

~ The Chosen's Prerogative ~

by romansilence

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Disclaimer 2: This is an alternative story, i.e., it deals with a sexual relationship between two consenting adult women, graphic descriptions included - no surprise here because it started as a PWP story that got slightly out of hand. Tuck your tail in if this scares you, move if it's illegal where you live, come back later if you're under age (besides, reading general stories (i.e. without sex) can sometimes also be very inspiring - bg).

Disclaimer 3: There's a lot of violence--implied or graphically described. Some scenes may offend the tender-stomached reader.

Disclaimer 4: The timeline follows the show up to season three's all time classics 'Bitter Suite' and 'One Against an Army' (still one of my favourites). So, adding to D 3, there also will be some hurt/angst elements. There are also some allusions to events revealed in season 4 to 6 (i.e. spoiler alert).

Disclaimer 5: English isn't my first language, so please be generous.

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1. Endings and Beginnings

A young warrior burst into the council hall. "My Queen, the perimeter watch intercepted a wagon with two men attempting to enter our territory. One of the drivers insists that he is a friend and has important news for you. Says his name is Iolaus."

The Queen's annoyance at being interrupted in mid-sentence changed to curiosity when she heard the man's name. "Where are they now?"

"Waiting for your orders, just outside of our borders."

"The other man, what does he look like?"

"He's very tall, broad shoulders, leather pants, strong chin, high cheek bones, shoulder length hair. Handsome. He didn't tell his name, didn't even look at us."

The expression in Gabrielle's eyes changed from surprise to something akin to shock when she recognized the description, and she forcibly had to shake herself out of it.

"Go back to your colleagues and tell them to let the men pass. I want you personally to escort them to the village. They are to be treated as honoured guests. Solari, have a guest hut prepared, and notify me as soon as they've arrived."

Rarely used, the air of command Gabrielle now exuded forbade every question the other council members may have had about those men. The Queen turned around and left for her quarters, leaving Ephiny the task to adjourn the meeting and deal with the curious elders.

Gabrielle closed the door to her simple hut and leant heavily against it. Her mind was running rampant. Hercules and Iolaus on their way to enter her village, and where by Tartarus' fires was.... She still couldn't bring herself to even think the name of her former lover, who despite her best efforts, never was far from her mind. And once again she couldn't help remembering the last time she had seen her about one and a half season cycles ago. No, Gabrielle thought with a rueful smile, she wouldn't lie to herself. Exactly one cycle, seven moons and nine days ago - and it still hurt.

In Illusia, they had been able to mend their friendship and regain each other's trust. Except for their short, childish tryst at the beach and the loving embraces after Tripolis, however, they had never even tried to salvage their physical relationship. While saving a village about two moons later, they ran into Hercules and Iolaus and began to travel together. The sensitive demi-god seemed to touch a chord in Xena's heart that no longer resonated for her long-time companion - and another two moons later Gabrielle found herself standing at the village temple in Amphipolis witnessing her lover marrying the son of Zeus.

The blonde Amazon once again couldn't help but re-visualise their parting in her mind's eye. She still could hear the tall warrior's emotionless voice. 'Herc and I will settle down. Mother gave us Grandmother's farm as a wedding present. Life will be peaceful for a change. What are you going to do?'

She also remembered her answer, and how she had to fight down the urge to burst into tears. 'Don't worry about me. I'll go to Athens. I always wanted to go back to the Academy. I was offered a position as a teacher sometime ago; now, I'll take them up on it. At least I can't get into trouble there.'

There was a hint of sadness in the background of Xena's blue eyes but her voice betrayed no hint of emotion. 'Take an Amazon escort to Athens, the roads are dangerous.'

'I can take care of myself, thank you. I'll have to, from now on,' she angrily replied as the sadness in Xena's eyes grew. 'Live well, Xena.' Gabrielle turned around, but it took all her willpower not to look back.

Gabrielle didn't go to Athens; she returned with Ephiny to the Amazon village and fulfilled her duty as their Queen. Her talents as a negotiator brought peace and prosperity to the Amazon nation. She was well loved by her subjects, and her rule was unchallenged. She was good at what she was doing, but her heart wasn't in it.

In the beginning, Ephiny and some other friends had tried to coax her out of her shell by prodding her into telling stories, but she adamantly refused. She even put her scrolls away and had never touched them since.

A knock on the door snapped her out of her musings. She turned around, opened the door, and was engulfed in a fierce bear hug. The blonde man was only a couple of inches taller than Gabrielle herself, and when he finally released her, his face signalled relief and a bone-deep weariness.

Glancing over his shoulders towards the wagon, the young Queen made a step towards where Hercules still sat motionlessly, but Iolaus stopped her. "He doesn't hear or see you, Gabrielle. That's only a body without a soul."

"Come in and tell me what happened. You both look as if you've had a hard time."

"I don't know where to begin. It's difficu..." A low growl, resembling a hurt and angry animal came from the vehicle, and some of the guards approached it with their swords drawn and ready. "Please, tell your warriors to stand back. It's nothing to worry about. I'll be back in an instant."

Gabrielle distractedly signalled the women to stop. She would have recognized the voice uttering the growl even if it came from the deepest levels of Tartarus.

The growling quickly quietened down, and Iolaus returned. Before the door behind them was even halfway closed, she asked, her voice quivering with barely concealed anger, "What happened to Xena? What did he do to her?"

"Please calm down, Gabrielle. It wasn't Herc's fault, though he certainly holds himself responsible. Don't jump to conclusions. I don't know if you're aware of this, but just a season cycle ago Xena gave birth to two daughters. She named..."

"I know. The Academy forwarded her letter. Continue with your story." Gabrielle's voice was harsh. She knew Xena had been pregnant when she married Hercules but reading of his daughters - Gabrielle and Ephiny, as if there were not other female names available in the world - reading about them had made it all the more real, and she finally knew that she never would get her lover back. She cast an apologetic smile towards the small man. "I'm sorry, Io. Please

continue."

His left hand gently patted her right. "I know how you feel, Gab. I can understand Xena's need to have another child after losing Solan, but I still don't understand why they married. She didn't love Herc the way she loved you. Sometimes I think there were only two things they had in common, their love for the girls and their dedication to fight for those unable to do so themselves."

Iolaus noticed the sudden pallor of the young women facing him. "I'm sorry, I'm rambling. I better get on with my report. As soon as the girls were weaned off, Xena and Herc took turns answering the calls for help that kept intruding into their rather secluded life. Half a moon ago, Herc was on his way to fight a giant up north. The next day, a messenger told Xena that Amphipolis was under siege from a warlord. She saddled up and left me with the babies.

"Two days later, all Tartarus broke loose. Soldiers surrounded the farm; they engaged me in a fight. I killed some, but there were simply too many of them. I soon was overpowered. They didn't even hurt me; just left me bound at the doorstep. They said they needed a witness. Two of them entered the house; they came back with the girls in their arms. They were put on the ground, a mere eight feet in front of me. I tried to reach them but I couldn't move. The sky darkened and a black cloud descended upon the girls, engulfing them. I heard their cries and a woman's voice laughing, Hera's voice. She... she tore the babies apart. She said that perhaps this time, Hercules would learn. She said that Xena had her husband to blame for the deaths of her daughters, her husband and no one else."

Tears were running down the man's cheeks, and he almost choked at the last words. Gabrielle was immediately on her feet and enfolded him in a compassionate hug. They sat in silence, and though all inside of her was screaming bloody murder, the Queen also knew that she had to give Iolaus a chance to finish his hurtful tale. So she waited for the tension in his body to lessen, and at the same time tried to reign in her boiling anger.

"At dusk, Xena arrived. She had some scrapes and bruises from fighting the marauders that had been bothering her hometown. She saw the bodies of her girls. She knelt next to them, and her face changed into a mask. Her jaw line looked as if she were desperately trying to keep herself from screaming, and her eyes were icy flames of anger and hatred. She freed me from my bonds, but she didn't talk to me, didn't ask any questions. Only after the funeral pyre had burned down, early the next morning, she asked. 'Hera?' I nodded. She said, 'Wait for Hercules, tell him what happened.' She was so calm, so deadly calm.

"After three days of waiting, I went in search of Herc. Four days ago, I finally found him, sitting on this wagon with Xena in heavy shackles in the back. I didn't know what happened, and I didn't know what to do. So, I decided to ask Alkmene for advice. A half day's journey brought me to a dark forest. I camped for the night in a small clearing. Before I could even think of collecting firewood, Artemis and Aphrodite appeared. They told me to get Herc to Delphi and bring Xena here. They also told me what happened."

The blonde man took a heavy breath and looked Gabrielle deep in the eyes. The young Queen

whispered. "Xena snapped."

"To put it mildly. I better repeat what the Goddesses told me. Xena made the three-day journey to mount Olympus in barely two. Argo broke her front legs in the rush to get there and Xena had to put her down. At the foot of the mountain, she called for the God of War. At first, he didn't know what Hera had done, but he could easily feel that her darkness had returned. Ares was so eager to get her back that he didn't bother to read her mind. She..." The curly haired man was hard driven to keep his voice calm.

"She got him to take her to his chambers at Olympus. To become once again his best warlord, she argued, she needed practice and the best sparring partner there is. He really was convinced that this time she would be his. They engaged in a fight, but the God of War soon found that he was no match for this Xena. She was more calculating, more powerful, and more ruthless than ever. She somehow got hold of his sword and knocked him unconscious.

"Xena went in search of Hera. She soon found her. Aphrodite said that Hera wanted Xena to collapse from grief, she wanted her reduced to a babbling idiot but her fire bolts only managed to increase her anger to raving madness."

"Xena killed her? But how, the gods are immortal?"

"Xena didn't just kill her. She cut her to pieces. She kept slicing at her body 'til there was nothing recognisable left. Then she shattered the sword against one of the marble columns. Aphrodite said that there are some things that can kill a god. One of these things is Ares' sword wielded by a mortal. Like most of the other gods' weapons it was crafted by Hephaestus and endowed with special powers by the father of the gods himself. While making sure that none of his siblings and children could kill one of their own, he at the time didn't count on these weapons falling in the hands of mortals. That's one of the reasons why Ares lost his godhood-by losing his sword to Sisyphus."

"What happened next?"

"Xena sat down next to the pile of flesh and bones that once had been the Queen of the Gods. She didn't even try to get away. She waited for Zeus to come and send her to Tartarus. Zeus' lightning never found its intended target but struck Hercules who had been alerted by Athena. Before Zeus was able to throw another bolt, Ares and Athena rushed in and stilled his hand from killing them both. They somehow managed to talk him out of it. He didn't know that Hera had killed his grandchildren, again, against his orders and despite the protection spell he had put around the house. With the help of Apollo's healer's, Hercules will regain his senses - with time."

"What about Xena?" Gabrielle impatiently interrupted.

"That's where Artemis comes in. Zeus insisted that both Xena and Hercules have to be punished. Herc's soul now is in Tartarus for opposing his father. As soon as we are in Delphi, his soul slowly will come back to him. But I was warned that it would take at least a full moon. With Xena, it's more difficult. She also has to be punished, but to do this she first has to be back to her

old self. At the moment, she is back to the time when she was the Destroyer of Nations. She's a ruthless killer: unable to control her emotions, and the only emotions she can feel right now are anger, hatred and blood lust. She sort of lost her memory and has to relearn her past. Artemis gave me a scroll with instructions, stating what to do to get her back, and also about the details of her punishment. I don't know any specifics myself." Iolaus took a rather thick scroll out of his backpack and handed it to her. It was sealed with Artemis' moon.

The blonde woman contemplated reading it on the spot, but then her eyes fell on the weary features of her male companion. "A guest hut has been prepared for you and Herc. Tomorrow morning you'll get a horse and an escort to Delphi. It will speed up your journey a few days at least." Iolaus nodded gratefully. "I'll call another council meeting for after dinner. Meanwhile we can think about where to put Xena as long as she is as dangerous as you say."

"Artemis has a solution for this. There's an old sweating hut outside the village," he said. "It's in a clearing and can easily be guarded. Xena is held in a cage. She's wearing cuffs at her wrists and ankles; they are bolted to the floor and the ceiling of the cage. She's also wearing a metal band around her waist, a short chain fastening it to the back of the cage. Here's the key to the cage door. The keys to the restraints will be given to you when the time is right."

"I know, Xena can be dangerous, but this sounds like overkill to me."

"It isn't. If these weren't steel bars and chains made by Hephaestus himself, she would have escaped more than once. Artemis said that using Ares' sword as a shield transformed the energy of Hera's lightning bolts and that now Xena is stronger than ever before, stronger than any other mortal. It will wear off, but it will take time, about a fortnight."

"I trust your judgement, my friend. Now, let me get you settled. Then, I'll take a look at this scroll."

A mere ten candledrops later, Gabrielle was back in her hut. She sat down at her desk and broke the scroll's seal. There was another scroll sealed with Athena's owl and Justice's balance wrapped in a big piece of parchment covered with neatly written lines. Her eyes scanned the bottom of the page where the simple initial 'A' next to another seal spoke clearly of the author. She took a deep breath and began reading.

My Chosen!

I know your heart, how much it hurt after this unfortunate marriage, but I also know that Xena still is at the centre of your thoughts, your memories, and your feelings. I know you would do anything to save her; you would risk your life and your very soul to do so. It can be done, but the task will be very hard.

Grief and anger made Xena's true soul retreat deep inside of her. At the moment, she doesn't know who she is or was. Tell her about all the things you know from her past, all the things you did together. This will bring back her memories, and it also slowly and painfully will coax her soul out of hiding.

For now, you have to be her voice of reason and compassion and love. But at the same time, you'll have to be hard and distant. I'll be there for you if it gets too hard to bear.

Bringing her back to herself, however, only is the first part. I doubt that she ever will regret killing Hera, but for every crime in the grand scheme of life there has to be some sort of retaliation.

In this case, Xena will be given the chance to choose. She either can submit to the punishment Athena and Justice prepared for her, or she will die a painless death. If she chooses death, her soul will neither rest in the Elysian Fields nor will it suffer in Tartarus. Her soul's energy simply will disappear from the tapestry of life, never to be reborn again. I really would regret doing this to her, but by begging Father for a new chance for Xena, I also became the executor of her punishment. It wasn't negotiable.

There also is a third choice I had to accept. It was Ares' condition. Xena can decide to go back to her warlord ways once again and irrevocably to become Ares' Chosen, but she always will painfully remember the time of happiness she spent with a certain bard from Potedeia.

I'm sure in the end Xena will take responsibility for what she did and submit to the punishment, but you have to make sure that she has at least an idea of what she is in for. Regaining her sanity and her old self will cause untold emotional pain; that's why the second part will focus on physical pain. She will have to live through more pain than ever before in her life. That's all she is allowed to know. You, however, are free to read the second scroll before she agrees to follow its regulations, just don't let her know any details.

Some of the council members certainly won't be happy about what you're trying to do. They still want her punished for the abduction of the Queen and the injuries Ephiny and the other warriors sustained. You are allowed to claim the 'Chosen's Prerogative' whenever you deem it necessary. My thoughts will be with you.

A.

Physical pain beyond everything Xena ever experienced before-was it worth it to pay such a price for the forgiveness of Zeus or the other gods? Was it worth such a price for the chance to be reborn into another life of suffering? Gabrielle tried to focus her mind on more immediate matters. The Chosen's Prerogative; if her recollection was correct, it enabled the Queen of the Amazons to rule, unquestioned and unchallenged, for a whole cycle of seasons. Afterwards, a trial by ordeal decided if the Chosen's rule really had been in accord with the will of the goddess. So, it was some kind of double-edged sword and hadn't been used for some generations now. Queens relying on it either became famous for their wisdom, or were only remembered as traitors to the Amazon nation.

Gabrielle tried not to dwell on the later possibility but couldn't help that it triggered her insecurities. Once, her stories had been able to coax a smile out of the proud warrior even when she was in one of her most sullen moods. Was she still able to move her this way? Was she able to move anyone this way?

A knock on the door propelled her back to reality. The door opened, and Ephiny came in. "How

are you doing my friend?" Gabrielle gave her a small smile but didn't answer. "I know who's in the cage, Gab, and it was really hard to not rush in and break her out."

"Good thing you didn't, Eph," Gabrielle answered and gave her friend a short recap of what had happened. "You all will have to cut me some slack for the next quarter moons to come. For now, select a mounted escort of at least six trusted warriors to see that Hercules and Iolaus arrive safely at Delphi, tomorrow at first light. And send a maintenance crew to the old sweating hut. Xena will stay there until she is better."

Though the Amazon Regent still had a wagonload of questions, Gabrielle's strained voice told her that her long time friend, at the moment, needed her support and not her questions. "It will be done, my Queen."

2. Reflections of the Past

Thanks to Ephiny's well thought out and well-timed interventions, Gabrielle hadn't been forced to rely on the Chosen's Prerogative, but there were times when she dearly wished she had. She felt on display like never before. During her first visits, when Queen Melosa still was alive, the whole village had been secretly scrutinizing the strange new princess, kept at bay by the looming presence of her tall, dark shadow. Her recent stay with her people had gotten her accustomed to being the centre of attention - but this was completely different. It was as if they all were waiting for something strange to happen and in her heart, she couldn't blame them.

Yes, the Amazons were her responsibility, but her commitment to Xena was older and more deeply ingrained in her. Perhaps that's why she relished the sometimes difficult candlemarks spent in the sweating hut turned prison, sharing her memories with the tall warrior, even though for the past moon she seldom got more than a sneer as response.

Every day, she was tempted to keep to the good memories only, the water fights in a pool or slow moving river, their love making, the fun adventures with Joxer and Autolykos, rescuing a child here and saving a village there. But she also knew that this had only been one part of their life, only one part of her complex partner.

Xena also had to know about the darkness she had lived in for so long. She had to know about Cortese and Caesar. She had to know about her fight to regain her humanity and to atone for her past. She had to know about Britannia and Chin. She had to know about Hope and Solan and Illusia. She had to know about Hercules and her daughters, and the revenge she had exacted for their deaths.

Today's meeting had completed the overall picture, and once more Gabrielle didn't get the response she had hoped for. Her tale brought a brilliant smile to her captive's face. Blue eyes found green and Xena said, "It was a rare piece of weaponry. I was a fool to destroy the sword." Gabrielle left, wondering if she ever would be able to reach Xena's hidden soul.

To cope with all her warring emotions, she went to the practice field. That was one part of her

daily routine not compromised by the warrior's presence. She easily defeated Eponin and Solari, but this time it didn't diminish her inner restlessness. She still didn't know what to do next, so she chose the only possibility left.

Gabrielle took a short bath, put on a fresh tunic, and went to Artemis' temple at the other side of the village. She knelt in front of the small wooden statue and waited.

"I'm very proud of you, my Chosen, you're doing fine."

"I don't know what to do next, my Goddess. I told her everything I know about her life but Xena still isn't back. She isn't reacting at all."

"Patience, Gabrielle, you have to be more patient. Knowing is not enough. She must now face the next hurdle. She has to understand and to feel, and it already has begun. She no longer fights her restraints. She has stopped making snide remarks to the warriors assigned to her feeding and hygiene. She no longer interrupts your tales, and though she knows what you're feeling, for the last three days she didn't try to seduce you. No, your message is taking root. I know how difficult it was for you, but it has been too easy for her. It's time for a reversal of roles. Get her to talk to you about the things you don't know about her past, about her perspective of your recent past together, about her love for her daughters. It won't be easy, but I'm sure you'll find a way." The disembodied voice coming from the statue faded away.

Having spent the better part of the night trying to devise a strategy to get Xena to talk, Gabrielle was about half a candlemark later than usual. When she entered the hut, her eyes met Xena's. For a fraction of a heartbeat, she was sure she saw something akin to relief in their depths.

"You're the storyteller, Amazon Queen," was all the raven-haired warrior said when she talked about the changing of roles the goddess had proposed.

"It is not negotiable, Xena. Let the guards know when you change your mind."

Gabrielle turned around and left her prisoner to herself and a whole day of uninterrupted thinking. This wasn't the only change in Xena's routine. In the evening when the two women assigned to see to her bodily needs entered, they didn't speak to her, they didn't even say hello, and they also didn't chat amongst themselves. She was bathed and fed in an eerie silence that began to get on her nerves.

Images and emotions that she was in no way prepared to face, rose to her conscious mind. Without the comfortable barrier of Gabrielle's voice, all she had been told about her past somehow took on a totally different meaning. She didn't want to think, too much thought was a weakness, and only the strong survived. - But she couldn't help it. She desperately sought to summon up enough anger to fight the confusing, unwanted feelings. She failed, miserably.

It all had been so easy, in the beginning, when she first came to her senses in this hut. She knew that she had to get out of her bonds and this cage, and that she would kill with relish everything and everyone in her path. Her fury multiplied when she found that she was unable even to loosen the cuffs fastened around her ankles and wrists; the waist restraint making it impossible to get enough leverage to wrench them out of their sockets. She remembered her boiling rage when she found herself not only without a stitch of clothing but also dependent on others for even the most simple of bodily functions. It bothered her though she instinctively knew that she wasn't a particularly modest person, and now the blonde woman's stories reminded her that she never had any qualms using her body and beauty as a weapon.

There was another part where she had to admit defeat during the last days. She was offered steamy details of whole nights of passionate love making with the Amazon Queen, but when she tried to turn the tables, it didn't work. She could practically feel the other woman's desire for her when the blonde's eyes were openly appraising her naked body. But the young woman just didn't rise to the bait despite her best efforts. Batting her eyes and wriggling her hips seductively didn't work. Somehow, somewhere it stopped being a power game, and she had to cope with her own feelings. At night, she dreamt about Gabrielle's body in her arms, gazing at the stars, and holding each other tenderly.

This night, however, she found herself confronted with scenes Gabrielle hadn't told her about. She tried to shut them out, tried to concentrate on her breathing, tried to think of some of the funnier episodes her jailer had mentioned. It didn't help. The whole night through she saw herself bent over the inert body of the storyteller, her hands bloodied up over her elbows, trying frantically to save the young woman's life. She could feel her desperation, could feel Gabrielle's life running through her fingers and her immeasurable joy when she came back to her.

These images told her all she needed to know, to understand, and honour the Queen's request, yet her mind still refused to acknowledge the truths of her heart and soul.

In the morning, she once again endured the silent treatment from her guards. They left the cage door open when they were finished. Shortly after, the curly haired Amazon she knew to be Ephiny (and according to Gabrielle she once had called her friend), entered. Dangling from her right hand was a long, thick, black scarf.

"Hello, Xena. The Queen decided it would be easier for you to come to terms with what to tell her when at least a part of your senses were directed inwards. You will be blindfolded."

The dark haired woman nodded. "Ephiny, tell me about Tessaly. I know you were there."

"What do you want to know?"

"Tell me about Gabrielle."

"She was injured, she died, and she came back for you." The Amazon's matter-of-fact voice didn't leave much room for interpretation.

The padlock at the door closed, and Ephiny's footsteps retreated. The blindfold stayed on during the day and all through the night, but Xena wasn't surrounded by darkness. In her mind's eye, a multitude of images were chasing each other, all of them showing the danger their life on the road had put Gabrielle in, time and again. Her memory was back, but there still was a part of her that didn't understand and revelled in the scenes of bloodshed replaying themselves in her head.

Being fed and bathed with a blindfold on was a strange feeling, she decided, and she wasn't surprised when her caretakers didn't touch it the next morning and Ephiny came back.

"Hello Xena, it's time to cut off your hearing. The bees' wax won't harm you in any way, but it will block out most of the noises coming from the outside. Tell the guards when you change your mind about talking to the Queen."

The earplugs were quickly put in place, and they were very effective. Now, Xena only could rely on her nose and the feeling of the air on her bare skin.

This day, her mind wandered back to her warlord days. To the time before Hercules had changed her way of thinking, when she had betrayed Cyane's trust and subsequently killed the proud leader of the Northern Amazons. She saw Solan's birth and the day she entrusted him in Kaleipus' care, the day Cirra burned, the incident with Ares and the Furies, and all the other things she now had no difficulty calling evil and dark and ruthless.

Every time the darkness of the past threatened to overwhelm her, a glimpse of her life with Gabrielle held her back.

Her caretakers' ministrations were as gentle and as efficient as ever, but on this day, she didn't care; her mind still was leagues away. She obediently opened her mouth when something touched her lips, chewed and swallowed it down, but for the life of her she wouldn't have been able to tell what it was.

The images were still coming steadily, and by the end of the next day she finally knew what the gods intended her to do. They had given her the rare opportunity once again to choose her path in life. She could let the darkness swallow her whole, start again where she stopped three summers ago and finally become what she set out to be: Xena, Destroyer of Nations, Empress of the Known World. On the other hand, she could go back to the time of her travels with the fair-haired bard, she could continue to try to atone for her past on the off-chance she wouldn't end up in Tartarus. She could go back to her life with Herc... No, she didn't want to think about this, right now.

All in all, it took four days and four nights, but in the end, it was relatively easy to make the decision between darkness and light, selfishness and responsibility. And when, in the morning, her guards once again came to see to her needs she said, "Tell Queen Gabrielle that I'll do everything she wants me to do."

About a candlemark later, she heard someone coming. It was neither Gabrielle nor Ephiny nor one of her guards.

"Do you know who I am, warrior?"

"Yes, the leader of the council of elders. What do you want?"

"The Queen and her Regent are on their way to the Centaurs, a minor problem with a couple of children. The Queen didn't think that you would come to a decision this fast, else she wouldn't have left the village. As it is, the council agreed that now probably is our only chance to see that Amazon justice is satisfied. Xena of Amphipolis you are accused of the abduction of our Queen, attempted murder, and multiple cases of bodily injury. What do you plead?"

The raven-haired woman didn't need to reflect on her answer; too vividly, the images--breaking Ephiny's arm and sending numerous other Amazons flying, dragging Gabrielle behind a horse and trying to throw her over the edge of a cliff--reminded her of her guilt. "I plead guilty to all charges, venerable elder."

"Do you of your own free will accept the sentence the council decided upon and submit to your punishment?"

"I'm hardly in a situation where I would be able to stop anything you want to do to me, am I? But for what it's worth, yes, I will accept the punishment the council sees fit to administer. Just get it going before the Queen is back. It probably would be better if she didn't know about this whole thing."

"You're right. When the Queen came back to live with us, she made it abundantly clear that you were not to be prosecuted for your crimes. She told us why you acted this way, that you were mad with grief and anger, and not responsible for your actions. Your answer today, nevertheless, shows that you feel responsible, which is why we can't and won't do anything without your consent."

"It's true that my actions were fuelled by anger and grief, but both were ill-directed. After Hope's death, I should have spent them on Callisto. Entombing her in the mountain simply wasn't enough. I shouldn't have listened to Ares. Gabrielle never was the one to blame, she just wanted to protect her child like I wanted to protect mine. But we both failed. Were it not for my hate for Caesar, my need for revenge, I never would have put her in a situation where she had to kill her own flesh and blood." Xena fell silent while her mind's eye produced the torn and bloodied bodies of her baby girls. "You have my permission to do whatever you decided upon, venerable elder."

"So be it."

At the same time, a few candlemarks' ride away, just at the entrance to the Centaur village, Gabrielle abruptly brought her small gelding to a halt. When Ephiny turned around to check on

her companion, the young Queen held a necklace in her hand with a small silvery gleaming key as a pendant.

"Ephiny, I'll take two of the guards and return to the village. This must be one of the keys to Xena's restraints."

"Seems like a good sign to me, Gab."

"It should be, but I also have the feeling that something isn't right at all. Give my regards to Tyldus, and tell Xenan that I'm sorry."

The blonde woman didn't wait for the affirmative nod from her friend before turning her horse and hurrying back to the Amazon village. Though she and her guards made good time, they had to stop just after midday to rest the horses. Gabrielle knew that they didn't have a choice, but the nearer they came to the village the greater became the sense of urgency clenching her heart.

When they arrived in the late afternoon candlemarks, she didn't stop at the stables. Instead, she rode directly to the makeshift prison. What she saw there first left her speechless and then had her bellowing at her riding companions. "Go and get Solari, tell her to bring the one responsible for guarding the hut, everyone on duty while we were away is to report to me, immediately; and send the healer."

The left side of Xena's head was discoloured with bruises, her eye was swollen shut, her whole body was covered in scrapes and bruises, and her right arm lay at an odd angle, apparently broken. Gabrielle opened the cage door and for the first time stepped in. Her left hand gently touched her former lover's cheek, and a blue eye fluttered open.

"It's you. I can feel that you're not a dream. Gabrielle, I'm sorry that I let you down. I never wanted to cause you any pain, but that's all I seem to be doing. I'm sorry, my love."

Gabrielle looked at her with big, unbelieving eyes. Never before had the bound woman used her birth name; she had called her 'girl', 'sweety', 'Amazon', 'storyteller' and a whole batch of more unpleasant names - but she never had used her name, the name that always had been able to bring shivers to the very core of the Amazon Queen's heart.

Before she could dwell on the possible consequences of the last endearment, a panting healer crossed the doorstep, with Solari and three members of the Royal guards hard on her heels.

"Erymma, treat Xena's wounds. Solari, what happened here?"

"My Queen, I, it would be better, if you'd ask the elders."

"It's you, I'm asking, captain of the Royal guards!" The Queen's voice was cold and her eyes hard and demanding.

"It was a punishment, my Queen." Solari answered with outward calm, obstinately avoiding

looking into the blonde woman's eyes. "The elders decided that Xena had to be punished for what she did when she took our Queen from the purification hut. They... they hurt her the way she hurt our warriors."

"Call a full council session; it's time that I mete out some punishments. I've had enough of their insubordination. Tell them to wait for me, I'll come as soon as I've calmed down enough not to want to kill them all on sight. Erymma, how is she?"

"She's fine. The bruises and scrapes are superficial, and she doesn't have a concussion. Her arm could be a problem. It's a simple break just below the elbow, but because of the way her wrist is secured, I'm not able to set it properly. I only can hope that it heals all right. However, we should be prepared to break it again as soon as she is free of her bonds."

"I might have a solution to this problem." Gabrielle took the key from around her neck and easily opened the wrist cuff while the young healer held the injured arm. Soon, the arm was set and in a cast, and Erymma took her leave.

"I'm sorry this happened to you, Xena. The ones responsible will pay for this. That's a promise."

"Gabrielle, please wait. There's something you have to know. I'm the one responsible. They wouldn't have gone through with this without my permission. I wanted to pay for what I did to Ephiny and the others - and to you. Try to understand. It... it still frightens me that I was able to hurt you physically. It felt good to get back at least some of the pain I caused. I feel better because of this, and I'm sure the Amazons do too. They now know that my crimes didn't go unpunished, and we can start anew. Please, don't be too hard on the elders. They only did what they thought was right."

"Perhaps, but they also acted against an explicit order of their Queen. I can't afford to let this go unpunished. During the last season cycle and a half, I learned to accept their strange views on responsibility and fault, but I never will understand them. I'll think of something suitable - and now I'll try to get these other restraints off of you."

"The key, it doesn't fit, damn it."

"It's all right. I'm not ready to be freed yet. There are still some things I have to come to terms with and other things I have to tell you."

"Good. I'll be back tomorrow morning."

"No, please, I need more time. This morning I was ready to talk, but it would have been too early. I don't know how much time I'll need but I'll let you know."

"I'll be patient, Xena. Try to get some sleep."

"Gabrielle, the blindfold, would you please put it back over my eyes. It's easier to think this

way."

"Are you sure?" The bound woman nodded. The blonde picked the discarded scarf from the floor and put it around Xena's head. Soft lips found the warrior's cheek, and Gabrielle left the hut.

Two days later, Xena was ready. Her caretakers immediately took off the blindfold and one of them went to alert the Queen. "Can you tell me what happened to the elders?"

"Oh, Queen Gabrielle sentenced all of them to a fortnight of taking care of the youngsters for their disobedience. Before even half their time is up, they will be begging for another punishment. These young ones tend to run their caretakers ragged. The warriors have to take turns with them since the Queen centralised their schooling to give the mothers more time for themselves. Last season it was my turn, and after only a quarter moon, I was ready to sleep for at least a fortnight. This way they will think twice before disobeying the Queen a second time."

"You don't share their opinion?" Xena asked with a hint of doubt in her voice.

"No, I can understand why you did it," The woman answered after taking a deep, cleansing breath.

"I'm sorry for asking. I didn't mean to pry."

"It's all right, it's in the past. - The Queen's coming. I'll leave you alone."

"Thanks, Belora."

"You're welcome, Xena."

Xena couldn't hide her smile when Gabrielle opened the door to her prison; the morning light came from behind and painted slightly red highlights on her blonde head. Her well-defined abs were visible with every step, and her Amazon garb accentuated her breasts. The cage door was still open; she came in and gave Xena a chaste kiss on her fading bruises.

"I know you have much to tell me, but there's something you'll have to know first. - Two days ago, when I came back, you said that you had let me down. That's not true and whatever happens, it never will be true."

Xena's smile was sad. "I married Hercules."

"That's what people do when they love each other, Xena."

The tall woman closed her eyes. "Herc is a good partner and a loving father and the best friend one can think of-but I didn't love him. I never was in love with him. No, give me the chance to explain. I was a coward and of all the mistakes I ever made in my life, this was the biggest. Don't

get me wrong, I don't regret the birth of Ephiny and Gabrielle." She visibly swallowed. "I don't regret the time I spent with Herc and them, with Iolaus and Mother and Alkmene.

"I made you believe... I tried to get you as far away.... I was afraid. After Tripolis, I was afraid. During the fight, I couldn't bear the thought of living without you. I promised I would be there for you, even in death though I knew that in the after-world we wouldn't end up in the same place. When the antidote began to work, I knew that I had been given another chance to keep you safe, and the only way to do this was to get you as far away from me as possible.

"Before the fight, you told me that you long ago had accepted the risks involved in living with me, in loving me, but I wasn't strong enough to live with them. I could no longer bear the thought that being with me endangered your life every candle drop of every day." Gabrielle tried to interrupt but Xena simply ignored her. "First, I didn't know how I would do it, but then I saw a chance. I saw your eyes when you saw me with Hercules."

"You knew that despite everything I said after the wedding I always would keep my distance from your new life, you remembered how you felt when I married Perdicus. I can't believe that you simply used him to get rid of me."

There it was again, the sad, tired smile. "I didn't use him. Hercules knew the truth from the beginning. He told me that I was wrong and that it wasn't my choice but yours to make. He tried to talk me out of it. Somehow, one day, something I said convinced him to do it. I still don't know what it was. We had to make it convincing; sleeping with him was the logical consequence."

Gabrielle visibly gulped, but her eyes held Xena's steadily.

"I hurt you by choosing him, and I'm not proud of what I did. I can understand if you never want to talk to me again." The last words were spoken almost in a whisper, and Xena's eyes concentrated on the ground.

Gabrielle was beyond words, but the silence soon became oppressive. There only was one way to reassure her former lover. She took a step forward, her right hand found Xena's chin; she bent her head and posed a gentle kiss on her mouth. When Xena's eyes finally found her own she said, "I never stopped loving you and I never will, Xe."

"Are you sure?"

"I love you, I'm in love with you. But I need a promise. I know there probably will be other situations where you'll have your doubts, that's why I want you to promise that you never again will make my decisions for me. Talk to me, and we will sort it out together."

"You're not disgusted by what I did?"

"Disgusted? Xena, if you only knew. No, you have to know. All these moons since you first spoke of marrying Hercules I dreamed that one day you would just ride in the centre of the

village, swipe me up in your arms, and tell me that you always loved me, that you couldn't live without I was so ashamed, especially after the girls were born."

Xena tried to put her broken arm around the Amazon Queen, but her range of motion only allowed her to lay her hand on the woman's hip. "Do you know how much I long to take you in my arms, Gabrielle?"

"I more than long to be held by you, Xena." Another moment of silence, and once again there was a long chain around her neck and a key. "I hope Artemis is kind to us."

And the Moon Goddess was. The key opened Xena's second wrist cuff. Her muscles were stiff and hurting with every move, but her hand sneaked around the blonde woman's shoulders and drew her to her chest. Gabrielle's head found its space under Xena's chin, her heartbeat matching her own. It was a feeling, strange and comfortingly familiar at the same time, like swimming in a quiet lake and racing wild water rapids, like exploring new lands and coming home.

This day, they didn't speak any further. They both fell asleep.

About a candlemark before sunset, Xena's instincts reaffirmed themselves. She heard footsteps approaching and tried to get Gabrielle to move. She whispered in her ear and squeezed her arm, but the younger woman only snuggled closer. The door to the former sweating hut opened, and Ephiny came in. Brown eyes found blue and the curly haired woman smiled; she saw both of the warrior's arms draped around her friend, and her smile grew larger.

She whispered. "I'll go and get you something to eat and tell the guards to stay clear of the hut for the night." Xena raised her right eyebrow. "I know, it's not what it looks like but, well, an old Amazon is allowed to dream that you finally came to your senses." And she left with a smirk. Ephiny not only brought something to eat, but also lit a torch. The night fell, and Gabrielle stirred in her arms.

"I missed you, my love."

3. Interlude

The next key opened both ankle cuffs, now only the waist restraint was left - and Xena made the best of her vastly improved freedom. Slowly, she began to exercise her long limbs. The long period of enforced immobility had made her lose a lot of muscle tone and flexibility.

With the exception of her daily sparring sessions, Gabrielle spent the whole day with her prisoner, and more than once she fell asleep in her ex-lover's arms. To make it more comfortable for both of them some blankets and cushions had been brought in, but at Xena's insistence, they yet had to resume their sexual relationship.

"I want you to know all of me, all of my past. I don't deserve your friendship, and I'll never understand how I came to gain your love. But I'll always love you. You are my centre of strength

and goodness and beauty. I want us to be together when this is over, but it will be your decision and yours alone. You will decide where we'll live and what we'll do. To do this there no longer can be any secrets between us. I'm not looking forward to telling you all of these things, but you have to know."

And so, Xena told her about M'Lila. She spoke about her time with Borias, her adventures in Chin and Japa. She let her know about the Rhinegold and Grendel, but one thing she left for last.

"Xena, I know all about you and the Queen of the Northern Amazons. I know you killed her in an honourable battle. I know she taught you many things, and I know she was your lover. Some of the elders and children survived the attack of your army, they told us what happened."

"You're right and you're wrong, Gabrielle. I killed Cyane and it was a fair fight; but I also killed the members of her council, and I used their own traps against them. Some of my fighting techniques I learned from the Queen, among them how to walk swiftly and silently in the tops of the trees. I spent a lot of time with her, even most of my nights but we never were lovers; we didn't have sex. She said that the darkness in my soul was too strong to warrant her love and devotion.

"I tried everything to bed her, but it never worked. There were times when I could smell, could feel her desire for me, but like with you before, she never acted on it. She told me that I would have to sign over my soul to take her as a lover. Then, I didn't know what she wanted to tell me. I didn't know that there is a difference between sex and love, that's why I didn't know what she was talking about. That's one of the things you taught me, Gabrielle. Before I came to love you, sex was a game of power to me, no strings attached, no feelings involved. You taught me what it means to love someone."

"You're exaggerating, Xena."

"No, I'm not - but I think your fellow Amazons should also know about my past with the Northern Amazons."

"Xena, did you really think that this part of your past could go unnoticed? I knew since I accepted the mask of the Queen. Ephiny knows, and Solari, and Eponin, and the council of elders, and I don't know how many more. What you did then has nothing to do with what we're talking about now. I should have told you long ago, but whatever guilt you may feel about their deaths won't influence your future with my Amazon sisters or your standing in the Nation. As far as Amazon justice is concerned, the scales between us are balanced."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I am."

"So, the only thing left for me to pay for is the death of Hera, goddess of the hearth and the

family, isn't it?" It wasn't really a question, and Xena couldn't keep the contempt out of her voice when mentioning the dead goddess' name.

"That's not as easy as it sounds." Gabrielle told the tall warrior about her choices. "I'm sorry, Xe."

"Don't be. I have to pay for what I did, Gabrielle. Don't get me wrong, I would do it again, even with all my senses at peak efficiency. And while I never will regret my actions, I still must accept the consequences. Even if this were a real choice, I will not run from my responsibilities. And I certainly will not return to Ares' lair. No, I'll submit to the punishment of the gods, whatever it may be. It's the only honourable choice, the only choice if I ever hope to one day deserve your love. Did you read the instructions for my punishment?"

"Not yet, getting you back was more important. Xena, make love to me."

Gabrielle pressed her lips to Xena's, effectively preventing any kind of protest. The warrior shivered when the blonde began to nibble at her lower lip. She opened her mouth slightly, and her arms sneaked around a slim waist, her fingers retracing Gabrielle's spine. She returned the kiss, gently at first but growing in intensity and passion.

Small hands made the best of the unrestricted access to Xena's smooth skin and firm breasts. The tall warrior leaned against the back bars of her cage to allow Gabrielle even more freedom while her own hands were busy untying the Queen's top. They leisurely explored the other's body, reacquainting themselves with once familiar territory.

The younger woman's lips found the pulse point at Xena's neck. She could feel the blood pumping rapidly beneath and followed the vein with her tongue first, then grazing the skin with her teeth. A sharp intake of breath and an even more accelerated heartbeat was all the encouragement she needed.

She slowly descended the taller woman's chest and immediately found already hardened nipples. One of her hands left a fine toned buttock and gently cupped a breast instead while her mouth transformed the other one to granite-like rock. When Gabrielle finally switched sides, a low groan erupted above her. She continued to suckle and squeeze, eliciting continuous moans from the powerful woman.

"Oh gods," she gasped in between breaths, "do you know what you're doing to me, Gabrielle?"

The blonde lifted her head from the still enticing bosom, looking at Xena with innocent eyes and an ill-concealed smirk. Her voice suddenly seemed half an octave deeper.

"Since you left me, all these moons ago, I dreamed of making love to you. I dreamed of ravaging your body, of devouring every inch of your skin, of controlling your pleasure from beginning to end. And then suddenly there was your body, these last quarter moons, offering me everything I craved, while your eyes told me that it wouldn't have been real, that it wasn't love you longed for but power and freedom. I would have only been a means to an end. It hurt so much to see you

like this. Now, that you're back, I couldn't resist the temptation of exacting a small revenge."

Xena slowly bent forward and placed a soft kiss on her beloved's lips, continuing on to the right ear. She whispered. "I want you to make love to me. I want your lips and tongue on every inch of my body. I want you to control my pleasure." She moved to look into green eyes with golden highlights. "All the years we were together, Gabrielle, it was always me who called the shots, me to decide when to make camp, where to go next. I even decided when and how we'd make love. I let you down more times than I care to remember, and I would spend a lifetime chained to your bed to make it up to you, my love."

The earnest pleading in the blue eyes left no doubt of the seriousness of her words, but still Gabrielle had to be sure. "Oh, Xena, don't say this just to please me. I know how you thrive on being in control."

"I can't deny it, Gabrielle, usually I do. But only because never before has there been someone I trusted enough to give in to the temptations of submission." The tall woman's eyes were calm, but her voice was trembling.

The Amazon Queen looked at her with wide eyes, and then her expression gradually changed to her mask of command, only slightly softened by her bright smile. "Grab the bars to the right and the left of your head, Xena. Don't let go until I tell you to. Don't speak." Gabrielle felt the shiver running through the other woman's body. Xena's hands found the sidebars of the cage, and she closed her eyes in surrender.

The smaller woman resumed her ministrations to Xena's breasts, slowly descending towards her navel, savouring every square inch of skin and delighting in the muffled groans and moans the older woman couldn't suppress. Her own desire was increased by the distinctive scent of the warrior's arousal mingling with her own. So, despite her best intentions, she reached the real centre of her intentions faster than initially planned.

The dark curls between Xena's legs were damp with her moisture. Gabrielle took a quick lap at the other woman's centre, and nearly fainted with the intoxicating taste. To keep control, she had to keep her distance from the focal point of her addiction; so, she nibbled her way down to the knee, from the knee to the toes and back to the knee level. There, she switched sides. She contemplated descending down to the other toes but instead decided to lick her way upwards.

Xena's moans now were a constant background noise, growing in volume. Gabrielle's head was only inches away from its goal, and finally she couldn't resist any longer. Her tongue dived down, grazing the other woman's sphincter, shortly penetrating her folds. Instead of concentrating on her lover's most intimate centre, the young woman redirected the top of her tongue to Xena's thighs.

"Gabrielle, please...."

The young woman hoisted herself up on her elbows. "Hush, don't. Don't speak. You're mine;

your body is mine to play with. Or did you change your mind?"

The tall woman vigorously shook her head. "I'm sorry. It will not happen again."

"Let's try again. I want you to keep your eyes open. I want you to see what I'm doing." Gabrielle retreated to the other end of the cage, turned to the left and began to undo the laces of her right boot. She took her time, giving Xena ample opportunity to drink in the sight of her well-muscled legs and slightly bouncing breasts. Still bent over, she made a half turn to the other side to take off her left boot, also agonisingly slow. Her head almost touched the top bars of the cage when she once again stood and discarded the last items of clothing, her skirt and breeches.

Xena's breath caught in her throat, and her hands tensed around the steel bars at the sight. The young woman's mons was clean-shaven except for a thin line in the middle. It was exactly as it had been when they still were lovers, before Illusia, before Chin, before Britannia.

Gabrielle inched closer and stopped only a hand's width away from Xena's face. "Don't move. I just wanted you to have a close look." She then straddled the bound woman and continued to tease her. She didn't sit down, instead her hands closed around Xena's to give her some leverage. She pressed her hard nipples against the taller woman's chest, rubbing breast against breast. Two nipples made contact and both women moaned. Gabrielle retreated just enough to almost lose contact, and she began to whisper in Xena's ear.

"Do you know what we would be doing now if you hadn't forced me to begin again? I'll tell you. Your scent was so intoxicating; I just would have teased you for a little bit by running my tongue in circles on your thigh. My lips, then, would have sucked your nether lips to get them all hot. I would have cleaned every crook and cranny of your folds, never able to lick away all of your juices. I would feel your frantic heartbeat under the flat of my tongue while getting ready to suck at your clit. All your senses by now would be focused on this small bundle of nerves but I wouldn't let you come, all the while fighting against my own need for release.

"Finally I would enter your slick opening. Two fingers would be enough to find the special spot inside, the one that always made you scream my name, the one you told me only I know to find. My mouth would lock itself around your protruding clit and you would come like you never did before. I would let you ride all the waves of your orgasm and revel in the feeling of your inner muscles clenching around my fingers. And then my digits would start anew, not only touching this special spot but circling and massaging it to a new eruption and then I would allow myself to...."

A frustrated groan interrupted her, she let go of Xena's hands and sat down in her lap, close enough to be tickled by the other's dark curls. Xena's long fingers were white knuckled with the strain to stay in position, her eyes were shining with unconcealed lust and her nipples hurt from arousal. Her partner's distinctive scent of sweet musk mingled with her own and made her slightly light-headed. Silence reigned and finally there was the command. "Kiss my breasts, Xena, only with your lips. Don't use your tongue, keep your hands where they are. - Yes, that's it my love, go slowly."

And Xena made the best of her limited options. She covered the other woman's breasts with a barrage of small, rapid kisses, barely taking the time to breathe but carefully avoiding the taut nipples. Gabrielle's breathing became ragged, and Xena changed tactics. She brought her head back and carefully took aim, using her lips to nibble her way all around the areola of the blond woman's hard buds. After what to both women seemed like an eternity, she sought Gabrielle's eyes for permission and closed her soft lips around the proud points.

Slowly increasing the pressure, she painstakingly avoided touching them with her teeth or tongue and was rewarded by the smooth flesh of the smaller woman's centre rocking against her own. Xena couldn't help but react, and they soon were moving in an enticingly familiar rhythm. When she came up for air, a firm hand guided her head to Gabrielle's mouth. A tongue entered and once again the proud warrior surrendered. The urgency to explore that was driving the Amazon Queen couldn't be denied.

The rhythm of their thrusts accelerated considerably and both women cried out the other's name in release. Gabrielle snuggled close, her head resting slightly above Xena's breasts, into the arms that encircled her protectively. They both fell asleep. About two candelmarks later, green eyes opened at the sensation of being watched. She turned her head and found her gaze captured by vivid blue eyes, smiling at her.

"We're not yet finished, my love," she whispered before guiding Xena to lie down on the ground, at least as far as the waist restraint allowed. She then spread the other woman's legs and settled between them, running the tips of her fingers along the sensitive surface of the inner thighs, and smiling at the goose bumps the simple movement produced. She found Xena's eyes, and before devouring an already peaking clit she said, "Close your eyes and enjoy, my love."

They played the rest of the day and the better part of the next night, not even acknowledging the brief presence of Xena's caretakers or the fact that the Amazon regent personally brought a meal of cider, bread and cheese - and not particularly surprised when a last key opened the warrior's waist restraint.

4. Out of the frying pan...

Early the next morning, Gabrielle reluctantly left for her hut. At Xena's insistence, she secured the cage door. She settled down on the back porch, the only luxury her simple hut possessed, and broke the seals of the second scroll. She was relieved to read that before the punishment could start Xena had to be physically at peak efficiency. It even contained a detailed training schedule consisting of running, weight lifting, and combat drills. To her dismay, it also made clear that her lover had to spend the remainder of her time in the cage, albeit unchained.

The training started rather slow, but within a fortnight Xena ran faster than the fastest scout and was able to outfight a whole squadron of warriors. It was time to declare her submission to the punishment before Artemis' altar. The words she had to use were in the scroll as well as a description of the clothing she had to wear. The difficult part began only then, for both of them.

To the uninformed, there was barely a change in the routine. Xena continued with her runs and the drilling sessions with the army though she limited herself to one-on-one fights most of the time. She also worked as a teacher to the scouts and held battle strategy classes.

Those who knew had a hard time understanding how she even managed to take a single step. They knew that in the evening, alone in her cage, the proud woman curled into a ball and bit on a leather covered steel bar to keep from crying out in pain. At least the pain subsided during the night giving her a few candlemarks of undisturbed sleep.

In the morning, when the first rays of dawn reached the village, it all began anew. The cage door was unlocked, Xena knelt near the centre and her wrists were cuffed to the roof. Gabrielle gave her a gentle kiss and washed her body with a soft sponge; she then donned the thin leather gloves and began to apply the salve on the tall woman's body, from the forehead to the soles of her feet, only leaving the palm of her hands untouched. Only heartbeats later the pain started - not slowly claiming one part of her body after the other; but suddenly and all encompassing. The wrist cuffs helped her to stay still for the three or four candledrops the salve needed to completely sink in. Most of Xena's friends at one time or another had insisted on trying the horrible concoction on their own bodies, and they all had to wash it away after only a few candledrops. Xena wasn't allowed such a luxury.

The effectiveness of the salve was astonishing; not even the torturers in Chin, famous for their clinical cruelty, could rely on such a powerful tool. A tiny part of the ex-warlord couldn't help being impressed with the simplicity of the ingredients. It held no secrets for her because she had to mix it herself. The village's healer, Erymma, had adamantly refused to prepare something designed to bring pain instead of taking it away.

From experience, Xena knew that one could get accustomed to pain but this time it didn't work. It had not been an exaggeration when Artemis wrote that she would have to withstand more pain than ever before in her life. Every day it was as if it was for the first time, and no amount of mental preparation was able to ease her suffering - though somehow she was grateful that it was only physical pain.

The first part of her sentence was through, twenty days of pain, followed by a three-day period of rest, well, sort of. The tall woman didn't allow herself any illusions.

With the rising sun, Gabrielle and Ephiny fastened the wrist and ankle cuffs, as well as the waist restraint, firmly in place. The Amazon Queen kissed her eyes and put the blindfold on while her regent prepared the earplugs. Xena expected to be assaulted by memories stemming from her dark past or at least by images showing off the dark consequences of Hera's death. Instead she found peace, real peace, thus giving her the opportunity to regain her inner strength. She was calm and well rested when the second phase of her punishment began.

She also found her state of mind surprisingly changed and longed to let Gabrielle know about it, but part of the goddesses' instructions were that she wasn't allowed to talk to anyone outside of

her duties as a warrior and teacher.

For the first time, she didn't see the pain as a mere whim of the gods but foremost as a chance to be purged of all the dark and evil aspects of her past, a temporary stay in Tartarus with the promise of a new chance at life in all its different layers. The desperation she had barely been able to contain before was gone, and she somehow learned to smile through the pain.

A few days before the end of her second twenty-day period, rumours about a huge army of Romans and Persians marching towards Amazon and Centaur territory reached the village. Scouts were sent to evaluate the threat. They came back at the break of dawn, and the council met to talk war and defence. Instead of Gabrielle, this day Ephiny opened the door to Xena's prison. "Stand up and put your leathers on, Xena, the Queen expects your presence in the council's hall."

"Didn't you forget something, Eph?"

"The Queen's orders were unambiguous. She said immediately, and she said, and this is a quote: 'don't bother with this senseless punishment'. Hurry up!"

"All right, tell her I'm on my way. I'll join you in a couple of candledrops."

"Don't do it, Xena."

"I don't have a choice, Ephiny, and you know it. I have to see this punishment thing through to the end. Gabrielle may be able to defy the will of the gods but for once in my life, I can't. The Queen doesn't have to know about it."

"I understand, Xena. I'll help you, but don't even try to fool the Queen. She will see the difference. We have to hurry."

A quarter of a candlemark later, Ephiny and Xena entered the hall, effectively silencing the crowd of elders, warriors, and craftswomen by taking their places to the right and the left of Gabrielle's throne. The young woman turned her head and whispered only for the leather-clad warrior to hear: "We have to talk. Stay here when the session is over."

Addressing the assembly, she stood and without raising her voice easily reached the back part of the huge room. "My sisters; as you all know by now, the scouts confirmed the presence of an army marching toward our joint borders with the Centaurs. It is lead by Marc Anthony and combines Roman and Persian forces. On their way, they already destroyed half a dozen villages. We and the Centaurs will be next."

The room erupted in shouts and questions, and it took some time for discipline to reaffirm itself. One of the most repeated questions was, "Why do Romans ally with Persians?"

Gabrielle simply answered. "We don't know."

"But based on what we do know, the Queen came to an informed guess," Xena continued, ignoring Ephiny's surprised look. "Since Caesar was murdered, his nephew Octavian and Marc Anthony are fighting for dominance in Rome and the Roman Empire. Octavian has on his side the better part of the Senate and the legions around the city of Rome under Brutus' command. Marc Anthony is backed by a large part of the army and Queen Cleopatra of Egypt. While Octavian is firmly established in Rome, Marc Anthony is trying to get there from the outside. He's trying to gain control of the provinces with the side effect of making life in the Capitol as uncomfortable as possible. With Egypt, he controls the grain storage of the Empire. It only would be logical to use Cleopatra's connections with Persia to form an alliance. With Persia on his side, he can cut off all the import of luxury items such as silk, exotic slaves, pepper, mustard, and other things. This would be a hard blow for the Patricians supporting Octavian. Should he manage to put his foot on Greece, they would have to rely on Roman wine only, and as we all know, one day it may be great but as long as the Romans are not ready to learn, their wine isn't worth the effort needed to grow it."

"Why not take on Athens or Corinth or any other of the city states?"

This time Gabrielle answered. "It should be obvious, my sisters. Amazons and Centaurs together form the most powerful military force in Greece. Defeating us will discourage any other opposition, and the last thing he wants is to destroy the wealth of the city-states. He'll need their taxes, first to take Rome, and then to get rid of his allies. All right, we don't have time to thoroughly discuss Roman politics. I already exchanged carrier pigeons with Tyldus. We will meet with the Centaur army at the edge of the forest. With our combined forces, the enemy army will still outnumber us three to two. We will have to rely on strategy as well as on strength and speed. That's why we both decided that Xena, as the most experienced among us, will lead our armies. This isn't open to discussion. I also decided that the punishment imposed on Xena by the gods is suspended until this threat to the Nation is eliminated."

Again, a chorus of voices uttered dismay, surprise, and support. Finally, all eyes concentrated on the tribe's priestess who stood in front of the Queen. "Queen Gabrielle, you can't disregard the will of the gods this blatantly. It will endanger the whole Amazon Nation if you do so. I know, it's a great opportunity to spare your lover the pain but..."

"You speak out of turn, priestess." Ephiny bellowed. "The Queen's decision is not to be questioned."

One of the elders proposed to have a vote considering this point. Gabrielle once again took her seat and waited for the calm to return.

"There will be no vote and also no further discussions. I wanted to avoid it, but you leave me no other choice." The blond woman slowly stood and put on her royal mask. "In the name of Artemis, goddess of the hunt and the moon, patron goddess of the Amazon Nation, I, Queen Gabrielle, invoke the Chosen's Prerogative, effective from this moment on to the end of this crisis." She lifted the mask up on her head and continued. "This meeting is adjourned. Eponin, Solari, Ephiny. See that the army is ready to leave the village tomorrow at first light. Leave

enough warriors behind to protect the elders and the children. I want a preliminary report during the midday meal, and I want two guards stationed at the entrance of this hut. No one is allowed to enter, under no condition whatsoever."

Finally, when Xena and Gabrielle were alone, the tall woman quietly said, "Perhaps the priestess is right, Gabrielle. I can command your army and continue the punishment including the restraints at night. This way we don't risk angering the gods."

"No, she's not. I need you at peak efficiency, my love. This has nothing to do with my desire to see this punishment end, regardless of how it may look to the priestess or whomever. This is all about you and your special touch in leading an army. You never were one to lead from behind the scenes, sitting atop your horse surrounded by a bunch of bodyguards, conveying your orders by messengers only.... My warriors as well as the Centaurs will follow you because you fight as one of them, as the best of them, because you're always where it is most dangerous. You can't do this when you're hurting all over. I spent a lot of time observing you during your drills and classes. The others probably aren't aware of it, but you and I both know that the pain somehow dulls your senses. No, don't. I know you won't admit to it. I sent them all away to prove it you, away from prying eyes. Grab this, and defend yourself."

Gabrielle tossed a staff towards Xena, picked up her own, and took a defensive battle stance. "Gabrielle, please stop it. I don't want to hurt you."

"You first have to touch me, my warrior, so put your staff where your mouth is and attack; or is the great warrior princess afraid to face off against a small storyteller from Potedaia?"

"You know I never could resist a challenge, but I promise I'll go easy on you."

"Yadda, yadda, yadda. I'm getting tired of waiting."

Xena was well aware that with a staff the Amazon Queen could easily defeat even the fiercest of her warriors. She knew she was in for some serious sparring, and she also knew that the pain indeed was slowing her down some. Still, she was confident in her abilities and wanted to put a quick end to what she regarded as being nonsense.

A fast combination of blows aimed for the chest was blocked and immediately followed up by some undercut swings at thigh level. Gabrielle simply jumped out of range and countered by using the length of her own staff to her advantage. Its end stabbed Xena's midriff and knocked the wind out of her. She saw it coming but wasn't fast enough to prevent being hit. In a real fight, a blow to the head would have disabled her adversary.

The brass-armoured warrior soon regained her composure and now was more careful with her attack moves. The bout lasted considerably longer, nevertheless, it ended with Xena sitting on her butt, taken out by a backhanded reverse sweep she should have been able to hear coming. She still wasn't ready to give in, so during the next couple of quarter candlemarks, Gabrielle continued to prove her point, and finally her opponent conceded defeat.

"Perhaps you should take command of the army, Queen Gabrielle. You're more than capable of leading them. My timing is off, my balance is off, my senses are dulled, and my reflexes are far too slow. If this had been for real, you could have hurt me pretty badly."

"If this had been for real you would have put more force behind your blows. If this had been for real, you would have tried to outmanoeuvre my staff and go for hand-to-hand combat. Xena, except for the first bout you still were all but easy to defeat, and without your handicap I still wouldn't stand a chance. I just had to prove a point. And I may be able to hold my own one-on-one, but you're the only one I trust with the lives of my sisters."

"What about Artemis and the other gods?"

"Artemis reminded me to refer to the Chosen's Prerogative should it become necessary. It's a good way to avoid senseless debates with the elders, and it also puts the responsibility for interrupting your punishment on my shoulders only. The Gods can't hold you responsible for it. No, don't, don't tell me that you'll go to the temple and try to convince Artemis otherwise. She knows my heart. And now, we will take a bath; I need you in top form as soon as possible. There's a lot to do. And tonight you will stay in my hut."

Xena answered with a kiss. She knew the Amazon Queen was right concerning her abilities, but she also knew that she couldn't let her take the sole responsibility for suspending the punishment.

During the day she kept busy with preparations, choosing a special squad of scouts and archers to serve as her personal messengers, selecting the members of the royal guard to have the Queen protected, and helping with the supplies of the field hospital Erymma was putting together. In the evening the village gathered for a party to celebrate the community and the courage of the warriors. As the designated leader of the combined army, Xena also had to attend. After dinner, she spoke a few words of encouragement, and while Gabrielle prepared to tell the story of their encounter with the Persian army at Tripolis the tall warrior sneaked away to Artemis' temple.

The Amazon Queen and her general left the festivities early, just after Gabrielle had finished the story of how they had outsmarted Caesar and Crassus to free Vercingetorix. "Take your clothes off, my warrior. I intend to savour these last peaceful candlemarks we have together. I want to feel your skin on mine, your heartbeat raging with desire and mine responding alike."

Xena didn't have to be told twice, and was standing before the younger woman mere heartbeats later. Her hands clasped behind her back, she was desperately trying to resist the urge simply to claim as her own the beauty sprawled out on the bed. Gabrielle called to her with a crooked finger, and she obeyed the unspoken command. She gently pushed some of the blonde's hair aside when her hand was captured in a firm grip.

"What's this?"

"New bracers?"

"Xena! I want the truth."

"It's the truth. They are as effective as my other ones, perhaps even more so. But that's not all that they are. They are also a reminder that my punishment isn't over yet." Gabrielle's annoyed and impatient look prompted her to tell the whole story of her visit to the temple. "I went there to tell the gods that you only acted in the best interest of your people and that the cessation of my punishment was only meant as a temporary reprieve. I, I told Artemis that I'm ready to start all over with the punishment, right from the beginning to make amends. No," a long finger sealed Gabrielle's lips, "please, let me finish. They didn't take me up on it. There was a voice coming from the small wooden statue. It told me that the gods know your intentions, and that I would be allowed to resume my punishment with the third set of instructions as soon as the threat to the Amazon Nation has been eliminated. Then I felt these new bracers around my arms. The voice said that they have to stay on until I'm back in the cage to face the remainder of my punishment. It may sound odd or even presumptuous, but I'm sure that the gods are content with your decision."

Gabrielle's fingers gently traced the intricate jewelled inlay of the bracers, looked into the sincere eyes of the raven-haired beauty, and decided to change the subject. When they finally finished playing and exploring, the first hints of dawn were colouring the sky and instead of getting some sleep, they voted for a leisurely breakfast.

Ephiny and Solari already were in the dining hut, quietly consuming cereals and tea, but they too obviously hadn't had any rest. Solari's eyes immediately fell on the new bracers, and Xena had to explain how she got them. "You know they're made of the same steel as the cage is, don't you."

"Yes, it's too bad their colouring doesn't go with her armour, Eph." This answer told the Amazon regent clearly that her Queen wasn't at all happy with the way things were going, but she also knew her well enough to keep her mouth shut in situations like this.

Gabrielle reluctantly travelled by horse while Xena and the main force of the Amazons chose to use the treetops. They met with the Centaur forces in the early candlemarks of the afternoon. The enemy was still three days away, so the joint army had the advantage to choose the battlefield. Just a day outside of both Amazon and Centaur territory, there was an area where small stripes of forest were interspersed with smooth plains of grassland. It was perfect for using the special skills of both groups to their advantage, with the Amazons as at home in the forest as the Centaurs were handicapped in the thick underbrush.

Marc Anthony was a good soldier, but he definitively would have been better off following orders instead of giving them. His deployment of troupes was fairly predictable, and he didn't have the faintest idea of what his opponents were capable. The first day Amazons and Centaurs had about ten dead and a score wounded. His losses were at least five fold, and his superior numbers were already running low.

Gabrielle insisted on giving them the opportunity to surrender or retreat. In the company of two

scouts, Xena sneaked near the command tent and sent an arrow straight into the middle of his desk; but as soon as they had entered the perimeter of his camp the former warlord knew that it wouldn't do any good.

Like a cook could smell a single rotten onion in a cellar full of them, Xena could feel Ares' presence in the enemy's camp. She was tempted to let the others know but finally opted to keeping it quiet. There was a part of her that didn't want to discourage her fellow fighters by letting them know that the god of War was supporting the other side. There also was a part of her that thought she personally could take on Ares and come out victorious, but there was also a part of her that was convinced that, considering Marc's ineptitude as a commander, he soon would change camps of his own accord.

The next morning, a barrage of arrows almost hit the young Queen, answering Gabrielle's message. This day the Roman warlord was more aware of the things going on around him and even managed to avoid yesterday's mistakes, so Xena didn't feel half as bad as the day before when he lost another three score of soldiers to one or the other of her traps.

The following days brought no further strategic improvement on the enemy's side. Now they were outnumbered, and still they kept on attacking. Day after day, the opposing army was reduced to half its original size while the allies had fewer losses to mourn - then the unpredictable happened.

Around midday, a Centaur runner found Xena in the midst of dispatching a group of Persians. He told her that Gabrielle had disappeared from the infirmary where she was assisting the healers.

"Did you search the camp and check the perimeter watch?"

"Erymma said that suddenly a man appeared in the middle of the tent, grabbed Gabrielle's arm, and they both were gone in a crack of blue lightning."

"Ares! I knew I never should have let her out of my sight!" Xena's deep voice never before so much resembled the growling of a huge predator as it did now. She took a deep breath to calm herself. "Go tell all the others to retreat to the tree line. Tell them to defend themselves if necessary but not to start any kind of new attack, regardless of how tempting it may be. There will be a messenger soon from Marc Anthony. Send him to my tent."

Though they still were facing about a dozen enemy soldiers, not one of them tried to attack the tall warrior from behind when she turned and stalked back to her camp. The Amazon war council was already waiting to discuss their options, but she dismissed them with a few words. "There are no options. The Romans now have Gabrielle. Otherwise, Ares would have come to me personally. We'll wait for their conditions."

She entered her tent and was hard pressed not to act on the dark wave of anger and rage trying to consume her soul. Part of her was tempted to leave the camp and fight her way through the enemy lines to get to her lover. Part of her knew that in this case, all she would find was

Gabrielle's dead body - and that Ares' ploy would have worked.

About a candlemark later, when the flaps of her tent were opened and a grim looking Ephiny and Eponin escorted in Marc Anthony, she was calmly sitting on her bed, meticulously sharpening her sword.

"Anthony, what a surprise, please take a seat. Eponin, please go and get hold of Tyldus. I hope you don't mind waiting, Marc Anthony; I want all the parties concerned present. Feel free to pour yourself a drink or eat some dried dates. Our cook prepared them the same way Queen Cleopatra prefers hers. She's a really remarkable woman, as you surely know."

"That's what she told me about you, Xena. She also told me never to underestimate your skills. So, what do you think you'll achieve with this polite chit-chat?"

"Decide for yourself, there could be a number of reasons. It could be that I'm talking to keep myself from beating the stuffing out of you." Xena for the first time raised her head, and the Roman Patrician found himself faced with pale blue eyes colder than the snowfields at Mount Amaro and deadlier than the waters of the river Styx. "It could be that... Ah, there's Tyldus coming. Would you please let him in, Regent Ephiny."

"My pleasure, General."

Xena waited another candledrop for the tall Centaur to get settled and then once again addressed the Roman, still with the schooled voice of a skilled negotiator hiding an iron fist behind gloves of silk. "And now, Marc Anthony, tell us what your master ordered you to demand in exchange for the Amazon Queen. Ares, or do you prefer to call him Mars? Anyway, the God of war took a great risk by abducting his sister's Chosen. What does he want?"

"Surrender, complete and unconditional."

"Where would be the fun in this? No, oh mighty Roman, that's not his style. I suppose he'd rather want to even the odds, I suppose, it's me he wants."

"How did you..."

"There's one thing you should have learned from Caesar, and that's know your enemies at least as well as you know yourself. Less than five years ago, I was ruling more than half of Greece, and I commanded an army twice the size yours was. I was Ares' Chosen, and I walked away from him."

"To fight for those not able to defend themselves. That's what Cleopatra said. I'm starting to see the wisdom of her words. She warned me. You're right; it's you he wants. I was to tell you that I was ready to make an exchange, you for the Amazon Queen, then I was to kill the Queen with you in chains and helpless to prevent it. He said it would dishearten the Amazons and destroy your spirit. He told me that you would be nothing more than a babbling idiot, and would no longer be a threat to anyone."

"Babbling idiot, no, that's rather improbable, that's not the way I react to the death of people I love - and Ares is well aware of that.

"When I was fifteen, my brother was killed by a warlord and I became one myself to get my revenge. Two summers later, your friend Julius Caesar put me on a cross and broke my legs. I became the Destroyer of Nations, orchestrating the defeat of his army more than once, the last time in Britannia with Boadicea's help." Xena's voice, far from proudly recalling past victories, was devoid of any emotion. But for just the blink of an eye, the Roman was certain he saw something akin to grief in her eyes. "A few moons ago, Hera killed my daughters out of hatred for their father, and in response I killed the goddess of the family and the hearth.

"Since I walked away from Ares' path and the darkness in my soul, he wants me back. He has tried time and again without success. I suppose he hopes that seeing Gabrielle die will bring back my dark side and make me once again accessible to him. It would break something in my soul, that's right, but you and your men wouldn't live long enough to savour your victory because I wouldn't care how many of you I'd take with me to Tartarus."

"Why are you telling me all of this? If you're trying to scare me away, it doesn't work."

The tall woman stood and slowly sheathed her weapon. She moved with the swiftness and precision of a predator and when she reached the desk he instinctively also stood, putting his hand on the hilt of his sword. Their eyes locked, and he could feel a cold shiver running down his spine. The tension in his body involuntarily lessened when she once again spoke.

"To Caesar the only person that counted was himself He would have used what I just told you about the Amazon Queen to his advantage, but you are a soldier not a politician. You are ruthless in battle and honourable in life. You never go back on your word, and Roman virtues still have meaning for you. That's why your officers and your soldiers follow you. So, what do you intend doing?"

"We never met before, so what do you base your judgement on?"

Xena's smile didn't reach her eyes, but it somewhat tempered their coldness. "Experience. We've captured some prisoners these last few days. Your men, the Romans, that is, are loyal to you, and they don't act out of fear but because they believe in what you stand for. And then there's Cleopatra. She associated herself with Caesar for the sake of her country, and he deceived her to strengthen his own power, as he always has. She never would have allowed you in her bed if you were even remotely alike, not even for the future of Egypt. But you didn't answer my question."

"You really aren't what I expected, Xena, but you are right. Not all the Roman and Greek gods combined could bring me to kill an unarmed woman, not even if she is the leader of my enemies. But I also can't just let her go, she's too valuable. There's only one honourable way: you fight for her. Two candelmarks from now, the Amazon Queen will be waiting in the middle of today's battlefield. To set her free you will have to defeat ten of the best fighters of my army. I give you my word of honour that she will be freed even if you die in this fight - and tomorrow all bets are

off and this war will continue. Without you leading the Amazons and Centaurs, I'm sure we still have a chance. And don't bring that round thing of yours."

"Regent Ephiny and our weapons' master will be at my side. They won't interfere with the fight, but make sure to get Queen Gabrielle back, regardless of the outcome."

"So be it." The fair-haired Roman stood, turned around, and left the tent.

"Xena, that's insane. You're more than brilliant as a fighter, we all know this, but alone against ten experienced soldiers. You don't stand a chance." The deep voice came from where the tall Centaur was standing.

"There's no other choice, Tyldus. Marc Anthony may have forgotten about Ares, I haven't.

"The punishment devised by Athena and Justice should have prevented my participation in this war. That's probably why he arranged the whole thing. By leading the combined armies, I foiled Ares' plans. But he still had a good show to enjoy with the battles going as they did. You don't need me to end this war in your favour. So, Amazons and Centaurs will stay safe, one way or the other.

"Ares won't kill Gabrielle himself, he knows he would get into too much trouble by personally killing Artemis' Chosen; but he also won't honour Marc Anthony's word if it's too easy for me. Ten against one are just the odds to keep him interested and entertained enough. Getting me back at the moment isn't his primary goal. The Roman situation, however, is bound to keep him occupied for quite some time, regardless of Marc Anthony's fate here. Brutus and Octavian won't stay allies for long; there are simply too many other parties involved. I also suppose that some of the recently conquered provinces will attempt to free themselves from Roman rule. Yes, Ares will be occupied.

"Besides, it isn't the first time that I have had to face more than five or six opponents at a time. I don't say that it will be a stroll through a meadow, but it can be done, my friend."

"I really hope you are right, Xena."

Xena, the two Amazons and Tyldus stepped from behind the cover of the trees as soon as her opponents appeared at the other side of the middle sized field, Gabrielle in their midst. Her hands were bound in front of her. But instead of keeping her this was during the fight, Marc Anthony stepped from behind his men and cut her restraints. The Amazon Queen's face was a study in anger and worry when she reached Xena and exchanged a few words with her - worry for the safety of her lover and anger about the fact that the tall warrior once again was in danger of sacrificing herself for her.

The younger woman continued in the direction of her Amazon sisters, Xena took another step forward, drew her sword and the fight was engaged without further words. When she was

surprised that Marc Anthony led the attack himself, her face didn't show it.

To Gabrielle's experienced eyes, it quickly was obvious that Romans and Persians followed a preconceived battle plan. Marc Anthony and one of his officers kept Xena occupied while the others slowly encircled her. They step by step inched closer, not knowing that Xena would have been able to feel their approach even with her eyes closed. Two more feet and they would be within striking distance. The Amazon Queen knew that her lover also had a plan, but still she involuntarily held her breath. Xena dispatched one of her immediate attackers by knocking him out with the flat of her sword against his temple. She then erupted in a blur of motion, jumping and slicing, kicking and thrusting, ducking and feinting.

Helpless against the dark haired woman's superior speed and skill, they tried to reorganise their ranks, and this time they seemed to get a head start. None were dead, but half were out of commission. Xena held three Romans in check with her intricate sword play while two Persian blades struck her back, her armour taking the brunt of it, but the raw power of the blows brought her to her knees. Marc Anthony staggered to his feet and aimed for her throat.

She quickly changed her weapon to her left hand and repositioned her right arm to deflect the Roman's sword with her bracer. Still occupied at getting back on her feet and holding the others at bay, she felt the impact and heard the surprised gasps of both the Amazons and her opponents. They all were looking at Marc Anthony's sword, or rather what was left of his sword. Almost one third was missing, with tiny parts of it lying harmlessly scattered on the ground.

One of the Persians had the presence of mind to try another attack from behind. Xena saw it in Marc Anthony's eyes, swirled her weapon around and impaled the man without even turning her head.

The tall warrior's eyes changed to an even darker, colder blue, and Gabrielle knew that for the first time in this fight Xena's sensitive nostrils registered the distinctive scent of her enemy's blood. A deadly smile appeared on Xena's face, and the Amazon Queen prayed to her Patron Goddess. 'Please, let her keep control, don't let her lose the light.'

The two surviving Persians immediately threw themselves against her. Xena somersaulted easily over their heads, turned around in mid-air and cut their heads off with a fluid, elegant movement belying the immense strength necessary to do so. Her smile broadened and her eyes grew colder. With her sword weaving some sort of impenetrable shield in front of her, she slowly advanced towards the seven remaining enemies.

The blonde woman knew they soon would be dead, and then and only then, she would have a chance to get back the woman she loved, the woman now dominated by a deeply embedded need to kill, a legacy from the times when she was proud to call herself Ares' Chosen. Marc Anthony seemed mesmerised by her display, and while the others retreated he just stood and looked at her. When she was at striking distance, he threw the remnants of his sword in front of her feet. She didn't stop the movement of her blade, but she no longer advanced either.

"I, Marc Anthony, rightful ruler of Rome, declare you, Xena of Amphipolis the indisputable

winner of this fight. There's no need to slaughter my men just to prove a point. I should have known when we talked, but until now I never understood why Caesar always feared you."

Xena's sword arm froze in mid-motion, and for an agonisingly long heartbeat it seemed as if she were about to strike the tall Roman down. She then abruptly sheathed her weapon and answered. "Go home, Marc Anthony; you're Roman but I don't want to kill you. Go home."

The tall man nodded toward his soldiers, and they left the battlefield. When they had disappeared behind the tree line at the other side, Xena turned her head. Her eyes no longer were cold and distant when they found Gabrielle's. The younger woman immediately was at her side and embraced her warrior with strong arms whispering how much she loved her.

"I love you, too. Gabrielle, I could use some help getting back to the camp, and then I'll need the blacksmith, my armour needs mending."

"You're hurt."

"It's just a scra...."

"It's never just a scratch, Xena. For you even to mention it, it must hurt like Tartarus. What happened?"

"I don't know for sure yet, but either my back armour broke with the two blows I got there or they were forceful enough to embed the armour plates itself slightly in my skin. It probably will be a little difficult to get it off."

5. Trial by ordeal

If she hadn't been so relieved that her stubborn lover still was alive, the Amazon Queen would have given her a piece of her mind. As it was, she was pacing in front of the command tent while Erymma and the Amazon's blacksmith tried to get Xena out of her brass armour, muttering to herself. 'A little difficult, pah, difficult, my ass! Warrior Princess of understatement, that's what she is. Slightly pah! As if!'

What in reality only took less than a candlemark, to Gabrielle it seemed to last an eternity; and when the healer and her unlikely helper left the hut, she had worked herself in a full-blown temper tantrum.

"My Queen, Xena now is ready for you. Please see that she doesn't get up and that she gets plenty of rest. She should stay flat on her stomach for at least three days. For any other, I would make it at least a quarter moon, but she's healing so incredibly fast."

Gabrielle nodded in acknowledgement, entered the tent, but didn't find the warrior lying on her simple bed. "Please sit down, Gabrielle. I know you have much to tell me. I heard you while you were pacing outside. Please, let me talk first."

The blonde woman turned towards the voice and bonelessly sank to the chair positioned at the centre of the tent. Xena was wearing the skirt of a simple Amazon outfit, dark brown leathers, ending just above mid-thigh. Instead of the traditional leather halter, she had on a very broad black scarf tied at her neck and around her waist. Her dark hair was in a braid falling over her left shoulder, and only the bracers reminded Gabrielle of the deadly warrior she was.

Xena lowered herself on her right knee in front of Gabrielle's chair and took the younger woman's hands. "I know you're angry with me, and you have every reason to be. I'm sorry for not keeping my promise, for agreeing to this fight without first asking you. I'm sorry for getting hurt, I never wanted you to worry. But having the pattern of my armour imprinted on my back for some time is a price I gladly pay for seeing you safe and not having to kill all those soldiers. I'm sorry for frightening you during the fight. I used my dark side then, but it didn't stand a chance against the love and trust in your eyes. I love you so much, my beautiful bard."

There were tears glistening in the corners of the blonde woman's eyes when she bent down and gently kissed her lover's lips. She sat back and smiled. "You know that you're not fighting fair, my sneaky warrior. How can I yell at you after such an apology?"

"Yell at me all you want I deserve it. It's better than seeing hurt, with worry and anger in your eyes."

"Don't look at me with those puppy dog eyes. You know very well that I never can stay angry for long, and I'd really like to show you that you're forgiven. However, Erymma said that you need rest and that you need to stay in bed for at least three days."

"She's exaggerating, Gabrielle. A good night's rest is all I need, and tomorrow I have to be back on the battlefield. The Romans are not to know that I was even slightly hurt, otherwise they will never see reason," The tall woman answered, stubbornly squaring her shoulders.

The Amazon Queen simply smiled. "We'll worry about the Romans in the morning. To bed with you, no, on your front, for once do what the healer says."

"But I can't hold you in my arms when I'm flat on my stomach," Xena replied with a pout.

"I'll be right beside you, my big dumb warrior, holding your hand," the Amazon Queen said, her calm voice belying the horror in her eyes when for the first time she had a good view of Xena's back. She barely stifled a gasp when she looked closer.

"It will be all right, my love. It doesn't look too good at the moment, but the swelling soon will go down. And if I'm lucky, there won't even be any scars. Erymma applied a painkiller, and there's more of it in the mug next to me for later in the night."

The next morning Gabrielle woke with the feeling of being observed and found the Amazon healer checking in on her patient and applying more of the healing salve. The pattern of the

warrior's armour now was clearly visible, but some of the imprints still oozed blood. What really astonished her was that Xena was still sleeping.

"No need to worry, my Queen. I suspected Xena would be too restless to stay in bed of her own accord, that's why I put some sleeping herbs in the mug with painkillers I left for her yesterday. The blacksmith and I had to cut off the armour one bit a time not to cause more damage. Some of the sharp edges nevertheless grazed a muscle or two. She has to stay as relaxed as possible to guarantee a complete recovery, and the easiest way to do this is to keep her unconscious while her body heals itself."

"Well, then we have our work cut out for us because she certainly won't be thrilled at the prospect. Thank you, Erymma. You're probably needed in the healer's tent, but I want you to have one of your apprentices monitor Xena's sleep. I don't want her to wake up alone while I try to smooth the ruffled feathers of the war council. They really detested being left out of the loop yesterday. Besides, there's still a war to win."

"The council is already expecting you, Queen Gabrielle. It seems the scouts brought some intriguing news."

And it was. According to the scouts, the enemy army obviously was in the middle of breaking up their camp. Their advance party already was on its way to the nearest seaport. Every member of the war council, Amazons and Centaurs alike, had his or her own theory about this rather unexpected behaviour. Some of them thought that they simply didn't want to risk their lives for a lost cause. Others suspected some sort of trap-that the Romans would try to circle around and get them from behind or try to attack their home villages.

The fervent discussions gave Gabrielle a headache so she simply adjourned the meeting by referring to the Chosen's Prerogative. She ordered the scouts to keep tabs on the enemy army and report to her every other candlemark. She then retired to the command tent where Xena adamantly refused to take another portion of sleeping herbs. The Queen heard the angry and exasperated voices even before she saw the tent, but she was in no mood to deal with more wasted candlemarks of endless discussions. She was resigned, having to cite the Chosen's Prerogative for the second time this day.

Xena was sitting on the bed, arguing furiously with Erymma who was holding a steaming mug. Her eyes found Gabrielle's, and whatever she saw in them made her relent. Hearing about the enemy's retreat, the tall warrior finally agreed to stay in bed for as long as the healer deemed necessary. In return she didn't have to drink the healer's tea. She wanted to stay alert in case the situation was not as it appeared to be, but the scouts' reports confirmed that the remnants of the Roman and Persian armies were heading towards the nearest seaport. There were no signs of anyone trying to double back.

The combined forces of Amazons and Centaurs stayed in the area for another three days, just to be on the safe side. Gabrielle took the opportunity to hammer out a treaty dealing with joint border patrols and advance scouting parties of Amazons and Centaurs to create a more efficient warning system. There was a big party before everyone returned to their villages.

Most of the Amazons were anxious to get back to their loved ones and hastened their return journey. They held the funeral rites for their fallen sisters the same evening; Xena and Ephiny sang the dirge together. The traditional victory celebration, however, would have to wait for Gabrielle to go through the trial by ordeal, to determine if she used the Chosen's Prerogative with honour and to the benefit of the Amazon nation.

The Queen had to spend a night in an isolated room in the temple. It was said that there she would be confronted not only with the consequences of the events she set in motion with the Prerogative, but also with circumstances and situations she still had to work through from her past to find a real balance in life. The next morning she would have to fight two of the best Amazon warriors with a weapon of her choice, one after the other. The outcome would decide upon her fate, her future. The Queen had to win both fights to fully justify her actions. Losing both of them meant at least lifelong exile; losing only one would give the Amazon council the chance to either get rid of her and choose a new Queen or reinstate her.

Gabrielle didn't look forward to both parts of the ritual. She was honest enough with herself to know that Xena's well being, for her, was at least as important as the security of the Amazon nation. Yes, there were innumerable reasons, all justifiable, to suspend her lover's punishment; but she also did it to spare her the pain and so she would no longer have to see the agony hidden deep in Xena's eyes-so deep no one else seemed to see it. Did the outcome really justify her means?

To Xena and her closest friends, Gabrielle's worries and insecurities were easily visible in her posture; she held her back straight, her shoulders were rigid, the set of her jaw was tense, and her smile didn't reach her eyes. Ephiny tried to get her to talk about her fears, but the Queen just changed the topic in return. Not even the afternoon sparring session managed to get her mind off the upcoming night.

All Xena could do was to keep reassuring her by maintaining some sort of physical contact for the better part of the day. It seemed to work but didn't help the growing feeling of helplessness the tall warrior was experiencing. So, when the time came, she silently followed the Queen to the temple.

The priestess acknowledged her presence with a nod but protested when she continued to follow Gabrielle to the room reserved for the Queen's vigil. "I don't care what you think, priestess. But out of respect, I'll tell you this: I won't interfere in the Queen's dealing with the goddess, but I won't let her go in there all alone. That's not an option. The scroll I read said that the goddess would speak to Gabrielle when she falls into a sleep-like state. Until then, I'll just hold her in my arms."

"Last night, the goddess told me that this would happen. Do what you need to do, warrior." Xena's left eyebrow rose in surprise, and only when the priestess closed the door behind them, did she realise that Gabrielle hadn't uttered a single word since entering the temple.

There were blankets and cushions liberally littering the floor. The Queen sat down as if to meditate, but before she could get started with the breathing exercises, Xena slid behind her and drew her into her arms. She could feel the rapid heart beat of her lover and knew she somehow had to calm her down. She lowered her head towards Gabrielle's and began to hum slowly in her ear. At first, it was just a low tone, only slightly higher than a murmur; but soon it involuntarily changed to a well-known melody, a lullaby she often had sung to her daughters. The tension rapidly was draining out of Gabrielle's body, and she slipped into what seemed like a deep sleep.

When the stoic warrior became aware of what she was doing, she could no longer stop the tears falling from her eyes. A gut feeling told her that this night vigil not only was for the Queen to cope with her past, but also for herself. She knew she yet had to mourn her little girls, and this night would be the beginning of another painful process of healing. For the second time in her life, she welcomed the wetness running down her cheeks.

At some point, she must have fallen asleep because she woke to the sensation of Gabrielle snuggling closer in her arms. Shortly after, the door to the room opened and the priestess entered, carrying the Queen's staff. After a few unsuccessful attempts to wake Gabrielle, Xena finally roused her with a kiss. It took some time for the young woman to regain her bearings in the unfamiliar room. She then looked into the eyes of her lover and saw only love, devotion, and trust. The regulations pertaining to the trial by ordeal didn't allow her to talk to anyone until after facing the challenges, so she gently kissed her lover in response.

Every inhabitant of the village was already waiting at the central square, even the teachers and the children; it made for rather close quarters. In the middle, a small rectangular area was cordoned off with two rows of benches on one side where the council and the elders were already seated. The weapons' master was Gabrielle's first opponent, the captain of the Royal guards her second. The Queen tried to convince herself that this wasn't any different from all the training bouts she had had with either woman, but in her gut, she knew it wasn't. She knew that this morning both Eponin and Solari had made a solemn vow in front of Artemis' altar to give their best in the upcoming fight regardless of their personal feelings.

Gabrielle's mind tuned out Ephiny announcing the rules and possible consequences of the fight while she tried to calm down. Suddenly, a hand rested on her shoulder, and it was as if some of Xena's confidence seeped through her skin directly to her heart and brain. She took a defensive stance and waited for Eponin to attack. They both knew the weaknesses and special quirks of the other's fighting style like the back of their own hand. So, they fought each other time and again to a standstill, but finally the Queen's greater speed gained the advantage needed to take the weapons' master down and pin her to the ground with the end of the smaller woman's staff at her throat. The watching Amazons cheered.

The rules allowed a small break to give Gabrielle the opportunity to have some water and towel off the sweat covering her body. Xena quickly wrapped her in the piece of fabric to keep her muscles from stiffening and gave her encouragement, advice, and a dazzling smile. While Eponin always tried to rely on her greater strength, the captain of the Royal guards had a style similar to Gabrielle's. In their sparring sessions, the Queen could two out of three times secure a victory, but she could already feel the strain on her arms from her first fight. Very quickly, she

had to rely only upon defending herself. Then her eyes, for a fraction of a heartbeat, found Xena's, and she knew what she had to do.

With a backwards roll, she distanced herself from her opponent, closed both hands around one end of her staff, and used the other end to pepper Solari with quick jabbing motions. Slightly astonished at the unexpected move, the other woman retreated far enough to let Gabrielle regain her favourite defensive stance; but instead of using the chance, the Queen attacked. She took three fast steps forward, planted the end of her staff on the ground, jumped and landed feet first on Solari's chest, effectively knocking the wind out of her.

The second fight was over, Gabrielle now would stay the Amazon's Queen, and best of all, no one would be able to challenge her rule for another cycle of seasons. Her subjects were cheering her, loud enough to be heard in the Centaur village at the other side of the river. Everyone, from the council members to the children, was eager to congratulate her, and though Gabrielle usually was a very touchy-feely kind of person, she felt more than overwhelmed. Everything around her, even the air, suddenly became too close. She lost consciousness-but she never hit the ground. Xena scooped her up in her arms and carried her to her hut. The healer was summoned to confirm Xena's and Ephiny's suspicion that she was simply exhausted. Unconsciousness quickly changed into sleep, and the tall warrior continued to hold her, soon succumbing to Morpheus' call as well.

Two candlemarks before sunset, they were sitting in one of the large tubs in the back room of the big bathing hut. "Was it a dream? Last night, was it a dream?"

"No, and if it was, your dream was mine, and my dream was yours. I'm ready to repeat to the whole Amazon nation, to the outside world, and to every god willing to listen what I said to you last night.

"From the day I first met you, just outside your home village, you were my life. You gave me meaning and joy. You are my heart and my soul, and you'll be a part of me forever. I promise to cherish you above all others, to honour and to love you, and to obey the commands of Queen Gabrielle. I promise to never again let my fear of hurting you get in the way of our love. Please agree to join your life to my life, your heart to my heart, your body to my body, your soul to my soul."

"Yes, I will my warrior. At the harvest festival, I will wait for you to pledge your allegiance to the Amazon nation, and me; and I will accept you as my consort and champion. Unfortunately, we'll first have to get this stupid punishment out of the way."

"I know; the sooner the better. Perhaps I should go back to my cage in the sweating hut immediately."

"No, tomorrow morning is soon enough. The army needs its commander to celebrate our victory and remember the dead. Besides, I have plans for us, after the festivities."

Despite the Queen's best efforts, they weren't able to leave until after midnight. The party still was in full swing, the hypnotising beat of the drums speaking to them even behind the closed doors of the hut. On impulse, Xena drew her closer, and they both began to move to the alluring rhythm. Xena's hands were solidly attached to the other woman's hips, while Gabrielle's sneaked past the barrier of the tall warrior's tunic. She revelled in the warmth of the older woman's skin.

"Your clothes, they have to come off. Now! That's an order, warrior!"

"Yes, my Queen. Your order shall be my wish." Xena reluctantly took two steps back, slowly and sensuously wriggling out of her clothing. Without being asked, she started to loosen the straps holding Gabrielle's Amazon garb in place. She held eye contact with her and continued to sway her hips. It didn't take long for both of their hearts to beat faster.

As soon as Gabrielle's clothing also was relegated to the floor, a hand found Xena's neck and guided her to waiting lips. She lost herself in the softness of her lover's mouth. They finally broke the kiss to come up to breathe.

"You're so incredibly beautiful, my love."

"No, you are the real beauty here. Your body is perfect, but the real source of your beauty is coming from the goodness you carry inside. I'm nothing more than an old, battered, scared ex-warlord, my beloved."

Gabrielle smiled enticingly and grabbed one of the taller woman's ears between thumb and index fingers, pulling her down. "My big dumb warrior! Sometimes you really have no clue. Come to bed, and I'll show you what your battered, scared body is doing to me, Granny."

A second invitation wasn't necessary. Xena lifted the Amazon Queen from her feet and cradled her in her strong arms. She carried her over to the big, solid bed, and they made love 'til the wee candlemarks of morning.

Before falling asleep Gabrielle, for a fraction of a heartbeat, contemplated getting up and setting a good example for her Amazon sisters by starting her day early even though they had just ended a major celebration. Then Xena pulled her closer to her chest, reminding her that her lover would have to spend her nights in the cage from now on, far away from her. Her virtuous thoughts were forgotten. They shared a gentle kiss, Gabrielle nestled her head more comfortably on Xena's shoulder, and they both fell asleep.

Some time after midday, the village began to wake from the aftermath of their party. Xena's senses alerted her of two sets of running feet approaching the hut from different directions. For a short moment, she contemplated warning them off with her chakram should they be insensitive enough simply to burst through the door without knocking first - but they did, and she reluctantly told them to wait. Gabrielle was roused from sleep with small kisses. They were putting on their discarded clothing from the night before when the knocking was repeated, more insistent this time. The Queen combed her blonde hair with her fingers and told them to enter.

Ephiny hurried through the door. "Queen Gabrielle, Xena, good morning. I'm sorry to disturb you, but there's been an incident at the council's hut. The scroll has disappeared from the wall."

"Scroll? Xena's scroll, the one with the details for the punishment?"

"Yes, my Queen. As you know, it was hanging on the back wall of the council's hut for everyone to read. When I checked the room during my morning rounds, it was gone. We've already searched the hut, and Olica and her staff are checking the library as we speak."

Both Gabrielle and Xena looked at her as if she had two heads, but before they could think of anything to ask or say Solari spoke up. "I think I may have an answer for the missing scroll, my Queen, but it's hard to explain. Come to the sweating hut. There's something you have to see."

"Don't play the mystery woman, Sol, just tell us."

"You have to see it with your own eyes, Eph. You won't believe it otherwise."

Gabrielle effectively ended the conversation by leaving the hut and starting out towards the sweating hut turned prison.

When the four friends entered the hut, they found the cage gone. In its place on the floor was silvery armour, matching Xena's bracers. The breastplate was a perfect reproduction of her old brass armour. The back protection was different; the central piece consisting of a flat surface between the shoulder blades, descended in a gentle curve almost to the waist. From there the familiar pattern stretched over the shoulders. The strands of steel were subtly curved, thus ensuring a perfect fit. At least that's what Xena thought by just looking at it. There also were shin protectors and metal bands for the upper arms.

The missing scroll was lying next to the armour pieces. It was unscrolled, and there was a broad line crossing the writing on it from the upper right to the lower left corner. At the bottom, a few additional lines had been added.

Xena!

Justice is satisfied. Zeus has agreed to put an end to your punishment. Use this chance for a new life to your advantage.

You did well in defending my people and my Chosen. The armour is a gift from Aphrodite and Hephaestus, made of the steel of your cage. It doesn't have any special powers, but it won't be as easily dented as your old one. See it as a joining gift of sorts. I'm looking forward to the harvest solstice.

Artemis

THE END

Any and all feedback is welcome at: romansilence@yahoo.de

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