

# ~ The Sacrifice ~

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## Disclaimers:

This story contains graphic descriptions of consensual sex between two women (no surprise there). There also is a great deal of violence depicted in the story, including a brutal rape. I do not disclaim this to put anyone off reading my story (I'm not completely nuts, you know!), just to prepare you that sometime along the way you'll see some brackets that will make you able to skip the really gruesome stuff, though it might make it harder to understand the reactions of at least one of my characters.

English is not my first language; so, thanks go to my beta readers Abby, Kali and qwordy13- any typos or inconsistencies left now are my fault, not theirs. So, just blame me and tell me about it. It's the only way I'll learn.

Oh, and one other thing: [send feedback](#). Constructive criticism is especially welcome, even if you don't like it. Helps me to improve. - Not that I would protest to praise, I'm not an idiot after all.

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## *Prologue*

It was the evening after the battle, a battle the lore keepers of the Amazon Nation later would call epic and legendary. Only this morning the Amazon warriors had faced an army more than four times their size, an army of four thousand men, well armed and disciplined. Then their Queen had started to carve her way through the rows of enemy flesh, giving no quarter - and they all had followed her lead.

Now, one candlemark before sunset, of the four thousand soldiers King Albebran of Velarius had sent to subdue the Nation of women warriors only about three scores were left. Most of them wounded. The Queen strode purposely towards them. The slowly setting sun reflected off her silver breast plate and her long blond hair. At six feet with toned muscles and bronzed skin she was a magnificent sight. Her battle dress, armour and hair were wet from a half-hearted and hasty attempt to get rid of at least some of the blood and gore from the fight. She looked down at the men with eyes as cold as a mountain lake in early spring.

"Amazons don't take prisoners. Kill them all!"

One of the prisoners, still more boy than man, sprang up from kneeling next to an older man and tried to attack her. She swatted him away like one would a fly without even looking and moments later two Amazon guards forced him on his knees in front of her.

"Why did you try something this stupid, boy?"

"I'm not a boy! My name is Yournar, I'm the healer's apprentice. You just killed my master." He answered defiantly.

"These are the hazards of war, boy. It kills what you love." The sadness in her voice was unmistakable.

"My Queen should we execute him with the others or shall he stand trial for his attack on you, your majesty?"

"I'm pretty sure that you don't want to call this childish reaction an attack, Detevia? See, if it really was an attack you, as my loyal guard would have failed in your sworn duty to protect me from harm and you would have to be punished. I need all our warriors for the rest of this campaign. So, I prefer not to see this as an attack." There was a hint of humour in her voice, but her eyes stayed cold as ice.

"As for the boy, let him live. He will carry my message to King Aldebran." A cruel smile was on her lips. "Bare his back and hold him still."

Queen Hippolyta took the healer's knife with which he had tried to attack her and began to make systematic cuts on his fair-skinned, smooth back, heedless of his cries of pain.

"Sarita!" She called for the head healer of the Amazon Nation.

The older woman was instantly at her side. "Yes, my Queen."

"Clean his back, give him some painkillers and see to it that he's able to travel tomorrow morning."

The grey-haired healer hesitated a moment, surprised at her Queen's rather unusual cruelty. She studied the younger woman's cold blue eyes and knew that it wouldn't do any good to talk to her now. So, she only nodded and knelt down behind him, two of her assistants ready to give her what she asked for.

The Queen meanwhile had knelt down in front of the young man. "Yournar, listen to me."

When he didn't immediately look up to her, she took his chin in her right hand and forced his head up. His green-brown eyes were filled with tears.

"Listen well, boy, because I want you to repeat what I tell you now word by word to your king, just in case the message on your back is not enough to make him understand. Tell him: Aldebran, you brought war and death to my world, again, and now I, Hippolyta, daughter of Hippolyta, daughter of Rhea, I will bring it to yours. You started this war and I will end it. Because of you I lost my heart and my soul and I will not rest until every single one of your men is dead and I'll hold your still beating heart in my hand.

"And now repeat the message."

He did with a slight stuttering but without making a mistake.

"Good boy." She said, patting his cheek.

"Endera," Hippolyta addressed a well-muscled Amazon kneeling to her right in a position of respect, "report!"

"113 fatalities, 178 seriously injured, 218 with minor injuries. All in all we were pretty lucky."

"Are you telling me that we only lost about three hundred warriors and all the while killed more than four thousand of Aldebran's men?"

"Yes my Queen."

"Dear Goddess! See to it that the boy here gets a horse and leaves tomorrow morning. He graciously offered to by my messenger to Aldebran. I'll retire to my tent. Have somebody call me as soon as the pyres for our fallen sisters are ready. I want the army ready to march in three days."

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## ***Chapter One***

Hippolyta was about to enter her tent when Camille, the priestess' apprentice, left it. "No one but my servants have the right to enter my tent. So, what in Tartarus did you do in there?"

"Instructing the servants, my Queen."

The tall woman entered the structure and stopped dead in her tracks. Someone had had the audacity to transform her minimalist but functional war tent in what looked like a cross between the abode of the Goddess of Love and an expensive bordello. Her servants should have known better, and they had, but the Amazons were a highly hierarchical society in which the priestess' apprentice had more say than mere servants. They had objected, but in the end, they had had to obey the young woman.

"Mara, Tareena, get this stuff out of here. I want it gone by the time I return." The Queen's voice was calm but cold enough to make a lake freeze over in the middle of summer. "I want all of this junk gone, including the bath tub. - Where the hell did you find a brass bathtub out here?"

The two women told her that the tub had been brought in by two temple servants. Hippolyta took a closer look and a sinister smile appeared on her face. Camille was still loitering outside. She was half a head shorter than the blonde Queen, with red hair and a slender physique.

"Follow me, Camille, your teacher and I have to talk."

They found the priestess of the Great Goddess at the edge of the forest, gathering herbs.

"Greetings, Priestess Lasega."

The older woman bowed before her Queen and studied Hippolyta's cold eyes. "What can I do for you, your majesty?"

"You can help me solve a riddle."

"A riddle?"

"I just found one of the ceremonial bathtubs from the temple in my tent, and I told myself: That's not possible, you must be dreaming. But it was there, solid brass, a prayer to the Goddess etched on both sides, standing right in the middle of my war tent, filled with steaming water." With every word the Queen's voice seemed to grow darker and colder. "Now, if I remember my lessons well, these tubs are not meant to wash off the gore of battle but to prepare for the sacred rites. So, now I'm asking myself, is there a new after-battle ritual I never heard of before? Or did you have some divine inspiration suspending the old rules? Or did your apprentice in her infinite wisdom decide to act on her own accord and in the process disregarded everything she has been taught? You see, Priestess Lasega, quite a riddle."

"Indeed, my Queen. So, Camille, care to enlighten me?"

The young redhead fell on her knees and answered, "I meant no harm, venerable priestess. The old scrolls say that the Goddess' Chosen should have all the comforts the temple can possibly provide. I only wanted to do what's best for our Queen."

"I'm no one's Chosen," Hippolyta growled.

"After this miraculous victory how could you be anything but?"

With lightening speed Hippolyta bent down, closed one of her hands around Camille's throat and pulled her on her feet with obvious ease.

"This victory was bought with the blood of your sisters, on the battlefield and in the sacrificial ring." Hippolyta's arm now was fully extended and the other woman's toes no longer touched the ground.

"Please, my Queen, I'll deal with my student and see that she is duly punished."

The strong hand holding Camille up opened and the young woman fell hard on the ground.

"I'll leave you to your duties, Priestess Lasega." Before Hippolyta left, she once again bent down to the apprentice, "I know what you tried to do. You could not have been more obvious if you had shouted your intentions all over the village square. So, I'll tell you one more time in a way

even you might understand: I would not be interested in you as a woman if we were that last living being on the Great Goddess' Earth. Heed my words, Camille. Stay out of my life if you value yours."

The Queen stormed off and found a quiet place at the riverbank bordering their camp. She knew that the young apprentice now was in for a lot of pain. Priestess Lasega demanded a lot of her students and her tolerance for failure was basically non-existent. She imagined Camille at the receiving end of the well-oiled, thick leather strap Lasega had used on her when she still was a child, but the thought of physical punishment brought back images of quite another kind.

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[Flashback: One quarter moon earlier]

"Are you out of your mind, Priestess? I don't care what your damn dreams seem to tell you. There have been no human sacrifices for hundreds of season cycles, and there will be none during my reign!" The voice of the blond Queen boomed through the large council chamber and was still heard half-ways across the village.

A young woman with black hair, cut short as a sign of her status as a servant, came from the side, carrying a tray with a goblet and a pitcher of cidre. Hippolyta smiled at her and took the freshly filled goblet from her.

The young woman whispered, "Hear Priestess Lasega out, Mistress, please."

Hippolyta looked at the old priestess who was still on her right knee in front of her and took a deep breath. "Rise, Priestess Lasega. My good conscience just told me that I should at least show you the curtsy to hear you out. The rest of the Council is dismissed."

The leader of the Council of Elders wanted to protest, but one look at the agitated blue eyes of her Queen let her relent.

"No, Sara, I want you to stay," Hippolyta added when the black-haired servant also was about to leave. "Let's go to my private rooms, Priestess."

Hippolyta took her customary seat on the couch, the priestess sat on one of the opposite easy chairs and Sara took a seat on the carpeted floor next to the Queen's right leg.

"You two don't have to pretend with me. I know what you feel for each other. I knew from the beginning and I approve."

"Sara is not pretending, Priestess Lasega. Our relationship is a bit more complex than most people know. This is just something she needs to do every now and then. - So, now tell me about your dreams, please."

"It started five nights ago," Lasega said. "I dreamed about the sacrificial ring of old. There were

two women kneeling in front of each other, one with the long hair of a warrior, the other with short hair, one blonde, the other dark. The short haired woman stripped and the blonde bound her spread-eagle between two torture posts..."

"The blond woman bent down and kissed the other. Both had tears in their eyes. The tall warrior walked around the torture posts and picked up a single tail whip waiting for her on the ground. When the first stroke hit the smooth back the priestess lowered a torch to the ground and fire sprang up in a circle, cutting them off from the others who were standing around to bear witness of the sacrifice." Sara said.

Hippolyta was instantly on her knees next to the dark haired servant. "Sara, love, what are you talking about? Is this the nightmare you didn't want to talk to me about?"

"Your majesty it seems your lover and I have the same dream."

"Please, tell me that it's not true, tell me that you read it in one of the old scrolls, tell me that these two women are not us."

Forest green eyes looked into blue and that was all the answer the taller woman needed. She scooped Sara up in her arms and returned to the couch.

"Don't worry, I won't allow it. I won't let you die."

"I know you don't want to hear that, your majesty, but you might have no other choice. You were one of my best students, Hippolyta, you know that sometimes the ways of the Goddess can be mysterious and painful. The Amazon Nation will be destroyed by Aldebran's troops if we don't heed her wishes."

"Our army is well prepared and I sure as Tartarus won't let Sara die just because of some superstitious dreams. And that is the last thing I ever want to hear about this, from both of you. Leave us now, Priestess, please."

As soon as the older woman was gone Hippolyta wrapped her arms even harder around the slender body of her servant and lover. "I love you. I won't let you go, not now, not ever."

Sara heard the determination in her lover's voice and decided to heed her words for the time being and give her more time to come to the right decision on her own.

[End of Flashback]

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Hippolyta's mind snapped back to the present when she heard footsteps closing in on her position. They were about forty paces away, three sets of footsteps coming from different directions; and she sensed about a dozen more a bit further out. So, her whole personal guard had come to escort her back to the camp. One of them stepped out of the tree line and immediately

got down on her right knee.

"Are the funeral pyres ready? That was fast." Hippolyta asked.

"Yes, my Queen. The men from Bogarnia came with dozens of wagons with wood for the pyres to thank the Nation for protecting them from Aldebran's troops. They also brought supplies to further the rest of the campaign."

"I suppose they have been properly thanked for their assistance." Hippolyta said with a neutral expression.

"Yes, my Queen. Priestess Lasega found appropriate words and made sure that they were escorted back safely."

Hippolyta nodded in acknowledgment and motioned for the young woman to precede her. The rest of her guard closed in around them and a few candledrops later they reached the outer perimeter of their camp. The torches and camp fires cast an eerie glow but it was enough to see the whip marks on the back walking right in front of her.

"Stop! What in Tartarus happened to your back, Detevia?"

The young woman who had only recently finished her training and was in the Royal Guard on a trial basis turned around and once again got down on her knee. She looked to the ground and answered.

"I..., I punished myself for failing to protect your majesty earlier this evening."

"You punished yourself?" Hippolyta's voice sounded angry and incredulous at the same time.

"Yes, my Queen. I gave myself twenty-six strokes with a strap for not doing my job properly. I know it should have been thirty, but the weapons' master stopped me. I'm sorry."

"Yes, you should be sorry. You should be sorry for disregarding the chain of command. You should be sorry for depriving me and your sisters of your sword for the next battle because until the last traces of your stupid actions are no longer visible you will serve with the healers. The members of my personal guard are not chosen for their muscles or even their fighting skills but because they're smart. You now will have to prove that we did not make a mistake choosing you, Detevia. Dismissed."

The young warrior knew better than to argue, rose and walked towards the infirmary with slumped shoulders. Before Hippolyta entered her tent to change she sent for the Captain of the Royal Guard.

"Lattenis, did you know about Detevia's stupid stunt?"

"Only after the fact. I read her the riot act. I heard you sent her to the healers for the time being,

my Queen?"

"Do you question my decision, old friend?"

"No, Lyta, it's the best solution under the circumstances. However, Sarita will not be happy with you. You know she hates it when you use her healers as an instrument of discipline."

"Sarita is rarely happy with me, Lattenis; that has not changed since she tried to teach us the basics of healing. Go to her and tell her to treat Detevia's back, no painkillers, just something to speed up the healing. Explain it to her, and inquire about the boy."

"Yes my Queen. Lyta? Why did you do it?"

"Carve his back?" The other woman nodded. "You know why, my friend."

"You came directly from the battlefield after having spent a full day fighting, after killing at least ten scores of our enemy yourself. The darkness and anger was too powerful to resist."

"It's still very close to the surface but this time it's more than that." Hippolyta answered. "I could feel the darkness long before the battle. In time, I'll get over it. Now go and speak with Sarita, and tell the warriors to get as much rest as they can. I want the army on the move late afternoon tomorrow. We'll march through the night and take Netha in the morning. The city is not well defended but as a major market place very important for Aldebran. I want him on his knees before I kill him. Hurry, Lattenis, our sisters await to be send to the Land of the Dead."

Lattenis bowed and left the tent. She was worried about her Queen and friend. They had grown up together, the daughter of a weaver and the heir to the Queen's mask. They each knew the other better than they knew themselves. She had seen Hippolyta fall on her knees after a battle and cry for the people she had had to kill. She had seen her rejoice in a victory, had seen her fuelled with excess energy and purge it with the next willing and beautiful woman at hand - losing herself for days either in grief and pain or debauchery, but she never had seen her acting cruel or heartless.

The captain of the Royal Guard feared that her Royal friend was about to lose herself, but she also could understand her. Regardless of how this war would end, the Queen of the Amazons had already lost. In the last five season cycles all of Hippolyta's energy and all of her emotions had been centred on one dark haired priestess apprentice come servant girl. She had become Hippolyta's heart and conscience, for all but in name she had been the Queen's consort. And Lattenis knew that her friend would never choose another mate. Sara had balanced Hippolyta's dark moods and fits of temper - and now this balance was gone and ...

The guards had told her that Hippolyta had smiled while she had mutilated the innocent boy. Yes, in the past she had had to torture enemy soldiers or spies to get the information they needed, but she never before had shown such ruthlessness. Lattenis dreaded what such actions would do to her friend's soul in the long run.

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The funeral pyres were lit. The thousands of bodies from Aldebran's army were in two big piles to the left and the right of the rows of fallen Amazons. While their bodies were burning their souls, so was the belief of the people, would be fused together for eternity; and only whole souls were allowed entrance in the Land of the Dead. Priestess Lasega spoke the ritual prayers for the fallen Amazons with the apprentice conspicuously absent. One hundred and eighteen bodies lay in two rows on their individual pyres.

At the Queen's nod they were lit with one hundred and eighteen torches and Hippolyta began to sing the traditional dirge. Her voice lacked its customary warmth but she still conveyed a sense of community to her warriors, a sense of community she wasn't able to feel. Instead her mind wandered back to the reason she had had to stand vigil over a pyre only two days ago.

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[Flashback]

When Hippolyta returned to her rooms the evening after Priestess Lasega's disturbing announcement about the necessity of a human sacrifice she found them empty. A tray with cheese, bread and wine was waiting on the table next to three old scrolls from the archives and a short note. She had a pretty good idea what the scrolls were about but she really didn't want to read them. She wanted to forget what she had been told the day before; she wished that it never had been said in the first place. And yet her eyes were irresistibly drawn to the familiar handwriting on the note.

"My beloved Queen, I know you don't want to talk about the sacrifice. I know you're confident that the Nation will prevail against Aldebran's forces. I don't doubt your fighting skills or your strategic genius, my love, but ever since the troops he's amassing at our borders started to outnumber our own I hear fear in your subjects. I have seen their confidence waning - and without confidence they don't stand a chance and it would be easier not to fight at all and be led into slavery.

"The sacrifice, however, is not only about the upcoming battle or the war. It's about much more than that; it's about the future of the Nation. Please, read the scrolls. I'll stay with Sarita until you're ready to talk. I'll always love you, my beloved Queen."

Hippolyta's first reaction was to storm over to the healer's hut to berate Sara for giving her such an ultimatum. She was one step from the door when she stopped, returned to the desk and reread the note.

Sara was right. She had overheard two of her younger warriors talking this day. They had been afraid, not afraid to die but afraid to end up in slavery. But still, there had to be another way than to sacrifice the only woman she had ever truly loved.

Sara was her heart and her soul - and she had been from the very first moment she had laid eyes

on her, the day she had freed her from her abusive master by killing him. Sara had been a slave then, and it had taken her a long time to begin to trust anyone again. She had slowly opened up to her and with part of her confidence restored had decided to become a priestess to the Great Goddess. For the first ten years of their service to the Goddess a priestess had to live a life of celibacy, but later on they were allowed to take a mate.

When Sara became the priestess' apprentice Hippolyta had already fallen hard for the former slave, but despite her trashed hopes she had helped Sara to study. Then to everyone's surprise almost a season cycle after the beginning of her apprenticeship Sara had opted out. In the history of the Amazon Nation something like this had never happened before. In the past apprentices had either given it up during the first moon or they had seen it through. And no one had been more surprised than Hippolyta when the young woman had begged to be allowed to be named as her personal servant, something she never before had considered needing.

Sara had told her that she could not honestly serve the Goddess because the better part of her heart already belonged to a mortal woman, and that the only way to be close to that woman was to become her personal servant. Sara than had left her humbly kneeling position, had stepped up to the throne and had planted a soul searing, breathtaking kiss on the other woman's lips. From that day on Hippolyta's life had been complete - and she was not ready to give that up, not without a fight.

Hippolyta began to pace the spacious room but with every pass of the table the scrolls seemed to cry out to her. She finally relented and sat down to read, but it took her another half candlemark before she could bring herself to open the first of them.

It told of a Queen of old who refused to sacrifice her young wife to strengthen the spirit of the Nation. Battle after battle was lost and half of the old territory was lost to men, until the arrow of one of her own archers accidentally struck her in the back, and the surviving members of the Nation were able to fight their attackers off, but it took more than five generations until they had their land back, five generations of constant warfare and losses.

The second scroll told of a Queen who had chosen to sacrifice herself instead of her beloved daughter. The war had been won but for the coming generations every Queen had to fight off challengers to the throne and none of them held the mask for more than a few years.

The last scroll told of a Queen who had obeyed the Goddess' will. After her consort's death she had shut herself off from her emotions and had never taken another mate, but the Nation had lived in peace and had prospered.

Hippolyta reread the scrolls and recalled everything she had been taught about sacrifices and the will of the Great Goddess. It all came down to one simple fact: she didn't have a real choice. As a rule she had not much use for any of the Gods, but in time she had learned to respect the irrefutable power of the mightiest of them all, the Great Goddess. She was the Queen of the Amazon Nation. It was her responsibility to keep them safe, to make sure that the Nation had a bright and happy future. She could not allow the Nation to suffer because of her selfishness.

Sara had understood from the beginning, and she was ready to give her life for the sake of the Nation. The intended victim had to be willing. Hippolyta took a deep breath and summoned her war leaders. She told them to take over the war preparations and ordered not to be disturbed by anyone but the priestess. She then went to the temple and entered the inner sanctum when she didn't find the woman in the main room.

"Your majesty?"

"You can make the announcement, Priestess. You will find us in our rooms, only come at the last possible moment."

The older woman studied the pain-filled blue eyes of her former student. "It will be done, your majesty."

The tall woman turned around and directed her steps to the hut of her head healer, situated at the edge of the village. She knocked, entered and said only one word. "Come!"

Just like the priestess, Sara only needed one look into her lover's eyes to know that her responsibility as the Queen had won out over the woman. She had hoped that Hippolyta would decide like this but in a small part of her heart it still hurt.

[End of Flashback]

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They had spent the next two and a half days making love and talking, but the overwhelming scent of burning human flesh didn't allow for such happy memories.

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[Flashback]

They had waited for the knock on the door since midday and walked arm in arm to the temple to prepare for the sacrifice. The preparations included a cleansing ritual and some time spent in solitary prayer. The cleansing was usually done with the help of the priestess or her apprentice but Lasega left them alone. Camille had tried to protest but the older woman dragged her out of the bathing chamber. Sara and Hippolyta scrubbed the other's body with the peeling soap, rinsed and dried it, rubbed it with precious oils. It could have been a very sensual experience if not for the pain and heartbreak evident in both pairs of eyes.

Hippolyta then was led into a small room with a wooden statue of the Great Goddess while Sara would say her prayers in the inner sanctum. Priestess Lasega had said the statue would help her to focus her thoughts. But Hippolyta didn't want to focus, she didn't want to think because the only thought she could come up with was, "Please, Goddess, save her. She already has suffered

so much and her heart is so big. She doesn't deserve to die. I wish you would have asked for my life. Please, save her, Goddess, I don't care what you ask of me in return; save her, Goddess, please."

Only when the old priestess came for her, Hippolyta became aware that she indeed had been praying.

Sara was clad in a blinding white tunic accentuating her sun darkened skin. She seemed calm and collected, centred, and that made her even more beautiful. The red golden sunset cast her in an eerie light and if she had not already been madly in love with the dark haired woman she would have fallen for her right that moment. She looked regal.

They reached the clearing at the other side of the village where the priestess and a few of her warriors had prepared the sacrificial ring. The whole Nation seemed to be in attendance. Hippolyta and Sara knelt in the middle of the ring, facing each other while the priestess spoke the incantation that would start the ritual. When she was finished, Sara stood up and shed her tunic. Her eyes never left the Queen's blue orbs. She stepped between the two torture poles and Hippolyta first bound Sara's wrists and then her ankles. Her eyes were full of trust and belief and love.

The blonde Queen bent down and kissed the other woman. Neither allowed the kiss to become erotic; this was about much more.

Hippolyta left her and picked up the single tail whip that had been put on the ground. She slowly uncoiled the weapon and weighed it in her hand. She had learned from the best and she knew that now she would use all her knowledge to make the woman she loved first suffer and then kill her. Then she let the first stroke fly, and with every single one after that the strong and proud Queen of the Amazons prayed, "Please, save her."

The ritual demanded that the executioner asked the victim every ten strokes if she still was willing to sacrifice her life for the sake of the Nation and the Goddess. The first time Sara said, "Kiss me and get on with it."

By the second time her back was bleeding profusely and she said. "I love you, please, continue."

The third time her voice was barely above a whisper, "Love you, Hip. Don't stop!" The Queen saw determination in the young woman's eyes beyond the pain.

The fourth time, with forty strokes already administered, it would be doubtful if she even would be able to utter one single word. Sara's head was hanging down when Hippolyta stepped around the torture frame to check on her. She seemed to gather the last of her strength to react to the Queen's question. Her eyes were full of pain but she moved her lips in a whispered, "Go on."

The fifth time she no longer was able to speak but beyond the pain Sara's eyes still held a core of love and trust. She managed a feeble nod that no one but her lover was able to see; and then it was as if she heard Sara's voice in her head. "I love you forever, my Queen. Don't forget, I'll

always love you."

Hippolyta once again kissed the woman she loved and resumed the whipping. After the sixtieth stroke there was no longer an answer but she kept to the prescribed ritual and continued for ten more strokes, and still she prayed to the Goddess to save the love of her life. She held Sara while undoing her restraints, totally indifferent to her lover's blood now on her hand and arms. To her big surprise she felt a faint heartbeat and her eyes found deep green orbs looking back at her filled with love. Hippolyta bent down and kissed the other woman, catching her last breath as her own.

The priestess obviously had recruited the better part of the Queen's personal guard as attendants and four of them were stepping forward to take Sara's body from her just after Lasega had finished the last incantation.

Hippolyta waved them away. "Prepare a funeral pyre for her. I will prepare her. As soon as I put her there I want all of you to leave me alone. We'll march out tomorrow at first light."

Hippolyta scooped up the body of her lover and carried her back to the temple. Camille tried to slip in after her when she entered the inner sanctum, offering to help but the low growl coming from the Queen made her back off.

The blonde warrior scrupulously cleaned, washed and wrapped the body, and as soon as the pyre was ready she carried her back to the clearing where the sacrificial ring had made place for the pyre. What her guards had built was a pyre worthy of an Amazon Royalty.

The clearing was deserted just as she had ordered, but she could feel their presence. She felt their eyes on her, hundreds of eyes, lurking behind the tree line. She resented their presence; she wanted to be alone with her dead lover. These were her last moments with her and she wanted no witnesses; but she also knew that her people had a right to pay their respects to Sara, to the woman who had given her life for the sake of the Amazon Nation.

Hippolyta lit the pyre and opened her mouth to sing the traditional dirge. The words were meant to guide the soul of the deceased to its new home in the Land of the Dead, but her voice refused to work. Her breathing was unusually shallow and her heart beat faster than normal. Only when the tears she had refused herself to shed finally fell despite her best effort and she accepted them like the cleansing they were, only then was she able to sing.

She sang like never before. There was so much pain in her voice, loss and anguish. The Amazons listening in were ashamed of intruding in her privacy and one by one left the forest surrounding the clearing and the sacrificial ring.

Hippolyta fell on her knees. She didn't see the flames consuming her lover's body; instead she saw Sara's face smiling at her. She saw her like she had seen her for the first time, the slave of a cruel master who refused him the satisfaction of seeing her tears. She saw Sara telling her about the strange One God her family believed in, this God who seemed to be afraid of women considering the many laws they had to control them. She saw Sara training with her staff; she

saw her in the healer's hut. She saw Sara on her knees, accepting servant status just to be able to be with her beloved Queen. She heard her saying that she loved her and for the first time in her life she really believed the words.

When all of her tears were cried the sun was beginning to rise, and while her Amazons began the last preparations for their march to the border, she slowly closed the doors to her feelings, one by one. She closed the door to her heart, leaving only darkness and anger.

[End of Flashback]

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## *Chapter Two*

The Amazon Queen left the former battlefield turned burial ground when the first tendrils of a new dawn began to colour the sky. Her resolve to crush Aldebran's reign once and for all had been renewed by the memories of her lover's ordeal. Hippolyta returned to her tent to try and get some rest before they would march out in the afternoon, though she doubted that she would be able to really sleep.

She found her bed occupied by a naked and sleeping Camille who was unceremoniously thrown out and ordered to stay where she had landed in full view of the Royal Guard. Hippolyta then sent for her teacher, Priestess Lasega. Her buttocks already bore the marks of a vigorously applied strap.

"Priestess, I found her in my bed, naked. See to it that she stays out of my way, out of my sight, or you will need a new apprentice."

"Yes, my Queen. Camille won't bother you again, and I'll see to it that she's duly punished." Lasega said.

Hippolyta turned around and disappeared back into her tent. Seconds later Camille's off-white tunic was thrown out. She had it already half pulled over her head when the priestess ordered her to stop.

"Oh, no, young one. If you think you can be naked in the Queen's tent, you'll stay naked outside. What in the Goddess' name did you think you're doing? Violate your oath to the Goddess? You know I would be in my right to ban you, from the temple and the Nation. In all probability Queen Hippolyta will never choose another mate. This is your last chance. Do you want to leave the service of the Goddess or are you ready to face the consequences of your ill-advised actions?"

"I'm ready to pay the price for what I tried to do, Mistress."

"Stand up and bend over, legs further apart, grab your ankles. You'll need the support. Weapons' master Endera, would you be so kind to let me borrow your punishment strap." The priestess

asked.

"Of course, Priestess Lasega. Do you also want to me to execute the punishment in your name?"

"I would be most obliged, Endera."

"How many?"

"Thirty for disobedience, on the buttocks only. - Camille, I want you to count the strokes and thank the weapons' master after every third."

"Yes Mistress Lasega." The young woman answered with a shaky voice.

One of the responsibilities of the weapons' master was to keep the warriors-in-training in line. Given the volatile temper of most young warriors she had ample, even daily opportunity to perfect her technique. She knew exactly how to inflict a maximum of pain while leaving a minimum of marks - and from Endera's point of view the young whelp didn't deserve any leniency.

Endera had heard about the stunt she had pulled with having the servants rearrange the Queen's tent but his bordered on delusional and suicidal. With Hippolyta's current rather fragile frame of mind she had been lucky that she had not been run through. Camille tried not to show her pain to the avidly watching warriors, but these thoughts fuelled the force of Endera's strokes, and she made every single one of them count.

Queen Hippolyta meanwhile lay on her bed and listened to rhythmic sounds of leather hitting naked flesh. It guided her thoughts back to the day when a flustered Sara had confessed that sometimes she liked a bit of pain and she liked being a servant to the Queen because she liked being subservient to her.

It had been at the end of a Council session, one of those sessions where tempers had been high and that didn't seem to end.

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[Flashback - Three and a half years prior]

It was one of Sara's duties to serve refreshments during the session, and though Hippolyta stuck to water in order to keep a level head, not everyone was as cautious. They were discussing the terms of a trade agreement with a village just outside of their borders and one of the most stubborn opponents of the Queen's ideas had just ordered her third refill with the potent Amazon wine. Sara heard her utter that Hippolyta was nothing but a stubborn moron, and instead of the goblet the wine from the pitcher hit the Elder's face.

The inebriated woman sprang from her chair and raised her hand against the dark-haired servant.

"Stop Handa. She's mine to deal with." Hippolyta ordered and two of the other council members stopped Handa.

"I demand her public punishment, your majesty."

"Come here, Sara." Hippolyta waited until the younger woman was kneeling in front of her. "Was it an accident or did you do it deliberately?"

"It was not an accident, Mistress."

"Why?"

"I'd rather not tell, my Queen."

"Then you leave me no choice but to punish you here and now. Weapons master, your strap please. Sara stand up and get over my knee."

The young woman obeyed and lowered herself over the Queen's right knee; her legs were immobilised by Hippolyta's left leg. She felt her tunic being pushed upwards and her breeches pulled down.

"Thirty strokes for disrespectful behaviour. I want you to count and thank me properly when it's over."

"Yes mistress." She then added in a whisper just loud enough to be only heard by the Queen. "I love you, my Queen. Please, don't hold back."

In the whole five moons since they had become lovers, Hippolyta had never had reason to give the young woman anything but joy and pleasure; so, she hesitated a few heartbeats before she raised the strap and delivered a stinging blow to the firm buttocks.

Had Sara not been firmly held, she would have jumped at the impact. "One," she counted dutifully.

"Two."

"Three."

"I changed my mind about the counting. Elder Handa, you were the wronged party. Step up here. You will count." Hippolyta said.

With the sixth stroke adding to the parallel lines on her lover's behind Hippolyta began to feel the wetness on her right thigh. Sara was getting aroused and from the way she wriggled and tried to get herself in a better position; she was actively working herself towards an orgasm. Hippolyta smiled to herself and pressed her free hand more firmly on the small of Sara's back to keep her still.

Stroke twenty-five crossed the others at a 45° degree angle and brought tears to the bright green eyes. When the last stroke had landed on the crimson red nether cheeks, Hippolyta dismissed the council.

"We'll reconvene tomorrow afternoon, and then I want to see some swift decision making. My time is too precious for endless and pointless debates. Leave, all of you."

As soon as they were gone she gently caressed the welts she had created and tried to help her lover up, but the young woman instead glided sideways to the floor and knelt in front of her. She bent forward and kissed her lover's hand and whispered, "Thank you for punishing me, my Queen."

"I'd rather not have had to do it, baby. Come, let me put some aloe on your skin."

"Could we talk first, please. There is something you have to know." Sara asked shyly.

"That the punishment aroused you? I know, my love. The sudden wetness on my thigh was a dead give-away." Hippolyta answered with a smile.

"You're not embarrassed or disappointed?"

"I love you, Sara, and I'll do anything to make you happy."

"Could we go to bed, please? I need to feel you inside of me."

Hippolyta bent down and took the smaller woman in her arms. She carried her to their bed in the private quarters. "Let me care for your welts first, baby."

"Please, don't, leave them. It will heighten my enjoyment, please."

"Are you sure, Sara? I don't want to hurt you more than I already have."

"Yes, I'm sure. It's a bit hard to explain..."

A hungry kiss swallowed her words and when they had to come up for air Hippolyta said. "First things first. We'll talk later."

Sara's breeches and tunic were gone in the blink of an eye, and the taller woman devoured her naked flesh with her eyes. As always when they started out with her on top she first reverently kissed the slave mark branded just over Sara's left breast and then kissed her way down to the already erect nipple.

It didn't take long for the dark-haired woman to plead, "Please, please go inside of me. I need to feel you, please, Mistress. The heat and pain in my ass make me so hot, please, release me, give me release."

Hippolyta only smiled in answer and returned to caress the firm globes of her lover. She suckled and flipped the left nipple with the tip of her tongue and rolled the other one between her index finger and thumb. To emphasise her pleading Sara began to buck her hips like an unbroken horse. Suddenly the left nipple was abandoned in favour of creating a trail of butterfly kisses down the toned abdomen. When the Queen had reached the pubic area she stopped her ministrations.

She looked up mischievously. "Just a bit more patience, my love."

Hippolyta kissed her way back up and closed her lips around the right nipple. Her left hand sneaked down and entered Sara's centre with two fingers. She ignored the pleading to go harder and faster but added a third finger after some languorous thrusts. Her mouth was still busy playing with the nipple but she wanted more. So, she quickly scooted down and began to lap up the abundant juices. As soon as she gently touched the quivering clit, Sara cried out her orgasm.

The first wave had barely subsided when Hippolyta began to work her fingers in earnest, combining wriggling with thrusting in a truly maddening rhythm. When she felt Sara's inner muscles clench in preparation for another orgasm, she quickly withdrew her fingers and rolled them over. She made sure that Sara's centre was riding on her slightly raised thigh and then began to gently slap the reddened ass cheeks of the other woman.

The tears in her lover's forest green eyes almost made her stop but the next moment she was treated to the sight of a breathtaking orgasm, and while the younger woman was in its grip she continued her ministrations, letting the slaps slowly change to gentle caresses.

For a few minutes Sara rejoiced in the afterglow, secure in the knowledge of their love. Her whispered, "It's your turn now, my beloved Queen," was like a light breeze tickling against the soft tissue of Hippolyta's full breasts. She answered with a soft chuckle.

Sara raised her upper body, expertly putting pressure on Hippolyta's centre and assumed the most serious expression she could muster.

"I'll have you know, oh mighty Queen, that this is not a laughing matter. Making love is a gift from the Goddess and has to be taken seriously. I suggest you spend the next hour kneeling in quiet contemplation." She said in her best imitation of Priestess Lasega's voice.

Hippolyta now really started to laugh and Sara urged her on by tickling her mercilessly. When the blonde ruler was helpless with laughter, Sara bit in her right nipple and entered her smoothly with three fingers at once, fingers she made flutter against the Hippolyta's love centre. Sara immediately was rewarded by clenching muscles and an arched back. Her fingers fought against the sudden pressure and Hippolyta shouted her name in release.

She left her fingers inside until the orgasm had subsided and the inner muscles relaxed. Only then she slowly withdrew them and made sure that her lover had a good view when she began to clean them sensually one by one with her lips and tongue, savouring the unique taste. Sara felt

Hippolyta's deep blue eyes on her. They warmed her in places that soon would be sore if they continued at that pace.

Hippolyta pulled her back up against her body. She revelled in the feeling of her lover's whole weight resting on top of her, but it unfortunately was not the best position for a talk. So, she let her glide to the side and lie in her arms. The next step was up to Sara.

The young woman snuggled closer and asked, "What do you remember of what I told you about my time as a slave?"

"Everything, my love. It made you who you are today, how could I forget?"

"There is something I didn't tell you. I was ashamed to tell you. I feared you would no longer want me if I did, but now I have hope. My former master liked to inflict pain. He was of the firm belief that regular beatings were the best method to keep a slave in line. He especially liked to inflict pain before or while he raped us."

Sara could feel the mounting tension in her lover's body and knew that she was angry on her behalf.

"No, Hippolyta, my love. It's over. You freed me. You killed him and he will never again hurt anyone. I need to tell you to make you understand. Pain was such a big part of my life that I sort of got used to it, so to speak. Not in the sense that it didn't hurt any longer, and one can't really get used to the whip, but over the moons and seasons I learned to enjoy the pain, at least as long as it didn't exceed a certain amount of pain.

"There's more, my love. When you began to teach me staff fighting was the first time you gave me short, stern orders and the tone of your voice alone made me wet and work harder. That was when I began to fall in love with you but I didn't think that I would ever stand a chance with the beautiful Queen of the Amazons. Then I got to know you better and I found a very caring person, someone funny and gentle. I was afraid that you would be disappointed, that's why I never told you. I was afraid I would lose you."

"You could never lose my love, and I'll never be disappointed in you, Sara. You were so incredibly beautiful draped over my knee. Do you know that for the last ten strokes you pushed your beautiful behind towards the strap. And when you thanked me with tears still clinging in your eyes I never before felt more loved. I never before felt this powerful. No, baby, I'm not disappointed. I'm thrilled." Hippolyta bent down and kissed her lover deeply while her hand gently padded her behind. "For the first time since I was a child I begin to understand my mother."

"Your mother?"

"Yes, Queen Hippolyta, daughter of Rhea. My mother's consort was a warrior of the Royal guard. She was tall and strong, one of the fiercest warriors of her time. She taught me most of my fighting skills. She was a tough teacher and the best second mother one could ever want. Some

people called her headstrong and arrogant, but when she was with my mother she became shy and submissive. Mother called her slave and she willingly sat at her feet and obeyed orders with a smile, orders other people would have been killed for. Sometimes my mother punished her for some bogus offences. At the time I couldn't understand how someone this strong could allow herself to be treated this way even by the Queen of the Amazons. It took me very long to understand that it was just an expression of their love. When Lygia died in battle my mother never took another consort or even a lover."

She once again kissed Sara and continued, "Don't get me wrong, my love, I don't want you to be my slave, but I wouldn't mind to explore this new part of our life a bit further."

"So, you wouldn't mind if I call you 'Mistress' every once in a while even when we're not in public?"

"No, my love, I won't mind, as long as you don't mind if I expect you to follow a few strange orders just for fun."

[End of Flashback]

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A knock at the tent pole brought her out of her musings. Her captain of the Royal guard let her know that everything was ready for them to march out. She mounted the big grey Arabian stallion she preferred as a war horse and looked at her troops.

"Tomorrow morning we will take Netha and cut off Aldebran's supply lines. We will put an end to his campaign of hatred, once and for all, in the name of freedom and love, in the name of the Great Goddess."

Her army answered, "In the name of the Great Goddess!"

Hundreds of voices ringing far ahead, so far ahead that the advance scouts sent to check the defences of the city still heard the echo. They rejoined the army a couple of hours after midnight.

Aldebran had obviously been busy. The city walls had been fortified and the old wooden gate replaced by one made entirely of steel. But there seemed to be barely enough troops to man all of the walls.

Hippolyta suspected that the crafty old man expected her to lay siege on the city and would then try to take them from behind with his mounted troops which had been suspiciously absent from the encounter the day before. Two more scout groups had yet to return; so, she decided to postpone the strategic planning to a later date.

When they were about two hours of slow march from the city one of the scouts returned. She had an arrow in her side and only barely clung to her saddle. At first what she told them didn't make much sense. She reported that Aldebran's troops were attacking Netha instead of manning the

walls or preparing an ambush for their Amazon enemies.

After a short forced march they crested the hill protecting the city from the fierce dawn winds. The scout had been right. Mounted soldiers wearing Aldebran's colours were trying to pick off the wall sentries with their bows and were likewise attacked, neither side was very successful. About five hundred foot soldiers at the same time were trying to climb the walls with ropes and obviously makeshift ladders. They were being peppered with stones and heated oil before they were even halfway up.

A sinister smile crept on Hippolyta's face and she gave her orders. The archers would attack Aldebran's foot soldiers first to keep them from establishing any kind of battle formation, then part of her own foot soldiers would sweep in to keep them out. She took charge of her mounted warriors.

They had the moment of surprise on their side, and the sun coming up behind them was another card stacked in their advantage. Hippolyta drew her sword and urged her horse in a gallop. The enemy was focused on the walls of the fortified city, and they only became aware of them when she yelled the Amazon battle cry.

"For freedom, love and the Goddess!"

And her troops, by now surrounding the enemy, echoed, "For the Goddess and Hippolyta!"

Their opponents forced their horses around when they heard her but the Amazons were already too close by to use their bows effectively, and bow and arrow were suddenly more of a hindrance than an asset. The blonde Queen as always was right in front, leading the assault flanked by the Royal guard. Together they cut a path through their enemies, and with every stroke of her sword, with every swipe severing one body part or the other the pain in her heart lessened.

After what seemed to be only a few candle-drops they had reached the centre of the enemy cavalry where about two scores of riders apparently tried to protect a man in shining golden armour and an ornate helmet. They were the most competent soldiers so far, but Hippolyta was not even slowed down. She laughed when two of them tried to attack her from the side while a third came on to her from behind. Omar, her horse, caught him full in the chest with his hind legs and lurched forward. She used the momentum to cut off the head of one of her attackers, ducked under the swipe of the other and rammed her dagger in his throat. The blood spurting out added to the gore already liberally splattered on her armour, and before she knew it she faced the man in the golden armour.

He carried a big sword at his side, much longer than her own, but defended himself with a battle mace. He was very tall and well-muscled. Just the challenge for her skills she had been waiting for. Predictably he tried to press his presumed advantage in strength and height but his horse was not half as well trained as hers and started to get skittish.

Hippolyta's personal guard by then had closed in around them and kept the few of his protectors who were still alive from interfering. The giant of a man finally got down from his horse and

attacked from the ground. He swung his mace against Omar's front leg. The stallion reared but the force of his swing carried the mace further and it crashed against Omar's left hind leg. Hippolyta was just able to jump off before the brave animal collapsed.

The man roared in triumph but instead of immediately pressing his advantage at her apparent shock, he began to brag what he would do to her as soon as he had her on her knees. Hippolyta killed her horse with one thrust of her sword through his heart. She then turned around, the death of the big man already written in her eyes.

The last remnants of pain had left her heart and all that remained were anger and hatred. For the average person both emotions are a dangerous guide in battle. Hippolyta, however, grew cold and calculating. Her first counter-attack sliced through the handle of the mace as if it were nothing but a thin twig. The second injured his unprotected left upper arm and the third did the same to the other side.

Her movements were so fast, he barely saw them. When he finally unsheathed his own sword, his own movements were slow and clumsy. His defences were like open barn doors and she could have killed him with one single stroke, but he had made her kill her beloved horse. He would pay for that in pain. So, she proceeded with her lightening quick attacks, each time leaving another part of his body with a bleeding wound.

She cut off his armour, one piece at a time and less than five candledrops later her blade cut through his heart. Hippolyta mounted his skittish mare without a backwards glance and rejoined the battle. Her usually vibrant blue eyes were now pale and cold. She continued to kill without looking left or right. Only when the last of Aldebran's cavalry had been killed did she stop. She looked up and saw that the sun had not yet reached its midday point. The battle was over for now.

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Twenty-six of her sisters had been killed; they had two and a half score wounded, according to Sarita they would be able to travel with the army but not to fight at their sisters' side. All that was left of Aldebran's five hundred foot soldiers and three hundred horsemen was a small group of about thirty people, young lads mostly, just like the one she had sent back with her message carved in his back.

They were kneeling on the floor. She looked down at them and ordered, "Endera, have them killed, they're useless."

"My Queen, please, reconsider. They surrendered without a fight."

"What by the Goddess are you doing out here? Is this how my orders are followed these days? I'm of a mind to punish you myself for disobedience, Detevia." Hippolyta said angrily.

"She didn't disobey your orders, my Queen. You told her to stay with the healers, and she came with me." Sarita explained coming from the side.

Hippolyta's eyes softened slightly at the sight of the old healer and she acknowledged her words with a nod; then she turned her attention back to Detevia who was on her right knee in front of her.

"Rise and turn around." The Queen studied the still slightly welted back. "You're allowed to resume your normal duties tomorrow morning. For now, go with Sarita."

The mare the Queen had commandeered whinnied and Hippolyta dismounted. She studied the animal's nervous eyes and asked for a water skin and a halter. To the utter astonishment of the men she began to take the mare's tack off, exchanged the mouth piece for a simple rope halter and offered her some water in her cupped hands. Calling one of her warriors over she handed her the rope and ordered,

"Take her to the stable master. Tell Louisa to care for her. The sides of her mouth are all bloody, and if I'm not mistaken she's carrying. She should not have been on a battle field." She followed the young warrior with her eyes and half whispered. "I really wish I knew your name, girl."

"Roga, her name is Roga, your majesty." A youthful male voice said from close by.

Hippolyta whirled around. "Who said this?"

Slowly a young man of about fifteen summers rose and took a tentative step forward. When he was not immediately cut down he took another step and got down on his right knee. "What's your name, boy?"

"Martin, your majesty."

"Did Roga's former master know that she was expecting a foal in the next moons?"

"I told him days ago. He said the colour of her coat would look great with his armour. I begged him not to take her today."

"So, Martin, what are you doing with such a sorry excuse of an army? And before you answer, remember that Amazons don't take prisoners."

The young man visibly paled and closed his right fist tighter around the pendant he had been clutching the whole time. He swallowed and answered. "We all come from a village a couple of days march from here, though with the army it took more than three. Lord Alba said that he would burn down our village if we would not come and take care of his horses. He said that his men had more important things to do."

The Queen and all of the warriors around her snorted in disgust.

"Yeah, my mother would tan my hide if I even thought something like this. Anyway, there were just too many of them and we are no warriors. We had to do what they asked. The soldiers and

regular stable hands wanted us to take up arms to defend ourselves but... but I convinced my friends not to. They said that you would kill us all anyway but my mother always told me that Amazons only fight those who attack them first and we didn't." He said.

"The thing that you clutch in your hand, what is it?" Hippolyta asked.

"It's a talisman my mother gave to me, your majesty. She said it would protect me."

"Rise and show it to me."

Hippolyta studied the pendant; a round medallion with Artemis' moon engraved on one side and her mother's sigil on the other. The front part was dented as if something sharp had tried to penetrate it. She remembered that her mother had used these pendants as identification marks for her official messengers and that she had had the design changed when one of them failed to come back. Part of her was curious about the story behind this pendant but now was not the time to investigate.

So she finally said, "Your mother might have just been right, Martin." She then addressed her weapons' master. "Endera, we'll take them with us and bring them back home. See that someone keeps an eye on them. I want the funeral pyres for our warriors prepared as soon as possible."

"We're already working on it, my Queen, and there's a delegation from Netha asking to talk to you."

"Let them wait a little bit longer, I first want to clean up, but to put their minds at ease tell them that we have no intention of taking over their city. All I want is the end of Aldebran's reign."

About half a candlemark later she had the delegation from Netha brought to her tent. It consisted of two men and two women. She listened to the elaborate and lengthy speech of one of the men, glad that she was already sitting. Their request was surprising and very unexpected.

"Did I understand that right? You want to become a part of the Amazon Nation, some sort of trading outpost? You know that this would mean to swear fealty to the Nation, right?"

"Yes, we do, your majesty." One of the women answered.

"As things stand at the moment we would not be able to protect you." Hippolyta said calmly.

"We know that, too, Queen Hippolyta, and we don't expect a decision right now. We held a vote of all the adult inhabitants of the city and it was almost unanimous. King Aldebran sucks the whole country dry with his unreasonable demands for more taxes, more soldiers, more supplies, and he never gave anything back. We always gave him everything we could, and yet he still pressed our young men to serve in his army. We even paid for the additional armaments of the wall and the city gate, but when Lord Alba, the new commander arrived here with his men, he ordered all of our men to fight outside of the gates. He wanted them on the frontlines to spare his own men. We refused and shut the gate right in front of his nose. King Aldebran will want

revenge, but we put all our hopes in you and your warriors, your majesty. We are ready to do everything in our power to assist you in this endeavour." The second of the men explained.

"What's in it for you?"

"Queen Hippolyta, I won't even pretend that we're doing this just because it is right, though it is. Should you accept us as part of the Nation in whatever capacity this city would finally have a chance to prosper and our children would have a chance to grow up without fear and hate." The first woman said.

"What is the difference between paying tribute to Aldebran or paying it to us?" Hippolyta asked.

"We are a city of merchants, your majesty. We spoke with traders from some of the villages that already have trading agreements or more with the Amazon Nation. They said that you are always fair and keep your side of the bargain and that you never change the conditions on a whim. Their villages have prospered under the patronage of the Amazon Nation. So, we decided that we'd rather take our chances with you, your majesty, than to continue to suffer under Aldebran's reign." The second woman said.

"I think I understand your reasoning now, but at the moment I can't make any decisions for the future. I have a war to win. We will speak again, and in the meantime I would be grateful if you could cut those of Aldebran's supply lines that run through here." Hippolyta answered.

"When we decided to close the gate to Lord Alba and his men we already did this. We hope that you and your army will use them to your benefit. Please, don't refuse them." The older woman said.

"Thanks for the offer. My supply master can tell you what we can use."

Priestess Lasega entered through the opened tent flaps and bowed. "Your majesty, it is time."

"Thank you Priestess. I'll be by shortly." Hippolyta turned back to the delegation. "If you would excuse me, it's time to honour our dead. One of my guards will escort you back to the city."

"Your majesty, if it wouldn't be too inconvenient, we'd like to witness the funeral on behalf of the city of Netha." The first man said shyly.

He didn't dare to look the Amazon Queen in the eyes. The better part of Hippolyta's mind still was in the grip of battle haze, but nonetheless the undercurrent in his voice was not lost to her.

"How many of your men were among Aldebran's soldiers?" She asked.

"He took more than one hundred and fifty of our young men." He answered.

Hippolyta thought for a moment and then addressed the priestess. "Priestess Lasega, I want you to postpone the lighting of the funeral pyres until the habitants of Netha had the chance to check

if some of the enemy dead belong to them. - You all are dismissed."

They silently filed out of her tent while she mentally prepared herself for another vigil at a funeral pyre. She definitively was not looking forward to it. The last time had brought too many dark memories and after the battle this morning the more pleasant memories about her time with her servant and lover held no longer any power. When she was finally called to the field where the ceremony would be held she counted twenty-seven of the smaller pyres.

"Lattenis, I thought we had only twenty-six dead?"

"That's right, my Queen. The last pyre is for Omar."

"He was just a horse." The sadness in Hippolyta's eyes belied her harsh words.

"Yes, but there's no rule denying animals entrance into the Land of the Dead. - Religion aside; Netha's butchers specialise in something they call 'salami'. It's made of horseflesh. We didn't want Omar to end this way."

"Did we lose any other of our horses?"

"About half are wounded, nothing that will not heal with time, though. We already selected replacements from Albedran's left-overs and added fifty volunteers from the ranks to our own cavalry. As you know we have a lot more qualified riders than we had trained war horses. These horses are not as well trained as our own but they will have to do. The boys Aldebran's general had forced from their village volunteered to assist our own stable hands, and Louisa said that she could use the help. I hope that meets with your approval, my Queen." Lattenis explained.

Hippolyta only nodded.

"Do you want to choose a new horse from the lot or would you prefer that we bring up Nerufa, your majesty?"

"Bring Nerufa, she's still young and not as fast as Omar but she's well trained. I just wish..." Becoming aware of the other woman's scrutiny she fell silent and then simply said. "Don't worry, my friend. I'll be alright, in time."

"I hate to see you hurting, Lyta." Lattenis said.

"I'll be alright. I will learn to live with the emptiness in my heart and if the call of darkness once again becomes too strong, as it did the day before yesterday with this boy, you and the others will stop me - that's an order, by the way. Stop me either with words or with deeds, do not let me lose the rest of my soul."

"Yes, my Queen, but I hope that it will not become necessary, my friend."

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Priestess Lasaga gave the signal that the funeral rites were to begin. The ritual words brought Hippolyta's dark mood back in full force, but she fought against the memories. This time Hippolyta managed to shut her emotions off before the ceremony started.

She sang the dirge as was her duty, as she did every time, at least she thought she did. Every Amazon within hearing range, however, couldn't help to hear the difference. The words were there; she hit every note and her voice was as pure as always, but it was without life. They all felt that she was just going through the motions for tradition's sake but only a few of them knew what was really going on with their Queen.

The friends with which she had grown up and her former teachers knew exactly what was happening at the moment. They had seen her like this once before, after her mother's death; and they feared for their Queen more than if she simply had been in the grip of anger and rage. She not only had put walls around her emotions; she had cut them off completely - and it showed in her dull blue eyes.

What she was not able to control, however, were her dreams, dreams so vivid that she began to dread going to sleep. They always started the same way and always ended the same way. They always started with happy memories of her beloved and ended with her killing Sara, once, twice, three times a night.

She remembered a day on a riverbank, making love. Her whole body had been squirming under the solicitous attentions of her beloved, and just when a final, decisive thrust would have caused her to go over the edge the scene changed. And she saw her hand holding a dagger; she saw her hand driving the dagger deep into Sara's heart.

She dreamed about taking the dark-haired woman with a phallus. She inhaled the scent of her arousal, revelled in her power over the beautiful body. She claimed her as her own. She saw the deep green eyes widen and then close in bliss - and then she saw Sara's barely clothed body being paraded along the rows of a jeering crowd. She heard the crude remarks of the men and of some of the women. She saw Sara jerk forward, driven by a five-pronged whip, a whip she was holding in her hand.

She saw Sara resist when two uniformed men tried to drag her up onto the auction platform. She saw how she raised her whip and how it ripped full force right across Sara's chest. The blow shredded the last remnants of the flimsy tunic Sara was wearing and left bleeding lash marks on the sensitive skin. Her hand rose a second time and a second set of marks crossed the first.

She heard Sara cry out but the young woman never ceased her struggle against the rough hands dragging her on. The strokes fell faster now and soon the men let go of their captive to avoid being hit themselves. She saw how Sara curled into a ball as best as she could with her hands bound behind her back and tried to make herself as small as possible. The whip only stopped falling when the body had ceased to move.

Every time Hippolyta woke up drenched in sweat but these dreams were not what really made her fear the dreamscape. The other dreams were worse, much worse. Before she had only looked on. She had recognised herself and her beloved but it had been with the eyes of a sympathetic stranger. These other dreams were more real because she was not a silent observer but a participant. She not only saw herself doing all these things; she really felt it. She relived her memories and the scenes of torture and death, though not part of her past, were equally vivid and real. It combined her most pleasant experiences with her beloved Sara with scenes of untold horror. There suddenly was no distance, no way to hide, nowhere to run.

In her mind she made love with Sara for the first time, on that rainy day shortly after she had become her servant; and the blink of an eye later she felt a rush of dark energy when her hands closed around the slender neck and strangled her lover.

In her mind she felt her fingers massaged by Sara's orgasmically clenching inner muscles. She felt her own arousal as she was riding the other woman's thigh. She felt herself at the brink of her own release, but instead of bliss the next moment she rejoiced in the feeling of her fists hitting soft, defenceless flesh.

The dreams always ended with Sara's dying body held in her arms. They always ended with Sara's green eyes looking up at her, filled with love and trust.

When she woke, Hippolyta's whole body was covered in sweat, her heart was beating a mile a minute. She was trembling but not in exhaustion or horror but in exhilaration. When she woke she still felt the unmitigated pleasure of having killed and maimed and beaten the woman she had professed to love. When she woke she remembered fondly every lash mark she had given her victim, every taunt she had uttered, every single one of Sara's laboured breaths, every cry of pain.

When she woke these memories were quickly replaced by the mental image of Sara's deep, trusting eyes, and the proud Queen of the Amazons lost what little was left in her stomach, followed by dry heaves that made her throat hurt.

Her lack of real sleep soon began to show in dark circles under her eyes and her ever shorter temper. After only a few days Sarita even offered to give her a sleeping draught, but she was afraid not to wake from her dreams and so she refused.

There was a tiny voice in her head telling her that she deserved to suffer for what she enjoyed in her dreams; that she deserved to hurt for having killed the bearer of her heart and soul. So, she put a tap on her temper and spent her restless energy in lonely sword drills as soon as the army started to make camp in the evening.

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### ***Chapter Three***

Two days after leaving Netha they passed the vicinity of the stable hands' home village but the

young men begged to be allowed to stay on and continue to care for the horses, and Hippolyta reluctantly agreed. After three more days the scouts reported that Aldebran had ordered his garrisons to fall back to the Capital. It was also on this day that they passed the first burned out village with dozens of unburied bodies. When they found a second and a third village it became clear that his troops followed a policy of scorched Earth. When they came close to Aldebran's capital Hippolyta decided to lead the scouting party herself.

Aldebran had amassed his troops on a huge plain in front of the capital. The three scouts she had with her gasped in shock when they saw women and children staked out in a long line in the middle of the large field, effectively blocking a frontal assault. They would have to go through the hostages to get to the enemy army, and if they stopped to free the hostages they would be living targets for Aldebran's archers.

After the first circuit of the camp's perimeter a tentative plan began to form. In the night they crawled past the sentries supposedly guarding the camp. To their surprise no one even tried to stop them. A group of ornate tents showed them where they would find the war leaders. Close by was a smaller, less ornate tent. It held a big table with a map on it. Hippolyta studied it intently, taking in the chiselled miniature stones indicating the different arms of the services, their position and numbers. Aldebran's war leaders obviously believed her own army to be much larger than it really was and they also seemed to expect a frontal assault, just like in the first two battles, though it certainly was not a battle strategy the Amazons usually preferred.

The map also showed that a small contingent of cavalry was stationed behind the city. It was not big enough for an effective ambush but there were enough men to serve as an escort should Aldebran decide to flee his own capital.

They left the camp as quietly as they had entered without ever being seen by Aldebran's guards and returned to their own camp. The Amazon guards turned out to be more alert than the enemy, and so the war council was already assembled when they rode in with the rising sun. Hippolyta left the report on troop strength and placements to her scouts, content that their observations were consistent with her own. Before the members of her war council could come up with suggestions what to do, Hippolyta began to issue orders. It was time to fight this war Amazon style; it was time to rely on stealth, speed, agility and cunning, however, with the hostages and the fact that they once again were outnumbered four to one; it would be anything but easy.

She sent a platoon of her cavalry under the command of Detevia to take out the king's men behind the city. They had orders to stay out of sight, wait until night fall, kill or at least subdue the men and take their place. Should Aldebran and his retinue of trusted advisors leave the city they were to arrest them and bring them back to the camp. It was an important part in her plan but it also would keep the youngest and most inexperienced of her warriors out of the worst of the fighting and greatly reduce the danger of them being killed or injured. They still would have to kill the contingent of guards, but they would do it swiftly and without making the enemy suffer unnecessarily, that at least was the plan.

Other small independently working groups would do the same at the left and right flank of Aldebran's troops. Their orders were to quietly take out as many enemy soldiers as possible, but

also to wait 'til the early hours of the morning and attack in force when the enemy was still waking up and thus disoriented should there even be the slightest chance that they could be found out.

The Amazons' best archers would try to get as close as possible to the command tents and take out the leaders of Aldebran's army as soon as they left them. It was one of the most important and also one of the most dangerous tasks. An army without proficient leaders was only half an army but there was no guarantee that the archers would be able to escape after fulfilling their duty. Initially Hippolyta had wanted to lead this group herself but Endera and Lattenis had convinced her she would be needed in the open assault against the main bulk of the king's troops.

Aldebran counted heavily on his superiour numbers and expected a frontal attack but with the flanks being taken care of before the battle had even started the Amazon horse women would be able to attack from both sides while the foot warriors would create a distraction for them. That also would hopefully provide enough of a cover to free the hostages.

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The preparations took them the whole day during which her scouts and guards arrested six of Aldebran's spies. They were brought before her. She asked them to tell her everything they knew and killed them one by one when they refused to answer. Number five was more cooperative but not of much use and quickly joined his companions in death. The last one had enough bravado to challenge her to a fight.

A nod of her head let the guards step back, a sword was thrown at his feet but he didn't pick it up. "I'm not a sword's man. I fight with a spear."

Another nod produced a spear baring Aldebran's marks they had taken from the last battlefield. He smiled when the Queen left her own sword sheathed and faced him with a simple fighting staff. Hippolyta could easily imagine the thoughts running through his mind.

'She's only a woman with a stick. This will be easier than I thought. King Aldebran will grant me every wish when I've killed the bitch.'

But the woman was faster than anyone he had ever seen and she knew exactly where to hit to inflict pain without doing too much damage. To everyone watching it was more than obvious that Queen Hippolyta was playing with him. Five candledrops later and after the at least tenth opportunity to kill her opponent the man was breathing heavily and barely able to stand while the Queen looked as relaxed as she had in the beginning.

With one last effort he thrust the spear towards her midsection. She used it as a vaulting pole and jumped over his head. Turning in mid-jump she made a powerful side-sweep and broke his neck.

Hippolyta was just about to attend to other matters when another man was dragged in front of her. He immediately fell on his knees and begged, "Help us, please, help us."

He didn't look like a soldier and he was not wearing a uniform. "Show me your hands."

She looked at his palms. He had the calluses of a farmer.

"Please, your majesty. Soldiers are attacking my village, please, help us."

"Where did they come from? The capital?"

"No, your majesty. The sheppard girl who warned us said that they were wearing the colours of the Northern Border Garrison. Please, save our children."

Hippolyta turned around to her Captain of the Guard. "Lattenis, I need my horse, my personal guard, fifty horse women, make sure that at least a score of them are good archers."

"My Queen, it could be a trick. It could be an ambush."

"Yes, it could, but it also could be genuine, and I certainly will not risk the life of innocents just because it could get me in trouble. I'll take the risk. Ask for volunteers, Lattenis, and bring a spare horse for him."

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They could smell the fire before they saw it. Once again the element of surprise worked in their favour.

Aldebran's soldiers were too busy killing helpless villagers to hear them coming. Hippolyta dismounted and started to cut them down with almost surgical precision. Her guard made sure that no one would be able to attack her from behind. The archers picked the black and yellow clad soldiers with the red sash off one by one, as if they were at target practice. One score of Amazon warriors had engaged the men busy with herding away the women and children.

When it was over, one hundred and forty-nine soldiers were dead but none of the Amazons had lost her life. Out of the corner of her eyes Hippolyta saw one last soldier trying to run away. She whistled, and moments later three arrows left their bow simultaneously. All three hit their target.

It took them another four hours to help put out the fires and create some shelters for the villagers. Hippolyta had also some supplies sent from her camp. The villagers promised to take care of the dead soldiers when burying their own dead. They offered to have their able-bodied men and women join the Amazon army, but Hippolyta made them understand that farmers and craftsmen were at least as important as soldiers and that sending untrained troops in the field would only do one thing, get them killed. She also told them that they had done the Amazon Nation a favour by warning them in time of these men sneaking up from their flank.

And in a way, it even was the truth. These one hundred and fifty soldiers could have made a difference the next day.

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When night had fallen Camille left the camp. She had told the sentries that she had been ordered to gather some herbs and they had let her go without a problem. That, however, had not been the truth.

Camille had been trained as a scout before she took her vows to the Goddess; so to her it was no problem to pass Aldebran's sentries without being detected. The only thing that could possibly identify her as an Amazon was the tattoo on her mons she had received after the first year of her apprenticeship in the temple but it was hidden under her curly nether hairs. She quickly reached a point closest to the east end of the three rows of bound hostages.

The three men assigned to guard them were playing dice, and when one of them looked up to check on the bound women he didn't see that there now was a prisoner more at his end than before.

Camille looked up at the night sky. She had about four to five candlemarks before the attack was scheduled to begin. She had to hurry.

Keeping one ear on the doings of the guards she cut the first woman loose. The young woman had a hard time to make the hostage understand that she would have to wait until the others also were free before they all could escape.

"They have to believe that you are completely helpless for as long as possible. When Queen Hippolyta's forces attack we will have the perfect opportunity to get out of here. It's the best chance we all have at survival."

Surprisingly she only had to repeat this a few times while she freed the hostages one by one. It went much faster than she had anticipated because even the young children seemed to have the good sense to stay quiet.

Camille's problems began when she came to the end of the front row; with the exception of three women everyone else had been freed from their restraints and was ready to bolt. Earlier, when she had reached the end of the first row, she had known that these three guards were trouble. It was obvious that they were just raping one of the hostages but she also knew her own abilities good enough to reluctantly accept that there was nothing she could do at the moment. She committed their faces to memory to make sure that they would pay for their crime at a later time.

Now, that she reached the end of the first row she saw that the first and the third place in line were empty. She silently slid between number four and five and observed the three men.

[Warning: Graphic description of rape. Please scroll down to the next brackets to skip it.]

Camille saw the exposed legs of a woman sticking out beneath one of the guards. He was grunting but his victim made no sound. The second guard was busy masturbating at the sight. He squirted his load right over the woman's torso. She still didn't move or give any sound. The third took a branch from their campfire and intently studied the woman's face.

"Stop it, you moron. The cunt is dead."

At this moment the first man came, oblivious of his comrade's words. He didn't even look up when the other one added,

"You're fucking a corpse, man."

He slowly withdrew, wiped his cock at a rag that once had been the woman's top and then answered,

"Well, at least she died happy. Let's get us another one, the night's still long and the captain said that these stupid harlots won't be here before the day after tomorrow. So, we'll have lots of time to sample the merchandise and have some more fun."

Camille once again scrutinised the horizon. It was at least a candlemark before dawn, probably more close to two candlemarks. There was nothing she could do.

"It's my turn to choose." The second guard said.

He stalked off towards the line of hostages and stopped almost in mid-step when he saw Camille. The young woman had the presence of mind to wind some remnants of rope around her wrists and hand her dagger to the woman she had just cut loose.

The man pulled her forwards but she made as if she were stumbling and fell back against the chest of another woman. Before he was able to yank her back she said,

"Keep quiet, don't interfere, the Amazons will be here soon."

Then she fought the man as best as she could without giving away her training and thus her identity. Meanwhile the third man had reached them and they dragged her towards the fire where they threw her down face first.

Camille closed her eyes and prayed to the Goddess. "Please forgive me that I failed you. Have mercy and save these women and children."

Her tunic was ripped apart. They saw the marks of her recent punishment and laughed.

Every morning since they had left the first battlefield she had had to ask her mistress and teacher to punish her for her failings; and every morning she had received thirty hard strokes with a strap. Her mistress, Priestess Lasega, had ordered her to make the journey on the hard wooden bench of one of the supply wagons. So, she had felt her punishment keenly the whole day long.

The priestess, however, had also talked to her and had given her the chance to re-evaluate her actions. On the forth day she finally had understood that she deserved every single stroke.

"You chose a naughty one, my friend, look at her ass." One of the men said.

They forced her face first on the hard ground. Her legs were pulled apart and suddenly a fierce pain erupted inside of her. She felt ripped asunder and her cry of pain filled the night. Big meaty hands closed on each side of her hips and held her in a vice grip. Instead of moving his hips he moved her whole body. Her breasts scraped over the stony ground.

Suddenly her upper body was lifted. The tip of a blade forced her mouth open and a wooden ring was pressed between her teeth. Before she had a chance to adjust the first man thrust his hard cock in her defenceless mouth. His member was long enough to trigger her gag reflex but there was nothing she could do. She registered only dimly that the third man was cheering them on.

She prayed. "Great Goddess, creator of all life, protect my sisters and my Queen. Send me to the Land of the Dead but please save those innocents. I know, I failed you, Great Goddess. I'm sorry."

Hot fluid forced itself down her throat and she almost choked on it. At the same time the hard shaft skewering her in two was withdrawn and they harshly turned her onto her back.

The first guard attacked her breasts like a hungry animal. It felt as if he was trying to rip her nipples right off. The man who had chosen her suddenly thrust his still hard dick right into her centre while the second man contended himself with watching. He laughed at her tear stained face and bent down to plunder her mouth with his tongue, and with the wooden ring still in place there was nothing she could do to prevent it.

Her mind was stuck on one thought, and one thought only. "Save them, Great Goddess, please save them."

[End of the heinous, back to the war.]

Suddenly the world around Camille exploded in sound and her attackers were gone. A warm cloak was draped over her body, a cloak smelling of the forest in which she had grown up.

Blue eyes looked down on her. Close enough to touch if she had had the strength to raise her hand. "You are very brave, Camille. Rest now, your part is done. You did well."

Queen Hippolyta got back on her feet. The little bit of warmth her eyes just had held was completely gone when she gave orders to her guard.

"Be careful when you carry her to the healers. See to it that she has the best care. Detain these men. They will face Amazon justice. Get these women to safety."

Hippolyta mounted a beautiful white mare and yelled. "For freedom, love, and the Goddess!"

"For the Goddess and our Queen!" The army answered in a roar.

"Kill them, kill them all!"

Queen Hippolyta had stepped up the timetable of her planned attack when she had heard the anguished cry of a woman. She initially had had planned to be with the foot soldiers to make sure that the attention of Aldebran's strategists was focused on her. But her plans changed when she had heard the anguished cry, and the last remnants of her control had instantly disappeared into nothing.

Instead of grief and pain there only were anger, cold fury and hatred left. These dark feelings let her to every hotspot of the following battle. Whenever it seemed as if one of the Amazons was facing impossible odds suddenly their Queen was there and reduced their opponents to kindling. It was as if she were an unstoppable wave, an army all of her own. And her warriors followed in her footsteps; even injured and exhausted they found new strength to combat the enemy.

This time, despite the element of surprise, the battle lasted almost the whole day, but shortly before the sun began to sink beneath the treetops Aldebran's capital surrendered to the Amazon Nation.

This time seventy-eight of her sisters had lost their lives, more than half of the others were wounded. On the other hand more than two thousand of his men had been killed. They once again had beaten the odds, and more than by a slim margin.

Hippolyta made sure that the injured would be taken care of, though her heart wanted nothing more than to keep on killing and killing and ...

While her fallen sisters were prepared to enter the Land of the Dead the Queen directed her steps towards the field infirmary. She spoke with most of the wounded and finally came to the secluded corner where the priestess' apprentice had been put. Priestess Lasaga was sitting next to the cot and held the young woman's hand.

Hippolyta knelt at the other side. Camille opened her eyes and said softly. "I'm sorry, your majesty. I'm sorry for not respecting your feelings. I'm sorry for being jealous of her."

"That's in the past, Camille. Your mistress told me that you paid your dues. What you did last night was incredibly stupid, I hope you know that, going off without telling anyone, but it also saved the lives of these women. You were very brave. Don't do it again."

"I'll try not to, my Queen." The young woman answered.

"Sarita told me that you'll need a few days to get back on your feet. What I need to know now is if you want to witness the punishment of the men who raped you. We then will keep them locked

up until you're ready." Hippolyta said.

"Getting raped was the punishment for betraying my oath to the Great Goddess and for trying to mate with the Queen. I accept the Goddess' judgement." The young woman closed her eyes and turned her head.

"Please, look at me, Camille."

And almost despite herself the young woman did.

"The Goddess is the creator and the protector of life. She gave us a mind to make our own judgement so that we could be free. Sometimes she shows her displeasure but she never would use rape as a punishment, Camille.

"Just like a prayer, giving your body willingly to someone else is a sacred act. The Great Goddess is love, and though sex is not love the Goddess would never use either of it in this way, especially not against one of her own.

"What happened to you was not a punishment, it was something that should not have happened, and something for that these soldiers will have to pay dearly. We are ready to do this now, but if you want to participate we will wait." Hippolyta said.

"I don't want to witness their punishment, your majesty, but... I want them to suffer for what they did to the two other women. They not only killed them, they made the end of their lives into a living nightmare. I want them to pay for what they did to them." The young woman said feebly.

"They will be punished, Camille. They will be punished according to the letter of the law. Get well, I want you to officiate the rites to our victory celebration when we return to the Nation."

"I'll try not to disappoint you, your majesty." Camille said.

"I know you will not." Hippolyta said and kissed the younger woman on the forehead.

She left and was immediately followed by the priestess.

"You know you just put me in a very difficult position, my Queen. Camille is not yet ready to lead the rites."

"No, she isn't, not at the moment, but we won't return home tomorrow. It will take at least a couple of weeks before we'll even be able to leave this town. And I know that Aldebran's city has a thriving underground community of the worshippers of the Great Goddess. I also heard that they have a temple equipped with all you'll need to perform a big cleansing or any other ritual you might find necessary. Camille will be alright in time." Hippolyta answered with a smug smile that didn't reach her eyes.

"You, my Queen, are too smart for your own good." Lasega said.

"That's what some people keep telling me." Hippolyta answered in an attempt to keep the mood light. "I suppose you'll want to witness their punishment?"

"What I really want, my Queen, is to rip them apart with my own hands, but unfortunately as the priestess I'm not allowed to take a life. Of course I want to witness the punishment."

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The three culprits were already spread-eagled between two torture poles at the former battlefield just where they had raped the young priestess' apprentice and raped and killed at least two other women. Everyone in the camp not currently occupied with guard duty or caring for the wounded seemed to be present. There also was a delegation from the city. They had said that they came to show their support of Amazon justice. Most of the women Camille had freed were also in attendance.

Hippolyta stepped in front of the men. "You are guilty of rape and murder. The penalty is death."

"Women dying of pleasure ain't no murder, you bitch!" One of the men shouted.

"Gag them. I don't have patience for this." For the sake of the delegation from the city Hippolyta added. "We will strip the skin from their bones and burn it in sacred fire, and we will only stop when they are dead or there is nothing left to burn. If we were not at war a jury would have rendered the verdict and then I would have the pleasure of making one of them pay myself. But this is war; so, I'm the one judging them and as such I'm not allowed to do it myself. So now, I'm asking for volunteers."

Most of the Amazons stepped forward and one of the former hostages. Hippolyta was surprised and asked her if she was really ready to do something like this.

"Yes, your majesty. These monsters killed my sister. They made her suffer for candlemarks. I want them to pay, and I want to be the one who makes them pay."

Hippolyta saw the hatred in the woman's eyes but she also saw the almost overwhelming pain. "Do you need a knife?"

"No, I still have the dagger the courageous young Amazon gave to me when she freed us." The woman answered.

"It belonged to her mother. Please, give it back to her when we're finished here and after it has been cleaned. Priestess Lasega, please, choose the other two volunteers."

"Your majesty, I would appreciate some directions. I never did something like this before."

"I'll give them to you." The Queen answered with a calm, emotionless voice, and then turned to the rest of the audience. "It has been a long time since such a punishment has had to be meted

out, not since the early years of the reign of my mother. Since then we rarely find offenders alive. They usually prefer to kill themselves instead of risking to end like these three men will. Amazon justice will be done."

Hippolyta then redirected her attention back to the village woman. "Are you sure that this really is what you want to do? Sorry, I didn't get your name."

"I didn't give it, your majesty. My name is Chire and I'll do this for my sister. Her name was Trebla. And I don't care what it will cost me."

"So, be it." Hippolyta said and continued to explain the proceedings for the sake of the former hostages and the delegation as well as the few Amazons who had forgotten their lessons. "The punishment for rape is intended to make the culprit feel as he made his victims feel. It's intended to let them feel all the anguish they put their victims through. Before their lives end they will have learned what it means to be taken advantage of, how it feels to be powerless and helpless, how it feels to be afraid of someone."

She looked around, making sure that every eye was on her and the rapists. Her words also addressed the two other volunteers, both of them scouts who also were friends with Camille. "Start by cutting off the rapist's clothes, one piece at a time. It serves to make them feel as helpless and exposed as their victims did."

Chire followed the instructions to the letter. She first cut off the remnants of the man's armour and took special care not to even nick his skin while then divesting him of the rest of his clothes.

Hippolyta studied the body of the man Chire was handling. He was well-built with scars identifying him as a long term soldier. All in all, even with his face distorted by the gag, he was a handsome specimen. In her eyes that made his actions even more hideous and reprehensible. She looked into his eyes and saw the horror when he became aware that despite everything, despite the threat hanging over his head he was becoming aroused.

"In the past there have been three ways to do this. The first had been to deeply cut the culprit's skin from head to toe on both sides and then slowly tear it off starting from the top. The second one was to first map the body and then cut it into sizable pieces to be torn off one by one. The third was to randomly cut out small parts of skin."

The Queen sought the eyes of Chire. "Do you have any experience with skinning animals?"

"Not really, but I think I'll muddle through. Just tell me what to do. The third way seems like the easiest to me." Chire answered.

"The easiest way to start is at the abdomen. They all are soldiers, so, they'll be flat, easy to train with. Make a small incision and put the tip of your knife or dagger in, angle the blade until it's resting almost flatly in the skin. Keep it as flat as you can when you start to really cut. At the moment only the outer layers of the skin are of interest. We don't want to kill them prematurely."

Take your time."

Hippolyta intently watched Chire cutting off a two-square-inch patch of skin. The movement of her blade had been tentative at first but with every quarter inch she gained more confidence.

"Priestess Lasega blessed the fire burning behind us. Every piece of skin you cut off of them will be burned in the sacred fire. Every piece of their skin will be a payment for what they did."

The man in front of her tried to get his body out of range of the punishing blade but he was too tightly bound. With the third piece of epidermis carved out of his skin his muffled curses turned to moans of pain.

The first piece had been an almost round patch cut out of his midsection; the second a long strip taken out of his left thigh. The third a similar strip from the right thigh.

"With men," the Amazon Queen continued her lecture with a cold voice, "their most sensitive parts aside from the obvious are the inside of their thighs and the inside of the upper arms. The same goes for the shins; remove the skin there and you'll get directly to the nerves. You'll have to be very careful not to hit any major blood vessels. We don't want them to simply bleed to death. It would be much too fast."

Chire began to systematically carve pieces out of the rapist's back. She used the blade methodically, apparently savouring every single moment.

His moans some time ago had changed to cries of pain.

Chire cut off his right nipple. He bit through the gag and to the Queen's ears his cry of pain was as loud as Camille's had been less than a day earlier.

The village woman looked into his eyes. She saw pain, anguish, and suffering. She also saw tears and something akin to sorrow. Chire raised the dagger to follow up with the left nipple but instead she buried the blade deep in his heart and ended his suffering.

He had been the last one of the three rapists to die.

Chire's whole body was shaking but her hand refused to let go of the weapon. It was clenched around it as if it were a lifeline.

Hippolyta closed her own hand around Chire's and whispered in her ear, "Let go! It's over. Justice has been satisfied!"

Chire turned around, burst out in tears, and buried her head against the Queen's shoulder. Hippolyta held her as she would any of her Amazon sisters.

Chire was crying for the life of her own sister cut short and she also was crying for herself, though she didn't know it yet.

The Amazons' punishment for rape had always been less about the offenders but more about the victims and their families. Never, since the beginning of recorded Amazon history, a rapist had been really tortured to death. Yes, they had suffered, but every single one of them had been given the coup de grace long before they would have succumbed to their injuries.

Sooner than the Queen had expected Chire got a hold on herself and stopped crying. She took a step back and knelt on both knees in front of the Queen.

"I failed you and the Nation, your majesty. I failed the Goddess, please forgive me."

The tall woman bent down and drew the other woman back on her feet. "You didn't fail me or the Nation or the Goddess, Chire. You did the right thing. If you really had been able to torture him to death you would have become like him. Then you would have failed the Goddess and yourself. By killing him the way you did you proved that you still possess what these men have lost. You proved your humanity."

"Thank you, your majesty."

The Amazons put the mutilated bodies of the three rapists on one of the piles with Aldebran's dead soldiers. The camp fire was put out and its remnants also thrown on the pile of corpses.

Priestess Lasega urged Hippolyta to try to get some sleep but she knew that she only would succumb to another nightmare. So, she decided to help erecting the funeral pyres and tried to exhaust herself to keep her mind from dwelling on the fact that she would not have ended these rapist's lives as fast as the others had.

Yes, she had told Chire that she had done the right thing. Personally, however, she had felt the dark fire burning inside of her, the fire that told her that they had not suffered enough, the fire that wanted to kill them over and over again and kill them slowly. So, the irony of her earlier words was not lost on her.

Hippolyta knew that every moment since Sara had died in her arms part of her humanity had also died. The march through Aldebran's lands, the needs of her army and the burned-out villages had been distracting enough to keep the darkness under control and hide it under a neutral mask. But she was aware of it, aware of the savagery of which she was capable, lurking just under the surface. She knew deep down that she was capable of being as much an animal as these men had been, no, she had become just like them when she had carved the back of this innocent boy.

Out of the corner of her eyes Hippolyta saw a woman coming from the direction of the capital. She joined the delegation and one of the men started to hurriedly talk to Endera.

-X-X-X-

## *Chapter Four*

Shortly after the funeral pyres of her sister's had been lit, Detevia and her warriors returned. Their mission had been a success. King Aldebran had been captured when he fled his capital after his troops had been defeated, together with three of his advisors and two grandsons. They had all been stripped of their ornate armours and sat bound and gagged on their horses.

"Well done, Detevia. Remove the old man's gag. I want to know where his fourth grandson is hiding."

"I only have three grandsons, you harlot, and Alba, my eldest will come and show you a woman's true place." King Aldebran spat at Hippolyta's feet.

"The inhabitants of Netha cheered when my Queen killed him, old man." Detevia retorted.

"Detevia, now is not the time." Hippolyta said and then turned towards her weapons' master who was striding towards her followed by four members of the delegation.

"Endera, please, tell me that they don't follow you to plead for the miserable life of their useless king and his brood."

"No, my Queen, quite the opposite. They are here to ask you to become their Queen, at least if I didn't misunderstand them. Their leader used a lot of hyperbolic words to try and express himself but I think that this was the gist of it." Endera answered.

"You're kidding, right? We didn't come here to take over but to remove a threat to the Nation. First Netha and now the capital. What are these people thinking? Well, they'll have to wait. We'll first have to find this elusive fourth grandson."

"Your majesty, may I speak?" An elderly woman stepped forward.

Hippolyta nodded.

"King Aldebran disowned his youngest grandson a few moons ago. Lord Alderan, though barely more than a child in the eyes of our law, spoke publicly against this war. The king had him whipped in front of the whole court and threw him out. Young Lord Alderan changed his name and joined the army as a healer's apprentice."

"Peace loving weakling. He deserved every cut you gave him, harlot. I had him thrown in my dungeon, may he feed the rats."

Hippolyta blanched and a small nod of her head sent Endera and two of her guards running.

Aldebran was still ranting. He insulted Queen Hippolyta, the delegation and especially the old woman who had spoken up. "And you, you old cunt. You still have not learned your place. I have been too lenient with you all these years. Ten strokes a day were not nearly enough."

"Detevia, put the gag back in. He's starting to annoy me."

"What is your name, good woman?"

"Negasi, your majesty." She answered.

Hippolyta turned to one of her guards and ordered her to ask Priestess Lasaga to join them.

"Before you start to talk about matters of state, I'd like to ask a favour, your majesty." The silver haired woman said.

"If it is in my power to grant, I will, Priestess Negasi."

"I never finished my training, your majesty. I don't deserve this title."

"You fulfilled the duties of a priestess successfully for many season cycles. Had the Goddess not approved of what you're doing your secret temple would have been found out long ago. So, what can I do for you?"

"While Amazon justice dealt with the three rapists we meted out some justice of our own, your majesty. We exacted revenge for what some of the men of this city did to us, their women, their mothers and sisters and daughters. We want their bodies to burn together with his soldiers."

"Do you need help to get the bodies out here?" Hippolyta asked.

"No, your majesty." The woman turned to rejoin the rest of the delegation but then stopped in mid-motion and added, "Your majesty, I know you're not inclined to add to your responsibilities, but this land needs to open a new page in the book of life, a page not tainted by the hatred of the past. Please consider the council's offer. It's genuine."

"Tell them to put it on a piece of parchment and I'll think about it." Hippolyta said and patted her on the back. She visibly flinched. "Do you need a healer, Negasi?"

-X-X-X-

During this exchange one of the advisors had freed himself and had even managed to cut the others loose. The ensuing scuffle ended quickly with one Amazon injured and all of the men dead, except for the king himself who had been caught running away. He was securely held by two guards.

"Remove his gag. As royalty he has the right to choose how he will die. What do you say, old man? You seem to have a fondness for the whip. So, that would be a nice choice, don't you think? Or how about skinning you alive and slowly watch the life drain out of your eyes. I was also told that you like to have women bound and eaten by fire ants. I think that might be a fitting end."

"Give me a sword and you will be the one to die, dirty harlot." Aldebran retorted.

"Your mother should have washed out your mouth with soap more often when you were a child, old man. With a bit more of discipline we might not have ended up like this."

"Alba will come and make you pay." This time he tried to spit her in the face but missed.

"Do you talk about the fool who rode an expecting mare into battle simply because her coat looked good with his uniform? Do you talk about the stupid brute who was still busy bragging about his prowess as a warrior when my sword was protruding his stomach? Are we talking about that Alba?" Hippolyta asked in a deceptively soft voice.

"I challenge you, you bitch. I challenge you and will then cut out your lying tongue." Aldebran shouted and tried to escape the firm grip of the guards.

"Lattenis, a staff please. I accept your challenge, old man. It's as good a way to execute you as any other. I'll even use a blindfold to make this last longer than a candledrop. Give him a sword or whatever he wants as a weapon."

"Your majesty, is this wise?" Negasi asked softly.

"No, but it will be fun, Priestess. Let's get started, shall we, old man?"

"I killed your grandmother and I will enjoy to see you die, too." Aldebran shouted.

"I know all about my grandmother's death, old man. You shot her with a poisoned crossbow bolt from behind. I also know how you ran when her guard stayed in formation and beat the living daylights out of your soldiers. Our scrolls are very detailed. The day my grandmother died you earned your nickname, old man, Aldebran, the Coward. Since that day you stayed away from the battlefield at all cost, just like we caught you running today."

The grey-haired king attacked with a roar. Hippolyta sidestepped his overbalanced thrust and answered with a flurry of moves against his ribcage. She heard the distinct crack of at least two ribs, but Aldebran was tougher than she had expected and only grunted. The Amazon Queen, however, knew that in the end it would not make a difference.

Hippolyta heard his laboured breathing when he tried to sneak up behind her. She let him think that his ruse worked, but her staff easily stopped the blade flying towards her side. Aldebran fainted an attack to the other side, but then arched the weapon up over her head in an effort to cut her in half. She brought her staff up and went with the force of the blow. She bent her knees and pushed the weapon back forcefully.

Aldebran stumbled and landed hard on the ground. She turned around and waited for him to get back on his feet. The faint scraping of steel against leather warned her. Hippolyta's right hand let go of her staff and she caught the dagger aimed at her chest in mid-flight.

"Still up to your old tricks, coward. It's time to end this charade of a fight."

Her next stroke broke a couple more of his ribs but before he could cry out a combination move shattered his right arm just above the wrist and the elbow. The sword hit the ground but she didn't stop her attack. Hard wacks took out his knees. She made a half turn. The steel encased tip of her staff hit his throat and shattered his windpipe.

Hippolyta removed the blindfold when she heard the wheezing sound of someone fighting for his last breath. Negasi was on her knees next to the prone man.

"May the Goddess have mercy on your soul, Aldebran."

He moved his lips but nothing could be heard. The silver-haired woman closed his eyes and whispered a prayer, a prayer meant to guide the souls of family members towards the Goddess. A small part of her mind saw it as a riddle to be solved and a strong hint that there once had been more between Negasi and Aldebran than the relationship between servant and master. The better part of her, however, was disgusted that this murderer received such loving attention. It fuelled her barely appeased anger and rage.

Hippolyta knew that she had to get away for sometime if she didn't want to hurt the wrong people. So, she barked a few orders, told everyone to leave her alone and broke into a run towards the forest. She ran straight ahead for over a candlemark and then found a clearing just big enough for some sword drills.

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Three candlemarks later when the sun had just reached its midday point she was finally able to put a lid on the dark, restless energy that had driven her from the encampment and the impenetrable and cold command mask she had shown everyone since at least Netha was back in place. She once again had shut off her feelings but this time she knew that it would not take much to bring them back to the surface and that it would not take much to act on them.

Hippolyta jogged back to her army to finally tackle the numerous tasks undoubtedly waiting for her, but the weapons' master and her other head warriors had everything well in hand. She came back to a well ordered camp, the wounded were expertly cared for, her own cooks and the city's innkeepers were preparing a feast. Her warriors were mingling with the inhabitants of the capital. The only very visible reminder of the battle the day before was the still burning pyre of Aldebran's army.

The Queen had nothing tangible left to do except to speak with the city's delegation, now increased by representatives of neighbouring villages. She tried to stall them by insisting that the day after a big battle was not the right time to decide upon the future of the whole realm. When they finally left the ongoing lack of sleep finally caught up on her and she dozed off at her desk with her head on top of the people's petition for her to accept Aldebran's throne. She woke an our later from a knock at the outer tent pole.

Lattenis escorted Aldebran's youngest grandson in. He was still pale but looked alert and rested. "What can I do for you, Lord Alderon?"

"My name is Yournar, your majesty. I'd rather not be reminded of my grandfather."

"And yet, according to the laws of this country, he left you a throne to claim."

"I never wanted his throne and even if your offer were genuine I would not take it, Queen Hippolyta."

"Are you afraid of the responsibility, young lord?" Hippolyta asked.

"I told you, my name is Yournar, son of Yournara, daughter of Negasi. I don't fear the responsibility, I am afraid that one day I will become like him. As much as I hate it, his blood flows in my veins and the power will corrupt me as it did him. My grandmother told me of a time when his heart was light and his thoughts not darkened by hatred, a time when he worshipped at the Goddess' temple and regarded women with respect and love. I don't want to be king, I don't want to become someone who daily whips a person he once professed to love. No, I don't want to be king."

Hippolyta's whole body stiffened at his words and she needed all of her hard won self-control not to betray the thoughts screaming in her mind. Her voice sounded calm when she asked, "So, why did you want to speak with me, grandson of Negasi?"

"I came to tell you that I don't blame you for sending your message the way you did. I came to apologise for attacking you, your majesty, and I came to ask you to accept the offer of the citizens. Take the throne. With you ruling this country men and women might learn faster to once again live as equals. Please, at least think about it, your majesty."

"You're a very unusual young man, Yournar. I promise to think about it. Leave me now, please."

Yournar bowed and left with Lattenis. Hippolyta rose from her seat and poured herself a cup of cidre, more to do something than to quench her thirst. Now that she knew why Negasi had shown such tenderness to the dying king a plan began to form in her head, a plan with which neither Negasi nor her grandson would easily go along.

Yournar's words echoed in her mind. "I don't want to become someone who daily whips a person he once professed to love." She didn't want to be such a person either, but that's exactly what she had become. She had killed the woman she loved with a whip. She had beaten her to death - and even if it had been for the greater good, in her eyes she had become a monster, a monster just like the one she had executed earlier this day, a monster that didn't deserve to live, that didn't deserve to lead such a proud and strong Nation.

The night she had knelt at Sara's funeral pyre only the need to protect her people from Aldebran's troops had kept her alive, even though she knew that continuing to live with the knowledge of

having killed her very reason to breathe was part of the sacrifice the Goddess' had demanded. It would be so easy; take a dagger, put the tip just to the right of her left breast, position it to slip in easily between two ribs and press down as hard and fast as possible.

It would be the coward's way out but it would once and for all end all of those dark, tempting thoughts and quieten the emptiness in her heart. It also would belittle Sara's willing sacrifice for the Nation and that was something she would never do. No, she didn't have the right to take her own life.

Another knock at the tent pole announced the entrance of two servants bringing in a bathtub and a line of others filling it up with hot water.

"I didn't order a bath." Hippolyta said.

One of the women got down on her right knee while the others continued with their task.  
"Priestess Lasega thought that you would want a bath before going to the temple, my Queen."

"Did she tell you why she wants me to go to the temple?" Hippolyta asked, slightly surprised at the unusual way this summon had been delivered.

"No, your majesty. We were only ordered to bring the bath. Will you need an attendant, my Queen?"

"No, thank you. Tell my personal guard that we'll leave for the city in half a candlemark."

The woman rose, bowed and left.

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It was late afternoon when Queen Hippolyta of the Amazon Nation entered the underground temple of the Great Goddess. Its existence and location had been an open secret among the women and a surprisingly big part of the city's men ever since Aldebran had outlawed the cult of the Goddess, the, as he had called it, protector of the harlots. It consisted of numerous interconnected caves, some natural, some man-made.

Hippolyta had changed from her battle dress and armour to a simple black, sleeveless, ankle-length dress. Her blond hair was falling freely down her back and she had left her weapons in her tent. She had expected to find either Lasega or Negasi to greet her. Instead a young acolyte led her to the inner sanctum and left her alone.

There was a strap lying in front of the marble altar and suddenly she knew what her former teacher wanted her to do. She opened the front laces of her dress and let the soft material glide down her back and her arms until her upper body was bare. The oil she had used after her bath made her skin shine in the flickering torchlight.

Hippolyta knelt in front of the altar and picked up the strap. It was about two and a half feet in

length with a handle just long enough to hold it firmly. Two inches broad and almost a quarter inch thick it would leave pronounced marks on her back.

There were time-honoured rules on how to thank the Great Goddess for her assistance in battle, but Hippolyta chose her own words.

"Great Goddess, creator of life, protector of my people, I am Hippolyta, daughter of Hippolyta, daughter of Rhea, Queen of the Amazon Nation. With the sacrifice you took my heart and my soul. All I have left to give is my obedience and submission to your will. Please, accept this sign of my submission."

Holding the strap in her right hand Hippolyta guided it in a flickering movement over her left shoulder. The second hard stroke let her clench her teeth in an effort not to groan. She repeated the move three more times, making sure to hit the same spot with every stroke. She then changed hands and let the strap fly over her right shoulder five times. Her back was now marked with two angry red stripes about three inches broad that criss-crossed her back.

Tradition now demanded of her to restore her clothing, thank the Goddess and say the appropriate prayers, but Hippolyta had something else in mind.

"Great Goddess, with your help the victory was ours. With your help my brave warriors destroyed the enemy forces. As their Queen, however, I failed you, Goddess. Two hundred and twenty-eight of your servants, two hundred and twenty-eight of my sisters died during this campaign. I was not strong enough to protect them, and according to the old traditions which were reinstated with the sacrifice as Queen of the Amazons I have to atone for their loss.

"The old rules state that the Queen will have to take one symbolical stroke for every life lost under her command. With two hundred and twenty-eight lives to atone for I will not be able to take it all in one sitting but I will take as much as I can without compromising my service for the Nation and I will return every day until my debt is paid in full."

Hippolyta once again raised the strap and aimed over her left shoulder. She whispered, "This is for the life of Ada."

But the stroke never hit and the leather strap was suddenly gone.

"That's not what you need to atone for, warrior child." The voice was warm and comforting, just like the first time she had heard it, a couple of weeks after her mother's death. "Your sisters died bravely. They died protecting their families and the Nation. They died like true warriors and their names will always be honoured but not on your back."

"Please, Goddess, I have to do this. I have to pay for their deaths. I have to pay for your servant being raped, I have to pay for the women and children being brutalised because I didn't act fast enough. I have to pay for mutilating an innocent with my own hands."

"Listen to me, warrior child."

Hippolyta felt the presence of another person close to her. A hand cupped her chin and made her look up. She saw a beautiful woman who appeared to be about her age. The silver hue of her breast armour reflected the torchlight but what really captured the Queen's attention were eyes of the colour of fertile soil sat in a face of timeless beauty. These eyes seemed to look into the deepest recesses of her soul.

"To make your body suffer will not fill the emptiness of your heart and soul, my child. Aldebran's hate is responsible for the death of your warriors. His hate has brutalised his own people for endless cycles, and his hate died with him and his three grandsons.

"The men who raped the Nation's next priestess paid with their lives and even in the afterlife their souls will find no rest. It was not in your power to prevent any of this, but on one point you are right, warrior child, you will have to pay for what you did to Youmar, grandson of Negasi, but not in my temple. Don't forget that not even the Queen of the Amazon Nation stands above the law. Do you understand, Hippolyta?"

"Yes, Great Goddess. I will see to it that justice is satisfied."

"I know you will. Rise and walk by my side. There are a few things I'd like to show to you."

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Hippolyta rose and the Goddess led her through a doorway she had not seen before. They entered a room that looked suspiciously like the one they just had left.

A young woman with hair of such a shining black that it appeared blue was kneeling in front of the altar stone. She prayed.

"Great Goddess, creator of life and protector of women. I don't ask for myself but for the unborn child I carry in my womb. The king's priests tell him that I will give him a boy, a grandson to raise in his image just like the two he already had from my half brother. My heart tells me that this child will be a girl, a beautiful baby girl with forest-green eyes, just like her grandmother. Please, help me to save her life when she is born. Protect her and help her to find love and happiness. I beg of you, Great Goddess, grant her the power to let pain and fear and anger not fester in her heart. Please, protect her as if she were your own."

The scene changed and a long finger sealed Hippolyta's lips before she could voice any of her many questions.

The woman she saw next had the same raven-black hair as the other one but accentuated by strands of silver. She carried something close to her chest and hurried down a dark corridor. The corridor ended in an opening in the city walls where a man and a woman had obviously been waiting for her. The woman looked up and gently put the burden she had been carrying into the other woman's arms.

Hippolyta recognised a much younger Negasi.

"Come, warrior child, there's more for you to see."

The Goddess who topped her own six feet by at least another four inches led her into the next room.

Hippolyta saw a dark-haired toddler with green eyes curiously exploring the world around her. She saw things her lover had told her about and finally began to understand that everything she was shown were parts of the life and destiny of her beloved Sara, but it still didn't make any sense.

Aldebran, so her spies had told her, had killed any female offspring, be it of his own seed or of the seed of his sons.

"Aldebran's soul was poisoned by hatred and wounded pride, warrior child." Hippolyta heard the Goddess' voice in her head. "But regardless of the way he treated her, there always was a tiny part of his heart that still loved Negasi. Then Yournara was born. He already had killed two baby girls born to slaves and he also wanted to kill her. Negasi begged for her life and he gave in under the condition that she kept the child as far away from him as possible while still living in the same household.

"Yournara developed into a very beautiful young woman and he decided that she could be useful to the realm by giving him beautiful grandchildren. When her first child was a girl she and her mother gave her to a family that had just lost their newborn daughter. Negasi told the king that the child had been still born."

"Goddess, why are you telling me this? Sara is dead. It does no longer matter who her ancestors were."

"That's why!"

The Goddess waved her hand and the scenes from Sara's youth disappeared. Instead Hippolyta saw her beloved entering the inner sanctum.

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Sara knelt on the hard marble floor in front of the altar stone and opened her heart to the Goddess. Suddenly she felt a warm, comforting presence and a soft voice said, "Your back is bleeding, my child."

She didn't look up. She had felt this presence many times before when she had asked the Great Goddess for help and clarity, the Creator of all Life and Mother of Gods and men. She never had told anyone about it, not even her lover.

"The priestess apprentice takes her duties very seriously, Great Goddess. Five lashes can be like

a whisper of a summer breeze and they can be like molten fire."

Something cool and soft touched her right shoulder and the pain was gone as it had never existed in the first place. Since the beginnings of the Amazon Nation every servant who wanted to enter the inner sanctum to pray to the Goddess had to take five lashes as a sign of her devotion. It was up to the priestess or her apprentice to decide how hard they would be.

Then the voice of the Goddess changed, it no longer sounded comforting and soothing but stern and hard. "You were not here for a long time, why did you come to me now? Your lover is not known at someone who worships the Gods. Did you come to beg for your life?"

The young woman who for a short time had been a priestess' apprentice was used to the Goddess' seemingly changing moods; so, once again she didn't look up. "I came to beg for her life and her soul, Great Goddess. I came to ask for your help to convince her that what we both fear still has to be done."

"You're courageous, little one." The eerie voice said.

"No, I'm not. At the moment I'm more afraid than I ever was before." The young woman said.

"Are you sure? More afraid than you were when all of your family and friends were killed in the raid?"

"Yes Great Goddess. I loved my family but in the one book my people hold sacred it says that: Thou shall leave your father and mother behind to be with the one your heart intended. Officially I'll never be more than her servant and all of her warriors may look down on me, but I still know that she is the one my heart intended. I knew it from the first moment I saw her and I'd do anything to keep her safe, her and the Nation."

"Tell me, little one, if you had to choose between her and the Nation, what would you do?"

"Hippolyta is the Nation, Great Goddess. She would not be able to live with herself if the Nation were lost because of her refusal to let me die. Without me she has a chance at a new life with someone more suited to her station in life."

"Would this someone also be more suited to her as a person?"

"I hope so, for both of them." Sara answered quietly.

"You know that none of my Amazons would act this way. They would fight for their love."

"They don't know her the way I do. She might think differently but I know that she never could live with herself with the knowledge that saving me meant the loss of the Nation. She never would let me feel it but a part of her soul would die, a part of her soul she could never regain. With only me gone, she has at least a chance at a normal life."

"You always were one of the bravest of my warriors, little one." The voice of the Goddess said.

"I'm no warrior, and I'm only brave when I'm with her. She is my life and my heart and my soul."

Sara felt two hands on her shoulders and a wave of energy seemed to sweep through her body.

"All I can do is give you confidence, little one. Hippolyta is your problem and your charge."

"I understand, Great Goddess."

"No, you don't, but you will soon."

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Hippolyta looked at the Goddess and said tonelessly. "Sara sacrificed herself because she wanted to save my soul."

"She also did it for the sake of the Amazon Nation, but yes, you were her main concern. And there's another reason, warrior child. Look."

The scene once again changed and Hippolyta saw herself kneeling in front of a wooden statue of the Great Goddess.

She heard herself pray. "Please, Goddess, save her, don't let her die. She has suffered so much and her heart is so big and pure. She doesn't deserve to die. I wish you would have asked for my life. Please, save her. I don't care what you ask of me in return. Save her, Goddess, please."

"Do you understand now, warrior child?"

"Why do you always call me warrior child, Goddess?"

"You are a warrior and from my point of view you always will be a child regardless of how old you'll get. Answer my question. Patience is not something of which I possess much. So, do you understand, warrior child?"

"What do I have to do to save Sara, Goddess?"

"Why didn't you ask what you'll have to do to get her back?"

The blonde Queen knew that the Goddess was testing her and answered as honestly as she could. While she searched for the right words the last two scenes repeated themselves.

"You are right, Great Goddess, I want Sara back at my side. She'll always be my heart and soul. But if the only way to save her is to let her go and give her another chance at happiness without me than that's what shall be, Great Goddess."

"Regardless of the outcome?" The Goddess asked.

Hippolyta only nodded.

"Even if I should decide to claim her as my new priestess?"

"Yes, Goddess. Sara would be alive and in your service she would have a chance at happiness." Hippolyta answered with an honesty that despite everything still surprised her. She usually was not one to wear her heart on her sleeve.

"Ever since the sacrifice I know that more than anything I need her to be alive. She is my heart. Ever since her death I have been empty inside and it would be all too easy to fill the emptiness with hate and anger and cruelty. I don't want to become like this, like Aldebran.

"I learned that I can exist without Sara in my life. I could learn to enjoy my existence if I had the chance to interact with her at least every once in a while. Sara would be a wonderful priestess, Goddess. And then I could at least hope that after ten cycles we once again would have the chance to be together, to live our love."

The Goddess laughed warmly at Hippolyta's words. "For a big, tough warrior you're awfully sappy."

Hippolyta felt herself blush.

"Go now, warrior child. It's time - and proceed with your plans for this land."

Hippolyta bowed but the Goddess was already gone. She left the temple and felt strangely energised when she stepped out in the bright daylight. A look at her visibly tired and relieved personal guard told her that she had been gone longer than any of them had anticipated. They all greeted her on their right knees, tension still radiating from their bodies.

She sent two of them ahead to call a meeting of the council of Elders at midday on the former battlefield. Two others were assigned to call the delegation or the city's council to the camp. They also had orders to make sure that Priestess Negasi and her grandson would be present. Hippolyta could see their questions but also knew that her orders would be obeyed.

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## *Chapter Five*

Two candlemarks later Lattenis entered her tent after knocking on the tent pole. "The delegation from the city is about ten candledrops out and the council is waiting for you, my Queen. I thought you might want to go and greet them."

"No, my friend, that's your job." Hippolyta answered softly without looking up from the scroll she was persuing.

"But I won't be able to answer their questions. They will at the least want to know why you summoned them."

"So do you, Lattenis, but you will just have to wait like everyone else. Go and greet them. I'll be with you shortly."

"Yes, my Queen." Lattenis offered a formal bow to Hippolyta and left the tent.

Despite the apparent lack of new information her long friendship with the Queen had helped her to learn quite a lot. Hippolyta's voice and posture that been relaxed and tense at once, a combination she only showed when she had decided to do something she knew the council of Elders or the whole Nation would not particularly like. In the past these decisions had usually been the result of Hippolyta's impulsive nature. So, she could only hope that this time her friend had thought things through.

The captain of the Royal Guard led the city delegation to the part of the battlefield where the three sets of poles still reminded of the rapists' punishment. The council of Elders - or at least those who had not stayed behind due to their old age - were already waiting. As per the Queen's orders all able-bodied Amazons currently not on duty were also present. They had to wait just long enough for the council members to suspect that they would not like what their Queen had to tell them and for the delegation to hope that Hippolyta would accept their offer.

The row of torture posts, the council and the delegation formed three sides of an otherwise empty square. Lattenis observed her Queen's body language and also saw the determination in those deep blue eyes.

Hippolyta was wearing a black tunic similar to the one she had been wearing during the sacrifice. The tall blonde strode directly to her weapons' master and ordered her to stand down from the council for the day. Endera reluctantly obeyed and stepped over to the other watching warriors.

The Queen returned to the centre of the square. "Amazons, Council of Elders, Representatives of the City. I, Hippolyta, daughter of Hippolyta, daughter of Rhea called you here to witness the execution of Amazon Justice. The actions you will have to judge, venerable members of the council, did not only break Amazon law, they also were extremely dishonourable. An innocent who never raised a weapon against an Amazon was not only injured but tortured and mutilated. Justice has to be satisfied and Amazon honour restored. I want your verdict, Elders of the Amazon Nation."

"Your majesty, we need to know more about the crime." Carena, the Amazons head cook said. "We need to know about the circumstances of the crime. We need to know about the victim. We need the victim's statement if possible. Only then a suitable punishment can be chosen. There can't be any shortcuts, your majesty."

Hippolyta chuckled. "It was worth a try, Elder Carena. So, let's do it according to the letter of the law. I am the culprit, venerable elders. After the first battle of this campaign I sent a message to the former king. I carved it in the back of a young healer's apprentice. He can show you the

marks on his back. Yournar, son of Yournara, daughter of Negasi, please step forward."

The young man cast a questioning glance towards his grandmother. Negasi nodded encouragingly and he joined Hippolyta on the square.

"Yournar, son of Yournara, for the sake of procedure we need you to confirm the charges against Queen Hippolyta brought forth by the Queen."

"Venerable Elders, it's true that Queen Hippolyta used my back as a substitute for parchment, but ultimately it saved my life. I was the only survivor of the whole army King Aldebran sent to the border of the Amazon Nation. In my eyes a few scars on my back are not too high a price to pay for surviving. Queen Hippolyta also conveniently chose not to mention that I did attack an Amazon. I didn't fight but I tried to kill your Queen after my teacher had died in my arms. So, I'm not really an innocent, venerable Elders."

"Yournar tried to threaten me with a healer's knife. I don't consider that a weapon. He was not in his right mind at the moment. It was not really an attack. What I did was against our laws and not even the Queen of the Amazons stands above the law."

"There is one more thing you should consider, venerable Elders. Had I not sent Yournar back to the king, had I not made him angry and warned him at the same time, he might not have had all these villages burned down. That makes me responsible for these deaths as well."

"King Aldebran was responsible for their death, pain and suffering, Queen Hippolyta." Priestess Negasi spoke up. "Do not burden your conscience with things that were not in your power to avert. Even you are only mortal, your majesty, and there's no guarantee that destroying the villages had not been part of his plans right from the start."

Disregarding the last part of Negasi's words Hippolyta pressed her point. "And as a mortal I'm responsible for my actions. As a mortal I don't stand above the law."

"Your majesty," Head Cook Carena said, "though it is true that no one stands above the law, in the long history of the Amazon Nation there never has been a Queen standing trial. It just does not seem right, my Queen."

"There have been examples in our past but if memory serves it has been at least as long as the next to last human sacrifice." Tresta, the usually quiet Amazon lore keeper said firmly.

"There's one more thing we'd have to know before we retire for our deliberations. What was the message you wrote, your majesty?" Priestess Lasega asked.

"I carved 'I'm coming for you', in capitals with an exclamation mark at the end. I'll await your verdict in my tent." Hippolyta bowed towards the council, well aware that a normal defendant would not have had the audacity to basically dismiss the women charged with judging them.

Hippolyta didn't have to wait for long. Less than half a candlemark later Endera knocked on the

tent pole and entered immediately.

"So, they're back. That didn't take long."

"Yes, my Queen, back and waiting for you. They didn't look particularly happy. Besides, Lyta, my friend, let me tell you, you're one damn stubborn bitch!"

That last remark got her a full belly laugh from her Queen and a hard slap on the back. "And it took you all these cycles to find that out, Dera? I thought you were smarter than that."

"Insults will get you nowhere, Lyta, but really, what were you thinking? It's been years since you made such an impulsive decision."

"It was not an impulsive decision, Dera. It's just the right thing to do. It's very important to me and to the future of the Nation. That's why I want you to step forward when the council will ask for a volunteer to carry out my punishment." Hippolyta said.

"Are you nuts, Lyta? I certainly will not be the one to whip you, to hurt you, not in this lifetime." Endera protested.

"Endera, I would not have asked if it were not important. Please, do it as a favour for a friend."

"You're not fighting fair, Lyta. At least try to explain it to me." Endera asked her friend.

"I owe you as much, Dera, but I'm not sure if I even can explain it to myself. Ever since the sacrifice I went from grief to uncontrollable anger and hatred, to what I thought was indifference to more anger and cruelty. Dera, what I did to this boy, it should never have happened. I lost a piece of what makes me human. If I ever want a chance to get that back, I have to go through with this and I'll need your help to do it." Hippolyta answered softly. "You have to do it."

"I'll do it. You have my word, my friend."

They left the tent and walked back to the former battlefield. "I wish I would have stopped you that day, my friend."

"You would have failed. I would have pulled rank or simply have lashed out against you, and then I might even have hurting one of my best friends on my conscience now. I was blinded by anger and fuelled by battle lust. I was way beyond listening to reason."

The tall weapons' master heard the sadness and resignation in Hippolyta's voice. Just like Lattenis Endera had grown up with the Queen. Over the cycles she had experienced the whole range of her friend's moods first hand and she had learned to read her emotions but the proud woman had rarely opened up like this. It was that unexpected openness that made her acquiesce to her Queen's request.

Hippolyta stepped into the square, bowed to the city delegation and got down on her right knee in front of the council. The seven members of the council were standing. They held their ceremonial masks in front of them but didn't wear them.

Carena cleared her throat and began to speak. "Amazons, hear the council's verdict. Hippolyta, daughter of Hippolyta, daughter of Rhea, Queen of the Amazon Nation, this council finds you guilty of deliberately injuring and torturing a non-combatant. Your actions showed uncommon cruelty. Yournar and the representatives of the city petitioned us to show leniency and declare you not guilty. They regard what you did as a sad but unavoidable part of war, any war and don't hold you responsible. We decided that complying with their wishes would not benefit the Amazon Nation and it would not benefit you, Queen Hippolyta."

The tall blonde's posture visibly relaxed. She was relieved that the council for once had made the right decision without being prompted by her.

"Our laws stipulate that the guilty party suffers the pain of the injured party twice fold. The council concedes that there were extenuating circumstances which are not to be discussed in public.

"Hippolyta, Queen of the Amazon Nation, as your punishment you will undergo a purification ritual in the city's temple of the Great Goddess," and as if the head cook were able to read her Queen's mind she continued, "directly after your punishment with a single tail whip and a strap. The whip will symbolically mark the letters you carved in Prince Yournar's back and the strap strokes every single small cut you needed to carve the letters.

"Hippolyta, daughter of Hippolyta, do you accept the ruling of the council?"

"Yes, I do, venerable council."

"Amazons, the council asks for a volunteer to carry out the first part of the punishment."

Endera stepped from the edge of the square and said. "Venerable council, I am Endera, daughter of Eklira, daughter of Louan. I volunteer to carry out the sentence."

"Why? You are known as a friend and loyal soldier of the Queen." Lattenis asked.

"Because I am a friend of Queen Hippolyta and she wanted it done right. I couldn't say no." Endera's answer was acknowledged with a nod and the tall brunette addressed the still kneeling Queen.

"I would like to begin with the strap, your majesty, but I need to know how many strokes there will be to administer."

"It were fifteen words and I needed forty-five single cuts to carve the message, weapons' master.

I counted them when I did it." The Queen answered while she got back on her feet.

That, of course, was only half the truth. Yes, she had counted the cuts but only after the fact when her mind had insisted on repeating the scene over and over again, wavering between clinical fascination by the way the healer's knife sliced through his skin, repulsion at her actions and a deep satisfaction at the pain they had inflicted.

Hippolyta smoothly pulled her tunic over her head, spread her legs and bent over. She grabbed her ankles and closed her eyes. It was hard enough to feel all these eyes on her, she didn't want to see them watching her. Her skin was crawling at the mere thought but this kind of humiliation has always been a part of public punishments.

Before the first stroke hit, however, a couple of the Amazon warriors turned around to give their Queen at least a modicum of privacy. One after the other followed their example and with the seventh stroke even the last member of the city's delegation was also facing away.

Hippolyta held her position 'til the end. She didn't move; she didn't twitch; she didn't flinch and her voice didn't waver while she counted the strokes.

"Forty-five, thank you weapons' master."

Only the council members witnessed the Queen's perseverance. They saw the tight control she had on her reactions. They saw the bronzed skin of her buttocks change from its normal colour to a pinkish red to dark purple. The last five marks were easily discernible. They formed a double cross bisected by a horizontal welt.

Someone else might have broken the skin but the weapons' master was very good at what she was doing. There would be no permanent marks but the pain was severe and would last for a few days. The only visible sign of the pain the Queen must be in was her strained smile when she saw the respectfully turned backs of her audience.

Hippolyta stepped between the middle pair of the torture posts and wrapped each hand around a leather strap hanging from the poles. It would help her to take the next part of the punishment with dignity. She listened to her friend unrolling the whip and making a few practice swings.

When the first stroke hit she silently started the mantra familiar from the sacrifice. "Please, save her!" She counted the lashes and also called out the corresponding letters she had cut in the back of the innocent boy's back. For the men and women listening, it made it all more real, for lack of a better word.

She knew that every stroke would draw blood and felt the blood trickling down her back. To her own surprise she also felt relief. It was as if the letters were purged from her soul bit by bit, just as if her crime were erased with every bleeding welt the whip left on her back.

So, instead of reflecting her growing pain, the Queen's voice was steadily getting calmer. She felt the blood from her back cooling her burning buttocks. She also knew that Endera carefully

spaced the lashes, taking just two or three heartbeats more between one and the next stroke. At first she had been able to pinpoint where the whip hit her, but soon her body seemed to be on fire.

"Fifteen, exclamation mark."

Hippolyta knew that it was over and that she could now relax, but she stayed in position and relied on her hearing.

She heard Endera's voice. "Venerable members of the council, the first part of Queen Hippolyta's punishment now has been served. Please, allow the healers to do their jobs."

The voice of her friend brought Hippolyta back to reality. She relaxed her stance and slowly let go of the leather straps. She held herself upright by sheer stubbornness and turned back to the council. Every step hurt but there were few occasions she ever had felt that light-hearted. She knelt in front of the council next to her discarded tunic.

"Thank you for witnessing this part of my punishment, venerable elders."

Before Hippolyta had had a chance to get back up Sarita and two of her apprentices had reached her and began to treat her back. The silver-haired healer applied a salve to stop the bleeding and also wanted to put a poultice on to speed up the healing. The Queen didn't allow it. She argued that it would lessen the effect and cheapen the purpose of the punishment.

With any other patient the old woman would have insisted but one look into her Queen's eyes told her that she would have to let her do this her own way. Even as a kid she had been proud and stubborn. She had mellowed out a lot over the time, especially under the influence of a certain dark-haired young servant. But Hippolyta's eyes told her teacher that this was extremely important for her. So, she only nodded and helped her to slip into the black tunic.

Before the Queen left for the temple she addressed the city's delegates and told them to rethink their petition to make her Queen. She asked them if they really wanted someone as their Queen who was capable of committing the crime for which she just had been punished.

"Your majesty," one of the men answered, "with all due respect, but what I've just witnessed only strengthens my conviction that we have made the right choice. King Aldebran never took personal responsibility for his actions. If things didn't go his way he always blamed someone else. You took responsibility for your actions. That tells me enough about what kind of person you are, your majesty. Someone I would be proud to call my Queen."

To her intense mortification Hippolyta blushed at his words. "Just counsel with the rest of the city council and if you still stick to the petition we will start to talk as soon as I return from the temple, but don't set your hopes too high. The Amazon Nation will always be my highest priority."

Hippolyta entered the underground temple. An attendant directed her to the main altar room. "I admit that I was not a very astute student at the time but I'm pretty sure that purification rituals usually start with a ritual cleansing."

"I'm only following orders, your majesty, and I was told to escort you here."

The blonde Queen shrugged and stepped into the cavernous room. When not open to the public for prayers the main altar room was only lit by two tripods burning to the left and right of the stone altar. But now a dozen torches were casting shadows from holders along the walls.

The door closed behind her and was secured. This really did not have the feel of any ritual of which she had learned as part of her training. The Queen of the Amazons had to be able to step in for the Priestess of the Great Goddess in times of need. But she also had learned that sometimes it was best to just trust Priestess Lasega.

So, she knelt in front of the altar and focused on a breathing exercise designed to free the mind from its worries. She had just started to really relax when her finely honed instincts prompted her to duck and roll to the side, just in time to avoid being hit by a staff that now bounced off the altar.

Hippolyta jumped to her feet and took a defensive stance. She ducked a swipe aimed to hit her at shoulder level. She let herself drop to the floor. Her perfectly timed leg swipe made her opponent hop back a step. Hippolyta sprang back on her feet and only then had a chance to identify her attacker.

Her surprise made her miss the tiny hint announcing the next attack. It grazed her hip and would probably leave a nasty bruise. Without a weapon she would not stand a chance against this expertly wielded staff. She executed a back flip that brought her halfway across the room. A few more steps and she had reached the wall. She lifted one of the torches off its holder and used it to block the next attack. She then grabbed a second torch and used them as a pair of short staves.

It levelled the playing field considerably though she knew that not even the best warrior in all of Amazon history would be able to win against this particular opponent. They fought for what seemed to be countless candlemarks. Her opponent's initial angry tension visible in the hard strokes and swift swipes of the staff had gradually changed to playfulness, a very contagious playfulness.

Hippolyta started to smile, the brilliant smile only friends and family had the privilege to see.

"Feeling better now, warrior child?"

"Yes, thank you, Great Goddess. The purification rituals I learned about never sounded like this much fun."

The tall Goddess laughed. "It didn't feel like a purification ritual because it was not a purification ritual. It was just some friendly sparring."

They sat down in front of the altar, leaning back against the stone pillars that held up the heavy altar plate.

"Why do I get the strong impression that you're not exactly truthful, Goddess?" Hippolyta asked.

"I like your irreverence, warrior child, but don't overstep your mark here."

Hippolyta simply nodded but didn't look the slightest bit contrite.

"However, you deserve an answer. The second half of our fight was only for fun, but during the first part I tested your will to live. It would have become rather painful for you had you not defended yourself with all your skill and strength. It was a test to make sure that you're good enough to protect my Chosen."

"Your Chosen, Goddess?"

"My Chosen, your consort."

"My consort?"

"What are you, a parrot? Yes, your consort. The only thing she thought about while she spent time in my realm was you. I offered her wealth and power and an army of servants. I told her that she only would be allowed to come back as your slave but she once again chose a life with you over everything else."

"Sara is alive?"

"Yes, warrior child, she is alive and well - and waiting for you in the bathing area. Now go and get your woman."

Hippolyta stared at the Goddess as if she had suddenly grown a second head that looked like a dragon and was breathing fire through its nostrils.

"Sara is mine again."

"Yes, oh dense one." The Goddess answered with an amused smile.

She expected the Queen to jump to her feet and run out of the altar room. Instead Hippolyta first planted a kiss on the Goddess' lips and bolted towards the door that automatically opened for her. Before she stepped over the threshold she turned around and yelled, "Thank you, Goddess."

-X-X-X-

Hippolyta quickly found her way to the bathing area. She barged in without knocking and immediately fell on her knees at the vision right in front of her.

The room was lit with dozens and dozens of candles; their dancing light let the woman in the white gown appear almost unreal. Long dark hair set in a single braid was falling over her right shoulder. The fabric of her dress was almost diaphanous and hugged her in all the right places.

One of Hippolyta's dreams had started out this way and had ended with Sara being tortured to death. Unconsciously she whispered,

"Please, don't let it be in a dream. I can't lose her again, please."

The sound carried in the room and within a heartbeat the apparition was kneeling in front of her. She felt her right hand lifted upwards and guided to the other woman's cheek. That broke a dam and tears spilled out of her eyes. Her body trembled with suppressed sobs that broke free when the apparition pulled her closer and took her in her arms.

Sara's soothing whispers made Hippolyta cry even harder, but the tension in her body lessened considerably. The dark-haired woman rocked the taller body until the tears subsided.

Hippolyta looked up into the forest green eyes of her lover filled with love and devotion.

"Sara." The Queen's voice was full of wonder. This one single word, four simple letters told more about Hippolyta's state of mind than a whole library of scrolls. It said even more than the uncharacteristic tears.

"I'm here, my love, and I'm here to stay, with you. I love you, my Queen."

"I killed you. I whipped you to death. Without you I turned into a monster. How can you love someone like me?"

"What you did was necessary, my love. I'm proud that you had the strength to do what had to be done. I'm proud that you had the strength to put the good of the Nation first, and I love you even more for it." Sara said with sincerity.

"Sara, join with me. I want the whole Nation to know that I belong to you and you belong to me. I want the whole world to know." Hippolyta said still lying in her smaller partner's arms.

"Hip, my love, we don't need an official joining to know that. I'm happy as your servant."

It was a familiar argument. The Queen wanted Sara at her side as her consort, but according to Amazon Law the Queen could only join with someone either born as an Amazon or of Royal blood. That law went back to the early cycles of Amazon history. It only could be changed or amended with the unanimous consent not only of the council of Elders but of the whole Nation, of every single adult Amazon.

Sara usually argued that they didn't need any outward proof of their love and that thus it made no sense to risk defying the Nation and time-honoured laws.

"If it were possible without having to change our laws, would you become my wife?"

"Yes, my love, but I don't need a joining to be your wife in my heart, just as I see you as my wife. I always have." Sara emphasised her words with a kiss that started out tender and gentle and quickly turned passionate and demanding. Hippolyta returned the kiss in kind and they were already on their way to Cythera.

Hippolyta sat up and closed her arms around the other woman's torso. Her hands roamed all over Sara's back, half in search of welts or other signs of the sacrifice, half for the simple joy of feeling the familiar body under her hands. Her blue eyes never left the green orbs facing her. When they finally broke the kiss Sara's eyes had darkened in desire.

"Take me, Mistress. Reclaim your possession."

Hippolyta followed the order.

Their next kiss was rougher, fuelled in part by the darkness that had festered in Hippolyta's soul since she had had to sacrifice her lover for the sake of the Amazon Nation. She pushed the smaller woman on her back and simultaneously pushed the long gown up over Sara's hips.

While Hippolyta's tongue was aggressively exploring, her right hand stroked the outside of her lover's left thigh gently. She let it glide upwards to almost the waist and descended back down as far as her fingers could reach. She let them wander to the inside of the thigh, revelling in the silky feel of the firm flesh.

She could smell Sara's arousal and soon her finger tips touched the cherished wetness, long before she even came close to the other's centre. Sara moaned in her mouth. She spread her legs and began to rock her hips in invitation. Hippolyta broke the kiss. Her own eyes had darkened to midnight blue and were burning with desire for the dark-haired beauty.

"Don't move!" She ordered.

Her hands still stayed clear of Sara's centre while drawing wet circles on the upper thigh. The muscles twitched involuntarily under her ministrations.

"What do you want, baby?"

"I want you. I want you inside of me, Hippolyta. I need you so badly." The heartfelt plea was immediately answered by gentle fingers parting her nether lips. Two digits dipped into the well lubricated canal. Instead of pumping them in and out to stimulate the slender body under her even more, she held them absolutely still.

"Please, more!"

A third finger was added and Hippolyta's thumb found the clit. She was rewarded with a loud moan and felt the tension running through Sara's body in her effort to keep her hip's still.

"Please, Mistress, make me come. I want to feel you on top of me when I come."

"Not yet, baby. First I need to savour what is mine. Are you mine?"

"Yours, my love, yours alone. Please."

-X-X-X-X-X-

## *Chapter Six*

Hippolyta resumed the kiss, now synchronising the movement of her tongue and her fingers. She heard and felt Sara's breathing grow ragged, her juices were flooding her hand and her inner walls clenched rhythmically against the welcome intruders. Hippolyta was also dripping wet.

When they had to break the kiss to breath she whispered, "Come for me, Sara-baby."

Hips arched, strong arms pulled Hippolyta down. The pain suddenly radiating from her whipped back was quickly swept away by her own release. She let herself be overwhelmed by the sensations and feelings and when Sara cried out her name in ecstasy she finally began to believe that this was really not a dream.

Even her most erotic dreams had never been this vivid, they had never been this real. She gently removed her hand from her lover's vagina and brought it to her lips. She tasted Sara's essence and playfully offered her her index finger to clean.

A pink tongue snaked out and swiped over the tip. Lips closed around it and slowly sucked the finger in up to the second knuckle. Sara sucked and nipped and licked. She made love to the finger with her mouth and thus re-stoked the fire of their passion.

Hippolyta rolled them over until she was on her back and the other woman's weight rested completely on top of her. Her back and buttocks hurt from the sudden pressure. She had to suppress a loud groan of pain and tried to cover her discomfort up by busying her hands with undoing the braid holding the now long hair of her beloved.

She raised her head to nuzzle Sara's neck and enjoyed the taste of the slightly sweaty skin.

"I like it long." She said between soft kisses.

"I know my love, that's why I asked the Goddess to restore it, if only for a short time."

"A short time? Why only a short time? You said that you would stay with me."

Panic was rising in the taller woman's mind, only held at bay by the security the firm body on top of her provided.

"No, love, don't be afraid. I will always be with you. Your ordeal is over, but when we leave the temple and return home I will once again be your servant and as a servant my hair will once again have to be cut short. You can still enjoy it as long as we're here." Sara answered while cradling the taller woman's head in her hands.

"I love you, Hippolyta, daughter of Hippolyta, daughter of Rhea. Here in the house of the Great Goddess, I vow to protect you and to cherish you. I vow to assist you and to guide you. I vow to obey you and to respect you. You own my soul and my heart and my body from now to eternity."

Sara said while drowning in the expressive blue orbs of her beloved and added, "I missed you so much. I will never let you go."

Hippolyta didn't even try to stop the tears spilling from her eyes. The words Sara had chosen were the traditional joining vows of the Amazons. Never in all the years they had been together had they come this close to a real commitment, mostly due to Sara's reluctance to insult the Goddess by not doing it the right way, in the temple in front of a priestess.

So, Hippolyta decided to seize this opportunity to finally speak the words that had been true in her heart ever since their first kiss.

"I love you, Sa..." A finger sealed her lips but she just kissed it and pulled the hand away. "I love you Sara, daughter of Yournara, daughter of Negasi. Here in the house of the Great Goddess, I vow to cherish you and to protect you. I vow to guide you and to assist you. I vow to respect you and to obey you. You own my soul and my heart and my body from now to eternity."

She confirmed her words with a kiss that once again started out as gentle reassurance and in no time had them both breathing hard and ready for more.

"I love you, Sara, more than life itself, and I want everyone to know it."

"I love you too, Hip, but you should not have done that. We might have insulted the Goddess." Sara objected.

"The Goddess is never insulted by true love, Sara. True love can't be denied. Please, make love to me. Show me that I belong to you as much as you belong to me."

"Then let us start by getting you undressed, my love. I want to see your muscles ripple when you come for me."

Hippolyta's eyes darkened further in arousal and she was ready to rip the tunic off her body, but Sara stilled her hands.

"Let me do it. I missed undressing you."

Sara pressed herself up on her arms and straddled her lover. The shift in weight increased the pain in Hippolyta's back but one look at the passion filled green eyes made her smile instead of groan. Sara slowly opened one lace after the other that held the black tunic closed in front. She thoroughly kissed the newly revealed skin before she continued with the next one and enjoyed the increase in her beloved's heartbeat.

Every movement brought more pain to Hippolyta's back and buttocks but she didn't mind, to her own surprise she even enjoyed the feeling. It seemed to heighten her awareness.

"I need to touch you, baby." She said.

Sara just smiled and wordlessly pulled the gown over her head. Hippolyta's eyes grew big in wonder. She raised her hand and gently brushed over the smooth skin just above the left breast. The slave mark, the ugly branding that had marred her skin for years was gone. She kissed the spot, just as she had done a thousand times before.

"Thank you, Goddess." She whispered before repeating the kiss.

This time she lingered a bit longer but gentle hands on her shoulders pressed her back down and she reluctantly complied.

"Your kisses are much too distracting, my beloved warrior. It's my turn to bring you pleasure. I want to make you scream my name in ecstasy."

Her voice was a little bit lower than usual with a throaty whisper and she knew exactly what this inflection did to Hippolyta's libido.

"You're the most beautiful woman I've ever seen, strong and soft, forceful and compassionate. Every time I look at you it's as if the sun had just come up. I love you."

The last three words were accentuated by small bites of Hippolyta's left nipple. The tall woman arched her back for more and was rewarded by another gentle bite. Sara teased her by expertly touching and kissing. She changed spots just at the height of sensation.

Hippolyta's whole body was tingling, a fire raged behind the blonde curls of her nether hair, a fire further fed by the ever changing pain coming from her back and buttocks. Sara had yet to touch anything below the belly button and the tall woman was ready to beg for more.

In reference to the beginning of their love making Sara asked. "What do you want, baby?"

Hippolyta answered in kind. "I want you. I want you inside of me, Sara. I need you so badly."

"Do you want me to fuck you with my fingers or do you need something bigger?"

The blonde head rose from the floor. "Bigger? Do we have something bigger?"

"This is the temple of the Goddess, love. Everything is possible." Sara answered with an enigmatic smile.

"Yes, please, I want you to take me, to fill me. I'm yours, please take me, claim me."

It was only on rare occasions that Hippolyta let herself be taken with a dildo and harness. Early in their relationship she had seen it as a sign of weakness to give up so much control but Sara had taught her differently. Usually the Queen enjoyed the exercise of her dominance very much but she also had learned to enjoy giving up control to Sara.

"Your wishes are my command, my love. Now, we'll just have to prepare you properly."

Sara scooted backwards and went from straddling Hippolyta to kneeling between her willingly spread thighs. Tiny fleeting kisses trailed from her belly button down to the patch of blonde hair. Gentle fingers spread her nether lips and she felt inquisitive eyes studying her folds.

"So beautiful." The words were spoken so softly, she barely heard them and suddenly the tip of a tongue was flicking her clit, very, very slowly and very, very gently.

"So beautiful and all mine." The whispered words were like a gentle breeze on her overheated centre. A fresh gush of wetness greeted them and Sara's mouth started to lap it all up, but there still came more.

"I think you're ready, my love." The breeze whispered.

Sara changed her position and something long and hard entered Hippolyta. Her muscles contracted around the intruder but as fast as it had come it also was withdrawn.

A whimper escaped her lips and it was back. It was kept still and the proud warrior begged, "Please, take me, fuck me hard. I need you so much, please."

Sara bent forward and the phallus slid in as deeply as possible. Their tongues met in duel but Hippolyta was quickly driven to distraction. Sara's firm breasts were pressed against her own while the tiny gyrating movements of her hips translated to a rhythmic scraping of the dildo's head on her inner walls.

Hippolyta howled in ecstasy and frustration. Every rotation seemed to drive her higher and higher, and yet it was too deep inside of her to trigger her release by touching this special spot that was perfectly positioned to be reached by her lover's skilled fingers.

"Are you ready, my love?" Sara asked.

She wanted to answer that she was way beyond ready but she only managed to nod. Suddenly the comforting weight of her lover's body was gone but she still was held by these intense green eyes.

Sara ordered her to wrap her legs around her waist, balanced most of her weight on her arms and began to thrust. She still took her time as if she wanted to explore every square inch inside of her beloved. Hippolyta moaned her name and the speed increased slowly, excruciatingly so. With the speed the force of the thrusts also increased and soon pubic bone slammed against pubic bone.

Both crushed over the edge simultaneously and had first to catch their breaths. "I love you." They finally said and burst into giggles at speaking up at the same time.

The laughing jarred the wounds at her back but the blonde didn't care because it also reignited her fiery passion which in turn re-awoke Sara's need.

"Please, love, take me now. I want to feel you deep inside of me." It now was Sara's turn to beg.

"Yes, baby, I want you too, but how? What do I have to do? The phallus you're wearing is too big to be comfortable for you."

"Don't worry, my love. This is the house of the Goddess after all. You only have to wish for what you want and it will be there."

"Just wish for it? I think I can do that."

One smooth roll reversed their positions and before Sara knew how she found herself pinned under her taller partner's body. Hippolyta's tunic slid down her back. Less than a heartbeat later she was again filled with a dildo. She felt the straps of a harness around her hips, and saw a phallus perfectly sized for her beloved protruding from it.

Her nose told her that lubrication would not be a problem; so, she started with quick, short thrusts. Sara's hips immediately bucked against her with the tip of the phallus just jabbing at her love spot but not long enough to get her what she wanted.

The tiny, still rational part of Sara's brain told her that she should be surprised at how fast their passion had returned after their last orgasms.

"Deeper." She demanded, "I need all of you inside of me. Please love."

Hippolyta readily complied. She altered her movements from short jabs to long steady thrusts. It had taken quite a bit of experimentation and false starts at the beginning of their relationship to find out the other's preferences. Sara loved being taken with an artificial member, but she needed a steady rhythm to slowly build up her passion and she had to be able to look into her lover's midnight blue eyes and read her arousal.

Experience had taught Hippolytah how to read Sara's facial expression. She saw when she wanted her to go faster or slower or when she wanted her to hold still.

Sara's legs closed around her waist and drew her in. The base of the phallus scraped against

Sara's clit. She raised her upper body from the floor and snaked her arms up to her lover's back. The palm of her hands rested flat on Hippolyta's hips, but she was already too far gone to feel the welts on the usually smooth skin. Hippolyta's last conscious action before her own climax took her was to enter her lover as deeply as possible and kiss her passionately.

In the grip of their orgasms, with their eyes still locked onto each other none of them saw the golden glow enveloping both of them and they also were oblivious to the harness and double dildo disappearing into thin air.

Hippolyta's arms were trembling with the strain of holding herself up and she finally rolled to the side. She pulled Sara in her arms and once again told her that she loved her and that they would be together as Queen and consort before succumbing to sleep. Sara followed her only heartbeats later.

Sara was the first to wake up again. She opened her eyes to the gentle light of the candles and smiled when she found out that the hard marble floor on which they had made love had morphed into a comfortable mattress. Hippolyta was as usual flat on her back and half of Sara's body was draped on top of her.

Oh, how she had missed waking up this way!

Without moving she began to inspect Hippolyta's body in search of injuries or other signs of the battles of which she only summarily knew. She didn't find anything but when her eyes fell on her hand which was in its customary place on her beloved's stomach she saw traces of blood. She moved her arm and turned her hand to find it literally covered in blood.

The sight made her bolt upright and the sudden movement woke Hippolyta. She found Sara staring at her bloodied hand and saw the fear in her eyes.

"Everything's alright, my love. I'm not injured. A few of the lash marks on my back must have opened up earlier, probably while I was sparring with the Goddess."

"Lash marks? Who would dare to whip the Queen of the Amazons? Were you captured?"

"Calm down, my love. I already feel much better. I was not captured. It was a punishment, all in tune with Amazon law, and believe me, I deserved every single stroke."

Hippolyta then told her what had happened. She kept to the facts, but didn't omit any details and also didn't try to find excuses for her actions, but Sara had long ago learned to read between the lines. She knew that Hippolyta still felt guilty. Justice might have been satisfied in the eyes of the law, but not in her lover's mind, and it wouldn't be for some time to come. Sara also sensed Hippolyta's shame at her loss of control.

"I'm sorry that I wasn't with you to stop you, my love. You shouldn't have had to go through all this guilt, but I'm proud that you took responsibility for your actions."

"Proud, how can you be proud of me? The few strokes I received don't change the fact that my actions were no different than what those slavers did to you with the branding. I'm just as..."

A hand clamped over her mouth and green eyes blazed angrily. "Don't you dare say something like this! Even if your whole soul were consumed by darkness, you still would not be able to do what they did on a regular basis. Yes, this one time you let your anger blind you to what is right. Yes, it should not have happened, but it did and you paid the price."

"They didn't even give me the full quota of the strokes." Hippolyta interjected.

"Oh dear Goddess, you can be so dense sometimes. It was not important what kind of punishment you received. It was only important that there was a punishment. Even your victim, the king's grandson, thinks so, else he would not have asked the council for leniency."

Hippolyta looked at her beloved and began to smile. "You're so beautiful when you're angry, Sara-baby, and you're right. I'm acting like a petulant child. I'm sorry."

"No, love, you're not acting like a child. You're acting like a proud warrior whose personal code of honour took a thorough beating. You'll get over it in time."

"You know me too well, my love, but there's one positive thing coming out of this whole punishment thing." Hippolyta said.

"Oh yes? And what would that be?" Sara asked, her anger as quickly appeased as it had been raised.

"For the first time in years I understand why our love-making is so much better after a thorough spanking." Hippolyta answered with mischievously sparkling eyes. "I'd like to try this again some day, perhaps with a little less pain involved."

Sara studied her partner's face and came to the conclusion that despite her casual tone she was quite serious. "Well, then, my beloved Queen, we'll have to find some transgression that requires a very private punishment, don't you think?"

"Oh, yes, my consort, but I'm sure that you will come up with something when the time is right." Hippolyta bantered back.

"Please, don't call me your consort, Hip. It's only a dream, nothing more. We'll never get the approval of the whole Nation. We know what we are to each other, that's enough." Sara said with a hint of resignation in her voice.

"There is nothing the council or anyone else can do to stop us, my love, and we also won't have to break any rules." Hippolyta said and took the dark-haired woman in her arms.

"I don't understand."

"What did the Goddess tell you about the war and anything else that happened, baby?"

"She only told me that the Amazon Nation has won a great victory.

"I remember taking my last breath in your arms. Suddenly there was a thick white fog all around me and the pain from the whipping was gone. I tried to find an opening in the fog and then I was back home, in our rooms - at least it looked like our home but the feeling was all wrong. It felt more like a temple than anything else." Sara fell silent and looked uncertainly to her lover.

"Go on, Sara-baby. I never will doubt your words or you."

"I heard the voice of the Goddess. She told me that my part of the sacrifice was over and that it now was up to you to bring it to a successful end."

"All of our warriors did it. It was not me alone." Hippolyta protested.

"I don't think that she was talking about the war, love. I think she knew that what you had to do to me combined with the fighting it would bring the darkness of your soul to the forefront."

"I could have invalidated your sacrifice had I turned this darkness against my own people. Is this what you think, Sara?" Hippolyta asked.

"In a nutshell, yes. I learned that the sacrifice is about confronting inner demons without fighting them and without letting them win. In contrast to most other people you are not afraid of physical pain, but you fear losing control, especially of the darker impulses of your soul brought out in battle. But you were strong enough to keep them in check and you willingly paid the price for the one time you didn't."

Everyone else would have been on the receiving end of a severe tongue lashing by the Queen whose words on occasion could be as sharp as her blade. She hated it when people could see through her this easily but Sara had always been an exception to this unspoken rule. So, she gently kissed her on the tip of her nose and said,

"I'm a lucky Queen to get a consort as wise as you are. Yes, my love, you will make a great consort and a great Queen." Hippolyta said.

"Which brings us back to the start of our conversation. How can you be so sure? The Goddess also said such cryptic, unbelievable things. She told me that I was her Chosen and would be a consort and a Queen leading two people in a brilliant future. I laughed. I told her that not even she could change who my parents were or turn me into a born Amazon. She became a bit angry at my answer but I could hear that it was more for show than anything. She said that this would not be necessary and simply disappeared. She then brought me here, to her temple and told me that you would come for me. I can't even tell you how much time went by since the sacrifice."

"It's been more than half a moon, my love. This will be a long story and I'm hungry. Do you think we could wish us some breakfast or something?"

Sara's answer was a loud rambling of her stomach and shortly after a tray heavy with the women's favourite dishes appeared next to them.

Hippolyta told Sara everything that has happened and everything the Goddess had shown her. She spoke long after the tray was empty, and it took Sara even longer to grasp the consequences of her words.

"There's no way on Gaia's green earth that I'll become their Queen, even if they would accept me. The Goddess promised me that I would return to your side and I will... I will... I don't know but she won't like it if she does not keep this promise." Sara stammered.

"Do not insult me, little one!" The voice of the Goddess reverberated through the room and soon after the immortal appeared out of thin air. "You will become the Queen of Aldebran's people. It is my will and it will happen. Did I make myself clear?"

"Yes Goddess." Sara said in a subdued voice and knelt respectfully.

Hippolyta took a protective stance between the tall Goddess and her lover. "Stop it, please, Great Goddess. Is this how you want your Chosen to be, Goddess, trembling at your feet? Do you really want her to act out of fear instead of standing up for what is right?"

The Goddess took a menacing step forward and then laughed loud. "Always the champion, aren't you, warrior child? And no, I don't want my Chosen quivering in fear at my sight. Stand up, little one. Nothing will happen to you or your beloved. You will be Queen here and Hippolyta will be your consort, just as you will be her consort in Amazonia. You will find a way to split your time between the two countries. I promised to return you to your warrior's side, and I always keep my promises."

Comforted by the Goddess' words and now securely held in her lover's strong arms Sara's smile returned. "Thank you, Great Goddess. I'm sorry I offended you."

"I'm not offended, little one. You spoke from your heart as you always do. I will never fault you for that, my Chosen. And now it is time for both of you to leave my realm and return to the mortal world. You both have a lot of work to do before you can be joined in Amazonia."

"A full-fledged Royal joining, the Elders will have a field day and drag up every odd law and tradition they can find. This possibly could take moons." Hippolyta said with a whine.

"The traditions all have a reason. They are important for the Nation, love. You can't just ignore them." Sara said.

"Just tell them that the future consort will not be able to wear the traditional leathers for the joining if they delay the ceremony for too long."

"I don't understand, Goddess." Sara said.

"No, you wouldn't, little one. When you made love here in my realm I gave you a gift. I gave it you but it's for the both of you, something you both prayed for without any hope that it ever would happen. After all the Amazon Nation needs an heir to the mask, and my stubborn warrior child made it abundantly clear to everyone who wanted to hear it that she refuses to do it the conventional way and lie with a man."

Hippolyta stared at the Goddess with wide eyes. Sara's reaction was more immediate. She left Hippolyta's arms and flung herself at the Goddess, hugging her with all her strength.

"Thank you, thank you. You just made my greatest dream come true, thank you."

"You're welcome, little one, just don't call on me for diaper duty."

The Goddess' humour was lost on Hippolyta. She asked. "We're going to have a child, a daughter?"

"Yes, warrior child. I heard your prayers when you trained one of the beginners' classes or when Sara told you about a day spent with the little ones at the nursery, when you watched her with a toddler in her arms telling a story or chasing them through the village." Still in the mood to tease the Queen the Goddess added, "For a prayer it was somehow lacking in formality but I still heard your mumbled, 'How I wish one of them would be ours.' Well, you got your wish, and yes, it will be a girl. Not even I can create a boy from the union of two women, at least not if I don't want to break my own rules."

Hippolyta sank on her right knee and saluted the Goddess like an unranked Amazon warrior would her Queen. "Thank you, Great Goddess. I'll always be in your debt for giving me back my heart and for your gift."

"Rise, warrior child, you don't owe me, neither do you, my Chosen. See, the sacrifice was not only to win this senseless war; there was much more at stake. Part of my duty is to keep the life I created in balance. There has to be a balance between life and death, between light and darkness. Aldebran was only a part in a much bigger equation, but this last campaign was the proverbial drop getting the barrel to overflow. The balance began to shift. It may sound cruel to you but the sacrifice was the best way to restore the balance."

Hippolyta blanched suddenly and the Goddess easily picked up her thoughts. "No, Hippolyta, even if you had allowed the darkness to overpower your heart, even if you had failed the second part of the ritual it would not have destroyed the light, it only would have taken much longer to restore the balance. - And now, return to your world, give this land a new Queen, get joined and raise your daughter to be proud, strong and wise."

The room around them suddenly shifted and they found themselves in the entry hall of the temple. Hippolyta was wearing her ceremonial leathers with all the beads and feathers. She felt her sword on her back and a dagger in her right boot. She also felt eyes on her and a soft finger tip on one of the more pronounced welts on her back. They still hurt but not as much as she had

expected after only a day or two.

Soft lips kissed the mark and Sara whispered, "She really could have taken them away. You don't deserve this pain."

Hippolyta quickly turned around and for a moment whatever she had wanted to say was stuck in her throat. Sara was dressed in a long skirt of beige doeskin that contrasted nicely with her own dark brown leathers. The material seemed to flow from her hips as if it were silk from the far South. Slits on both sides up to mid-thigh ensured her freedom of movement. The skirt sat low on her hips, held by an intricately braided, multi-coloured belt. Her bodice was made of the same soft leather as the skirt and hugged the upper body like a second skin. It ended about two inches under the breasts and left her toned midsection bare. The halters going over her shoulders and her décolleté were adorned with rows of tiny beads repeating the colour scheme of the belt. Her long dark hair was falling in waves down her back. She carried a staff that looked like a shorter replica of Hippolyta's.

"Sweet Goddess, you're beautiful."

She took Sara in her arms and kissed her passionately. Hippolyta's roaming hands came to the small of Sara's back and touched a dagger strapped to the belt. When they had to break the kiss to breathe she unsheathed it and studied the intricately carved ivory handle.

It held scenes of her life with Sara from the day they had first met. One of the images even depicted them making love, another showed the sacrifice, another their joining, a baby securely held in Sara's arms with her arms around Sara. One showed Sara leading an army and finally there was one showing both of them as old women.

The warrior in her also saw the fine quality of the steel, the perfect balance of blade and handle, the perfect fit for her partner's hand.

"This is almost as beautiful as you, Sara-baby." Hippolyta whispered.

"So, that's it. I'm rating only slightly higher than a dagger."

That got her a sheepish grin that seemed totally out of character. "Well, you're both gifts from the Goddess, that should count for something."

"Look at the sword on your back. Seems to me that you got your own new weapon from the Goddess."

Hippolyta reached back over her shoulder and as soon as her hand closed around the hilt she felt the difference. She drew the weapon and Sara took a few steps back to give her more room. After only a few practice swings she started to move the blade in intricate defensive patterns. It had taken her more time to familiarise herself with the two swords she had inherited from her mother and make them to an extension of her arm. This weapon, however, felt like a part of her from the very beginning. When she stopped, Sara's face held the same expression of love and awe she had

felt earlier for Sara.

"Sweet Goddess, you're so beautiful, love."

This time the smaller woman initiated the kiss. Later, they studied the hilt of the sword. It also was made of ivory and held scenes of their lives. It started with Hippolyta taking the mask of the Queen and Sara standing on an auction block. There was a carving showing how she had killed Sara's owner, their staff practice, them making love, the sacrifice. Hippolyta saw herself carving letters in Yournar's back, she saw their joining, saw them holding the baby. She saw herself strapped to a bed, Sara surrounded by four children and then both were sitting on a porch as old women.

Their eyes met for a long time before Hippolyta re-sheathed the weapon. "It's time, my love."

"Yes, my consort, it's time to go. I can't wait to get back to Amazonia and have a few rooms added to the palace."

"Why? We could simply turn my room into a nursery."

"Yes, we probably could, but I want to be prepared for the others." Hippolyta said softly.

"The others? You mean the scene with me and the other children? Do you really think the Goddess would grant us more than one miracle?"

"I don't know, my love, but my gut tells me that these four children on the hilt will call you Mom. However, they also look so different that I think we might have just taken them as our own for one reason or the other."

Sara saw the sincerity and joyful anticipation in her beloved's eyes, and kissed her gently on the lips. "The future will tell, my love. Let's go and brave the council. I fear we will have a lot of explaining to do."

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## *Epilogue*

Sara's prediction turned out to be an understatement of massive proportions. While Hippolyta's personal guard took their clues from their Queen and simply accepted Sara's return and her change in status as a gift of the Great Goddess, the Elder's council and the delegations were not as easy to convince. Hippolyta had spent almost four days in the temple and in the meantime delegations from all over the land had assembled on the former battlefield. Every city and large village had sent a small group, every smaller village at least one representative.

The two priestesses and Lattenis had convinced them to select a group of twelve men and women to speak on all of their behalves. They even already had decided to all support the capital's petition for Hippolyta to become their new Queen.

To get all of them to accept that Sara was really Aldebran's granddaughter and would make a good Queen had been much harder, even after Priestess Negasi had confirmed what Hippolyta had told them. They slowly began to change their tune when they learned that the silent dark-haired beauty at the Queen's side was also her soon-to-be consort.

After their third meeting, when they were just about to adjourn to the next day, one of the men asked her, "Do you even want to be Queen?"

"No, not particularly. All I really want is to share my life with the one I love, to be at her side and to one day help her to raise our children, but the Goddess told me that it's my destiny and I will not defy her by refusing to do my duty." Sara answered softly.

Her heartfelt words had turned the tide but they needed another day to iron out the structure of the new government and to get Negasi and Yournar to accept the proposed positions as co-regents.

The sessions with the council of Elders were even more strenuous. Though they had had no problem to accept Sara as the future consort, they were very reluctant to give up the idea of a traditional Royal joining with all the old traditions being strictly adhered to. Only Sara's profound knowledge of the old law scrolls got them to finally relent.

So, almost two months after the sacrifice and one after the magical time spent in the temple, Hippolyta, Queen of the Amazon Nation, and Sara, Queen of Velarius, were joined by the Goddess herself. She blessed their union and the future cooperation of their people and promised to be back when it was time for their daughter's name-giving ceremony.

T H E E N D

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