

~ Trials, Challenges and Chances ~

by romansilence

Disclaimer 1: No, and we all know it. Xena, Gabrielle, and the Amazons don't belong to me but to TPTB at Renaissance Pictures and Universal Studios. I only borrow them, no copyright infringement is intended, no profit will be made.

Disclaimer 2: This story deals with adult women in love with each other, and going to great lengths to be together, however, this time there's no sex. If you're not old enough or it's illegal where you live go away. If it bothers you, change your attitude. There's also some violence, some hurt and angst, and elements of dominance and discipline, consensual of course.

Disclaimer 3: Timeline; this story takes place shortly after the episode 'Adventures in the Sin Trade' and Xena's reunion with Gabrielle at the beginning of season 4. It's a stand alone piece, and has nothing to do with my other stories, 'Conqueror and Amazon' or 'The Chosen's Prerogative'. - This is a rather dark piece and I'm well aware that this isn't my usual stuff, but I had to get it out of my system. And after it was written, I decided to share my twisted fantasies.

Disclaimer 4: This story has two endings because I couldn't decide which one I liked better. Let me know what you think about it.

Disclaimer 5: English isn't my first language; so I'd be grateful if you'd send me note about my mistakes because I always try to improve my writing. Don't blame them on my beta reader, she did a tremendous job. Thank you, Mary.

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Prologue

"Gabrielle, you can't do this. Amazon joinings are for life, they need the blessing of Artemis. You simply can't this blatantly disregard our traditions. You're the Queen, what example would this give to the nation, the children?!"

"Ephiny, that's not fair. It's not the nation I want to do this for - and you know it." Gabrielle angrily retorted while pacing the full length of the council hall. "I asked Xena to become my consort as well as my champion, and I won't subject her to petty vengeance - it's hard enough that I couldn't impede her being punished by the Amazon council two seasons ago. She submitted to your twisted sense of justice only because of me, because she loves me. And she would do it again, regardless of what it would cost her. I won't risk her health or even her life to appease any god. I won't let it happen."

She stopped in mid-motion and turned towards the curly haired Amazon, already a little calmer but with a hint of resignation and sadness in her voice. "I studied all the scrolls concerning

joinings, royal joinings in particular. Only twice pardon has been granted for the prospective lifebond's crimes against individual Amazons or the Amazon nation. And Artemis never showed leniency when the Queen's consort was concerned. I won't risk it."

"Gabrielle, you're Artemis' Chosen. You're a bard. I'm sure you can find a way to convince her. Maybe make a deal or something."

"A deal? Eph, you can't bargain with Gods."

"Why not? Artemis isn't like Ares. She never would go back on her word, never."

"I'll think about it, my friend."

Chapter One: The Verdict

The next morning found the young Queen in front of Artemis' temple at the edge of the village. She had spent the whole night thinking about what she possibly could offer the patron goddess of the Amazons to make her forgive what Xena did to the Northern Amazons all those years ago - and if she was really lucky, there was a way. Her stubborn lover certainly wouldn't like it, so she was glad that the tall woman was with Solari and the hunting party. They weren't expected back for another two days.

Gabrielle knelt in front of the altar after dismissing the priestess and her attendants. "Artemis, goddess of the hunt and the moon, protector of the forest and the peace, patron goddess of the Amazons from the beginning of time to its end, please hear thy child and servant."

The blonde fell silent, waiting for a sign. Never before had she tried to speak to the goddess of the hunt, so she wasn't sure what to expect. When no answer was forthcoming, she simply continued, in the hope of being heard.

"Artemis, I come to you to ask for your blessing. As Queen of the Amazons I have chosen a Royal Consort, a woman of honour and courage whom I love deeply. Xena will...."

"How dare you," the growling voice seemed to come from everywhere at once and reverberated in Gabrielle's head, causing her to jump to her feet and automatically assume a defensive stance, "speak her name in my presence. She's a murderer and a traitor, this can't be forgiven."

The young woman swallowed hard but also was determined to hold her ground. "Everything can be forgiven, else I wouldn't be alive. I was responsible for the death of her only child, and still she forgave me. She let me back into her heart and I never will betray her trust again. Without her the Amazons and Centaurs probably would have killed each other by now. Without her Velaska would have destroyed the Amazon nation by leading them into senseless battles. Without her...."

"That's enough!" The voice had lost a lot of its volume, and now seemed to come from behind

the altar. "It doesn't change what she did to the Northern Amazon, to my former Chosen."

"No, goddess, it doesn't. Nothing can, regardless of how much she regrets her past or wishes to turn back the hands of time. Xena will always have to live with her guilt, but with her at my side, at the side of your Queen, the Amazon nation will stand a better chance to face the future. I don't know why of all people you made me your Chosen, but I know that I can't do it without the other half of my heart, goddess."

"I don't think, I like what you're insinuating, child. Do you really think you could try to bargain with me, to threaten me? I'm not my brother, I don't share his affinity to human flaws. I'm not as easy to manipulate." The voice growled lowly while taking form in the well muscled body of a tall blonde woman, with a quiver at her back and a long bow in her right hand.

"That's not what she's doing, and you know it well, goddess." Xena's familiar voice came from the left of the altar, and she quietly stepped next to her blonde lover. "She's offering you her soul, her future, in exchange for your blessing - but I can't let her do this. She may be your Chosen but first she has to stay faithful to herself. If one day she decides to rule the Amazon nation, she will lead them to greatness, despite the roman threat. She has the power and the skills necessary to unite the tribes, to reconcile their traditions but she has to do this of her own accord, and not in an attempt to pacify you, goddess."

The tall warrior turned her attention from the half dumbfounded, half secretly amused goddess of the hunt to Gabrielle. "I don't need an Amazon joining to always love you, Gabrielle. You're my heart and my soul, my conscience and my strength. You're my light, my reason of living. We don't need the gods to be happy."

"I know." The younger woman answered dejectedly.

"But...."

"It's childish, I know, but I want the whole world to know that we belong together. I never again want to be without you." Her shoulders slumped and her eyes went straight to the ground.

Even remembering what she had felt when she thought her fair haired lover was forever lost to her after she had jumped in the lava pit to save Xena's life, hurt too much. So, Xena enfolded her gently but firmly in her arms and Gabrielle instinctively nestled closer. "I love you, Gabrielle. I won't leave you. I also want the world to know that I belong to you. You're my greater good. I'm yours, body, heart and soul."

She softly kissed the younger woman on her head, closed her eyes as if to gather her strength, opened her arms, and gently nudged her lover away.

The proud woman then turned her attention to the goddess standing next to the altar, enveloped in a soft green glow that eerily contrasted with her dark blue eyes. She lowered herself on her right knee and put both hands on her left.

"Artemis, patron goddess of the Amazon nation from the beginnings of time to its end, I, Xena of Amphipolis, am guilty of killing the spiritual and military leaders of the Northern Amazons by using their own defences against them. I am guilty of killing two of them on holy ground. I am guilty of having betrayed their trust and their friendship. I am guilty of having betrayed and used their Queen without remorse." Xena now lowered her eyes to the ground. "I know what I did can never be undone. I know I can never hope of being forgiven for these crimes, and I'm ready and willing to pay for what I did though I also know that it never will be enough."

"So, traitor, are you finally offering me your life?" The goddess asked while trying to keep the smile that was threatening to creep on her lips from showing. This really was going better than planned. Allowing Xena and the others to hunt down what they needed in only two days instead of the previewed four, and thus bringing the warrior back to the village just at the right time, had been a stroke of genius she had to thank her older sister for.

"No, goddess. I can't give you my life, nor my heart, nor my soul, they already belong to your Chosen. All I can offer is my pride, as a warrior and a woman, and my hope of redemption for the sins of my past, and I can beg the woman I love more than anything else to let you use these other parts of me to see that justice finally will be satisfied."

"Do you really know what your offering, warrior? With what you just gave me, I could make you suffer in the deepest pitch of Tartarus for eternity." Gabrielle opened her mouth to protest. "Hush, child, this is between me and your warrior."

"Yes, I know, goddess. Look in my heart, and you'll see that I spoke the truth. You'll also see that I am afraid of what you'll decide to do but my own suffering is a small price to pay for the chance of giving Gabrielle the happiness she deserves. I'll do everything and risk everything for her."

The young Queen slowly began to understand what Xena wanted her to do, but still she had to make sure. "Xena, my love, are sure that this is what you really want? You don't have to cater to my childish whims. I know that sometimes you need physical and emotional pain to be able to live with your guilt, but..."

"Yes, Gabrielle, that's what I want. You're not the only reason I want to do this, I need to balance the scales; it has been too long."

Gabrielle squeezed the right shoulder of the still kneeling woman, and then found the eyes of the goddess. "I won't give you her life, and I won't give you her sanity, Artemis."

Now, the carefully held back smile broke free. "When Xena gave Yakut the new words to enter my hunting grounds and thus freed the Northern Tribe from their captivity, Cyane immediately found me and spoke for your warrior."

The goddess concentrated her attention on the blond bard only. Gabrielle could feel the tension slowly building in her soulmate's body but her right hand still on the shoulder and her thumb firmly massaging a well muscled neck seemed to anchor the tall woman.

"She told me that she had looked in Xena's soul, and that instead of darkness there now was love and compassion, grief and guilt. She told me that one day soon, Xena would be ready to pay for her crimes. She begged me to at least show her some understanding, to accept that there had been extenuating circumstances because she was under the influence of Ares and Alti."

"It was me that killed them, not Ares, nor Alti." Xena couldn't help to retort, staring angrily at the goddess who was as tall as she herself.

"She knew you would say something like this, and she wanted you to answer one question before I make my decision. The question is: After leaving the burned out Amazon village behind, what happened the first time you once again killed?"

Xena's eyes dropped to the ground, the tension abruptly left her body, her shoulders slumped in defeat. Her voice was quiet, almost inaudible. "I saw her face, her eyes." She fell silent. A big, warm hand gently closed around her own, still resting on her knee. She looked up, and found her face only inches away from the goddess', unable to avoid her startling blue eyes.

"I always felt joy in fighting. I relished the feeling of power while fighting in a battle or otherwise defending myself, I still do. But after Caesar, it no longer mattered why I killed or how I killed. I thrived on the fear I could see in my opponents eyes, and that was all that counted for me. That's how I fought in Chin, and that's how I killed the Amazons.

"When I propelled Cyane against the tree trunk and her heart was pierced through by the broken branch, there was no fear in her eyes. All I saw was disappointment and love. From that day on, whenever I ended someone's life without being forced to, when I killed out of boredom or simply because I could, I saw her, the disappointment in her eyes, I still do."

Tears were running freely and silently down the tall woman's cheeks. Gabrielle's arms closed around Xena's waist, never before her proud lover had shown the slightest hint of weakness in the presence of a god, not even when the Furies had been trying to drive her crazy. With snuggling her upper body against the warrior's broad back, she let her know that she still needed the older woman's strength. She also felt that the tears were like a cleansing for her best friend and part of a healing too, a soothing balm put on the raw spots of a wounded soul.

Xena gratefully intensified the contact by leaning back into the touch but never lost eye contact with the goddess either. The threesome stayed like this long after the raven head's eyes had dried up. Finally the goddess stood up and told Gabrielle to stand by her side, as official witness.

"Cyane was right, you deserve a second chance. Tomorrow morning you'll come back here, without your weapons and barefooted, wearing nothing but a simple shift. A masked warrior will be waiting for you. You will obey her every command for she will be your guide while you face what is called 'the challenge of righteousness'. It's not exactly an Amazon tradition but it will do. It consists of three trials, one dealing with pain and humiliation, the second with obedience and endurance, and the third with trust and self-sacrifice. Any god making a claim on you is allowed to try and make you fail one way or the other. Failing the quest usually equals forfeiting one's

life. Out of consideration for my Chosen, I promise that you will survive however it ends but should you fail, you will be banned from all Amazon territories for the rest of your earthly existence. Do you accept the challenge, Xena of Amphipolis?"

"Yes, I do."

"Tomorrow morning, at sunrise. And don't forget, no weapons at all."

Chapter Two: Pain And Humiliation

"Don't you think you're exaggerating, Xena?" The Amazon Regent asked, still holding the leather strips in her hand.

"No, I'm not, otherwise they wouldn't have been waiting for me next to my tunic. Artemis' orders were very clear. No weapons at all, and as long as I can freely move my hands and feet I'm not without weapons. It's as easy as this."

"As if a couple of leather strips would be of any hindrance for you, Xena. These are so thin, even I could break them."

"You probably could but they weren't sent to hold you but me - and I'm sure that I couldn't break them, even if I tried which I do not intend to do. Go on, start with my legs. Try to leave me at least a foot of freedom. Besides, the first trial is about humiliation, what better way then to enter Artemis' temple hobbled and with my hands tightly bound behind my back. Yes, that's good."

"Tell me again, why Gabrielle isn't doing this? It isn't like her not to at least make sure that you are not harmed in the process."

"Stop, not like that, binding my wrists is not effective enough. Last night, Artemis told her in a dream that she risks jeopardising the whole challenge by taking any part in it. That's why she's not here, hovering over you. Now, for my arms. Take one end of the strap and fasten it around my right arm, just above the elbow. Make sure that it can't be easily moved around and that the knot is very tight.

"Now, take my left wrist and tie it to the right arm. Make sure that the back side of my wrist sits directly on top of the knot, this way I won't be able to pry it loose. Take care that there's no give and secure the wrist with another knot, place it just under the base of the thumb, so I won't be able to touch this knot either. This is already beginning to feel uncomfortable, you're doing fine."

"Well, it definitively looks uncomfortable. What's next?"

"Now, you'll have to bind my right arm from elbow to wrist to my left arm wrist to elbow by wrapping the leather strap tightly around both underarms. This way my right wrist should end up just on top of my left elbow, repeat the thing with the knots, wrap the rest of the strap back to the right side, and if possible back to the middle. Tie it up, and that's it. It's almost impossible to get

out of this bondage without at least straining the muscles involved. I'm ready, let's go."

Ephiny followed the tall woman, and due to the effective restraints around her ankles, they headed at a snail's pace straight through the village and towards the temple. Xena held her head high, not even once acknowledging the curious and bewildered eyes of the onlookers - but secretly relieved that her lover had decided to go for an early morning walk.

The stares as well as the whole situation would undoubtedly have triggered the bard's volatile temper. She smiled at the memory of the argument they had after returning to the Queen's hut the day before, and how they had spend the whole day and a big part of the night making up, so to speak. Before she could immerse herself more in the pleasant memories, they reached the temple.

They parted ways at the foot of the steps leading to the entrance area and Xena began to manoeuvre them one at a time. In front of the altar stood the masked woman Artemis had spoken about, clad in black from head to toe. When she faced her, she found herself dwarfed by about half a foot. "You're four candledrops late, culprit."

"I'm sor..." Faster than lightning, taking her completely by surprise a gloved hand struck her right cheek and propelled her backwards. She landed on the ground almost two body lengths away.

"Rule number one, culprit, you never speak without being given permission. Rule number two, when you're allowed to speak you do so by addressing me as 'venerable guide' or 'madam guide'. - Now, get back on your feet and stand in front of me."

Xena hadn't been a fighter for all of her adult life for nothing, so she tensed the muscles in her back and legs and jumped back on her feet. Another flip would have brought her directly in front of the masked woman but instinctively she decided against it. Twenty hobbled steps later, she once again was face to face with the taller woman. "Turn around."

"Not bad," the guide commented, while roughly checking Xena's restraints. "That's so much more effective than just binding the wrists, isn't it?" Xena was about to verbally agree, when she remembered that she hadn't been commanded to answer.

She could feel the woman's dark eyes on her, and felt like a small rabbit being scrutinised by a hungry snake. She suddenly had a hard time standing still.

"You know," the woman continued conversationally, while idly retracing her arm muscles with the tip of a dagger, "The gods on Mount Olympus were keen on giving me a broad variety of ideas on what to let you do during this challenge. One could be let to believe that every single one of them is interested in you. What do you think? Are you this interesting? Answer."

"Don't think so. I never asked anything from any of them, and I also never took anything they offered, until yesterday. Artemis might be an exception, but the others are probably just bored

out of their godly minds."

This time Xena anticipated the blow and ducked out of the way but quickly found herself bent over the tall woman's knee, her upper body held steady by one hand, while the other was busy lifting the hem of her shift up. "When you speak like a brat, you'll be treated like one. - Tsk, tsk, tsk. Weren't you told to wear nothing but a shift?"

The bound woman felt the fabric of her tunic at the small of her back, and the tip of a knife slicing through the material of her breeches. At the same time she couldn't help but marvel at the strength of her guide, holding her down this easily.

The raven head's mind was reeling, her body was ready to struggle out of this undignified position. "Now, you'll get spanked, culprit, for not showing respect to the gods, for disobedience, and for not addressing me the proper way. You will count the strokes and thank me after every ten."

The warrior now was straining against her restraints but was, as predicted, not able to break them. Only a few years ago, half of Greece had been at her beck and call - and now she had willingly manoeuvred herself in a position where she felt utterly helpless. She hated it.

She saw a gloved hand in the air, ready to strike, the glove made out of the same smooth, silk like material as the rest of the guide's clothing and her mask. When the first stroke came, however, it didn't feel like a glove, more like a leather paddle. She instinctively tried to compensate by relaxing her rigid muscles.

Xena's mind despite herself wandered back to the one and only time her mother had taken a paddle to her backside.

Chasing her younger brother through the kitchen on a winter afternoon, they somehow had managed to unhitch the big kettle with fish stew for the evening crowd at the inn. It dropped into the flames of the fire place, upended, and created a mess of fish bits, vegetables, and boiling hot water on the floor.

Xena instinctively had jumped out of the way but Lyceus was caught by the water and burned his feet. Cyrene had been livid. Lyceus was treated and sent to his room, while Xena was told to go to the barn and await her punishment.

On every other day she would have run off and spent the night in one of her hide-outs in the forest, only coming back when one of her brothers assured her that their mother had calmed down. This day, however, she felt guilty for getting her beloved brother hurt, so she'd stayed.

She didn't have to wait long, but long enough to be very nervous by the time the barn door opened. Her mother entered, followed by the healer and one of the village elders.

"How's Lyceus? Will he be all right?"

"Yes, child," the healer answered. "He'll be back on his feet in a couple of days."

"You both were lucky, this time," the elder continued. "You and your brother could have been seriously injured, just imagine you would have collided with one of the knife blocks." Xena's eyes found the ground. "You know, you were absolutely irresponsible and you should have known better. Your younger brother is your responsibility; and for you to easier learn, your mother asked us to bear witness of your punishment."

Meanwhile Cyrene had seated herself on a bale of hay, holding something in her hands, the girl never had seen before. It had a handle like one of the kitchen knives, widening to a plane round surface, the size of her hand, with old but well oiled leather on both sides.

"Come here, over my knees. Put your hands on your back, and try not to move. - When I left my home to open this inn, my father gave me this leather paddle. As a child I often felt its bite. He told me that one day I would need it to discipline my own children. I never before felt the need to use it."

While talking, her mother held her slender wrists in one hand and with the other stripped her of her breeches and scooped up her tunic.

And then it began. Xena bit her lips, determined not to cry or scream in front of these men. One stroke to the left, one to the right, one in the middle; one stroke to the left, one to the right, one in the middle.

One stroke to the left, one to the right, one in the middle, a steady rhythm that kept Xena in her childhood memories. Then it stopped, and her mind returned to the here and now.

"If you don't count, it doesn't count, culprit. We would have been halfway through by now. I don't mind doing this as long as it takes." The rhythm resumed.

She quickly lost count of the number of strokes finding their target, concentrating all her efforts on not showing any pain. But finally a single tear slipped out of her tightly shot eyes. It took a dozen or so more strokes to let her succumb to the tears, but even at age seven she was crying without making a sound.

Finally it was over, and her mother took her gently in her arm, whispering in her ear. "It's over now, little one. You did good."

"I'm sorry mother." The girl sniffled. "I didn't want this to happen. We'll find somewhere else to play, I promise."

"I know you're sorry now, but to enforce the lesson you'll spend the next two days

with me in the kitchen, where you will sit and clean and slice vegetables, and in the evenings you will sit behind the bar and learn how to mend your clothes. - And now, stand up, and thank the witnesses that they sacrificed their time to see you punished."

"Yes, mother." Xena remembered the wave of shame and embarrassment cursing through her veins, the two men having slipped her mind completely. She did what she had been told, her face beet red with humiliation.

The warrior's backside now was burning, and she imagined it having attained an angry shade of red. Humiliation; that's why the masked woman insisted she had to count. More humiliating than being punished like a naughty, irresponsible child certainly was having to take an active part in the punishment. She had to make a decision, defying the authority of the masked woman or really committing to the challenge.

Slap to the right buttock. "One."

"Nine." Slap. "Ten." Xena swallowed, and hastily continued. "Thank you, venerable guide." She didn't see the smile behind the mask.

"Fifty-nine." And one in the middle. "Sixty. - Thank you, ma'am."

"Ten more for not addressing me properly." This time she only alternated sides, left, right, left; right, left, right.

"Seventy. - Thank you, madam guide." Strong hands took her at the shoulders and brought her back to her feet.

"Close your eyes and wait, I'll be back."

Chapter Three: Marked

Xena tried not to think about how ridiculous she must look to anyone coming in now. Bound hand and foot, standing slightly to the right of the altar, with her eyes closed. 'Wait!' She hated waiting, always had and always would. A senseless waste of time. Her arms hurt from being held in this uncomfortable position, and her mind worked on ways to get rid of her bonds. The edge of the altar plate had looked rather sharp, with a bit of effort she should be able to saw the leather strips through.

The tall woman had to remind herself that this wasn't why she was standing here. She was here to appease the gods, Artemis in particular, by making it through this challenge. She was here to be allowed to officially become Gabrielle's consort, the Queen's consort, without tainting the blond woman's reign by her dark past.

The guide already was gone for over half a candlemark, her innate sense of time told her, but there was nothing she could do to speed things up. She was certain that the taller woman no

longer was in the central room of the temple but still she couldn't shake off the feeling of being observed.

She consciously pushed her shoulders back, easing the strain on her arms, and concentrated on her breathing, using the meditation techniques she had learned in Chin. 'To conquer others is to have power, to conquer yourself is to know the way.' LaoMa had been right, and suddenly Xena realised that standing here, following the orders of someone else, even submitting to this challenge in the first place was a big step in this direction - the right direction. She smiled and internally calmed down, no longer concerned about her reputation.

Shortly after, her guide returned. She heard the whisper of steel being taken out of a leather sheath, and more felt than heard the slicing through of the restraints at her ankles. "Open your eyes, and follow me, culprit."

They left the central room by a back door, walked along the hallway where the priestess and her assistants lived, and finally ended up in the temple garden. A big, well cared for herb garden. All the herbs needed for the ritual offerings were grown here, and Xena also saw a large section with medicinal herbs.

In the middle was an apple tree, not very tall but older than any she had ever seen before. Next to it were two tables, one was as long as she was tall, it was bare. On the second, smaller one there was an assortment of small clay pots, some parchment, a few leather straps and a lot of needles. Xena forced herself not to speculate about what they would be needed for.

"On the table, face down." The tall warrior did as she was told, carefully first lowering her upper body down and then swinging her legs up to compensate for her arms still pinned behind her back.

The masked woman put a piece of parchment next to her face. She studied it. Artemis' moon, symbolised by a full circle; in the middle of the circle a tightly rolled single tail whip, interwoven with a pair of manacles. Without thinking, she whispered. "Slave markings."

"Do you object to wearing them on your skin, culprit, for everyone to see? Answer honestly."

"No, I don't. It's what I deserve, it's better than what I deserve, madam guide."

Xena closed her eyes, knowing her words to be true but also knowing that as a slave to the Amazon nation it would become even more difficult to be named consort to the Queen. It wasn't entirely impossible but it certainly wouldn't ease things any. "I don't see any fire or hot iron."

"And you won't. You will not be branded, you'll get a tattoo, with very special needles, designed to administer much more pain than a simple branding would. You will wear the markings at the small of your back. You now will be immobilised, I don't want you to jerk in the wrong direction while I'm working on your back. This is a test of pain and endurance. - But first things first. You have to be punished for speaking without permission. Get down from the table and back over my knee. Thirty solid whacks should be enough, and don't forget to count."

A few candledrops later the warrior was back on the table. Her ankle restraints had been fastened to solid metal rings at each side of the table. There were leather strip pinning down her knees and her thighs; a belt holding down her waist and two more strips fastened around her elbows made it impossible to move her upper body more than a quarter of an inch.

"I'll take off my mask while working on the tattoo. The rules say that you're not allowed to see my face. Do you want a blindfold or will you keep your eyes shut, culprit? Answer."

"I promise I will not look at you but, please, don't use the blindfold."

"Why not? It'll be easier for you."

Xena closed her eyes on the memories the whole situation had unexpectedly dragged up. "No, it won't." She knew that her masked guide would want an explanation but there only was one person alive knowing about this. Telling the guide, meant telling the gods, meant giving Ares even more ammunition, but somehow she felt the need to be honest to this stranger.

"Over the years I've learned to stand pain rather well but it doesn't work when I'm not able to see. I once.... It was at the beginning of my warlord days, long before Ares began to take any interest in me. My army was still very small but until then we had been lucky. We ran out of luck when crossing a mountain range a day's ride out of Amphipolis and were ambushed by a group of mercenaries outnumbering us two to one. Most of my men got out alive but I was captured. At first they wanted to sell me at the nearest slave market but then they decided that I first had to pay for the deaths of their comrades. I was raped and beaten and whipped and branded. I didn't know if it was day or night or how long they held me captive before I managed to get away. The whole time there was a blindfold around my head, and at first I wasn't able to distinguish my captors but I soon learned to differentiate between their smell, the sound of their boots or the feeling of their hands on my skin. I..., I still tend to get overwhelmed by the combination of blindness and pain."

"I understand. The blindfold made you loose your sense of reality. It made it easy to get lost in the pain, it let you loose yourself up to a certain degree. How old were you? And what happened to these men?"

"I killed them as soon as I had regained my strength, and all of them died a very painful death. It happened two days after my sixteenth birthday, and I still don't regret it, neither that I killed them, nor the way I did it." Xena answered with defiance in her voice.

The masked woman paused as if to carefully consider her words. "I know it has been a long time since then, but I don't see any scars."

"The scars on my body disappeared when LaoMa healed my legs, venerable guide."

The masked woman nodded. "All right, your word is enough for me. Let's begin."

The first prick of the needle felt like melted iron seeping into her skin and through her veins; pain immediately engulfed her whole body. She clenched her teeth in an effort not to cry out.

"You can cry out or scream without shame. We'll be alone 'til this is over. I know it's hard to take."

Xena didn't scream but fought the pain by trying to match every prick of a needle with the design of the slave markings still lying next to her head. And for a while it worked rather well. The circle was finished but instead of beginning with the whip and the manacles the taller woman dotted out another, slightly taller circle. Perhaps she only wanted to make the line thicker but her skin, though numbed by the all consuming pain, told her that there was a distance between the circles, not more than the sharpened tip of her sword but a distance.

Suddenly it stopped and the guide appeared in front of her, once again masked. "I put some mild disinfectant on your back and protected it with a thin layer of bandage. I'll leave you to rest for a while. I'll be back, be prepared for some visitors. And remember, the rules haven't changed."

Xena didn't have long to wait before a very familiar feeling made the hair at the base of her head stand at attention. Ares was here, probably to the left and behind the table. Instead of calling out to him, as she would have done in any other situation, she choose to stay quiet. - Let him do the talking for a change but she couldn't help her muscles tense in anticipation of the upcoming confrontation.

"How the mighty have fallen. You're pathetic, Xena. Lying helplessly bound on a table being tortured by a faceless bitch without any regard for your real worth, your real talent. And all this in the name of love! Disgusting."

He now was crouching next to the table, his eyes on one level with hers. She was smiling, this special smile he knew so well, sexy and arrogant all in one, the smile capable of making fierce fighters and great kings shake in their boots, the smile telling everyone that whatever they thought they knew, they didn't have a clue.

Her eyes were sparkling, and without reading her thoughts, which at the moment, in the sanctuary of his sister, he couldn't, he still had the distinct impression that she was telling him exactly this. He didn't have a clue.

Ares was beginning to get angry. He'd only agreed to participate in this whole challenge thing to get her back. Though his father had pointed out the risk of losing her forever, he still couldn't believe it. The treatment she already had received should have been enough to bring the old Xena back, the Destroyer of Nations, the ruthless killer, but no! Despite the pain he knew she still was feeling from Hephaestus' needles, she seemed at peace. The most powerful, most devious general ever - at peace, this just wasn't right - and it was all the fault of that annoying blonde.

The god of war tried to taunt her some more. His words described the glorious days when half of Greece had been at her beck and call. He tried to make her believe how easy it would be to go back to this existence.

"You're made to rule, Xena, not to stand in the shadow of a peace loving village girl playing Queen. She would make a good body slave, but that's about all she's good for. Get out of here and take the mask for yourself. The Amazon warriors will follow you, you can lead them to new greatness. Under your command they could rule all of Greece instead of hiding in some out of the way forests. Make them the commanders of your new army, and no woman ever again will have to fear being beaten or raped."

Xena flinched slightly at his words but she had known that he would try and use this new opening to his advantage. So she raised her left eyebrow, not much, only a quarter of an inch, and added a hint of boredom to her eyes, thus letting him know that his words weren't of any consequence for her. He jumped up and began to pace the length of the table.

The bound woman knew that in Artemis' realm the powers of the other gods were limited, but she wouldn't have thought it possible to beat him this easily, and without even uttering a single word. He was out of her sight now but she still could feel his presence, could feel the danger radiating from him, as intense as never before.

"Perhaps those men were right, all those years ago. Perhaps you need to be bound to be of any use for a man. Perhaps I wasted my time catering to your whims. Perhaps you had too much freedom leading my army. But from now on you will feel who your master is every single moment of your life."

His voice told her that something inside of him must have snapped. He shot a disdainful glance at the piece of parchment at Xena's head.

"They want to make you into an Amazon slave, and you will be a slave, mine, and mine alone. You'll be Ares' bitch, and in contrast to a tattoo my markings won't heal."

His right hand touched the piece of fabric covering her lower back, the pain intensified tenfold, and for the first time the proud warrior woman cried out.

"This is what it will feel like whenever you're not at your natural place, on your knees, next to my feet." He pressed the heel of his hand down harder, and once again Xena screamed but still held tenaciously to consciousness. "This is what it will feel like if you even think of diso...."

Suddenly the excruciating pain was gone, and Ares no longer was at her side. He was lying on the ground at least ten body lengths away. Another hand gently pushed the bandage aside and touched the angry red skin that now looked like a severe second degree burn already forming blisters. A few moments later everything was gone, except for the two circles in the middle of her back. There no longer was any pain. The god of war was back on his feet, glaring angrily at the intruder still outside of Xena's range of view.

"Ares, you broke the rules. One should think that you'd make better use of your last chance to get Xena back. All the gods agreed to Zeus' terms. You were allowed to talk to her, to seduce her, to let her feel the power of your darkness.

"But you were not allowed to touch her, no one but her guide is. You once again followed your emotions instead of using your head. When will you ever learn, little brother. For my part, I'm tired of getting you out of trouble all the time. I'm tired of fighting battles you and your incompetent generals risked out of greed and irrationality.

"From now on, god of war, you will be on your own. Get out of your sister's sanctuary before she finds out what you just tried to do." Ares vanished without his usual flourish but glaring angrily at his former Chosen.

The voice told Xena a lot. It was a woman that had helped her, a very tall woman. It sounded somehow familiar but she couldn't place it. The hem of her shift was drawn over her backside and shortly after she was staring at a black leather dress, adorned with silver armour plates. The woman knelt down and Xena almost drowned in eyes of the same silver as the armour bits. "Are you all right?"

She nodded, and then whispered. "Thanks to you."

A finger sealed her lips. "We have a lot of things to talk about, little one, but now is not the time. You need to rest. Soon your guide will be back to lead you through the rest of your trials, and there still is a tattoo to finish. Sleep now." A hand touched her forehead and her eyes closed before she consciously registered who this woman was.

She woke to the voice of the masked guide, telling her to prepare herself for more pain. She didn't answer, she wasn't supposed to. Instead she concentrated on her breathing. After the first ten pricks, she had a rather surprising revelation. The pain was still as intense as during the first session but she no longer was fighting it. She also no longer tried to rationalise it.

Having spent half a life time ignoring pain, putting it out of her conscious mind, it should have been harder to fully accept it. But now, it simply was part of the challenge; something she had to see through to get Artemis' blessing.

On this level it had nothing to do with her. On another level, however, there was this tiny part in the deep recesses of her mind that was convinced that no amount of pain could ever make her atone for her crimes; a part that welcomed the sensation, another foretaste of Tartarus. She didn't deserve any better.

Another needle pierced her skin next to the spine, and she involuntarily jerked. She was convinced she didn't deserve any better, but Gabrielle, her kind-hearted lover who insisted on seeing the best in everything and everyone, even in a soul as dark as her own, never would see it that way.

Gabrielle knew everything about her past. In the beginning Xena had told her a lot about the darkness in her soul - initially to scare her away, to get her to go back to her village and lead a stable, secure life. There never had been any censure or judgement in the blonde's eyes. And she never complained when one of the warrior's nightmares had kept her awake half of the night trying to calm her down by talking to her, by singing to her, and finally by spending the night in her arms.

Another needle, still dangerously close to her spine.

In the end, it all came down to this tenacious, innocent village girl who had painstakingly broken down every single barrier around her heart and her soul. Gabrielle, she had been her salvation, in more than one way. She was her light but she also had taught her that she had a light of her own. Gabrielle was worth every sacrifice.

Another needle, thicker than the ones before and driven more deeply into her flesh. She tried to hold back the scream but couldn't.

Chapter Four: Obedience

"That was the last one. It's time to give you back your freedom of movement." The guide began to undo the restraints holding her on the table and freed her ankles. She helped her to sit up and slowly unfastened the bindings immobilising her arms. Making sure that circulation returned to its normal rate by gently massaging the arms and hands before freeing them completely. Xena silently had dreaded this moment but thanks to the thoughtful ministrations of her guide it turned out to be a rather pleasant experience. She sought the eyes behind the mask.

"You want to say something?" Xena nodded. "Go ahead, culprit."

"Thank you, venerable guide."

"You're welcome. Stand up and do some stretches, it's time for the next trial."

When Xena was content with her range of movement, they returned to the central room of the temple. The raven haired warrior immediately spotted her sword lying on the altar.

"Go ahead and take it, make a few practice swings. I know you still are in a lot of pain but it will subside as soon as you have defeated the ten fighters that should be here shortly. It would be good if you don't spill too much blood in Artemis' temple but don't worry about killing them. They are already dead, I borrowed them from Tartarus."

As soon as the masked woman had finished speaking, the ten men appeared. Xena knew all of them, she had sent them to Tartarus herself sometime during the last three summers. Four of them attacked at once and Xena easily jumped out of the way. Due to their lack of co-ordination two of them impaled each other and immediately disappeared, while the other two barely avoided the same fate.

A fifth rushed her from behind, she instinctively thrust her weapon backwards but then rolled out of the way, jumped back to her feet, and knocked him unconscious with the hilt of her sword. Another two were dispatched with similar manoeuvres. Five out of the way, five left to go; Xena was definitively beginning to enjoy herself, despite the pain still vividly radiating from her back.

"Defeat them, culprit. I never said anything about playing around. Hurry up!" Xena nodded in acknowledgement, and began to fight in earnest, the feral smile still on her lips. A couple of candledrops later the dead fighters had once again rejoined their colleagues in Tartarus - and the pain from the tattoo was gone, as if it never had been.

"Give me your sword, you won't need it any longer. Now, for the next part. Gabrielle pleaded with Artemis to let her see you. She somehow heard your screams and now wants to make sure that you're not harmed. She'll be here in a little while but you are not allowed to talk to her, not one word.

"Gabrielle will touch you because that's the kind of person she is. You're not allowed to react to her touch in any way or to avoid it. Gabrielle will be hurt by your lack of response but this time you will just have to stand it. This is the most important of the trials, don't mess it up, culprit."

Xena's eyes were trained to the main entrance but only a couple of candledrops after the guide had left she heard familiar footsteps coming from behind. She turned around and smiled at the smaller woman dressed in an oversized shirt belonging to her. The smile grew bigger transforming her whole face and letting her appear much younger.

Gabrielle crossed the big room at breakneck speed and jumped, absolutely certain that her future consort would catch her. And so she did, obedience be damned. Holding her now felt like they had been apart for days and not a few candlemarks. Feeling her body against her own was like stepping out into the sun after spending the whole week in a dark cave. Oh, how she had missed her.

The blonde had her arms around her neck and was busy kissing every inch of her face, starting with the front and ending at the lips. Her tongue teasingly demanded entrance, and the taller woman needed all her willpower not to give in. It would be so easy, and it would show her partner without any doubt that she was unharmed.

Instead of following her heart's desire, she gently lowered the younger woman to stand on the ground, and put her own hands behind her back. Gabrielle's hands closed around her face, and her head was pulled down, insistent lips meeting her own. Xena felt like crying, running away, and kissing the bard senseless at the same time. Her heart was beating a fast dancing rhythm but she held her emotions in check. Slowly her whole body became rigid with tension, and finally Gabrielle became aware of her lover's strange behaviour.

"Are you all right, love?" She asked.

Xena nodded, holding the other woman's eyes and trying to convey her feelings, her desire, her lust, her love, her regret, and her determination.

Gabrielle only saw cold blue eyes holding her at arm's length. She saw the hardened fighter, and not the woman she loved. She saw someone aloof and distant, not the playmate she loved to roughhouse with. Though she was more than relieved to see her warrior safe and apparently sound, the indifference hurt her and triggered her volatile temper.

"I begged Artemis' to let me see you, and now you're standing there, not even acknowledging my presence. If this is what our future will be, I don't want you to become my"

Xena somehow managed to tune out the ranting. Gabrielle's words just hurt too much, but she couldn't block them out completely.

"... I don't know why I even thought I'd know you I won't let you treat me like a child anymore I wish you'd never had saved me from these slavers."

The last sentence snapped Xena out of her self induced half-trance. The blonde woman turned around and began to briskly move away but she simply couldn't let her believe such things. Her rational mind told her that it was more than probable that this wasn't her lover but a substitute or a hallucination, but still she had to follow her heart. So she did the only thing she could think of.

She somersaulted over her head, kissed her on the mouth and took her in her arms. Then she broke the kiss and found the other woman's eyes, and this time Gabrielle saw the love in her baby blues, and also the hurt and sadness. She finally understood.

"It's all part of the challenge." The blonde whispered. "I'm such an idiot. I'm sorry, my love." She returned the hug, kissed the tip of her nose and walked towards the exit.

Xena herself reluctantly turned back towards the altar. After only two steps her neck hair once again rose, she swirled around, and saw Ares pointing a crossbow at Gabrielle's back. She was already on the move when the god pulled the trigger and caught the first bolt long before it could endanger her lover. But she wasn't fast enough and the second one went right through her shoulder.

She knew there was nothing she could do but to shield Gabrielle's escape with her own body, and she knew that Ares also knew it. He calmly reloaded the crossbow, his finger tightening around the trigger, pulling it twice. The bolts would have hit her in the middle of her chest, piercing her heart, but they never found their target, they simply stood in mid-air as if embedded in an invisible wall.

Moments later, Artemis and the silver clad goddess materialised, each of them holding one of the bolts - and another heartbeat later the god of war was bound by heavy shackles, held by the delicate hands of Aphrodite.

"You know I love you, brother, being the goddess of love, what else can I do. But this time even

I can't sweet-talk you out of trouble, and for once, I really don't want to. Trying to manipulate Xena is one thing because at one time she was your Chosen."

"And she always will be. She just doesn't know it yet. The day she dies, I'll be at the gates of Tartarus, and take her back to serve me."

"Oh, shut up." Aphrodite snipped her fingers and a solid gag was between Ares' teeth. "Speaking of Hades' realm, Father has banned you to Tartarus for six moons, for interfering with the challenge and for trying to kill one of your sibling's Chosen. This challenge was to determine Xena's fate, once and for all. You agreed to the terms, you even swore on your mother's hearth. This time, you'll have to pay for breaking your word. - And from now on Xena is off limits for you. You agreed to let her go. From now on every attempt to interfere with Gabrielle's or Xena's life will send you to Tartarus for another six moons. Besides, Uncle Hades is already looking forward to letting you do some work for a change. He muttered something about giving Sisyphus a break. - Now, it's your turn, big sister. I'll be back in a heartbeat."

Xena was too stunned from what she just had witnessed to pay any attention to her shoulder but Gabrielle already was trying to stop the bleeding by pressing her hands on the entrance and the exit wounds. The silver eyed goddess came over and gently nudged Gabrielle in Xena's other arm. She put her own hands where the bard's had been and a few heartbeats later, except for the blood covering the tunic there was no sign left of her injury.

"This definitively didn't go as planned. What was Ares thinking?" Artemis mumbled.

"What he's always thinking, nothing. I'd celebrate the day when he finally stops acting like a badly trained, half grown put. - Everything worked out, and though I had something slightly different in mind for the last trial, I think Xena sufficiently proved her willingness to sacrifice herself for others.

"As the guide leading you through the challenge and the judge appointed by Zeus and Gaia, I, Athena, declare that you won the challenge, Xena of Amphipolis, and that you are worthy of becoming the consort of Queen Gabrielle of the Greek Amazons. - Artemis..."

"I'm not convinced that she didn't fail the trial of obedience but..."

"Oh no, she didn't fail. I thought she was really great. She did what anyone really in love would do." The goddess of love, suddenly appearing with a rainbow of pinks, reds, and purples trailing behind her, interrupted. "You simply can't expect someone as protective of Gabrielle as Xena is, doing anything to get her lover hurt. And Gabrielle never would have reacted this badly if you hadn't made her unable to see the love in the warrior babe's eyes, Arty. Gabby was simply more important to her than this stupid challenge of yours."

Aphrodite was now on a roll but was cut off by the goddess of the hunt. "Oh, Dite, please, you really would benefit from letting people finish their phrases. And you know damned well, why this challenge was important. Ares' manipulations began to disrupt the order of things. - Anyway: What I was trying to say was that I wouldn't have chosen the Amazons as my subjects

if obedience was this important to me. They had their own minds from the very beginning, and I don't want them to change - and besides, she once again saved the life of my Chosen.

"Hey, don't get your leathers in a wad, that's all I wanted to know. Gotta go now, see ya all." The blonde goddess said while pushing her mane back over her shoulder and disappearing once again.

Artemis shook her head at her sister's antics and continued. "No, I agree with Athena, Xena, you were successful, and I'll be glad to join Gabrielle and you as Queen and Consort at the next full moon in front of the whole Amazon nation. The only question left is," she now turned her attention to her other half sister, "will Gabrielle be joined to Xena of Amphipolis, a simple Amazon, or will she be joined to Xena of Amphipolis, Chosen of Athena, goddess of wisdom and strategy of war?"

"Sometimes, you're just like Dite, always rushing things. I think these two had enough excitement for one day."

Finally, Xena found her voice. "I don't like being spoken about as if I weren't in the room, not even by the one god I always respected above all others, venerable guide. With the slave markings on my back, by Amazon law for Gabrielle and I to be joined we will need the unanimous consent of the high council of all the tribes, and that won't be easy to obtain."

"The tattoo at your back, it's not the one I showed you. It looks like this." Athena unfastened her breast plate and pushed the leather dress down, revealing an expanse of tanned flesh and a tattoo. Two silver circles with an owl in the middle and crossed sword and quill under the animal. - The sign of Athena's Chosen.

Xena stared at it for a few candle-drops, still trying to wrap her mind around it all. Artemis just had granted hers and Gabrielle's greatest wish, and Athena offered her not only the chance to continue working for the greater good but also freedom from Ares' influence for the rest of their lives by making her her Chosen. She swallowed and asked the only thing she could think of.

"Why? Why me?"

"Because that's how it should have always been, little one." Athena snapped her fingers and two comfortable sofas appeared. "Sit down, this will take awhile." Xena flinched slightly when her still sore behind touched the soft fabric of the seat.

Epilogue: Chances

Xena opened her eyes to the typical blackness of pre-dawn. Her senses told her that everything was as it should be. Gabrielle was nestled in her usual spot, with her head on the taller woman's shoulder, one arm possessively draped over her middle and her left leg pinning down Xena's. Their breathing rhythms matched and she had a hand on Gabrielle's hip. Everything was as it should be, and yet, she couldn't shake the feeling of being caught in a dream.

Her mind replayed the entire conversation with the goddesses. It had been a lot to take in.

According to Athena, she not only had the blood of a god running through her veins but she owed her life to the love of two gods, two goddesses.

After centuries of being lovers, Artemis wanted a visible reminder of her love to the goddess of wisdom. "If gods create a child of their life essences, it is born as a god. But it doesn't work this way with gods of the same sex, not since Zeus became the first among the Olympian gods." Athena had explained. "However, there is a way. One of them has to become a mortal, to conceive, carry, and deliver the child."

Gabrielle had been faster to understand the full range of the goddess' words. "If Xena is really your daughter, why did you let her suffer so much. Parents are supposed to protect their child." She said with more than a hint of rebellion in her voice.

"It was my fault." Athena answered with sadness in her voice. "After Xena was born, Artemis wanted me to bring her up to mount Olympus and give her some ambrosia without the other gods knowing about it. But I insisted that they had to be told, and the council of gods decided against our request.

"We had some support, Aphrodite, Demeter, and Apollo, even Hephaestus, but with Hera, who was still reeling about Hercules, against us, we didn't stand a chance." Artemis interjected. "

Zeus and Hera also made it impossible for any one of us to participate in your life. We could see you in the fountain of truth but there was nothing we could do to influence you in any way. I shouldn't have obeyed, not after Ares sent Cortese to your village. I could have spared.... I'm sorry."

"Ena, please, it wasn't your fault. The other gods also were forbidden to interfere in her life. Stop beating yourself up over things that can't be changed. As if this stupid tattoo wouldn't be reminder enough. - Xena was lost to us for a long time but now we have another chance. You'll finally get the chance to teach her everything you wanted her to know about her skills from the day she rode that black monster of a wild stallion."

"I was only eight when I captured him, but mother wouldn't let me keep him. Why are you wearing this tattoo? I know it's the sign of Athena's Chosen but..."

"I know, why would I mark myself as my own Chosen?! I never had a Chosen - before. Over the centuries a few mortals had my favour but none of them was worthy. I had Hephaestus put the tattoo on me as a daily reminder that I failed the one person capable of becoming my Chosen, that I failed my only child. But now it can become the sign of a new beginning, if you want to.

"Just say the word and your tattoo will disappear, you'll still become the Amazon Queen's Consort, but nothing of what we have told you today will influence yours or Gabrielle's future in any way."

"You really would keep your distance and stay out of my life, if I wanted you to?" Xena asked surprised.

"Yes, we would. It was a hard lesson to learn over the years but we both finally understood that you don't need us. Athena always was convinced that you would one day find your way out of the darkness but I had given up on you more than once. When you saved my Chosen's life for the first time, I even wanted to interfere to keep her away from you. But Gabrielle always had a head of her own. She made me see that there's a lot more to you than being a bloodthirsty warlord. It's your decision but ..."

"Arty, no. It has to be Xena's decision. We better leave you alone now, give you some time to think."

Xena looked deeply in Gabrielle's eyes, and the younger woman nodded. "I don't need time to think. I already made my choice, this morning when I came to the temple. I would be honoured to be your Chosen, Athena, but I don't know yet how comfortable I am with accepting the both of you as my mothers. To me my mother's name still is Cyrene."

"As it should be. When Zeus made the decision to leave you with the mortals, we were allowed to find a home for you. A young woman prayed to Demeter to grant her still born daughter safe passage to the Elysian fields. This woman was Cyrene. We asked her if she would be willing to raise you as her child, and she promised us to never let you know."

"What changed, what made Zeus change his mind and allow this contact?" Gabrielle asked.

"Ares was not only endangering your lives with his continuous interference but also a lot of other people that never should have been touched by either of you. The Fates complained and also the Muses, but Ares still is Zeus' favourite. Only when Gaia also insisted on the situation being taken care of once and for all, he relented." Athena explained.

"And now, for something more pleasant. About this joining ceremony, what do you intend to wear, Xena?" Artemis asked to lighten the mood after a long candledrop of awkward silence.

"My armour, of course." - "Her armour, of course." Both dark haired women said as if out of one mouth.

And their blond companions, one mortal, one god, one rather short and one tall, equally unanimously answered. "Oh, no, you won't. It's a sacred ritual, not weapons' practice."

Green and blue eyes bore into blue and silver. Xena and Athena began to grin impishly and finally all four of them broke into a full-out laughter.

THE END



[Alternative Ending]

Xena opened her eyes to the typical blackness of pre-dawn. Her senses told her that everything was as it should be. Gabrielle was nestled in her usual spot, with her head on the taller woman's shoulder, one arm possessively draped over her middle and her left leg pinning down Xena's. Their breathing rhythms matched and she had a hand on Gabrielle's hip. Everything was as it should be, and yet, she couldn't shake the feeling of being caught in a dream.

Her mind replayed the entire conversation with the goddesses. She remembered Athena's words. "The day of your birth you were destined to one day become my Chosen. But at the time, I was convinced that you had to find your own way. I wanted you to come to me of your own accord but I didn't take into account that other gods would also be interested in you. A mortal with your natural skills is rare, very rare - especially when there's no god involved. Ares made a claim on you as well as Apollo, Artemis wanted you, at least 'til Gabrielle was born, and even Aphrodite wanted you to become her high priestess."

"For a time, after your brother's death, it looked as if Ares had won." The goddess of the hunt had continued. "And after Caesar we all gave up hope that one day you'd use your skills for good - and not for evil. Your encounter with LaoMa, however, made us realise that there still was hope. It did take an awful lot of time but finally you turned your life around and turned your back on Ares. The day you met Gabrielle, you not only had buried your weapons, you also wanted to end your life, and for what you had done to Cyane and the other Northern Amazons, I wanted to see you die. But Ena and Dite convinced me otherwise. And it turned out to be a good decision. You now are stronger than ever before."

Stronger than ever before, perhaps, but it was all Gabrielle's doing. The bard was her heart and her strength. The sleeping woman nestled closer, as she always did a few candledrops before opening her eyes.

Athena's Chosen - it was tempting, very tempting. She recalled the goddess' answer when she asked what her duties would be.

"Believe it or not, but I want you to continue doing what you do now. Help those that need your help, use your head as well as your sword. And I want you to learn, a lot of your skills are still dormant, some are of a physical nature, some spiritual. It will be a challenge, if you accept. I'll send you to temples and villages to act in my name, and people will come to ask for your help. But there's one thing you no longer will be able to do. My Chosen needs a permanent place to stay in, and I personally think the Amazon village would be a good choice. I can't have you vagabonding all over Greece. I'd really like to know where to find you, and more important, I'd

like the people to know where to go to when they need help. Besides, I doubt you'd ever be happy in a big town like Athens."

Gabrielle's eyes opened, and she found her lover still deeply in thought. "Good morning, my love, what has you so preoccupied this early in the morning?"

"You really have to ask, my Queen?"

"No, not really. Did you get any sleep at all, or did you spend the whole night thinking?"

"Surprisingly, I slept like a baby, but I still don't know what to do. On the one hand, it sounds like a great chance; on the other hand, I learned the hard way not to trust the gods. What do you think? Am I a fool for wanting to live up to the tattoo on my back? Can I trust Athena?"

"What is your heart saying? It has to be your decision, and yours alone. Athena made this very clear. Whatever you decide, I'll be at your side. Always. If this means, wandering through the known world and risking our lives, I'll be with you, and if it means fighting for the greater good in the name of Athena and Artemis and risking our lives, I'll also be with you."

"I love you, my bard, do you know that? So in less than a fortnight, Artemis' Chosen will be joined to Athena's Chosen. It certainly will be quite a change from being Ares' Chosen."

"That it will be, but there's one thing that never will change. You'll always be my Chosen, Xena." The tall warrior answered with a kiss, and they greeted the new day by making love, passionately and tenderly.

THE END

Let me know what you think about it: romansilence@yahoo.de

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