt in front of the boy.

"Hello, Ly. Come with me, I will lead you to safety."

"No, the evil one will kill my dad, he said so. He said: 'Answer before noon or else...' He said: 'Bring back the answer or our father will die.' Only dad calls me Ly, how come?"

"Long ago your dad and I were very close, so I know this name is dear to his heart. Stay here, I'll be back shortly and escort you back to your dad." Xena added having read Darphus' message. She handed it to Queen Melosa and began to take off her armour.

"What the Hades do you think you're doing? This is not only stupid and foolish, it's outright suicidal, and it won't work."

"It's the only way to buy our warriors the time they'll need. There's no doubt Darphus will try to kill the hostages, and there's no doubt he will attack the Amazons. He obviously knew about the festival but he didn't know that it had been cut short because of the trial. If it hadn't he really would have got to us. I'm sure he counts on using the Amazon's territory as vantage point to conquer his own part of Greece, now that I'm out of the picture, so to say.

"He knows of my abdication, knows that I'm all but dead. I'm sure, that he ordered the soldiers in the frontier fort killed, and the ones we fought off some time ago certainly were part of his army. He always was screwed. He wanted me to take the blame for the Amazon's death. But I hope that his hatred for me is still stronger than his ambition and hopefully stronger than his rational self. The knowledge that I'm close by and the chance to get his hands on me once again without a fight certainly has speeded up his plan.

"I need the best scouts of the royal guard to follow me out there. To fight them we'll have to get the civilians out of the way, that's what they will have to do. The grass is high enough to offer a decent cover. As soon as I hear the signal of your warriors I'll try to get Darphus away from the hostages and give the signal to attack."

"Sounds like a plan though I don't like it. May the goddess protect you."

"Thank you, Queen Melosa." When Xena reappeared at the tree line, she wore nothing but her leathers, boots, and a light cloak draped around her broad shoulders. She knelt on one knee in front of the boy. "It's time to go back, sprout. Whatever happens, I want you to stay away from Darphus. I know, you're afraid for your dad. I will do everything I can to protect him but there's one thing, you always have to remember: to him, your life is far more important than his own. So you better take care of yourself."

"I'm so afraid. Boys are never afraid, I'm a coward."

There was a sad expression in Xena's eyes, and before she spoke, she took the boy's chin in her right hand. "Look at me, Lyceus. When you have to fight, fear is as good a weapon as a sword. It keeps you on your toes and you don't get reckless. Without fear, we tend to overestimate ourselves, and then we will be killed. It would be really, really stupid not to be afraid, and I know you ain't a stupid guy. And know this, a coward never would have had the courage to bring this message. It takes an awful lot of courage to do things you're afraid of. Your dad is a very brave man also, and I know now he's very proud of you. Understand?"

A tentative smile crept in the boy's face while he nodded.

Xena loosened the strap holding her cloak and let it fall to the ground shortly before reaching Darphus who now was standing in front of the hostages. He was half a foot shorter than the former Conqueror, heavily built and more than twice her weight with fat softening the silhouette of his body. He carried a sword on his right and two daggers on his left hip. Behind him was Najara, holding Lyceus' father at sword's point.

"Tell me, Toris, how many times Mother told you not to go and play with strangers?"

"Couldn't help it, Conqueror. Irresistible candies." The tall man answered who except for his dark brown eyes looked exactly like a male version of Xena.

"I really hate to disturb this lovely family reunion." A high-pitched, vaguely male voice said.

"So you're still singing in the boy's choir. Good to hear. It always pays to do a thorough job, Darphus. Now, let's do some business. I'm here, no armour, no weapons. Set them free, now!"

The last words were said with a threatening growl. Darphus' left hand backhanded her but she didn't even try to stop him and she didn't flinch when it made contact.

"The voice of a child and the punch of its great-grandmother, some things never change." Now a brass covered gauntlet hit her stomach but all she did was smile. "Set them free, you spineless bastard."

"You always had a soft spot for the weak and useless. It never did you any good. This time you will pay with your life. This time I won't have any pity. This time you will not get away."

"Promises, promises. The trouble is, you never stand for your word, don't you!" Xena easily sidestepped his next hit. "And pity? Bite me. Your own men turned against you when you tried to kill me off. They stripped you of your armour and your dignity and you fled your camp under the cover of the night." She blocked his fist aimed at her nose with her left arm, seemingly unimpressed by his mounting fury.

"You left the encampment in the middle of the night, soldier boy." She continued taunting him, with every punch that found its target drawing him further away from the hostages and nearer to her discarded cloak. "You ran with your tail between your legs, and still justice dug you out of your hiding hole."

Darphus now was well beyond rational thought, blows were raining on her torso and arms, and she knew she would get some ugly bruises out of this but she continued to smile at him. The smile didn't reach her eyes but it still gave the impression of a mother indulgently observing the harmless antics of her toddler.

"Stop playing, Darphus, and get this over with. We have a battle to fight and a village to destroy. The Amazons are far greater a threat than this over-confident slave."

"I don't care for your damned Amazons, slut. I spent a lot of time planning her death, and I intend to savour every moment. She's mine, and she will cry out my name be it in pain or in lust before she dies."

"Lust? The loss of your balls must have damaged your brain, Darphus. You never were man enough, not even in my worst nightmares, neither for me nor any other woman with self-esteem. So, your choice of partner really shouldn't be a great surprise. Two of a kind, a perfect match: a petty excuse for a warlord without guts and brains and an ex-Amazon, a bloody rapist and too much of a coward to take responsibility for her actions. I guess it's true: two birds of a feather flock toge..."

Unsurprisingly Najara lost her temper. She let go of Xena's brother and attacked the former Conqueror who blocked the momentum of her sword arm with her hands, dodged a roundhouse punch from Darphus and suddenly felt the sharp but all too familiar pain of a knife sticking deep in her thigh. This time she allowed her body to react to the threat, sending the ex-Amazon into oblivion with a fisted blow to her chin. The sound of a dislocated jaw gave her at least some sort of satisfaction but it was by far not enough to quench her rising anger. So, she quickly refocused on the enemy leader.

"It's time getting serious, Darphus. You really made a mistake attacking the Amazons. What do you know about them? Did you get nothing of the lessons I taught you years ago? You have to know your enemy better than he knows himself. Do you know Amazons don't take kindly on men crossing their borders uninvited? Do you know they don't care about outsiders being killed? Your hostages are more of an obstacle than a shield, they won't protect you, they'll slow you down, considerably. Perhaps you will win the battle but you certainly will loose the war. You really should use your brain, not your... oh sorry!"

The last words brought Darphus finally over the edge; he unsheathed his sword and attacked her. Xena hastily stepped back. The birdcall signalled the Amazon army in attack position. She avoided his second thrust and fell on the ground. When she immediately reached for her cloak half an arm's length away, he knew it was a trap.

In one fluid movement she retrieved her chakram from the cloak and let it fly before the enemy leader was able to completely regain his balance, at the same time she fastened a leather thong around her leg to slow down the blood flow. The chakram unerringly found its way and embedded itself in his chest. And then, all Tartarus was breaking loose. Less than two body length behind her five scouts rose from the ground and herded the hostages away. The enemy soldiers found themselves attacked from three sides but they still outnumbered the Amazon forces largely. Xena took Darphus' sword and sliced through the bindings of the dark haired prisoner. She gutted an attacker on her left and flipped his sword over to her brother.

"Here take it, Toris, get the boy and the others out of here, and hurry. Take care of him."

"Come with me, Xena. You're bleeding, it's too dangerous."

As only answer, she yanked her chakram free from Darphus' chest and used it to keep the enemy at bay while her peripheral vision took in the slow retreat of the scouts still struggling with the frightened civilians. The sword in her hand was a weird feeling, not because of her recent lack of drilling time but it simply was far too ornate to be functional. She thought about exchanging it for something more appropriate while taking on four of the soldiers having banded together against her.

Her leg was throbbing but to get them all she just had to jump. So, she put the pain out of her conscious mind as she was used to do and executed a thorough spin beheading three of them. The fourth wisely decided to back off and ran. She somehow managed to replace the leather thong with an improvised bandaged before the next group attacked.

It was then that she realised that there were far more than two hundred of them. The odds were closer to three than two to one against the Amazons. 'Not good, not good at all', but only when she heard the scream of pain of a familiar voice all the fighting skills that had contributed to make her some sort of legend finally kicked in, a voice belonging to someone who by all means should be in the safety of the village.

When chakram and sword sliced a big gaping hole in the enemy ranks, she could feel a very familiar sensation slowly rising from the centre of her body, heating up her veins, and chilling the conscious part of her mind literally to the bone. She could feel what her men always had called 'Ares' gift' rushing through her, the urge to kill and fight she'd revelled in year after year, expanding itself in a feral grin that changed her whole outer appearance. Her focus totally narrowed down to the weapons pointed in her direction, and she took them out one by one with deadly precision. Her movements were smooth and easy, more a vision of dance than of death, a dark fire in her eyes glowing with every thrust and stroke. To her, time didn't have any meaning but less than two candlemarks later there were dead bodies scattered all around her.

Xena needed the better part of a quarter candlemark to finally realise that there were no opponents left. The dark rage slowly began to subside, returning to its hiding place, and once again, her rational mind took charge. The unfamiliar sword fell to the ground, her hands, her arms, and her leathers were covered with blood and grime, and when the battle field resounded with the Amazon's victory cry her injured leg gave way and she tumbled to the ground.

Still acting more on instinct than on anything else, she rummaged through her healer's pouch and quickly proceeded to stitch the wound on her thigh that now was liberally bleeding. She didn't even bother to first clean it, time being of great importance. She knew there were a lot of injured Amazons to tend to and bodies to burn. The outpost had to be secured and scouts sent to find out about possible reinforcements or other signs of more danger.

The time being, she dismissed all these necessities. Xena turned just in time to see Anara collapsing over a small, slender body. The soldier who with the last bit of energy he could muster had thrown his sword at her was dead even before the chakram hit him right between the eyes. Fortunately, his aim was off. The weapon protruded Anara's right arm just below the shoulder not her back, and so it was relatively easy to stop the bleeding.

The healer's patient was bigger a problem. It was her voice Xena had heard earlier. An arrow was embedded in her lower stomach. The wound already was packed with painkilling herbs; the girl's breathing was shallow at best. She didn't speak but her eyes were widened with pain and fear.

In her mind, Xena saw visions of all the gut wounds she had had to deal with during her years as a warlord, and she knew that less than one out of twenty ever survived the first night. Anara also had known, that's why she only had tried to ease her pain and nothing else.

And it really would be best to put the young Amazon's suffering to an end - but when she once again looked into Thania's eyes she saw trust and hope there.

Unfortunately, she knew no pressure points for numbing stomach wounds, so, she simply knocked her unconscious by pressing two points in the back of her neck. Xena shed her blood-encrusted leathers to reveal an only slightly stained linen shift and rinsed her hands and arms with water from Anara's supply who still was out of commission. As she had done earlier with her physical pain, she now forced her fears in the background of her mind and began her task. The arrow had to be removed, damaged veins and nerves and muscles cleaned and sewn, the wound closed. She worked for over a candlemark, and still Thania's life signs miraculously were solid and stable. Now all she could do was to hope.

Meanwhile Toris and some of the hostages had a fire going, all the able bodied warriors were sorting out the wounded and dead, and Melosa and the royal guard were already in the midst of depositing of the enemy corpses. The extent of teamwork and professionalism the Amazons presented was more than amazing and encouraging, so Xena allowed herself solely to concentrate on the injured.

Once again, it was well after dark when the last of the litters with the more seriously injured arrived at the village; and against all odds this time, there were fewer fatalities and fewer casualties. With her right arm bandaged and safely tucked away in a sling, Anara was to her own dismay forced to rely mostly on giving verbal advice. So, she insisted on reopening the stitches at Xena's thigh when the limping became increasingly obvious.

The warrior knew, she was right. The wound had to be thoroughly cleaned to prevent an infection, that is, if it wasn't too late yet, but many other things also had to be done; so she hesitated.

"Just do it, Xena, that's an order. Anara's apprentice is dead and I can't afford all of my healers incapacitated. If you're not able to walk, you'll not be able to help. The volunteers can only do so much."

"I will comply, Queen Melosa. I can remove the stitches myself but someone else will have to clean the gash. It has to be cleaned with herbed water but this won't be enough. It's too deep and it's been too long. To be on the safe side a heated up dagger has to be thrust in in its whole length. I'll probably pass out in the process, so it would be better to get some warriors to hold me down, just in case."

The Queen winced inwardly at the thought but quickly summoned three of her more heavily built warriors. Toris also lent a hand and they followed her instructions. Xena didn't cry out when the white hot iron of her own breast dagger was slowly introduced in the gaping hole, and she didn't pass out either but the whole strength of the Amazon warriors and the big man was needed to keep her still. The Queen did a thorough job, re-stitching it with shaking hands and bandaging it. Anara also insisted in her taking a break to regain some strength and stamina herself, and once again, Xena had to listen to the voice of reason.

The dark haired warrior soon was asleep. About three candelmarks later, a hesitant touch on her left shoulder brought her back to reality. She could not hinder her body to go in defensive mode and grab a small hand by the wrist but as soon as her mind registered whose hand it was, she stopped herself from twisting it painfully.

"Lyceus, you gotta be more careful. My body doesn't know that you're a friend. It tries to defend itself. You really could have been hurt." She let go of the boy's arm and smiled reassuringly to take the sting out of her words. "Turn your head, Ly. That's a nasty bump you got on your temple. What happened?"

"Bumped my head on a stone when the young Amazon pushed me out of the way of this arrow. You have to help her, you did it out there, I saw you, and you have to help her once again. The blonde in the funny chair on wheels says that she will die, that she has an in... infection at her stomach and that the healers can't help her anymore. I don't want her to die, she saved me, and she smiled at me and she didn't cry."

"Infection. Thania really is very badly injured. I don't know if I can help but I will do all I can, Lyceus. Where's your dad?"

"He's with the others burning the nasty men. Please help her."

"I'll try, sprout, I'll try." Xena hoisted herself out of bed. At first she only tentatively put weight on her injured leg but the kind of throbbing she could feel, regular and slow, soon reassured her that the cleaning was done just in time.

Anara and the Queen were sitting on the left side of the girl's bed and Gabrielle was on the right, holding her hand. The hopeless expression in Anara's face told her more than enough, but she had to see it with her own eyes: Thania still was unconscious, her breathing was flat, fever raking her body. The area around the arrow entry was inflamed. For several heartbeats Xena lost herself in the peaceful expression on her young face, knowing all too well that soon it would be contorted with pain, unbearable pain.

She closed her eyes in defeat, and when she reopened them, she knew she had at least to try. "Queen Melosa, do you have an empty hut that can be transformed in a sweating hut?"

"We have a sweating hut near the hot springs. Nobody used it, so it wasn't maintained but after what you did for Gabrielle Akyra insisted on putting it back in working order. It could be heated up in less than three candlemarks."

"Do it, Queen Melosa!"

"What do you have in mind, Xena? You said this shaman stuff only worked because Gabrielle is the other half of your soul."

"I know, it will be more difficult with Thania but it also isn't the same problem, Anara. To help Gabrielle I had to reunite her soul with her body. Thania here hasn't lost touch with her body but she simply isn't strong enough to fight blood loss, infection, fever, and shock at the same time. All she needs is an additional source of strength. It will be difficult to establish the contact because she's not of my blood and I'm not really trained in doing such things but I will try to give her some of my strength. I have to try."

"What exactly will you do?"

"We will take her to the sweating hut. The heat is one of the things I'll need to open a way to the land of her soul, the land of her dreams. Then I will have to keep open the path to our reality and at the same time lending her my strength to help her heal."

"It will be difficult enough to guard the retreat, so it's better to have another source of strength to tap in, Xena. I will go with you."

"We still all could die, and she will know if we survive, Eponin."

"I can't let her die," the Amazon warrior answered who until then had been silently standing in the back of the hut, "and I'm tired of hiding in the shadows anyway."

"Xena, I don't want to loose you. Tell me that you won't die."

"I'll try my best, Gabrielle, but it's very dangerous. I don't want to loose you either but for Thania, it's the only chance there is. It's just one of these things I have to do, no matter what."

"I love you, Xena."

"Love you too, Gabrielle."

When dawn was breaking, the sweating hut was ready and Melosa, Eponin, Toris, Lyceus, and Gabrielle were waiting in front of it, aside Thania's litter. Xena was somewhere in the forest to get some 'stuff' as she called it which the Queen supposed to be some herbs and roots just like the last time. She could clearly feel the anxiety coming from the weapons' master and longed to take her in her arms and hold her tight 'til all of this was over but she also was painfully aware of the fact that her lover for more than one reason didn't like public displays of affection. The boy, Xena's nephew, was kneeling next to the litter, holding the unconscious girl's hand, while his father was pacing at his side looking helpless, tired and somewhat irritated.

Xena arrived in time with the first rays of sun. She carried a bundle of black cloth and was wearing but a leather thong around the hips barely covering her private parts. Her chest was bare but adorned with an intricate pattern of red lines emphasising her muscles as well as her womanly built. Her attire effectively took Gabrielle's breath away and managed to freeze Toris in mid-step. Forehead and cheeks also had red markings; in her eyes was a faraway look, a look that to Melosa didn't bode too well. She was about to speak to her when Akyra who had walked two paces behind her stopped the Queen with a stern look and a shake of her head.

The tall warrior opened the bundle and unfolded the freshly skinned hide of a deer buck on the ground next to the litter. She stripped the girl of all but the bandages, wrapped her in the skin, and carried her in the hut. Akyra told Eponin to strip also before both of them followed her. She also advised the Queen to have some archers ready, just in case.

For the next candlemarks all the others could do was to wait, at a safety distance of about fifty paces. Gabrielle was sitting in the wheelchair nervously drumming her fingers on her left thigh and envying Toris, Lyceus and Melosa who at least could express their anxiety and uneasiness by pacing to and thro'. The sun already was high in the sky when the blonde woman couldn't stand it any longer, neither the waiting, nor the uncomfortable silence.

"Tell me about your sister, Toris, about her childhood. In all our moons together, she never willingly spoke about her home. And when she did there always was so much sadness and loss in her voice. Tell me about her."

"It's no good to dwell in the past, there are too many dark corners, and ghosts who'd better stay

hidden. I haven't seen her in years, and the last time we didn't part on friendly terms. You all know more about her than I do. This slime, Darphus, he wanted me to believe that she ran away from Corinth and her throne and her power and all the things she lost her soul to gain. And when this woman told me she lives as a slave with the Amazons I was sure that they were lying."

Melosa and Gabrielle tried to fill him in on all the things that had happened the last moons and quarter moons. He really had a hard time even hearing it. What they told him just didn't fit with the picture he long ago had forged about his sister, about the Conqueror.

It was way after noon when the small door to the sweating hut was opened. Akyra was visibly exhausted but there also was a smile on her face. She shielded her eyes against the sudden assault of daylight, but before she could say anything Melosa burst inside the hut. It took some time to get two more stretchers from the village but soon they all were back in the healer's hut.

Xena and Eponin were asleep but the girl was conscious, feeble, but conscious. She even asked for water and something to eat. There was no more fever, the inflammation was gone, her breathing was regular, and there was a smile on her face whenever she looked at one of the two women.

Instead of regaining the healer's hut with the others Akyra insisted on taking care of the fire in the sweating hut first but this wasn't the reason for her lingering behind. She sat down in front of the hut and waited for the other woman to join her.

"Xena - she knows, doesn't she?"

"She knows the fact but not the reason. Tonight when she asked for my help she did it as an apprentice would beg her mistress, and despite my resolve to stay away from this stuff I couldn't ignore her plea. She would have done it without me, though she knows that her skills don't extend this far. She willingly risked her life and her soul to save the girl. There's a connection between her and the girl. Did you know that she calls her 'little one'? And Thania asked her and Gabrielle to be her second mothers."

"Time will tell, my friend. I'd really like to get to know Gabrielle better, she holds Xena's soul, but she doesn't know it. When Xena introduced us the day I arrived, she seemed genuinely pleased to make my acquaintance but she's openly hostile since she knows of my role in the trial. Do you really think it was a good idea?"

"Perhaps not, but it was the best plan I could come up with, and if all goes as it should my granddaughter and Xena can begin to finally heal from the past. There's only one thing we should be really careful about. It's Xena, if she finds out too soon; she could easily ruin all our plans. The moment I saw her at the village square I could feel it, she could be one of the mightiest ever if she really wanted to. I'd really like to know who taught her."

"Do you think we should ask her about it during the trial?"

"No, Theano. The jury will have more than enough to deal with as it is. They don't have to know about her spiritual powers, not yet anyway, not as long as she doesn't embrace them herself."

"I'm worried about her. She has lost a lot of the anger and hatred driving her to conquer Greece and Rome but it hasn't been replaced with something else yet. All she has now are her love for Gabrielle and her self-hatred. I really hope all of this will work out."

"It will, one way or the other. This isn't about saving her body but her soul. Xena prays to the Goddess, let's hope she's begging for the right things."

Eponin woke some time before sunset but when Anara tried to wake Xena, she found her unconscious. With Melosa's help, she checked on the dagger wound and found it inflamed, two of the five stitches torn and the flesh hot to the touch. To prevent a fever they had to redo the cleaning and cauterising. This time sturdy leather thongs were used to keep the warrior from moving should she regain her senses in the process. She did and managed to tear apart the wrist restraints but Toris, who spent most of the time reviewing what he recently had learned about her, was able to pin her back to the mattress.

"You can get back up now, Toris. They've finished. Thank you for your help."

"I really hope it won't have to be done a third time. But you're welcome, sis."

"I'm afraid it will have to be repeated at least twice to be really effective. I never thought I would live the day you'd once again call me your sister. The dagger only did minor damage, I won't die, so you don't have to be nice or anything."

"My sister died the day Lyceus was killed. - I know what I said, and only the day before yesterday I was sure that it was still true. I can't really understand it, I don't understand how it happened, but the person I see now is my sister. The way you were buying time by allowing this Darphus person to hit you, how you got this Amazon away from me, the healer tending to all others but forgetting about herself, yes, this was the sister I remember, the child I never was able to forget, the child I never hated. This sister never died, Xena."

Silent tears were running down her cheeks, the soft fingers of a child were quickly brushing them away and a small voice asked. "Are you okay? Is your leg hurting this bad? You didn't cry before. Mother cried before she died. Don't die!"

"I won't die, Lyceus, I'm okay. The leg will heal just fine, don't you worry. I'm crying because your father said something very, very nice that made me very happy." Xena smiled at the frown on his face. "You know, sprout, grown-ups sometimes are a bit goofy. I'll be back on my two feet very soon. Big promise. And if you give me a big hug I will heal even faster."

So the boy did and Xena turned her head back to his father. "You know, Toris, you were right then, your sister died this day. But somehow at least a part of her was reborn and over the years, she bid by bid was able to control the monster I had become. Now, tell me," she continued in a

desperate need to lighten the mood, "why are you in Greece? The orders of the Conqueror were unambiguous, as far as I remember."

"Albion was far too cold in winter, and I didn't get along too well with their leader."

When Xena saw the expression of uneasiness on his face, she couldn't help a hearty laughter being rather well aware of Boadicea's voracious sexual appetite. "Well, I would have loved to see you at the head of her clan, Toris. She seemed rather taken with the looks running in our family." Uneasiness quickly changed to discomfort, so Xena choose to change the subject. "I suppose you're on your way to mother?!"

"Yeah, and I can't wait to tell her the good news. She will be happy to get her little girl back."

"Don't give yourself to illusions, Toris. I'm still a killer, I'm still dangerous, and what I did in the past won't be undone only by changing my way of life regardless of how ... Two of my soldiers will soon be arriving at Corinth to get mother to safety. They will explain everything to her. No one associated with me is safe there as soon as the council gets my letter of resignation. I left her the choice to go to Albion or to Chin. Tomorrow I will send another of my men to find them and tell her about you. With Boadicea out of the picture, you will have to move to Chin to be safe. The empress is a friend and she also will be a great teacher for Lyceus."

Before Toris could say anything against Xena taking charge once again and deciding about his life, Anara held a steaming mug in front of Xena that she sniffed suspiciously. "I don't need any painkillers, Anara. Safe them for the others, and the sleeping herbs also could find a better use."

"Don't argue, just drink. Your body needs rest. I need you back to operational mode as soon as possible, with only one arm I can't do all the work by myself."

"All right, you win. Next time wake me before you start on my leg again. I won't tear the restraints when I'm conscious." The healer simply nodded and took the mug away.

Toris stayed at Xena's bedside long after she'd closed her eyes. He once again tried to reconcile the picture of so many years with the sister he now could see, remembering the last time she'd talked to him.

Three moons after his wife died while giving birth to a stillborn baby girl, some two and a half years ago, he found a detachment of the First Order clustered around the inn when returning from his morning hunt. He entered the kitchen unhindered from the back door, and heard the voice of his mother and sister coming from the main room.

"I will not leave my home, Conqueror. Never!"

"Oh yes, you will. I don't care what you think about it but you will move to Corinth. You will live in the house I choose for you, and that's all there is to say."

"You may rule all of Greece but you will not tell me what to do or not to do, Conqueror."

"The Conqueror doesn't care if she has to burn the house or personally destroy the whole village to get what she wants. The Conqueror doesn't care if her soldiers have to drag you behind a horse all the way. You will move to Corinth, today. Toris, come join us. You also should get your things together. You also will move. You will be my Ambassador in Albion."

"No, I won't leave mother. She already has lost one son to you, Conqueror. She will not loose the rest of her family. I never will leave her at your mercy."

"You all are at my mercy, and you both will do as I say. We will leave in two candlemarks whether you're ready or not. The Conqueror don't has a problem with putting you in chains in front of your son, if need be."

There was no emotion in her voice or her face, and soon his gaze dropped confronted with the chilling expression in her eyes. On the long trek to Corinth, he could feel her watchful eyes surrounding the group of soldiers but she kept her distance.

The difference between the commanding woman of his memories and the peacefully sleeping one in front of him was striking -, more than striking, it was incredible. Where once he only saw heartless determination, there now was tenderness and caring. The Conqueror never would have risked her life to save the Amazon girl, the Conqueror never would have cared for the safety of his son or the well-being of the hostages, or wouldn't she?

Toris remembered his arrival at Albion, and his first conversation with the tribe leader. Boadicea was a very impressive woman, almost as tall as his sister, full of will power, fighting skills and a great leadership presence. She was the only woman leading a tribe on her own, the only one the other tribe leaders listened to. She was the one who turned a small regional rebellion in an all-out war against the Roman occupational forces, finally and with a little help from the Conqueror forcing them back to the beaches of Gaul.

She had greeted him as one warrior greets another. 'You and your son will now be safe. No one will be audacious enough to venture in one of our villages or camps. It would be suicide. There will be no more threats to your life.'

At the time, it didn't occur to him that she could have been speaking about anyone other than the Conqueror threatening his security. But now he began to wonder. Perhaps even then she tried to keep her family safe. Perhaps she always cared for them but wasn't able to show it to people who had disowned her. Perhaps the loving and caring kid she once had been never really was dead.

His musings abruptly were interrupted by a soft voice calling his name. "Toris, I'm sorry but the sun is going down. Last night was an exception but usually men are not allowed to stay in the

village during the night. A tent has been prepared at the clearing where Xena's soldiers are staying. Solari, the leader of the royal guard, will show you the way. Your son is already asleep. Queen Melosa agreed to let him stay. He'll be safe in the healer's hut."

"Thank you, Gabrielle, but I'll take him with me. I don't want him to wake up and not knowing where I am. He won't even stir when I pick him up. One night in Albion a whole bunch of sheep panicked during a storm and stampeded through our camp. Our tent was destroyed and I barely managed to get us out alive but he never even blinked."

He stood and stretched. With a last look at his sister, he said. "Can you tell me more about her tomorrow, Gabrielle? Perhaps you can help me to get to know her better."

"I'll try but it certainly would be easier to talk to her yourself. She surely won't answer all of your questions but she will try."

"I'll think about it, Gabrielle, take good care of her."

The blond woman studied Xena's sleeping face before reluctantly waking her up. A shadow of a smile crossed her own features when she remembered the first time she had tried to rouse the tall warrior from sleep. The boy really had been lucky the day before because back then she was unceremoniously thrown out of bed. They shared a bed for about a quarter moon having soon learned thus to keep their respective nightmares at bay but they weren't lovers yet. The following night, Xena even was afraid to let sleep claim her for fear of hurting her again, and her smile broadened at the thought while she asked herself how she could have been this blind this long.

Now, there was no longer any danger for her in doing this though she rarely had the opportunity to do it with Xena always being up and about well before dawn. Her left hand slightly touched the right biceps, and blue eyes slowly opened. What she saw brought a smile to the warrior's face.

Torches stuck in every corner of the room and a candle stood at every bedside, but Xena only was interested in the sparkling eyes in front of her, eyes the colour of the high sea bathed in sunlight, the colour of a summer forest just after a light rain.

Even when the young woman was smiling as she did now, there always was a certain amount of sadness to be found. It hurt the warrior's heart that now it not only was directed to the past but also her doing with the fighting and the trial and all. She knew it was the right thing to do, the only thing to do but there was also a part of Xena's mind convinced that whatever the jury might decide upon, it would never be enough to pay for all the atrocities she'd committed, for all the deaths she'd caused, all the families she'd destroyed. And there also was a third part only striving to live a long and happy life with her lover.

"I'm sorry, love. I'm so sorry to cause you pain."

"I love you, Xena. Nothing will ever be able to change my heart. You're a part of me, and you always will be, regardless of the jury's verdict. Ephiny will find a way. I trust her."

"I'm sure she will do her very best but don't blame her if it doesn't work out. - I suppose, it's time for another treatment?"

"Yes, Anara said to fight the inflammation effectively it has to be done two more times, now and tomorrow morning. But I really don't ... It was all right after the first cleaning the Queen did, or so you said."

"Yes, it was doing fine then. I don't know for sure what happened, Gab. I knew what I did in the sweating hut was dangerous and we all were very lucky that it worked out. It was very exhausting; the inflammation may be my body's reaction to the strain. I will heal fast as I always do. I'm certain Anara will insist on putting me to sleep once again 'til the next treatment, and tomorrow morning my leg can be re-stitched for good."

The last treatment was shortly before dawn. Xena decided to stay up and tend to the few more seriously wounded to give Anara a break. The healer only complied with her when she promised to keep off her leg and rely on a crutch, and because there was not one long enough for her tall frame, she accepted Gabrielle's offer to use the blond woman's fighting staff to get around more easily.

"Good morning, little one. You must be hungry, so we'll try with some soup. No, don't try to sit up." Xena eased herself behind the girl whose head now was resting against her chest. "Here, take the bowl yourself. It's only lukewarm but that's better for you now. Eat slowly. Your body needs all the strength it can get to heal."

"You're not angry with me?"

"Well, you deliberately disobeyed an order but the boy certainly would be dead without you there. No, I'm not angry; I'm rather proud of you. Don't get me wrong: I'm pretty sure you left the village for the wrong reasons, and you will have to answer the Queen for doing so, but you did the right thing when you had to act. Only a true Amazon would risk her life to save someone she doesn't know. The Queen will keep this in mind also, and I'm sure she also is very proud of her apprentice."

Some candledrops later, the bowl was finished off. "Try to sleep some more now." Xena lowered the girl's upper body back to the mattress and gently tucked her in.

"Xena, why didn't she ever tell me? I always wanted to be like her."

Eponin had spent the whole night sitting at the girl's bedside. She left only to fulfil her duties as weapons' master by attending the council meeting.

"I don't know, Thania. You'll have to ask her yourself as soon as you're better. I'm sure she only wanted what she thought was best for you. She loves you very much, you know. The Queen really had a hard time to keep her from following Najara and killing her. She thinks she's

responsible for what happened to you. I'm sure she will tell you all you want to know. Give her some time."

"I will, Xena. Please tell her, it's not her fault. Najara and the others are just mean."

"The others?"

The girl's eyes were fixated to her hands and she nervously was biting her lower lip. "Please, little one, talk to me. Are there other apprentices treated as you were?"

To Be Concluded in Part III

The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive

~ Conqueror and Amazon ~

by romansilence

Disclaimers: See [Part 1](#)

Additional Disclaimer: The following chapters contain graphic descriptions of physical violence and allusions to sexual abuse. I tried to make the story work without them but wasn't satisfied with the outcome, so please feel free to skip any scene offending your sensibilities.

Send any and all comments to: romansilence@yahoo.de

Conqueror and Amazon: Towards a New Life Part III

By romansilence

Chapter Seven: All my trials and tribulations

Queen Melosa was in mid-sentence when the double-winged door to the council's hut burst open and two Amazons stumbled in forced forward by the end of a fighting staff. Their legs were swept away and they found themselves in a heap in front of a gray haired but still well muscled elder. Xena towered over them, blood coloured the bandage at her thigh but her whole body oozed power and barely contained anger. Her eyes were almost black, and the surprised guards didn't dare touching her.

It was as if time suddenly stood still in the hut, the council members all but pinned to their seats,

the Queen with her mouth still half open and the two Amazons frozen on the ground.

Eponin was the first one to regain her composure. She ordered the guards to back up and return to their posts and slowly approached Xena from her right. Having witnessed the taller woman's fighting skills some days ago, she knew better than to near her from behind or to try and overpower her. When she was already well in striking range of the staff she stopped.

"Xena, you don't need the staff any longer. Let me hold it for you."

Xena meanwhile had locked eyes with the Amazon elder in front of her and negligently handed Gabrielle's staff to the weapons' master. The emotions heating up her veins were clearly discernible in her voice.

"Najara wasn't the only one," was all she said, and all she had to say. The council members knew about the real reasons for the Queen adopting an apprentice, and Najara's obvious treason during battle was all even the most reluctant among them needed to believe it.

Amazon values had been twisted beyond recognition, and suddenly all were talking at once. The two women on the floor tried to get back on their feet, and Eponin unceremoniously knocked them out.

Melosa now was standing next to the older Amazon. "Xena, I need evidence."

Xena still held the gaze of the gray haired Amazon, her voice now seething with anger and hatred. "Go to the healer's hut, Queen Melosa, there are three girls whose bodies carry all the evidence you'll need."

"I refuse to answer the pointless accusation of an unruly slave, my Queen." The older Amazon snarled without being verbally accused.

"You'll soon have to answer my questions, Yolica. Solari, I want six guards in here, immediately, no one is to leave the hut. Akyra, Novalia, come with me - and everybody else, just shut up, and sit down. I'll be back."

Despite the Queen's order there was a lot of whispering going on, the council members filling in their guests about the extend of Najara's crimes. The two women on the floor regained consciousness but were not stupid enough to try and get up a second time. Xena still held the eyes of the older woman.

About a candlemark later, the door once again burst open and in stormed Queen Melosa. Disgust and anger clearly written all over her face but her voice was calm and devoid of any emotion.

"Yolica, Umbra, Canara, evidence has been brought before my eyes that you are guilty of rape and child abuse. Your trial will be held tomorrow after dawn, and the jury will decide upon your punishment. Until then, you will be secured in the detention hut. - The council session is adjourned."

No one said a word when the three women were led away, and slowly one after one, elders and guests, left the hut. When only Eponin and the Queen were left, Xena knelt in front of Melosa and lowered her eyes to the ground.

"The law says that you have to be isolated until the elders decide upon your punishment but Anara needs your help in the healer's hut. So you will not leave it without my personal consent."

Xena nodded and limped away, squaring her shoulders when she left the hut, appearing as emotionless as everyone expected her to be. Melosa's eyes followed her with concern, and another set of eyes that observed her entering the infirmary not only knew that she was really shaken up but that also another of her numerous emotional barriers had broken down.

Melosa meanwhile let herself sink in Eponin's arms, she was reluctant to go and do what now had to be done. The physical condition of the girls was more than enough evidence, and probably the testimony of Anara and the two other witnesses would be enough to satisfy the jury. She didn't want the girls to have to appear at the trial, they already had experienced enough hurt and humiliation. Still, the huts had to be searched, and it had to be done now.

When Queen and weapons' master left the council chamber news of the arrests and its reason had already spread and Solari had to deal with many very angry Amazons who were more than eager to take justice in their own hands. The guards actually had to protect the women in the detention hut, and they only quieted down after the Queen reminded her subjects that revenge wasn't the Amazons' way, and that justice would be satisfied, according to the laws. Eponin stayed with Melosa but the Queen could feel the body of her lover getting increasingly tense almost every candle drop. Nonetheless, every time they found one of these horrid scrolls detailing the so-called punishments the weapons' masters arm was firmly tucked around her waist and she was pulled into a comforting hug - regardless of the three elders and four guards they had as witnesses.

Candlemarks later Melosa knew that tomorrow two of her subjects would die by an arrow to their hearts, the tip coated with a very potent poison designed to end their lives immediately and without much pain. To judge Yolica would be more difficult. The scrolls showed her as a very strict mistress and some of her punishments were unreasonably severe but there wasn't any evidence for rape or sexual violence.

This day the Queen did what she hadn't done for a long time. She went to Artemis' temple without any ceremonial issues in mind. When she left it a long, calming prayer later the craftswomen were preparing the funeral pyres for the five fallen Amazons, and she went to the healer's hut to ask Xena to sing the funeral dirge together with Ephiny.

But the former Conqueror wasn't where she was supposed to be. She had changed the bandage and re-stitched her wound. After some prodding from Thania and Gabrielle, she reluctantly had agreed to tend to the other girls. Anara told the Queen that she was rather stiff before but when she was sitting at one of the girl's beds something seemed to change in her demeanour. It lasted

only for a heartbeat then she straightened up and told the healer that she would take her horse Argo and 'check the perimeter'. Two candlemarks ago Ephiny had sent a scouting party to track her down, they weren't back yet.

After the funeral ceremony, the scouts told her that Argo was back in the barn, still sweaty and with her saddle on but that there was no sign of Xena. The scouts were sure that she had returned with her horse, so now the village was searched. They didn't find her in Melosa's hut nor in the dining hall nor in the sweating hut nor in the infirmary.

Finally, Theano took a closer look at the barn, and there she was, in a dark corner behind two large bales of hay, tightly rolled in a ball. She didn't react when her name was called, she didn't react when Melosa touched her shoulder. Theano and Eponin recruited Gabrielle's help and lowered her to the ground next to the tall warrior, and slowly the soothing voice of her lover coaxed Xena out of her paralysis. Blue eyes filled with hurt and despair looked into loving green eyes, and led by Theano the Amazons left them alone.

"How did you know that she was still at the barn, Theano?"

"That's where she always took refuge when she was a child, my Queen." The older woman answered while taking the saddle off the warhorse's back and beginning to rub her down. "The Conqueror simply would have gone and killed, and that's what I feared she would do when I heard she took Argo and left. It's a good sign that she came back without injuring someone else or herself."

"One of the mightiest warriors ever lying helplessly and almost catatonic in the barn, and that's a good sign?" Eponin asked in disbelief.

"Yes, she no longer is able to completely hide behind anger and violence, perhaps now she will accept my help. All these years I could do nothing but watch and pray but now I begin to stand a chance. - I can see the questions in your eyes, my Queen, but I really would be grateful if you didn't ask them now. As soon as the trial is over, I will give you all the answers you crave. But I'll stand by my word, my concern and love for Xena won't impair my court performance."

Melosa spent the night with Eponin; they sat in front of the fireplace in the Queen's main room and held each other. Melosa couldn't help blaming herself and her lack of control for what had happened to the girls and the weapons' master had a hard time to make her believe that it wasn't her fault.

Since the beginning the Amazon nation had been built on trust and respect, respect for each other, respect for the law, and respect for the Goddess. Eponin told her that it wasn't the first time in history that members of the nation had betrayed these virtues as well as the other highly esteemed values. It wasn't the first time in history that personal pride and lust for power dominated and blinded some individuals. She reminded the Queen of Velasca who more than four years ago killed one of her Amazon sisters to stop the peace negotiations with the Centaurs. Eponin told her lover that now it was her turn to trust her subjects and sisters, and that they

would find a way to make things right, together.

The weapons' master as a rule wasn't one for words, she favoured a more physical approach to problems, but Melosa's body language clearly had told her that she was in great turmoil and needed to be reassured. That's what gave her the power to put aside her own helpless anger. Her voice was low but without sensual undertones, a soothing balm gently applied to a beloved soul - and slowly, while the fire was burning low, the clenched muscles in Melosa's shoulders and back began to relax, and she drifted in a dreamless sleep.

Unfortunately, this wasn't a night for comfort and rest. Less than two candelmarks later there was harsh knocking at the door, the door opened almost instantly, and Solari rushed to the Queen's bedroom door and once again knocked.

"Queen Melosa, there's been an incident at the detention hut. Open up, your presence is required."

"I'm over here, Solari. Tell me what happened." Melosa stood in front of the mantelpiece while Eponin was busy with rekindling the fire and lighting a torch.

Solari went down on her right knee and bowed her head. "My Queen, I apologise for the intrusion. I don't know how to say this, and I take full responsibility for what happened but two of the prisoners are dead and Yolica is severely wounded. She won't let Anara take care of her wounds. She wants to speak with you first, and Anara says that she will die if the bleeding isn't stopped soon."

"Eponin, go and get Xena from the barn, Anara will probably need her help. Hurry!"

When Queen Melosa entered the newly repaired hut, there was a lot of blood all over the place. The two bodies already had been removed, and the gray haired Amazon was sitting on the ground, leaning against the far wall, bleeding from a chest wound. Her right hand held a dagger, the tip breaking the skin at the pulse point - only a slight turn of the wrist and a little more pressure would be enough to end her life.

Anara was kneeling in front of her, she tried to reason with the woman she still regarded as a friend. When the Queen knelt next to the healer, the older woman tried to rise but didn't have enough energy left to do so. Her voice however still held enough force to carry outside.

"Queen Melosa, I'm no longer worthy to call you 'my Queen' because I failed you and I failed the nation. I want you to hear my confession. I am guilty of rape and child abuse. The punishments my apprentice had to endure were severe and more than once, they were without mercy but that's not why I'm guilty.

"Since Najara left the village I knew what my former apprentices were doing. I knew and I menaced them to change their ways but I did nothing to stop them.

"Most of all I'm guilty because my belief in corporal punishments made them what they became, women without a heart, selfish and filled with misguided ambition. I have long outlived the stories told about me. The only honourable thing left for me to do is to end this life now."

Yolica increased the pressure of the dagger against her throat, a small body rushed towards her, pushing the Queen against Anara's injured arm, a voice yelled "No!" and determined hands yanked the dagger back, creating a profusely bleeding gash a fraction of an inch in front of the jugular artery. The Queen was lying on top of Anara who had passed out from the sudden pain in her arm, and young pleading eyes were looking at the door.

"Please help her, Xena. You saved Thania, please save her."

The former Conqueror stood nailed to the spot. She knew the woman soon would die and then no one would ever be hurt by her again. A deep voice reached her ear. "Help her, little one. It wasn't her, I give you my word of honour."

Xena worked in silence. She really had lost a lot of blood but the chest wound in itself wasn't life threatening, with time and good care she would live. When she told the girl, her eyes were lightning up with relief and joy.

"She will be very weak for the days to come, Piri. She will sleep a lot and whenever she's awake someone has to be at her side."

"I will care for her, I promise."

"Are you really sure that you want to do this? You don't do this just because you're afraid or something?"

"Please, Queen Melosa, I don't want to loose her. She's strict but she also is my best friend. I love her."

"You can stay with her as long as you want, Piri, but you don't have to do everything by yourself. You will have plenty of help in the healer's hut."

"Queen Melosa, it would be better not to move her this far yet, not for two or three days anyway. The stitches I put on her chest, there are a lot of old scars and the skin is very thin, it wouldn't be good if they were pulled. There may not be enough unmarred skin left to redo them properly."

"When will she be well enough to answer some questions? I still have to find out what happened with the others."

"As soon as she is settled on the cot I'll give her some painkillers and sleeping herbs. I think it will be tomorrow around noon before she re-awakes. Could you find someone to help me with the cleaning of the hut?"

"I will see that the blood and gore are washed away, that's not your job. Instead I want you to check Anara's arm, make sure that the other patients are still settled and then come back with the healing tea."

Xena nodded and guided a slightly dizzy healer to her quarters. The sudden pressure had caused some bleeding but there weren't any stitches pulled, so the tall woman simply changed the bandage and put her to bed, with surprisingly little resistance.

The only way to calm down the other occupants of the hut was to tell them the truth about the night's commotion. The girls seemed relieved and one of them asked her if Piri's mistress really would get well again.

"That's good! How? She wasn't much better than the others." Eponin's voice came from the back door.

Thania unsuccessfully tried to sit up in her bed and answered. "That's not true, Najara and the two others only were mean when she wasn't with them. They told us that she was too old to understand the wisdom of their methods."

Xena knelt next to Thania bed. "I understand, little one. It will take some time but Yolica will get well again. She feels responsible for what happened to all of you but the Queen will find a way to make things right again. Piri will stay with her mistress, so stop worrying and sleep now. - Akyra could you please keep an eye on them while I return to the detention hut."

The black eyed woman nodded and Eponin followed Xena who was well aware of the tension and anger emanating from the weapons' master. "The moon is still high, Eponin, are you up for some sparring?"

"I can't understand you. I saw your eyes in the council's hut and yet in there you practically turned Yolica into some kind of victim, why?"

"I am still angry with her. We'll talk after the sparring. We'll meet at the training grounds. I'm probably not up to hand-to-hand. You better chose some staves. Don't worry about the law, I already went against it once this morning."

The scent of blood was still discernible to Xena's sensitive nostrils but the obvious reminders of whatever had happened in the detention hut were gone. Melosa and Piri were sitting side-by-side opposite of the cot. Yolica's eyes were closed but the breathing rhythm told Xena that she was wide-awake.

"Yolica, here drink this."

The older woman opened her eyes. "I know you dressed my wounds, why? Only five candledrops more and I would have gone with honour."

"I have an Amazon's word of honour that you didn't harm the girls, and I'll never doubt her. I heard a lot of stories about you when I was still a child; stories I now know were true. You don't deserve to die - and now drink this and sleep."

Xena joined Eponin at the training grounds where big torches were set in a circle to chase the night away. Gabrielle was sitting in her wheelchair just inside of this circle of light.

The candlemarks in the barn with her love had done a lot for Xena to acknowledge and accept her memories and the emotional turmoil they still held. Now, she needed to vent her anger and helplessness as desperately as Eponin did. This Gabrielle knew for certain, but she wasn't too happy with the choice of weapon or Xena's injury. She knew Eponin was one of the best staff fighters in Amazon history.

The two warriors began to circle each other. Their movements were slow, thrust and parry almost tentative.

Eponin attacked first, a downward sweep aimed at Xena's knees was easily blocked. She used the momentum of the rebound to go for the taller woman's ribs but the staff only met thin air.

Xena's first attack consisted in a rapid succession of right and left thrusts aimed at Eponin's midsection, forcing her two steps backwards. The weapons' master finally ducked one of them, rolled out of the way and the dance began anew.

Many Amazons weren't able to go back to sleep quietly, so the circle of light soon was lined with spectators, Melosa and Solari at Gabrielle's side. The two of them went on and on for over two candlemarks, their bodies glistening with sweat, muscles trembling in the torchlight. Gabrielle and the Queen flinched every time when one or the other of their respective lovers was hit; but they also didn't miss that the grim and frozen expression on their faces slowly made place for an almost relaxed grin. They really began to enjoy themselves.

When their movements began to slow down the Queen sent them to the bathing area and ordered the rest of her subjects to get some shuteye. Xena and Eponin had a lot to talk about and the dawn was breaking when they finally returned to the Queen's hut where Melosa and Gabrielle were waiting in front of the fireplace.

The fire was burning low and their lovers were fast asleep. Xena carried the blond storyteller to her bed and gently tucked her in. She banked the fire, locked the chain to her slave collar, and snuggled next to Gabrielle. She was sure sleep would elude her but when she opened her eyes the sun was high in the sky, and Gabrielle regardless of her splints was comfortably draped on top of her.

The door opened and Eponin undid the chain. She told her that Anara didn't need her help at the moment and that she should stay in bed until Gabrielle came back to the land of the living. She also told her that the Queen at this very moment was in a meeting with the elders to decide upon

her punishment.

"It's a rather long list of things I wasn't allowed to do. Perhaps it would be easier to just add them to the list of charges and deal with it during the trial. Are there any news yet about what possibly happened in the detention hut?"

"Nothing definitive. Solari has some ideas but she's not sure yet. Your prosecutor has offered her help. She seems to have experience with this kind of death. They're currently looking at the bodies."

"Theano is very good as a lawyer, and she also works a lot outside the Amazon borders. Please, tell Solari to take her advice seriously."

"I will, Xena."

"Open your eyes, Gabrielle. I can hear that you're not sleeping any more. Please don't be angry with Theano, my love!"

"Don't you dare taking her side! What she does is wrong. She will get you killed. She's a traitor."

"Gabrielle, please, don't talk about her like this. She's a friend; she's much more than a friend. She will do everything she can to save my life but she also knows that justice has to be satisfied. That's the first thing she ever taught me and it took me long enough to remember this lesson. Take some time and talk to her, please."

"I'll try - but I'm hungry first."

Xena knew that sudden changes of subject always meant that Gabrielle wasn't ready to talk yet, and over the moons, she had learned to accept these reluctancies. Talking was very important to the younger woman but she tended to always work things out for herself first.

"According to the monster growling in your stomach, you're starving, love. Let's go and feed the monster."

Before they could completely finish their morning meal two members of the royal guard escorted Xena to the council's hut. Melosa was standing in the middle of the room, the elders forming a half-circle behind her and like last time Xena knelt in front of the Queen.

"No, Xena, you will not be judged as a slave but as an Amazon warrior, please get up." The tall woman changed her position and now was kneeling on her right knee only. "Xena, you were accused of disrespectful interruption of a council meeting, using inappropriate violence against Amazons, usage of a weapon without permission, and disobedience.

"The council found you not guilty of the first two charges but you're guilty of disobedience by

leaving the healer's hut. The usage of the staff in the morning was considered self-defence but the sparring match with Eponin can't be interpreted as such. Do you deny any of these charges?"

"Queen Melosa, venerable elders," Xena answered, her eyes locked with the Queen's, "I don't deny the charges and will accept any punishment."

"For disobedience you will receive ten strokes with a strap on your back and ten on your buttocks. For using a weapon without permission and life-threatening need you will spend the rest of the day in the barn, grooming and brushing the horses."

Around midday, the doors of the barn opened and Toris entered carrying a tray with bread, cheese, and a pitcher of plain cider. Never one for idle small talk her brother came straight to the point. "Gabrielle told me what happened yesterday, with the girls and all. Are you all right?"

Xena considered her options and voted for honesty. "Yes, Toris, I am now. - Yesterday it was pretty tough but Gab took care of me, and the sparring with Eponin also helped. It was the first time I couldn't deny what happened, I don't feel the need to hide it any longer but I'm also not really ready to talk about it."

"Gabrielle was pretty shaken by what you told her, but obviously you didn't tell her all of it."

"No, I didn't. It may have contributed to who I am now but it wasn't necessary to explain why I reacted the way I did. I killed a man twice your actual size when I was eleven. How do you explain this? There are times I don't believe it myself."

"You did what you had to do, sis. - I also talked to Theano, she said you'll need more time to deal with it, and she said" He fell silent when he saw the guarded expression on his sister's face. He swallowed hard and then continued. How do you feel with her at the other side of the fence? Gabrielle really is pissed off at her, and though I don't feel any compassion for the things, you did as a warlord I really don't want to see you dead. I don't understand her either but I never did. Perhaps I should talk to Queen Melosa about it. Theano certainly is prejudiced, so perhaps Queen Melosa will name a prosecutor not as good as she is."

"The Queen knows that there is a very personal connection between us. She probably doesn't know to which extend but she trusts Theano to keep both sides separated in this case. I already told Gabrielle, Theano will do everything legally possible to keep me alive. But Toris, you, and Gabrielle, you both have to understand that some of the most horrible things I did in my life I did to the Amazons. I betrayed them and the values they live by. I'm responsible for the death of the warriors of a whole tribe - and I'm ready to pay for my crimes. Year after year hatred and anger fuelled my actions but even then they couldn't completely silence the guilt I feel."

The dark haired woman knew Toris still didn't understand, so she added. "When I opened my heart to Gabrielle a lot of other feelings came back, and since I once again live with Amazons every day I understand better what I really destroyed all those years ago."

"You really aren't the Conqueror any more, sis."

"Oh, Toris, alas, it isn't this easy. I may no longer be the Conqueror of Greece and Rome but I'm still capable of killing in cold blood. You saw me on the battlefield. No one would have been able to stop me, neither friend nor foe, not even the God of War himself."

"So, it's true that you are Ares' Chosen?"

They were sitting on a bale of hay, the tray between them. She didn't answer and avoided his eyes.

"It's all right, Xena, I don't want you to feel uncomfortable with my questions. Gabrielle warned me that you probably wouldn't answer all of them."

Blue eyes looked into blue eyes. "No, Toris, you deserve an answer but I don't want you to talk about it to anyone else. Sometimes, I don't understand it myself. No, I'm not Ares' Chosen. I never swore allegiance to him. Yes, I am Ares' Chosen because he always showed great interest in what I was doing. He tried to influence my decisions and gave me lessons in warfare."

"Lessons, the God of War?"

"Yeah, told you it isn't easy to understand. It began after Cortese, well about two moons later. At first, I thought it was nothing but a dream. I had this odd feeling in the pit of my stomach, my skin was crawling, and there he was, telling me that one day I would rule the world and that war was the only way to save the future of mortal life. He told me that he would give me an army composed of the best and most ruthless fighters ever. At the time I loved the power ruling my man gave me but I didn't think twice about the future. At the time I didn't want to rule the world, I only wanted to keep Amphipolis save."

"You talked to the God of War? What does he look like? Why didn't you accept his help?"

"He's tall, about a half foot taller than we are, broad shoulders, black hair and beard, black leather clothing. Handsome for a man. He loves to hear himself talk, his stories taught me a lot about errors other warlords had made, sometimes fatal errors and for the most part, I avoided to repeat them. One of the lessons I learned was that it doesn't pay to rely on his help. There was this siege of a fortified village, he told me about, and it didn't go too well, so the warlord asked for Ares' help. The God he prayed to didn't help him. Ares told me that everyone who needed his help could ask for it but that the one's who actually did weren't worth his attention."

"I learned as much as I could from our little talks but as long as he was near me the feeling in my stomach didn't go away. I didn't trust him and tried to keep my distance. At least, until he stopped coming himself and sent the cloaked woman warrior instead. She always wore black leather and a black mask, she didn't tell me her name but the better part of my fighting skills I learned from her. She taught me how to defeat someone twice my size, gave me lessons in hand-to-hand combat, wrestling, archery and swordplay. And we talked about campaign strategy and how to lead an army."

"She was different, she didn't tell me what to do but taught me how to use my brain. Some of the things she said to me I didn't understand for years to come and there are a lot that I still don't truly understand. - I had a few sparring lessons with Ares but I'm convinced that she could have bested him easily. After Caesar she didn't come back but Ares reappeared when I took Corinth."

"Why do you speak so frankly about these things, Xena? Don't you fear his wrath?"

"That's one of the reasons I don't want you to talk about it, Toris. It's fairly safe to do so in Amazon territory. It's said that generations and generations ago Zeus granted a favour to Artemis. No other God is allowed to cross the Amazon borders except in Artemis' company or with her consent. Only Artemis knows what happens in the confines of this village and the forest beyond - and Ares never would be allowed to enter Amazon territory."

"I never thought of the Conqueror as one who really believes in the Gods."

"For a long time I didn't, Toris, and I still believe that we mortals forge our own destinies but somehow they keep dropping in and out of my life. So, I know they exist, and I know they can rely upon powers far greater than we mortals do but they also are far from perfect being ruled by their feelings just as much as we are."

"I definitively have to think about what you just told me, sis. There's another question I don't get out of my mind...." Before Toris could finish his phrase the barn doors burst open and Piri requested Xena's help, Yolica obviously had pulled the stitches in her chest.

When Xena ran over the Queen already had put an end to it. "Good timing, Xena. I came to speak with Yolica but first the bandages have to be re-done. I'll wait outside."

"Piri would you go to healer's hut and bring over some healing tea." Xena shifted her attention to the older woman. "It probably will hurt to take the old bandages off, Yolica, but I'll try to be as gentle as possible. Can you prop your upper body up on your elbows for better access?"

The Amazon elder did as she was told. The soft touches surprised her and the equally soft voice commenting on everything Xena did. Two of the stitches were slightly pulled and easily redone. There was no sign of an infection or inflammation.

While her upper torso was re-wrapped, the older woman asked. "Yesterday your eyes were filled with hate. Where did it go?"

"Yesterday I looked at you, Yolica, but I didn't see you. I saw what I thought you did, I hated the woman capable of doing these things. Now I know better. Piri loves you and the other girls are really worried about you. Please don't try to harm yourself any further." The old woman just nodded. "I'll check on you again after dinner. Drink the tea when Queen Melosa is through with her questions."

Xena took Piri back to the barn after the Queen had promised to notify the girl as soon as her presence was required at the detention hut. Toris had left a note that he was off finding his son and would be back later. The tray still was sitting on the bale and so they settled down for a late lunch. The girl insisted on helping Xena with the horses, and when Gabrielle about two candlemarks later rolled through the still opened doors the tall warrior was brushing Argo's coat while Piri was perched on her back combing the mane.

Argo was the last horse to be done and so they soon took a comfortable spot in the hay to listen to one of Gabrielle's stories, the younger woman having largely profited of the Amazon's history and story scrolls since her recovery from the poison induced fever more than a moon ago. She already had a whole set of scrolls of her own filled with favourite stories and notes. Trying to write with her left hand at first was awkward and barely legible but Xena had frequently encouraged her lover and now she managed fairly well.

Meanwhile Chandala was in the council's hut nervously waiting to speak with Queen Melosa.

"My Queen, I know you don't have much time with the council meeting about to begin. It's the trial... The charge of deliberate murder against Xena of Amphipolis. I filed it. I'm no longer sure if it really was murder. I'd like to withdraw the charge, my Queen."

Melosa was surprised, only days ago the body language and also the eyes of the young warrior spoke clearly of her hatred and lust for revenge, now she seemed to be confused and rather insecure. Unfortunately now wasn't the time to dig deeper, and though Melosa more than approved of her request, the regulations didn't leave her any choice in the matter.

"Did you speak with Theano before you decided to speak with me, Chandala?"

"No, my Queen, I... I didn't want to disappoint her."

"You should have. She would have told you that it's far too late to change any of the charges. The trial was scheduled for a distinct date; changes only can be made a day and a night before this day. Xena's trial only was postponed; it's too late to change the preferral of charges. I'm sorry."

Upon registering the crestfallen expression on Chandala's face Melosa continued. "There's one thing you should keep in mind though you probably won't like it. The foremost duty of the defence lawyer is to prove the innocence of the client; they have to be biased. The prosecutor's duty however is not to prove the guilt of the defendant, her main goal is to find the truth. It's her duty to see that justice is satisfied. Think about it, and now send in the elders."

"Thank you, Queen Melosa."

At the barn Gabrielle was just finishing her second story when Toris and Lyceus joined them. The boy reminded Gabrielle that she had promised to tell a story to him.

"Yes, I did but I'll need something to drink first or I'll get a sore throat. What about you, Piri? You could check on Yolica on our way to the dining hall."

The girl cast a questioning look at Xena, received an encouraging smile, and left the barn.

"I'm sorry, we were interrupted earlier. Let's take a walk, I'm about finished in here and Yolica or the Queen won't need me until shortly before sundown."

Half a candlemark later they arrived in a small glen with a bubbling spring bathed in afternoon sunlight. They sat down and Xena asked. "Now, tell me what's the other thing that's intriguing you, Toris?"

Long heartbeats passed before the blue-eyed man removed his eyes from the yellow wild flowers next to his boots.

"The other day... I saw your back."

Silence, followed by a sigh. "Are you sure, you wanna know about it, bro?"

"I can accept what Gabrielle and Queen Melosa told me about the past moons. So, I can make sense of the things this other Amazon told me. Darphus was different. One would suppose that a man with his voice shouldn't speak all the time but he did. He babbled incessantly, about the things he would do in the future; and he gloated about all his past accomplishments. I didn't believe him then but since I saw your back I began to ... well, doubt, sort of..."

"I can easily imagine what he told you. He was one of my commanders and along the way; it became personal, very personal. You sort of were part of the final chapter of this story. I never really talked about it, so I'm not sure where or when to begin."

Xena focused on the swirling water of the spring but her voice testified of the fact that she was about to relate some rather hurtful memories.

"After I conquered Greece all I had to worry about was the security of our borders which was granted by numerous treaties and alliances. Five years ago Egypt rallied forces with Persia. My spies told me in time to make ample preparations and I... we were able to destroy the Persian army before they even had a chance to set foot on the Grecian soil. Left on their own the Egyptians backed off. When we returned to Greece we had to deal with a lot of wounded, slowing down the mayor part of the army considerably..."

It had been a rough campaign; some of Xena's most trusted commanders and lieutenants were dead or wounded due to the ruthlessness and cruelty displayed by the Persian army. More than once she had to deal with advance parties sent to destroy the crop, burn the villages and even kill their inhabitants, their own fellow countrymen just to spread hunger and disease along the path

of her advancing army.

The journey back was even more tedious. Every day's progress had to be properly prepared, provisions had to be procured in advance, small bands of raiders and slavers taken care of, groups of Persian soldiers who didn't agree with their king's surrender and just continued harassing them to be dispatched.

For safety measures the dark haired warlord divided her army, the mayor part staying with the wounded and the heavy wagons under Palemon's command while Xena stayed with the smaller advance party of about five score with Darphus as her second. The better part of her time was spent with intimidating village elders to procure the supplies they needed. After everything the villagers just had lived through most of them considered that giving up a part of their provisions was a small prize to pay for their lives and limbs, even if some of them probably would go hungry in the upcoming winter. The little resistance they faced from time to time was quickly subdued.

They were at about a day's riding distance to the Grecian border when the brewing hostility between Xena and her second in command finally boiled over.

It had been raining four days in a row; everything was damp, the bedrolls, the blankets, and the tents, even the spare clothes. The provisions spoiled or tasteless, and the small fires Xena against all odds had managed to get going weren't all that helpful. Though this fourth day the weather began to clear around midday and the sun broke through the still clouded sky, her men were evil spirited and ready to tear into each other. Having made camp for the evening, the three scouts she had sent ahead in the morning came back with news about a middle-sized village situated in a sheltered clearing behind a ridge three candelmarks west from their encampment. There weren't any defences to worry about and the inhabitants mainly were composed of elders, women, and children.

Kafourka was one of these self-relying villages not interested in the problems of the outside world. It was founded by Grecian farmers some fifty years ago and still didn't show any of the signs so typical for Persian settlements. They lived from farming, sheep, and horses; in fact, they were beginning to get rather famous for their pure breeds. On the way in, Xena had spent two or three relaxing candelmarks speaking horses with their reeve when they requested to be incorporated in the Grecian realm after the end of the campaign. She had promised to at least think about it, already contemplating the advantages to gain from the horsemanship of the villagers and the possibility of being able to rely on a continuous supply of trained horses.

She hadn't made up her mind yet but when the scouts had finished their report, she made a mental note to talk to the council of elders once again while they were waiting for the rest of the army to catch up.

"Sounds like a good opportunity to have some fun for the guys," commented Darphus, "those women would be good to release the tension, have a decent meal, a warm bed and some fun. What do you think, Xena? We'll find you a good-looking pal as well."

"The village soon will be a part of Greece, the inhabitants are not to be harmed. However, beginning tomorrow the men will be allowed to take some time off, not more than 10 or 15 men at a time and they'll better be on their best behaviour."

"It was a long campaign, Xena. Just once, show some sense. The men need to spend some of their pent-up energy. A good fuck or a good fight will do a world of good to them. Down there, they even could get both. You just keep too tight a reign. I don't care why they fight as long as they follow our orders. However, experience taught me that it pays to let them have some fun, once in a while. Helps to keep them in line. Hell, I need to fuck someone, myself."

The back of Xena's right hand landed on the right cheek of the sturdy soldier propelling him to the other end of the tent.

"Never doubt my orders, never again. You know the regulations about pillaging and rape. In the long run, it doesn't pay to kill the civilians. There's no leeway in this, and no discussion. We're soldiers no barbarians. I don't like soldiers only acting out of greed or lust; I demand loyalty. I won't tolerate uppity, Darphus, not from the kitchen help and certainly not from my second in command. Consider yourself on probation - next time you'll end up as a common soldier. Well, if you're very lucky, that is. Understood?"

"Yes, General." The man was still on the ground, his eyes refusing to meet Xena's.

"Smart boy, I'll go for a ride, I won't be back until tomorrow morning. Then we all will do some sparring if you really think that the men have too much energy. I'll begin with a sword fight against you, just to set the mood for my men."

The Conqueror spent the better part of the night on the back of her dark gray mare, her hair flying freely in the night wind. From time to time, she needed the freedom of being all for herself to keep her temper. Most of the time, her outings ended with a long bath in a spring or stream, and she was more than ready to face another moon of sweating men, blood and gore, of worrying about strategy, supplies or all the civilian followers involved in a campaign like this.

Xena was lying in the middle of a small lake, and tried to find patterns in the night sky, bears and archers and balances and virgins, and Chasing Wolves or Pointed Arrows. Innumerable heartbeats later a red and yellow glow at the eastern sky diverted her attention. Dawn was at least three candlemarks away. So, there was only one possible explanation: a fire. Xena hastily regained the shore and donned her leathers. The mare snorted impatiently, obviously sensing the uneasiness of her mistress. On top of her steed she now could smell the raging fire, and only then realised where it came from.

The red glow of dawn mingled with the dying flames of the fire when the hooves of her mare thundered towards what once had been Kafourka. Without even bothering to stop, she jumped down and the chakram sliced through the throat of one of her men crouched over the inert body of a woman, his trousers at knee level. Another one was impaled by her sword, and most of the others had enough sense to jump out of her line of sight when she began to make her way to one

of the few buildings still standing, following a grunting noise she recognised as belonging to Darphus.

Once again, her second in command found himself on the ground, struggling to rearrange his clothing in a semblance of decency. Xena knew at first sight the woman was dead but nonetheless checked her injuries.

"Darphus, you sick bastard, my sword will not be tainted with your blood." Xena picked up a kitchen knife the woman obviously had tried to defend herself with. "I'll gut you like the stinking pig you are."

Xena's arm was high over her head, ready to throw the knife when her attention was diverted; there was a sound, something between wailing and sobbing, coming from the neighbouring room. She sheathed the knife on the inside of her right boot, opened the door and found herself face to face with about two score of children, differing in age from babies and toddlers to teens.

They stared at each other; Xena could smell their fear. Candles stretched to eternity while she decided what to do. "Stay here, I'll be back to get you all to safety."

When she closed the door and turned, Darphus was gone but there were more pressing matters to attend to first. The bodies had to be gathered and burned, the last of the flames extinguished, the injured tended to, and she had to find the surviving relatives of the children. So, she took a deep breath, left the small house, and began to bark orders.

A quick count told her that about two thirds of her advance party had joined in the raid. She wrote a message to the remaining third to break camp, and come to the village immediately. One of the older village boys delivered the parchment for her because she wasn't sure that she could trust her men this far. At the moment, they followed her orders but she didn't miss the covert glances they cast at each other nor the weary and hateful looks directed her way. So, Xena stayed on her guard.

The following candlemarks were spent mostly with tending to the few survivors, about ten women, half of them heavy with child and the better part of the council of elders, trapped in the cellar of the inn in the course of testing last years vintage when the raid began. Darphus obviously had made them believe that he was only following her orders, and she had a hard time to convince them otherwise.

Xena was in the midst of checking on the wounded in the makeshift infirmary that had been set up at the inn, the healer's hut having burned to the ground. Shortly after midday, the sound of thundering hooves filled the air and a small band of about fifteen riders entered the village, her messenger among them. Their leader was a dark skinned young man with shining eyes. During her stay in the Persian capital, he had been part of her personal guards and had proved himself being a skilled fighter with fast and gracefully fluid movements. His name was Marcos.

He told her that Darphus had incited all of them to descend upon the villagers in order to, as he called it, 'finally get some fun out of this Gods be damned campaign' and that they now would

get what they deserved, what they had earned by their blood. Marcos and his men tried to make the others see reason but to no avail. Darphus had them bound and gagged. As soon as they were able to free themselves they sent a party of ten riders back to the main army, three scouts were following the hoof prints of Xena's mare and three more were trying to find the village's men.

Before Xena could make up her mind what to do with this small but loyal group shouting and crying called her to the other end of the village. She jumped on the back of her mare. When she turned the last corner she saw a sword ready to be pierced through a small crying bundle lying on the ground next to the inert body of a young woman. Her chakram stopped the attack. The momentum of the weapon propelled the middle-aged man to the ground without hurting him. Xena landed in front of him, picked up the now loudly wailing child, and at the same time drew her sword.

"Even think of killing the child and you'll be next to greet Hades. You're supposed to be soldiers but you act like a band of common thugs. You not only have disgraced yourself, Greece will be judged by the way you behave, and as soon as we're back at Corinth you will be dealt with accordingly."

Xena made a swift turn; well aware of the murderous glances the men sent her way. She returned to Marcos and his group. Now she knew what she had to do. She ordered the newcomers to escort the women, children, and elders out of the village. They were to escort them to a small valley a half day's ride to the southeast where according to the elders the able bodied men were chasing and branding this year's foals and fillies. The stretchers and wagons were quickly readied and Xena accompanied them to the edge of the village and followed them with her eyes as long as possible.

The raven-haired warrior turned her steed and sighed. She slowly regained the village square, equally determined to get her men back in line and to punish Darphus and his cronies.

"In the past I more than once had to deal with over-ambitious high-ranking soldiers. Darphus was just one more. He would challenge me, I would kill him, and everything soon would return to working order. Unfortunately Darphus was more cunning than most of them. - When I reached the central market place of the village the better part of the raiders were listening to his low, vibrating voice."

"Xena betrayed us all. Her coffers are full of Persian gold and jewellery but we will never see a single coin of it. On our way back, we could have laid waste to every single village along our way. We wouldn't have been forced to live on travelling bars and water. The cellar we just found is full of the finest wine, another one has meat and fruits that will last us a full moon, probably more. But Xena ordered us to leave them alone. We no longer will suffer the whims of a mere woman."

The already heavily drunk soldiers broke in a round of cheers and howling.

"We will hunt down the women and children, we will kill their men, and then we will return and celebrate the victory of the only true disciples of Ares."

Xena listened to his ramblings sitting astride her tall gray mare, and when his last phrase was finished, she broke in a full-throated laugh before the men could once again cheer their new leader.

"Ares never was known to champion wanna-be leaders and cowards, Darphus. Leadership is something that has to be earned, and you will have to fight for it."

"Oh no. Xena, I won't walk open-eyed into your trap. I won't fight you. My men won't allow it - yes, Gen'rl, my men. They don't follow your orders any longer."

Xena heard the distinctive whiz of at least three crossbow bolts heading towards her but not one of them penetrated her personal space. Instead, her trusty mare collapsed and she found herself lying on the ground next to her dying horse, more than a dozen swords pointed at her throat and chest.

Darphus jumped down the wagon from which he had delivered his speech. He looked down at her, his voice filled with malice and triumph.

"You will be the party entertainment, Xena. When we're finished you will be begging to serve me, and I'm not talking about your overestimated warrior skills. You will be my personal body slave and you will love it."

Once again, Xena laughed and the surrounding crowd fell silent. She seemed relaxed but her laughter held no warmth. Her mind was racing. First of all, she had to keep them from hunting down the villagers. She could try and fight them and she even had a chance to win. She also knew that fighting them she wouldn't be able to control all of her opponents. A score or so of them easily could get away and kill the women and children. She had to find a way to keep them all occupied, to keep their attention fixed on her and on her only.

Finally, Xena said. "There's only one way to get rid of me, Darphus. If you don't accept the challenge, you will have to accept a vote, a two third's majority. Or could it be that you're not too sure about the loyalty of 'your' men?!"

A cruel smile appeared on his face. "A vote is fine with me but we'll do it the old fashioned way. If the vote decides against you, you will leave my army the way every real warrior did for hundreds of years. You just signed your death sentence, o mighty warrior woman."

The men around her were murmuring, some of them shaking their heads, some of them obviously shocked. Running the gauntlet as a disciplinary measure had been abandoned generations ago. It was considered too cruel and thus inefficient.

"We'll see who's going to die in the end." Xena was shaking inside, she knew as good as any of her men that her chances of survival were rather slim but it would have been totally against her nature to back out of this challenge. "Let's take this vote now."

Three of the older soldiers supervised the vote. It took them over a candlemark to find a small trunk with black and white beads in the still smoldering remnants of the council's hall. Every soldier would receive one of each; drop one of them in a big amphora and then the counting would begin. In the end, there were 23 white beans and 49 black ones. It was a rather narrow majority but all Darphus needed.

"Take her weapons and armour, don't forget the leather dress."

Since she had send off the wagon train more than two candlemarks had passed, not enough time to get out of the range of Darphus' men. She still needed to bind their attention as long as possible, so she didn't resist when two of the more adventurous men demanded her weapons. "I'll take them off myself."

Another half candlemark went by with the men taking their positions, evenly spaced across the whole length of the village square. The men were armed with thick branches ripped from nearby trees, leather belts, whips, riding crops, there were even some swords meticulously wrapped with thick layers of cloth. A big drum was brought to the finish line and one of the older men took his place behind it. Xena stared unblinking in the afternoon sun, knowing that she probably wouldn't see another sunrise, while her hands were tightly bound behind her back. The men weren't allowed to leave their assigned positions but as long as she was within the reach of their whips and other implements, they were free to strike as often as they liked.

Xena's face didn't show the fear she felt slowly sinking its claws in her heart but she also didn't wear the impassable warrior's mask the men were used to. Her eyes were shining with hatred and her whole posture signalled disdain and revenge.

Darphus was on the other side and drew a line on the dirty ground. "This is your last chance to live, Xena. Surrender and swear loyalty to me and you may live as befitting a woman, at the feet of a real man. Choose now!"

This time Xena's laughter sent waves of chill and shudder through most of the men. "Do you really think I will do something to you I denied to the God of War himself? Besides, have you recently had a look in a mirror, I never would take you in my bed, not even if we were the last living beings in the world. No, Darphus, I will live as a free woman, and I will return to make you pay for what you did to this village. And now, let the drums begin."

Without awaiting Darphus' command, the drumstick fell on the taut deerskin and Xena took her first step forward. The sun disappeared behind a black cloud, tinting the whole scene with an aura of dark foreboding. A tree limb almost as thick as a battle mace hit her in the stomach and she tumbled back. She started again ducked the first blow only to be hit by the same weapon square in the back throwing her to the ground. The tip of a whip hitting her again and again while

she tried to get back to her feet had something sharp tied in it, Xena could hear her shift tearing and felt her skin breaking. She was half way up when someone sliced through her bindings and pushed her forward.

Her arms were free and she was able to fight back. She never knew which one of her former soldiers freed her but it was the edge she needed to survive the ordeal. Wrestling with one of the whip-holders, Xena didn't see the sword coming. It hit her in the back and she once again fell to the ground. The weapon hit her with such force that it sliced through the wrappings around the blade and covered her back with blood. Riding crops and sticks continued to rain blows on her and she was one breath away from passing out. Then her eyes found Darphus' face, his triumphant smile gave her all the motivation she needed. Fuelled by pain and hatred she continued on.

There were only ten or twelve feet left to master; Xena was on her knees. She didn't have enough strength left to fight her aggressors. She was way beyond pain, her whole energy fixed at the line on the ground. She didn't feel the blows any longer, her vision was blurring. Her legs gave way and she was drawing herself forward with the strength of her fingers and arms only. Her right hand reached over the line, the drumming stopped, the last two of the men stopped in mid-motion.

Xena slowly realised that it was over; she had crossed the line and she was still breathing. She reached deep inside herself, activating energy she usually only could tap into during a battle. She got on her knees and feet, sweat and blood pouring down her body, her eyes were dark, and the men next to her easily could feel the equally dark energy emanating from her. All around the square voices were heard calling what just happened 'a miracle', 'unheard of' or 'utterly unbelievable'.

Darphus voice drowned them all. "Kill her!"

The old man at the drums blocked his way. "No! Xena followed the rules, fair and square. She crossed the line and has earned her freedom. She is free to go, it would dishonour us all to kill her now."

Darphus knew that this soldier was speaking the others' hearts and he backed off. "Go and never ever return."

As only answer, she spat him right between the eyes and left the village casting a last regretful glance at her dead horse. The sun hasn't returned but her inner sense of time told her that it was about sunset. Marcos and the wagons any time now must be arriving at the valley.

Xena stumbled through the growing darkness, not exactly knowing where she was headed, nor caring about the clear trail of blood she was leaving. After what seemed like an eternity but only was about three or three and a half candelmarks, she reached the entrance to a small cave. She could hear water dripping inside and collapsed on the ground after having quenched her thirst.

When Xena finally regained consciousness daylight was filtering through the cave entrance. Her tattered shift was gone, and she was lying face down on a soft fur-lined bedroll. There was a wet piece of cloth draped all over her back and she could feel the controlled breathing of another human being, just out of her reach and observing her every move.

"Who are you?"

"My name is Terreis, General."

"You're the Amazon scout, the one without a tribe but with a lot of sisters."

"That's me, General. I was with the scouts following the footprints of your horse. She was beautiful, I'm sorry, she had to die."

"Me too. Help me up, I have an army to find and traitors to execute."

"No, General, not now. Your body needs rest, lots of rest. I managed to stop the bleeding for now but even the slightest amount of strain or pressure will get it going again. I'll need your help if I'm going to sew you up. The permission to call a good healer would even be better. I'm not very good with herbs and all this stuff. Palemon will take care of Darphus and his men. I sent one of my companions to find him. I wrote a scroll telling him what happened. It doesn't go into details about the extend of your injuries but states that you're alive and will be joining with him as soon as possible."

"How did you know?"

"One of the older soldiers in the village gave me a resume. He also had your sword and your armour but I couldn't find the chakram. Darphus won't stay their leader for very long. He tried to send some scouts to kill you for good but the men insisted that you are to be left alone. They said that you have earned your freedom. The men also don't like that he insists on going after the villagers. Your trail was easy to follow; even a blind scout would have been able to find it. I erased your footprints and the blood."

"Do you always talk this much, Terreis?"

"Only when I'm nervous, General. I don't want you to hurt yourself by getting up too early, and what's more, I'm not really good with needle and thread and I never had to suture up gashes this deep and numerous."

"I'll tell you what to do, step by step. Did you also 'find' my saddlebags?"

"No, I didn't but the old soldier also gave your healer's pack to me. He said it probably would come in handy."

"Yeah, it does. At first, we will have to clean the wounds. The cold water was a good idea but it won't be enough." Xena tried to sit up but the sharp pain hitting her whole body like a tidal wave

quickly brought her back to her prone position.

"We stayed another three days in the cave. Meanwhile Palemon and the main part of the army had fought and killed what was left of Darphus' men, the more intelligent of them ran off when it finally sank in that the main army undoubtedly soon would be after them. The bruises on my front were healing nicely but at the end of the first day riding and walking some of the stitches broke. Terreis had a hard time getting them cleaned and closed. I hurt for more than a moon. She was probably the only person that stayed totally unimpressed by my continuous bad mood. Afterwards I asked her how she could possibly stand my bitching. She answered that a lifetime spent with the very nation the words cranky and bitchy and moody were created for was a good school for dealings with niggling generals." Xena ended her long report in an attempt to lighten the mood.

"What happened to Darphus?" Toris asked.

"He fled his own army only candle drops before they were attacked by Palemon. It took almost a moon to track him down. He was brought to Corinth and sentenced to death for rape and murder. The day of his trial also was the anniversary of my reign in Corinth. That's why I spared his life but I also made sure that he never would be able to commit another rape. I personally cut his balls off and made sure that he stayed alive. - I should have killed him. Terreis was right. It would have saved a lot of lives, those of the men at the frontier fort, and all the Amazons and First Order soldiers who died during the last two battles."

"Sister, you're full of bullshit. Don't blame yourself. Darphus is the one to blame. No one forced him to attack your soldiers or the Amazons. It was his responsibility, not yours, and as far as I could see a lot of lives were saved because you fought on their side. - Do you think one day the scars will fade?" The tall man was clumsily trying to redirect Xena's thoughts.

"I don't know, Toris, but I also don't mind them anymore. At first, they were a daily reminder of my over-confidence and a severe lapse in judgement. There are moments I still feel this way. For the most part, however, I now see them as a reminder of the first time in years my actions were not fuelled by hatred and anger, the first time my actions actually were for the benefit of others even though they endangered my primary goal."

"Primary goal?" Toris voice held a whole range of questions.

"Yeah, you know: keeping Greece safe, destroying nations, conquering the world, stuff like this."

The raven-haired woman's tone was deliberately light but her body was tense, and Toris was able to detect sadness and regret in her eyes. So he did what he never had the courage to do when they still were kids, he put one arm around her shoulders and pulled her in a big hug. He could feel the tension slowly ebbing out of her body and finally whispered in her ear. "I'm proud of you, sis."

Chapter Eight: Amazon Justice

When the first rays of dawn slowly crept over the windowsill Xena found herself in her room in Queen Melosa's hut, securely wrapped in the arms of her young lover. Cautious not to disturb her peaceful sleep she got up and hurried to the healer's hut where she originally was supposed to spend the night. The evening's conversation with her brother had taken more out of Xena than she would have thought possible, so it was fortunate that her presence at the healer's hut hadn't been necessary.

When Xena opened the door, it was very calm with the girls and the other occupants of the infirmary still asleep. Anara took the opportunity to check on Xena's thigh. To the Amazon healer's great surprise, it was almost completely healed. The skin around the sutures was healthy without any sign of it having recently sported the angry red and pale white of inflammation. Anara cast the dark haired warrior an inquisitive look but Xena only shrugged her shoulders and gave her a lopsided grin.

"Don't search for an explanation, Anara. It has always been this way, I can't explain it either but it comes in handy when one's a warrior."

The Amazon healer obviously wanted to question her further but then thought better of it. "There's no doubt about this. I think we safely can take out the stitches but you should keep the bandage on for another day or two."

Xena nodded and even let Chulapa work on her thigh. The young woman eagerly had accepted the Queen's proposal that she should begin with her apprenticeship as a healer now, without waiting for the harvest festival. She not only showed great eagerness but also had a real talent for the healing arts. Her kindness and sensitivity had a calming and reassuring effect on her fellow Amazons.

When Xena left the infirmary to help Gabrielle with the wheelchair the Amazon council met once again, having spent almost all of yesterday with intense and controversial discussions. This day Queen Melosa was far better prepared, she already had decided what she wanted done and had passed the better part of the night away with preliminary talks with most of the council members. At midday, Solari, in her function as captain of the royal guards, was ordered to call all adult members of the tribe to the central square by blowing the great horn.

Generations ago the ram's horn had been used to announce the Queen's arrival at the battlefield and to proclaim great victories. It was said to be a gift to Penthesilea, the most brave and powerful warrior in Amazon history, unequalled in strategist's skills, feared enemy and trusty friend, a gift from Artemis herself.

Less than half a candlemark later, warriors and craftswomen, elders, apprentices and children

were gathered in and around the central square, Xena and Gabrielle among them. Queen Melosa stepped onto the dais in front of the council's hut, wearing her mask and the rest of her royal attire. Eponin and Solari were on her right and on her left, both of them also wearing all the insignia of their ranks. It had been years since the nation had been summoned by the great horn; consequently, the assembly didn't take long to fall silent. They went to their knees in greeting.

Melosa's voice powerfully rang out over their bent heads. "Amazon sisters! I called upon you to celebrate a great victory in battle - and that's what we will do tonight. Our fallen sisters now are dwelling in the golden forest of Artemis; their courage never will be forgotten. Their spirit will stay in our hearts thus it will stay alive. We all have every reason to be proud of what we have accomplished."

Women sprang to their feet, cheers rose to the sky, and once again, Solari blew the great horn. Silence settled quickly on the square.

"Alas, Amazon sisters! I also called upon you because this time of joy and triumph also is a time of shame, to our village as well as to our tribe. You all know that the enemy army and their leader were largely helped by one of our own, by Najara, from now on known as Najara, the traitor. As we learned by surviving members of his army, Najara told him about the festival and she also convinced him to attack the day he did. Not only did she betray the very Nation she was born to, she cowardly also tried to kill an innocent child while escaping from the battlefield. From this day on she will be an outlaw, the council unanimously condemned her to death."

Melosa closed her eyes and fell silent while the tension among her audience grew considerably. She took a deep breath and continued.

"Najara was sent to another village because she was found guilty of rape and child abuse. I believed to act in the best interest of the girl as well as the village at the time by keeping her crimes out of the records. I also wanted to give Najara a chance to redeem herself out of respect for her fighting skills and the battles over the years she had to fight for the nation. The recent past showed that I was wrong. We have to thank Xena of Amphipolis that my misjudgement didn't have more serious consequences than it had. We have to thank her prowess as a warrior as well as her skills as a healer."

Melosa took a sip from the water skin held to her by the weapons' master. "Xena did more. She drew our attention towards two other cases of child abuse and rape. The evidence found in the huts of the warriors Umbra and Canara was overwhelmingly convincing. Both were found guilty and justice already has been satisfied. Two nights ago elder Yolica witnessed the culprits killing each other in the detention hut. Yolica was injured while trying to get them off of each other. The Amazon or Amazons responsible for tossing the daggers in the detention hut are to report to me privately to be punished for interfering in the true course of Amazon justice.

"At the time Yolica also had been a suspect. The evidence found in her hut as well as the testimony of her apprentice cleared her of all charges. Nonetheless, she holds herself responsible for the wrong doings of Canara and Umbra because both once counted among her warrior's apprentices. Her services to the nation are well known, not only as a warrior but also as a most

estimated member of the elder's council. As the Queen, I don't see any responsibility on her part but out of respect, I granted her request. As soon as her health is completely restored, she wants to step down from her position as an elder. She then will resume responsibility not only for her own apprentice but also for Diona and Ryenna, the former apprentices of Canara and Umbra. The council will miss her wisdom and experience." The Queen took another deep breath.

"Before the preparations for the evening's festivities will begin, there's one more announcement to make: The trial of Xena of Amphipolis will begin tomorrow morning, one candlemark after the break of dawn. The Queen has spoken."

The women returned to their respective tasks, which had most of them, already involved in some kind of preparation for the upcoming festivity. Xena and Eponin were about to join two of the hunters for fishing when Silea blocked their way.

"Xena of Amphipolis, I challenge you to an archery competition."

"I accept the challenge, young warrior. We will follow the rules of two years ago, I presume?"

Before the young Amazon was able to answer, Eponin took a step forwards. "As weapons' master I object to the challenge. You should reconsider and eventually reissue the challenge when Xena can answer it appropriately. You should know that a slave is not allowed to use weapons of any kind. You should go back to your superior and think about what is honourable to do and dishonourable."

"Eponin, please don't interfere. I don't need a weapon for this kind of fight; none of us will get hurt. Silea has every right to issue this challenge; it's a question of honour to her. Don't worry."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, weapons' master, I am sure. We can go fishing in no more than half a candlemark."

"So be it. I will officially witness the challenge."

The three of them went to the training grounds. At the beginning of the long range area of the archery ground Silea stood and began to prepare her bow while Xena continued on to the target area. She turned around and faced the young Amazon. Her posture seemed relaxed and she wore a bored and somewhat sleepy expression on her face.

The young warrior took an arrow out of her quiver, drew back as far as possible, closed her eyes for half of a heartbeat and let her arrow fly. Eponin unintentionally held her breath but Xena still seemed largely unconcerned. To the weapons' master it was as if time stood still. One moment Xena stood motionless, the next she held the arrow in her almost fully outstretched hand. Eponin stared unbelievably but this only was the beginning.

The rapidly following two arrows were as easily discarded as the first one. When the quiver was

empty, Silea advanced to the markings for short range shooting and Xena handed her the arrows. The game started anew. The arrows now were much nearer to her face and chest when Xena caught them but none of them got through. Silea was down to the second to last arrow. This time her aim seemed to be completely off but suddenly the arrow began to righten itself and also seemed to gather speed thus coming in from a very unusual angle. At the same time, Xena saw the last arrow coming straight at her. She managed to catch the first but then had to jump out of the way and the steel tip of Silea's last arrow embedded itself in the bull's eye of the hay target. Obviously, this was the end of the challenge.

"You did good, Silea. You've learned a lot since the last time. If I still had an army to lead, I would be proud to count you among my top archers. You won the challenge fair and square." Xena offered her arm for a warrior's handshake but the young woman wordlessly turned and left the training grounds.

The tall raven-haired warrior now gave her attention to the weapons' master. "I owe an explanation to you. We can talk on the way to the river."

Eponin was still too dumbfounded from Xena's performance to speak and only nodded. "When I began to prepare the campaign against Rome and Caesar I tried to recruit the best warriors I could lay my hands on. The Amazon village and their neighbours at the seacoast all had suffered from raids of Roman soldiers and Roman slavers. They all had a very good reason to fight them, so I was able to add some of the best sailors and navigators to my army. I had opted for a combined attack by sea and by land, and it really gave me the edge I needed to outsmart Caesar. He was too arrogant to believe that any army would stand a fighting chance against Roman legions, so he concentrated his attention on the sea battle. My ships had to engage the Romans and break up their battle formation. This necessitated a combination of long-range fighting and hand-to-hand combat. There were a lot more qualified candidates than I was willing to risk. I organised an archery contest to determine who would go and who would stay with the main army. I only allowed battle-hardened warriors on board of my ships.

"Silea breezed through the preliminary contests, technically she was one of the best. What you just saw was the final test. The task was to hit the target behind me, regardless how. Silea didn't have the stomach to try and hurt me in the process. This time she did, she even managed to trick me."

"Then why didn't she accept your surrender?"

"I'm not sure. I think that she didn't believe that she could win and I suppose she still feels robbed of her dreams. She desperately wanted to serve on my flagship but ended as a scout. She did a really good job at it; she saved one of my advance parties from running in an ambush. She would have been a good asset to the army, especially after the war. She just needs more time."

"You kept her in your line of sight by making her a scout and at the same time made sure that she made use of all of her Amazon training. Why did you try and protect her?"

"When the campaign began she still had her blood innocence. On a ship, there wouldn't have

been time to deal with it but the leader of the scouts was also an Amazon. She wasn't alone when it happened and she had to deal with the aftermath of a battle for the first time."

"It may take some time but one day she will understand. Young warriors may have the skills but they don't know what it means to fight and to kill. Most of them have heard a lot about battle lust but they don't foresee that it would be dampened by emotional and physical pain and grief. There are always loved-ones or friends injured or dead. The young ones always have a hard time when they lose their blood innocence."

"Only when they're lucky. Having someone to talk to or to make love with is a lot of help. It's one of the better ways to spend this residual energy."

"Yes, darkness can be very tempting."

The two warriors fell silent, neither of them ready to give voice to their respective dark memories.

Just like the last time the fishing trip ended with an all out water fight and once again, they relaxed on the riverbank. While their two companions took the four baskets with their catch to the kitchen area Eponin and Xena engaged in a friendly wrestling match. When they finally returned to the village, they immediately were recruited for last minute preparations.

Amazons just loved a good party and they rarely ran out of excuses to have one at least twice a moon. As always there were lots of food, dancing, and singing. Akyra and Gabrielle each told a story, and children and adults alike were avidly listening. In contrast to most of the other parties, however, the strong Amazon wine and Centaur beer wasn't as much requested as usual. Apparently, no one wanted to risk having a hangover the next day.

When the party came to an end Queen Melosa presented Xena and Gabrielle with Najara's now unoccupied hut that had been newly furnished with a table and chairs, cushions and a fire place fur. There also was a new bed stand, mattress, and blankets, some cups and mugs, plates, knives and spoons. The hut was on ground level, so it would be easy for Gabrielle to manoeuvre in and out of it with the wheel chair.

Xena was about to voice her protest when she was silenced by one stern look from Theano.

"I know what you're thinking, Xena. We owe you, and we know it. The council's vote was unanimous. Regardless of what will happen during and after the trial, this hut from now on will be yours and Gabrielle's. Regardless of the collar you're wearing as long as you are inside the hut you are free. You'll be an Amazon warrior in your own right and you'll be able to act accordingly. We will honour the choices you make as we would any other free and adult Amazon's decisions. It may be for one night only or it may be for the rest of your life but this hut will be your sanctuary. We always will be in your debt. This is only a token of our gratitude as a village as well as a nation."

"Queen Melosa, please let the council know that I humbly accept your gift. But I also want you to know and to record that all in all it is me who always will be in the debt of the Amazon nation." Xena cast an almost imperceptible glance towards Theano. "Thus far my life was marked by a lot of twists and turns but whenever I made a step in the right direction it was an Amazon, by birth or by spirit, who was there to help or trigger my decision. Thank you very much, Queen Melosa."

About a candlemark later, Xena and Gabrielle were sitting quietly in front of the fireplace. Finally, the young woman couldn't stand the silence any longer. "I don't understand you. Xena, I really don't. Why didn't you accept Queen Melosa's offer, why?"

A sad smile flickered through Xena's face but her gaze stayed fixed in the flames. She slowly turned around, now with an expression of earnest and grief showing. "They didn't know what they were talking about, Gabrielle. What I did to Queen Cyane and the Northern Amazons can't be balanced by what I recently did. It wouldn't be right. Please don't look at me this way. This isn't a question of pride but of justice. Begging for mercy is something I'd willingly do for your sake but I'm not worthy of mercy. No, please don't... The Amazons have every right to ask for my life, my heart, and my soul. My heart and my soul belong to you, my love, I can only give them my life - and I gladly will, should they ask it of me."

Gabrielle couldn't help the feeling that Xena's clear blue eyes were directly piercing her very soul. She found herself lost in their sincere, unblinking attentiveness, and resignedly closed her own. Candles stretched to eternity while she gathered the strength to speak.

"How can you stay this calm, Xena?" She finally asked.

"Gabrielle, do you really know what this hut, Melosa's gift, is meant to say?"

Continuing on her negative vein the young woman answered. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"You studied Amazon history and law, their nursery songs and legends, you should know."

The blonde only shrugged her shoulders.

"Whatever the jury will decide upon, Gab, they won't kill me."

"How can you be so sure?"

"This hut is situated in the centre of the village. Najara only had the privilege to live here because it was the hut of her birth mother. Traditionally the huts here only are assigned to warriors or craftswomen who have made proof of exceptional loyalty to the tribe and the nation. The council's decision was based upon the things I recently did but they never will refrain from it. The trial still may end with a death sentence but after tonight no one will even attempt to carry it out. It will be postponed 'til the day I commit another capital crime or die in battle or of old age."

Our future depends only upon you, Gab, if you're able to share your life with someone wearing a slave's collar or even with someone sentenced to death."

Xena once again had her eyes on the flickering flames. She hadn't expected an answer but the answer she got not only gave her hope for the future but also the strength to finally begin to face the demons of her past.

Gabrielle's right leg was still encased in splinters but she didn't hesitate to turn to her left and enfold Xena in a hug as fierce as she could manage. Though Xena had had the opportunity to carry Gabrielle to the bedroom, they made love in front of the fireplace, slowly and tenderly.

Xena returned to consciousness with the feeling of the younger woman solidly draped and anchored around her body. The tall warrior relished the feeling. Dawn was just about to creep over the edge of the horizon when Xena slowly attempted to also wake her companion. There was a part of her that craved to fight whatever enemy would present himself but there also was a part patiently waiting for the Queen's orders - and the beginning of the court session.

There were two distinctive knocks and a voice calling out loud. "Sun's up, another half candlemark to go, Xena."

"On my way, Queen Melosa. Give me a few candledrops."

Xena kissed Gabrielle on the forehead to rouse her to consciousness. It didn't work. She kissed her on both eyes and the tip of the nose, still no response. Her tongue spent some time lingering on the cheeks and cheekbones. Her lips finally found Gabrielle's, doing the best teasing job she could come up with. Slowly her tongue began to play with Gabrielle's lips and when she was sure of the other woman's attention, she penetrated further. She broke the kiss and whispered in the younger woman's ear.

"I have to go now, my love. Toris and Solari will see that you're settled in a front row seat. Don't worry about me. Queen Melosa, Ephiny, and Theano will do the best they can to avoid a death sentence. Please don't doubt their judgement, whatever they will find necessary to do to get to the truth. I will return to your loving arms. I love you - more than I loved or desired everything or everyone else before. You're not only the other half of my soul, you're the part of my soul that's worth living and fighting for."

Ten candledrops later Xena left the hut. She held her arms out, close to each other, and Eponin reluctantly fastened the cuffs at her wrists. The weapons' master took the place usually assigned to the captain of the Royal guard. Xena stepped between the two rows of her escort and they slowly proceeded to the end of the central square, in front of the council's hut. None of Xena's guards bore any arms, thus more resembling an escort of honour than guards to a prisoner. The village square already was packed with Amazons of every rank and age. There was a life at stake, so they all knew they only would be able to witness the first part of the trial; trials like this usually being closed to the public.

The Queen's dais had been considerably enlarged to accommodate the whole jury consisting of the Queen, the weapons' master, and the captain of the Royal guards. Another three representatives were recruited among the full time warriors. There also was Akyra and two other elders, one of the older apprentices. The scouts, hunters, and different crafts also each had a seat. Two additional seats were granted to Melosa's aunt and the young weapons' master of the mountain village - twenty people, all in all.

On either side of the dais, a table was set up for prosecution and defence, facing the dais as well as each other. When silence settled all around the village square, Ephiny was standing to Xena's right, her eyes flickering once and again to her opponents at the other side, the main part of her attention concentrated on Queen Melosa and the jury. She was an experienced lawyer and had rarely lost a case but never before, she had had to deal with a capital crime and a possible death sentence.

Xena's answers to the younger woman's questions had never been very forthcoming, not even after she began to willingly talk with her lawyer. But her profession had made Ephiny an expert in reading between the lines, so the things Xena didn't say taught her a lot about her client. After the summer solstice, she already was pretty sure what it was that the tall warrior was hiding behind her tougher-than-leather-attitude.

The battle against Darphus and his men more than confirmed her suspicions. What she witnessed was more than astonishing: Even in the midst of the fray, surrounded by Amazons and enemy soldiers alike Xena's strokes never strayed. Her sword unerringly found her goal, and though the blue-eyed woman would have denied it, she actively avoided harming the Amazons with her weapons. Sword and chakram always were where they were needed most, and more than just one or two Amazons, this day owed their lives to her relentless energy.

Ephiny suddenly snapped out of her musings when Queen Melosa finally lowered the royal mask over her face to officially get started with the trial.

"Xena of Amphipolis, you are standing in front of the jury under the scrutinising eyes of the whole nation to be judged according to Amazon law. Hear now the charges brought against you: First. You are accused being directly responsible of the deliberate breaking of the peace treaty signed between yourself, the Centaur and the Amazon Nation. You are further accused of having thus endangered the lives of the Amazons on guard duty. Third. You are under the accusation of multiple murder by ruthlessly killing the military and spiritual leaders of the Northern Amazons ten summers ago. Fourth. The Amazon leaders died at the funeral ground near the temple, on holy ground. Therefore, you are also under the charge of repeated sacrilegious behaviour. Every one of these charges will be dealt with individually. Xena of Amphipolis, do you understand the charges levelled against you?"

"Yes, Queen Melosa, I do."

"Do you of your own free will accept the authority of the jury and will you abide with whatever we may decide on you?"

"I do and I will, Queen Melosa."

"As a symbol of your submission you now will accept ten strokes with a single tail whip. Do you wish to be restrained, Xena?"

"It won't be necessary, thank you, Queen Melosa."

Eponin, her face an expressionless mask, left the dais and led Xena to a wooden structure on the right side of the central place about twelve paces away. It stood about nine feet high and consisted of two square posts with carefully smoothed surfaces. They stood about five feet apart and were joined one to the other by three horizontal steel bars, two feet apart each and descending from the top.

The weapons' master took a key from her waistband and disconnected Xena's cuffs. She opened the shoulder clasps holding the slightly taller woman's tunic. The material slipped down to the waist exposing Xena's scarred back to the audience. Xena's hands reached up and she wrapped her fingers firmly around the middle one of the steel bars.

The other woman took a few steps backwards, uncoiled the whip, and did her duty. Five strokes from the right and five from the left, not touching and not criss-crossing each other. The whipping was supposed to leave marks but not to break the skin. The tall warrior never made the slightest sound and soon the ordeal was over. Xena lowered her arms back to her sides; Eponin refastened the tunic and once again hooked the cuffs together. The both returned to their respective seats.

"Xena of Amphipolis, according to Amazon law it is your privilege to decide if the court sessions will be held here where the whole nation will bear witness or if they shall be held in the privacy of the council's hut away from prying eyes. In the past capital crimes usually were dealt with in private. Please keep in mind that there is the very real possibility of a forced interrogation."

"I don't request privacy, Queen Melosa. My crimes had consequences for the nation as a whole, the court sessions also should be held in front of the whole nation."

Melosa only nodded in acceptance. She hadn't expected any other decision though she wasn't able to determine if Xena's words were based on feelings of guilt, pride, or honour. The major part of the Amazons, however, was surprised and showed it with a round of whispers and gasps. The Queen's voice once again resounded throughout the central square.

"The charges have been made known. We now will begin to examine each of them thoroughly. Regarding the first charge, the breaking of the peace treaty, does the defence plead guilty or not guilty?"

Before Xena was on her feet to answer, Ephiny stood tall and said. "Queen Melosa, venerable members of the jury, my client insists on pleading guilty. In her best interest, I intend on making

use of the defender's prerogative. Thus I overrule the declaration of guilt and plead a case of partial responsibility by neglect."

Xena's eyes were shooting daggers at Ephiny but she knew that there was nothing at all she could do against it.

"The prosecutor's answer, please."

Now, it was Theano's turn. "The prosecutor accepts the declaration of the defending lawyer at face value but we must insist that the exact extent of responsibility has to be agreed upon. My first question is for Xena of Amphipolis. When was your attention first called upon the problems pertaining the Amazon Nation, Xena?"

"About two and a half moons ago." The tall warrior answered.

"I'm sure the jury would appreciate more details."

For two long heartbeats, Xena's eyes locked with Theano's. With an almost imperceptible nod, she turned her attention to the jury and began to relate the story of the Council's meeting and her decision to take a look at the situation herself. She also told them that she found the frontier fort abandoned and that there were no signs of Amazon interference. Tracks led her to the equally abandoned encampment of a small army and further towards Amazon country. Xena saw no need to also recall the battle she interfered in but to her utter surprise, Theano's assistant pointed it out.

It was Ephiny's turn to ask the next question. "Queen Melosa, could you please give a short report on the time table of the intrusions on our land, the danger they presented to the nation as well as to individual warriors, and could you please tell the jury what you did to put an end to it."

The Queen answered that the first intrusion took place more than two seasons ago. She told them that starting with the second incident she did send a report and an official protest towards Corinth but that she never received an answer. She also made clear that guard duty at the border never was without danger, and that none of the intrusions had posed a real threat to the nation or to the village.

When she ended there, was a lot of murmuring among the audience and when they finally fell silent Theano once again spoke up.

"I think there now is only one question left. Xena, as the Conqueror of Greece and Rome did you ever receive one of Queen Melosa's letters of reports?"

"No I didn't. I didn't pay enough attention to what was happening in the confines of my realm. The deaths of my men as well as the deaths of the Amazon warriors could easily have been avoided if I had done my duty. That's why I am guilty, venerable members of the jury."

"The jury will take your declaration in account, Xena. Are there any more questions pertaining to

this charge? No? Good! Prosecutor, may we now hear your final statement."

Chandala stood, trying to hide her nervousness by clasping her hands behind her back. "The prosecutor agrees with the plea of the defendant's lawyer. To us there is no doubt that Xena of Amphipolis cannot be held responsible for everything going wrong in her jurisdiction. She may have been wrong to trust her advisors but that's a danger every ruler has to live with. This jury only has to judge her personal responsibility, nothing more and nothing less. We don't agree with the defendant's self-evaluation and therefore join with the defender's request."

"The jury now will retire to the council's hut to discuss the pleas and depositions just made. The great horn will let you know as soon as we have come to a decision."

Xena was escorted to the detention hut where Eponin once again unlocked the manacles. "Thank you, Eponin."

"I only did what I had to do, Xena. There's no need to thank me."

"Yes, there is. You know as good as I do that within the letter of the law you did the minimum. You could have inflicted much more pain. These marks will be gone this time tomorrow. - Please try and keep Gabrielle occupied while the jury is debating."

Xena was about to slip in a light meditation when the horn sounded about two and a half candlemarks later. The jury members re-emerged from the council's hut and took their seats. When Queen Melosa remained standing and put on her mask the audience also got to their feet and fell in expectant silence. Melosa nodded and Xena knelt in front of the dais.

"Xena of Amphipolis, hear the jury's verdict on the first charge." Xena lowered her eyes to the ground. "The jury found you not guilty of deliberately breaking the peace treaty. Although we are not sure that the deaths of our sisters as well as your soldiers could have been avoided had you acted otherwise, we unanimously agreed that after the trial you will do three seasons of personal service to the nation. You will be made a part of the village's teaching staff, with all the other duties for an Amazon warrior as taking part in guard duty and other communal services. You will be directly accountable to the weapons' master. Do you of your own free will submit to this sentence?"

"Yes, Queen Melosa, I will." Xena made a move to get back to her place next to Ephiny.

"Stay where you are. We're not finished yet." Melosa straightened her shoulders. "The jury also has agreed to drop the charge accusing you, Xena of Amphipolis, of having carelessly endangered members of the Amazon nation. Not being found guilty of the first charge entails that you also cannot be found responsible of the second one. If there are any objections you may voice your protest now."

The Queen's eyes seemed to check on every single one of her subjects daring them to speak up.

"So be it. - Do the prosecutors wish to proceed with the next charge?"

"Queen Melosa, venerable jury," Theano replied, "we are well aware that it was agreed upon in advance to treat the charges independently but as the first and second charge were intertwined, so are the third and the fourth. Both are dealing with capital crimes, we should treat them when we all are well rested and alert. We ask the jury to postpone the session to tomorrow instead of starting something that we won't be able to finish today. Are there any objections from the defending party?"

"No, the defence joins the prosecutor's request."

"The jury also agrees. We will meet again tomorrow morning one candlemark after sunrise."

Once again, Xena was escorted to the detention hut. The manacles were unhooked but she insisted on keeping them fastened around her wrists. The trial didn't at all go as she had anticipated; thus far, defence and prosecution seemed equally determined to keep her unharmed. Despite herself, she felt a great deal of relieve but she also was deeply intrigued.

The look of pure hatred Chandala had given her shortly before the summer festival still burned in her soul but it had all but vanished from the younger woman's eyes by now. She spent the remainder of the day speculating about possible reasons. When the sun was about to set Xena also began to long for Gabrielle's comforting touch to keep the memories of ten years ago at bay but before the end of the trial, there was no chance of this happening.

The only window of her prison showed eastwards, and when the first twilight of dawn was breaking Xena found herself lost in one of the most breath-taking sunrises she ever had the chance to witness. The few slightly red tinted clouds quickly dissolved and promised an exceptionally sunny day. There also was a slight breeze that would keep the temperature rather pleasing. A perfect day to take the midday-meal beneath the apple tree. 'No, don't go there,' Xena scolded herself, 'this never will happen again. You can't afford to get lost in memories.' There also was another voice telling her: 'Why not? Just trust Theano, you dump warrior.'

This day's court session began as yesterday's had ended, with the audience in expectant silence and Melosa wearing her Queen's mask, and she began without preamble.

"Xena of Amphipolis, you are accused of having murdered the spiritual and military leaders of the Northern Amazons. Do you plead guilty or not guilty?"

"I am personally responsible for the deaths of Queen Cyane and her council, Queen Melosa."

"Answer the Queen's question," Theano growled, "guilty or not guilty?"

"I am responsible for their deaths and I am the only one responsible."

Theano now was standing in front of Xena, and though the prosecutor had to look up to meet the tall woman's eyes, Xena began to squirm under her gaze. "Answer the question, Xena. Did you murder them?"

"I'm responsible, that's all there is to say." With the last word, Xena's eyes found her manacled wrists and didn't budge from there.

"Queen Melosa, venerable jury, the defendants reluctance to answer appropriately doesn't leave us any choice, prosecution requests a forced interrogation."

"Xena of Amphipolis, look at me. Answer my question. Did you cold-bloodedly murder Queen Cyane and her entourage?"

"I am respon..." The words died on Xena's lips and her gaze once again dropped to her hands.

"The prosecutor's request is granted. Are there any volunteers to carry out the physical part?" Murmuring and whispering spread through the rows of the audience but no one spoke up.

"Queen Melosa, knowing the defendant as good as I do I anticipated that this step would become necessary. With your permission I will take over the physical encouragement part and my assistant, Chandala, will pose the questions. That is if there are no objections from the defendant or defender." Xena just nodded, leaving Ephiny no choice than to agree as well.

Once again, Xena was led to the wooden structure. Eponin unfastened the wrist cuffs and opened the tunic. The tall woman now was facing the jury and the major part of the public; Xena's arms now were shackled to the steel bar in the middle. The young woman behind the prosecutor's table nervously fidgeted with a piece of parchment while Theano took position behind Xena's back.

"Are you ready, Theano?" The older woman answered with a nod.

"Traditionally the first question goes to the defender." The Queen announced.

"Xena of Amphipolis, did you murder Queen Cyane and the members of her council?"

Xena didn't answer, internally counting to ten and preparing for what she knew would come. She closed her eyes in anticipation when Theano's right arm drew back. The bound woman's upper body jerked forwards with the impact and immediately was propelled in the other direction because of the wrist restraints. It sounded as if the skin had been sliced to the bones but all even the most meticulous observer would have been able to detect was a small welt adorning Xena's right shoulder blade.

"Queen Melosa, may I reformulate the question?" The woman nodded. "Xena, did you kill Queen Cyane and the others?"

This time the ebony haired warrior didn't hesitate to answer. "Yes, I did."

Chandala continued the questioning. "You killed them and that's why you are responsible for their deaths?"

"Yes."

"The jury still needs an answer to the initial question, Xena. Did you commit murder when you killed them?" The Queen insisted.

No answer, and shortly after the mark on her right side had a twin on the left.

"The question will be repeated for as long as necessary. For your own sake, answer now. Don't make this harder than it already is." Ephiny pleaded.

Once again, the tip of the whip found its goal and this time Xena was hard pressed to avoid an audible reaction. There now was a rapidly swelling horizontal line at the small of her back but still not a single drop of blood had been spilled. Three strokes later Xena finally said.

"No, I didn't commit murder. I fought them and I killed them."

"We have to know more than this. Tell us the whole story! I not only order you to do so as the head of the jury but also as the Queen and priestess of this tribe."

The tall woman kept her mouth shut. Theano's blows now were steadily raining on her back and soon sent her in some sort of meditative haze. Suddenly the whip wrapped herself around her upper body and her left breast, just on top of the nipple sported a small gash resembling a half circle. This brought her back to reality. Another stroke found its way to the other side and she haltingly began to speak.

"At the time I was on my way back from the far east. I not only wanted to rule Greece but the whole world, Xena, Destroyer of Nations. The Northern Amazons were the first opponents to pick my ambitious mind. Queen Cyane was a formidable warrior, far better than I ever would have thought possible. I tried to kill her but was easily defeated. Borias, my partner, wanted to form an alliance with them, he wanted them to join with our army. Queen Cyane only agreed to some sort of none-aggression pact but she also agreed to become my teacher - and I was eager to learn all the incredible things I had seen her doing.

"About two moons later I decided that I now knew all she would ever be able to teach. I was wrong but I had learned enough to turn their fighting skills against them. At first, I thought about taking them out individually.

"One day they all came together to prepare the funeral fire for a young warrior. I had seen her playing with some of the others in the trees when she fell and broke her neck. Killing the council on holy ground to me was the best way to demoralise the whole tribe. I told them that I had caused her death thus provoking a fight. I killed them one after the other. Queen Cyane the whole time tried to reason with me, to get me to see some sense. I didn't stab them from behind but I wanted to see them dead, and I got what I wanted."

Xena's voice was audibly strained and though she tried to keep her facial expression impassable everyone listening to her knew for sure that there still were many things left unsaid. Silence reigned among the audience and the jury alike, finally Ephiny got to her feet and waited for Melosa's consent to ask the next question.

"Xena, we all know that you're probably the best fighter we ever will have living among us. What we are talking about now was ten years ago; I can't believe that you were already this good way back then. Would you please elaborate!"

A sad half-smile flickered over Xena's face. She wasn't ready to answer this question and began to regret her insistence on a public trial. She waited for the sting of the whip on her body but it didn't come. Instead, the older woman was directly behind her and whispered in her ear.

"Follow the voice of your heart, little one, and you will get what you really crave."

Xena swallowed hard, her eyes found Ephiny's and she answered. "Technically speaking I wasn't as good a fighter as I am now. But at the same time, I was better. I was convinced that being a good warrior was dependent on the number of adversaries killed. Killing was all I lived for. The fear in my opponent's eyes a heartbeat before I sent them to the river Styx sent surges of energy through my body and kept me from feeling exhaustion and pain."

She now turned her head to the jury. "The battle haze most of you saw me in some days ago is only a weak reminder of how I fought then. There were simply no holds barred. Nonetheless I still wouldn't have had the slightest chance to win but for two things. The council members never made an attempt at a joint attack. I easily could have been overpowered but there were only one on one or one on two combats. I still don't know if they acted out of a sense of honour or if they foll..."

Xena fell silent. She heard the crack of the whip and this time she cried out in pain. Gasping she slowly continued. "The healing arts were something I always was interested in. I knew a lot about herbs and roots and how to use them. At the time I was convinced that one can't be a warrior and a healer all in one, so I didn't use my skills as I should have.

"In the east, in Chin I experienced the mind altering power of certain plants. I wanted to use them to control my own men as well as my enemies.... Anyway, before searching the confrontation with Queen Cyane I took a combination of herbs that sharpened my senses, sped up my reflexes and at the same time slowed down the flow of my blood. Together with my innate ruthlessness, this gave me the edge I needed to stand a chance. I didn't commit murder but the way I killed them wasn't much better."

"Weapons' master, please escort Xena back to the detention hut. We will take a break, its close to midday anyway. The jury has a lot to think about and undoubtedly will have some more question for the defendant."

The tall warrior was sitting on her cot, feeling completely drained. There still were a lot of things about her stay with the Northern Amazons she wasn't ready to talk about yet; she even didn't want to think about it - but she also knew that soon she would have to reveal at least some of them.

The door was opened and Anara entered. "I'm here to see to it that your back stays clean. I can't give you a painkiller yet but I'm also not ready to risk another inflammation."

"Don't worry, Anara. All is as it should be with my back. It hurts now but the marks will be gone in no longer than three days, five, or six if I didn't have the ability to heal as fast as I do. The skin was irritated but not broken."

"Theano is really this good with the whip?"

"Yes, she is. The whip is her weapon of choice, together with the staff. She taught me how to use a staff when I still was a little girl but even after all these years she easily would be able to knock me on my ass in a sparring match. - How's Gabrielle? I hate that she has to see me like this."

"Gabrielle's why it took me so long before looking after you. She tried to attack the prosecutor and fell out of the wheel chair."

Xena was on her feet and at the door in the blink of an eye. "Calm down, Xena, there was no harm done. The splints encasing her leg stayed in place. The ones on her wrist broke but they could have gone off anyway. She bruised her good shoulder, that's all. Nothing to worry about. Queen Melosa threatened to confine her to her hut for the remainder of the trial, so she promised to behave from now on. This young woman has a protective streak as wide as Mount Olympus is high when it comes to you."

"Please tell her that I love her, and tell her that I'm sorry. Tell her that I'm as stubborn as a mule and that Theano only did what was necessary. Theano is a friend, she shouldn't be pissed at her."

"Pissed?, oh gal, you don't know half of it. Gabrielle threw a full-fledged temper tantrum when Theano tried to tell her that everything would be all right soon. She even accused her of enjoying what she's doing."

There was a sad smile on Xena's face. "To Theano doing what she's doing today is as difficult as observing it is to Gabrielle, Anara. But Theano also knows me and that's why she knows there is no way out of it. It has to be done. Please, try and make Gabrielle understand,"

"You can talk to her yourself, Xena, tonight. Gabrielle was sentenced to a night spend in detention for attacking the prosecutor."

"Let me guess: Theano's idea?"

"Yes. It's almost time to continue, now. Please, don't be stubborn and answer the questions honestly."

Less than five candle drops later Xena once again was bound to the whipping post.

"The jury members have some questions regarding your testimony. First of all: We want you to describe your fight with Queen Cyane." The Queen announced from behind her mask.

Xena having expected this particular question didn't need an incentive to answer. She told them in detail how she fought and killed the better part of Queen Cyane's council in the treetops surrounding the funeral area. When only two of the guards were left, she knocked Cyane unconscious by jumping unexpectedly out of a tree. The two royal Guards were worthy opponents but fuelled by ambition and battle haze she finally managed to overcome their defences. She even had the time to put some provisional bandages on the worst of the numerous cuts scattered all over her body while she waited for Cyane to regain consciousness.

Xena's testimony having trailed off too often was once and again encouraged by Theano's whip. "Having eliminated all the others I felt rather cocky but even then I knew that I didn't stand a chance when I gave the Queen a chance to take the fight to the trees. I was good then and I'm good now but I still wouldn't stand a chance against her skills. Queen Cyane continued to reason with me but I was way beyond reasonable. When I fought her, I wasn't aware of the injuries I already had sustained. We fought and in my mind, we were evenly matched. Well, that's what I wanted to believe at the time.

"The more my own fighting skills were honed over the following years, the more I began to understand that this wasn't true. I used all the skills and all the energy I had to kill the Queen but she only tried to wear me out. - She wanted me to face Amazon justice for my crimes and she promised that my soul would be freed from the evil spirits haunting it, and that I would find peace. I didn't listen, I didn't want to listen.

"We exchanged parry and thrust, strike and jab.

"Suddenly she stumbled, backwards over one of the branches cut for the funeral pyre. I saw an opening and my sword pierced through her chest. I never will forget the expression of utter surprise on her face when she took her last breath."

The audience was silent, as if an intangible and invisible force held down their tongues. Even the Queen needed some candledrops to regain her spirits and pose the next question.

"Was the chakram already in your possession when you fought the Northern Amazons?"

"Yes, Queen Melosa."

"Then, tell us, why didn't you use it against the council."

Two strokes with the whip later, the first only making light contact with the skin between Xena's shoulder blades, the second adding another horizontal welt at the small of her back, the tall

woman answered.

"I killed them all. I was a better fighter and warrior, in my mind at least. I wanted to prove to myself that I was better than all of them combined."

Xena again fell silent. She heard the crack of the whip just beneath her right ear. She felt it circling around the back of her head and another cracking sound on her left but there was no pain. "It just wouldn't have felt right. With the chakram it would have been murder."

There was a long moment of silence before the Queen raised her voice. "When you were experiencing with herbs, were you on your own or did you have some kind of teacher?"

"Her name was Perat, she was the Northern Amazon's shamaness. She was four or three years my senior but despite her youth her wisdom extended more than a lifetime or even two."

"Was Perat the only one?" Ephiny asked.

No answer. Once again, it took more than one incentive to get her to speak. The original ten lashes from the day before now barely were visible anymore; instead, there was a pattern of welts criss-crossing her back.

"No, she wasn't the only one."

The former Conqueror's body once again involuntarily jerked with the momentum.

"There was another one. Queen Cyane years earlier had her banished from the village. This woman - she only was interested in the dark side of the spiritual powers. She wanted to control them, to get them to do her bidding. She was thriving for power, power over the very souls of everything living. She spoke to the dark side of my soul and I was more than eager to listen. Her name was Alti. She told me that one day I would be able to conquer the whole world. She told me that I would become the Destroyer of Nations, the ultimate power in this world and that destroying the Northern Amazons was the first step. I wanted to believe her. She told me about the Northern tribe and Queen Cyane in the first place. And when I first set out to kill the Queen it were her directions that guided me securely into the village."

"What happened to her?"

"I'm not sure." Xena replied after the half circles on her breasts were completed to full circles. "When Cyane was dead Alti entered the clearing. She examined the dead body. Suddenly she turned around and slapped me hard across the face. She said 'I told you to leave her heart unharmed, it's useless to me now, you stupid fool.' She continued raving about how I had ruined her plans and continued insulting me. I didn't take kindly to insults, so I picked up Cyane's sword, ran her through, yanked the weapon free, and took her head off. The momentum made me turn around once and where her body should have been, there only was an almost faded column of smoke. It was as if she had vanished into thin air. I don't know if I killed her for good or if it was an illusion I beheaded."

"What happened afterwards?"

"I dropped the blade and left the funeral ground. I stumbled aimlessly through the forest only wanting to get away from the clearing as far as possible. I didn't even think of tending to my wounds.

"Killing always was intoxicating for me, it elicited a feeling of invincibility, superiority, and joy. I had expected these feelings to be multiplied tenfold after Queen Cyane's death. But I only felt numb, as if something had died inside of me. Four days later, the scouts found me unconscious at the edge of the forest and it took three more days 'til I came to my senses. More than half of the men had been killed in battle and the Northern Amazons were destroyed."

"The jury has no more questions. What about defence?" The Queen quietly asked, breaking the silence that had settled among the avidly listening Amazons.

"No, Queen Melosa."

"Prosecution?"

"Yes, my Queen. There's still something to clarify. Xena of Amphipolis, what would you do if a god gave you the power to go back in time and stop your younger self? Would you accept the offer?"

"Ten years ago there existed no power in the world that would have been able to stop me. I didn't listen to reason but to brute strength only. The only way to stop me was by killing me but I would do it in a heartbeat to save Queen Cyane and the council."

"That's all for now. Eponin, please unfasten Xena's restraints and lead her back to her chair. We're ready to hear the defending party's summation now."

"Venerable jury, the defendant's testimony made clear that there only can be one decision for you. Xena of Amphipolis is to be declared not guilty of the charge of multiple murder. She also freely admitted being guilty of sacrilegious behaviour in three cases. Xena's testimony also showed that there are extenuating circumstances, the defendant not only was under the influence of drugs, she also stood under the spell of a shamaness using black magic. Please take this into consideration when you decide upon the sentence." Ephiny sat down ignoring Xena's angry stare.

"Queen Melosa, venerable jury," Chandala began, "I stand before you not only as the prosecutor's assistant but also as an eye witness of sorts. It was me who filed the last two charges. - Ten years ago, I was the warrior's apprentice to the weapons' master of the Northern Amazons. When Xena was living with us, she spent most of her time with Queen Cyane. To me Xena and the Queen were the most beautiful women in the world, they were gorgeous, but side by side they were breathtaking. I followed them around as often as I could. I didn't even dare to look the Queen in her eyes, Xena was more accessible, and she even gave me some lessons in stealth and tracking. I had a big crush on her.

"One day I found her footsteps in the forest and decided to follow her trail. It wasn't easy but finally I stood at the edge of the funeral ground. I almost stumbled over the dead body of my mistress. I saw the two guards in the middle of the clearing and Queen Cyane with Xena's sword protruding her chest. The shock was too much for me. I fainted. When I opened my eyes again, I was lying next to the Queen on the ground. I knew that Xena had murdered them all and I vowed to Artemis that one day she would pay for her crimes.

"The other day when I saw how Xena risked her own life over and over again to fight our enemies I knew that she had the skill to kill the best fighters of the Amazon nation in fair combat. It was already too late to withdraw the charge. All I can do now is to join the plea of Xena's defender. Xena of Amphipolis is responsible for the death of Queen Cyane and the ten members of her council and the two guards but she didn't murder them. They died in a honourable fight, a death befitting an Amazon warrior."

"Xena?"

"I didn't commit murder but the sacrilege I committed is also a capital crime. There are no extenuating circumstances, venerable jury."

"The jury now will retire to the council's hut. You all will be summoned by the great horn as soon as we've come to a verdict. Anara, please see that Xena's back is tended to before you join us."

The Queen turned and left the dais, immediately followed by the others. The audience, however, only slowly dissipated. The day had brought a lot to think and to talk about.

The sun was about to set when Anara left the detention hut. Two Amazons placed a second cot directly beside Xena's, and Ephiny pushed Gabrielle's wheel chair through the door. Both women instantly were lost in each other's eyes and completely oblivious to the door being closed shut.

The weather had dramatically changed throughout the day. When Xena had been bound to the wooden structure, the first clouds began to hide the sun. The sky gradually seemed to darken with every stroke of the whip and now the first ramblings of thunder were heard. Throughout the night thunder, lightning, and cascade-like rain were fighting for supremacy but that wasn't all that kept the two women awake for the better part of the night.

"Don't be angry with Theano, my love. The forced interrogation was necessary. It always was the easiest way to find out the truth when there are no other eyewitnesses left. And I never would have told them the truth otherwise. I needed the pain." Xena quietly explained to the stubborn and still very angry young woman.

"Why, Xena? What you did wasn't this horrible in my eyes. One against thirteen sounds more than fair to me."

"I will be judged for the fight but you know as well as the jury that this isn't about the fight. Queen Cyane trusted me. She was my friend. I betrayed her friendship. The trial brought back a lot of memories and emotions, Gabrielle. Theano's whip and the pain it caused helped me not to drown in my memories and my guilt. This day at the clearing, I ended thirteen lives. I killed women who had shared their meals and their laughter with me. They shared their dreams and their traditions, their skills and their wisdom, and I repaid their kindness by killing them.

"I didn't know it then but when Queen Cyane's heart stopped beating I lost a big part of my humanity. You're the reason why I have the courage to face my past, Gab. Without your love, I never would have willingly entered Amazon territory. I now have the chance to pay for what I did."

There was a long period of silence. "I still won't forgive her. She hurt you. I could see her face; she smiled. She enjoyed hurting you. I won't forgive her."

"Please try to understand, Gabrielle. I'm glad that Theano had the strength of mind to do what she did. Every other person yielding the whip would have inflicted much more pain. Please, believe me, she didn't enjoy what she had to do."

"She smiled." The younger woman stubbornly insisted.

"She smiled because it worked. Every stroke was a sign of her love for me and as soon as I get the chance, I will thank her. If you really need someone to be angry with, be angry with me. I deserve it much more than she does. Your love was the spark that started the fire but Theano's whip kept the fire blazing. She never would do me any harm. She was my friend and protector when I was a child and she still is, Gabrielle.

"I owe her much more than my life. All these years through Theano was the one person who always got past my defences, the only person who could occasionally make me change my mind. She always was there to remind me of all the things that really count, even when my soul was all but lost to the darkness. Give her a chance, love, and I'm sure the two of you will become friends soon enough."

"I don't want to talk about her anymore, Xena. I want you to hold me tight, I want to feel your breath on my skin."

The tall woman turned half ways around, bent forwards and tenderly brushed smooth lips with her own. Gabrielle obviously needed more time to cope with this day's events. Her long arms gently slid under Gabrielle's back and limbs and she posed her on the small bed. Kneeling beside the low surface, she opened the knots holding the tunic in place with her teeth and slowly kissed her way downwards to the younger woman's waistband. Gabrielle's breath already had picked up and though Xena meanwhile didn't need any further invitation, she still questioningly looked up, asking for permission.

The waistband was loosened and Gabrielle's breeches inched down, agonisingly slow because Xena took special care to leave the still encased right leg as far as possible untouched. She was

anxious to put any kind of strain on the healing limb. The young woman was healing incredibly fast, according to Anara due to the joining with Xena's soul in the dreamscape. Still Xena insisted on being more than careful, this night she even had to slow her lover down.

They gently made love, exploring every pore of the other woman's body, licking every square inch of skin, enjoying the familiar scent and taste of the other's sex. Xena's calm confidence slowly filled the blond woman's soul, sweeping away her anxiousness about the outcome of the trial.

When dawn was breaking, Gabrielle was wrapped securely around long limbs, her head deeply snuggled in Xena's chest. She was sleeping soundly. Xena consciously took in the scent of blond hair and finally fell asleep herself.

The great horn sounded shortly before midday, blue and green eyes opened simultaneously, mirroring a strange mixture of fear, anticipation and relieve. Xena just had settled Gabrielle in the wheelchair when the door was opened. Eponin stepped in and once again fastened the cuffs around Xena's wrists. Her face was set in a warrior's mask belying the tension the rest of her body showed. To Xena it was obvious that the weapons' master wasn't at all happy about the jury's decision.

Ten candledrops later the women filling the central square got to their feet while the jury stepped on the dais. They already were wearing their ceremonial masks making it impossible to read their facial expressions. The silence became oppressive when Queen Melosa slowly rounded the jury's table and stood in front of it.

"Xena of Amphipolis, hear the jury's verdict." Xena left Ephiny's side and knelt in front of the dais. "The jury found you not guilty of murder but there also can be no doubt that you are responsible for the deaths of Queen Cyane and the members of her council. However, this responsibility does not concern Amazon law and justice. It's something you will have to live with."

The tall woman kept her eyes firmly on the ground while the familiar feeling of guilt rushed through her veins, colouring her cheeks despite her best intention to keep her emotions in check.

"The jury found you guilty of sacrilegious behaviour in three cases. You set out to kill on holy ground, so there are no extenuating circumstances. A crime such as this was unheard of until now. Neither the laws nor the history scrolls gave any indication what kind of punishment would be adequate. I went to the temple to pray for an answer but none was forthcoming.

"When I returned to the council's hut I remembered a story my grandmother once told me. A story about Queen Penthesilea and how she accidentally killed the Priestess in front of Artemis' altar with a misplaced arrow. With Queen Penthesilea being the mightiest warrior in Amazon history, later generations considered the story incredible and improbable. So, it never was entered in the history scrolls but it still lives in our legends. Are you familiar with this particular story, Xena?"

"Yes, Queen Melosa, I am." Xena's eyes made contact with Melosa's, the rest of the Queen's face still hidden behind the mask. The Queen nodded and the kneeling woman continued to speak.

"Queen Penthesilea was said to be Artemis' Chosen. The remorse and guilt she felt at the death of the priestess who also had been a childhood friend of hers began to slowly burn out her soul. She was lost in grief and self-depreciation, and stopped paying attention to what was going on in the nation. It was a time of danger and insecurities, and the council grew worried. They urged the Queen to appoint a Regent who would take care of the day to day business. Queen Penthesilea complied but she also decided that she would do penance for the death of her friend and priestess. It is said that she retreated in a sweating hut for three days and four nights. She found that she had the choice of abandoning her sisters and trying to redeem herself in the outer world or let her body pay the price."

"Considering that your sacrilege was threefold and had been committed with premeditation the punishment Queen Penthesilea imposed upon herself was modified but it will not endanger your life. Do you accept the punishment the jury found befitting your crime without exactly knowing what will happen to you or do you prefer to be banished from Amazon territory for a period of three times five years instead, after your servitude of three seasons, that is?"

"Queen Melosa, venerable jury, I'm more than honoured but I don't deserve to have a choice like that. Killing Queen Cyane and the council was one of the biggest mistakes I ever made. I'm no Amazon and I'm not of noble birth. I don't deserve to be treated as such. However, from the beginning, I was ready to pay the prize this jury would find appropriate and I am weary of running from my responsibilities. I trust the wisdom of the jury and will humbly submit to its verdict." Xena had her eyes once again on the ground.

Chapter nine: All my sins and fears to bear

"I really don't understand you. First you reject the Queen's offer to grant you an amnesty and now you miss out on the chance to leave your past behind and start a new life."

Xena smiled, she knew the question would come eventually but she wouldn't have thought possible that it really would be the first thing to cross her lover's mind.

"Seems stupid, doesn't it? Please believe me, it isn't this easy." The tall warrior visibly was searching for the right words. "Remember the day your father demanded that you once again be put in his custody. You had the chance to let me deal with him. You wouldn't have had to face him but you insisted on doing so tough we both knew in advance you would be badly shaken up by the encounter. Why?"

"It was the right thing to do, Xena. It was the only way to get rid of my past. I had to look him in the eyes. I had to know why he sold me like I was one of his sheep. I had to know why he never loved me. It was the first time I had the chance to face what had happened. I knew I was finally

free the day you first brought me to the apple tree but I only began to feel free when I faced him. However, the situations are not comparable."

"Are you sure?" The younger woman didn't answer, her eyes fixed on her hands. "Please, look at me. There's something I didn't tell the jury, about what happened after Queen Cyane's death.

"I really can't recall in which direction I stumbled but at a point I found myself once again at the funeral clearing. I don't know if it was one or two days later but the bodies still were lying as they were killed. Artemis' temple was right next to the funeral ground but it was further away from the village than it is here. Thunder was rolling not too far off. I decided to seek shelter in the temple.

"Immediately afterwards I tried to convince myself that it had been a hallucination, a fever induced dream but deep in my heart I knew that it was true.

"The doors were open and I was foolish and arrogant enough to enter. I passed the threshold and suddenly found myself in front of the altar. There was the weight of a whole mountain resting on my shoulders and I was forced to my knees. I desperately tried to get back to my feet but it didn't work. I reached for the altar stone to pull me up. My hand touched the shimmering surface and the weight on my shoulders descended deep in my heart. For the first time in years, I had a name for these feelings, feelings that since the death of my brother every once in while threatened to suffocate me.

"I always managed to ignore them, I put them away in dark corner of my mind and closed the door. This day I knew the feeling was guilt, and I felt as helpless as never before. My lips didn't move but my mind cried out, loud, 'Why don't you kill me, Artemis, patron goddess of the Amazon nation? Kill me to end the cycle of hatred.'

"I fell back to my knees, the tips of my fingers still touching the altar. My whole body was shaking with sobs but there was not a single tear in my eyes. Suddenly the hair at the nape of my neck stood at attention but the feeling subsided as quick as it came. There was something like a pillar of light at my left. I tried to see it more clearly and soon was sure that it was a woman. With all the light surrounding her, I wasn't able to discern her features but I'm sure that it was the Goddess of the Hunt herself.

"I felt comfortable in her presence and then there was a voice in my head. It was unfamiliar; unlike everything I ever had heard before but at the same time, it was as if it always had been a part of me. I still can't explain it.

"The voice said. 'You now owe a debt of life, young warrior. This isn't the way your life was supposed to be. You still have a chance. One day you will return to your roots, you will return to what should have been from the beginning and then you will get the chance to redeem yourself. Don't waste the opportunity. You will be punished for what you did to my sisters, and the punishment will be welcomed. You will loose the life you now long for but the ice that encases your heart will melt and you will..."

"...find the other half of your soul." The young woman sitting next to Xena put an arm around the tall warrior trying to pull her as close as possible. "The ice that now encases your heart will melt and you will find the other half of your soul. You will find a love so fulfilling and perfect it will sweep away all your fears and memories of darkness. That's what the voice in Athena's temple said when I begged her to take my life before once again being sold. Do you think that they already knew about us?"

"I don't know, my love. I still can't make any sense of what I experienced this day. Part of me has a great deal of doubt that the gods really have in mind the best for humankind whenever they interfere with mortal lives. I also know that I didn't feel threatened by the voice and what it said. I rather felt comforted. It is said that Artemis and Athena never stopped being lovers but I don't see why any of them should be interested in you and me. However, I knew that you are the other side of my soul since I first looked in your eyes though I don't know why someone as pure and kind as you are should find its completion in someone as tainted and dark as me. When I found you everything became possible, and this punishment, though it may sound cruel, is my chance to take some of the weight off my heart."

Gabrielle didn't answer immediately, she turned her head towards the blue orbs of her companion and studied them for almost a quarter of a candelmark. Part of Xena was squirming under the scrutiny, the bigger part, however, was feeling secure, loved, and cherished.

During their voyage to her hometown, Cyrene's escort that had started out with eight men had almost doubled in size. All of them were veterans from one or the other of Xena's campaigns. All of them seemed to care deeply for her daughter; they talked about her kindness when caring for the injured, her bravery in the midst of a battle, and her sense of justice. They told her that she never asked of her men what she wasn't ready to do herself, that she not only was a brilliant strategist and a great warrior in her own right but that she was leading the army with her personality, her passion for life. They told her that she always cared about her men first before seeing to her own needs.

The stories these men told reminded her of someone she thought had died together with her younger brother. Reflections of the past appeared unbidden before her mind's eye.

It had been during the coldest winter she ever had lived through. The village had pooled their resources - and in contrast to other settlements, no one had perished by cold or famine, yet. One moon before spring solstice the weather changed but it only was a short respite, and one that spoiled a considerable part of their provisions by thawing meat and vegetables alike. The frost returned and the elders had to cut short the daily rations for each member of the community.

Having acted like a caged animal for the better part of a half moon, one day Xena simply disappeared. Cyrene was out of her mind with worry. The short note her stubborn daughter had left behind couldn't really reassure her, and on top of it all, her sons insisted on leaving the village to follow their sister's trail. Three days later, she stumbled into the inn, totally exhausted with a great buck draped around her shoulders. She collapsed on the floor but managed to tell her

brothers that there were three more about two candlemarks walk away to the north. Enough to sustain the village for a long time.

She never knew what exactly Xena had to do to hunt her game down and get them this close to the village. With her fourteen summers her daughter had done what the seasoned hunters of the village hadn't dared to even try; she had risked her life, alone in the cold, to contribute to the well-fare of her village but she never saw it as something special...

Cyrene tried to shake herself out of the realm of her memories. All she had had to experience lately was just too confusing. Despising her daughter for becoming the Conqueror simply was easier but it wasn't as easy as it had been all these years long. She began to find a kernel of truth in the exuberant stories the men were telling.

It had been decided that she would enter the village only with Theodorus, Palemon, and Meleager as an escort. The others would be waiting nearby. The town seemed unchanged; it was well kept and peaceful. Everything seemed as it had been two and a half years ago, it was an eerie and unsettling feeling. Had she been honest with herself she would have recognised these feelings as disappointment. In Corinth, her daily routine had been a far cry from the active life of an innkeeper. Though she quickly had found herself something to do by helping in the central kitchen set up to feed the poor and homeless, it still was nothing compared to the challenge of organising supplies, cooking and keeping the often drunken crowd in hand. A small voice in the back of her heart kept nagging that a change as significant as her forced move to Corinth should have left at least some sort of scar visible in the community she had spend the better part of her life in.

They dismounted in front of the inn, her inn, which also seemed to be utterly unchanged. The voices and laughter of the midday crowd wafted through the open windows and Cyrene recognised the distinct smell of heavily spiced venison stew, very close to the recipe she used to use but not quite the same. She hesitated in front of the main entrance, and then turned her steps to the rear door that led directly into her kitchen and to the storing rooms. She entered without knocking, surprised to see a young, rather dark skinned woman labouring behind her stove in the middle of the spacious room. She was about her own height with eyes like coal casting her an irritated glance. Her facial expression suddenly changed when she spotted the large man stepping over the threshold.

"Meleager, what are you doing here. We didn't expect you for at least another two moons. I'm so happy you could make it earlier. Reena will be out of her mind seeing her favourite uncle." The young woman said, her voice clear, with a very uncommon but pleasant melody to it. She rushed past the older woman and wrapped her arms securely around the tall man's waist squeezing him tight.

"Shirin, I'm happy to see you so well but unfortunately, I'm not here for a vacation. A lot of things are about to change at the moment but before we talk business let me introduce you to my companion. - Shirin, this is Cyrene, the owner of this inn. - Cyrene, this is Shirin, she and her husband, Tarik, are the ones I told you about not too long ago. They look after your inn as long

as you live in Corinth."

There was a shadow quickly crossing the young woman's face but then she smiled at Cyrene and shook her outstretched hand. "Cyrene, the village will be happy to have you back. The last two and a half years we've heard a lot about you and your family. I hope you give my husband and me some time to adjust to the transition with the inn."

"What are you talking about? Though it feels really strange, it's no longer my inn."

"I should have told you in advance, Cyrene," Meleager interferred. "The inn is still yours and will always be. Tarik and Shirin are here to run it in your absence, they never would take it from you."

"Your rooms at the first floor are waiting for you. But I'm afraid it will take some time for us to accommodate to the fact that it's not longer us who is in charge - that is if you intend in keeping us on your payroll."

"My rooms?"

"Xe..., the General insisted that they should be kept ready for you. She told us that she would send a warning before your return, to smooth things down."

"Shirin, I won't drive you out of your home, and I don't intend to come back, not yet. We're here to gather some supplies, herbs and stuff, that's all. Perhaps it would be better if Meleager filled you in on all the things that have happened the last moon or two. If you don't mind I'll take care of the kitchen and the midday meal as long as the two of you are talking - and meanwhile I'll have something to eat for myself, Palemon and Theodorus."

"They're both here?" Meleager nodded. "And the General is not?" The warrior shook his head to confirm. "Than there must really be something important going on."

"I would be grateful if you could take over Cyrene. I'll be back as soon as possible. You'll find that I altered some of your recipes slightly by using herbs from my ho... the country I was born. I hope you don't mind too much."

After the midday guests had gone, Tarik closed the inn for the day. There simply was too much to discuss to also worry about the customers and their needs. The news of Cyrene's return had spread through the village like a wildfire and they had no choice than to inform the elder of the things that had happened at Corinth.

The gray haired woman had found all of the personal belongings she had left behind all these years back untouched, and had spent the afternoon candlemarks not occupied with conversations with her former neighbours sorting through the herb stock. She had learned that Xena had ordered to leave everything as she was used to. Part of this arrangement was that the new innkeepers didn't live-in but had their own cabin nearby. Her daughter also had instructed Shirin

in taking care of the herb plantation in the forest, so she didn't have to deal with over-aged supplies. The evening found her in the main room of the inn in front of a mug of mulled cider listening to a story she never would have given any credence to, were it not for the people telling it.

Her question should have been easy to answer but what the young couple sitting in front of her had to say was everything but a simple tale. Tarik was almost half a head shorter than Palemon who quietly was sitting at her side. He had an irresistible smile that lit up his eyes giving everyone around the impression that he never had known any hardship or pain of any kind.

"The first time I saw the General was in the healer's tent just outside of the Persian capital, and as I learned later a full day after the all-decisive battle. I could see a slender hand descending upon the arm holding the saw to cut off my right leg. A deep but definitively female voice told him to stop, and then there were the most intense eyes I ever saw looking straight into my soul. At the time I didn't know how to speak your language and none of the other healers and attendants even tried to make me understand what was about to happen. There was the hint of a smile in her eyes but her expression was serious. Weighing every word carefully and from time to time searching for the right expression she talked to me - in my native tongue. She told me that my left leg was shattered beneath the knee. She told me that to save my life the best thing to do would be to cut it off right now. She also told me that if I were ready to endure a lot of pain and have a lot of patience that she could try to keep the leg whole. There would be a limp and she couldn't guarantee that I survived the healing but I took the chance. She saved my leg and by now, I'm only limping after a very long day. But my leg and my life aren't the only things I owe to the General."

"Without her we never would have found each other again, without her we wouldn't have a daughter to love and to cherish." Shirin continued the tale. "The General's army stayed at the capital for more than a moon and Tarik slowly began to regain his strength. He never wanted to join the army but my father had him recruited against his will. Tarik only was a carpenter and woodcarver still trying to establish his own shop. My father never accepted him and wanted to marry me off to a man more to his liking, a rich merchant, more than forty years my senior. The marriage was arranged as soon as my beloved was out of the picture. About ten days before the bride prize should be paid my parents discovered that I was with child, Tarik's child. The marriage was cancelled and my father disowned me."

She fell silent, an expression halfway between sadness and contempt crossing her dark eyes. Shirin took a deep breath sensing the comforting hand of her husband on her knee under the table.

"By law he could have tossed me out on the street with nothing but my clothes on - but he didn't. He told me that I was nothing but a whore and that this was how I should live from now on. He told me that he lost a lot of money because of me and that I would spend the rest of my life to repay him. He bound my hands and one of his servants almost dragged me to another part of the town, a quarter I only had heard about before. From this day on, I spend my days in a room barely big enough for a bed. Food and drink reached me through a hole in the wall. There was a small window next to the ceiling. I could see the days pass by but it was too far up to allow a

look outside. All night through I could hear the noises coming from the outside, and I knew that I really was in a whorehouse. And though I never saw a living soul, I also knew that they would come and take my child when it was time and then would force me to do their bidding. There was nothing to hope for and no chance for escape. But still, the life growing inside of me wouldn't hear of defeat. So, I continued hoping.

"As soon as Tarik was better he talked one of his new Greek comrades to come looking for me at my father's house. He was lucky and ran into my former maid. She told him what had happened but she didn't know exactly where I was, and if I was still alive. What happened next is better be told by Meleager or Palemon."

"My gut wound was healing rather fast and I could get up soon. When I returned with my news to Tarik's bedside, the lass nearly cracked. Had he told me what Shirin really meant to him, I never would have told him the whole truth. As it turned out it was a good thing, I did. The whole day he tried to get up and when dusk was near he finally got to his feet when the healer's weren't paying attention and ran straight into the General."

"Yeah, I thought I collided with a solid tree trunk when I crashed into her. She grabbed me by my shirt, lifted me in her arms, and brought me back to bad as if I were nothing but a half-grown boy. I could see the anger in her eyes, and I thought she would kill me for trying to escape. So, all I could think of doing was to whisper that I would have come back. She answered that this wasn't true. Her voice was cold with rage. She said that I would have died because the splints weren't made to support my body's weight but to hold the bones in place. Whatever my face told her then it softened her up. She told me that I never would have been able to leave the camp undetected and that I was risking my life senselessly. It still took some prodding but I told her the whole story. She ordered me to stay put and said that she would take care of everything."

"She signalled for me to follow her outside where she first scolded me for irresponsibly running around alone in the city and that I wasn't strong enough yet to ward off an attacker." Meleager continued the story. "Then she called for Palemon, Marcos and the rest of her personal guard she surrounded herself with when venturing to the palace and told me to lead her to Shirin's house. She had to break all of the father's fingers to get the information she wanted. We took off towards a cheap whorehouse at the east of the capital. The General didn't even bother to ask for Shirin's whereabouts but had us searching the whole building stirring up the clients. When I found her she was in labour, and to me it didn't look too good."

"Every time I felt a contraction I thought I would die, I didn't but the overall pain consuming my body was far worse. I think it was early in the evening, usually the house was rather quiet at this time of the day but now through the pain I could hear cries and doors crashing against the walls and deep voices barking orders. When the door to my cell was kicked open, there was a tall man filling almost the entire frame but I was too weak to worry. Only a few heartbeats later, I felt a cool hand on my forehead and I heard someone whisper that everything would be all right and that Tarik was alive. Then the same voice began to shout orders and out of nowhere there was hot water and clean towels. It took me some time to see that the stranger with the two swords strapped around the waist was a woman and that she knew better than I did what was happening and what was wrong. She continued to bark orders all the while exploring my swollen belly and

cramped nether region carefully with her hands. There were calluses at her fingers but her touch was soft, barely discernible and my fears began to ebb away.

"She ordered the men to guard the door and turned around. When the next contraction hit she held my hand and helped me to breathe. She told me, the baby hadn't turned around yet - and what she would have to do about it. She held my hand and talked to me the whole night through. Without her, my daughter never would have been born and I would have died also. She took us back to her camp on a litter. There was a tent set aside the healer's hut and after we had settled another litter was brought in."

"When the General began to prepare for the trip back to Greece she asked us what we would like to do." The dark skinned man at Shirin's left said. "I knew that it would be impossible to stay in a town where her father still held too much power. We talked about it and asked to go with the General to Corinth. Shirin was helping in the kitchen a few candlemarks a day and I was assigned to deal with the Persian emissaries and correspondence aside from working as a woodcarver. When the General began to prepare for the campaign against the Romans, she sent my family to Amphipolis. She said it wasn't safe in the capital any longer."

"If you don't mind our company we will come with you to the Amazons. She is beginning a new life there, a life with peace and love she more than deserves to lead. The people who care about her should be part of this."

Cyrene was confused, to say the least. There were more and more questions accumulating in her mind the longer this journey took, questions only her daughter would be able to answer. "Are you really sure that you want to leave your home without knowing what the next day will bring for you and your child?"

"Yes, Cyrene, we are sure. We love the inn and the people in the village. They never showed us the contempt some of the nobles in Corinth had for us, especially when Xena invited us to her table for official dinners. But both of us hoped that one day she would call us back to the palace. So, yes, it is worth the risk. Reena can't wait to see her again."

"How comes that you are one of the few people to call Xena by her name?"

"When she birthed my child she told me it would be easier this way, and when we were back in Greece she told me to keep it up. She said that she needed the company of at least a few people handling her like a human being and not listening to her reputation."

Three days later Cyrene's party once again set out. The packing mules had been replaced by three wagons with supplies, and to Palemon's dismay they were slowed down, not much but he also didn't know what timetable he had to race against. To be sincere he also didn't know what Cyrene possibly could do to dissuade the Amazons should they decide to execute the General.

Gabrielle was securely nestled in the circle of Xena's long arms, her right leg with the new, much

lighter and smaller splints was pinning the taller woman to the soft mattress. She wasn't yet allowed to leave the wheelchair but now she at least was able to bend her knee and start on really exercising her muscles. Her eyes were closed tight and she was wide-awake. She just wasn't ready to face reality.

It was the day after the jury's judgement. The two of them had spent the day as they had finished the last, with lots of talking and making love. The new splints Anara had insisted on putting on this morning enabled her to take a more active role in their play. During the long nights alone in the healer's hut she not only had missed Xena's embrace to keep the nightmares at bay, she also longed for the unique feeling of Xena's wet centre under her tongue, the blissful expression on the older woman's face when coaxing her to multiple orgasms. The day before she wasn't able to stop the feeling of having to learn about her lover's body all over again. It wasn't at all true but when they went to the dining hall to get their midday meal, she suddenly understood why she was feeling this way.

There was a playfulness emanating from the tall warrior Gabrielle only knew from rare private moments with her. This wasn't the woman able to face down an assembly of grown battle-hardened men by raising an eyebrow. This wasn't the woman whose smile could freeze an entire army in horror. This wasn't the ruthless murderer who first killed, and asked questions later. Though she didn't let her guard down completely Xena was relaxed. What she had said the day before was true; it was as if a weight had been lifted off her shoulders.

Some candelights ago, the tall woman fell asleep but Gabrielle was too anxious to follow her example despite her newfound insight in her lover's feelings. It was already late afternoon and soon Xena would be escorted to the temple of Artemis. The young woman's stomach clenched at the thought of what would happen the next morning and she couldn't help the goose bumps crawling over her skin. She instinctively snuggled closer, holding tight.

She felt Xena's lips on the top of her head, her voice whispering. "Everything will be all right, love."

"I'm so afraid for you, Xe. I don't want it to happen, I don't want you to hurt."

"I know, my love, but it's the right thing to do." There was a long moment of silence before Xena continued. "I know you're not comfortable with my decision but if you really think you can't live with it, I'll go back on my word. You know that I want to scale the balances with the Amazons but you're far more important."

"You really would do this for me?"

Xena slowly nodded but there also was a great sadness in her eyes.

"I love you, Xe, but you have to follow your heart and your conscience. I may not like it, and I really don't but as long as you are sure that this has to be done I'll be by your side."

"So, I guess you won't consider staying in the village tomorrow. You don't have to watch."

"Don't, Xena! I'll be by your side, no matter what. I won't let you face them alone... And they better don't even attempt to make any weird remarks or else I'll... I'll..."

"You have my permission to roll them over with your wheelchair. But be assured, they won't, Gabrielle," Both women turned their heads to see Queen Melosa casually leaning on the windowsill. "Some of my sisters may only come out of curiosity but the better part will be there out of respect for someone who has the courage not to take the easier way out. The trial and the way Xena held her own in the forced interrogation have effectively silenced the few critics left after the fight. I'm sorry to intrude, Gabrielle, but it's time for the ritual bath."

"I have to be at the temple at sunset. Queen Melosa is right. Please try to get some sleep, Gab. Tomorrow Solari and Ephiny will help you to get to the temple in time. I love you."

Xena stood, put on her sandals, and placed tender kisses on the blond woman's forehead, her eyes, and her mouth. She jumped out of the window and was gone.

"I love you too, Xe." Gabrielle said to the empty room. She snuggled deeper under the blanket, hugging the pillow, and inhaled the scent and warmth of the others woman's body still lingering there. She closed her eyes, picturing in her mind what now was happening some hundred paces away. Only this morning while Anara was changing her splints and tending to Xena's back the Queen had thoroughly explained the proceedings.

The bathing area now was empty except for Xena and Queen Melosa. Usually at this time of the day, before the evening meal, there was a large crowd using the facilities. This day Xena would not simply take a bath, Melosa in her role as the priestess of Artemis would conduct a purification ritual: beginning with cold ablutions, the main part consisted in a massage with a slightly rough textured cream peeling away the outermost layer of Xena's skin. After residual cream had been washed away with more cold water the tall woman would put on a set of plain Amazon leathers, the one's she had been wearing during the summer festival. She would follow the Queen to the temple where she had to spend the night. Queen Melosa had told her that this would give her lover the chance to meditate and pray - to put her in the right frame of mind.

Gabrielle tried to stop her mind from anticipating further, from what would happen some time after sunrise - without great success. The soft mattress became increasingly uncomfortable, and the young woman grew increasingly restless. Meanwhile it was dark outside, she was well aware that Xena wanted her not to get out of bed on her own. She all but had made the promise to wait for Ephiny and Solari to help her. Gabrielle also knew that she never would be able to sleep.

It took her almost one and a half candlemark to get ready and lift her body into the chair, and another half candlemark to open the door and roll out of the hut. She was lucky, there already were enough stars in the sky to let her easily find the way to the temple. This way at least she would be as close to her lover as possible. She stayed at the edge of the clearing, longingly looking towards the steps to Artemis' temple. There was enough light to clearly see the outlines of the big statue inside, and she was sure to also be able to discern Xena's lean body in front of the altar.

Alas! she wasn't able to make out if Xena was praying or meditating. One day when the tall woman gave her a lesson in meditation, she had told her that these techniques were not only useful to clear one's mind. She had told her the story of a master of meditation who was able to escape captivity by reducing his heartbeats and making his guards believe that he already was dead. They also could be used to reduce the sensibility to pain or to increase the body's ability to heal. Xena could use them to make her ordeal more bearable.

"She won't do it, Gabrielle."

The young woman turned around as fast as possible and found herself facing Xena's prosecutor. She still was angry with the woman but she couldn't help asking. "What are you talking about?"

"She won't use her spiritual powers to make this easier but she also won't use them to make it more difficult or more painful."

"The meditation techniques, how can you be so sure? How did you know what I was thinking about?"

"You love her, you're in love with her. Your face was easy to read, little one. Her sense of integrity and honour wouldn't allow either."

"Don't call me 'little one'. She told me what it means, and you don't have the right to call me thus'. If it were up to me you even wouldn't be allowed to use it for her." The blonde angrily retorted. "She loves you, and you hurt her."

"So, you're still mad at me. She told me you would be - and I really do understand your feelings. I probably would feel the same if our roles were reversed."

"There's rain in the air, we should go back to the village. Queen Melosa is with her; she will keep an eye on Xena all through the night. There's nothing we can do right now. Let's go back to your hut and have a talk."

The young woman didn't answer immediately; the older one let her take her time. "She told me that for a long time you were her light, that you gave voice to her heart while her soul was captured by darkness. She told me that since defeating Cortese you carried the voice of reason and humanity."

"She also said that the forced interrogation was necessary to break through the barriers she keeps her memories and emotions under. So, I guess, somehow, I owe you this talk."

Meanwhile Xena was on her knees in front of the altar. Her sandals were just outside the entrance, and her weight was resting on her heels. She resisted the urge to pray or meditate and concentrated instead on reviewing the last night she had spent in Artemis' temple. Then she had been kneeling on the left side of the altar as befitted an uninitiated assistant, and the Queen who

this night was sitting on the right side had been in front of it.

She had tried to act as if on night watch in the forest with all her senses concentrated on external stimuli but it hadn't worked. Instead, she helplessly watched as wave after wave of images rolled through her mind. At first, there had been the far too familiar images of dead bodies, burning houses, and deadly wounded crying out in pain and fear. She had seen all the things she had done over the years and regretted at one point or the other: Queen Cyane's death, the battles against the Centaurs, Borias' lifeless body, the unconcealed hatred in Kaleipus' eyes. Just remembering these things she could feel her grip on her emotions lessening.

The images she consciously had recalled now came seemingly of their own accord. Like the last time they brought back memories of happier times: Her younger self trying to jump a ravine. The first time she mastered riding the big black stallion even the most skilled of her fellow villagers wasn't able to approach. Lying in the grass with Lyceus while searching pictures in the clouds or the stars. The first buck she hunted down on her own, field dressed, and brought back to the inn. Many happy memories even from the time of darkness.

The last sequel of images she had seen the first night had been centred entirely on Gabrielle. It was then that she knew for certain that there was something to live for and that she had to survive the trial. That's why she agreed to answer Ephiny's questions, and she really had tried her best but sometimes it was just too hard and too shameful to open the doors to certain memories.

The last time the images had stopped there, not this night though. This night she saw a tall girl with jet-black hair, a summer dress ripped to pieces at the front showing a collection of bruises, both old and new ones, and bite marks. In her hand, she had a red-hot iron bar but she didn't feel the heat. Her almost lifeless eyes were fixed to a body in front of her, the body of a bearded man about seven feet tall with broad shoulders and very well muscled lying in a pool of blood on the ground.

Xena heard herself thinking. 'No, I don't want to see this.' But the image in her head didn't go away. When finally the adults found the girl, the iron bar had already cooled down and attached itself to her hand. The reeve tried to take it from her but the skin tore from the flesh and the pain let her snap back to reality. The marks on her body told the elders enough to close the case as self-defence, and in a way, it was. Her body healed but it took moons for her eyes to once again reflect life and joy.

The tall warrior physically was shaking when she thought about the moon and a half before and the moons after his death. She knew that she had to get back some semblance of control and began to take deep calming breaths.

Finally, these memories faded away - but only to be replaced by another dead body: The tear stained face of a very young woman was looking in open but unseeing eyes, trying to wrap her mind around the unbelievable, the one thing she never had taken into consideration when organising the defence of their home town.

Cortese and his men were on the run, all of them except for the wounded and the dead, the

village was save. She had turned around to share their triumph with her younger brother when he suddenly dropped to his knees, an arrowhead protruding his chest. Acting on instinct alone she threw her sword at his already injured attacker and caught Lyceus collapsing body in her arms. On his face was no pain, not even surprise. It still reflected youthful joy, the glory of having defended his home at the age of thirteen, of finally having proven himself as a man.

The images shifted, and Xena now was looking at her own body, at her younger self. Silent tears were running down her cheeks, she made no sound at all, no sobs, no wailing, no cursing, just a seemingly never-ending flow of salty water. When the rest of her improvised militia returned from their pursuit of the enemy, they tried to take care of his body.

One of the older men knelt down and closed his eyes. The young woman slowly looked up. Her sky blue eyes were dark and cold. She cradled the corpse in her arms, his light brown hair resting at her shoulder. She slowly stood holding onto him like a mother would to her sleeping child. She raised her voice and the victory drunken crowd in front of her fell silent. She told them that they had done a great job at defending Amphipolis. But she also told them that their job wasn't finished yet, that it was their duty to keep the village save not only now but for years to come. She told them that they not only had to do this for the sake of their families but also for the memory of the purest and the most brave of them all. 'His death shall not be in vain.'

The tall youngster carried her brother the two hundred paces to her mother's inn and gently lowered him on her bed. She reappeared and went to retrieve her sword from the body of his murderer. She yanked it free, disregarding his faint breathing. All her strength was put in a single blow, severing his head. She impaled the head on a spear and planted the spear in front of the inn.

Xena knew exactly what she had been feeling then. She knew of the anger and hatred bit by bit swallowing her guilt and grief, leading her from protector to warlord to conqueror, from village girl to soldier to murderer. But now it was as if she were observing a complete stranger. She tried to find these feelings in her heart now but they were simply not there. Yes, there was grief and regret that her kind-hearted, beautiful brother didn't have the chance to grow into a strong, caring man but there was no hatred, no self-loathing, and no numbness. She continued to examine her emotions and finally had to concede that it wasn't something new she was feeling, until now she simply hadn't been able to acknowledge it.

For the first time since her vigil had begun, she raised her eyes to the statue of Artemis dominating the hall. She closed her eyes for a long heartbeat and let her mind speak.

'Artemis! Goddess of the hunt and the moon, Protector of the Amazon nation! You know I don't speak kindly of most of the Gods and I usually speak to only one, the One who was before Zeus and Cronos, the One who always will be. My prayers go to her because she isn't known for her interference in the life of mortals.

'When my brother died I was weak and I embraced the darkness that always has been a part of me. It dominated everything I did, everything I thought. I didn't want to accept it's hold on me,

my pride wouldn't allow it. Now I know that it is a part of what, of who I am. I am a fighter, a warrior; whenever I kill, the darkness grows.

'The darkness probably never will go away completely but without my fighting abilities I also won't succumb to it a second time. Please take the....'

There was a noise as if thunder was exploding directly in front of her, a blue light wrapped itself around the statue and lent her a semblance of life. The green gems her eyes were made of seemed to sparkle and a familiar voice echoed in her heart.

'No, Xena, it took you long enough to finally choose the way that was meant to be yours from the beginning. Today and the moons to come you will atone for the crimes committed against the Amazon nation but this only is the beginning. Assuring the safety of Greece is your destiny but until now, you only guarded your home land, your heritage against external evil. It is time for you to fight the internal enemy. You are a fighter and you always will be. You will need your weapons and all of your fighting skills in the years to come, not only in physical battles. The strength of your mind and your heart will be as important as the power of your sword arm or the sureness of your aim. Remember what the masked warrior taught to you.'

'I don't deserve that you speak to me, Goddess.'

'No, you don't - not yet. Some day in the future you will understand. I won't do anything that might endanger your destiny but I will grant you a wish, to you personally, Gabrielle and Thania must heal in their own time.'

'You know my thoughts well.' Xena had the impression that the statue was smiling. 'I'm healing faster than any other mortal I ever saw. The punishment won't be as hard on me as it should be. Could you take this away and give it back when I've redeemed myself in your eyes, Artemis?'

'Your ability to heal fast is as much a part of you as your fighting skills. Gods only can heal or condemn with the blessings of Athena or Apollo. I can't make any promises but I'll try.'

'Thank you, Artemis.' Xena's mind answered and while she closed her eyes, the light in the temple returned to its usual nightly shade.

The tall woman heard and sensed the forest surrounding the temple slowly awakening to a new day though dawn was still another half candelmark away. She knew she should be worried about the conversation her young lover and her oldest friend were probably still engaged in. She should worry if the goddess would grant her wish and about how Gabrielle would react to the news. She should be worried about the moons to come and her unique position amongst the Amazon nation. She should worry about the future of Greece, about what the Goddess meant when she told her about the internal enemy. Instead, she felt calm and surprisingly well rested.

Xena could hear the steady rhythm of Queen Melosa's breathing, indicating that she still was deep in prayer. She could feel the sun rising behind her back and without moving a muscle she

dedicated a prayer of her own to Artemis and to the one who was first and always will be. She still was kneeling in front of the altar when the first Amazons were arriving at the temple clearing. She recognised the voices of some of the royal guards, obviously sent in advance to keep the other spectators some paces away from the temple steps to make sure that there was enough space to accommodate the jury as the official witnesses of Xena's punishment. There were more and more people coming near but only when her ears recognised the distinct scratching of wheels on the hard ground she slowly opened her eyes.

When Queen Melosa squeezed her shoulder, she stood, fastened the thongs keeping the sandals in place, and left the temple. Every single Amazon not on guard duty was standing in expectant silence with the jury, Ephiny, Gabrielle, Theano, and Chandala in the front row. Xena descended the seven stairs to ground level, turned around and knelt on her right knee. Melosa was still at the top, an unrolled scroll in her hands. The whole assembly bowed their heads when she raised her voice.

"I am Melosa, priestess of Artemis, I am Melosa, Queen of the Amazon nation by right of birth and mutual consent. I greet all of you my sisters, you who have come here to witness justice satisfied.

"Xena of Amphipolis, you were found guilty of sacrilegious behaviour in three cases. Every case will be punished separately. You will receive three sets of fifty strokes with a single tail whip on your back, and twenty more for one of the Amazons you killed on sacred ground was a Queen. Only strokes that break the skin will be counted. There will be a period of recuperation of a full moon between each set, and you will stay a slave to the Amazon nation until the last stroke lands on your skin. Are you ready to submit to Amazon justice?"

"Yes, Queen Melosa. I choose Theano as my assistant."

This was a surprise not only for the audiences but also to the Queen. "I'm sorry, Xena, I'm not able to approve of your choice. The assistant has to be a relative or a bond mate. In your case only the third option is left, the priestess herself."

The kneeling woman turned her head to Theano who took three steps forward, smiled and nodded. "Queen Melosa, Theano is part of my family. She is my second mother."

The astonishment on Melosa's face now was clearly visible but at the same time, many things suddenly began to make sense. "Do you accept the culprit's choice, Theano?"

"Yes, Queen Melosa, I do."

Melosa nodded her agreement and told Eponin to begin. The weapons' master gave a pair of fur-lined cuffs to the older Amazon that fitted around Xena's wrists without even a tenth of an inch give. The raven-haired woman climbed the stairs and knelt on the stony ground between two pillars in front of the temple entrance. Sturdy leather thongs were fastened at the cuffs and wrought tightly around each pillar stretching Xena's arms as far as possible. The leather straps holding her top were unlaced and a great white towel tied around her waist. Theano would count

the strokes and make sure that she didn't pass out in the process.

Eponin was still standing in front of the stairs but instead of uncoiling the whip she laid it down on the first step went up to Xena and knelt in front of her. "Xena, I see you as a friend but the law doesn't leave me any choice in the matter. Please forgive me what I have the duty to do."

"There's nothing to forgive, weapons' master. You are a friend to me, too, now more than ever. I would be honoured if you could see your duty also as a personal favour for me."

"Thank you, my friend."

The Amazon returned to her assigned place and put to use what she only recently had learned from the woman now under her lash.

"Fifteen."

Theano requested a break. Drops of blood were colouring the towel around Xena's hips. The lash not only had drawn blood every time but also opened up some of the welts from the forced interrogation. Beads of sweat already were covering the rest of the bound woman's skin and the older Amazon gently wiped them away from her face. She whispered in her ear.

"There's no shame in screaming, little one. It won't change their respect for you and it won't change Gabrielle's love."

Xena managed a small smile and answered. "Not yet, Theano. I have to do this my way."

The whipping continued.

"Twenty-five."

"Twenty-nine."

At the thirty-third stroke, the lawyer called another time-out. To the untrained eye, Xena's back already was a bloody mess but she yet had to utter a single scream or moan. There were tears silently running down her cheeks, and Theano had to force the tip of a water skin between her clenched teeth.

"Drink, Xena. Only seventeen more to go. I know you can do it, little one." She made sure that Xena's long black hair didn't accidentally touch her back, gave her a kiss on the forehead and signalled to Eponin to continue. She stayed in front of the younger warrior, holding Xena's pain-filled blue eyes with her own.

"Forty-nine."

The bound woman screamed, an earth-shattering scream, part pain, and part anger but when the

last stroke hit its target, she abruptly fell silent. When her wrists were simultaneously uncuffed by the Queen and the weapons' master she collapsed against Theano's chest who helped her to her feet as gently as possible. Xena took a couple of deep breaths trying to tone out the pain radiating from her back and through her body to the very end of her hair. She slowly steadied herself and made small steps to the altar where she bent her knee and whispered 'Thank you, Artemis.'

Xena descended the stairs in slow motion and went directly to Gabrielle. The young woman was very pale and she visibly had trouble to keep her tears in check. Once again, she went down on her right knee, painfully leaned forward, and kissed her.

"I love you, Gabrielle. All the time, I could feel your eyes on me, and the power of your love gave me strength. You are the light in my darkness; you hold my soul. Being with me makes your life dangerous; being with me may even threaten your soul. I don't know what the future will bring but I know that I can't imagine living my life without you. It would be more appropriate to wait but I simply have to ask now. Will you become my wife, will you join your life with mine 'til death will part us as soon as I am a free woman once again?"

The blond woman was speechless, never before Xena had given voice to her feelings in public, and now this!! She kissed her back, looked deep in her lover's eyes, and answered. "Yes, Xe, I will. - But now we should go back to the village where Anara can see to your back."

Xena smiled and took the first two steps towards the edge of the clearing when a dizzy spell hit her. Immediately Theano was at her side. "You have nothing to prove, Xena."

"Thank you for looking out for me, my second mother."

"Any time, little one."

"Eponin, my friend, I could use another helping hand to get back to the village."

The weapons' master smiled a relieved smile, draped Xena's arm around her shoulders, and the threesome slowly navigated through the easily parting crowd with Gabrielle, Ephiny, Melosa and the rest of the jury following close behind.

THE END

(for now)

Yes, there's a sequel brewing in my mind, there simply are too many questions left unanswered: Will the governing council in Corinth persevere and will they be able to hold Greece together without Xena at the helm? When will Najara be back to cause more trouble, and will the djinn this time be at her side? What will become of Xena's soldiers? What will happen when Cyrene

finally arrives at the Amazon village? Will Thania ever get to know why Eponin didn't tell her the truth from the beginning and will the weapons' master officially accept the Queen's love? What is the secret surrounding Gabrielle's birth and heritage or the mystery about Akyra's past? Will Alti be back soon? What has become of Terreis? I'm sure you can think of a lot more things you'd like to know. Feel free to let me know.

Now I have answers to some of these questions and other loose ends but I don't know if I ever will put them to words. So, let me know what you thought of the story so far. I'm open for praise and criticism alike. I don't shoot flaming arrows at constructive criticism but purely homophobic remarks may receive a good portion of verbal Greek fire.

I'm expecting your comments under romansilence@yahoo.de

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