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Description: After reuniting in Palladia, Xena and Gabrielle use their many skills to defend the town and its residents from the Amazons. Queen Melosa and Corianyx, the leader of the ruthless band of fanatics known as the Wild Boars, continue their quest to restore the Amazon Nation to its former glory - and now, they have set their sights on the biggest town in the region, Palladia...

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PREVIOUSLY ON A QUESTION OF LOYALTY, PART 1:

After witnessing the aftermath of a devastating attack on a small village called Tirus, Xena and Gabrielle learn that Queen Melosa has started an all-out war against the neighboring villages and that she is supported by a band of highly skilled, ruthless Amazons whose coat of arms is a stylized image of a wild boar.

With Xena concentrating on trying to organize the defenses at Palladia, the largest town in the region and the one most at risk from new attacks, Gabrielle travels alone to the Amazon camp to try to talk Queen Melosa into stopping the campaign.

When Gabrielle meets - and runs afoul of - the leader of the Wild Boars, a strong, charismatic woman whose warriors follow her blindly, she realizes that it's already too late for reason and leaves her Amazon Sisters in the middle of an attack to rejoin Xena...

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CHAPTER 1

Three days after the first attack on Palladia.

The sentries that stood watch outside the royal hut in the Amazon camp briefly looked at each other with identical, goofy grins on their faces after their Queen had let out a long, colorful and highly imaginative tirade that had been audible across most of the nearby paths and huts.

Inside the royal hut, Corianyx, the leader of the feared black-sleeved Amazons that had terrorized the entire area with their merciless hit-and-run attacks, leaned back in her seat and stared at Queen Melosa almost like she couldn't believe what the Amazon regent had just said to her.

At the other side of the table, Ephiny was still cringing, and all the other senior Amazons at the tribal council meeting had suddenly turned to studying the texture of the table in front of them.

Solari successfully hid a smirk - though it was tough going because she was seated directly opposite Corianyx whose facial color proved that she was seething on the inside - and leaned in towards Ephiny. "Bet she hadn't been spoken to like that since she was a junior, huh?" she whispered and put a hand on her curly-haired partner's thigh underneath the table.

"No," Ephiny said in a matching whisper. "I don't think that kind of language has ever been used at a council meeting," she continued, looking to her left at Queen Melosa who was grinding her jaw incessantly.

"May I be allowed to speak?" Corianyx said, sitting up straight.

"By all means," the Queen said with a distinct chill in her voice.

Clearly choosing her words with caution, Corianyx first leaned forward but then changed her mind and rose instead. "Queen Melosa," she said and put her hands behind her back, "the attack on Palladia was not a success, that is correct, however it had nothing to do with the dedication or effort brought forth by my Wild Boars, but everything to do with the fact that not only was I withheld vital information about the town's defenses, but that Princess

Gabrielle... that you have appointed your heir, I might add, Queen Melosa... chose to defect, no, to betray her Sisters in the middle of the battle!"

Along the sentence, Corianyx' voice gradually grew in volume until she was almost shouting at the end. Once she had delivered her message, she made a quick bow and sat down again.

The Queen ground her jaw a bit more but then looked down and signed a scroll that had been lying open in front of her. "That may be, but the end result was the same. And, by royal decree, we... and you are included in that, Corianyx... will now concentrate on Brisus and Xilannium before we return to Palladia. End of discussion."

Moving their eyes as one, Ephiny and Solari both looked at Corianyx to see how the leader of the northern Amazons took that decree. At first, she didn't move a muscle but kept her face a stoic mask of professionalism - even if her facial color was still a bit off - but she eventually conceded the argument with a nod.

"All right," Queen Melosa said and rose from her throne.

The senior Amazons all rose and bowed their heads to show respect for their queen before filing out of the royal hut with Corianyx leading the way in a hard stride.

Corianyx had barely left the royal hut before a young warrior from Melosa's own tribe accidentally bumped into the northern Amazon. The young warrior immediately started apologizing profusely, but Corianyx just turned towards her and shot her the most evil, feral glare any mortal had witnessed since Medusa's heyday.

Watching the dramatic scene unfold, Ephiny shook her head slowly. "You know, Solari... I'm beginning to understand why Gabrielle took off. Even if it did upset me when we heard about it."

"Mmm-yeah," Solari said and licked her lips. Looking around to see if there were any of the black-sleeved Amazons in their vicinity, she leaned in towards Ephiny and whispered: "It's not too late to do what we talked about."

The curly-haired Amazon scrunched up her face and began to rub her chin. "I don't know... it's an awfully big step. We could find ourselves banished for life... would you be ready for that?"

In the meantime, Corianyx finished her altercation with the young Amazon by giving her such a hard shove on the shoulder that she took several fumbling steps backwards and fell on her rear.

Solari sighed and followed Corianyx with her eyes as the leader strode across the camp to get to her hut. "Yes. Yes, I would be."

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In Palladia, the usual morning hustle and bustle had returned after a few quiet days following the devastating attack. The villagers walked and drove up and down main street that had been cleared of the roadblocks like they always had - though the timber logs had merely been moved to the side of the street - and the business in Iriadne's tavern had returned to normal.

The rosy-cheeked, slightly matronly tavernkeeper could be mistaken for a whirlwind as she tried to keep up with the many breakfast orders that typically included warm ale, scrambled eggs and sausages, or dairy products with plenty of honey and homemade jam - there were even some who ordered the local specialty, thick slices of rye with pig fat spread, salt and crunchy, fried onions.

Upstairs in her room, Xena yawned and rubbed her eyes. Sighing deeply, she put her arm on the cold side of the double bed where Gabrielle was supposed to be, but wasn't. "I love her... but she can be so damn stubborn sometimes," Xena mumbled under her breath. "Volunteering to spend the last three days and nights in the magistrate's prison is just... just... just, ugh! So Amazonic!"

Realizing that she was complaining about something Gabrielle always complained that she, Xena, suffered from in spades made the Warrior Princess chuckle as she swung her bare legs over the side of the bed and pulled the chair with her clothes towards her.

After getting dressed, she took her sword and checked that the two-candlemark sharpening session she had gone through the evening before had taken care of the many little nicks it'd had. In the battle, it had been her Chakram that had seen most action, but for some reason, her sword had ended up looking like it had fought an entire army all by itself. Satisfied that it was in tip-top shape, she twirled it a couple of times and inserted it into the scabbard she carried on her back.

Once nature's call had been heeded in the public outhouse, she went back inside into the communal room where she was quite surprised to see the anthill-like activity. Much like always, she felt uncomfortable with a large crowd around her, so she quickly moved up to the counter and waited for Iriadne to come back out of the kitchen.

She didn't have to wait long as the rosy-cheeked woman was soon out, carrying a tray of greasy sausages.

"Oh, good morning, Xena!" Iriadne said as she put down the tray on the counter. "Fancy a sausage or two?"

"Uh, no thanks. I'm just here for the usual."

"Ah yes, bread and water for the prisoners," Iriadne said and reached below the counter where she found a jug and a small tray. "The bread is coming right up... can you wait five candledrips?"

"Sure. I don't know if Gabrielle can, though. I'll bet she's hanging off the cell bars already, moaning about her empty stomach," Xena said with a wicked gleam in her ice blue eyes.

Iriadne laughed out loud at that, but soon had to service some of her regulars who came up to the counter to get a refill of their warm ale.

While she was waiting for the bread to be taken out of the oven, Xena turned around and began to study the villagers. One of them was Selena who was wearing a very nice green dress with a plunging neckline. As the two women locked eyes, Selena shot Xena a saucy wink that the warrior didn't even want to think about responding to.

Xena's acute embarrassment was saved when Iriadne came back into the communal room with a full tray of bread and buns. The matronly tavernkeeper quickly distributed the buns onto two smaller plates and then put one of the loaves onto the tray she had prepared for Xena.

"Here you go, Xena. Just take the water from the well out back, like always."

"Yep," Xena said and took the tray with the load of bread and the empty water jug. "Thanks, Iriadne."

"You're welcome. Let's hope this'll be the last morning you'll have to do this. I mean, you have a double bed in your room, you know," Iriadne said and winked saucily, causing Xena's embarrassment from before to return, only stronger.

The jail and the magistrate's office were housed in a stone building in one of the side streets off main street, and it didn't take Xena long to go down there. After knocking twice on the heavily reinforced wooden door, she took a step back so the magistrate could see her through a small gunslit.

The town magistrate was a man in his late forties with a stern face and an even sterner demeanor, and he always seemed to be stricken with some kind of ailment. As the man opened the door to let Xena inside, he winced in pain and pressed a hand to his lower back.

"Good morning, Augeas," Xena said and put the tray down on a little table just inside the door.

The magistrate grumbled a reply and began to check the loaf and the jug of water for contraband or means to help the prisoners to escape.

While he was doing that, Xena took the time to look around the dull, lifeless office. Everything was held in dark grays and dark browns, even down to the scattered items on the desk: an opened scroll, an inkwell and a quill.

Xena was astounded to see that unlike Gabrielle's colorful quills, the magistrate's was monochrome and that most of the feathers had been plucked from it. The only splash of color in the entire office was a coat hanger with the magistrate's official cape and hat which were both pale gray.

A narrow corridor off to the left connected the main office with the jail cells, but the wooden door separating the two was closed.

"It's all right, you can go in now," Augeas grumbled and put away the dagger he had used to cut the freshly baked loaf of bread into four uneven chunks.

The delicious smell of the fresh bread soon wafted through the office and down the corridor, and it didn't take half a candledrip before Gabrielle's voice could be heard to say: *'That's torture! Torture, I tell you! Jailer! We haven't eaten since last night in here! Jailer!'*

Xena chuckled and picked up the tray. "Thank you, Augeas. Would you be so kind to open the door?"

Augeas just blinked a couple of times at the request, but relented and shuffled over to the door, pressing his hand against his back and grumbling under his breath the entire way there.

"Oh, thank the Gods!" Gabrielle exclaimed loudly when she spotted the tray of food and Xena - in that order. The smell of bread had made the bard press herself against the bars of her cell, but she quickly turned around and walked back to the lumpy bunk, having learned from the previous days that the magistrate wouldn't open the cell door if she wasn't at a safe distance from it.

Once the magistrate had fumbled with the keys, he swung the creaky cell door open and stepped aside to let Xena in.

Walking past Augeas, the warrior shot him a dark glare that told him in no uncertain terms that she desired to be alone with the Amazons. To underline her point, she kept standing in the doorway to the cell until he got the message.

Grumbling, Augeas relented and shuffled away, rolling his eyes the entire way back to his office.

Xena quickly put down the tray and scooped Gabrielle into her arms. Looking deeply into each other's eyes, they let unbridled love flow between them for nearly a candledrip, but soon, the urge to connect was too strong and they leaned in at the same time and claimed their partner's lips in a searing good-morning kiss.

In the cell adjacent to Gabrielle's, Achillea coughed and let out a long groan when she realized that the warrior and the bard were at it again. Sighing deeply, she pulled the coarse blanket over her head.

Separating, Xena gently ran her finger down the side of Gabrielle's face and broke out in a wide, genuine smile. "Good morning, love. Did you sleep well?"

"Mostly," Gabrielle said with a grin. "Once I had settled a turf war with a rat, everything was just hunky-dory," she continued, pointing at the far end of the cell where a small, brown lump had been thrown into the corner next to the chamber pot.

"Mmmm!" Xena groaned, scrunching up her face.

"Oh, it was nothing, really. Was it, Achillea?"

"No, you were quite brave, Princess Gabrielle," Achillea said and peeked out from underneath the blanket.

Chuckling, Xena put an arm around her lover and pulled her into a sideways hug. "How are you, Achillea?" Xena said loudly.

"Eh," the injured Amazon said with a shrug before going back under the cover.

"I think she has an infection, love," Gabrielle said quietly while she snatched the first of the chunks of bread and began to eat it. "She hasn't slept well. She's been talking in her sleep... you know."

"Yeah," Xena said and cocked her head. "I think I need to speak with Augeas. She-"

Xena didn't have time to complete the sentence as the wooden door to the cells was opened to reveal Augeas and Eneas, the mayor of Palladia.

"Morning, everybody!" Eneas said cheerily, waving a scroll. "I've just signed your release, Gabrielle."

"Oh! But... what about Achillea? She needs a healer," Gabrielle said, hooking her arm inside Xena's.

The news seemed to come as a surprise to Eneas as he came to a sudden halt in the middle of the filthy floor. "Honestly," he said with a grimace, "I don't think we can find a healer in town who'll help her. Up until three days ago, she wanted to kill us all."

Gabrielle's face fell while she digested the news, and when she realized that Eneas was right, she pressed herself close to Xena. "Oh... I guess that's understandable," she said after a little while.

Xena looked from the mayor to the dour jailer to her partner and finally to the forlorn figure lying in the bed in the next cell. An idea formed in her mind, but whether or not she could persuade the town officials to follow it was an open question. "Eneas... what if you released Achillea to my custody? I can help her."

"Out of the question!" Augeas said strongly before the mayor had even had time to open his mouth.

"Now, just hang on for a minute, Augeas... you know just as well as I do that we can trust Xena," Eneas said, raising an index finger at the magistrate.

"We can trust Xena, but we sure as shit on a pig's ass can't trust an Amazon," the magistrate growled.

Xena and Gabrielle both had to suppress chuckles, but Achillea was caught by surprise by the unfiltered statement and let out a braying laugh from underneath the blanket.

Staring wide-eyed at the magistrate, Eneas looked like he wanted to take the older man over his knee and give him a good flogging. "Language, please! There are ladies present! No, I've made up my mind. Achillea is released, too, and Xena will take responsibility for her actions. All right?" the mayor continued, looking at Xena.

"All right," Xena said. Hanging onto the warrior's left arm, Gabrielle broke out in a wide smile as well.

"Good. And with that, I bid you a good day." After bowing impressively, Eneas left the cells with Augeas in tow - the jailer was mumbling all the way out of the cells.

Gabrielle leaned her head back and let out a long sigh. "I was getting cabin fever, so... I'm glad to get out here."

"I'm glad, too. Hey, don't forget to eat," Xena said and pointed at the long-forgotten tray with the carved-up loaf of bread and the jug of water.

"Mmmm... later."

"Later?! Gab- Gabrielle...? You're not Gabrielle! Who are you?" Xena said and pretended to reel at the surprising revelation.

"Oh, ha ha. Later 'cos I need a bath first... a warm bath... a long, warm bath..." Gabrielle mused, snuggling up to her lover. "And I need someone to scrub all my hard-to-reach places. Any volunteers?"

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A few candlemarks later, Xena and Gabrielle strolled hand in hand down towards the artificial clearing where they had first met Eneas and his brothers.

Iriadne had insisted on making them lunch, and the wonderful smells that came out of the reed picnic basket made Gabrielle's stomach growl in several keys at once underneath the cape she had borrowed to stop the villagers from staring daggers at her Amazon fatigues.

"That's more like it," Xena said and gave her partner's hand a little squeeze.

"I know, I know," Gabrielle said with a chuckle. "I happen to like food."

"Mmmm?"

"But I love you."

"Mmmm," Xena said with a broad grin that left no doubt as to her mood.

The two women strolled on in silence until they reached the dirt road that marked the direct way between the Amazon camp and Tirus, the village that had been burned to the ground by the black-sleeved Amazons. Once they got there, Gabrielle stopped and looked in the direction of the camp. After a few seconds, she let out a disappointed sigh and continued.

"I'm sure you can go back there someday, love. You are an Amazon princess, after all," Xena said and put her hands on Gabrielle's shoulders.

Looking downhearted, Gabrielle shrugged and reached up to caress Xena's arms. "Oh, it's not that. It's... Ephiny and Solari, and... my travel bag with all my stuff. Aphrodite only knows what they've done with my scrolls and the things I had in there... like my leather scroll case."

"Well, you don't have to worry about that particular item. I'll buy you a new one if they ruin it. So..." Xena said and wrapped her arm around Gabrielle's shoulders as they resumed strolling across the dirt road and down into the clearing. "What's first? Sparring, eating... or kissing?"

"Hmmm... too bloated to spar after I've eaten... too sweaty to kiss after we've sparred... which leaves us with kissing, then sparring, then eating," Gabrielle said and suddenly pulled Xena behind the biggest tree she could find.

Thinking quickly, Gabrielle stepped up on two protruding roots which brought her lips up to the exact level of Xena's. Smirking widely, she dove in and claimed the warrior's lips in a series of little nibbles punctuated by an occasional deep kiss. "I've... missed... doing... this... my... love..." she whispered around the nibbles and kisses.

"I can tell," Xena said in a matching whisper, feeling a warm buzz spreading over her body with each kiss that Gabrielle gave her. By the red flush that had begun to tinge Gabrielle's cheeks and throat, she knew that the bard felt the same.

When the kissing turned deeper and more heated, Xena was about to suggest finding a new place that was better suited to what she felt like doing, but before she had time to speak, she was rudely interrupted by a crackle of ozone.

Growling, she moved away from Gabrielle's mouth, fully prepared to give Ares a piece of her mind when she realized that the intruder wasn't the God of War at all.

"Well, Gabrielle," Artemis said wearing a sour expression, "I'm glad to see you haven't forgotten **all** the sacred Amazon rituals. Though... couldn't you at least have found a Sister to mate with?"

The Goddess of the Hunt moved uncomfortably close to the two kissing women and folded her arms across her chest almost like she was waiting for Xena to leave. When the warrior stayed put, Artemis' face took on the distinct look of someone who had been forced to smell rotten eggs.

Unwillingly admitting defeat, Artemis eventually threw her hands in the air and took a step back from her subject. "Gabrielle ... I was there when the first tribe of my glorious Amazon Nation moved out of the Caucasus to settle in Cappadocia on the banks of the Thermodon. I was there when the cities of Smyrna, Cyme, Myrina and Paphos were founded. I was there when you learned to build and command boats so you could reach Samothrace, Attica, Lesbos and finally Boeotia on the mainland. I was there when you captured Thrace and the kingdoms to the north..."

"Artemis-" Gabrielle tried, but the Goddess didn't care to stop for a mortal.

"Silence! But listen to me now, little girl..." Artemis continued, pointing an accusing finger at the bard. "I will **not** allow you to destroy my glorious Amazon Nation with your ideas of peace and serenity. That's not who the Amazons are! I created you to live and die as proud, fierce warrior women with a dagger, a longbow or a spear in your hand... and for millennia, that's what you did. Now, for the last few generations, you have devolved into simple slaves whose territories shrink day by day. And what do you do? Nothing. Prometheus may have created Man from clay, but I created the Amazons from my own blood, and I tell you right now, Gabrielle, the true Amazons will fight back. And when they do, you'll have to make up your mind... are you an Amazon... or aren't you?"

With that, Artemis took a step back and disappeared in a cloud of green energy.

Taking a deep breath, Gabrielle ran her hands through her hair and let out a long groan. "Why do the Olympians insist on torturing us, Xena? Why won't they leave us alone? What kind of twisted world is this, anyway?"

"I don't know," Xena said and pushed herself off the tree. "But I do have the perfect remedy to lose some of the pent-up frustration I see in your shoulders, love."

"Oh, I... I think we need to take a rain check. Her diatribe left me really, really not in the mood for anything remotely intimate..."

"Good, 'cos I was thinking of staff practice... and sharing lunch afterwards," Xena said with a grin, throwing Gabrielle her staff.

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The staff practice and the following lunch did the bard good, and as she and Xena walked back towards the town swinging their hands back and forth, her mood was far better than it had been earlier in the day.

'I know the silver cloud has a dark lining,' she thought, 'but I refuse to let Artemis' words overshadow my first day back in the sunlight... and in the arms of my love.'

Ever astute, Xena gave Gabrielle's hand a little squeeze and leaned in to bump shoulders with her. "What's on your mind?"

"What the Goddess told us. And then there's you. No, it's actually mostly you. Well, you and my scroll case," Gabrielle said and returned the squeeze, earning herself a little chuckle.

The two women walked in silence for a few candledrips, nodding brief hellos to various townspeople who recognized them. Soon, the two burly men in buckskin Xena and Gabrielle had seen when they first arrived at Palladia went past them with their team of oxen and all four of Eneas' brothers, and plenty of Good Mornings were duly exchanged.

"Xena, what are we going to do about Achillea?" Gabrielle said as they turned onto main street.

"I don't really know, love. The herbs I gave her should be strong enough to keep her asleep most of the day and take care of her infection, but after that... well," Xena said with a shrug.

The warrior's keen senses suddenly caught some commotion at the other end of the main street, near Iriadne's tavern where they had left Achillea sleeping in their room - commotion that involved shouting villagers wielding pitchforks. "Trouble! Come on!" she suddenly barked and took off in a fast run.

"Here we go again!" Gabrielle said and threw her hands in the air before following the warrior.

Moments later, Xena and Gabrielle arrived at a circle of angry villagers who had forced two people up against the wall of Iriadne's tavern and were threatening them with pitchforks, old, rusty swords and the wooden spikes that had been made for the defense of the town.

Xena could see at once that the situation would get out of hand if it wasn't controlled very quickly, so she put two fingers in her mouth and let out the loudest whistle she could produce. Once the unruly crowd stopped what they were doing and turned around to face her, she put her hands in the air and smiled at them. "Settle down, settle down... what's going on here...? Who's-"

"Ephiny! Solari!" Gabrielle howled and jumped forward. Looking through the throng of people, she had been able to spot the very familiar curly head of her friend, and as she pushed her way towards the inside of the circle, her suspicions were proven correct.

"Princess Gabrielle... thank the Gods you're here," Ephiny croaked and let out a huge sigh of relief. With a smile, she pulled the strawberry-blonde Amazon into a hug and gave her a little crush that made Xena arch an eyebrow.

Once Gabrielle and Ephiny separated, Solari pulled the bard into a half-hug while she held out her left arm in a very awkward pose. "Hello, Princess... wow, you can't imagine how happy we are to see you."

"Wh- what happened to your hand? Did they...?" Gabrielle said and immediately tried to touch Solari's arm but the Amazon shied back at once.

"Oh, that's nothing," Solari said through clenched teeth. "Just a little ding. We had a run-in with one of the Wild Boar sentries on our way here and I guess I sprained my wrist on her jaw. Or maybe I broke it, I don't know."

"You need to see a healer!" Gabrielle said and waved Xena over to her.

'I have a healer right here!' someone said from somewhere deep in the crowd, holding up a freshly made noose.

Gabrielle just grumbled, but Xena quickly identified the man and shot him such a stone cold glare that he turned around and scooted down main street.

"Let's go inside... Xena can take a look at your- OH! That's my travel bag!" Gabrielle suddenly howled when she realized that the third bag on the ground next to Ephiny's and Solari's own belongings was hers.

"Yep," Ephiny said with a grin. "We hid it when you didn't come back. Corianyx was in a foul mood... and I mean Entire Amazon Village Cycling At Once-kind of a foul mood. We didn't want her anywhere near your scrolls, so..."

Smiling, Gabrielle pulled her friends into a gentle hug. "Thank you. Thank you so much... Xena?"

"Right here, love," Xena said and helped Solari over the doorstep and into Iriadne's tavern.

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A candlemark later, Ephiny, Solari, Gabrielle and Xena sat around the small desk in the room Xena had rented studying several maps the two defecting Amazons had been able to sneak out of the camp. In the background, Achillea's gentle snores from the bunk mixed with the lively chatter and created a cozy atmosphere - the small mountain of food Iriadne had made for them didn't detract from the mood, either.

"So," Gabrielle said around chewing on a slice of Dalmatian sausage on rye, "when you left, Corianyx' plan was to attack Brisus, here... and Xilannium, here."

"That's right," Ephiny said.

"She's so arrogant she'll probably stick to those plans," Gabrielle said, finishing off her food. "Xena?"

The warrior leaned forward and measured the distances between Palladia and the two villages that were in danger of being eradicated by the black-sleeved Amazons. "Well... I've never been to either of those villages, but on the map, they appear smaller than Palladia, so I'd say they aren't as well protected as we are."

"That's right," Ephiny said, nodding. "I've been to Xilannium a couple of times to trade. It's just, oh, maybe ten-twelve wooden houses."

"Right. And don't forget Brisus lost so many of their men in the failed ambush. None of them will stand a chance," the warrior said matter-of-factly, sending chills down the spines of the Amazons who were sitting at the table. "The distance between all three villages is too great for a single campaign, so my best guess is that Corianyx and Melosa will concentrate on Brisus and Xilannium for now. Once they've been dealt with, they'll come back here."

Sighing, Gabrielle leaned back on her chair and folded her arms across her chest, her food long forgotten. "I never thought I'd see the day where Amazons would attack and kill innocent people simply because their leaders worked with someone who opposed the tribes."

"It's really nothing new, Gabrielle," Solari said. "In the ancient scrolls, this sort of thing happened all the time."

"I know, but that still doesn't make it right," Gabrielle said and scrunched up her face. Suddenly getting a burr in her top, she pushed her chair back and began to pace the room silently. After two complete tours, she went over to Xena and kissed the warrior's neck. "I need a moment alone, love. I'll take a little stroll."

"Please be ca-"

"Yes, I'll be careful. Ephiny, Solari... see you in a little while," Gabrielle said and hurriedly grabbed her staff before she left the room.

Back in her pea-green top and rust brown skirt for the first time in several days after getting her travel bag back, Gabrielle observed that the villagers were shooting her fewer Evil Eyes than when she had worn her Amazon leathers, but that some were still looking at her like she was their mortal enemy.

The bard kept standing in front of Iriadne's tavern for a little while, but then decided to venture into the town, Evil Eyes be damned. Crossing main street, she went past several people who ignored her completely before finally saying hello to some of the younger villagers.

Initially, she wanted to stop at the site where the roadblock had been in the attack, but when she got there, the street was too busy for her needs so she turned left up the next side street and kept walking until she was out of town and into a small clearing.

There, she found and sat down on a tree stump that had been reclaimed by nature. Finally alone with her thoughts, she let out a long sigh and put her staff down on the ground.

"Am I an Amazon or aren't I?" she said out loud, echoing Artemis' earlier words.

Her mind was filled with thoughts and images from the times she and Xena had dealt with the Amazons; their initial encounter with Terreis and Melosa that had ended up with her, the peasant girl from Potaideia, being bestowed the title of Amazon Princess; the chills she'd had when she and Xena returned to the Amazon village later on only to find that the war against Licantus had changed Melosa so drastically that she had seemed like a different woman; the joy of working with the three juniors who had confirmed that the Amazons had a bright future; the horrors of the nasty business in Crete that had led directly to the even greater horror known as Corianyx who was so cold and full of fanaticism that she didn't deserve to be called a Sister - and finally the shock of losing Eponin.

"Am I an Amazon or aren't I?" she whispered in a voice that trailed off into nothing. *'If Corianyx is an Amazon, then I'm not. But I feel the kinship with the Sisters who have preceded me... I feel their blood coursing through my veins though I'm not an Amazon by birth... I feel inherently connected to Ephiny, to Solari, to Agata, Elif and Tatiana... to Eponin who could have ripped me apart and put me in the hodge-podge stew but didn't... because she also felt the kinship. That's it...'*

Jumping up from the tree stump, Gabrielle began to stride around the clearing, gesticulating wildly with her arms as she turned herself into a fiery furnace of righteous fury. "The kinship! That's it! I am an Amazon because I feel the kinship with my Sisters! Those who have infested our tribe with their ideas of war and bloodshed are not true Amazons... well, they are, but they represent the past, not the future! We are the future... a

future of peaceful co-existence, of prosperity from unlimited trade and from romantic liaisons with whomever the Amazons want to have liaisons with! Yes..."

Gabrielle slowly came to a halt and allowed her blood pressure to come back down. In her excitement, she had worked herself into quite a state, and as she took several deep breaths to calm down, she felt everything fall into place for her.

"Artemis! Did you hear me? I've made up my mind! I *am* an Amazon!" Gabrielle roared at the heavens.

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CHAPTER 2

Four days later.

The call signaling the return of a scout had barely echoed through the Amazon camp before Queen Melosa stormed out of her royal hut and strode over to the main entrance.

"What's the news?" she said as soon as she stepped into the recently vacated command hut looking intently at the scout who was taking several deep gulps from a waterskin.

The scout quickly jumped to her feet and wiped her mouth on the back of her hand before she took a deep bow. "My Queen. I have news for you."

"Yes, yes, yes... spit it out, Amazon!" Melosa said and crossed her arms over her chest.

"Ephiny and Solari have joined Princess Gabrielle in Palladia, my Queen. One of the-

"Hera's tits!" Melosa shouted and punched a fist into her open palm. Growling out loud, she moved to the left in the command hut and stared at the unmade bunk that used to belong to the two Amazons but that had been claimed by the senior member of the tribe who had taken over the archives. She shook her head in frustration and turned back to the scout. "Go on."

"One of the Wild Boars is with them as well, though she is ill and not in any condition to fight. She has a bad case of fever."

"Mmmm."

"There is more, my Queen... I wasn't able to get it confirmed. The villager got too drunk too quickly. That was my fault."

"Eh..." Melosa said and rubbed her forehead. "Tell me anyway. It may be important later on."

"The villager said that Princess Gabrielle and the others are staying in a room or rooms at the town's tavern. I tried to find out which room, but he didn't know. Oh, and the villager also said that the tavernkeeper is married to the mayor."

"Hmmm. Interesting. That connection makes her an enemy of the Amazon Nation. All right, thank you," Melosa said and clasped arms with the scout who quickly bowed and left the command hut.

Within moments of the scout leaving, a sentry from the main gate came up to the command hut and knocked on the doorjamb.

"Enter!" Melosa said and turned around to face the door.

"Queen Melosa," the sentry said as she entered the hut. "We have spotted Corianyx and her Wild Boars moving towards the camp. They'll be back in less than fifteen candledrips."

"Excellent. As soon as they've returned, tell Corianyx to meet me in the royal hut," Melosa said and brushed past the sentry on her way back to her hut. "At once! You understand?"

"I understand, my Queen."

Thirteen candledrips later, Corianyx brushed the curtains aside and stepped into the royal hut. The leader of the black-sleeved Amazons was sweaty, filthy and bloodied, but while her appearance didn't follow the royal protocol, the wicked gleam in her eyes and the spring in her step proved that the campaign had been successful.

"Queen Melosa," she said and bowed at the Amazon ruler who was standing at the map table in the center of the hut.

"Corianyx. Did you accomplish what you set out to do?" Melosa asked and rolled out one of the maps.

Smirking broadly, Corianyx wiped a few soot-stained drops of sweat off her brow and approached the queen. "We did, Queen Melosa. You need to have your cartographer draw new maps of the area. I'm afraid that Brisus and Xilannium are but distant memories."

"Any casualties?"

"Us or them?"

"Both."

"Well, we lost one or two, but that was only because they were too slow to avoid pitchforks. And for the villagers, well... suffice to say that Charon is very busy right now," Corianyx said and dusted off the stylized image of the wild boar on her left sleeve. "I'd imagine that he's angry, actually. Death came so sudden for most of them that they didn't have time to find coins for their crossing," she added in a smiling voice.

"Good," Melosa said and thumped her index finger down on the spot on the map that said Xilannium.

When the queen didn't seem to want to go on, Corianyx got suspicious and cocked her head. "Will that be all, Queen Melosa? I would like to freshen up a bit before supper."

"No, that's not all, Corianyx. As you expected when they left us, Ephiny and Solari have joined forces with Princess Gabrielle."

"All too predictable, I'm afraid."

"Yes. Well, thanks to the effects of port, we know where they are," Melosa said and moved over to her throne where she sat down. With a flurry, she put her right leg over her left and leaned back to assume a regal pose.

The unexpected information made Corianyx lick her lips and narrow her eyes down into grayish slits. "And where would that be, Queen Melosa?"

"At the tavern in Palladia. They have one of your Wild Boars with them."

"Impossible!"

"No, the contact at Palladia had no reason to lie about that. She is sick... probably injured in the attack and left behind for dead."

'Achillea... that conniving daughter of an inbred whore...' Corianyx thought but kept it to herself. Standing up straight, she made up her mind to make sure that her former second in command would suffer a nasty end for her betrayal. "I see," she said out loud.

On the throne, Melosa shifted her position and moved to the edge of the seat. "Corianyx, I want you to assemble a small strike team. I want you to go into Palladia and create a diversion that will keep Xena busy so she won't be in the way for the main part of the operation, which is to kill the traitors Ephiny and Solari by torching the tavern and everyone inside it. Achillea is one of yours, you can do with her as you please."

"Yes, Queen Melosa. It shall be done," Corianyx said and began to bow, but suddenly realized that Melosa hadn't said anything about Gabrielle. "My Queen... what about the Princess?"

"I want you to..." Seeking - and not finding - the words, Melosa leaned back on her throne and let out a long sigh. "I want you to capture her and bring her back here. Unharmmed," she said after a brief delay.

At first, Corianyx didn't offer a verbal reply, but the way her lips turned into a narrow line in her face told a stronger tale than words would have done. After a few seconds, she spoke in a hoarse voice: "Queen Melosa, with all due respect, Gab-"

"I want her back unharmmed because she's my heir, Corianyx. She is Amazon royalty. Blood runs thicker than treason. Don't question my orders."

"Yes, Queen Melosa."

"Mmmm," the Queen said, remembering their earlier confrontation with a sour expression creasing her lips. "Get cleaned up. I want the mission to be carried out tonight. Now leave," she continued and waved her hand impatiently at Corianyx.

"Yes, Queen Melosa," the Amazon leader said and bowed deeply.

On her way to the public bathing hut, Corianyx kicked at some loose gravel that was in her way, sending it flying under the nearest hut. "Damn that woman..." she grumbled under her breath. "She better watch her back. One of these days... one of these days, she's going to wake up and discover that she's been sent to the Realm of the Dead. Hardly even congratulated me on taking care of business at Brisus and Xilannium... want me to spare that little Princess bitch... yeah, right."

The face of the leader of the black-sleeved Amazons was so dark and drawn that everybody - even some of her own warriors - gave her a very wide berth as she stomped through the camp.

Even as she put her hand on the door to the public bathing hut, she changed her mind and strode over to the stables instead.

Once there, she went straight over to her new second in command, Kamara, a tough, stocky, square-built woman in her late twenties who had joined the Wild Boars when they had run across her birth-tribe who lived as nomads on the great plains in the northeast. Her features were half-Mongolian, half-Caucasian, the result of an attempted alliance between her tribe and a local warlord that had failed when he had realized he had fathered a girl, but in her heart, she was all-Wild Boar.

"Kamara," Corianyx said and leaned against the wooden wall between two of the boxes in the stables as she watched Kamara groom her sweaty horse. "I have a little job for you. I want you to find two Boars for a new, highly secretive mission. However, I want you to pick two who are expendable."

"All right," Kamara said and calmly continued to groom her mare, seemingly not at all concerned with the implications of Corianyx' words.

"You and I will be going as well. The mission takes place in Palladia."

"I see. Not a full scale attack?"

"Not for now," Corianyx said and pushed herself off the wall. "I'll tell you more about it once we get under way. Get some rest and something to eat, Kamara. We're leaving before midnight so we can be there when it's darkest."

"Yes, Corianyx. What kind of weapons do we need?"

"Oh, let's see... we'll be slitting throats, so our hunting daggers... and an incendiary bomb or two to create the nice, little diversion I have in mind," Corianyx said casually on her way out of the stables.

Half a candlemark later, Corianyx had just finished washing her hair in a small wooden bowl in the public bathing hut when Kamara knocked on the door and stepped inside with two young Wild Boars.

"Mmmm?" Corianyx said, reaching for a rag to dry her hair.

The two young, black-sleeved Amazons blushed and looked away, clearly embarrassed to see their leader stark naked and dripping wet, but Kamara just gave them a push in the back which made them jerk forward.

"Corianyx, this is Alecta and Cleona. I've found them to be suitable for the mission you have planned," the second in command said, looking directly into Corianyx' eyes.

The leader nodded and eyed the two young Amazons as she began to dry her body with another, larger rag. "So... Alecta and Cleona. You haven't been with us long, have you?"

"No, Corianyx," Alecta said. She was a pretty, long-haired ash-blonde in her early twenties whose gangly torso clashed slightly with her well-toned arms and legs that had come from tending to their horses. "We joined up with your Boars when you crossed into Upper Thrace. That was... oh, four moons ago, wasn't it?"

Cleona nodded enthusiastically. She was a few years younger than Alecta, only a late teen, but she was of a sturdier, stockier build that was reflected in her short hair and her slightly square jaw. "Yes, that's right. We both joined you then, Corianyx."

"I see. Well," Corianyx said, once again locking eyes with her second in command who nodded imperceptibly. "I have chosen you for a special mission. The four of us are going to Palladia to rescue Princess Gabrielle who's being held prisoner by the enemy. Are you with me so far?"

Alecta and Cleona both nodded, their eyes shining with enthusiasm and youthful exuberance.

"Good," Corianyx said and stepped into a pair of breeches before pulling up her deerskin pants. "It's tonight, so eat something to get your strength up. And hear me now, if you speak a word of this mission... then," she continued, adding a dark glare that could not be misinterpreted.

"Yes, Corianyx," both young Amazons said as one, gulping audibly.

Nodding, Corianyx put on her protective top and tied it behind her back, and then reached for the jacket that completed the deerskin hunting outfit. When she had put it on, she made sure the black sleeve with the stylized Wild Boar was straight and free of lint. "Good. Get to it. Kamara, I need a word with you on the finer details of the mission."

"Yes, Corianyx!" the young Amazons said before hurrying out of the public bathing hut.

Once the door closed behind them, Kamara stepped forward and crossed her arms over her chest. "Will they suffice, Corianyx?"

"Yes, they're very good. I'm sure they'll be excellent martyrs for the glorious Amazon Nation," Corianyx said and flicked her hair out of her collar.

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In Iriadne's tavern, Ephiny carried three mugs of ale back to the table she shared with Solari and Achillea who looked better, though still not fully up to scratch.

The former second in command was dressed in neutral clothes that she had borrowed from Iriadne - a peasant dress with a built-in apron. The dress hung on the Amazon's athletic frame like a poorly erected tent, but Iriadne had been the only one who even had something she could spare.

"Here you go," the curly-haired Amazon said as she put the mugs down on the table. Sitting down, she noticed that the tables closest to them were conspicuously empty even though the tavern was well-visited.

"Thanks," Solari said and clinked mugs with her partner, but when she tried to do the same with Achillea, the third Amazon was far more subdued. "Hey, if they haven't killed you yet, I think you'll be safe now," she said to try to lighten the mood.

"Hmmm, I wouldn't bet my last dinar on it... well, I don't even have any, so..." Achillea said in a downcast voice. The Amazon's usually so soft, friendly eyes were locked onto the mug on the table so she didn't have to look at any of the villagers.

"How's your arm?" Ephiny said, drinking from her mug.

"Better, but the stitches make it kinda stiff and sore... it feels like my nether regions did after my first attempt at riding bareback."

Chuckling out loud, Solari took another swig of her mug and shot the former black-sleeved Amazon a curious glance. "Achillea, would you go back to your unit if you had a chance?"

"Corianyx' cutthroats? Never. I don't know what in Tartarus I was thinking when I joined her. I knew from the first time I met her that she was bad news, but she's a perfect orator. She always knows what to say to get our blood pumping."

"Yeah, I know what you mean... she always gave me the creeps," Solari said with a shrug. "Where are you from, originally?"

"A small village a league south of Troy, near the coast. When the war was at its worst a few years ago, the elders decided to abandon the village and start over further inland to get away from the fighting... I wasn't interested. My parents and my brother had died from the fever, so... well, there wasn't anything to keep me there."

"No cute girls?" Ephiny said with a grin.

"No cute boys," Achillea said and took a long swig from her mug.

"Oh..." Ephiny and Solari said as one, shrugging and shooting each other highly puzzled glances.

Behind them, Xena and Gabrielle came down from the stairs, wearing identical goofy grins and clinging onto each other like they were afraid the other would fall over if they let go. "Hi!" Gabrielle said cheerily when she saw her fellow Amazons sitting at the table.

"Hello, Princess Gabrielle. Nice to finally see you in a better mood," Ephiny said and got up to make a seat free for Gabrielle.

"Yeah... I guess I've been a little frustrated these past few days. Sorry 'bout that."

"Ah, that's okay. I s'pose tall, dark and deadly there had a hand in helping you get over it?" Ephiny said and winked at Xena.

"Uh... uh... she did, yes," Gabrielle said while a slight blush crept up on her cheeks and stayed there. Fidgeting with a loose thread on her skirt, she quickly sat down and looked away from the cheeky glares she just knew her friends were sending her.

"We heard," Solari said into her mug, but pretended to have coughed when Gabrielle whipped her head around and stared at her.

Xena narrowed her eyes down into blue slits and pretended to growl from somewhere deep in her throat as a mock threat to lay off her love or else. To underline her growl, she went up behind Gabrielle and put her hands tenderly on the bard's shoulders.

Solari caught the message at once and held up her hands in defeat. "I surrender! I need all my limbs in one piece..."

"So do I!" Ephiny said and quickly moved over behind Solari. "I mean, I need all Solari's limbs in one piece. Right?" she said and mussed her partner's neck.

The subject made all five women chuckle out loud and look knowingly at each other. This made Gabrielle blush even harder and she quickly grabbed Ephiny's half-full mug to take a long swig.

"I guess it's time for a new round," Xena said and found the coin pouch on her belt. "Anyone?"

"Yes, please, love... but please ask Iriadne to water it down a lot," Gabrielle said and gave Xena's hand a little squeeze.

"Sure."

"No thanks, we're fine," Solari said backed up by a nod from Ephiny, but Achillea pushed her empty mug into the center of the table.

"I'd like another, if you don't mind spending money on someone like me," she said with an apologetic smile.

Unaware of all the innuendo floating around the room, the rosy-cheeked Iriadne came out from behind the curtain to the kitchen with a merry ditty on her lips and a tray with freshly baked loaves of bread in her hands. As she distributed the bread on the counter and the shelves, the familiar, warm scent spread throughout the tavern.

It didn't take long for the bard's insatiable stomach to Growwl! out loud, earning her a new round of cheeky laughs which in turn made her blush even stronger. "So I get the munchies... big deal," she mumbled.

"I'll ask for a loaf of nutbread for you to go with the ales, love," Xena said and squeezed Gabrielle's shoulder.

Some time later, Achillea had gone upstairs to get some rest, but the other four women were well into telling tall tales and juicy gossip from the Amazon camp.

Chuckling out loud at a punch line delivered by Solari, Xena leaned back in her seat and put an arm around Gabrielle's shoulder for comfort. Her sixth sense began to tingle in her ear, but when she glanced around the room, she couldn't see anything unusual.

A little later, Gabrielle also felt a tell-tale niggling feeling between her shoulder blades, and she broke out in a little shiver to make it go away.

"You feel it too?" Xena said.

"Yeah... something's about to happen."

"Yeah."

"Oh, what are you two worrywarts up to now, huh?" Ephiny said, draining the last of her second mug of ale. "Weren't we supposed to drink ale and have fun?"

"We were and we are, Ephiny," Gabrielle said, holding up her mug of watered-down ale. She rolled her shoulders to show that she was cool and on top of everything - unfortunately, the niggling feeling persisted. The last time she'd had a similar sensation was when she had been cornered by Corianyx and some of the black-sleeved warriors when she had been watching the weaponsmiths back in the Amazon camp, but unlike that incident, there wasn't anything openly untoward in the tavern.

Moments later, the double doors creaked open to reveal a fair-sized group of young men from the village. The three Amazons and Xena fell silent when they realized the men were staring at them.

Unnoticeably, Xena pushed her chair back to be able to get to her Chakram.

The men mumbled something to each other while Iriadne poured them each a mug of ale. The matronly tavernkeeper didn't seem overly concerned about the unexpected situation, but she kept a weary eye on the men and on her female guests at the table just to be on the safe side.

When some of the men gave a young fellow in their midst a push to make him go over to the three Amazons and the warrior, Xena rose from her chair to meet him halfway.

"Yes?" she said in a voice that was a well-calculated mix of interest and coolness. Putting her hands on her hips, her broad frame acted as a very effective roadblock and shield against any unwanted attention.

"I, uh..." the young man said. Struggling for words, he took off his cap and began to wring it in his hands, a gesture that made Xena realize that she had already spoken to him.

"Hmmm... Linus, right?" she said, loosening up just a little bit when she remembered the young man as the long range scout who had warned her and Eneas of the black-sleeved Amazons before the big battle.

"Y- yes, Xena," Linus said in a stutter. "I j- just wanted to know if your frie- uh... partn- uh... if the Princess would mind t- teaching us some of her staff techniques...?"

"I'm sorry?" Gabrielle said and suddenly appeared underneath Xena's left arm. After patting Xena's elbow to tell her to relax, the bard put out her arm and waited for the young man to clasp it. "Gabrielle of Potaideia. Nice to meet you."

"Uh... Linus of Palladia. The pleasure is all mine," the young man said and was immediately heckled by his mates at the bar.

"So you want to learn staff techniques, huh?" Gabrielle said and pulled Linus over to their table where Ephiny and Solari made room for him.

"Y- yes," Linus said as he sat down. "We heard about what you did when you bumped into some villagers in the attack, and we... uh... think that it could help us if the Amaz... uh, the other Amazons ever return. The sawmill has already agreed to make us some staffs."

Grinning from ear to ear, Gabrielle nudged her elbow into Xena's side. When the warrior leaned down towards her, the bard whispered: "You may call me Miss Drill Instructor now!" in her ear.

"Uh-huh?" Xena replied in a husky purr that made a little buzz run up Gabrielle's entire right side and down her left.

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As dusk fell, Iriadne's tavern was slowly filled to capacity with expectant villagers who were eager to see the Amazon Princess teach their young ones a few lessons with her staff.

It had been Iriadne's plan to remove some of the tables at the front of the room to create a space for the exhibition, but there were so many people present in the communal room that she was forced to remove several tables further towards the back, too.

To accomplish this task, she had enlisted the help of Xena, Ephiny and Solari who all struggled valiantly with trying to push their way through the throng of people while carrying the heavy wooden tables and chairs.

"I can't believe it... this was one of the reasons why I left Amphipolis..." Xena grumbled under her breath as she dodged left and right to get to the kitchen where the furniture was stacked up without stepping on too many toes on her way.

Wiping her hands on a towel, Iriadne just nodded in the direction where she wanted the tables to be placed. "Yes, that's good... thank you," she said with a smile as she pulled her bonnet down past her ears. "Oh, by the way, I need a volunteer to work the ale kegs. With all these people, I'll be very busy in here tonight."

"Don't look at me," Xena said, remembering all too well the many evenings she had spent in Cyrene's tavern pouring ale for semi-drunk, all-annoying villagers. "I have to help Gabrielle with the exhibition."

Solari looked at Ephiny and smirked broadly. "I guess we could do it... couldn't we? I mean... pour ale into mugs... eh?"

"I guess... yeah... okay," Ephiny said.

"Great! So, first of all, you have to get the kegs up from the cellar. We need, oh, I'd say... hmmm... seven to begin with."

"Seven kegs?!" Ephiny and Solari said over each other. Xena knew exactly what was coming and used the moment to quietly slip back upstairs to the room she and Gabrielle had rented.

Knock-knock!

"Enter!" Gabrielle said as she went through the final staff moves she'd use in the exhibition; she wasn't actually using the staff, the room was simply too small.

Xena stepped inside and closed the door behind her. Turning around, she looked at her partner with a very wide smile on her face. "You know, love," she said and pulled the bard into a crush. "I'm glad we got that awful double-you thing sorted. If there had been two of you for this mess, I think I would have jumped off the roof by now just to put myself out of my misery."

"You'd probably just do a forward triple-flip and land on your feet," Gabrielle said into the nook of the warrior's shoulder.

"Oh, I'm not so sure... I wonder if Aphrodite has finished broadening her horizons yet...?"

Gabrielle began to snicker in a highly embarrassed fashion and dug her suddenly flushed face into Xena's soft skin. "I don't know. Knowing Aphrodite as we do, I'd say..."

"Probably not." -- "Probably not," both women said as one and began to laugh when they realized how much they were in tune.

"So, are you ready?" Xena said and moved a step away from her partner.

"Yeah... I'll only be going at slow motion. I don't want to bruise any egos. They hate us enough already."

Xena chuckled at the undeniable truth of those words. Reaching up, she moved a lock of Gabrielle's slightly damp hair behind her ear and took the opportunity to caress her fair cheek. "True. If things get too fraught, you could always tell them one of your stories."

"Oh! I've got the best-"

"*Not* one of mine, though," Xena said, cutting the bard off just as she was getting started.

"Oh, you..." Gabrielle said and stood up on tip-toes to claim Xena's lips.

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"And now, Ladies and Gentlemen!" Eneas said in a stentorian voice to be heard at the back end of the communal room. "Our very own Amazon Princess, Gabrielle of Potaideia, will now give us a few lessons in offensive and defensive moves. Give her a warm welcome, everybody," the mayor continued and began to clap.

Behind the curtain to the kitchen, Gabrielle gulped nervously and looked up at Xena who was her usual stoic self. "I didn't think it'd be such a big production number... why did he make it into such a big production number, Xena?"

"Probably 'cos he knows you're good for it. C'mon, get," Xena said and patted Gabrielle's rear end to get her to go through the curtain.

Once the bard had done so, she was met with applause and she quickly waved at the close to fifty people who was there to see her exhibition.

"Right!" she said, twirling her staff. "Offensive moves... I always prefer to begin with a leg-sweep... it doesn't really matter if it's a left- or a right-sweep, just go with how much room you have," she continued, performing the move at one-third speed so that everyone had a chance to follow the movement.

"That stops most people. If they carry on, I'll do a double-sided whack to the gut or the rib cage. Again, like this," she said and performed the double move she had practiced so often with Xena that she knew it by heart. "All right?"

Some of the spectators said "Yes!" but quite a lot of them just looked lost. Seeing that, Gabrielle scrunched up her face, but went on with the program.

"So, the next part is using the staff against the opponent's crotch," - she performed a forward thrust-and-flick-up close to ground level that made every single man in the communal room cross his legs and wince in projected pain - "or the solar plexus," - she

performed a fast forward-and-backwards thrust at center level - "or a hit to the head," - she held the staff high and pretended to aim at the side of her imaginary opponent's head.

"Finally, you can also do a double of that, like this," she said and pulled the staff back, twirled it to her other arm and thrust it forward again. "And that's it."

Once that part of the exhibition was over, Gabrielle put the butt of the staff down on the floor and looked expectantly at the ground. "Any questions?" she said with a smile that slowly faded when she realized that the spectators were all quite pale. "Oh, there's nothing to it... really!"

Raising his hand in the air, Linus stepped forward with his own, homemade staff. "Uh... Princess Gabrielle?"

"Yes, Linus?"

"Th- those are all offensive moves... would you mind showing us some defensive ones...?"

"Of course not," Gabrielle said and twirled her staff. She quickly went into a defensive stance but reconsidered and waved the young scout towards her. "Linus, why don't you come over here... we can pretend you're attacking me."

"Uh..." Linus said, casting very nervous sideways glances at Xena who had been leaning against the wall the entire time to get a bit away from the crowd.

"Oh, she's as calm as a purring pussycat, aren't you?" Gabrielle asked with a wink.

Xena just nodded.

"There, you see?" Gabrielle continued. "Okay, come up here with your staff."

Once Linus had moved to the front of the communal room, Gabrielle went into a defensive stance where she held her staff horizontally at chest height. "Come at me... slowly. I don't want any of us to lose any teeth tonight..."

Linus held his staff like a sword, but his first swings and thrusts were easily blocked. The next few attempts were equally ineffective, and it didn't take long for him to grow frustrated - this made him forget all about his own defense and Gabrielle had no problem marking a blow to his solar plexus that would have stunned him in a real fight.

"Ouch..." Linus said, realizing that he would have been dead meat against one of the black-sleeved Amazons.

An uneasy murmur spread among the spectators and several of them began to sneak out of the door having seen more than enough. Eneas tried a bit of fast talking to keep them there, but they weren't exactly enthusiastic.

"Uh... right," Gabrielle said and put the butt of the staff down on the ground.

Xena knew it wouldn't be fair to Iriadne to scare away all her paying customers, especially not while she was hard at work in the kitchen preparing food for all of them, so she stepped forward and wrapped an arm around Gabrielle's shoulder.

"And that concludes the exhibition," the warrior said with a smile. "In a few moments, Iriadne will arrive with the food and the ale... there's enough for everybody. Princess Gabrielle has graciously agreed to tell you a few light, humorous stories that we hope will be a good end to your evening here. Isn't that right, Princess Gabrielle?" Xena continued, nudging her elbow into Gabrielle's side.

"I have...? Uh... that's right, I have!" Gabrielle said with a broad grin as she pulled herself up to sit on the counter so everyone could see her. When she was met by a cheer from the crowd, she shot Xena a quick thumbs-up and threw herself into weaving a wild tale of mistakes, mishaps and pratfalls.

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The orange light of the many torches illuminating the Amazon camp flickered across the four black-sleeved Amazons as they pulled their horses out of the stables and went over to the main gate. Once there, Corianyx went down to the two inexperienced, expendable warriors and gave their tack and weapons a thorough check.

"All set," the leader said, earning herself two excited nods by the two young warriors who were about to go out on their first - and last - important mission.

"Mount up! Let's ride," Corianyx continued and put her foot in the stirrup. Behind her, Kamara, Alecta and Cleona all climbed up into the saddle and kept tight reins on their impatient steeds.

As they moved past the sentries at the gate at walking pace, Alecta's special friend Shannai - who had pulled all-night guard duty - blew the tall, gangly Amazon a kiss and added a cute smile that were responded to in kind.

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CHAPTER 3

Sleep wouldn't come to Xena no matter what she tried. The warrior was staring at the ceiling with her hands folded behind her head, counting the boards used for the separation between the two floors. When she had reached forty-seven, she sighed deeply and began to count down to zero.

Unlike Xena, Gabrielle didn't have any problems whatsoever with sleeping. She was snoring merrily, sprawled across Xena's bare stomach and chest with her head nesting between the warrior's soft peaks.

Chuckling, Xena moved her hands down to muss Gabrielle's hair. The touch made the bard smack her lips a couple of times and shift a few inches, but she was soon back to dreamland.

The smile faded from Xena's face when she began to analyze why she couldn't sleep. In her gut, she had a knot of worry that refused to go away regardless of how many boards she counted or how many of Gabrielle's humorous tales she tried to recollect.

'Corianyx,' she thought, sighing again. 'And Melosa, but mostly Corianyx. We knew all along that we were dealing with fanatics, but the fact that she's so tactically shrewd is worrying. She's unpredictable... and unpredictable opponents are always the most dangerous. They must know by now that Ephiny and Solari stole several maps when they left... they must know that we're familiar with their original plans... which means they'll have to come up with new plans that we can't possibly predict. Hmmm.'

Xena's bladder suddenly made its presence felt and she gently moved Gabrielle's limbs aside to carve a path away from the bunk. Once she was in the clear - and Gabrielle was resting on her stomach as fluidly as a big cat - Xena swung her legs over the side of the bunk and stood up.

She briefly considered using the chamber pot that Iriadne had provided for them but thought better of it at once. With her usual speed and limberness, she quickly hopped into her boots and her battledress and slipped out of the door.

Two doors down the hall at Ephiny's and Solari's room, faint moans and heavy breathing filtered through the cracks in the doorjamb, causing Xena to pause briefly - and then to hurry past it to give their friends some privacy.

Downstairs, Iriadne had closed the tavern for the night and was busy counting the money in the coin box. The perpetually rosy-cheeked woman looked up with a smile when she noticed that she had been joined by the warrior who had come back from the public outhouse. " 'Evening, Xena," she said and closed the lid of the coin box.

" 'Evening. How's business going?"

"Oh, quite well, thank you. Princess Gabrielle told me your mother runs a tavern further north?"

"That's right," Xena said and leaned against the counter.

"I guess I don't have to tell you that it can be a tough life... but sometimes, something happens that gives your day a real boost. Like the Princess tonight. She's such a wonderful storyteller," Iriadne said, covering her mouth to stifle a yawn.

"She is."

The matronly tavernkeeper scrubbed the counter with a rag to soak up the final beer stains and used a small piece of cloth to brush the breadcrumbs down into a trash can. "So..." she said, looking at Xena while stifling another yawn.

"Yeah... sorry," Xena said and pushed herself off the counter. "I couldn't sleep. I didn't mean to-"

"No, it's all right. My husband is keeping my bed warm for me. Well, the bread oven is... our bed's right on the other side of the wall," Iriadne said and pointed down a narrow hall next to the curtain to the kitchen, "but don't tell him that. He likes to think it's his manliness," the tavernkeeper said and broke out into a snicker that seemed to make her rosy cheeks even rosier.

"Oh, right... my lips are sealed," Xena said and moved her fingers across her mouth in the age-old gesture.

Iriadne nodded and grinned, but the grin was ambushed by a wide yawn. Once it had petered out, she smiled and began to shuffle back towards her bedroom.

"I'll let you get some rest, Iriadne. Good nig-" Xena started to say, but frantic knocking on the locked front door cut her off.

'It's Linus! Iriadne, are you in there? I need to speak with Xena at once! Iriadne? Are you in there?'

Hearing the trembling, frenetic tone in Linus' voice made Xena's good mood evaporate like the morning dew and she shot Iriadne a hard look to make her unlock the door on the double.

"Oh... oh!" the matronly tavernkeeper said as she struggled to find her keys. After fumbling for a brief moment, she finally found the large bronze key and hurried over to unlock the door.

The young scout barged in, tore off his cap and began to wring it in his hands at once. "Iriadne, I need to speak with- oh... Xena! Thank the Gods you're here already ... we've spotted a few Amazons out there! At least two, but I think there are more."

"Where, Linus? Which direction are they headed?" Xena said impatiently.

"A thousand paces, at the old crossroad, slowly moving this way. Mounted... they're riding in the middle of the road like... like..."

Xena's analytical mind went into overdrive and began to work out all the possible permutations and tactics. "Like they want us to see them. All right, we could be looking at a diversion... what makes you say there are more than those two?"

The young scout really put his back into wringing his cap, almost to the point of tearing the garment in two. He opened his mouth once, then another time, but still couldn't say what was on his mind. "No, it's..." he said a few seconds later, "it's too silly to say in front of someone like y- you..."

"Spill it, Linus!"

"We c- could smell more horses. S- somewhere behind us... we couldn't see anything, Zachariah and me... but we could smell them..."

Xena began biting her lips. She didn't doubt that Linus was right about smelling more horses - but if they had already split up at the old crossroad where she had recently spoken to Ares, it meant that the second team could be right under their noses.

"Hey... what's all the hubbub?" Eneas said, standing at the end of the hall that led to the bedroom wearing slippers, a sleeping tunic and an outrageous nightcap.

"Amazons have been spotted approaching the town," Xena said matter-of-factly.

"Raiders?"

"Most likely," Xena said as she moved back to the stairs. "Eneas, call in the men. Not all, but some... let's make it fifteen for now."

"A- all right," Eneas said and tore off his nightcap. Losing the ridiculous garment made him look far more like a town mayor, but his paleness subtracted from the image. "Sh- should we... th- the roadblocks... what about the roadblocks, Xena?"

Xena put her hand on the railing, already on her way upstairs to get her weapons, her armor and Gabrielle. "No point, Eneas. I have a feeling they've already infiltrated the town."

"By the Gods...!" Eneas croaked and bared his teeth in a terrified grimace.

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Fifteen candelights later, Iriadne's tavern was once again filled to the rafters with villagers, but this time, they were all shouting over each other to be heard in the confusion.

Acting as the eye of the storm, Xena tried to get everyone calmed down with words, gestures and hard glares distributed evenly among the jittery villagers, but even her imposing presence couldn't control them.

When the crowd wouldn't obey her, Xena shot Gabrielle, Ephiny, Solari and Achillea - who were all standing well off to the side - an exasperated look that told them in no uncertain terms that an explosion was imminent.

Gabrielle tried to look her lover in the eye to tell her subliminally that she should relax, but there was so much negative energy floating around the room that even their special connection had a hard time getting through.

The warrior ground her jaw incessantly, counting to a hundred-and-ten on the inside so she wouldn't forget her manners and let her Chakram do the talking. In the end, she stuck two fingers in her mouth and let out a whistle that was loud enough to shake sawdust from the beams in the ceiling. "Shut up, all of you!" she barked. "You hear me? Keep quiet!"

The unruly crowd finally settled down, but even so, there was a constant ripple of upset mumbling flowing back and forth between the villagers.

"Linus, tell 'em what you saw," Xena continued and made way for the young scout who was still wringing his cap in his hands.

"Two Amazons coming this way... but me and Zachariah think there are more. Xena thinks it's a diversion... right?" Linus said, red-faced from being at the center of attention.

"That's right," Xena said strongly to cut off any potential outbursts from the villagers.

"But only two Amazons... what can two Amazons do?" someone in the crowd said.

Knowing all too well the answer to that question, Gabrielle stepped away from the wall and into the center of the communal room. "Two Amazons can do plenty of damage, believe me. Linus, were you able to see if they wore the black sleeves or if they were from Melosa's tribe?" she said in a calm voice to keep the frantic scout calm.

"N- no, Princess," Linus said, shaking his head so hard that his hair shook left and right. "It was too dark. But I th- think they wore the blac-"

"Why don't we just hog-tie those four Gods-be-damned Amazons and kick their asses out into the street? The others can have 'em back! That way, none of *us* will get hurt!" a male voice said from the crowd, cutting Linus off mid-stream.

The provocative statement made the crowd fall silent and spread out to reveal the identity of the speaker - Augeas, the magistrate. Even though every eye in the room was trained on him, the colorless, stern-faced man stood his ground and even stuck out his jaw to show his defiance.

Gabrielle glanced nervously at Xena, but the warrior seemed to keep everything under wraps.

"Augeas, have you lost your mind?!" Eneas said from his position next to his wife behind the counter.

"On the contrary, mayor. I seem to be the only one here who has kept it! I am the law around here, or did you forget that? Do you want me to repeat my suggestion? All right, I say, hog-tie her, her, her and her," Augeas said and pointed at Gabrielle, Ephiny, Achillea and Solari respectively, "and throw their sorry asses into the street. Why? Because I'm a hundred percent certain they've betrayed their tribe."

"Augeas..." Eneas said imploringly, but the magistrate wasn't done.

"Let me speak, mayor. I'm certain they've betrayed their tribe because when the blonde girl arrived, she rode with the raiders... but when they left, she stayed here with... her," Augeas continued, pointing at Xena. "But unlike the tall one who's clearly a prisoner of war, the blonde girl has way too many privileges. She's a traitor as are the two older women. And since treason is a way of life for some people, we can't trust any of them. I say, give 'em back to the Amazons."

"Older women!" Ephiny grumbled, but Solari quickly grabbed her hand and began to pat it.

"Is that it, Augeas?" Xena suddenly said in a voice so cold and steely that Gabrielle immediately rushed over to her partner and stepped half in front of her so she couldn't get a clear shot.

"Well... yes."

"All right. Tell you what," Xena continued, finding Gabrielle's fingers and giving them a little squeeze to show that she wasn't about to go berserker on anyone. "When the Amazons do arrive, why don't you go out there on your own and repeat that little tale you just told us...? I'm sure they'll be very interested. But before you do, I want you to know that the so-called blonde girl and the three other Amazons over there have more courage and integrity than you'll ever have."

"I beg your par-!"

"By coming here and offering us their help, they not only lost their tribe for good, they risked losing their lives... and you want to send them back, Augeas? Have you ever risked your life for anything or anybody?"

The magistrate began to chew on his cheek but couldn't quite come up with a reply to Xena's question. After a few seconds, he spun around and stomped towards the exit, cursing his touch of podagra that gave him a slight limp.

On his way there, he briefly stopped and looked at Eneas who had his arm around his wife's plentiful waist. "I'm still the law here!" the magistrate growled and left the tavern, slamming the door behind him.

"Let's see about that," Eneas said under his breath, but his comment was soon drowned out by a loud cheer from the crowd celebrating Xena and the Amazons.

Gabrielle drew a sigh of relief but sobered when Xena put her hands in the air and cleared her throat to get everyone's attention.

"All right," the warrior said. "With that settled, it's time to get out in the streets. If you see anything, and I do mean anything unusual or suspicious, report back to us at once. Gabrielle and I will stay here for the time being. And... please take care. You know how merciless the black-sleeved Amazons are."

Once the villagers started filing out of the tavern, Gabrielle pulled Xena down to claim her lips in a gentle good-luck kiss.

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The commotion on main street provided the perfect cover for Corianyx and Kamara who were sneaking around in the shadows on the side street opposite the tavern.

When they came up to a wooden portal that allowed access to the backyard of one of the two-story stone buildings, Corianyx eased into it and crouched down to present as small a target as possible. Behind her, Kamara did the same.

Through a series of hand signals, Corianyx explained that once they had heard the diversion, they should cross the street and gather at the back of the tavern.

Kamara nodded and put down both ceramic jugs she was holding to adjust her longbow that had begun to fall down.

Suddenly, movement to their right made both seasoned Amazons look into the backyard. Moments later, a young woman with a candle stick crossed the cobbled yard headed for the outhouse.

Independently of each other, Corianyx and Kamara both drew their hunting daggers, ready and willing to kill the young woman if necessary. After the woman had finished her business, she closed the door to the outhouse and slipped back across the cobbled yard, seemingly unaware of the hectic activity on main street or the danger she had been in.

Looking ahead, Corianyx concentrated on the tavern and the men and women who constantly came and went.

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Down the at other end of Palladia, Alecta and Cleona were hard at work preparing the diversion. They had carried four ceramic jugs and were busy inserting fuses into the necks of the jugs to make them highly flammable incendiary bombs instead of harmless containers of a thick, vile-smelling liquid.

"Gah, this stuff stinks!" Alecta said quietly, popping the cork out of the neck and cramming a fuse into the jug.

"Yeah... like a dung heap in a headwind," Cleona said, scrunching up her face. "And it gets on your fingers, too," she continued, sniffing the hand that had just been in contact with another of the jugs.

"Yeah... okay, this one's ready," Alecta said and reached for the next jug.

When all four jugs were prepared, the two inexperienced black-sleeved Amazons put them right next to each other to make them faster to reach. Moving into the shadows, Alecta craned her long neck to see where they actually were. "What is this place, anyway? Looks like a... a..."

"Looks like the town jail," Cleona said from just out of sight.

"Yeah. That's probably why Corianyx- Hush! Somebody's coming!" Alecta whispered hoarsely and tried to squeeze herself even further back into the shadows. Unfortunately, her long legs couldn't fit and she ended up pushing one of the jugs that tipped over and rolled a foot down the street.

Outside the magistrate's office, Augeas came to a limping halt and turned around to scan the entire side street very carefully to see what had caused the strange, rolling sound.

"Oh, sweet Artemis... ohhh, sweet Artemis!" Alecta mumbled, trying to pull herself even farther into the shadows.

The tension was unbearable for the two young Amazons, but after what felt like several candledrips, Augeas shrugged, unlocked the door and limped inside.

Once the door was closed behind him, Alecta and Cleona both let out identical sighs of relief. "By the Gods, that was close," Cleona said from somewhere in the darkness.

"Sorry 'bout that... all right... let's do it," Alecta said and righted the bomb that had tipped over. Reaching into a small leather pouch she had on her belt, she took a pair of flints and held them ready at the first fuse. "Uh... Cleona... did Corianyx say anything about how long the fuses will burn before the jug detonates?"

"Uh... no..."

"Great... all right, let's... let's get a little closer," Alecta said and moved two of the ceramic jugs to the middle of the street. "Keep watch, I'll light them."

"Okay, Alecta," Cleona said and ran a distance away to be able to see better.

The first strike of the flints only produced a little spark that quickly fizzled out, but the second strike made the fuse light up. Taking a deep breath to stop her teeth from chattering, Alecta picked up the live bomb, aimed at the front of the jail and threw the jug as hard as she could.

When the bomb hit the wall, it shattered into a dozen pieces and soaked the wall in the thick liquid. Just when Alecta thought it had been a dud, the fuse ignited the liquid and set the entire wall alight in a roaring explosion that sent a shockwave of intense heat across the street.

"Whoa!" Alecta shouted and quickly shied back from the wall of heat produced by the fire. Thinking fast, she threw the other bombs at the conflagration without bothering to ignite the fuses - one after the other, the bombs were crushed against the wall and added to the raging, all-consuming fire.

"Let's get outta here while we still can!" Cleona shouted from her position higher up the street.

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The explosions could be heard all over town, and soon, a great number of people streamed out of the houses along main street and ran towards the incident site with fire beaters and empty buckets.

From her spot at the wooden gate, Corianyx looked with great interest as the double doors at the tavern were flung open and the tall, fierce-looking warrior in the black battledress she had encountered in the attack stepped out onto the sidewalk, apparently cursing wildly. Moments later, Princess Gabrielle came out to stand next to the warrior and the two women spoke briefly.

The conversation ended with the warrior running up the street and Gabrielle staying in front of the tavern. A few seconds on, the Amazon royalty looked up and down main street before withdrawing to the tavern and shutting the double doors behind her.

As smoke and flames rose from the other end of town, Corianyx allowed a brief smile to crease her lips.

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The sheer number of people running towards the fire created such a congestion on main street that it was nearly impossible for Xena to make her way through. Although still running, she went slower and slower until she had to settle for a slow jog.

Frustrated over the sluggishness of the massive crowd, she let out her battle cry and vaulted above the heads of a dozen people before taking off again at full speed.

Moments later, she tore around the corner of the side street and immediately realized that the fire was centered around the magistrate's office. Out of the corner of her eye, she spotted two black-sleeved Amazons dressed in deerskin hunting outfits who were nearly pressing themselves flat up against a wall to stay out of sight - filing that information for later, she concentrated on the fire.

The heat from the wall of fire was unbearable and Xena could tell from the stench that hung in the air that it hadn't started naturally. "Greek Fire!" she roared to no one in particular.

To her right, someone shouted "There they are! Look! There they are!" which made most of the crowd spin around and run towards the two Amazons, but several people came to her help, Eneas among them.

"Xena!" the mayor shouted, flailing his arms in the air to catch the warrior's attention.

"I don't have time right now, Eneas!" Xena shouted back while her brain was running at maximum speed to come up with a solution on how to get inside without getting roasted.

The door to the office was only partially on fire, and that meant that Xena focused all her efforts on it. Taking a deep breath, she sent Gabrielle a brief thought before running ahead at full steam.

The lock on the door was already weakened by the flames licking around the door handle and was no match for a charging Warrior Princess - it gave way at once. The rush of air as the door was flung open briefly fueled the flames and forced Xena to protect her face as she ran head-first through a wall of fire.

A quick somersault took care of the few embers that had been trapped in her long tresses, and as soon as she landed, she started looking for Augeas.

The inside of the office was like Tartarus on a bad day; smoke and burning embers were everywhere, creating such a hostile environment that Xena quickly dove down on the floor to evade the worst of the billowing, pitch black smoke.

It didn't take long for her to find what she was looking for: the magistrate was lying lifeless on the floor, having apparently tried to get to the door separating the office from the cells. To make sure there weren't any prisoners who needed to be rescued, Xena quickly looked into the narrow hallway, but both cells were empty.

Reaching under Augeas' prone body, she took a very deep breath and lifted him off the floor. He was heavier than he appeared, but she managed to get to the front door and out to safety, even if she had to walk straight through the worst of the smoke and the fire to get there.

The air wasn't much fresher outside, but Xena took in several deep gulps as she put Augeas down on the street.

Eneas quickly knelt down and began to touch Augeas' chest and neck to feel for a pulse. "Thank the Gods you're all right," he said in a shaky voice. "Augeas isn't. He's dead..."

"Try thumping your fist against his chest!" Xena said, wiping the sweat off her brow creating a weirdly-looking stripe on her forehead. The air was thick with soot, and the black, sticky stuff quickly attached itself to every exposed part of her skin, making her appear like she had been working in a coal mine.

"My fist... what?!"

"Try to... never mind. I'll do it," the warrior continued and knelt down opposite from Eneas. Remembering where the procedure had been successful on Gabrielle, she began to pound rhythmically on Augeas' chest to try to get him back.

"What are you doing, Xena? This is madness..."

"This works, Eneas! Or at least, it did not long ago... but... no. It's no use," she said and leaned back on her thighs when she realized that Augeas didn't respond the same way Gabrielle had done in the temple in Thessaly. "Ares' balls!" she grumbled and wiped her soot-stained face.

"You did all you could. Now we just have to concentrate on putting out the fire," Eneas said and began to look around for volunteers to form a fireline. "Hey... what's going on up there...?" he continued, pointing up at the far end of the side street.

A group of villagers had formed a circle and were hurling abuse and the occasional rock at someone inside the ring.

It suddenly struck Xena that the group of people were located at the point where she had seen the two black-sleeved Amazons on her way to the fire. Acting fast, she jumped to her feet and raced up there.

"Hey, hey, hey, let me through," the warrior said once she had reached the outer rim of the circle. With a lot of effort, she was able to push herself through to the center. As predicted, the villagers had caught the two Amazons and had attacked them.

One of the two deerskin-clad women was lying motionless in a fetal position on the ground with a nasty, bleeding wound on her forehead, and the other was draped across her fallen comrade, trying to protect her from the rocks the villagers threw at them.

Xena saw at once that the two Amazons weren't in the same league as Corianyx and the rest of her cutthroats so she stepped forward and put her hands in the air to get the villagers to stop stoning the young women. "Enough!" she barked. "They're prisoners of war!"

"They're arsonists!" someone shouted from the crowd. Moments later, another stone came sailing through the air and hit the Amazon who was trying to protect her friend right across the shoulder, making her cry out in pain.

"The next person who throws a stone will taste my Chakram!" Xena roared, drawing her circular weapon. The threat seemed to work as the crowd began to pull back from the two injured women. "Can you walk?" Xena asked the Amazon without even looking down.

"Y- yes," Alecta said in a trembling voice, "but my f- friend can't... I can't wake her up. I can't-"

"All right, don't panic. I'll take her. What's your name?"

"Alecta..."

"Alecta, consider yourself a prisoner of war. If you try to escape, I'll kill you myself. Get it?"

"Y- yes," Alecta said and nodded hard. While they were speaking, she didn't dare take her eyes off the hostile crowd, but when they began to dissipate, she broke down and couldn't hold back the tears.

"Come on," Xena said and reached under the unresponsive Cleona. When the warrior realized that the Amazon she held in her arms didn't even appear to be twenty summers, she cursed loudly in several different languages.

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At the same time, Corianyx eased open the back door to the tavern and sneaked inside with Kamara hot on her heels. The back door led to a storage room where dozens of barrels, crates and jugs of all kinds were stored. At the far end of the room, another door led off to the kitchen itself.

Corianyx could hear agitated voices from the communal room further ahead and she turned around and signaled Kamara that they should be completely quiet. Holding her hand on the hilt of her hunting dagger on her belt, she sneaked further into the room, glad that her deerskin shoes were so worn they didn't even squeak.

The two Amazons shoved one of their two incendiary bombs in among a few sacks of flour but changed their minds when they realized the room held liquor as well. With a wicked gleam in her eyes, Corianyx removed the bomb from the flour shelf and put it right next to a barrel of homemade Ouzo, knowing full well that the alcohol would blow up like Hephaestus' volcano when the Greek Fire was ignited.

From the communal room up ahead, several more agitated voices had joined the first few, and Corianyx furrowed her brow when she realized that it would be suicide - even for the two most experienced warriors among all the Wild Boars - to attempt to complete their mission.

Growling, she signaled Kamara to fall back to the door.

Suddenly the door to the kitchen was opened and an overweight, rosy-cheeked woman stepped into the storage room. Corianyx and Kamara were perfectly disguised by the shadows so the woman couldn't see them, but they could see her as clear as day.

Corianyx slowly drew her hunting dagger and waited for the woman to come near her.

Eager to get back to the communal room to rejoin the conversation, Iriadne quickly went through the shelves and took a few items that she needed for the snack she had been asked to prepare. When her foot bumped into something that hadn't been there before next to the barrel of Ouzo, she stopped with a jerk and looked down.

Corianyx took full advantage of the opportunity and jumped out of her hiding place. Before the rosy-cheeked woman had time to cry for help, the Amazon leader had slammed her strong, callused hand across the tavernkeeper's mouth to cut her off - then she rammed the hunting dagger into the woman's belly, burying it to the hilt.

Iriadne screamed into Corianyx' hand, but her muffled voice didn't carry past the closed door behind her. With wide, frightened eyes, the portly woman fell to her knees, tortured by a burning sensation in her belly that was so excruciatingly painful that it robbed her of all her strength.

Once Corianyx was sure the woman was too weak to scream again, she let go and watched the tavernkeeper slip onto the floor where she groaned pitifully and clutched her bleeding stomach.

Corianyx briefly considered slitting the woman's throat, but changed her mind almost at once when she looked at the spasms that racked the large body on the floor - it would simply be a waste of time.

After signaling Kamara to leave, Corianyx pulled back to the door to the side street and used her flints to ignite the fuse in their last incendiary bomb. With a wicked laugh, she kissed the ceramic jug for good luck and threw it hard onto the storage room floor.

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CHAPTER 4

The explosion in the storage room was strong enough to blow the door to the kitchen clean off its hinges; the unstoppable shockwave screamed through the tavern and tore the curtain separating the kitchen from the communal room to shreds.

A split second later, the communal room descended into utter chaos as a storm of wooden and ceramic fragments from the devastated kitchen pelted everyone present.

Everybody shrieked and dove for cover, but most were in the path of the flying fragments. Gabrielle was hit across her left elbow by a large piece of debris, numbing it instantly and sending a wave of needles and pins up and down her arm as she slowly regained the feeling in it.

"Ouch..." the bard said, rubbing her arm as she scrambled to her feet once the worst of the duststorm had settled. "Is everyone all right? Ephiny? Solari? Achillea?"

Coughing, Ephiny sat up and rubbed her eyes furiously to get the gunk out. "I'm okay... I got a cartload of stuff in my eyes... I need some water... Solari?"

"I'm okay, I'm okay... I don't have any water," Solari said and scrambled over to her partner to assist her. A quick check of Ephiny's brown eyes proved that they had indeed received a load of dusty debris.

"I'm okay, too," Achillea said around a series of rattling coughs. The tall Amazon had been blown across the room and was nursing her injured leg that had been slammed against the edge of a table.

Gabrielle quickly got up and dusted off her arms. It didn't take her more than a few seconds to smell the characteristic scent of smoke, and as she looked into the kitchen, her fears were proven correct. "Fire! We got a fire! Hurry!" she barked, running behind the counter to get the bucket she knew Iriadne had there.

Only then did she realize that Iriadne had gone into the kitchen moments before the explosion. In an instant, she blew hot and cold with the coldness winning out, assembling into a single knot of fear that hit her squarely in the gut and that made ice cold shivers break out over her entire body. "Iriadne..." she croaked, moving back to the shredded curtain.

The tavernkeeper was lying prone on the floor just beyond the destroyed door to the storage room, right in front of a wall of flames that had already begun licking up the support beams.

"Eph-" Gabrielle said, but as she looked back at her curly-haired friend, she realized that she wouldn't be any use before she could get her eyes cleaned. "Solari! Achillea! I need your help! Now!" she roared in a trembling voice.

Achillea was at her side in two heartbeats and looked into the kitchen. "Hera's tits! She's gotta be-"

"Come on!" Gabrielle said and pulled the tall Amazon with her. Not long after, Solari followed them.

The crackle of the flames was deafening and the heat in the storage room was so intense that everything smelled like it was about to burst into flames. Iriadne was in the middle of the inferno, lying on her right side facing away from the door.

"Take her arm! Come on!" Gabrielle roared and dove down onto the floor, ignoring the pain that shot up from her knees as various pieces of debris was pressed into her bare skin. "Come on!"

The portly woman proved to be too heavy to shift for Gabrielle alone, but when Achillea took Iriadne's other arm, they were able to pull her back towards the kitchen. Arriving late, Solari jumped over Iriadne's legs, spun around and grabbed hold of them to aid her fellow Amazons.

When her fingers were coated in blood, she furrowed her brow and looked closer at the tavernkeeper. "Look! She's been... she's been stabbed!" she roared, pointing at the large pool of blood on the floor where Iriadne had been lying and the dark, bleeding wound in her gut.

At the news, Gabrielle began to growl somewhere deep in her throat. The anger bubbled up to the surface and helped her to really put her back into dragging Iriadne away from the danger.

Working as one, it didn't take the three Amazons long to get the tavernkeeper to safety, but when they turned her over onto her back, they could tell by her unresponsiveness and her waxen skin that she was seriously injured.

"Corianyx..." Gabrielle growled, clenching her fists. "Come on! We need to put out the fire or it's all been for naught!"

Leaving Solari to tend to Iriadne, Achillea grabbed a fire beater and followed Gabrielle back into the kitchen. Working hard and fast, the former Wild Boar tried with all her might to beat the flames into submission, but no matter how hard she worked, the flames mocked her by coming back over and over again. "Greek Fire," she growled under her breath - then she spotted the second bomb next to the barrel of Ouzo.

Her face instantly grew pale from knowing that if she couldn't get the bomb away from the barrel, they would all die.

"What... what's wrong, Achillea?" Gabrielle said, matching the taller Amazon every bit of the way in the effort to beat out the flames.

"A fire bomb... by the Ouzo," Achillea croaked, pointing at the small ceramic jug.

"By the Gods..." Gabrielle said, forgetting all about her efforts. She tried to reach for it, but Achillea held her arm back.

"No, Princess Gabrielle!" the tall Amazon shouted. "If it goes off while we're here, we'll be doused in burning Greek Fire! We gotta pull back!"

"Never!" Gabrielle barked and reached for the ceramic jug only to find it so hot that her fingertips were singed. Shrieking, she jerked her hand back and started waving them around.

"Time to go!" Achillea shouted and put her hands on Gabrielle's shoulders, but the bard was determined to make another attempt.

Frantically looking around, she spotted a three-foot long wooden board that she had seen Iriadne use to take the loaves of bread out of the oven. Grabbing it at once, she went back to the ceramic jug and tried to shove the spatula-like board in under it.

Achillea could suddenly see what Gabrielle wanted to do and jumped over to the struggling bard to help her control the long board. With their combined effort, they were able to get the jug onto the board, lift it off the ground and carry it away from the barrel of Ouzo.

"Where to? Where to?!" Gabrielle shouted, nearly stumbling over an unsighted piece of debris as she held the long board ahead of her.

"The back door!" Achillea shouted back, tapping the bard's shoulder to make her look in that direction.

The flames didn't cover the entire floor, and from a bit of good fortune, Gabrielle was able to inch past them and get to the back door that had also been blown off its hinges. With a loud groan, she shoved the board and the ceramic jug through the open door and out onto the cobbled side street. As soon as the jug hit the ground, it split and ignited, sending shrapnel flying everywhere and starting a new - but far smaller - fire in the middle of street. "Thank the Gods," Gabrielle croaked as she inched back into the storage room.

"Now we gotta take the barrel outside as well!" Achillea shouted and began to shift the drum. "I can handle it, Princess! Go back and-"

From the communal room, a heartrending scream pierced the wall of noise that came from the crackling flames. Moving as one, Achillea and Gabrielle whipped their heads around to see what had happened.

A beat later, Xena appeared in the doorway to the kitchen, looking like she was expecting the worst. When she caught sight of Gabrielle, she closed her eyes and mouthed a silent prayer.

"Xena!" Gabrielle shouted and ran over to her lover. Once there, she threw herself into the warrior's arms and gave her the crush of a lifetime. "It's Greek Fire! We can't put it out!"

"We need some wet blankets... they'll strangle it," Xena said into the bard's soot-covered hair in a voice that didn't sound like hers at all.

"All right... I'll get on it at once... and... and Iriadne..." Gabrielle said after pulling back.

"I know." When Xena looked over the bard's shoulder at the carnage in the kitchen and the storage room, a brief look of pure, unadulterated darkness flashed across her face.

Achillea was still manhandling the heavy barrel away from the heat, but the old wound in her arm had reopened from the exertion and she was sweating like a pig.

"I better help her," Xena said and quickly grabbed the other side of the barrel. Together, the two strong women were able to get the Ouzo through the communal room and out onto the street where they left it to cool off.

Coming back inside, Achillea went over to check up on the two Amazons Xena had brought to the tavern and to help Solari wash the gunk out of Ephiny's eyes, but Xena kept standing in the center of the room, looking at Eneas cradling his wife's body.

Gabrielle came bounding down the stairs a few moments later with an armful of blankets. "I got 'em, Xena!" she shouted. "I'm gonna go out to the well and soak 'em!"

Sighing deeply, Xena hurried after her partner to try to contain the fire before it was too late.

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Half a candlemark later, Xena and Gabrielle - covered in soot from head to toe - surveyed the damage to the storage room and the kitchen. The soaked blankets had strangled the fire like Xena had said they would, but everything was blackened and badly charred. All four support beams in the storage room appeared to have become brittle, and in both rooms, most things were ruined beyond salvation, save for the stone oven in the kitchen and a few minor items.

Sighing, Gabrielle wrapped an arm around Xena's waist and pulled herself into the warrior's strong grip. "It's all so senseless, love... why Iriadne? She wouldn't hurt a fly... is it just because we were here?"

"Probably."

"Then I might as well have killed her myself," Gabrielle said in a despondent voice and leaned in to rest her head on Xena's shoulder.

"Mmmm. C'mon, let's get to the others," Xena said and pulled her partner with her.

While Xena and Gabrielle had fought the fire, the communal room had turned into a hospice. No less than five people in various states of despair were being tended to; some were moaning and some were biting down the pain.

Eneas hadn't moved from his wife's side even though everyone else had. Achillea's arm was bleeding profusely again from the wound on her left biceps, but it didn't stop her from looking at the severe bruising suffered by Alecta. The young Amazon's upper body was speckled with black and blue bruises, a fact that was very apparent after she had taken off her deerskin jacket and had ripped off her black sleeve in disgust. On the floor next to her, Cleona was lying motionless with her own jacket covering her face.

One of the people tending to the casualties was Selena who had changed into a black dress that was far more appropriate to the tragic situation than one of her usual, colorful outfits. "Hello, Xena. Gabrielle," she said in a tired voice as the warrior and the bard approached her.

"Hello, Selena. Thanks for giving us a helping hand," Xena said and clasped arms with the pretty brunette. "She didn't make it...?" she continued, pointing at Cleona.

"No. Her head injury was too severe... she never regained consciousness. While you were busy back there, her breathing suddenly ceased... and that was it."

Gabrielle sighed and looked at the body of the young Amazon, thinking about the warrior who had been injured when the healers had been captured - she had suffered the exact same fate.

Nodding, Xena sensed her partner's dark thoughts and pulled her closer. "And Iriadne?"

"No. I'm sorry," Selena said quietly.

Xena closed her eyes and shook her head slowly. Suddenly, her astute senses felt the presence of an Olympian and she cracked open an eyelid to give the tavern a closer study. When she couldn't see any of the familiar Gods or Goddesses, she briefly wondered if she had sensed Celeste arriving for Iriadne.

Her question was answered when Ares showed up as smug as ever, startling everyone in the communal room into complete silence. The God of War grabbed the edges of his vest and strutted around like a peacock until he was standing next to Iriadne and a gobsmacked Eneas. "What's this?" Ares said, looking down at the body of the tavernkeeper. "Someone hasn't been paying attention... Xena."

Sighing, the warrior released herself from Gabrielle's possessive grip and walked over to the God. "What is it this time?"

"You can save Iriadne. With a simple three-letter reply, you can save the woman who has been so kind to you over the last few days. Wouldn't you like to do that, Xena? I suspect it's what you wanted all along... though I imagine you hadn't expected to use it on someone like her," Ares said with a nasty grin gracing his dark, ruggedly handsome features.

The God's words made Eneas shoot up from the floor and grab hold of Xena's arms. "You must! I don't care what you have to do! If you can save my wife, you must!" he shouted, shaking her back and forth.

"Eneas," Gabrielle said, trying to get her love free of the bereaved man's grip. "You don't understand... Ares just wants-"

"I don't care!" Eneas yelled, pushing Gabrielle aside and grabbing hold of Xena's arms again. "Please, Xena... if you can save her, you must!"

Growling instead of replying, Xena knelt down next to Iriadne and put her hands on the large woman's neck that had already grown quite cold.

"Xena..." Gabrielle implored, kneeling down on the other side of the body and putting her hands on top of Xena's. "Ares wants you f- for something... I d- don't know what, but I do know that he doesn't give a pile of Centaur dung about Iriadne... this is all about you, love!"

Xena bared her teeth in a frustrated grimace and looked at Gabrielle, at Eneas who was tearing his hair out and finally at Ares who was looking so smug that his dark core was showing. "Gabrielle, if I don't at least try, am I any better than him?" she whispered. "Ares... the answer is yes. Yes, I want to save her."

The God of War closed his black eyes and let out a thunderous cheer that made everyone present jump a foot in the air. After a few seconds, he opened his eyes again and gave Xena a mock salute. "Welcome back, champ. So glad you could join my party. Like I always say, Where there's evil, there's a way. She's all yours." - With that, he disappeared in his customary cloud of pale blue energy.

"Wait, Ares!" Gabrielle shouted. "What's Xena supposed to do?"

The only reply was a disembodied laugh that echoed through the tavern for several seconds.

"I know what to do," Xena said quietly and closed her eyes. Once she was alone in the darkness behind her eyelids, she tuned out every sound and forced herself to reach into the darkest corner of her soul. There, she willingly allowed Ares' long reach to influence her actions, and before long, she felt the shroud of darkness fall over her like an old, comfortable blanket.

A strange, pale blue light shone out of Xena's hands and made Gabrielle remove her own hands in an almighty hurry. The pale blue light spread out over Iriadne's prone body and soon enveloped her fully.

After a brief while, it seemed to seep into her body - and then it was gone altogether, leaving behind a breathing, moaning Iriadne who immediately pressed her hands against her belly where the horrible stab wound had been.

Eneas let out a wailing cry of relief and threw himself onto the floor where he pulled his wife into a wild, crushing hug. The other people in the tavern sat in stunned silence, not quite fathoming what had happened to Eneas and Iriadne.

Gabrielle stared at her partner in a state of wide-eyed shock, but Xena just leaned back on her thighs and slowly opened her eyes. In her heart, she knew she had done something terribly wrong, even if it had been for the right reasons - she knew that Ares would be back someday to collect the debt she owed him. Looking up, she locked eyes with Gabrielle, but couldn't hold the bard's confused yet compassionate stare.

"Love..." the bard whispered. "What just happened? You're not a G- Goddess now or something... are you?"

"No. It's far simpler than that," Xena said in a hoarse voice. "Remember Ares gave me the gift of healing myself if I tapped into my dark side... but I wanted more. I wanted to be able to save you if... if necessary. I just gave Ares access to my soul in exchange for Iriadne's life," she continued, reaching out for Gabrielle who jumped up at once and ran into her lover's arms to comfort her.

"Oh, love..." Gabrielle croaked into Xena's ear. "You did the right thing... look at Eneas... he got his wife back."

"But Ares-"

"We'll deal with Ares when the time comes, love. You did the right thing."

Sighing, Xena wasn't so sure.

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The faint light of the early morning gave way to the stronger light of the day just as Corianyx and Kamara rode through the main gate and into the Amazon camp. The sentry who had offered her friend Alecta a kiss and a smile when they left stood forlornly by and watched the strike team return without her.

Clip-clopping through the camp, Corianyx and Kamara turned their horses around and headed for the stables. Once there, they dismounted and removed their saddles and the tack.

As Kamara began to brush her horse, Corianyx leaned against the wall separating the boxes and crossed her arms over her chest. "I feel dissatisfied, Kamara. We didn't actually accomplish anything, apart from torching the tavern. We didn't kill any of the traitors, we hardly even saw the Princess, much less gut her like a fish like I wanted to."

"There were too many people around. It happens," Kamara said, running a brush up and down her horse's sweaty flanks.

"Yeah. I'll be in the public bath if something happens," Corianyx said and pushed herself off the wall.

A short time later, her bathing session was rudely interrupted by one of Melosa's Amazons who barged into the hut without even knocking. Judging by the look on the Amazon's face, she was in a foul mood, but Corianyx refused to let herself be stressed by someone who wasn't under her command. "Yes?" Corianyx said, sitting half-submerged in one of the tubs and emptying a bowl of steaming hot water onto her shoulders and arms.

"Corianyx, Queen Melosa demands that you go to the royal hut at once!"

Corianyx just shrugged and reached over to refill the bowl from a smaller, heated barrel of water next to the tub she was sitting in. Once the bowl was full, she poured the contents over her other shoulder. "Warrior, what's your name?" she said completely unfazed by the Amazon's impatience and foul mood.

"Khila," the other Amazon grumbled.

"Mmmm. I don't see a Wild Boar on your sleeve...?"

"I'm a member of Melosa's tribe."

Refilling the bowl once again, Corianyx held it ready but didn't go on. "In that case, why do you believe that you... or she... have the right to demand that I do anything? Tell you what, Khila. I'll come see your Queen when I'm good and ready for her." With a smirk, the leader of the black-sleeved Amazons poured the steaming hot water over her head to signal the end of the conversation.

Khila spun around and stomped out of the bathing hut, grumbling a few choice words about Corianyx' parentage as she slammed the door shut behind her.

In the tub, Corianyx put the bowl away before rubbing her wet, warm face and moving her hands back across her soaked hair to wipe off the excess water. Staring at the door to the hut without actually seeing anything, she began to hammer out a plan that would change everything - not just for her, but for the entire tribe.

Predictably, Queen Melosa arrived at the bathing hut a few candlerips later wearing a frown that was so deep and dark it was clear that she wasn't there to congratulate Corianyx on a job well done.

As she barged in without knocking, she went up to stand at the tub and slammed her hands down on the edge. "Corianyx," she said hoarsely, "have you lost your mind? You are my Master at Arms... my subordinate! How dare you speak to me like that? And where's the Princess? I specifically asked you to bring her back!"

The northern Amazon grunted and rose from the tub. As the water streamed down her naked body, she swung her leg over the side of the bathing tub and reached for a rag.

"Well?" Melosa said in a voice that held a growly undertone. "I'm your Queen! Answer me, dammit!"

"You're *a* Queen, yes. But you're not my Queen, Melosa," Corianyx said as she dried herself.

Taken aback by the Amazon's words, Melosa scrunched up her face in anger and thumped her fist down onto the edge of the tub. "You have lost your mind... what is wrong with you, Corianyx? Why these petty games now that we're so close to putting the Amazon Nation back on the map?"

"Oh, I can assure you that I haven't lost my mind," Corianyx said as she pulled up her breeches and stepped into her deerskin pants. "In fact, I feel more... mmmm... I feel closer to the true Amazon spirit than I have for moons. You see, Melosa, without my Wild Boars, you would be nowhere."

"That's a lie, Corianyx! Last year, my tribe nearly went to war against the Centaurs. I'll bet you know how tough and proud an opponent they are!"

"Ah, but as we say back home, Nearly makes no hay. Why didn't you go to war against the Centaurs, Melosa? Too few brave warriors?" Corianyx said and put on her protective top and her deerskin jacket.

"Calmer heads prevailed," the Queen hissed.

"I see. Cowards prevailed, I'll bet."

Melosa knew that Corianyx couldn't know what had happened when the Amazons and the Centaurs had joined up through the help of Xena and Gabrielle to fight the warlord Krykus, but the accusation still gnawed at her gut. "Look, you better not talk about something you have no knowledge of. What happened last night, Corianyx? Why weren't you able to get Princess Gabri-

"Queen Melosa, when you raid a town, who do you kill?"

"Wh- what?"

"When you raid a town, who do you kill?" Corianyx repeated nonchalantly. Picking up her boots, she went over to a bench at the far wall of the hut and sat down to put them on.

Melosa narrowed her eyes, unsure of what kind of game the northern Amazon was playing. "Those who pick up arms to fight back."

"Wrong answer... and that's why you're not and can never be my Queen. When you raid a town, you kill everyone. Men, women and children. Old, young... the fair and the ugly," Corianyx said and crossed one leg over the other as she leaned back against the backrest of the bench.

"Corianyx, you're insane... I want-

"No, Melosa, I'm not."

"You are! I want you and your fanatics out of my camp by noon! Today!" Melosa roared and spun around.

"Mmmm," Corianyx said and played with the hilt of her hunting dagger that was lying on the bench next to her.

Outside, Melosa stomped across the yard to get away from Corianyx' insanity, but she had only made it halfway to the royal hut when she heard Corianyx shout her name somewhere behind her. Spinning around, Melosa put her hands on her hips and shot her Sister a fierce glare.

"Melosa, I'm calling you out!" Corianyx roared loud enough for most of the camp to hear. "I'm demand a challenge for the crown!"

"You can't, you lunatic! You're not of royal Amazon blood!"

"Oh, I think you'll find that my blood is pure," Corianyx said calmly and stepped closer to the reigning Queen. "The ancient scrolls are quite clear on this matter, Melosa... you must honor the challenge."

Amazons from both tribes slowly gathered around the two formidable warriors, quickly choosing sides and joining their tribal Sisters in supporting their particular challenger.

Melosa realized that Corianyx was right, much as it pained her to admit it. "All right. Where?"

"How about... here? In front of our Sisters?"

Melosa nodded curtly and began to warm up.

Corianyx smirked and raised her hands in the air. "As the challenger, I get to choose the weapon. I choose the hunting dagger, the very symbol of the ferocity of the Wild Boars and the glorious Amazon Nation!" she said and drew her dagger from the sheath she had in her boot.

"Now," Corianyx continued over a nervous murmur from the Amazons, "as I'm sure some of you know, the tradition is to have the winner of the challenge execute all those who supported the defeated challenger... however, I promise that after my victory, none of Melosa's supporters will be harmed if you pledge your allegiance to me and my Wild Boars. If Artemis sides with Melosa and I'm defeated, well, I'm sure your queen will try to follow the traditions. 'Try' being the operative word."

"Shut up and fight," Melosa grumbled, having taken off her loose jacket to be able to move more freely. The Queen's traditional pale brown protective top and her sculpted, hard body drew several appreciative cheers from her supporters as she went into a final warm-up.

"I always honor a woman's dying wish, Melosa," Corianyx said and twirled the hunting dagger in her hand.

The two combatants entered the fight by circling each other and occasionally thrusting their daggers ahead, though it was mainly for show. Despite serving as Queen for the better part of seven winters, Melosa had only ever fought in three challenges, one of which was against Xena that she had lost, so she wasn't as sharp as she could have been.

Corianyx could see from the look in Melosa's eyes that the sitting Queen wasn't too confident in her abilities, a fact the northern Amazon exploited by suddenly surging ahead and nearly plunging the dagger into Melosa's stomach.

The Queen reacted with lightning speed and stepped aside, but it had been so close that the hilt of Corianyx' dagger actually brushed past her skin. Taking full advantage of the

proximity of the northern Amazon, Melosa lashed out and elbowed Corianyx across the mouth, causing her to groan out loud.

Behind the fighters, Melosa's supporters cheered wildly.

Corianyx stepped back and wiped her bleeding lips with her fingers. When she saw the blood, she smiled and licked her fingertips clean to show that she wasn't affected by the hit.

The devilish grin on Corianyx' face sent a shiver down Melosa's back, and she jumped forward with the dagger ahead of her to try to surprise the other fighter - unfortunately for her, Corianyx was too quick and evaded the thrust.

To another cheer from her supporters, Melosa decided to change tactics and kicked out at her challenger, hitting Corianyx across the gut with the heel of her boot.

The impact was harder than Corianyx cared for, and she quickly jumped back and performed a sideways roll to get away from the taller Amazon's reach. Jumping up, she swung the dagger at Melosa's back, but missed - then she had to duck the boot that came right at her face.

Melosa missed the second kick, but found herself in a perfect position to charge Corianyx. Moving in deep, she grabbed Corianyx around the neck with her left hand and forced the northern Amazon's head backwards to expose her throat. At the same time, she tried to raise her right hand that held the dagger, but Corianyx understood the danger and held it down with both hands.

The two combatants groaned out loud as the royal challenge suddenly turned into a match of physical strength. Their equally impressive muscles bulged out as one tried to finish the other, and the other tried to hold on for dear life.

Corianyx suddenly found an opening in Melosa's attack and slammed her knee up into the Queen's lower gut. When Melosa moaned in pain and lost the strength in the fingers that were pressed against Corianyx' jaw, the northern Amazon pulled back and flipped the Queen over her hip.

Landing with a bone-rattling crash on the hard ground, Melosa was stunned and winded, but she knew she'd die if she stayed there for too long, so she rolled over onto her stomach and climbed to her feet.

Corianyx twirled the hunting dagger in her hand, giving her fierce opponent a chance to get back on her feet; then, she charged the Queen with a feint that proved successful. Aiming left, Corianyx changed direction at the last moment and went for Melosa's unprotected right side where she plunged the dagger into the Queen's skin along her ribs.

Screaming in pain, Melosa clutched her side that had already begun to bleed profusely. The tip of the dagger had been deflected off one of her ribs, but the skin and the flesh had been

cut open and a tremendous wave of pain surged through her, forcing her into taking a few staggering steps backwards.

Corianyx suddenly calmed down. She knew she had won the challenge, even if Melosa was still breathing. As she watched the Queen fall to her knees with blood pouring from the open wound, she twirled the dagger again and jumped behind Melosa.

"Time to end this!" Corianyx shouted, seeking out Kamara in the crowd. When she found her second in command, she was proud to see that she and indeed all the Wild Boars were armed to the teeth, ready to take control over the Amazon camp.

With a resounding roar, she fell down on her knees, grabbed Melosa's head for leverage and buried the dagger hilt-deep in the central part of the Queen's back right next to her spine, making sure that no shoulder blades or ribs would get in the way on this occasion.

Groaning gutturally, Melosa was forced to surrender to the unbearable pain that shot up from her back, and as the groan ended in a gruesome gurgle, she knew that she was going to die. Her breathing became labored as blood filled her lungs, and as Corianyx let go of her head, she fell down on her stomach. She briefly tried to get up, but it was to no avail.

Behind the fallen Queen, Corianyx pulled her dagger out of the wound and wiped it clean on the back of Melosa's traditional protective top. "Give Eponin my regards," Corianyx whispered for Melosa's ears only.

The Amazons who had belonged to Melosa's tribe all fell quiet and looked like they didn't know what to do.

"Bow to your new Queen," Corianyx said calmly as she walked over to Melosa's Amazons. Some of them did so willingly, but others were more reluctant. In the end, they all bowed to Corianyx save for a few elders who began to shuffle away to pack their travel bags.

"Queen Corianyx?" Kamara said with a brief bow as she came over to stand next to the new ruler. "What about those?" she continued, pointing at the elders.

"Ah, let them be. They only have a few winters left, anyhow," Corianyx said wearing a wide, devious grin on her face.

The grin faded as she turned around to look at Melosa's body. The once proud Queen was facing her, seemingly mocking her with a smile that was frozen on her lips at the moment of death. "Kamara, build a funeral pyre for Melosa. She fought well," Corianyx said and strode away from the scene to take possession of the royal hut.

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CHAPTER 5

The next day.

Like at the Amazon camp, the town of Palladia held funerals for the people who had perished in the attack on the magistrate's office and the tavern. Three pyres - for Augeas, Cleona and an elderly woman who had suffered a fatal shock when the incendiary bombs had detonated at the tavern - had been erected over night and were burning strongly.

Singing the last stanza of her funeral dirge, Xena stepped back into the ranks of people and put her arm across Gabrielle's shoulder. Looking to her left, she watched a pale-faced Iriadne do the same with her husband, Eneas. The two women briefly locked eyes, but Xena couldn't find a proper response to Iriadne's look of gratitude, so she turned back to Gabrielle.

Once the public part of the funerals was over, Xena and Gabrielle joined Ephiny, Solari, Achillea and Alecta at Cleona's pyre. All morning, Gabrielle's fair face had been dark and closed off as the bard had been deep in thought over what she should or shouldn't do about the mess they had found themselves in. Looking at her Amazon Sisters, she still felt that special kinship she had touched upon when she had debated with herself about Artemis - she even felt it with Achillea and Alecta though they had chosen to wear the uniform of the enemy.

"As we send our Sister to the Realm of the Dead," Gabrielle said in a choked-up voice, "we pray for her soul on her journey, and for her safe arrival where she shall be reunited with our eternal Sisters. The path to the Realm is fraught with pain and suffering, but the reward is so much greater than anything this world can provide. I didn't know Cleona personally, but I've been told that she was... that she was a true Amazon. Thank you," the bard continued and stepped back with tears stinging her eyes.

Xena sensed her partner's discomfort and pulled her into a hug that the bard gladly accepted.

"Too many people have died, Xena... I've... I've decided to go back to Melosa and beg her to stop the campaign," Gabrielle whispered.

"Gabrielle, no..." Xena said as they separated, but the bard simply shook her head.

"I know what you're about to say, love, but the only way we can stop this meaningless war is through Melosa. She can control Corianyx... or so I hope. I have to try," Gabrielle said quietly. Sniffing, she glanced over at a crying Alecta who was being comforted by Achillea. "Look, Xena... is Alecta our enemy? A young woman who was lured in and blinded by big words and the promise of Sisterhood... she carried the Wild Boar, yes, but look at her now. Now she's just an Amazon who's lost a friend like so many of us have. I'm going."

Xena sighed and looked towards the heavens. She knew that when Gabrielle had made up her mind, ten wild horses - or ten wild Xenas for that matter - couldn't make her change it. "All right. But I'm coming with you."

"No."

"Okay, this is not up for debate-" Xena said, but was cut off by Gabrielle putting two fingers across the warrior's lips.

"No. I go alone. She won't hurt me."

Before Xena had time to come up with a logical counter, Gabrielle had moved over to her Amazon Sisters to let them in on her plan. The warrior scrunched up her face and had to bite her tongue to stop herself from speaking her mind.

Mentally counting to a hundred-and-ten, Xena eventually decided to follow Gabrielle to the Amazon camp whether the bard liked it or not. *'Not, I suspect... but we'll just have to kiss and make up later. Better safe than sorry!'* Xena thought, nodding to herself.

Several candlemarks later, Gabrielle came out of the room she and Xena shared on the first floor of the fire-damaged tavern. In the meantime, she had changed into her full Amazon leathers, and even though it had gained a husky quality from the smoke it had been exposed to, she felt it would be more prudent to return to the Amazons wearing it.

Xena was waiting downstairs with Iriadne, Ephiny and Solari, and as her lover descended the stairs in her Amazon uniform, she couldn't help but feel a pang of pride at the sublime way Gabrielle was able to fill out the leathers.

"Hi again, everybody," Gabrielle said, slightly embarrassed to have so many people staring at her.

Iriadne had regained some of her cheeriness - even if she couldn't fathom what had happened to give her such a strange pain in her gut - and hurried forward to pull Gabrielle into a hug. "Hello, Princess Gabrielle! Oh boy, you look fantastic! I've made you another lunch basket... here," the tavernkeeper said and thrust a reed basket into Gabrielle's hands.

"Uh... thank you. I hope you didn't use everything you had left..."

"Oh no, no. But even if I had, royalty deserves the best, in my opinion," Iriadne said and pulled Gabrielle into another hug. "My mother taught me that... she worked at a castle down south when she was younger."

"Oh... okay."

Ephiny stepped forward and clasped arms with Gabrielle. "I hope you're successful, Princess Gabrielle. Melosa is a hard woman, but she will listen to reason."

"Well, let's hope so. See you in a few days," Gabrielle said and hugged her curly-haired friend. "You too, Solari. Goodbye for now."

"Bye, Princess Gabrielle. Don't binge-eat all that's in that basket, huh?" Solari said, winking at the bard.

"I'll try," Gabrielle said saucily.

As the small group of women stepped outside onto the busy main street, they said hello to Eneas and his brothers who had set up a small woodshop where they were hard at work carving a new back door and new support beams for the charred storage room.

Waving to their fellow Amazons, Achillea and Alecta walked towards them pulling Alecta's horse that she had found wandering around on its own just outside of town. "Princess Gabrielle," Alecta said, "this is Gartheon. She's a very robust and rock-solid mare. She'll do anything you say and go anywhere you want to go."

"Thank you, Alecta," Gabrielle said, appraising the horse. Taught by bitter experience, she didn't bring her travel bag this time but settled for taking her staff - and the picnic basket.

After sliding the staff into the two loops on the side of the saddle, she put the basket down on the ground and turned around.

"And this is our cue," Ephiny said, recognizing the look on Gabrielle's face. "Come on, Amazons, let's give the Princess a little room to kiss and cuddle with her lover before she leaves," she continued, shooing the others back towards the tavern - Iriadne giggled loudly the entire way there.

"Ephiny!" Gabrielle barked in a mock growl, but Ephiny's only answer was a dismissive wave.

Xena and Gabrielle weren't exactly alone, but it didn't stop them from pulling each other into a strong hug. Meeting at the halfway point, they shared a warm, loving kiss that went on for long enough to make up for the fact that they had to be separated for the next few days. "I'll be back, Xena... I love you," the bard whispered, caressing the warrior's prominent cheekbone.

"I love you, too. Please stay safe. I can feel if you're in trouble, you know," Xena said and touched her gut. "If I sense anything, I'll turn Harpy on anyone who threatens you."

"Oh, that's good to know," Gabrielle said and kissed her partner again for good measure. When they separated, she quickly mounted the horse and hung the reed basket on the saddle horn. "See you in a few days," she said and reached down.

"I can't wait," Xena said and answered the call at once by reaching up and giving Gabrielle's hands a squeeze.

A few candelrips later, Xena entered the tavern and went straight over to the stairs in a very determined stride.

"Hey... what's the rush? Come have an ale with us," Ephiny said, sitting at a table with Solari and drinking from a large mug.

"No. I'm gonna groom Argo," Xena said curtly before bounding up the stairs.

Ephiny just chuckled and took another swig from her mug. "Uh-huh...?" she said, winking at Solari.

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The Amazon camp was bustling with activity. The day since Melosa's funeral had been spent on getting every warrior, every horse and every weapon ready for a big event - a speech Corianyx had proclaimed she would hold in front of the royal hut.

As the candlemark approached, Amazon after Amazon filed into the small square in front of the hut; some worried, some merely curious and some eager to prove their worth to their new Queen.

Kamara had a hard time getting the Wild Boars into forming orderly lines. Their horses were spooked by the large number of people who were crammed into the square, and more often than not, their usually so trusty steeds reacted by whinnying and throwing their large heads.

In the hut, Corianyx was sprawled across the throne, getting the maximum out of the near-unlimited power she had over her new subjects.

At the base of the intricately decorated wooden throne, one of the elders was on her knees, carving Corianyx' name into a blank spot next to Melosa's. Once the Amazon elder was done, she bowed to her new Queen and walked backwards out of the royal hut.

Corianyx laughed out loud and jumped off the throne. Spinning around, she knelt down to take a look at what the elder had done. The carving was obviously still fresh, but she liked the look of her name next to the weathered carvings proudly displaying the names of the Queens of the last few generations. "Francia... Evellanda... Melosa... Corianyx... ha! And they doubted me... they doubted me, those miserable sons of-

Knock-knock!

"Enter!" Corianyx barked, getting back up into the throne.

The curtain fluttered aside to reveal Kamara who had cleaned her uniform and cut her hair for the special occasion. "Queen Corianyx, we're all ready for your speech," she said with a bow.

"Oh, excellent, Kamara," Corianyx said and rose. Dusting off her hands, she adjusted the black sleeve to make it line up properly and removed a few pieces of sawdust that was stuck to her pant legs after kneeling on the floor in front of the throne. "You're ready... and I'm ready. Let's do it," she continued and strode out of the tent.

Outside, the Amazons all fell silent as Corianyx came out to stand before them.

Smirking, Corianyx put her hands on her hips and let her eyes glide slowly over the motley crew of Amazons she had inherited from Melosa. Not all were as strong or smart as her own Wild Boars, but they all had that certain something that proved they belonged to the Amazons - a proud look in their eyes and an upright, assertive stance.

"Amazons!" Corianyx said in a strong voice that carried to the back of the small square. "As your new Queen, it is my privilege and honor to announce to you that we are about to start a new chapter in the never-ending saga of our glorious Amazon Nation. Later today, we shall embark on a campaign that will remind the world why we, the almighty Amazons, were once a force to be feared," Corianyx said, pausing to let her words sink in.

"Conquering Palladia, the largest town in the area, will be a good place to start. Once we have reclaimed the land that was stolen from our Sisters, the remaining towns and villages will know that we have the strength and the ability to sweep over them, too... and sweep over them we will! With fire! In the end, their choice will be simple: surrender to us, or face annihilation. Thank you, my Sisters."

Taking a step back to the sound of rapturous applause, Corianyx waited for a few moments to hear if there were any dissident voices, but nearly all seemed to go with the plan. One or two of the Amazons who had been in Melosa's tribe seemed less enthusiastic, but even they clapped at their new Queen.

The Wild Boars saluted their leader by waving their javelins in the air and chanting her name, led by Kamara whose eyes were shining with excitement at the prospects of once again bringing the Amazons to the attention of the world.

Corianyx grunted and spun around to go back to her new hut.

Not long after, Corianyx was studying the maps of the local area when there was a knock on the hut's doorjamb. "Enter!" she said, rolling up a map.

Kamara stepped inside the royal hut and bowed deeply. "Queen Corianyx. All units are ready, willing and very much able. Our horses are all fresh and the ground troops have just now received a batch of the latest weapons from the smithy."

"Just in time, eh? Very well, Kamara."

"Should I send recon teams out to gather-"

"No," Corianyx said decisively. "No, I want the attack to be a surprise to them. We shall go as one tribe, Kamara, in a glorious marching column a thousand paces long. Mounted units at the front, then archers, then the ground troops."

"Yes, my Queen," Kamara said with a bow.

Corianyx stuffed a map into a scroll case and put a small cap on it to hold it there. Pausing, she looked up and stared at the wooden throne that now sported her own name. "It's quite remarkable, isn't it?"

"Queen Corianyx?"

"All this, I mean. All we've accomplished..." Corianyx said in a voice that trailed off into a whisper. "I hope my mother will be proud," she said to herself. Suddenly realizing that she had spoken the last part out loud, she turned towards Kamara and shot her a hard look.

"You're dismissed. Tell the mess staff to make a little extra of everything. We'll have the entire way there to burn off the loads my warriors will eat," Corianyx continued.

"Yes, my Queen," Kamara said and bowed so deeply she was staring at her boots. Turning around, she hurried out of the royal hut, thinking about the Queen's slip of the tongue. Like a majority of the Wild Boars, she had heard the rumors that Corianyx was the daughter of Athena, but until then, she hadn't believed it. *'Maybe it's true... Sweet Artemis, with the Goddess of Warfare on our side, how can we lose?'* she thought as she strode over to the mess barn to relay the Queen's decree.

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The distance seemed twice as long as usual for Gabrielle as she and her new horse Gartheon trotted along the dirt road that would take her to the Amazon camp - not because it was, but because the horse she had borrowed from Alecta wasn't particularly fast.

Alecta had told her it would do anything the rider would ask of it, and that was true, however, she had failed to mention that it would do it slowly.

Grunting, Gabrielle had to settle for nibbling at the many delicious items in the picnic basket, reciting poetry and working on her latest story that she had been forced to neglect by all the negative things she and Xena had encountered.

She had that tell-tale niggling feeling between her shoulder blades again that typically meant that someone was watching her from afar. It had been there since the start of her journey, but even though she had turned around in the saddle to scan the horizon several times, she hadn't been able to spot anything.

Two candlemarks later, Gabrielle knew something was wrong, and she turned off the main dirt road and chose to venture out of the woods and into the unharvested fields where her tracks would be harder to follow for her mysterious pursuer. She still hadn't found any physical proof that she was being followed, but her sixth sense was screaming in her ear that she was.

Remembering a trick Xena had taught her, she nudged her heels into the sides of the mare to get it to speed up in order to throw off the followers, or at least make them misjudge her pace. At first, the horse was reluctant to increase its tempo, but she actually managed to get it to gallop for a few candlemarks.

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Six hundred paces behind Gabrielle, Xena was bursting with pride as she watched her partner kick some life into the slow mare and take off in a gallop as she entered the unharvested field.

"That's my girl," the warrior mumbled to herself as she mused Argo's neck. "I taught her that, you know," she continued, earning herself a whinny and a nod from her trusty warhorse.

"Yeah... well, I know where she's going so it won't matter if she beats us there, huh?"

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Gabrielle could finally see the tall trees that lined the Amazon camp some distance ahead of her, and she broke out in a smile as she patted the mare's neck to thank it for getting her to her target.

Just as she was looking at the trees, birds flew up from their crowns, startled by something just out of sight of where Gabrielle was. The bard scrunched up her face and tried to stand up in her stirrups, but her legs weren't long enough to give her the extra inches needed to see above a rolling hill between her and the camp.

Then, she suddenly heard scores of horses and people come straight for her. Furrowing her brow, she tried to stand up again, and this time, she was able to see what appeared to be the entire tribe come at her led by a large group of mounted warriors, all armed to the teeth. At the head of the riders was a lone, dark chestnut mare whose rider sat tall in the saddle wearing the mask of the Queen.

The column of Amazons stretched on for several hundred paces; the riders rode in a fairly disorderly cluster, but the warriors behind them were lined up in a strict two-by-two formation all the way back to the camp.

"By the Gods..." Gabrielle croaked. "Melosa... Melosa is going to war... a full scale war...!"

The realization that something was terribly wrong hit Gabrielle straight in the gut when she was able to see that the lone rider at the front of the column wasn't Melosa but someone wearing the brown deerskin uniform of the black-sleeved Amazons. "That's... that's Corianyx... if she's wearing the mask... Melosa must be... no... no, no, no," the bard said, rubbing her face furiously to try to get back to the reality she knew had to exist somewhere.

Thinking fast, she knew that if the column lookouts spotted her before she could make herself scarce, her life wouldn't be worth two dinars, so she quickly dismounted Gartheon, held her staff in one hand and the tack in the other and dragged the reluctant mare over towards some shrubbery that marked the line between two fields.

Once there, she slapped the horse hard across its hind quarters to get it to bolt, and watched as it - for once - took off in a hurry, roughly headed back towards Palladia.

Gabrielle's head was swimming from the shock of seeing someone other than Melosa wearing the Queen's sacred mask, but she knew she had to get back to the real world before she was spotted, and hurriedly ducked down among the shrubbery where she covered her pale arms, back and legs in loose dirt so she would be next to impossible to see from a distance.

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The moment Xena caught a glimpse of Gartheon aimlessly trotting around without a rider and with the picnic basket still attached to the saddle horn, a knot of fear hit her in the gut. Clenching her teeth, the warrior concentrated hard, but couldn't stop a brief wave of darkness surging through her.

Her lips moved silently, but it was clear they formed a single word - Gabrielle.

With a "YAH!" she drove Argo into a hard gallop, and soon, the warhorse was thundering through the field, going so fast that Xena's hair stood out straight behind her.

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The column walked past Gabrielle only sixty paces from her position. Now and then, she dared to raise her head to take a peek, but she was too far away to recognize any of the warriors, however, she had seen enough to know that they were all armed to the teeth, like the riders at the head of the attack force had been.

Once the last few warriors had filed past, two black-sleeved and two regular Amazons brought up the rear driving two supply carts loaded to the railings with weapons, food and tents.

Gabrielle waited for several candle-drips after the last of the carts had driven past her before she dared to get up and lean back on her thighs. Moments later, the easily recognizable sound of a horse thundering towards her made her curse out loud and duck back down where she quickly buried herself under more loose dirt.

Xena had already gone past Gabrielle's hiding place before she realized that something was off - a very faint shock of strawberry-blonde where such a sight shouldn't have been. Pulling back Argo's reins in a hurry, she quickly established with yet another pang of pride that her partner had paid attention to one of her many lessons.

"Gabrielle!" Xena whispered and dismounted Argo in a hurry.

Looking up in confusion, Gabrielle couldn't avoid spotting Xena, and as she sat up and leaned back on her thighs, she put her hands on her hips and shot her partner an annoyed look. "What on Mother Gaia's green earth are you doing here? Were you afraid I might screw up?"

"No, I-"

"I have learned one or two things over the past two years, you know!" Gabrielle said as she brushed all the excess dirt off her arms and legs.

Xena jumped forward and helped the bard get cleaned up before pulling her into a hug. "I know, I know... Gabrielle, that column of Amazons... it wasn't Melosa at the front, it was-"

"Corianyx, yeah. She wore the Queen's sacred mask, Xena..." - Gabrielle closed her eyes and sighed deeply when she thought of the hard but ultimately fair Melosa. "As Queen, she will... they'll all follow her anywhere she'll go. Every last one of them."

"They'll follow her to Tartarus. Every last one of them," Xena said with such cold detachment that a chill ran down Gabrielle's spine.

Usually, the bard would have voiced her concerns over Xena's language, or even complained in a loud and clear fashion, but all she could think of was how both her Amazon mentors were gone - Eponin and now Melosa. Next in line would be Ephiny and Solari, but the mere thought of that made her teeth chatter, so she pushed it away the farthest she could.

"I'll bet you the moon they're headed for Palladia," Xena said and grabbed hold of Gabrielle's arm. "Come, we must get back and alert the town's defenses. This battle won't be as easily won as the first one," she continued as she mounted Argo and reached out for Gabrielle.

The bard snapped out of her dark thoughts and quickly climbed up on Argo. Wrapping her arms around Xena's waist, she held on like the world depended on her strength. "We need to hurry, love," she whispered into the warrior's broad back.

"I know. YAH!" Xena shouted and nudged her boots into Argo's sides.

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Some time later, Xena pulled back on Argo's reins, making the large, hard-working animal come to a hard stop just outside of Palladia. Wheezing and panting, the entire body of the warhorse shook from the terrible strain of having to carry two people at that speed for that long.

Zachariah, one of the scouts, came out from behind a low wall and ran up to the panting horse. "Xena? Princess Gabrielle?"

"Zachariah, listen to me!" Xena said and quickly jumped off Argo. "We have very little time. The entire Amazon tribe is headed this way... and I do mean the entire tribe! My best guess is that we have one candlemark, maybe a little more... you understand? Alert Eneas and get everyone to their stations at once!"

"Uh... buh..." the young scout said, standing with his mouth half-open and generally acting like he hadn't understood a single thing of what the warrior had told him.

"Zachariah!"

"Uh... yes, yes! I got it... I-" the scout said, but Xena had more important things to do and turned back towards Argo. Once the warrior's words had settled in Zachariah's brain, he sprinted back to Palladia.

"Oh, Argo..." Xena said and held her horse's neck. "I'm sorry you had to do that, girl, but we had to beat them here... I'll make it up to you, I promise," she continued, wiping some of the froth off Argo's neck.

"Oh... Xe- Xena...?" Gabrielle said, suddenly feeling so dizzy that she had to cling onto the saddle in order not to fall off.

"Mmmm?"

Gabrielle's eyes began to roll around in her head and she turned quite pale. "I feel... I f- feel strang-" the bard started to say, but before she had time to complete the sentence, she vanished into thin air in a cloud of green energy.

At first, Xena just stared wide-eyed at the empty saddle, but she soon clenched her fists and flung back her head. "Bring her back! You hear me? Whoever you are, bring her back!" she roared at the heavens.

Trapped in a pitch black void, Gabrielle let out a brief shriek. At first, she felt like she was falling from a great height, but her landing was surprisingly soft, almost like she had come down on a fluffy pillow.

Opening her eyes that she had slammed shut when the saddle - and the rest of the world - had disappeared between her fingers, she quickly established that she had landed in a pile of fallen leaves in the middle of an oakwood forest. High above her, birds were singing serenely from the branches and the crowns of the ancient trees, and several deer were nibbling at the grassy edges of a small clearing a short distance away from her.

The bard rose from her comfortable landing spot and dusted off the seat of her Amazon skirt. Looking around, she couldn't see any signs of human involvement, and she briefly worried that she had been thrown back into the age of the Titans just like when she and Xena got mixed up in the misadventure regarding Aphrodite's love spell.

"No, you're not in the age of the Titans," a female voice said from behind the wide trunk of an oak. Moments later, Artemis stepped around the trunk and leaned against it. "You're in my realm."

As usual, the Goddess was dressed in dark green hunting fatigues and she had a longbow and a quiver strapped to her back. As Gabrielle was watching, the Goddess took an arrow from the quiver and put it on the bow. Making the bowstring taut, Artemis aimed at one of the deer but didn't release the arrow.

"Artemis," Gabrielle said surly, folding her arms over her chest.

"Gabrielle," Artemis mocked, pretending to smile at the Amazon Princess.

"Is there a point to all this?"

"You mean apart from the one at the tip of my arrow?" Artemis said and lowered the longbow. "Yes, there is. The point is that I would like to ask you what you are doing...?"

The bard began to grumble somewhere deep in her throat. She knew that the time had finally come to make the Goddess aware of where she stood. "What I am doing? I'm doing

what I need to do, Artemis. I'm fighting for the true Amazon Nation by defending the villagers of Palladia against a bunch of raving fanatics."

"Nonsense. The true Amazon Nation is the one that's about to attack Palladia."

"No, Goddess, you're wrong. Didn't you hear me when I made up my mind? I think you must have... after all, aren't you all-powerful?" Gabrielle said with an evil smirk.

Artemis' only reply was to stand up straight and arch an eyebrow.

"You did hear me, I know it... but I can see that I need to repeat it," Gabrielle said, cocking her head. "I and those who are closest to me, like Ephiny, Solari, Eponin, Melosa and many, many more share or shared a bond, a kinship that proves we are the true Amazons. That bitch Corianyx and her mindless followers may believe they form a tribe all on their own, but they aren't and can never be true Amazons. Why? Because they're not part of the Sisterhood... the kinship that binds us all together. It's in our blood. They are merely impostors dressed up to look like Amazons."

The Goddess chuckled darkly and swung her longbow back on her shoulder. "Oh, I can assure you that the bitch Corianyx, as you so eloquently called her, is very much an Amazon. Her blood is drawn from the purest source. Mine."

"Oh..."

"Corianyx is my daughter, Princess Gabrielle. I took a cue from my Father's book of tricks and disguised myself as a mortal. I visited one of the Centaur villages during a full moon and mated with the chieftain of their clan. I knew at once that he had made me with child, so I slew him and drank and bathed in his warm blood to welcome my unborn into this world. A day later, I gave birth to Corianyx. She was such a perfect child."

"By the Gods... but the ancient scrolls call you the virgin Goddess!"

"Pah. I've had hundreds of daughters. All by the bravest, strongest warriors of their time."

"But... the Centaurs? The Amazons and the Centaurs used to hate each other!"

"For Corianyx I chose a Centaur because of who they are... their ferocity, their pride, their strength. So you see, Princess Gabrielle, when you call yourself a true Amazon, you are gravely mistaken. Corianyx is the true Amazon. And you... you're the imposter."

With that, the Goddess waved her hand.

The scenery instantly dissolved into the dirt road close to Palladia. As Gabrielle reappeared on Argo's back, the horse got spooked and nearly threw her off but she managed to grab hold of the reins at the very last moment.

"Gabrielle! Whoa, girl... whoa!" Xena shouted, quickly taking the other end of Argo's reins to calm down the frightened horse.

Once Argo was calm again, Gabrielle quickly dismounted and ran over to Xena. "Xena, I... I was with Artemis. Corianyx... Corianyx is her daughter!"

"What?"

"Corianyx is the daughter of Artemis and a Centaur chieftain!"

"Well, that explains a few things..." Xena mumbled.

"By the Gods, Xena... what if she's an immortal? We'll never... never be able to -"

"Shhh, let's leave that for later," Xena said and pulled her partner into a hug. "Right now, we need to organize the defenses. Corianyx may be an immortal, but her warriors certainly aren't. Come on!"

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Fifty candelights later, most of the townspeople of Palladia had assumed their defensive positions at the roadblocks, crouching down near or at the timber logs used to block main street and all the side streets.

Xena was off down the other end of the street with Eneas to inspect the work, but Gabrielle was inside Iriadne's tavern, pacing back and forth on the floor that had been cleared to serve as a hospital for the wounded that would inevitably come.

The dark, haunted expression on Gabrielle's face made the women there with her - Ephiny, Solari, Achillea, Alecta and Selena - reluctant to speak with her. Just when it seemed like Gabrielle would stop pacing, she spun around and did another tour of the floor.

"Princess Gabrielle," Ephiny said and stepped forward. "Are you sure Artemis wasn't just trying to manipulate you? I mean -"

"I'm sure, Ephiny. She was sincere. Corianyx is her daughter," Gabrielle said and paused briefly before resuming her pacing.

Achillea chuckled and squeezed Alecta's shoulder. "It would certainly explain a lot, huh? I always called her a bastard behind her back... how was I to know I could have said it to her face?"

The attempt at humor made the others laugh nervously, except for Gabrielle. The gangly Alecta - who was still wearing her deerskin uniform save for the black sleeve that she had torn off and burned - giggled in the way only young women could.

"My Sisters... and Selena," Gabrielle suddenly said, making the others clam up in an instant. "Today, we'll be fighting fellow Amazons... people we've lived with, laughed with, maybe even kissed... but we must fight them. Our lives depend on it, but more importantly, the lives of these townspeople depend on it," she said, holding out her hand at Selena who gave her a faint smile in return.

Taking a deep breath, the bard continued: "I know it will be almost impossible for you to release your arrows when you have someone you know lined up in your sights... but you must remember it's them or us. All right, Amazons... the time has come."

Smiling wistfully, Gabrielle reached out to each of her Sisters to clasp their arms.

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CHAPTER 6

A few candelrips later, Linus and Zachariah came running back towards the first roadblock, flailing their arms in the air and screaming at the top of their lungs.

"They're here," Xena said calmly, ducking down behind the roadblock. Squeezing Gabrielle's hands, the warrior looked at Achillea who was next in line behind the bard. "Achillea, do you suspect they'll change their tactics considering their number?"

"Hmmm... no," the former second in command said. "Burning arrows, mounted assault with javelins, ground troops. I think Corianyx will stick with what has worked so far."

Gabrielle sighed and peeked over the edge of the timber logs. "And on Mount Olympus, the Gods are laughing at us."

"Aren't they always?" Xena said and drew her Chakram. Through the hustle and bustle at the roadblock, her keen hearing had picked up the sound of many horses coming closer.

Looking behind her, the warrior could see that main street was deserted, save for the people manning the roadblocks. All shutters had been closed on all buildings and two dozen water barrels were lined up on either side of the street to allow the defenders easy access to water when fire would start raining down on them.

Gabrielle suddenly felt an irrational urge to connect with her partner, and she reached out to put a cool, trembling hand on Xena's arm. "Xena... if one of us... or both of us... won't make it... please know that I love you."

"I love you, too, Gabrielle," Xena said and pulled the bard close. "And don't worry. Even if we do leave this world, there's no way, no *way* I won't come for you... I don't care where we end up, I'll find you."

"Oh, I-" Gabrielle started to say, but was cut off by Xena claiming her lips in a strong, loving kiss that soothed her soul down to the core. Pulling back, the bard caressed the warrior's prominent cheekbone and allowed a brief smile to play on her lips. "And I'll find you, love," she whispered for Xena's ears only.

"By the Gods! LOOK!" Ephiny suddenly shouted, pointing at the sky that had darkened from the scores of burning arrows that came sailing through the air.

"Everybody get down!" Xena roared and pressed herself and Gabrielle into the timber logs.

All around them, the burning arrows thwacked ceaselessly into the ground, the houses, the timber logs and even some of the defenders. The heat created by the many arrows was unbearable, and soon, billowing smoke and a foul stench of burning thatch and flesh drifted across main street.

"Tartarus on Earth..." Solari croaked, looking at one of the townspeople who had been hit in the heart by a burning arrow.

It didn't take long for several roofs to catch fire, but the contingency plans were brought into effect by groups of people who ran towards the houses with fire beaters and buckets of water.

A second volley of arrows came at them, forcing everyone to take cover. A whole slew of arrows hit the timber logs Xena and the others were using for cover, and the warrior let out a long, highly imaginative blue streak that made Gabrielle blush.

"Amazons! There!" Achillea barked, peeking over the burning log. Ahead and to the right of the roadblock, two Amazons - one Wild Boar and one from Melosa's old tribe - were trying to sneak up to it carrying two incendiary bombs of the kind that had devastated the tavern.

Xena instantly drew her Chakram but didn't throw it. Instead, she looked at Gabrielle who was also peeking over the log at the aggressors.

When the bard nodded almost imperceptibly, Xena jumped up and released the Chakram that soon screamed through the air towards the Amazons. As it reached them, it crushed the ceramic jugs, dousing the two warriors in the highly flammable liquid.

Gabrielle ducked back down so she wouldn't have to watch - the screams that filtered through the crackling fires were more than enough for her and her vivid imagination. After a little while, the screams were silenced.

The reply was instant as another volley of burning arrows came at the town, hitting the roofs on the other side of main street and prompting a new wave of townspeople running there with their buckets. Then an unnatural calm fell over the battleground.

Moments later, the calm was shattered by the sound of scores of hooves pounding against the dirt road beyond the town's cobbled streets. Sighing deeply, Gabrielle reached out to touch Ephiny and Solari to wish them good luck.

The two senior Amazons kissed each other briefly before preparing their bows and arrows. Next to them, the two former Wild Boars clasped arms and hunkered down with a pair of crude, but effective, spears one of Eneas' brothers had made for them.

Just as the first horse reached the roadblock, Xena pulled Gabrielle down and shoved her into the small gap between the lower log and the street.

"No! Wait a minute-" Gabrielle shouted, but her voice was drowned out by the deafening thunder of nine horses vaulting over the roadblock and landing on the other side.

At once, death and destruction ruled the battlesite with arrows and crossbow bolts screaming through the air, javelins stabbing downwards from the mounted Amazons, smoke billowing across from the burning houses and blood splattering from horrible wounds.

Two of the attacking horses never made it further than the roadblock; their bellies had been sliced open by Achillea and Alecta's spears that had been jammed into the ground. When the riders had fallen off, they were quickly finished.

As Corianyx and her lead group thundered up main street standing in their stirrups and firing burning arrows at the buildings, more horses followed the first wave over the logs and began to wipe out the townspeople who were manning the water barrels.

When a javelin came down precariously close to Xena's right shoulder, she instinctively reached up and grabbed it, forcing the rider off the horse where she was easy prey.

Turning around, Ephiny and Solari aimed their bows at the backs of some of the riders as they thundered past them, but they were careful only to shoot at those in the deerskin uniforms.

To the left of main street, the roof covering one of the stone buildings collapsed in a cloud of dust and fire that sent burning embers all over the street below. Xena noticed at once that a large piece of burning thatch was headed straight for their position, so she grabbed Gabrielle and pulled the two of them to safety.

"Will you let go of me!" Gabrielle yelled as she was pushed inside a doorway to the next house - the warrior had kept a firm grip on her suede top. "What was that for? I need to be out there, Xena..."

"People die out there, love," Xena growled, aiming and releasing her Chakram at one of the riders. When the circular weapon came back to her hand, it was covered in blood.

"I know! My Sisters are dying out there! That's why I need to be there!"

Even while Gabrielle was speaking, another group of horses sailed over the roadblock and crashed directly into Achillea and Alecta who both tumbled end-over-end to the side of the street where they remained motionless.

"Oh, no! No!" Gabrielle howled, gripping her staff so hard it nearly crumbled.

Xena peeked around the edge of the doorway and established that the most recent group of riders had been the last. In the distance, she could see scores of fully armed Amazon ground troops line up in a three-wide formation.

Further up main street, the mounted Amazons ravaged the town, weakening the secondary defenses by cutting down everyone who dared to oppose them.

"I'll bet Ares is salivating over this...!" Xena grumbled under her breath as she clutched her Chakram. "Gabrielle, the ground troops are lining up now. Corianyx needs to pull back her mounted units to make room for them... once they go past us, I'll hit 'em hard. Just so you know. All right?"

"All right, love. It's all right," Gabrielle said, staring at the awful carnage on the street.

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Down the other end of main street, Corianyx forced her dark chestnut mare around in a circle as she continuously stabbed downwards with her javelin. The street was littered with dead and dying defenders and Wild Boars alike, and a heavy stench of blood and burning thatch was lingering in the air.

Looking around, she could see that they had lost quite a few of her black-sleeved Sisters, but it didn't really concern her. After gesturing to Kamara who was equally busy with her javelin, the two leaders turned their horses back towards the entry to the town and took off in a hurry.

Behind them, the surviving Wild Boars of the mounted units lined up and prepared to follow their leaders.

Just as Corianyx reached the roadblock, the raven-haired warrior she had already seen in the first raid stepped out of a doorway and fired a circular weapon at them. Corianyx managed to duck at the very last moment, but Kamara couldn't react as quickly and was cut down by the spinning blade, losing her grip on the reins and falling off the horse.

The Amazons behind them scrambled to evade the blade and their fallen leader, but they were unable to get their horses to react soon enough and two of them couldn't avoid trampling Kamara to a pulp.

Upon its return, the circular blade sliced through two more black-sleeved Amazons, and now, Corianyx understood they were in real trouble. Turning back towards the roadblock, she slammed her heels into the sides of her horse and sailed clean over the top of the smoldering logs with only a small handful of riders following her.

Catching the Chakram, Xena shouted "Come on!" and took off out of the doorway, feeling in her heart that Gabrielle was following her closely. They quickly ran to the other side of the street where Xena knelt down and touched Achillea and Alecta to feel if they were still alive.

"Achillea is dead... broken neck... but Alecta is breathing," Xena said, dragging the young, gangly Amazon away from her precarious position and over to the wall of the tavern where she would be relatively safe.

Gabrielle kept standing at Achillea's body, looking at the fallen Amazon's soft, friendly eyes that were looking at the sky without seeing anything. The bard's lips became two thin lines in her face and she clenched her fists in a reflection of the surge of anger that bubbled up inside her and threatened to drown her.

"Gabrielle, we need to- Gabrielle!" Xena shouted, waving to get the bard closer to her, but Gabrielle didn't obey.

Instead, she stomped over to the roadblock, used her staff to sweep a few pieces of burning thatch off the top log and climbed on top of it. Taking a deep breath to calm her wildly beating heart, she raised her staff high in the air and waited for the first line of the ground troops to reach her.

Xena shook her head angrily, thinking that her partner had gone insane. Grumbling out loud, she ran over to Gabrielle and tugged at her skirt to get her to come down from the logs, but she was brushed off.

The first several lines of the ground troops began to falter in their stride and it wasn't long before the whole column was backed up - eventually, it came to a full stop.

Gabrielle was still holding her staff high above her head, and as she locked eyes with each and every one of the regular Amazons closest to her, she could see that several of them were beginning to have doubts.

The warriors at the head of the column were all from Melosa's old tribe and they all knew the Princess - most of them knew why Melosa had bestowed Gabrielle with the title, but those who didn't were quickly brought up to speed in whispers and murmurs.

A group of mounted black-sleeved Amazons lining the column looked with increasing worry at the show of defiance, and one of them took her longbow and aimed it carefully at

Gabrielle's heart - however, before she had time to release the fatal strike, she was attacked and brought down from her horse by two of Melosa's warriors.

The unexpected twist spurred the rest of the regular Amazons into action. Instead of resuming the charge on the town, they turned against the Wild Boars and fell over them like a pack of starved lions. Within moments, all but two of the black-sleeved guards had been slain - the remaining two had wisely thrown down their weapons and surrendered.

On top of the logs, Gabrielle let out the breath she had been holding for the past several candelrips and felt her knees buckle under her. Choking up, she climbed off the roadblock and went out to greet her Sisters.

Xena stood behind the timber logs with her jaw suspended just above her navel. She could hardly believe what she had just witnessed, but when Gabrielle began to hug and embrace the fully armed - and wildly cheering - Amazons, she knew that her lover had well and truly grown up. Gabrielle was no longer merely a young girl from a sleepy, backwater sheep town, she had affirmed her status as Amazon royalty.

The townspeople slowly came out of their homes, looking at the wild celebrations in complete and utter disbelief. Stunned, Selena and Eneas ran over to Xena to hear what was going on.

"By the Gods," Eneas croaked, repeatedly rubbing his face. Then he realized that although the battle seemed to be over, there were still fires to combat. Spinning around, he let out a loud whistle and began to organize several teams of villagers to fight the raging fires.

"Xena...? Wh- what's... why are..." Selena stuttered, staring wide-eyed at the unbelievable scenes of joy from the otherwise feared opponents.

Xena tried to open her mouth to explain to Selena, but found that she didn't have the answer, either. Chuckling, she sheathed her sword and put the Chakram on its little hook.

Suddenly Ares materialized right next to the two women, making Selena jump a foot in the air. "Do you think this is over, Xena? Ooooh, big mistake," Ares purred into Xena's ear before he vanished again.

Xena growled out loud and drew her sword again, knowing exactly what the God of War was alluding to - Corianyx.

"Wh- wh- what's going on with you two and the Gods?!" Selena howled, grabbing Xena's arm. "That's the second time you've been visited by Ares!"

"Long story, Selena. All right, we need to take full advantage of the lull. Please gather up as many wounded as you can and bring them to the tavern. I'll find Iriadne and ask her to light the stove so we can boil some water. You understand?" Xena said, prying Selena's surprisingly strong fingers off her arm.

"Okay... okay! I'm on it!"

Xena briefly chuckled at the sight of the eager woman raising her long dress and hurrying up main street, but soon sobered and ran over to Gabrielle who was busy celebrating with the regular Amazons.

"Love," Xena said into Gabrielle's ear. "Corianyx is still here somewhere."

Laughing out loud, Gabrielle grabbed Xena by the shoulders and gave her a quick spin that ended in a close embrace. "I know. But for now, we celebrate and..." - the bard reached up and stole a quick kiss - "... kiss."

"Nice... Gabrielle, I have an idea. Once they've taken the two prisoners of war to the tavern, please tell the Amazons to go home. All of them. I know their presence will make the townspeople very nervous."

"But they're not-"

"Please, love. We have a million things to do now... being joined by an entire Amazon tribe will only complicate matters," Xena said quietly.

Gabrielle sighed and nodded. "Yeah... I guess you're right. I'll tell them... I think several of them have already turned back, anyway."

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As dusk fell on Palladia, main street was once again bathed in flickering orange light, though this time it was from dozens of torches that had been put up all along the town's main artery. At every torch, three townspeople were standing guard, warming their hands on the fire or the mugs of warm tea they were holding.

Inside Iriadne's tavern, Xena stood by a table and worked on the second to last injured villager, a man who had been hit by a bolt from a crossbow. Tying a knot on the suture she had used, she patted the man's arm and helped him off the table. "Who's next?" she said in a tired voice.

Linus held up his hand that had been hastily bandaged and went over to the table. "That would be me, Xena."

"All right, Linus," Xena said and took the young scout's hand. "You don't have to lie down. What happened to you?"

"I got burned when I tried to put out one of the arrows. A full bucket of water didn't work so I grabbed the arrow and wanted to throw it away, but some of the gunk they had coated them in dripped onto my hand and- OW!"

"Sorry," Xena said as she peeled away the bandage. "Oh yeah, that's a lovely little burn. Tell you what, first, we need to..."

While Xena was tending to Linus, Gabrielle and some of the senior Amazons had assembled at the back of the tavern in an impromptu council meeting. "So, Princess Gabrielle," Khila said, "Corianyx defeated Melosa in a fair challenge. Of course, we didn't like it, but..."

Ephiny grunted in a very disgusted fashion and crossed her arms over her chest. "I'm sure some of you could have-"

"No," Khila said, shaking her head vehemently. "You know as well as I do that it would be suicide to go against the sitting Queen... even if she's a fanatic. And quite frankly, Corianyx isn't the first Queen in the history of the Amazons who's been a bit to the side."

"Ain't that the truth," Solari mumbled under her breath.

Chuckling, Gabrielle leaned forward and scratched her eyebrow. "Well, I agree, but we still need to deal with her. I have a feeling she won't take this lightly."

"No doubt about that," Khila said solemnly.

Gabrielle sighed and looked behind her at the covered-up body of Achillea. Alecta and one of the two prisoners of war - a young warrior with dark hair and long limbs - gave each other a warm hug and a quick kiss before they knelt down next to the fallen Amazon and seemed to recite some kind of burial chant.

Just then, Iriadne came out of the refurbished kitchen wiping her hands on her apron. On her way over to the Amazons, she made sure to take the long way around the dead bodies that had been placed at one end of the tavern. "Can I get you anything to drink? Hot, cold, strong...? Or maybe some smoked sausage or smoked lamb?"

"No thank you, Iriadne. I think we're fine," Gabrielle said and offered the rosy-cheeked tavernkeeper a tired smile.

Ephiny and Solari nodded affirmatively, but Khila raised her hand in the air. "Actually, I'd like some sausage..."

"Smoked sausage?"

"If I may, thank you."

"You certainly may!" Iriadne said and spun around to go back to the kitchen.

When Khila noticed that her fellow Amazons gave her funny looks, she shrugged to such an extent that her shoulders nearly reached her ears. "I ran out of rations inside the first candlemark. It was a long march..."

Outside, in the darkness between two buildings, Corianyx moved as stealthily as she could to get away from the many villagers standing at the torches. The defeat was still burning in her gut as was the fact that the entire tribe had betrayed her, their Queen.

When she came up to a torch with three villagers who were talking to each other in hushed tones, she drew her hunting dagger and moved so deeply into the shadows that she was practically invisible.

Having cleared yet another hurdle, Corianyx turned the corner and went up to the back door of the tavern that she and Kamara had used in the arson attack - only this time, the lock on the new door had been made far sturdier. After a couple of attempts at breaking it open, she gave up and continued to sneak along the wall of the tavern.

She knew that she wouldn't be able to escape detection if she went ahead with the simple plan that was etched into her mind, but she decided that it was the only possible way to get her revenge.

Jumping out into the open, she ran up to stand in front of the tavern and took a deep breath. "Princess Gabrielle!" she roared in a stentorian voice.

Hearing the voice that sounded like an escaped ghoul from Tartarus, Gabrielle jumped up from the chair and ran over to the double doors. Xena was instantly at her side and the two women opened the doors as one.

Corianyx was standing in the middle of main street with her legs slightly apart and her hunting dagger in her hand. Her usually so pristine uniform was filthy and bloodied, and the black sleeve with the stylized image of the wild boar had nearly been torn in half and was flapping in the breeze.

"Princess Gabrielle... so nice to see you," Corianyx said and pretended to salute the bard.

"Corianyx. Give it up. You can't win this one," Gabrielle said as she slowly closed the distance between them.

"Maybe I can't... maybe I can. Who knows?"

"I know. We all know, Corianyx. You can't win. Give up now... and we'll spare your life."

"Pah. Don't patronize me, Princess. You know as well as I do that your warrior there is ready to behead me with the circular blade at your slightest wink."

Knowing that Corianyx was right, Gabrielle turned around and put her hand on Xena's elbow. "Love... please try not to kill her. I know she won't make it easy for you, but... she needs to be alive to go before an Amazon tribunal for her crimes."

"I'll try," Xena said and put down the Chakram.

Corianyx had watched the exchange with great interest and let her eyes roam down Xena's shapely body. "Oh, what's it gonna be? Are you going to make me wait forever?"

Gabrielle spun around to give Corianyx an uncensored piece of her mind, but when she saw how the torches glinted off the hunting dagger, she narrowed her eyes and fell silent. *'The dagger... the dagger she may have used on Eponin... the dagger that she used to kill Melosa so she could claim the title... wait... that's it!'*

"Corianyx, I challenge you for the crown!" Gabrielle said strongly, walking away from the tavern.

"What?" Xena barked and tried to grab hold of Gabrielle's arm, but the bard shook off the warrior's hand and kept walking.

Corianyx looked like she didn't know whether to laugh or cry at the challenge, but she eventually settled for laughing condescendingly. "Well, that would certainly take care of my little problem... namely you. I accept!"

Taking a deep breath and letting it out slowly, Gabrielle walked onto the street and began to close on Corianyx. Halfway there, she twirled her staff a few times.

Corianyx did the same with her hunting dagger to set the scene for the epic fight.

Behind the two fighters, Ephiny bounded out onto the sidewalk and threw her hands in the air. "What on Mother Gaia's green earth is she doing?! Xena, why didn't you stop her?"

"Stop her? Have you ever tried to stop Gabrielle once she's got a notion into her skull?" Xena growled, bending down to pick up the Chakram.

"Mmmm... good point," Ephiny said and ran her hands through her curly hair.

Gabrielle hunched over slightly and held her staff horizontally in a defensive stance. She kept a close eye on Corianyx to try to predict her every move, but she soon came to realize that the leader of the black-sleeved Amazons was a formidable tactician.

Around them, townspeople had lined up in a large circle that very neatly outlined the arena, and the two fighters began to slowly roam the circle with neither offering an opening the other could exploit.

"She has trained you well," Corianyx said in a hoarse voice, feigning several moves that Gabrielle didn't react to, "but you're no match for my skills, Princess. Challenging me was a fatal mistake. You should have let your sexy girlfriend do me instead."

The provocative language made Gabrielle stop and narrow her eyes - Corianyx grabbed the opportunity and jumped forward with the hunting dagger pointed directly at Gabrielle's exposed stomach.

The bard snapped out of her shock just in time to slam the staff up and to the left, trapping Corianyx' hand that held the dagger and forcing it upwards.

Roaring, Corianyx continued forward and gave Gabrielle a hard shoulder-block, upsetting the petite woman's balance and throwing her backwards. Corianyx exploited the weakness to the fullest and elbowed Gabrielle across the jaw.

Gabrielle groaned out loud as a myriad of bright, little stars exploded in her vision. Her jaw and face hurt like it had been at the wrong end of a rockslide and she couldn't hold onto the staff. Staggering backwards, she wasn't able to keep herself erect and fumbled onto the cobbled street.

Instead of going in for the kill, Corianyx took a step back and kept a close eye on Xena. When the leather-clad warrior stepped off the sidewalk and hurried over to the fallen Amazon, Corianyx twirled the hunting dagger but kept back.

"Gabrielle..." Xena said in a harried voice, holding onto the bard's torso. "Gabrielle...? Are you all right?"

"I'm... I'm okay, love... watch her... watch her, she's a snake..." Gabrielle croaked, clinging onto her partner's strong grip.

On the roof of the tavern, a pale blue energy cloud and a crackle of ozone heralded the arrival of Ares. Stroking his goatee, he watched the scene with great interest.

"Can you stand?" Xena said and began to help Gabrielle up.

When a shadow suddenly fell over Xena, she realized that for very nearly the first time in her life, she had been careless. Her boundless love for Gabrielle had exposed her to an enemy and now she would pay the price. Swinging her head around, Xena only caught a glimpse of the seven-inch blade of the hunting dagger glinting in the torchlight before it penetrated her leathers and buried itself halfway into her right side.

Groaning in pain, Xena let Gabrielle go and fell to her hands and knees. She clutched her side and felt blood coat her fingers at once. Somewhere behind her, a female voice shouted something she couldn't understand - and in front of her, Gabrielle's wide, emerald green eyes showed shock, fear and finally unlimited rage.

As the warrior collapsed halfway on top of her, groaning and losing blood fast from the deep wound, the bard felt her heart explode. A wave of heat flooded her mind and limbs, and when the wave receded, only darkness remained.

She could see Corianyx laughing, but she couldn't hear the Amazon. With her left hand, she found her staff that had rolled away when she had collapsed earlier. Tapping into a source of strength she didn't know she had, she gripped the staff hard and rose from the ground.

Acting in slow motion, Gabrielle watched her arms and hands move the staff in an arc that put it on a collision course with Corianyx' face. Then, the staff whacked the Amazon leader across the brow, knocking her head backwards.

Suddenly back to real speed, Gabrielle jumped forward and released all the rage and fury she'd had bottled up inside her since meeting the mother back in Tirus who couldn't understand her toddlers were dead.

Again and again, she pummeled Corianyx with the staff, slamming the hardwood weapon across the black-sleeved Amazon's knees, hips, gut, hands, arms, rib cage and head; thinking about Eponin, Melosa and Achillea only made her rage stronger and she went to work on Corianyx' upper chest and her face.

When the leader of the Wild Boars fell backwards and hit the ground hard without protecting herself, Gabrielle kept standing over her with the staff ready to pounce again, panting so hard that she could almost taste blood.

On the rooftop, Ares punched the air in delight and blew Gabrielle a kiss before he disappeared in his customary pale blue cloud of energy.

A pair of hands touched Gabrielle's arms, and when she looked down, she realized they belonged to Solari who pulled her away from the thoroughly defeated Corianyx.

With the battle rush leaving her system, Gabrielle came to and remembered that her partner was in bad shape. Blinking several times, the bard staggered back towards Xena who had rolled over onto her left side to give the wound some air.

"Oh, love..." the bard said as she knelt down next to her prone partner. "It's bad..."

"I know," Xena said through clenched teeth.

"Full circle..." Gabrielle whispered.

"Wh- what?"

"Full circle... remember when you got hurt at Winter Solstice? That w- was when we kissed for the first time..."

"I remember," Xena croaked. "That was worse, though... back then, I was under a foot of snow... too warm for snow tonight," she tried to joke, but judging by the look on Gabrielle's face, she couldn't exactly see the humor.

"Come on... let's get you into the tavern..."

Behind them and out of sight of everyone there, Corianyx' fingers inched across the cobblestones until she could reach the hilt of her hunting dagger. Once it was in her grasp, she grabbed it and jumped up. Roaring, she pulled back her arm to release the lethal weapon at Xena and Gabrielle-

THWACK!

Stunned, Corianyx let out a pained groan and took several staggering steps backwards. With wide, uncomprehending eyes, she looked down at her chest where an Amazon arrow had penetrated her skin and had lodged itself deep in her heart.

Ephiny lowered the longbow and gave Corianyx a look that spelled out very clearly that Eponin and Melosa had been avenged.

Dropping the dagger that clanged harmlessly onto the ground, Corianyx fell down on her knees and began to sway back and forth. It only lasted for a few seconds, then her strength failed her and she slipped backwards to the ground.

Nearly at the tavern, Xena and Gabrielle nodded as one, happy to see the end of Corianyx. Supporting one another, they turned back around to get some help for the warrior when Artemis suddenly emerged in a pale green cloud of energy right in front of them.

For several seconds, the Goddess of the Hunt just observed Gabrielle silently before walking into the center of the street and crouching down next to her daughter.

"Mother... please help me," Corianyx said around a series of rattling coughs. She tried to reach out for the Goddess, but Artemis didn't take her hand. "Mother... please..."

"Why should I help you, daughter?" Artemis said in a cold voice. "You failed. Your mission was simple, yet you failed. And by failing, you betrayed me. No. You don't deserve my help." - With that, the Goddess stood up and disappeared.

"By the Gods..." Gabrielle croaked, watching Corianyx' erratic breathing slow down and ultimately cease. "She didn't even help her daughter... she turned her back on her own flesh and blood..."

"Like you said," Xena said, holding onto her aching side. "The Gods are laughing at us."

The tavern quickly filled with people who wanted to congratulate Xena and Gabrielle, but the bard insisted that they were given some room and shooed everybody back out onto the street, except her fellow Amazons.

Quickly closing the double doors, Gabrielle hurried back to Xena who had sat down on the table she had used for her own patients only a short time before.

The breastplate and the laces on the warrior's battledress were quickly taken care of, and as Gabrielle helped Xena take off her leathers, Alecta let out an embarrassed, braying snort that made the other, more senior Amazons turn around and stare at the gangly youth.

"How long have you been an Amazon, Alecta...?" Ephiny said, cocking her head.

"Some of us are just shy, that's all," Alecta replied with her cheeks slowly turning red. Shannai, her special friend who had surrendered at the roadblock, moved her arm around Alecta's waist and gave her a little squeeze.

Khila chuckled and slapped the young warrior on her back. "You haven't lived until you've shared the bathing hut with thirty other Amazons."

Smiling, Xena reached up to give Gabrielle's arm a little caress. "Oh, I know all about shy Amazons, Alecta... it took ages before I could persuade Gabrielle to take off her shift before bathing."

"Ha, ha," Gabrielle said as she cleaned the wound with a sponge and hot water from a bowl. "It's not as deep as I feared, love. It'll need stitches, but... yeah."

Turning around, Gabrielle hurried over to the counter and found her stitching set. As she held the needle and thread in her hands, she stopped and thought about that cold winter night where she had set out to find Xena when the warrior hadn't come back from an insignificant mission to a neighboring village. When she had finally found the warrior buried under a pile of snow more dead than alive, she'd had to really step up her game to save her.

With the memory of the very first kiss she and Xena had shared came a warm, lovely feeling that gradually flowed through her. "It happened on Winter Solstice Night... I kissed my girl in the bright moonlight..." Gabrielle said quietly, reciting the song she had heard a travelling bard sing at an event.

"What's that?" Xena said, looking at her lover.

"Oh... nothing. Okay, this will sting," Gabrielle said and went back to the undressed warrior.

While Gabrielle was working on Xena's wound, Ephiny began to chew on her cheek. "Uh... Gabrielle?" she said, scrunching up her face.

"I'm a little busy right now."

"I know, but... uh..."

"Ephiny!" Gabrielle growled, holding the needle in her hand.

The command seemed to give the curly-haired senior Amazon a kick up the backside because she suddenly stood up straight, only to go into a deep bow. "When we return to the Amazon camp, your royal hut will be ready for you in a matter of candlemarks, Queen Gabrielle."

At first, Gabrielle just stood there like a marble statue, but then her hands began to tremble ever so slightly. "Queen...?" she said hoarsely.

"You defeated the sitting Queen in a fair challenge... you're the new Queen of our tribe," Solari confirmed.

Gabrielle's hands trembled a bit more, enough for Xena to reach up and still them before the needle could get too close to her skin that was tender enough already. "Love..." the warrior said insistently.

"Uh... all right," Gabrielle said and stepped back from the wound. "Queen Gabrielle... Gabrielle, Queen of the Amazons... huh! Hey... technically, you defeated her, Ephiny."

"No," Solari interjected. "Corianyx didn't follow the rules of the challenge. She was defeated yet continued the fight. Ephiny only followed the ancient traditions by killing the defeated opponent."

Suddenly fidgeting, Alecta raised her hand in the air. "Uh... where does that leave us?" she said and pulled her friend even closer.

"Well," Gabrielle said, looking at Alecta and her special friend. "...oh, I'm sorry, I didn't catch your name?"

"Shannai, Queen Gabrielle," the young Amazon said in a husky voice that Gabrielle just knew would be a hit when the lights were out. As she was being scrutinized by her new Queen, Shannai first kept eye contact but soon remembered her manners and looked down at her boots.

"Alecta, Shannai... do you consider yourselves Amazons?" Gabrielle said, having overcome her initial surprise enough to get back to stitching the wound.

"An Amazon...? Yes. Yes, I'm an Amazon," Alecta said in a strong voice. Even as she made her declaration, she reached behind her back and sought out Shannai's hand.

"So am I, my Queen," Shannai said, taking Alecta's fingers and giving them a little squeeze.

Gabrielle looked up and noticed the sweet attention. Chuckling in a very tired fashion, she shot her new Sisters a broad smile. "Welcome to the tribe."

"Sweet Arte-... oh... uh, thank you, Queen Gabrielle. You won't regret it," Alecta said, squeezing Shannai's fingers for all they were worth. Moments later, Ephiny, Solari and Khila went over to the new recruits and congratulated them.

"Hope not," Gabrielle said under her breath. Leaning down, she clipped the suture with her teeth and tied a little knot on it. "Good as new," she said and put a warm hand on Xena's bare stomach.

When the warrior didn't reply, Gabrielle looked up to see a persistent sheen of unbridled love and pride in the ice blue orbs. Laughing out loud, Gabrielle helped Xena sit up, mindful not to stress the injury.

"I love you... Queenie..." Xena said with a wink and pulled her partner into a sideways hug.

"I love you, too... Princessie..." Gabrielle replied, husking into the warrior's ear.

"Ohhhhh! That wasn't one of your best puns, lov- MMMPF!" -- Xena was lovingly interrupted by Gabrielle who leaned in to claim her lips in a strong, warm kiss that went on and on and on...

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THE END.