

Stretching up, Gabrielle looked past Xena's shoulder at a small hill roughly four hundred yards ahead of them. "Mmm-hmmm?"

"From there, I think we'll be able to see Lavrion."

"I don't care if we're able to see Mount Olympus from there... all I know is that if I don't get a rest soon, my rear will go numb and fall off," Gabrielle grumbled, shuddering from the cold.

Five candelrips later, Gabrielle jumped off the tall, golden mare and walked around the small clearing on stiff legs, groaning loudly about the worn-down state of her hind quarters.

"Oh, I don't know, Gabrielle... it looks fairly normal from here," Xena said with a cheeky grin as she jumped down from Argo and unbuckled the saddlebags.

Matching the cheeky grin with one of her own, Gabrielle began to rub her aching behind. "It doesn't feel that way, that's for sure... ugh."

Xena put down the saddlebags next to an old, long-abandoned firepit and quickly pulled a log over to sit on. "I'll make us some tea. Go on, have a little walk in the meantime. It'll do you good," she said and sat down on the log.

"Good idea. I'll go look for Lavrion," Gabrielle said and hobbled away from the firepit.

Working efficiently, Xena reached into the saddlebags and found a kettle, two mugs, the waterskin and the dried tea leaves and put them down on the ground before getting up to collect some kindling.

"Gabrielle, would you mind reading the last scroll we got from Ephiny?" Xena said a few candelrips later as she blew on her tea to make it cool down.

"No problem," Gabrielle said and reached for the saddlebags. "Hang on, it's here somewhere... here it is. *'An orderly from one of our sister tribes has informed us that they have fought another of Licantus' raiding parties thirty leagues to the South. The raiding party was obliterated but two Sisters perished. A scroll recovered from the leader of the raiders proved to be his orders, instructing him to ignore all Amazons except the fittest and strongest. The orders were signed by Licantus himself. We have entered a state of high alert but haven't seen anything suspicious.'*"

Once she finished reading aloud, Gabrielle looked up to read Xena's expression. When the stoic warrior didn't offer an immediate response, Gabrielle rolled up the scroll and put it into her leather case that Xena had given her as a Winter Solstice present.

"Well," Xena said after a little while. "Licantus isn't looking for slaves, that much is clear now. Any slave trader worth his salt knows that it would be bordering on the insane to only snatch strong, fit Amazons. There's more here than meets the eye."

Digesting Xena's words, Gabrielle emptied her mug of tea and shook the droplets out of it. "Maybe Licantus is working for someone... to build an army of some kind?" she said as she got on her feet and began to collect their various items.

"An army consisting of feisty Amazons?"

"Yeah... I see your point. Probably not," Gabrielle said with a chuckle.

"Well, whatever is going on here, we need to get to the bottom of it... that's why we're travelling to Crete. Gabrielle, has your rear end recovered?" Xena said and got up from the log. With a smile, she pulled Gabrielle into a tender hug and placed a sweet, little kiss on the bard's pink lips.

"It has," Gabrielle replied, standing up on tip-toes to kiss Xena back. "But even so, I think I'll walk the rest of the way. It's only two or three miles, anyway."

"The road is quite rocky... I wouldn't want you to hurt a knee or an ankle..."

"Oh, I think I'll manage, Xena," Gabrielle said cheekily.

"All right. Let's get going. Like I said, the cap-"

"Captain won't wait, yeah, yeah, I got it the first time... I'm not that slow," Gabrielle said and stuffed her mug down the saddlebag.

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Once Xena and Gabrielle got going again, Ares stepped back from the portal to the world and waved his hand to make it dissolve into a pool of blood.

Turning around slowly, he admired the walls of his chamber on Mount Olympus that were decorated with colorful frescoes of the greatest mortal warriors since the dawn of time. There were several women among them, but the one that invariably caught his eye was the tall, fearsome, leather-clad icon of Xena, the Destroyer Of Nations.

She was pictured standing atop a pile of bloodied corpses, holding a sword high in the air - Ares' sword. Looking at the icon, the God of War could almost taste the victory the battle had brought; he could certainly still taste the way Xena had used him to work off her battle lust that same evening.

"Wild, unrestrained and ruthless, yet clever, disciplined and focused... that's the real Xena... not this pathetic, soft-hearted fool she has become," he said on his way over to his throne.

Sitting down, a nasty grin spread out over his dark, ruggedly handsome features. As he stroked his mustache, he began to mull over his latest devious plan - a plan that would make sure that Xena would return to fight by his side. "And she'll do it willingly," he said out loud, breaking into an evil laugh that echoed through the Halls of War.

At much the same time, four hundred miles south of Mount Olympus in a prison camp built to the east of the Cretan city Heraklion, Licantus stepped out of the senior officers' quarters and walked across a small courtyard to get to his lavishly decorated command hut.

In his late fifties, he was a tall, burly - yet surprisingly agile - man with a pockmarked face dominated by a hawkish nose and a pair of very active, dark blue, snake-like eyes that never missed a thing. His hair and full beard were both graying, but no one was crazy enough to call his advanced years a weakness.

Licantus of Crete was as cruel as his reputation made him out to be; among other things, he had been a prison camp commandant during one of the countless local wars. No stranger to whipping his prisoners to death or caning them beyond their mental breaking point, he had always taken pride in running a tight, disciplined camp. After the latest

war had been won, the camp had fallen into disuse until he had bought it from the corrupt Heraklion council who were glad to get it off their hands.

Pushing open the door to the command hut, Licantus stepped inside and took off the helmet and the heavy body armor he always wore when travelling unaccompanied. After hanging the items on nails on one of the walls, he stoked the fire in the pot-bellied stove and sat down behind a desk that was covered by maps and various scrolls.

A second later, a blue flash and a crackle of ozone heralded the arrival of the God of War who came up to stand in front of the desk with his bulging arms crossed over his chest.

"My Lord Ares," Licantus said and quickly got up from the chair. Moving into the center of the hut, the slave trader knelt down to show the proper respect.

"Rise, Licantus. How are things going at your camp?" Ares said, sitting down on the corner of the desk.

Getting back on his feet, Licantus put his hands behind his back and nodded several times in a very satisfied manner. "Very good, Lord Ares. Currently, we have ninety prisoners, but we have room for nearly three times that. I have raiding parties deployed all over Greece. It won't be long before we have a full complement for our friends from the East."

"Good. Although, I have heard stories that some of the parties have encountered stiff resistance in the shape of Amazons."

"Very true, Lord Ares. It's only to be expected. But we'll break them eventually. May I...?" Licantus said, pointing at his desk.

Getting off the corner of the desk, Ares made a sweeping gesture with his hand as he moved into the center of the command hut. "By all means, Licantus. I'm not here to slow you down," Ares said as he studied the stolen valuables and the dozens of genuine Cretan rugs and carpets that were on display in the fairly small hut. "But I'm afraid the two raiding parties due back later today will only bring you another thirty prisoners instead of the sixty you're expecting," he continued, moving over to the stove.

"Oh...?"

"It seems that your Lieutenants aren't as good as you think they are. One of them is a head shorter now than he was when he got his orders."

"Who, Lord Ares?"

"Amectus."

"That fool..." Licantus said and slammed his fist into the desk. "I knew he wasn't cut out for the job. I'm understaffed, you understand, Lord Ares. For many men, all the gold or silver they can carry isn't enough when I tell them they'll be going up against Amazons. Pah, cowards..."

Reaching into the stove, Ares scooped up a small flame and began to play with it with his bare hands. As he blew on it very gently, it flared up into a perfect image of Xena. "Indeed. However, like I've been known to say, sometimes the best man for the job is a woman," the God continued, stroking the flame with his index finger.

"I've yet to meet a woman who could wield a sword as effectively as a man," Licantus said and began to work on a scroll.

After shooting the slave trader an incredulous look, Ares leaned his head back and let out a bellowing laugh that was strong enough to quench the little flame in his hand.

"Wh- what's wrong, Lord Ares?"

"Oh, nothing. Forget it." Pausing briefly, Ares closed his eyes and used his divine insight to see what Xena was doing at that very moment. Once he opened his eyes again, he waved his hand briefly and went over to Licantus' desk. "Will you be punishing anyone for the killing of your Lieutenant?"

Licantus leaned back in his chair and chewed on the shaft of a featherless quill. "Yes, I've just sentenced four random Amazons to death by decapitation," he said, tapping the quill on the scroll. "Will that suffice, Lord Ares?"

"Oh, yes, yes. Four is such a nice, round number," Ares said and disappeared in his customary blue cloud of energy.

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"What do you mean, one hundred dinars? We shook hands on forty!" Xena hissed through clenched teeth, acting aggressive enough for the elderly captain standing in front of her to take several staggering steps backwards.

"I m-m-m-mean one hundred d-d-d-dinars, warrior. That's the p-p-p-price if you want to go to Cr-cr-cr-crete...!" the man said, visibly quaking in his boots.

Knowing what was to come, Gabrielle put a hand on Xena's elbow and led her away from the terrified captain. The two women turned around and went back up the narrow gangway they had been standing on next to the fishing boat that had been supposed to take them to Crete.

Soon, they were at the edge of the docks, looking despondently at the five vessels moored in the port of Lavrion. "Well, that's that," Xena said and pulled her winter coat tight.

Gabrielle mirrored her partner's actions and then leaned in to be heard over the noise of the busy port and the ever-present seagulls. "That captain was scared of you, but I think he's even more scared of getting on the wrong side of Licantus, Xena."

"You're probably right," Xena said and began to move away from the docks.

After they had run across a busy street, they found themselves next to a row of run-down, three-story buildings that looked like they could collapse at any moment. A steady stream of sailors and young women went in and out of the buildings, and Xena soon realized that she and Gabrielle might be able to use that to their advantage.

"Now what?" Gabrielle said, nodding towards the buildings behind them. "Should we try to rent a room for the night in one of those hotels?"

"Hmmm. Well, we could, but you wouldn't catch a wink of sleep all night, love."

"Uh... why not?"

"They're brothels."

Making a horrified face, Gabrielle jumped a foot ahead so she wouldn't be too close to the face of the building. "Oh by the Gods! All six of them?!" she exclaimed loudly, looking down the street at the remaining five houses.

"Yup."

"What in Tartarus is the world coming to...?" Gabrielle mumbled, taking a firmer grip on her staff to be ready to clobber anyone who even looked at her funny.

"I think we might be able to exploit it, actually," Xena said and began to walk slowly down the street, headed for the third of the buildings.

"How? Don't tell me we're going to pose as fallen women, Xena!"

Arriving at the third building - named Have A Jolly Good Duck - Xena held the door open for Gabrielle and pulled her inside before she realized where she was going. "No, I meant that where there's a brothel, there's usually a few Hestian missionaries who look after the women."

"Oh... by the Gods, if Mother could see me now... or Lila... I'd never hear the end of it," Gabrielle said, looking around in the hall of the brothel with eyes as wide as saucers.

Everything was held in browns and grays and it was far less flashy than she had expected. Unlike what she had heard in saucy stories from Athens or Piraeus, the hall was mostly bare with only a single, empty, chair to break the monotony.

The room was lit by four large candles that had been placed on a long counter to the right of the entrance, and at the end of the hall, a open staircase connected the ground level with the upper floors, allowing passage for a few distant sounds of squeaky springs and carnal passion.

To Xena's and Gabrielle's right, a curtain was moved aside and a surprisingly young Madam dressed in a coarse, charcoal colored dress stepped into the cone of light from the candles. "What can I do ya for? You're lucky, we only got two rooms left right now."

Once again, Gabrielle found herself staring wide-eyed at something - in this case, at the woman who didn't appear to be a day over twenty. As she ran her eyes down the other woman's body, she noticed that the Madam was holding her left arm in an unnatural position, almost like she had lost the use of it.

Noticing Gabrielle's slackjawed appearance, Xena chuckled and moved towards the young Madam. "Hey. Do you know where I can find one of the Hestians?"

"No, but I do know that neither of you gals have ever been at a convent..." the Madam said, stifling a snicker.

Gabrielle suddenly narrowed her eyes, unsure whether or not that was supposed to be taken as a compliment.

Digging into the small money pouch she carried on her belt, Xena found a five-dinar coin and flipped it to the Madam who deftly caught it with her right hand. "Very true. Do you know when one of them will swing by?"

"Not precisely, no, but I don't think it'll be long. You want a room in the mean time?" the Madam said and bit down on the coin to check its genuineness.

"No thanks, we're fine."

Finding that the coin was real, the Madam buffed it on her dress and put it into a small, hidden pouch. "Suit yourselves."

"I'm s-sorry... can I ask you a question?" Gabrielle said in a small voice. Shuffling over to the chair, she sat down and held her legs together in a very lady-like fashion.

"Sure."

"Wh-what's your name?"

"Is that your question? My name is Rubia."

"N-no, it wasn't... uh, I'm Gabrielle. Why are you working here, Rubia? I mean, there must be something more honora... more... something else for you to do?"

"Hera's tits, I'm not just working here, girl, this is my establishment!" Rubia said and made a sweeping gesture with her right arm. "I bought it fair and square when the previous owner died of syphilis."

"Syphilis... oh..." Gabrielle said and shot up from the chair.

Chuckling over the scared look on the blonde's face, Rubia decided that she appeared to be uncomfortable enough even without hearing a few saucy, exaggerated stories, so she kept them all in. "Let me guess, you're a country girl, right?"

"That's right... Potaideia. It's up north, in Thrace."

"You're a long way from home, then," Rubia said and looked to her left as the door was flung open to reveal a sailor and a prostitute. When the two people walked past the bar, the Madam nodded at the hooker and threw her a key to one of the rooms. "Number eight, Galea."

"Right. I'll pay you once he's done... in three candledrips," Galea said and let out a knowing giggle that Rubia answered with one of her own.

Gabrielle just blushed.

Before Xena had time to put a comforting hand on Gabrielle's shoulder, the door was opened again and a Hestian nun in her late forties carrying a basket with bread and medicine stepped inside and greeted the Madam.

"Hello, Sister Marcella," Rubia said before pointing at Xena and Gabrielle. "These women have been waiting for you."

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Two candlemarks later, Xena stepped out of the cabin and onto the deck of the small barge they had succeeded in hiring, and took a deep breath to fill her lungs with fresh, clean, salty air. Still wearing one of the two Hestian habits she and Gabrielle had borrowed from the missionary at the cost of a few dinars to the slender collection box, Xena certainly looked the part, dressed in white from top to toe in a robe that covered all her armor and her weapons.

After taking another deep breath, she turned around to see what was keeping Gabrielle.

Moments later, the bard came shuffling out of the cabin in a habit that was at least two sizes too large for her. Even though she had rolled her sleeves up twice, she still couldn't see her hands - but that was nothing compared to the all-covering hood that completely obscured her vision, or the broom-like effect created by the tail of her robe dragging along the dusty, filthy deck.

"By the Gods," Gabrielle grumbled on her way over to Xena.

"Well, you look... uh... cute. Let's call it that," Xena said and pulled her lover into a hug.

"I'll give you cute... Should we even be hugging? I can't see anything, but I'm sure the sailors are gawking at us, Xena," Gabrielle said somewhere underneath the impossibly large hood.

Quickly glancing at the four sailors who were indeed gawking, Xena gave Gabrielle another squeeze and said: "Nah. No one's looking at us." With those words, she sent the men a steely gaze that made all of them spin around and go back to their work.

"I'll have to take your word for it. I wonder who they made this habit for... Sister Gargantua?" Gabrielle said and tried to find her hands through the tent-like dress.

"Hmmm, yeah. At least the air is less stuffy out here than inside the cabin."

"Couldn't be more stuffy, that's a fact."

Suddenly feeling Xena tense up, Gabrielle hurriedly pulled and tugged at the large hood to see what was going on. When she was finally able to look out over the South Aegean Sea, she spotted a large ship roughly a mile to the East of them. The two-master bore a full rigging and was going a lot faster than their little barge ever could. "What's wrong, Xena? Is it something to do with that ship?"

"Yes," Xena said tersely, trying to shield her eyes from the sun so she could pick out a few more details. "It's too far away to say for sure, but the feeling in my gut tells me that it's carrying slaves. It's got that look about it."

"Oh, Sweet Aphrodite... to Licantus?"

"Probably. When we left the docks, I spotted it going into Lavrion. They must have had a very fast turnaround. I guess they have plenty of experience by now..."

"More Amazons..." Gabrielle said quietly, scrunching up her face.

"If we could only borrow the captain's looking glass," Xena said under her breath, looking to her right at the captain of the barge who was on the poop deck, observing the fast ship.

"I don't think Hestians are supposed to know what a looking glass is, Xena."

"Mmmm. Maybe we can get him to do it for us." Licking her lips, Xena briefly put an index finger against Gabrielle's shoulder to let her know that something was going to happen. "Follow my lead," she said quietly, sensing rather than seeing the nod that followed.

"I say, my good man!" Xena said in the voice she had already used when they got onboard - one that was a full octave higher than her regular velvet tones. "My good man, what is that ship over there?" she continued, covering the lower part of her face with the hood so only her bright blue eyes were visible.

Closing the looking glass, the captain gave the white-clad figure a thorough once-over before stepping down from the poop deck. "It's the Falcon, Sister. One of Licantus of Crete's ships. They're carrying slaves, I think."

"Oh, slaves! Oh, how barbaric... isn't that right, Sister Gabreena?"

Underneath her white, over-sized hood, Gabrielle narrowed her eyes and began to grumble over the cheeky pet name. "It certainly is, Sister Xeneena. It certainly is," she said, wearing a crooked grin.

"Sisters, there's no need for you to worry," the captain said, wondering about such uncharacteristic banter between two Hestians. "They're not interested in what we're doing. We'll see them again once we dock in Heraklion... well,

unless they've already left when we get there. This is only a small barge, you understand, Sister. One mast," he continued, pointing upwards at the large sail suspended from the single mast.

"Oh, we can see that," Gabrielle said somewhat flatly.

"Thank you, captain," Xena said and bowed her head. Grunting, the captain mirrored the bow and went back to work.

Leaning in, Xena nudged her elbow into Gabrielle's ribs and then put her hands on the bard's shoulders to steer her back to the cabin. "Gabrielle, I'm not sure whether or not Hestians are allowed to know about looking glasses... but I'm positive they don't know about sarcasm."

"Sorry," Gabrielle said as she came to a stop in the door to the cabin, trying to move aside the huge curtain she was wearing so she could see her feet.

"What are you doing?" Xena whispered.

"Trying to find my feet! I don't feel like falling down any stairs today!"

Chuckling, Xena simply grabbed Gabrielle around the waist and carried her down the stairs, earning herself a squeal in the process. Once she had put the bard down in the center of the small room, she folded her hood back and reached into their saddlebags to find a knife and a fresh apple.

"Uh, thank you," Gabrielle said, working hard to find the leading edge of the dress so she could take it off. After trying for a candel drip, she gave up and sat down with a bump and a sigh on the edge of the bunk.

Cutting the apple, Xena's skin suddenly began to crawl - a feeling she knew all too well. "We're being watched... by Ares," she said quietly.

"Oh no, not again... why can't he just leave us alone?" Gabrielle said, slamming her fist into the lumpy mattress she was sitting on.

"Because I love to see what you puny, little humans do with your pathetic lives," the God of War said in a booming voice as he materialized in the center of the small cabin. "My, my, Xena... white is so not your color," he said when he spotted Xena's robe.

"Stay out of our business, Ares."

"What is your business, exactly? Did you really think you could waltz into Licantus' camp and tell him to release the Amazon prisoners? That sounds like something your little garden gnome girlfriend here has cooked up in a henbane high," Ares said and pointed his thumb at Gabrielle.

Gabrielle instantly flushed beet root red and bit down hard on her lips to stop herself from speaking her mind. Feeling Xena's eyes on her, she looked up and shared a look of love that made Ares' words go down easier.

"We weren't going to ask him," Xena said, taking off her white robe.

"Mmmm. It's still a ridiculous plan. Oh, I have a great idea... how about I created an army for you to command? Just five, ten, fifteen thousand men...? That way you could roll over Licantus like a tidal wave. Now that would be a sight for sore eyes."

"I thought Licantus was one of yours, Ares?"

"Oh, he is," the God said with a nasty grin playing on his lips.

Getting a brief case of the shivers, Xena made a face at the God and turned away from him. "Thanks, but no thanks. Gabrielle and I will do just fine on our own."

Ares looked back at Gabrielle and let out such a condescending laugh that the bard flushed beet root red all over again. "Uh-huh... sure. Luckily for you, I have already informed Licantus of your impending arrival. Oh... I love it when you look at me like that, Xena," Ares said off the steely gaze Xena flashed him.

"Ares..." Xena said in a guttural growl that left no doubt as to what she really felt for the leather-clad God of War.

"Just to up the stakes a bit more," Ares said and grabbed hold of Gabrielle, prompting Xena to draw her Chakram and sneer at the God. "Oh, I see you haven't forgotten everything I taught you."

"Xena..." Gabrielle cried out, struggling in vain to break free of the God's strong hand.

"Let her go, you rotten creep!"

Keeping a firm grip on Gabrielle, Ares turned around and flashed Xena a broad grin. "Charming. No, here's what I have in mind. I'm going to take Gabrielle with me. It's up to you where we'll be going, Xena."

"Up to me?" Xena said hoarsely.

"Yes. Your reaction will determine her fate. Oh, isn't this cozy?" Ares said and gave Gabrielle a hard shake. "Come on, Xena, I'm waiting... what does this little girl really mean to you? Don't forget, her life depends on your answer."

At those words, Gabrielle began to shiver and she couldn't hold back a small groan that only seemed to spur on the God even more.

Hearing her lover's heartfelt reaction, a red spark of anger ignited deep inside Xena; rapidly growing in strength, it soon sent an avalanche of fire through her system, causing her to grip her Chakram so tightly that her knuckles turned white. As her anger reached its climax, her face was contorted into a wolf-like mask of pure hatred towards Ares and all his wretched games.

Xena's raw, unadulterated rage streamed off her in waves, prompting Ares to close his eyes and let the Warrior Princess' fire recharge his batteries. "Oooooooh, Xena... THAT'S what I'm talkin' about! OH YEAH! That wasn't so hard, was it? Great answer, by the way. I was really worried that you were going to break down into a blubbing mess, begging me to spare your cute, little lover. Of course, if you had, I would have thrown the garden gnome into the Aegean Sea from thirty thousand feet... or possibly into the crater of an active volcano. Wouldn't that have been fun?" Ares said, giving Gabrielle another hard shake that made her whimper again.

Turning back to Xena, Ares' dark eyes sparkled brightly, showing that he was enjoying the situation a bit too much. "But you didn't break down. Instead, you reacted like a true warrior. And now, I'm going to be real nice to your girlfriend. Instead of killing her on the spot, I'll deliver her in a neatly wrapped package... to Licantus. Bye, Xena," Ares said and waved his hand.

"XEN-!" Gabrielle screamed, but she and the God vanished before she had time to utter the entire word.

Roaring loudly, Xena jumped forward to try to follow the God through the void, but she wasn't fast enough, and she only grasped at empty air.

Despite a steady backdrop of waves hitting the bow and the many creaks and groans emanating from the old barge, the silence in the cabin was deafening. Thinking about Gabrielle's fate at the hands of the brutal slave trader made an ice cold sense of fear grab hold of Xena's heart, but she forced herself to push everything else away and concentrate on the task at hand.

After taking a few deep breaths of the stale, stuffy air in the cabin, Xena hooked the Chakram back onto her belt and left the cabin to ask the captain to hoist every sail he had.

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CHAPTER 2

Six candlemarks later.

Jumping off the barge's railing even before the dock workers had secured the ship to the pier, Xena strode purposefully up the torch-lit gangway carrying a small bag with the things she and Gabrielle had chosen to take along for the voyage.

Once on dry land, Xena looked left and right to find someone who could tell her the way to Licantus' stronghold, but the darkness prevented even her keen eyes from seeing much. Where her eyes failed her, her ears came to her rescue, and she was soon striding towards a tavern that - judging by the loud music and the sounds of men laughing - appeared to be the small harbor town's main attraction.

Moving through a pair of swinging doors, she looked around at the typical mess of drunken men throwing dice and drinking ale, and scantily clad women who were serving the barflies or attempting to writhe about to the disharmonic tones coming from a band of drunken musicians.

The stench of unwashed people and stale ale made Xena's nostrils flare, but the fire within her was strong enough to overcome such trivialities.

Ignoring the curious looks some of the patrons were sending her, she kept her hand near her Chakram and moved up to the bar.

"Ale," she said, waving the bartender over to her. She reached into her money pouch and found a few coins that she threw down on the counter while she waited for the man to react.

"For that, you can only get a small mug," the bartender said - a flabby man in his late forties with watery eyes and a full, unkempt beard.

"Then a small ale. C'mon."

"All right, all right. By Ares' balls, the wimmenfolk around here..." the bartender mumbled to himself as he poured a mugful from the keg.

Putting down the mug, he quickly scooped up the coins and let them disappear into a metal box.

Xena briefly tasted the ale and found it to be as watery as the bar keep's eyes. *'Well, I've paid for it, I might as well drink it,'* she thought and took a healthy swig.

"What's your name, warrior?" the bartender said, trying to make it sound like he wasn't really interested in the answer.

"What's it to you?"

"Nothing. Are you working for Licantus?"

"None of your beeswax," Xena said and turned away from the bar keep. Leaning against the bar, she took another swig from the watery ale.

"I hear he's looking for new muscle. You look like you would fit that description... 's all."

That caught Xena's attention and she turned back around and gulped down the rest of the ale, leaning in just enough to make her appear interested in what the man had to say. "Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"I might give it some thought. Where's his castle?"

Chuckling, the bartender took the empty mug and put it on a shelf underneath the counter without even wiping it off. "He doesn't have one. He's running a prison camp some eight leagues east of here. On the Spinalonga peninsula, near Kolokitha."

"I'll find it."

"Ah, that's the easy part. Just follow the main road to the east. Ya can't miss it."

"Right. Where can I rent or buy a horse?" Xena said, suddenly sensing movement behind her.

"At this time of night? Forget it, warrior. Besides, they'll be too busy sorting the new prisoners that arrived earlier today to have time to be friendly." With those words, the bartender moved away from Xena, looking over her shoulder at someone who was sneaking up on her.

"Hmmm," Xena said, furrowing her brow. Trying to get the timing just right, she held her breath and tightened her muscles. At the very last moment, she spun around and put the pinch on a short man whose long, slender fingers had already gripped her money pouch.

Letting out a gurgling cry, the man - an ugly, wiry fellow of indeterminate age and origin - collapsed to his knees, clutching his throat.

As Xena withdrew her fingers from the man's neck, the tavern fell silent.

"You weren't trying to steal my money, were you?" she purred.

Gurgling incoherently, the wiry man shook his head vigorously.

"I think you were. In case you don't know the drill, I've cut off the flow of blood to your brain... you'll be dead in thirty seconds. Of course, that's counting from when I applied it. I'll give you fifteen seconds now. Maybe ten."

When a thin stream of blood slowly ran down the man's upper lip, his eyes popped wide open and he gurgled even louder.

"But I'm not in a killing mood today, so..." Xena said and stabbed her fingers back into the man's neck to take off the pinch. As the man fell backwards, Xena drew her sword and thumped the hilt down onto the man's forehead, causing his eyes to roll back in his head.

Looking around, Xena locked eyes with each and every one of the other barflies to send them a silent message that if they wanted to get killed, all they had to do was to attack her.

Wisely paying attention to the warrior's steely, no-nonsense gaze, the others chose to stay out of the conflict.

"To save us all a lot of trouble, just tell me where I can find a Gods-be-damned horse," Xena growled at the bartender who had come back, looking fairly pale.

Standing up straight, the bartender pointed out of the door with a shaking finger. "The stables are down the street. There's always someone there..."

"Thanks. That wasn't so hard, was it?" Xena said and stepped over the unconscious thief on her way over to the swinging doors. The last she heard before she left the tavern was a muted, *'You'll fit right in with Licantus, wench!'*

A candlemark later, Xena was well on her way to Licantus' prison camp, cursing the lazy beast she had been forced to take - the nag she was riding was the only one left in the stables.

The road ahead was only lit up by the full moon, so whenever a cloud raced past the silvery disk, she and the beast momentarily lost track of the directions. Combined with the laziness of the horse, this meant that it was tough going and she wished dearly she'd found a way to get Argo to come with them on the barge.

As she crested one of the numerous rocky hills, faint orange lights in the far distance showed very clearly how far she still had to go. Cursing again, she tried to nudge her boots into the horse's sides, but the slow beast didn't pay any attention to her.

Another two candlemarks later, Xena dismounted the stubborn horse and began to pull it along the road, feeling right away that she wasn't traveling that much slower on foot.

Looking at the position of the moon, she calculated that it was well past midnight, which meant that she would reach the camp on someone's dogwatch - she hoped it would mean that she'd meet a lower ranking officer at the gate.

Roughly seven hundred yards from the entrance to the imposing prison camp, a shock of white lying in a ditch off to the right caught her eye and she steered the reluctant horse over to it.

Reaching the item, Xena knew instantly that it was the white habit Gabrielle had been wearing when Ares had taken her, only now it was splattered with blood. A pair of dark brown leather boots stuck out from the lower hem of the habit; completely still, the lump in the ditch was obviously a dead body lying face down.

Clenching her jaw, Xena let go of the horse's reins and knelt down next to the corpse, feeling a numbing sense of fear flow over her. After taking a deep, shaky breath, she pulled the white cover back to try to see the face of the person in the dim moonlight.

When she realized it wasn't Gabrielle, she thanked Aphrodite and the rest of the benign Olympians for their mercy and let out a long, heartfelt sigh that created a plume of white steam that floated away into the chilly night.

With the intense fright slowly leaving her, Xena's analytical mind returned and she could see that the victim was an Amazon in her late twenties. She had several deep red bruises on her face, a large gash across her upper left arm and a deep, untreated - potentially fatal - puncture wound in the center of her back, seemingly the result of being hit by a spear or a javelin.

The Amazon's hands and legs were free but angry red stripes around her wrists and ankles showed that she had been part of a chain gang. Deciding to let the Amazon rest in dignity, Xena put the white cover back over her face.

Standing up and looking ahead, Xena could see the dark, foreboding prison camp stretching out for several hundred yards on either side of the road. The road itself came to an end at the main entrance which was framed by two watch towers, each lit up by four torches.

Further watch towers had been erected along the tall, wooden fence that surrounded the entire perimeter, all connected through a system of gangways fastened just above the upper level of the fence. Here and there, soldiers were shuffling back and forth atop the gangway, some looking out at the road, some looking in.

Xena scrunched up her face, thinking that it was a very impressive camp - and thinking that Ares had been right. Whatever their original battle plan had been, it had been a foolish attempt at getting something without knowing all the facts.

Steeling her resolve, Xena took the horse's reins and began to walk towards the camp's main entrance, hoping the guards didn't have orders to shoot on sight.

As she got closer to the entrance, she decided that it was better to be pro-active than to pull an arrow from her gut, so she put two fingers in her mouth and let out a piercing whistle.

"Ahoy, camp!" she shouted to get the sentries' attention - it worked. Moments later, the soldiers atop the gangways began to shout to each other and cover her with crossbows.

'Halt! Who goes there? Identify yourself!' a deep, rusty voice said from behind the sturdy double doors.

"I am Ralna of Mytilene. I'm here to see Licantus of Crete!" Xena said loudly in the tone of voice she had used to great effect when she had been commanding her own army.

When the only reply was silence, she began to think that she might not get in after all, but then the double doors were forced open by a group of soldiers.

An officer dressed in crimson leathers, dirt brown body armor and a dull metal helmet that covered most of his face took one of the torches and came out to greet Xena.

"Good evening, Ralna of Mytilene, I'm Colonel Iacobius of Athens, the senior watch commander. I must say, we're quite surprised to see you at this time of night. Have you traveled here alone?"

In his late forties, Iacobius was a tall and well-built man whose callused hands had seen more than their fair share of action. His hair was hidden by the helmet, but the well-groomed nature of his sandy beard gave away that he was a cut above many of the other people Xena had met who had called themselves officers.

As the man came closer, Xena gathered from his stance and the intelligent look in his blue eyes that he was an experienced soldier who wouldn't be fooled by a cock-and-bull story, so she decided to stick close to the truth.

Easily falling back into her old mannerisms, she assumed a suitably arrogant expression on her face and put her hands on her hips to make her shoulders appear twice as broad under her coarse, black winter coat.

"Alone with a miserable excuse for a horse, yes," Xena said, nodding at the nag. "I'm here to see Licantus. I have a business proposition for him."

"Oh?"

"Yes. I ran into one of his raiding parties up north... it was led by the least capable soldier I've ever met. It wasn't a surprise to me when I heard he ended up bled dry and fed his own balls for breakfast."

"Did you happen to catch his name?"

"Carminius."

"Carminius? Hmmm, that was several moons ago, Ralna. What have you been doing since then?"

"Chasing Amazons."

"Have you now? Did you kill any of them?" Iacobius said, cocking his head.

"Now why would I do that when there's a profit to be made?"

"True. I assume that's what you want to talk to Licantus about?"

"Yes."

"Hmmm." The officer took a step back and held the torch so he could get a better look at Xena. "Where did you say you were from?"

"Mytilene, by way of Thrace. Are we quite done squalling? I heard that Licantus was someone to make deals with. I'm here to offer my services as an experienced hunter of men... and women."

Nodding, Iacobius turned around and began to walk back towards the entrance. "Come with me," he said, waving his hand to get Xena to follow him.

"So this is Licantus' famed prison camp?" Xena said as she and Iacobius went past several rows of low, thatched huts. From what Xena could gather in the darkness, the camp consisted of at least twenty buildings; twelve barracks for prisoners, four huts for the regular soldiers, two huts for the officers, a mess hut and a command hut at the far end of the camp. Even though she could hear horses, she couldn't see any so she deduced that the stables were on the other side of the barracks.

"Yes. He didn't build it, of course. He's merely the latest owner," Iacobius said, still holding the torch.

On their way up a wide, gravelly path, they went past a stinking waste pit and an area Xena could only describe as a playground for the sadistic - a gallows, a recently used chopping block, a wooden cage in a deep pit and two crosses, one in the regular shape and one shaped like an X.

A naked Amazon was hanging on the X-shaped cross, very clearly dead.

Even Xena felt a shiver running up and down her spine at the gruesome sight; judging by the color of the Amazon's skin, she had been dead for several days and Xena knew that Licantus had kept her there as a warning to the other prisoners.

Shivering again, Xena's heart grew heavy when she thought about Gabrielle's reaction to discovering the corpse on the cross. Thinking about her lover made her sixth sense kick into action and she turned her head to study the barracks opposite the main path.

In one of the windows of what she thought might be the mess hut, she was able to spot a shock of strawberry red moving around, but it was too brief for her to know for sure.

"Colonel Iacobius, wait a 'drip," Xena said, stopping outside the mess hut.

"Didn't you say you wanted to talk to Licantus?" Iacobius said, turning around and holding the torch so it shone on both of them.

"Yes, but my hunger is greater than my need for dinars. Where can I find a bunk for the night and someone to keep me company? Preferably a redhead."

Chuckling at the direct language, Iacobius pointed at the mess hut. "I'm sure you'll be able to satisfy both those needs in the mess. Some of the prisoners brought in today weren't warriors but young girls."

"Yeah? How young?"

"Late teens, but some younger than that. Skinny little kittens most of 'em. Wouldn't last a candledrip in the arena... girls that soft are only good for cookin' and fuckin'. You should be able to find someone to help you with your hunger," the Colonel said and let out an amused little chuckle.

'Arena...?' Xena thought, furrowing her brow. *I wonder if that's Licantus' plan... to round up fighters for some kind of tournament...?* "Well. Sounds promising. Thank you, Iacobius. I'll speak with Licantus in the morning," Xena said and strode towards the mess hut.

"You're welcome, Ralna of Mytilene," the Colonel said, admiring the warrior's purposeful walk from a safe distance.

Despite the lateness of the hour, the mess hut was bustling with activity. At least ten junior Amazons dressed in suede or buckskin were busy dunking plates into a huge bowl of water, wiping them off and putting them into large cupboards.

Xena quickly realized that most of them were teenagers or even younger, probably no more than twelve or thirteen summers; too young for even their rites of passage. Some of them appeared to have been crying and they all looked miserable and homesick.

Walking away from the doorway, Xena kept her hands on her hips, knowing full well that the juniors would be frightened witless by her imposing figure. It pained her to see the fear in their eyes as they glanced at her sideways, but a part of her knew that it would be for the best - she wouldn't want to instill a false sense of hope into them before she knew what she'd be able to accomplish.

The split second she opened her mouth to ask one of the girls for some food, a very familiar figure in a pea-green top and a rust brown skirt turned a corner and came into the kitchen holding another stack of dirty dishes.

For several heartbeats, Xena and Gabrielle just stared at each other with bated breaths, wishing they were alone. Once the initial shock at seeing one another had passed, both women felt a yoke being lifted from their shoulders - they knew that together, they'd be able to deal with anything Ares or Licantus could throw at them.

Xena quickly assumed an arrogant, aloof expression, looking down her nose at the bard who realized at once that they needed to play a charade to keep everyone safe.

"Warrior?" Gabrielle said and put the stack of dirty dishes into the bowl of water.

"My name is Ralna of Mytilene. I was told I could get something to eat here," Xena said coolly.

"I'm Gabrielle of Potaideia, I'm the temporary mistress of the kitchen. Follow me, please," Gabrielle said and took a loaf of pasty bread and a jug of wine before leaving for the seating area of the mess hut.

Gabrielle went past the first few rows of benches - the men from the raiding parties that had kept them occupied in the kitchen had all finished eating - before she sat down at a bench where she was sure no one could eavesdrop on them.

As Xena sat down opposite her, Gabrielle broke off a piece of bread and poured some of the wine into a cup that was already on the table. "Here you go... uh, Ralna," she said and pushed the cup across the table. "It's really weak so you can drink some of it to make it believable," she said quietly, looking around to see if they really were alone.

"Thank you," Xena said and took a healthy swig of the wine. "Thank the Gods you're safe... I'm sorry that I... that I couldn't stop him from taking you," she continued, grabbing hold of Gabrielle's hand and giving it an almighty squeeze.

"Don't worry about that now. Believe it or not, Ares was actually fairly accommodating. Like I said, he made me the mistress of the kitchen... it could have been far, far worse. By the Gods, uh, Ralna... this camp is Tartarus on Earth... did you see that poor Amazon on the cross?"

Xena nodded as she took a large bite out of the bread - the first thing she had eaten since lunch. "Yeah," she said, chewing energetically on the salty, pasty bread.

"I haven't met Licantus yet, but he must be a real animal. No wonder he's one of Ares' men."

"What happened when you got here...? I saw your white habit out on the road and I thought that... that... never mind," Xena said, trying to hide her discomfort by taking another swig from the cup.

Gabrielle - as ever in tune with her lover's mood - offered Xena a small smile and gave her callused hand a little squeeze. "I had been here for a couple of candlemarks when a runner came to the camp reporting that the slave traders were on their way. The kitchen staff were sent out to intercept them and help shepherd the prisoners into the barracks. There were roughly forty of them, but ten were juniors and one of the adult warriors had lost too much blood to survive. We tried to help her, but... she was just too weak."

"Did you recognize any of the new Amazons?"

"No. But I overheard two officers mentioning that Licantus was very, very annoyed when he discovered that a large part of the new prisoners were just kids. All those junior Amazons working in the kitchen now were in the second group, captured by a Lieutenant called Tiresias."

Leaning in, Gabrielle lowered her voice as she spoke the next sentence: "He's a glorified windbag if you ask me. All bluster and no guts. You'll know exactly what I mean when you meet him."

Xena chuckled and emptied the last of the wine.

"I'm glad I was able to talk him and another Lieutenant into letting them work here... By the Gods, Ralna, when I had to go to the waste pit earlier, I found four Amazons down there... they... they had been... been-" Unable to finish the sentence, Gabrielle moved an index finger across her throat to illustrate what she meant.

Grimacing, Xena suddenly lost her appetite and pushed the last of the bread away. "That's what we're fighting, Gabrielle. Don't forget-"

Behind Gabrielle, the door was suddenly opened and Colonel Iacobius stepped inside. Taking off his helmet, he went up to the table Xena and Gabrielle were sitting at, grinning at the sight. "I see you've found what you were looking for, Ralna. Food and a redhead."

"I got the first part, still working on the second," Xena replied cockily.

"Oh, that shouldn't be too hard to get, should it? Anyway, I came to tell you that I've secured a bunk for you in the junior officer's quarters, that's the second of the two huts. Of course, you'll be sharing with the men there... might not be to your liking?"

"I'll take it anyway it comes," Xena said and got up from the table. Sending Gabrielle a non-verbal message to play along, Xena reached down, put her hand under the bard's chin and raised it in a coarse manner - in reality, Gabrielle did it all herself. "I'll see you tomorrow. If I catch you fooling around with anyone else, you'll taste my sword... you understand?"

"I understand, warrior. I'm all yours," Gabrielle said, pretending to cower meekly at the table.

"Good. Lead the way, Colonel Iacobius," Xena said and left the table.

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Xena was only allowed four candlemarks of sleep before she was rudely awoken at first light by someone kicking her bunk. By the time the mysterious stranger pulled his leg back to kick the bunk for a second time, Xena was on her feet, pressing the Chakram against the man's crotch. "Go ahead, kick my bunk again," she said in an appropriately hoarse whisper.

The man took a step back but didn't lose the cocky smile he had on his lips.

Looking at the officer, it didn't take long for Xena to understand that it was the Lieutenant Gabrielle had mentioned in their brief conversation that night - the glorified windbag.

The officer was in his mid-twenties, baby-faced and looking like he wasn't able to grow a decent beard yet apart from a pencil-thin mustache on his upper lip.

His body armor wasn't dirt brown like those of his fellow officers, it was golden and shone brightly from hours of polishing. His crimson leather uniform was the same as everyone else's, but he had inserted golden ribbons here and there to make himself stand out in the crowd.

"Lieutenant Tiresias, I presume?" Xena said as she hooked the Chakram back on her belt.

"That's right. And you're Ralna of Mytilene. That's on Lesbos, right? Explains everything," Tiresias said with a snicker.

"Does it now?"

"Yes. May I ask, why are you here?"

"I'm here to offer my services to Licantus."

"As a warrior?" Tiresias said in a rather condescending tone.

"What else?"

"Oh, I don't know. You're too old to be a whore."

"Are you always this charming?" Xena said and moved into Tiresias' personal space on purpose.

Squirming backwards from the warrior's powerful presence, Tiresias narrowed his eyes and put his hand on the hilt of the sword he had on his hip. "Oh, I can be very charming when I feel like it. If you're here to work for Licantus, it could mean you're aiming for my job. I won't allow that. I challenge you to a bout of swordplay, Ralna. Winner gets to live. How about it?"

"A duel before breakfast? How quaint," Xena said, fluffed her winter coat and wrapped it over her shoulders. Standing up straight, she noticed with some satisfaction that she was a few inches taller than the pompous Lieutenant.

"Does that mean you'll accept my challenge?"

Rolling her eyes, Xena tried to find a solution that wouldn't involve bloodshed, but realized that it was already inevitable. "Look... Tiresias... I'm only here to apply for a job. Who knows if Licantus will even hire me?"

"Oh, he'll hire you all right... you do know, woman, that your reluctance to fight me is a sign of your cowardice...?"

Xena wasn't in the least stung by the officer's bluster, but she knew that she'd draw unwanted attention to herself if she defeated one of Licantus' Lieutenants as her first task, so she decided to back down. "I'm not going to fight you, Tiresias. Now if you'll excuse me, I need to speak with your master and get something to eat."

With those words, she brushed past the officer who kept standing at Xena's bunk, wearing a gobsmacked expression on his face.

Three candelrips later, Xena knocked on the door to Licantus' office. When she heard a gruff voice call '*Enter!*' she opened it and stepped inside.

"Good morning, Sire, I'm Ralna of Mytilene," Xena said on her way up to a desk, getting her first ever look of the pockmarked, snake-like Licantus of Crete. "I'm here to offer my services as a slave hunter."

"Mmmm?" Licantus said and put down a quill. Leaning back in his chair, he studied the imposing warrior closely. "Can you handle a sword?" he continued, running his eyes up the warrior's body, stopping at one or two strategically important spots.

"I can, Sire."

"Why have you come to us? I'm sure there are others who can use swordsmen."

"While in Thrace on business, I heard stories about your raiding parties. Or rather, about their lack of efficiency."

"Mmmm! True, unfortunately. Have you ever captured Amazons?"

"Yes," Xena said darkly, thinking back to her days as Ares' champion where she rolled through the Northern Amazons like the plague, leaving behind only death and destruction.

A loud crackle of thunder and a bright blue flash heralded the arrival of the God of War. Once fully materialized, Ares turned to Xena and saluted her. "I can vouch for that, Licantus."

Clenching her jaw, Xena stared daggers at the God, but he shrugged it off with a grin.

"You see... Ralna here was once my champion," Ares continued, walking up to stand behind Xena.

"Oh, really, Lord Ares? So she's the one you were talking about yesterday?" Licantus said and got up from his chair to get a closer look at the dark-haired warrior.

"Yes, she is."

Scratching his hawkish nose, Licantus broke out in a wide, nasty grin as he took in the female figure standing before him. "Very good. All right, Ralna, you're hired. If you fail an assignment, I'll behead you myself."

"Sounds fair enough," Xena said and clasped arms with the brutal commandant.

"Trouble awaits, Xena," Ares whispered into Xena's ear as the two of them left Licantus' hut. Turning the corner to go into the small square between the huts, Xena immediately saw what Ares meant.

Gabrielle had been forced down onto her knees on the dirt path, with Tiresias standing behind her, gripping her harshly and holding a sword across her throat.

"Hello, Ralna," Tiresias said in a condescending voice. "We have unfinished business, you and I. Colonel Iacobius told me that you and this redhead made an arrangement last night. I wouldn't mind having a go at her myself, actually. She doesn't look as disease-ridden as some of the scarecrows here, so... let's duel. Winner gets to fuck the slave."

"Now that's what I call a challenge," Ares whispered, clapping Xena's rear end before vanishing in his customary blue cloud.

Xena cast off her winter coat and moved closer to the two people. Around them, a few officers and several soldiers had circled the soon-to-be fighters, hoping to see a bit of action.

"Tiresias, I'm giving you a chance to reconsider," Xena said in a steely tone as she drew her sword. "Trust me, you don't want to make me mad."

Grinning from ear to ear, Tiresias pushed Gabrielle aside and made a few figure-eights in the air with his sword. "Fine by me. I just want to make you very, very dead."

Xena twirled her sword a couple of times and then crouched down to go into an offensive stance. Locking eyes with Gabrielle, she sent her a silent message that everything would be fine.

Gabrielle nodded and pulled herself as far away from the two fighters as she could.

Feeling that it was high time to fight, the pompous Lieutenant roared loudly and jumped forward with his sword high in the air - Xena avoided him easily and stepped aside to let him blast past her, much to the amusement of the spectators.

Tiresias spun around and attacked Xena again, coming at her with a series of thrusts and wild swings; going in deep, he tried to run her through, but all he succeeded in doing was to have his sword kicked out of his hand by Xena's right boot.

Xena calmly stepped back to let the Lieutenant pick up his sword, earning herself a few muted laughs from the audience.

Grumbling loudly, Tiresias grabbed his sword and made a new figure eight to show that he wasn't frightened of the warriorress. Roaring again, he jumped forward and attacked her with a new series of thrusts and wild swings.

Xena effortlessly blocked his attack, but she had to admit that he was better than she had expected. After blocking yet another series of attacks, she grew tired of the needless nonsense and decided to end the duel.

Going on the offensive, Xena slammed the flat side of her sword down on the Lieutenant's arm, stunning him and forcing him to drop his blade. Moving in deep, she performed a backwards flip and kicked him in the chest and face with both boots, sending him sprawling onto the dirt.

Even before the officer had come to a rest, Xena knelt down next to him and pressed the hilt of her sword against his windpipe. "I suggest you yield, Tiresias," she said hoarsely.

"Never! That was unfair! I said a sword fight, not that kicking business! I demand a second chance...!" he said, wiggling to break free of her grip.

Pushing his way through the crowd, Licantus entered the fighting circle and folded his arms across his chest. "You don't deserve a second chance, Tiresias. Kill him, Ralna."

"But Licantus!" the Lieutenant howled, trying even harder to wiggle free.

"With all due respect, Sire. I'm not here to kill our allies," Xena said, pulling slightly back from Tiresias but keeping her sword near his throat.

"He's of no use to me. I demand you kill him... or you'll die in his place," Licantus said gruffly.

Before Xena had time to come up with a solution to the unsolvable problem, a red line raced across Tiresias' throat from his right to his left ear, just below her sword. A split second later, the line opened up and sent a thick spray of blood out over her arm and down Tiresias' shiny body armor.

To a chorus of gasps from the watching crowd, Lieutenant Tiresias' eyes popped wide open when he realized that his throat had been slit. Gurgling grotesquely, he tried to seal the horrible wound with his hands, but the blood just continued to pour out of him. After a few seconds, his eyes rolled back in his head and he became still.

Behind Licantus, Ares appeared wearing an impossibly nasty grin.

When Xena noticed, her skin started to crawl and she looked up to find Gabrielle, hoping that the bard had seen the exact sequence of events - but much to her dismay, Gabrielle was walking away on unsteady legs.

"Well done, Ralna," Licantus said, helping Xena on her feet. "A messy way to do it, but well done. You've earned your place at my side. Welcome to the family," he continued, slapping Xena's shoulder.

"Thank you, Sire," Xena croaked, trying to see where Gabrielle went. After cleaning her arm and her blade on Tiresias' uniform, she rose, picked up her winter coat and followed Gabrielle over to the mess hut.

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CHAPTER 3

"Gabrielle, wait," Xena said, putting her hand on her partner's arm just as they were about to enter the mess hut. Looking behind her, she could see that although most of the crowd had dissipated, a few soldiers were still lurking so she had to play it much lower-key than she would have wanted.

Pulling herself away from the warrior, Gabrielle stepped inside the hut and turned into the kitchen. "Please don't touch me right now, Xena. Not... not after you killed that man like that."

"I didn't. It was all Ares," Xena said quietly.

Gabrielle shot Xena a quizzical look as she put on an apron. "But your sword was right there, Xena. You moved it back and slit his throat. All right, he was a windbag, but he didn't deserve to die like that."

"I agree, but you heard Licantus... if Tiresias hadn't died, he would have turned everyone on me. That wouldn't have helped us either, would it?"

"So now you're saying you did kill him?" Gabrielle said, pointing at Xena with a large wooden spoon.

Instead of speaking, Xena pulled Gabrielle into a hug. After a few seconds, she felt the bard relax in her arms, something she was grateful for. "No, Gabrielle... it was Ares," she said, caressing Gabrielle's hair. "But I will kill anyone who threatens you, anyone at all..." she continued in a whisper.

"Thank you. Well, thank you for wanting to protect me... I hope that in those situations, we can find a way to resolve it by talking instead of killing."

"I'll try, but I can't make any promises," Xena said and kissed Gabrielle's forehead.

Behind them, a young, shy-looking Amazon of no more than twelve summers came into the kitchen, clutching her hands in front of her stomach. "Mistress Gabrielle...?" she said in a tiny voice.

"Hello, Cheris. Is anything wrong?" Gabrielle said and moved away from the hug.

"My mother told me to work in the kitchen today."

"Oh, I don't really have anything for you to do right now..." Looking around, Gabrielle spotted a large ceramic bowl and a jar of flour. "Tell you what, how about you and me bake some bread...?"

When the young Amazon nodded, Xena assumed her steely gaze and turned towards Gabrielle. "That's not a job for a warrior. I'll be back later and check up on my investment."

"All right, Ralna. Too many cooks, you know..." Gabrielle said and winked at Xena.

On her way out of the kitchen, Xena stopped just out of sight when she heard the young Amazon say: *'Mistress Gabrielle, my mother told me I should come back and warn them if one of the guards came too close to their hut... is that black warrior one of them...?'*

'Yes, Cheris, she is. But you don't have to tell your mother about her. Ralna and I have a little agreement...' Gabrielle answered in a friendly voice.

Digesting the junior Amazon's words, Xena furrowed her brow and began to chew on her cheek. As she left the mess hut and went over to the junior officer's quarters, it didn't take her long to connect the dots.

'If the Amazons want to be warned of approaching guards, it can only mean they're planning something... Sweet Athena, they'll be slaughtered,' Xena thought and picked up the pace.

After taking off her coat and throwing it on the bunk, Xena sat down at the foot end and reached for her bag. It didn't take her long to find her whetstone and a rag, and she quickly began sharpening her sword to remove the nicks and dents it had received in the brief fight against Tiresias.

Working with the whetstone always made her mind roam freely, and she began to think about their situation, how they could free the Amazons without losing too many to Licantus' men, and whether or not she should worry about some of Tiresias' friends wanting to avenge his death.

Xena looked around the utilitarian quarters for junior officers, trying to remember if she had heard the names of the other people using it as their base. The hut wasn't particularly large, only seventy by twenty feet, but there were twelve bunks in there - her own, Tiresias' and ten more. Each position had a footlocker and a small table at opposite ends of the bunk, but none of them had any personal items on display.

Re-focusing on the whetstone, she sighed and found herself wishing she could travel like the Gods - if she'd be able to go anywhere in the Known World simply by waving her hand or snapping her fingers, she could take Gabrielle out of harms' way at the first signs of trouble.

"Awww... how cute," Ares said, suddenly emerging on the bunk opposite Xena. "You know, I think it's SO cute how you try to protect the strawberry blonde chick. She's almost like a pet hamster to you, isn't she? I had a pet once. His name was Cerberus. He was such a lovely puppy... he always ate hamsters for breakfast. Now he just eats people."

Looking up, Xena shot Ares a few Evil Eyes but they just bounced off the God's natural slickness.

Undaunted, Ares got up from the bunk and strutted around in the hut. "My my, you're really good at that... you can polish my sword any day, Xena."

"No thanks, Ares," Xena growled.

"Suit yourself," Ares said, buffing his fingernails on his black leather vest. "So, you'd like to travel like the Gods, do ya? Well, I have the means to get that done. It's just a little thing and you'll hardly feel it."

Putting away her whetstone and her rag, Xena got up and twirled the sword a couple of times. Satisfied with the result, she put it into her scabbard and turned to face the God. "I'm not interested in your offers of immortality, Ares. I've lost count of the number of times I've told you."

"So have I. But I have some news for you, Xena... oh, I don't know if I should even tell you," Ares said, wearing one of those nasty grins he always wore when he was ready to spring an unwanted surprise on an unsuspecting mortal.

"Just spit it out!"

"Remember when I told you a few moons back that I was angry with you for allowing yourself to grow old and weak...?"

"At my birthday? Yes."

"Do you feel any different now, Xena...?" Ares said, getting ready to wave his hand to disappear.

"No...?"

"Oh... all right. In that case, I better not tell you."

"Ares..."

"My lips are zipped. Oh, by the way, the Amazons who are plotting against Licantus are gathered in hut number nine right now... I thought you might want to swing by and listen to what they've worked out. See ya... champ," Ares said and sent Xena a wink. Even though she didn't answer it, he grinned broadly and vanished in his customary blue cloud.

'What did he do to me, that miserable...?' Xena thought and looked at her hands. Clenching and unclenching them, she couldn't feel a difference to how she had felt before Ares had given her the surprising snippet of news, but she knew that he rarely bragged without a reason.

Getting a bad feeling in the pit of her stomach, she grabbed her winter coat and hurried out of the hut.

"Gabrielle, I need a word," Xena said strongly as she barged into the kitchen area of the mess hut.

Gabrielle - standing at one of the tables with both arms deep into a ceramic bowl, kneading a large lump of dough - whipped her head around at the unusual undertone to her lover's voice. Cheris was standing next to her, up to her elbows in flour and looking more than a little terrified at the dark warrior's surprising return.

Trying to keep her voice friendly and free of worry, Gabrielle leaned in towards the junior Amazon. "Cheris, I need to have a private word with the warrior. Please. Come back in a little while, ten candelr... uh... count to three hundred, okay?"

"Yes, Mistress Gabrielle," Cheris said and curtsied on her way out of the kitchen, staying far away from the dark warrior.

As soon as they were alone, Gabrielle pulled her hands out of the bowl and wiped them off. "What's wrong, Xena... you're really pale," she said and pulled her lover into an embrace.

"I fear Ares has done something do me," Xena whispered.

"Are you pregnant?!"

"Gods, no...! Not like that! I'm worried that he has given me some form of... some sort of... I don't know... maybe he's granted me immortality against my will. I spoke with him just now and he was even more cryptic than usual."

"But I don't underst-"

"There's something I need you to do for me, my love. I need you to cut me with a knife," Xena said quietly.

Taking a step back, Gabrielle narrowed her eyes and put her hand across her mouth. "Cut you...?"

"If I bleed, I'm still a mortal."

"By the Gods, Xena, you can't expect me to..."

"Please, Gabrielle. We've encountered enough immortals to know that something like this has to be done by someone else," Xena said and put her hands on Gabrielle's shoulders.

Gulping loudly to keep down a rising tide of bile, Gabrielle turned around and found a small carving knife. "Give me your hand," she whispered in a shaky voice.

As Xena held out her right hand, Gabrielle lowered the carving knife and held it just above Xena's long fingers. Gulping again, she moved the blade of the knife across the top of Xena's middle finger. At once, a few dark red droplets of blood seeped out of the wound and dripped onto the wooden floor of the kitchen.

"Thank the Gods," Gabrielle whispered, staring at the bloody smear on the knife.

Feeling confused, Xena scrunched up her face and licked on the wound to make it stop bleeding. After a few seconds, she clenched and unclenched her fists again, trying to work out what Ares had meant.

"Immortality is a curse, Xena, I know that now," Gabrielle said and found a small kerchief that she proceeded to wrap around Xena's finger much to the warrior's amusement.

"I don't understand... and I hate it when I'm not on top of everything," Xena said quietly. Shaking her head, she pushed it to the back of her mind for later. "Anyway, Ares also told me that some of the Amazons are drawing plans as we speak. I'm about to go over there to see what I can find out."

Grabbing both Xena's hands, Gabrielle pulled the dark warrior into a hug. "Oh, I wish you wouldn't... but I doubt I could get you to stop. Please take care, love."

"I'll be fine. Don't worry," Xena said and caressed Gabrielle's cheek.

"But I do worry... I love you, you know."

Leaning in, Xena gave Gabrielle a brief kiss on the lips. "I love you, too, Gabrielle. I know things are looking bleak right now, but I promise that we'll get out of it in one piece. With the Amazons."

"That's good enough for me," Gabrielle said and pulled the warrior back down for a proper kiss.

Five candelrips later, Xena snuck around the corner of barrack number nine, trying to pick up any sounds from the inside. Pressing her ear to the wall, she was able to hear a few faint, but clearly agitated, female voices speaking in a Pannonian dialect - the same language Borias had spent weeks trying to teach her when they had first met.

Chuckling over the strange coincidence, Xena strained her hearing and was soon able to pick up a few scattered words, 'Licantus', 'attack', 'ship' and 'escape tomorrow' among them.

What made her curse under her breath was hearing 'escape tomorrow' said more than once by more than one Amazon. *'Gabrielle will kill me if I allow the Amazons to go into battle before we've softened Licantus' defenses... but she'll get upset, too, if I draw attention to the insurrection... Charon's balls!'*

Weighing the options, Xena came to the conclusion that if she intervened ahead of time, it might mean that no Amazon would die. Standing up straight, she drew her sword and her Chakram and barged into barrack number nine.

Standing at a table, a senior Amazon in her mid-forties pointed at a rough sketch of the camp, moving her index finger from one watch tower to the next. '... if we engage the sentries here and he-' she said in the Pannonian dialect before she was rudely interrupted by Xena's arrival.

Nineteen warriors spun around and stared at the dark warrior; nineteen strapping Amazons, all of the same body type Xena remembered so well from Borias and his countrymen and -women: olive-skinned, dark-haired and slightly stocky, and with faintly Slavic features.

'Go on, don't mind me,' she said in a somewhat rusty attempt at the Pannonian dialect. 'I'd love to hear your plans on how to get killed in two easy steps. Oh, and you might want to keep a better guard than someone's young daughter. She's all right,' she continued hastily, raising her weapons in the air when an Amazon in her late twenties cursed at her.

Turning towards Xena, the senior Amazon put her hands behind her deerskin-clad back and studied the warrior thoroughly. 'You're Ralna of Mytilene, aren't you? Licantus' new slave hunter?'

'Yes. And no.'

'Explain yourself, warrior,' another Amazon said.

'Licantus thinks I'm Ralna of Mytilene... but in reality, I'm Xena of Amphipolis.'

'Liar,' the senior Amazon said.

'No. Princess Gabrielle of Queen Melosa's tribe is here as well.'

'As a slave?'

'Not exactly, but she's working in the kitchen. With your daughter,' Xena said to the Amazon who had cursed her earlier. 'She and I are trying to help you all get out of here.'

That piece of information led to an excited murmur that went by so fast Xena couldn't keep up with the dialect. She glanced from one Amazon to the next to try to gauge their mood, but she knew at heart that the warriors were too experienced to believe her word at face value.

When the voices died down, the senior Amazon turned back towards Xena with an expectant look on her face. 'Bring her here so we can judge for ourselves if she's really a Sister.'

"Very well," Xena said, nodding. Sheathing her weapons, she spun around on her heel and left the barrack.

._*_*._*

"I'm telling you the truth, Yakan... I'm Princess Gabrielle, adopted daughter of Queen Melosa and rightful heir to her throne," Gabrielle said strongly, trying to overpower the voices of the many agitated warriors surrounding her. The ten candlesticks that had passed since Xena had brought her to the hut had taxed her patience severely - now she knew why Amazons had such a bad reputation for being combative or even cantankerous.

Xena moved up to stand very close behind Gabrielle and reached ahead to put her hands across the bard's stomach. With a sigh, she leaned down and placed her chin on the inviting shoulder. "Boy, they love to talk, don't they?" she said for Gabrielle's ears only.

"Yeah... this is even worse than the strategy meetings back in Melosa's tribe," Gabrielle answered out of the corner of her mouth.

Yakan - the senior Amazon - raised her hands in the air to quiet her Sisters. Looking in turn at each of the other Amazons, it was clear that she was hoping that one of them would provide the golden clue, but they all kept their mouths firmly shut.

Without evidence to the contrary, she found that she had no reason not to believe the blonde woman's story, and she finally nodded her acceptance of Gabrielle's position in the Amazon hierarchy.

"Good. Finally! Now, tell me, Yakan, what do you know?" Gabrielle said and moved forward to look at the rough sketch of the camp.

After clearing her throat, Yakan began to speak in somewhat faltering Greek. "Princess Gabrielle, we don't know much. When we arrived, one of our warriors spoke to a sick Amazon who had been left behind because she was too weak. She told my warrior that her Sisters had been taken by a group of men from Galatia or perhaps further east."

"How would she know that?" Xena asked.

"She was with them when they were led down to a ship that had anchored near a rocky beach only half a league to the east, away from the camp. When the men realized she was too weak, they left her to die, but she managed to walk back to the camp."

"Hmmm," Xena said, rubbing her forehead. *'This ties in with what Iacobius said about the arena. I'll bet that a ship arrives at regular intervals to take away the fittest women and deliver them to someone in the east... maybe to Cyprus, Cappadocia or Syria... perhaps they're being used as gladiators in some kind of bloody spectacle... perhaps as prey for hunters... or wild animals.'*

Looking behind her, Gabrielle recognized the thoughtful look on Xena's face and reached up to caress the warrior's cheek. "What's on your mind?"

"A tournament."

"I'm sorr-"

"I'm willing to bet that the Amazons are rounded up to take place in a tournament of some kind," Xena said somberly. "They're shipped further east. If they really are fighting as gladiators, I doubt that any of them have survived more than a few weeks. It's a brutal, bloody life... and typically a short one, too."

Scrunching up her face, Gabrielle was about to turn back to Yakan when the sound of someone pounding on a bell penetrated the hut. "What in Tartarus is that?" Gabrielle said with a puzzled expression on her face.

Xena hurriedly swung her winter coat over her shoulders and checked her weapons to make sure they were ready in case she needed them. "I don't know... but I better go and see. Gabrielle, you can stay a little while longer, but it's probably wisest if you return to the kitchen sooner rather than later. All right?"

"All right, Xena. Please be careful!" Gabrielle said and quickly offered her partner a little kiss on the lips, earning herself a chorus of confused grunts by the other Amazons.

As Xena ran into the square in front of the command hut, she quickly noticed that all the officers had lined up in perfect rows, like at an inspection.

Aiming for the first available spot, she came to a dust-producing halt just as Licantus and Ares stepped out of the command hut. The sight of the nasty grin on the God of War's dark features gave Xena a kick in the gut, but she was determined to stand her ground against everything the two brutal beings could throw at her.

"Men! Listen up!" Licantus said loudly. "The Pride of Antiochia is scheduled to arrive tomorrow so I want you to make detailed reports about the health of our prisoners. In case someone is too weak to be a good investment for our business associate Fasawi, kill them. If they resist the examination, kill them. If you need to set an example, kill the natural leader of the various barracks. That's guaranteed to make sheep out of the others. You have my full blessing," he continued, speaking the last words in a sanctimonious voice.

The officers all laughed, including Xena, even though the laughter got stuck in her craw. During Licantus' brief speech, she had looked at Ares who had made quite a number out of *not* looking at her - instead, he had been looking at Iacobius, the senior watch commander Xena had met when she arrived at the camp.

After Licantus broke up the meeting, the group of officers dissolved until only Xena, Iacobius and Ares remained.

Adjusting his body armor, Iacobius walked over to Xena and put out his hand. "Good day, Ralna. Have you spoken to Licantus yet?"

"I have, yes. He's hired me."

"I thought he might. What happened with Tiresias this morning? I was still sleeping then, but when I woke up, I heard on the grapevine that you and he had a little altercation?"

"Well, you could say that. We dueled. He wound up dead," Xena said with a shrug.

"Why?"

"Don't know, really. I guess he was upset I was hired by Licantus."

"Hmmm. All right. By the way, Licantus has put your name on the watch rotation. We'll be seeing a lot of each other tonight, Ralna."

"Oh...?"

"Yes. A junior officer will come for you when it's time. You're to report to the main watch tower, down by the entrance. We'll spend the night there. Oh, if I were you, I'd get some sleep now before it's too late. Have you had the redhead yet?"

"Not quite, no. Uh, she's claiming to be an Amazon Princess. She wants me to speak with her mother first," Xena fibbed, adding a laugh that she hoped was appropriately saucy.

"Oh... is her mother a redhead, too?"

"Wouldn't know. I haven't had her, either."

"Har, har! Well, see you tonight, Ralna," Iacobius said and thumped Xena's shoulder before walking off towards the senior officer's hut.

"I'll be there."

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Twelve candlemarks later.

After slapping a large spoonful of thick porridge into a bowl, Gabrielle turned around and handed it to Xena. "Here you go."

"Thank you," Xena said and began to wolf down the contents of the bowl.

Leaning against the kitchen table, Gabrielle wiped her hands on her apron and began to toy with the bronze swirls on Xena's breastplate. "Guard duty?"

"Uh-huh."

"Do you think Licantus is on to us?"

"No, quite the contrary," Xena said around a mouthful of porridge. "I think everything is going as planned. I've spent the entire day writing down how fit the Amazons are. They're pretty much okay, by the way. Some of them have injuries, but on a whole, they're okay."

Gabrielle leaned forward and put her hand on the side of Xena's leathers, roughly at the spot where she stitched the deep wound so long ago. "I wish I had your confidence, love," she said quietly.

"How are the junior Amazons holding up?"

"Well, the juniors are scared... but the seniors are growing impatient."

"Understandable," Xena said and scooped up the last porridge. "What about you?"

"Oh... I'm... well, I'm growing impatient as well. I'd like to see the end of this engagement."

"I know."

"Anyway, I'll be fine. And Xena... so will you. Right? Right?!" Gabrielle said, poking her index finger into Xena's gut.

"Ouch...! Yes, yes, I'll be fine. We'll both be fine. I have a good feeling about the watch commander, Iacobius. He's a professional soldier, not a degenerate like several of the others."

"Okay, but promise me to take care. I'm a peaceful Amazon, but if push comes to shove, or if you get in trouble, I might need to go on a berserker rage, you know," Gabrielle said and puffed herself up.

Leaning down, Xena kissed the tip of Gabrielle's nose and then put the empty bowl down on the kitchen table behind the bard. "I'll be sure to remember that, Gabrielle," Xena said and began to move away, but Gabrielle grabbed the warrior and forced her to give her a real kiss.

A few candelights later, Xena exited the mess hut and walked along the gravelly path that was once again lit up by rows of torches.

On her way down to the main watch tower by the entrance, she decided that she wanted to ask Iacobius about the ship. *'He might not want to talk to me about it, but we need all the information we can get. At this point, it seems that the best time to strike is when the Amazons are let out of their huts to go to the ship... but if the crew of the ship is too large or too well armed, it would be a suicide run... hmmm.'*

Reaching the main gate, Xena quickly climbed the ladder and went into the small room atop the watch tower.

"Ralna of Mytilene reporting for guard duty, Colonel Iacobius," Xena said and offered Iacobius a halfway decent salute - mostly to stay on his good side, but also to show that she respected his level-headed approach to his task.

The Colonel was sitting behind a small desk, writing on a scroll with a long-necked quill. "Good evening, Ralna. Let's take the first round together," he said, put the quill into an inkwell and rose from the chair.

Standing on the gangway between the towers at the easternmost point of the camp, Iacobius made a sweeping gesture out into the pitch black darkness. "As you can see, there's nothing at all out there, apart from a well-worn path down to the ocean, so there's no point in having a large number of guards on this side of the camp. Even though Licantus has made many enemies, no one is crazy enough to go up against his benefactor, the God of War."

"Mmmm," Xena said, studying the barracks inside the camp instead of the terrain outside the fence. "Do you know anything about the ship that's coming in tomorrow?"

"Oh yes. The Pride of Antiochia or the Pride of Syria arrives once every moon or so to ship the prisoners east. Let's move on," the Colonel said and resumed walking along the gangway. "There's a secondary gate below us that opens up to the well-worn path. The ship's captain and crew enter by the main gate, but the prisoners are escorted out through the secondary gate and down to the ship."

"I see."

"Oh... Ralna, I think I'd take a sick day tomorrow if I were you. The traders would pay top dinar for you. You're exactly the type of woman they're here for. I wouldn't be surprised if they'd offer Licantus ten thousand dinars for you... he might be tempted."

"Thanks for the tip," Xena said, chuckling darkly. Knowing an opening when she heard one, she decided to push the issue. "So... where do they come from, exactly?"

"Tyros in Syria. It's a small port roughly ten leagues north of the Syrian-Judaeian border."

"Really? It must take them... what... twenty days to travel that distance?"

Stopping briefly, Iacobius studied Xena's face for a few seconds before continuing on his way. "That's fairly accurate. Twenty-two days if they stop in Paphus on Cyprus, which they almost always do. Have you ever been to Syria?"

"No, though I've traveled extensively further north."

"I'll bet you have. I've been there, actually. I was on one of the first ships. Horrible place... far too hot for an Athenian like me, but Licantus wanted to know exactly what went on out there. The warlord Fasawi is a clever man."

"How so?"

"Well, he's surrounded by no less than four Roman legions, the Gallica and the Ferrata, both located in Raphana, Syria... the Cyrenaica in Bostra, Arabia, and finally the Fretensis in Hierosolyma further south in Judaea... and yet, he manages to keep them off his back."

Looking back at the secondary gate they had just left, Xena stored the information in her brain. "Bribery," she said, chuckling again.

"Probably."

They continued in silence for another few candelrips before turning the next corner and starting the final leg that would take them back to the main tower.

"Ralna, I have a question for you," the watch commander said, breaking the silence.

"Shoot."

"Have you had the redhead yet?"

"Not quite, no," Xena said, not expecting the conversation to take such a turn.

"Well..." - stopping, Iacobius turned around and put his hands behind his back. "You can have the rest of the evening off to take care of business."

At first, Xena just scrunched up her face, but then she remembered her manners and bowed slightly to the officer.

"Thank you, Colonel. May I ask why?"

"Because she won't be here tomorrow evening, that's why. She and the rest of the Amazons in barracks one through seven will be shipped out tomorrow at noon."

Xena's eyes momentarily grew wide at that news, but she quickly put a lid on her emotions before Iacobius would notice. "I see."

"You can borrow my room in the senior officers' hut. It's number four. You won't be bothered by anyone there, no matter how loud you get," Iacobius said with a crooked grin. "Here's the key," he continued, throwing Xena a brass key.

"Thank you, Colonel Iacobius. It's much appreciated," Xena said, looking at the heavy key.

Waving his hand, Iacobius laughed off the gobsmacked look on the warrior's face. "Ah, you're welcome. Leave the key on top of the door frame when you're done. You're relieved of your guard duty, Ralna of Mytilene."

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"So I'm scheduled to be shipped out tomorrow, Xena?" Gabrielle said with a very worried expression on her face as she and Xena walked along the short corridor inside the senior officers' hut.

"Yes, at noon, along with the Amazons from the first seven barracks."

"Sweet Aphrodite, we need to get the ball rolling before then."

"Yes."

"Are you sure this isn't a trap?" Gabrielle said as she unlocked the door to Iacobius' room.

"No."

Shooting her lover a dark look, Gabrielle opened the door and stepped into the room. "Oh, that's SO reassuring."

"I won't say I trust the Colonel, but like I told you before, he's a decent fellow compared to most of the rest of Licantus' raiders."

"Decent fellows are usually the worst kind... Like Perdicus back home in Potaideia. He was decent... yet he couldn't wait to get his tongue down my throat," Gabrielle mumbled under her breath as she found a tallow candle and a pair of flints.

Striking the flints together, she was able to create a spark that ignited the candle. Once the flame was strong, she moved the candlestick around the room to take a look at the Colonel's belongings. "A bunk, a closet, a small table, a footlocker... boy, these military types are always so... so... Xena, what are you doing?"

Having sat down on the bunk, Xena unbuckled her breastplate and put it next to her. Without speaking, she removed her gauntlets and began to unlace her leathers.

"Are you... yes, you are... Xena... are you undressing?"

"Yes."

"Dumb question, I know... but why? 'Cos I'm not in the mood, frankly."

"Well, neither am I, but I thought of something you've said many times in the year we've been together. That we should always take full-

"Take full advantage of the quiet moments because we never know when the next crisis will pop up and bite us on the bottom. Yeah, that's true."

"Exactly," Xena said and pulled her shoulder straps down.

"Uh, all right. Okay..." Gabrielle said and put the candlestick down on the small table. "Well, I guess we could do that... now that we've been offered the use of someone's bunk."

Just as Gabrielle was about to sit down, she shot to her feet and pointed at the bunk with a horrified expression on her face. "Ewww... do you think he's had se... that he's... you know... on the bunk?"

"Can't say without askin'. You want me to ask him, Gabrielle?"

"Uh... no."

"Come to bed. We can deal with the other things later," Xena said and swung her legs up into bed. When Gabrielle proved reluctant to join her, she scooted over to one side and patted the empty space to the right of her.

After a brief delay, Gabrielle shrugged and climbed up into the bunk. Sighing deeply, she got comfortable in her favorite position, resting her head in the nook of Xena's right shoulder.

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On Mount Olympus, Ares studied the tender scene in his portal to the world. Stroking his goatee, he wondered whether or not he should go ahead with the next part of his diabolical plan. After debating with himself for all of three seconds, he waved his hand and disappeared in his usual blue flash.

Moments later, a blue flash in the middle of Licantus' office startled the camp commandant so badly that he nearly knocked a stack of scrolls onto the floor with his elbow. "Lord Ares... at this hour?"

"The God of War never rests, Licantus. And neither should you... for there are spies at work in your camp."

"Spies? Impossible!"

Chuckling, Ares threw himself into a chair and let one of his leather-clad legs dangle over the side. "Oh but there is. A woman... well, you have plenty of women here, so that's not much help. A special woman."

"Ralna...? The dark-haired warrior from Lesbos?" Licantus said, rising from his chair.

"Ah, no. But it warms my heart that you consider her special, because she is. No, not Ralna. But someone Ralna is really close to right now. In fact, they're so close at this very moment that you couldn't put an unfurled scroll between them... catch my drift?"

"Yes... where, Lord Ares?"

"In the senior officers' hut. Room four."

"Excellent... I'll send someone over there... no, I'll go over there myself. Who's the spy?" Licantus said and picked a curved Syrian sword off two hooks on the wall.

"The cook," Ares said and sat up straight. "For some reason, it's always the cook," he continued with a chuckle.

Moving away from the desk, Licantus swung the sword in the air to get reacquainted with the unusual looking weapon. "Will you come with me, Lord Ares?"

"I wouldn't miss it for the world!" Ares said and jumped out of the chair.

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A scant two candelights later, the door to room four was violently kicked down by one of Licantus' raiders. A wild scream by a fair voice was immediately followed by a metallic, whooshing sound.

A split second later, the raider stumbled back out of the room and collapsed onto his knees, clutching his throat where the Chakram had sliced through it.

Jumping to her feet, Xena deftly caught the Chakram as it returned and hooked it onto her belt. Grabbing her sword, she twirled it several times before she went into a defensive position, keeping Gabrielle well hidden behind her.

'Ralna! It's Licantus! Send the spy out and no harm will come to you!' the commandant's gruff voice said from around the corner.

"Spy?" Xena echoed, knowing all too well that Ares was involved.

The God himself soon arrived in a blue flash, moving in close to put a large hand on Gabrielle's shoulder. "Yes, spy. This spy," he said and squeezed down on the shoulder, making Gabrielle whimper in pain.

"Ares, you miserable son of a whore! What are you doing now?!" Xena barked hoarsely, pulling her shoulder straps back up.

"Upping the stakes, champ. Oh, I love this game!" Ares said loudly, punching the air with his free hand. "Licantus! I'm coming out with the spy!"

'Excellent, Lord Ares.'

Pulling Gabrielle tight to him, Ares' eyes sparkled with mischief as he nodded in the direction of the door, silently telling Xena to vacate the premises.

Grumbling loudly, Xena put her sword in the scabbard, grabbed her breastplate and her gauntlets and left the room.

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CHAPTER 4

As the small group stepped out of the room, Licantus came up to meet them. "Ralna, I won't hold the killing of my soldier against you. However, fraternizing with the enemy will cost you ten lashes in the morning. And you," he said, grabbing hold of Gabrielle's neck. "You are going into the cage for forty-eight candlemarks. Then, I'll behead you myself."

Struggling against the harsh grip, Gabrielle sent a silent plea to Xena to do something - anything. "I'm not a spy, Licantus! I'm Princess Gabrielle of Queen Melosa's tribe... Ares brought me here the day before yesterday. I'm an Amazon, yes, but not a spy!"

"She's babbling," Ares said with a nasty laugh.

"Most decidedly," Licantus said and pulled his arm back to backhand Gabrielle across the face.

Before he could complete the punishment, Xena stepped between her lover and the camp commandant and pushed Gabrielle away. "I'll deal with her, Sire. I know just the right method to get her to speak," she growled.

Narrowing his eyes, Licantus stared daggers at the warrior for interrupting him, but after a brief pause, he nodded and pulled back. "All right. But you'll get another ten lashes for being disrespectful of my authority."

"Yes, Sire."

"However, if you double-cross me and kill her yourself, the last thing you'll see in this world will be my sword coming down on your exposed neck," Licantus said, pointing his gloved index finger in Xena's face.

Biting down hard on her tongue to stop herself from talking back, Xena nodded curtly and gave Gabrielle a gentle shove to tell her to get out of the door.

The commotion had attracted quite a crowd in front of the senior officers' hut and it took several strongly worded commands by Licantus to get them to move enough for Xena and the small group of people to fit through.

One of the spectators was Iacobius who met Xena and the others halfway to the execution square. Pushing his metal helmet away from his eyes to see better, he stared openly at Ares and at the angry look on Licantus' face. "Ralna...? What in Tartarus is going on here?" he whispered out of the corner of his mouth as he fell in next to Xena.

"Well..."

"Were you and the girl that loud?"

The misplaced humor made Xena glare at him and he quickly raised his gloved hands in the air. "Sorry," he said, chuckling.

"Iacobius... whose side are you on?" Xena whispered, glaring even harder at the soldier.

"My own," Iacobius answered truthfully. Looking at the ice blue orbs in the warrior's face, he suddenly realized that there was more to the situation than met the eye. Reaching the execution square, he had figured out that something was about to happen.

Grabbing a torch from a holder, Licantus barged his way through the small group and gave the wooden cage that had been buried halfway into a soggy pit a good kick. "This is where spies go," he said in a menacing voice. "Throw that little bitch in, Ralna."

Pretending to do what she was told, Xena put her hands on Gabrielle's shoulders and appeared to be squeezing her hard. "Don't you want her to reveal her associates first, Sire? I know a trick that works wonders on little girls like her."

"Really?" Licantus said, visibly interested.

"Mmmm, yes. Watch," Xena said and jabbed two fingers into Gabrielle's neck.

Gabrielle had seen the pinch applied often enough to know what was about to happen - but when she didn't even feel a tingle from the jab, she knew that Xena had deliberately missed the pressure points.

'Then you just have to fake it, Gabrielle,' she thought and began to moan loudly. Collapsing onto her knees, she began to shake uncontrollably in a gruesome, staccato fashion that left the rest of the group convinced that they were watching someone's brains get fried.

"I've cut off the flow of blood to your brain. In a candledrip, your brain will melt out of your ears if I don't release it. Who do you work for?" Xena hissed into the bard's ear.

Hearing that, Ares cocked his head and let a devious little smile play across his lips.

"Th-the gr-great Amazon Qu-queen Cyane!" Gabrielle said, shaking like a leaf caught in a storm.

"Why are you here?"

"T-to h-help the Amazons esc-cape..."

"How?"

"Out the m-main entrance!"

"When?"

"As s-soon as po-possible!"

Nodding, Xena pretended to take off the pinch. When Gabrielle stopped shaking, Xena gave her a little push in the back that told her she should collapse onto the ground. "And there you have it, Sire," Xena said to Licantus, nudging the tip of her boot against the fallen woman.

"Mmmm," Licantus said. Appearing to be deep in thought, the commandant looked from Gabrielle's prone figure and up to the person he believed to be Ralna of Mytilene. "Lord Ares, what do you suggest?" he said after a short pause.

Still wearing the devious grin, Ares swaggered over to stand behind Xena and put his hands on her upper arms. Looking around at the assembled soldiers, he waved his hand and made time come to a standstill.

"You shouldn't have pulled that little stunt, Xena," Ares whispered into Xena's ear. "Before, Licantus wasn't sure of what to do, but now he's made up his mind. Since he already has the information he needs, why waste time by putting her in the cage? Your precious little Gabrielle is about to be beheaded. But you can stop it... you can save her... by surrendering to me. Oh, Xena, the most powerful of all my champions, I do believe this is what is called a dilemma."

Trapped in a nightmarish void, Xena could do nothing about Ares' tirade - nothing apart from accepting the grim reality of his words. If she didn't act, she'd lose Gabrielle; if she did act, she'd lose herself and all she had fought for by reverting to her old, dark self.

Not even remotely finished tormenting Xena, Ares slid in very close and moved a few of Xena's locks away from her face. "My airhead sister says love makes you strong... and for once, I agree with her. Oh, I know what you're thinking, but it's true. Love will give you an extra kick in the pants to wipe 'em all out if someone threatens the hamster girl, like we saw back on the barge."

Chuckling darkly, Ares stepped over Gabrielle who was still frozen in time, and went over to Xena's other side where he slid his fingers from her jaw and down her throat. "Now, contrary to popular belief, I don't mind the two of you rolling around like weasels... Zeus knows I've done that countless times myself... I actually welcome it. Why? Because it makes you stronger when something like this happens. I know that you won't accept losing her, Xena. Just like I won't accept losing you... and there's that dilemma again. Come on, champ, what say thee? Watch Gabrielle die... or kill 'em all...? The choice is yours... and the time to make it is now."

Suddenly stepping back, Ares waved his hand to make time go back to normal.

"Lord Ares, what do you suggest?" Licantus said again.

Fighting a terrible battle against her emotions, Xena slammed her eyes shut to still the storm that was raging in her mind - to no avail. Even when she clenched her fists and tried to recall some of the meditation techniques Lao Ma had taught her all those years ago, the voice in her ear demanded that she should take action; that she needed to listen to Ares to save her lover.

"Oh, my dear Licantus, you're experienced enough to make your own decisions," Ares said and folded his arms across his chest.

Shrugging, the commandant waved one of the raiders who was standing nearby over to them. "Soldier, take this Amazon to the block. There's no point in wasting time by throwing her into the cage."

"Yes, Master," the soldier said and grabbed hold of Gabrielle.

A split second later, everything happened at once. Xena drew her sword and ran the soldier through. As he fell backwards with a gurgling scream, Gabrielle punched Licantus in his unprotected crotch and jumped to her feet; then, Xena performed a flying dropkick that hit the commandant squarely in the face with both boots - and finally, Ares clenched his fists, let out a delighted roar and looked towards the heavens with a diabolical grin on his face.

Upon landing, Xena quickly drew her Chakram and let it fly against the soldiers nearest to her. Looking around, she could see three, five, seven soldiers come running towards her and Gabrielle, and she immediately pulled her arm back and sent the Chakram on its way a second time.

"Xena! More soldiers to our left!" Gabrielle shouted, trying to find something to use as a weapon. She briefly considered the sword of the soldier Xena had killed, but decided against it.

"I got 'em!" Xena said and carved her way through a group of three soldiers that had come at them from another angle, hacking and slashing with her sword until the blade was coated with blood.

Meanwhile, the Chakram had done its job - leaving a string of dead or maimed bodies in its wake - and returned to Xena's hand, much to Ares' apparent pleasure.

"Oh! Xena, try to... try to break the cage! I can use one of the beams as a staff!" Gabrielle shouted, unsuccessfully trying to break one of the round, wooden boards off the side of the cage with her hands.

"Stand back," Xena said and waited for Gabrielle to comply. Once the firing line was clear, the Chakram screamed through the air and quickly chopped off all the bindings on the side of the cage facing them.

Gabrielle quickly bent down and found the one that was most similar to her own Amazon fighting staff. "Thanks. Now what?"

"If we stop fighting now, they'll rip us to shreds... we'll have to fight to the bitter end! Four more coming your way!" Xena said and pointed at a group of soldiers approaching them from the main gate.

"I have them," Gabrielle said and jumped into action, going through an impressive array of high-skill maneuvers with the makeshift staff. After fighting for a few seconds, she made one of the soldiers go down like a ton of clay bricks by clonking him across the jaw.

Taking a sword from one of the dead guards, Ares swung it wildly through the air a couple of times, just to test what it felt like. "The bitter end... there's nothing bitter about fighting, Xena!"

"Shut up, Ares... you've done enough as it is," Xena growled, once again taking the Chakram off its hook as a dark figure ran towards them, partially obscured by the shadows.

"Don't shoot! It's me, Iacobius!" the dark figure said, running towards Xena with his hands in the air.

Staying on high alert, Xena moved around constantly to cover all angles and to make herself a smaller target in case the next wave of soldiers came at them with crossbows. "I thought you said you were on your own side, Iacobius?"

"I am... but I guess I'm a bit on your side as well, especially after seeing you kill so many men so effortlessly," Iacobius said and held his hand on his sheathed sword. "Once the fighting started, I opened the main gate. The path is clear for you and the redhead to escape at any time... you'll need some horses, though."

"We're not planning on escaping... not without the Amazons, anyway," Xena said, keeping track of what Gabrielle was doing.

Gabrielle had already defeated three of the four soldiers that had charged her but the last one proved to be more difficult. She tried all the things she had in her bag of tricks, but the soldier kept eluding her staff. Remembering some of the things Xena had spent hours trying to teach her, she moved the staff in to act as a spear and thrust it against the soldier's throat.

When that failed as well, she tore the staff back and performed a series of high-speed left-right sweeps, first against the soldier's legs - that he simply jumped over - then at his sides. Getting agitated, Gabrielle didn't realize until it was too late that the soldier had managed to grab hold of the staff.

Taking a step back, Gabrielle stumbled when the staff didn't follow her hand, and she fell flat on her rear end.

At once, the soldier roared, threw down the staff and took a double-handed grip on his sword to use it as an ax, hoping to bury it in the blonde's bare midriff - but Gabrielle managed to roll away at the very last moment.

Jumping to her feet, she grabbed the makeshift staff and slammed it into the back of the soldier's unprotected head. Even though the soldier collapsed to his knees at the first strike, Gabrielle hit his neck and back again and again, roaring out her pent-up frustrations as she did so.

Suddenly feeling a strange tremor in the air, Ares turned away from Xena and Iacobius fighting a new group of men to study the bard and her actions. When he saw the dark aura - that usually only came from people ready for his advances - emanating from the hitherto so pure bard, he arched an eyebrow and let out an amused little chuckle. The aura soon dissipated, but it was a valuable piece of information that he stored at the back of his dark mind.

Knowing that he had to study the subject a bit further before he could make any conclusions, he waved his hand and disappeared in his customary blue cloud to be able to study Gabrielle unseen.

Gabrielle finally realized that her opponent was out cold and staggered away from the fallen soldier - then she noticed that the spot where Licantus had fallen after Xena had dropkicked him was empty.

"Tartarus... Xena! Xena! Licantus is gone!" she shouted to be heard over the sound of Xena's and Iacobius' swords clanging against three blades.

After slashing an X across the chest of one of her opponents, Xena looked back over her shoulder to see for herself. Grumbling loudly over the fact that the commandant was missing, she let her sword do the talking and slashed the next opponent mercilessly.

Finishing his fight by slamming the hilt of his sword down on the opposing soldier's head, Iacobius pulled back but kept vigilant.

"Iacobius, are you alone or do you have any men who are loyal to you?" Xena said, wiping her sword on the uniform of one of the fallen soldiers.

"I'm alone, Ralna. They're only loyal to the almighty Dinar."

"Hmmm. Oh, by the way, my name isn't Ralna of Mytilene. It's Xena of Amphipolis," Xena said and put out her arm.

Cocking his head, Iacobius clasped arms with the warrior. "Hello, Xena. I was wondering about your Thracian accent. I guess that means that the redhead really is a spy?"

"Not exactly, but it's a long story I'll be happy to tell you over a quiet mug of ale... her name is Gabrielle of Potaideia."

"Oh... but she is an Amazon, right?" Iacobius said and wiped some sweat off his brow.

"Yep. Amazon royalty. That part is true."

"Xena, may I ask where Ares fits in...?"

Turning around to find her partner, Xena soon spotted Gabrielle thumping a new soldier in the gut with her makeshift staff. "I used to be one of his champions... he's kept an eye on me ever since. Come on, we need to find Licantus. Gabrielle!" Xena shouted, waving when Gabrielle looked her way.

"Yeah?" the bard shouted back.

"We need more hands! Go to barrack number nine and release the Pannonian Amazons! Take them to the command hut! And please, tell them to watch who they're shooting at!" Xena shouted, remembering an incident from her past where she'd had to dig two Amazon arrows out of her shoulder because she had worn the wrong colors.

"Will do!" Gabrielle shouted, setting off in a fast jog down towards the ninth barrack.

Hunching over, Xena and Iacobius soon ran the other way, towards Licantus' command hut. "Xena, pardon me for asking, but Ares generally doesn't let his champions go unless they die... how did you manage to escape his grasp?"

"Oh, that's an even longer story, Iacobius. Suffice to say you've just looked at the main reason."

"Oh... oh. I get it," Iacobius said and put his hand on the door to Licantus' office. Reaching over, the Colonel opened it with a swoosh and briefly peeked inside. When nothing came out, he jumped up and dove through the opened door.

"Iacobius, wait!" Xena said, but the Colonel was already up and gone.

._*_*._

Running as fast as she could, Gabrielle tore through the camp, turned right behind barrack number two and sprinted down towards number nine. On her way there, she had to slip into the shadows several times as groups of soldiers came towards her running the other way.

Once she reached barrack nine, she quickly began to pound her staff against the padlocked door to get it to release. After the fifth blow, she realized that the padlock wouldn't break off and she went to work on the hinges instead.

"Hey!" she shouted loudly. "Hey in there! It's Princess Gabrielle...! I need your help! Try to press something against the door," she continued in between pounding on the hinges.

'All right... we'll try,' a female voice said from the inside in broken Greek.

"Yeah, I hope you will 'cos this thing isn't moving an inch," Gabrielle said under her breath. Putting down the staff, she clenched and unclenched her aching fists that had turned quite raw from gripping the untreated beam.

Unnoticed by Gabrielle - but very much noticed by Ares who was watching everything under a cloak of invisibility - a soldier stepped out of the shadows holding a dagger in his right hand.

While Gabrielle was distracted by her sore hands, the soldier snuck up behind her and held the dagger ready, intent on burying it between the blonde's ribs.

With the thumping sounds from inside the barrack growing louder, the soldier decided to spring into action and reached ahead of him to put his free hand across Gabrielle's mouth so she wouldn't scream when he knifed her in the back.

Never realizing that she was being watched until it was too late, Gabrielle shrieked into the callused hand that suddenly clamped down on her nose and mouth. At the same time, she felt an intense pain in her back that she tried to get away from by twisting to her left.

The soldier cursed loudly when he felt his dagger didn't go all the way in but merely penetrated the outer skin and scraped along the smooth surface of the young woman's back. He quickly pulled his hand back to try again, but before he had time for a second thrust, he was hit in the face with a bench from the barrack, forcing his head so far backwards that his neck snapped.

As he fell bonelessly to the ground, he let go of Gabrielle who slipped down next to him, moaning loudly from the wound in her back and the knock she got on her knee.

'It's the Princess... help her on her feet, Samman,' Yakan said to the next Amazon behind her, pointing at the prone woman. 'And get us some weapons... we have a war to win!' she continued, raising her arm in the air and spreading her fingers like a flower, signaling the rest of her tribe that they were free to attack at will.

After the tribe had streamed out of the hut and disappeared into the darkness, Samman - a stocky, strong Amazon in her late twenties - remained by Gabrielle's side and put her callused hands on the bard's much softer arms to help her up.

Groaning, Gabrielle staggered to her feet, holding onto the strong Amazon. When she put her hand on her back to feel the size of the wound, her fingers quickly became coated in her own blood. "Great," she croaked. "Just great. Do you speak Greek?"

The Pannonian Amazon just shrugged.

"Thracian?"

Another shrug.

"I'd call that a no. Hmmm."

Hobbling into the barrack to see if anyone was left, Gabrielle felt the wound sting quite badly, but she could also feel that it wasn't as deep as it could have been. "Thank the Gods for small favors..." she said and let out another groan.

"Mistress Gabrielle?" a small voice said from down the other end of the barrack.

"Cheris?"

"Yes, it's me... and four others," Cheris said and popped her fair head out of the shadows. Next to her, four more junior Amazons showed their worried faces.

"I'm glad to see that you're all right," Gabrielle said and put a bloody handprint on the wall. "The Amazon outside can't speak Greek... I need you to translate for me. Okay?"

"Okay!" Cheris said and jumped up from her hiding place to run to the door. Once there, she briefly stuck her head outside but preferred the relative safety of the barrack.

"Good. Tell her that she must stay here to protect the five of you. I'm going to help Xena," Gabrielle said, speaking slowly to allow the young child to keep up.

Leaning forward, Cheris tugged at Samman's buckskin to make the warrior pay attention. 'Samman, Mistress Gabrielle wants you to stay here and protect us. She's going to help the other warrior.'

Samman's only answer was a nod.

"The strong, silent type, huh? Well, I'm used to that. So long, Cheris. Please stay safe... I'll be back for you once the fight is over," Gabrielle said and mussed Cheris' whiteblonde hair.

"Yes, Mistress Gabrielle."

"Good," Gabrielle said and grabbed the makeshift staff. Taking a deep breath, she hobbled off to find Xena.

._*._*_._

Four candledrips earlier.

THWACK! THWACK!

The two crossbow bolts screamed through the air towards their intended target, Iacobius. The first bolt missed and embedded itself into the door behind the Colonel, but the second hit him on the left side of his neck, carving a deep furrow across the tender skin before getting stuck under his ear.

Screaming in pain, he let go of his sword and clapped both hands on the wound that had already begun to bleed profusely - moments later, he fell to his knees and then onto his stomach, feeling too dizzy to stand.

Outside, Xena recognized the scream and cursed loudly. Unhooking her Chakram, she quickly glanced through the opened door - almost getting a crossbow bolt up her nose as a result - and released the circular weapon to do its gruesome task.

The weapon whizzed through the office, clanging against the pot-bellied stove, the desk, the walls and various other items, each time sending out an impressive, colorful flash of sparks. The last thing the Chakram found wasn't metal but flesh and bone, and Xena could quite clearly hear a male voice gurgling from somewhere inside the office.

Once the Chakram returned to her hand, everything went quiet.

After a brief pause to catch her breath, Xena inched closer to the opened door and turned her head so the people inside - if anyone was still alive - could hear her. "Licantus, you know me as Ralna but my real name is Xena. I think you must have heard of me. I've come to end your little game."

'*Bitch!*' Licantus' gruff voice shouted from somewhere deep in the shadows.

"I've been called worse. I suggest you come out now... while you still can."

'*Lord Ares will help me!*' Licantus said, quickly followed by another *Thwack!* from a crossbow bolt.

When the bolt embedded itself impotently into the wall, Xena chuckled loudly just to draw a reaction out of the commandant. "How many bolts do you have in there, Licantus? Can't be too many...?"

THWACK!

"You're wasting your ammunition, Licantus. You'd be better served if you came out with your hands in the air."

'*Never!*'

Rolling her eyes, Xena looked around to see if there was anything she could use to drag the fallen Iacobius out of the office. She had just about given up trying to find anything when she spotted Gabrielle come out of the shadows between the barracks, pressing a hand to her side and hobbling along like she had hurt a knee.

"Gabrielle! Over here! Keep low!" Xena said, waving her hand in the air.

Gabrielle quickly changed direction and hobbled over to her lover. Crouching down to the best of her abilities, she flew past the door and sat down on the ground next to Xena, keeping the wound out of her lover's line of sight. Once she was safe, she wrapped her arms around Xena's torso and began to shower her face with kisses.

"Whoa! We're in the middle of a war here, Gabrielle!"

"I know, but I'm just happy to see you..."

Hearing the strain in the bard's voice, Xena furrowed her brow and spun around to give the blonde woman a thorough check. "You're hurt... I can hear it in your voice."

"Oh, it's just-"

"Don't even think about denying it. I know you too well," Xena said and pulled the bard close. Putting her hand on Gabrielle's back, she instantly recognized the sticky feeling, and she let out a shocked gasp when she saw the amount of blood that had seeped out of the wound and down onto the rust brown skirt.

"Gabri-**elle**...!" Xena growled, looking around frantically for something to treat the wound with.

"It's nothing, really. Some soldier jumped me from behind. He's dead... but he wanted to stab me in the back. Fortunately, the Pannonian Amazons were there to help me," Gabrielle said around a groan that was intensified when Xena began to touch the skin around the wound. "Wh-what are you doing?" Gabrielle said through clenched teeth.

"I'm cleaning it!"

"It hurts like Tartarus on a bad day..."

"I know, I'm sorry. It has to be done. What happened to your knee?"

Rubbing her forehead to take her mind off the pain, Gabrielle began to feel queasy but forced herself to think of something else. "I fell on it when he stabbed me. It's only a bit numb, no big deal."

"Knee problems are always big deals, Gabrielle. You know that. You've seen enough war cripples to know what'll happen if something like that isn't treated," Xena said, smearing some blood on her fingers and smelling it. "It's clean, Gabrielle... no dirt."

"That's something at lea- BY THE GODS, XENA!" Gabrielle suddenly yelled as a group of soldiers stormed around the corner of the office and came at them with eight feet long spears with razor-sharp heads.

"Ares' balls!" Xena roared and jumped to her feet. Even before she was fully erect, she had released the Chakram that tore through the spears like a dagger through butter, breaking them in two - except one that had managed to escape the circular weapon.

The soldier holding the final spear roared triumphantly as he thrust it forward, feeling the metal tip penetrate the warrior's leathers in her lower right part of her gut and working itself into the soft tissue underneath.

Xena could faintly hear Gabrielle screaming somewhere to her right, but the burning pain in her gut was so intense she had to block everything else out. Grappling for her Chakram, she let it fly at the soldier - at point blank range, the results were devastating.

The other soldiers in the group had stood idly by, waiting for their comrade to finish off the two women, but when he staggered back with the Chakram deeply embedded in his rib cage, they all jumped into action, piling on top of the warrior in black.

At that very moment, Ares appeared next to the group of soldiers and looked with great interest at the fierce, lop-sided battle. Not worried in the least about Xena's health, he calmly raised his hand in the air.

A loud crackle of thunder and several blue lightning bolts heralded the arrival of the Sword of War; seemingly coming out of nowhere, the long, dramatic-looking sword materialized upwards from Ares' hand until it was complete - the essence of war personified in five feet of steel.

Taking a step back, Ares swung the Sword of War a couple of times, creating an infernal sound as the blade swooshed through the air. "And now it's your turn, Xena... show me what you're made of," he said and stretched out his free hand towards the melee.

Gabrielle was working flat out, bonking as many soldiers as she could with her makeshift staff, but their bloodlust had grown too strong for it to have any effect. She could still hear Xena's angry roars underneath the pile of men, but they were growing weaker by the second, and she had to bite down hard to stop the rising tide of bile she could feel at the back of her throat.

Looking at Ares who was standing with his hand stretched out towards her, Gabrielle seriously considered asking for his help, but before she had time to do so, the pile covering Xena exploded in a colorful frenzy with men in crimson red uniforms flying off her like they had sprouted wings.

Finally free of the men, Xena jumped to her feet, let out a bellowing war cry - that made Ares cross-eyed with pleasure - and threw every kick and punch she could think of at the soldiers,

One after the other, they succumbed to the unlimited rage - and nearly unlimited strength - of the Warrior Princess, tumbling through the air to the horrendous sound of crunching bones and the sight of cascading blood.

When the final man dropped to the ground, Xena was still standing; keeping her fists clenched, she had a look on her face that told a story of someone who had reached deep into her dark side to survive. Bruised and bloodied, Xena's face was contorted into a hideous mask that only began to soften when Gabrielle hobbled around her to check her injuries.

Gabrielle stared wide-eyed at Xena, hardly believing how her lover was looking - gone were the soft features and the loving sparkle in the ice blue orbs, replaced by a hard, angular visage framed by grime and blood. When she reached up to wipe some blood away from Xena's cheek, she was stunned to feel the warrior pull back from her hand, almost like she was shying away from a friendly touch.

Refusing to back down, Gabrielle tried again and began to wipe some of the excess blood off Xena's cheek and jaw, determined to get her clean and respectable again.

When Xena realized that Gabrielle wasn't one of the people trying to hurt her, she let out a hoarse chuckle and reached up to caress Gabrielle's hand. "Thanks, love," she whispered, smiling at her partner.

"You're welcome. Oh, Xena, we've got to get something done about that wound... in your... in your gut... Xena, it's gone!" Gabrielle said, touching the tear in the leathers where the razor-sharp spear had hit the warrior, but not finding any tissue damage or even blood.

Xena looked up and locked eyes with Ares who promptly shrugged in a classic 'Who, me?' fashion.

"Well, I didn't give you a birthday present, Xena, so you know... Happy Birthday, champ," Ares said with a mischievous grin on his lips, crossing his fingers behind his back.

"Hmmm. Thank you."

"You're welcome. Now, we've still got a war to wage here. How about you go after Licantus while I slaughter the soldiers... and stuff...?" Ares said, twirling the Sword of War.

Hobbling around to face him, Gabrielle clenched her fists and shot Ares a murderous look. "Don't you dare touch my fellow Amazons, Ares!"

"Oh! The pet hamster can speak! And not only that, she gives orders... I'm impressed!" Ares said and let out a loud, and slightly condescending, laugh that made Gabrielle's hackles rise even more.

Ares twirled the Sword of War, hoping that a juicy target would soon come his way - right on cue, a soldier came running down towards them, holding a crossbow. Grinning evilly, Ares took a double-handed grip on his sword and struck out at the soldier, effortlessly cutting him in half at the waist. "I'm just happy I was allowed to fight side by side with the greatest mortal warrior since the dawn of time... okay, mortal usually means... no, I better not say anything."

"Ares..." Xena growled, but the God just moved his fingers across his lips.

"Nope. My lips are zipped. Anyway, Licantus is still inside, Xena. Come on... let's go get him," Ares said and jumped through the opened door.

Gabrielle let out a deep sigh and shook her head slowly. Turning towards Xena, she put her hands on the warrior's shoulders and tried to come up with something positive to say about the devious God. In the end, she just shrugged.

"I know what you mean, Gabrielle. He's a piece of work, all right," Xena said and leaned down to give Gabrielle a kiss on the forehead.

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CHAPTER 5

By the time Xena entered the hut, Ares had Licantus pinned down across his desk, keeping the unconscious commandant down by holding his pinkie finger on the helmet.

At once, Xena knelt down next to Iacobius who was still lying face-down on the dusty floor, bleeding from a horrible wound in the neck. She tried to turn him over and remove the crossbow bolt from his neck, but it had gone in too deep to remove without tools.

"Hey, Xena, I thought you'd taken a wrong turn somewhere... what kept ya? No, let me guess... more kissing?" Ares said, buffing the fingernails on his free hand against his black leather vest. When he noticed what Xena was doing, he waved his hand dismissively. "Oh, he's fine. Who's that, anyway? Your new secret lover? Oh dear, what will your pet hamster say?"

"Shut up, Ares. He's an ally."

"Oh, an ally. I know all about allies, Xena. An ally is someone who hasn't betrayed you yet."

Xena moved over to the other side of Iacobius and shot the God a dark look. "If you could treat my wound, I'm sure you can treat his, too. Do it."

"Making demands now, are we?"

"Ares..." Xena growled, shooting fire at him with her eyes.

Wiggling his eyebrows, Ares broke out in a cheesy grin. "Mmmm... I could never say no to you when you made goo-goo eyes at me. Lover-ly. Ah, consider him treated," Ares said and waved his hand again.

Looking down, Xena could see the wound in Iacobius' neck disappear and the bolt fall harmlessly onto the floor. After a few seconds, the Colonel groaned and sat up on his knees, rubbing his neck where the gaping hole had been.

"Uh... By Zeus, that was a weird dream," he croaked, looking around in a daze until he realized where he was and who was with him. "Oh... Ares? Xena?"

Xena reached down and helped the Colonel on his feet, dusting off his body armor in the process. "I'll explain later, Iacobius. Gabrielle is hurt, she needs your help outside."

"I'll take a look at her," Iacobius said and staggered out of the command hut, instantly holding his hands high in the air when he saw the massed ranks of Pannonian Amazons beginning to arrive outside.

Moving up to Ares, Xena sent him a silent thank you that the God responded to by grinning. "Let Licantus go, Ares. Even though he doesn't deserve it, I'll see to it that he gets a fair trial," she said and reached for Licantus' uniform.

"Oh, spare me, killer. A fair trial? Wouldn't it be a lot more fun to see me crush his skull with my pinkie? I can do that, you know. You're not the only one with many skills."

"Ares..."

Rolling his eyes, Ares moved his hand down to Licantus' body armor and hauled the commandant off the desk. "Oh, all right. Spoilsport. Here he is," he continued, throwing Licantus onto the floor of the command hut.

Just as Xena crouched down to wake Licantus up, Ares closed his eyes and let out a muted, throaty grunt.

When he opened his eyes again, he waved his hand in Xena's direction. "Don't bother, Xena. In less than four candle-drips, he'll be listening to Charon's infernal singing on his merry way across the river Styx. I've foreseen it."

"He's not going to die, Ares. At least not by my hand," Xena said and slapped Licantus' cheeks a couple of times to get him to come to. Once the commandant had regained consciousness, Xena hauled the heavy man on his feet and pushed him towards the door.

"No, that's true. But die he will," Ares said and followed his champion out of the door.

Outside, Xena nodded at Gabrielle who came over at once to help her hold the groggy man steady. "No, he's not dead... Ares did something to him," Xena said off the worried look on Gabrielle's face.

"Oh... I... okay. Boy, he's heavy..."

"Yeah. Take care of yourself, Gabrielle. I have him," Xena said when she noticed how badly Gabrielle hobbled on her injured knee.

Ducking under his arm and putting it across her shoulders, Gabrielle sent Xena a dark look. "And I have him, too."

While Xena had been in the command hut, Yakan and the rest of the Pannonian Amazons had gathered at the small square in front of the hut. With their enemy in such a vulnerable state, they let out a series of cheers that echoed between the huts and the barracks.

As Xena walked past her, Yakan stepped forward and put a hand on Licantus' chest. 'The only place he's going is to the chopping block, Xena,' she said in the Pannonian dialect.

'No, Yakan. He's a prisoner of war. If we execute him now, we're no better than he was.'

'A lot of fancy talk won't free him of his sins. He needs to die and it needs to be right now,' the senior Amazon said, giving Licantus a shove with the hilt of a sword she had taken off a dead soldier.

'Look, Yakan... we both know that any magistrate will sentence him to death. We have to let it run its course...'

A pained groan by Gabrielle - whose knee had made a crunching sound when she had stepped on a rock - made Xena take her eyes off Yakan and the prisoner.

The perfectly awake and alert Licantus exploited that to the fullest by elbowing Gabrielle in the side and reaching for Yakan's sword that was just in front of his hands. As he pulled it backwards, the blade carved two furrows in the senior Amazon's hands, making her scream in pain and sending a spray of blood down on the sandy ground.

Roaring loudly, Licantus swung the sword at Xena who ducked and rolled to get out of the danger zone.

At once, she drew her own sword and went in deep, attacking the commandant with such speed that her sword appeared to have been transformed into a wall of steel that glinted in the orange torchlight.

It didn't take her long to disarm the cursing Licantus, and she put an end to the fight by slashing a large X into his body armor and knocking him on his rear with a high kick to his face.

"Licantus," she said in a growl once the man was flat on his back on the ground. "If you value your life, you better stop fighting now." Holding the tip of her sword against the man's throat, she left no doubts as to her intentions.

"I'll never surrender to Amazons!" Licantus growled back.

"Luckily for you, I'm not an Amazon. Yield, fool!" Xena barked when Licantus tried to get up. "Yield or die!"

'Take him to the chopping block!' someone shouted in Pannonian. The lone Amazon was soon joined by many more, and soon, the entire group of warriors shoved Xena aside and grabbed hold of the commandant.

'Let's hack him to pieces for what he did to Yakan!' another Amazon said, followed by a loud cheer from the others. The group quickly moved as one towards the instruments of torture, slamming Licantus' right arm down on the chopping block.

Turning away from the gruesome spectacle, Gabrielle clenched her jaw and hobbled over to Xena. "Oh, by the Gods, I can't watch that..."

"You don't have to, love. How's your knee?" Xena said, turning away from the crowd that cheered loudly when a sword came down onto Licantus' arm.

To the east, the first rays of the new day were slowly breaking above the horizon - a fitting end to the terrible events of the night.

"Not good. I think you need to have a look at it," Gabrielle said through clenched teeth as she leaned on Xena for support.

"I know just what to do. I remember Lyceus damaged his knee once falling down from old man Skiros' hayloft. A warm poultice will have you up and running in no time."

Briefly looking behind her at the sound of the sword coming down again, Xena shuddered and pulled Gabrielle into a heartfelt hug. "I love you, Gabrielle," she whispered, kissing the bard's filthy hair.

"I love you, too, Xena. How about a little vacation?"

"A vacation sounds pretty good right now, that's a fact," Xena said and ran a hand through her own horrendously tousled hair. "Maybe spend three days at a waterfall somewhere."

"Three days?! I was thinking three moons!"

"Oh... uh, three moons is quite a long while, Gabrielle..."

"Sheesh! Well, perhaps I should tie you to the bedroll to stop you from gettin' all antsy!"

"On second thoughts... three moons sounds about right," Xena said with an uncharacteristic snicker.

'Xena!' Yakan said, moving away from the Pannonian Amazons who once again cheered wildly when the sword connected with one of Licantus' limbs.

"Yes, Yakan? In Greek, please," Xena said, pulling Gabrielle close to her.

"I'll try. We are ready to leave now. Once the bastard is dead, I'll tell my warriors to break down the doors of the other barracks. We'll be a mighty force. We'll head to Heraklion and capture the ship we came on."

Looking over the senior Amazon's shoulder at the gruesome sight of the former camp commandant's mutilated body, Xena sighed and scrunched up her face. "I'd say he won't get any more dead than he is now, Yakan."

"Hmmm?"

"But it's your call... all right. But as you know, the road back to the ship is long and tough," Xena said, glancing down at Gabrielle's knee.

Sensing her lover's thoughts, Gabrielle gave the warrior a squeeze. "Oh, don't you worry about me, Xena. I can handle it."

"No, you can't," Xena said vehemently. "I know what to do. First, we'll get the horses from the stables at the other side of the camp... then we'll travel to Heraklion. Yakan?"

"Sounds fine. I'll tell my warriors to go into the other barracks now," the senior Amazon said and turned back to her own tribe to explain the situation.

"Xena, I can walk-" Gabrielle started to say.

Reaching over, Xena put two fingers across Gabrielle's soft lips, cutting her off mid-stream. "No. We'll find a horse for you. End of discussion."

Ten candlerips later, Xena and three of the Pannonian Amazons led a few mules and a pack of horses - recently vacated by Licantus' raiders - around the corner of a barrack and into the small square.

"Hey, Gabrielle, look here," Xena said astride a chestnut mare. "Look what we found... two mules for you..."

"I'm not quite that heavy, thank you very much!" Gabrielle said and rose from the doorstep she had been sitting on.

Dismounting the mare, Xena quickly ran over to Gabrielle to help her get the weight off the knee. "Oh, I know... but there's a covered wagon, too. I was thinking that you and the juniors could travel together...? Perhaps you could tell them a story or two on the road to Heraklion," the warrior said, running her fingers down Gabrielle's cheek.

"Oh! I definitely could, Xena. That's a wonderful idea. They must be frightened," Gabrielle said, smiling like a little sun. "I'll do that right away. You better go and help Yakan break out the other Amazons. I haven't been able to understand everything, but I think they're having trouble with the doors."

"Nothing that a bit of Chakram can't cure. All right, I'll prepare the wagon for you first, then I'll help with the locks," Xena said and stole a kiss from Gabrielle when nobody was watching.

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"Cheris, I'll need your help to get up in the wagon," Gabrielle said as she came back out into the square with the juniors all walking behind her in a well-ordered fashion, looking very much like a row of ducklings with their mother.

"I will help you, Mistress Gabrielle. I'm strong," the whiteblonde junior said proudly.

"Oh, I know you are. First we need to pull the tail gate down... yes, like that," Gabrielle said as Cheris opened the four catches and let the gate fall down.

Leaning against the rear end of the covered wagon with the staff in her hand, Gabrielle noted that the wagon was old, rusty and poorly maintained. "Hmmm," she said, crinkling her nose at the thick layers of muck and dust that covered the wheels and the axles. "Well, beggars can't be choosers. Come on, Amazons... get up into the wagon. Oh, who wants to help an old, old woman...?"

Two of the older juniors raised their hands in the air and quickly joined Cheris in helping Gabrielle up to sit on the tail gate. From there, she could relatively easily get up on her own and hobbled up to the front of the wagon.

"Oh, that's very good thinking," Gabrielle said when she saw that one of the juniors was carrying a full waterskin. "What's your name?"

"Alia, Princess Gabrielle," a thirteen year old junior with dark blue eyes and dirty-blond hair said. She quickly averted her eyes to show her respect, but when Gabrielle let out a laugh, she looked up in surprise.

"Right now, I'm not a Princess... I'm just someone waiting to be driven somewhere. Do any of you juniors know how to drive a team of mules...?"

All twelve juniors shook their heads.

"Me, neither. Oh well, I guess I'll just have to tell you a story while we wait," Gabrielle said and sat down on an old canvas sack someone had forgotten to remove from the wagon. As she stretched out her bad leg, a flash of pain raced across her face and she had to bite down on her bottom lip.

"Are you all right, Mistress Gabrielle?" Cheris asked, clearly concerned.

"Not really... I hurt my knee in the fight... among other things," Gabrielle said through clenched teeth. After a short while, the pain had receded enough for her to breathe normally again. "Okay... so... anybody want to hear a story?" she continued, wiping a few beads of cold sweat off her forehead.

"Yes, please!" the juniors said in unison, sitting down wherever they could find a clean spot.

"Right. Have you heard the one about..."

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At the same time, Xena raised her Chakram in the air and let the circular weapon fly towards the door to barrack six. The fast-spinning metal disk easily cut through the hinges which caused the door to fall into the hut.

No sooner had the door disappeared before a wildly cheering group of very dark-skinned female warriors came streaming out, shielding their eyes against the early morning sun.

'They're not Amazons... who are they?' Yakan said in the Pannonian dialect, furrowing her brow at the sight of the long-limbed, muscular women whose skin was so black it appeared shiny.

'Nubians, I believe. From Africanus, south of Egypt,' Xena said and put out her open hands so the warriors could see she wasn't a threat.

The first of the female warriors began to speak to Xena and Yakan in excited tones, but it soon became apparent that neither understood the other. Shrugging, the woman gave up trying and went back to her own people.

'Yakan!' one of the Pannonian Amazons said, huffing and puffing from checking the other barracks.

'Go on, Garan.'

'Apart from number seven, the other barracks are empty. My best guess is that twenty Amazons are kept in the next hut.'

'All right. Thank you. Go back to the others at the square, Garan.'

'Yes, Yakan,' the runner said and continued back towards the square in a fast jog.

Coming back out of the barrack, Xena nodded to the senior Amazon. "This one is empty. What about number seven?" she said, polishing her Chakram to keep it ready for any eventuality.

"Twenty more Amazons. They're the last ones," Yakan said in somewhat broken Greek.

"Well, let's get 'em," Xena said and hooked the Chakram onto the little hook on her belt. "Travelling back to Heraklion will be a long, hard slog. The sooner we leave, the better. This far south, the sun will be murderous when it gets high in the sky, even this late in the year."

"Mmmmm," Yakan said, looking at the reddish disk that was still hovering fairly low in the eastern sky.

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Four candlemarks later.

The junior Amazons had finally succumbed to the hot, dusty conditions and were resting peacefully inside the covered wagon.

With her throat as dry as parchment and her knee and the wound in her back aching worse than ever, Gabrielle was anything but at rest. Not wanting to groan too loudly out of fear of waking up the insatiable juniors, she bit down hard as she tried to shuffle around on the canvas sack to find a better spot for her sore behind.

Sighing deeply, she looked at the juniors with a heavy heart. Their hair and faces were dirty from the large amounts of dust that was kicked up by the wheels, and yet most of them had two clear lines going down their cheeks; trails after teardrops.

'Some of them will have lost their mothers or sisters in the raids that brought them here... most of them will have seen things they weren't ready for... but Thank Artemis and Aphrodite that they were more valuable untouched,' Gabrielle thought, shivering through the heat at the unthinkable alternative.

Up on the bench seat, the Pannonian Amazon who had volunteered to be the driver had fallen asleep, which resulted in the wagon's wheels finding all the biggest potholes. Sighing again, Gabrielle tried to move up to grab the reins herself, but she was unable to get up on her own.

Bumping back down on the canvas sack, she rolled her eyes and let potholes be potholes.

Looking back from her position at the lead of the dusty column of Amazons, Xena noticed that the driver of Gabrielle's wagon had fallen asleep. Cursing under her breath, she let herself fall back until she was at a level with the driverless mules.

Effortlessly jumping over to the bench seat, she took the reins from the sleeping Amazon and steered the mules back on track. The hairy beasts were going a bit too slowly for her liking, but a brief crack of the whip in the air above them spurred them into moving their stocky legs faster.

A few dozen yards further on, the curtain behind her was moved aside, revealing a filthy, very tired-looking Gabrielle whose face immediately lit up in a smile when she saw that she and her juniors had a new driver.

"Hey," Xena said, but she was quickly shushed by Gabrielle.

"They're sleeping," the bard whispered, pointing at the juniors.

"Oh... your stories put them to sleep, did they?"

When Gabrielle's only response was a lightning bolt from her emerald green eyes, Xena chuckled quietly and concentrated on driving the team of mules.

"Verrrrry funny," Gabrielle whispered. "Just so you know, they laughed at all the right places."

"Which story did you tell them?" Xena whispered back.

"Nearly all of 'em!"

"Oh."

Reaching up, Gabrielle put her hand on Xena's hip, the only part of her lover that she could reach from her position on the canvas sack. "I'm really thirsty, Xena... do you have any water?"

"No, I don't."

"Damn. When do you think we'll be in Heraklion?"

"Hmmm," Xena said and looked for any landmarks that would give a clue as to how far they had come. "Hard to say. Several candlemarks, I think."

"Double damn."

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When the column of heavily armed Amazons finally reached the outskirts of Heraklion another three candlemarks later, the citizens scurried away like rats at the sight of more than a hundred fierce-looking, dirty and frustrated female warriors invading their port town.

Scattering into small groups, the Amazons soon sought out all the shade they could find, hogging every facade of every house in the town.

Xena chuckled at the sight as she released the mules from the covered wagon, patting their dusty furs for a job well done. After she had watched them wander off on their own, she went back to the rear of the wagon and carefully lowered the tail gate.

Moving the curtain aside - waving her hands to dissolve the dust storm that had come from the canvas - Xena popped her head into the wagon, intent on asking if everyone was all right.

The sight of Gabrielle deeply engaged in relaying a particularly dramatic scene made her stop and keep quiet. The juniors, though exhausted, were listening to Gabrielle with eyes as wide as saucers, and none of them had time to notice that the dark warrior they had been so afraid of was watching them.

Gabrielle sent a quick wink in Xena's direction, silently promising that it wouldn't be long before she was finished with the tale.

Nodding an affirmative reply, Xena just pointed at herself and then towards the outside, earning herself a smile from the storyteller.

"Yakan?" Xena said, walking through the double doors of the tavern she had visited a few nights earlier.

'Over here, Xena,' the senior Amazon said. She was sitting at a table that had no less than four large - empty - mugs on it.

'Was that wise?' Xena said, pointing at the mugs.

'Yes, because it's water. The bar keep wasn't co-operative at first, but we convinced him to show us where his well was.'

'Oh. I'm going down to the Falcon now. It's best if I go alone,' Xena said and tapped a fingernail against the Chakram.

'Be my guest. We'll just wait in here until you have seized the ship,' Yakan said and began to drink from another mug an Amazon handed to her.

'Princess Gabrielle and the juniors need water, too, Yakan. Perhaps you could see to that?'

'Consider it done, Xena,' Yakan said and snapped her fingers, prompting two warriors to jump to the senior Amazon's side at once.

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"Where's the captain?!" Xena barked when she jumped down from the railing and onto the deck of the Falcon, Licantus' fast, two-masted ship she hoped would be their ticket back to mainland Greece.

Several of the sailors working on the deck looked up in surprise, but it took one of Xena's patented sneers to make them point at the cabins at the stern of the ship.

Grumbling a thank you, Xena strode across the deck and into the cabin without bothering to knock - however, when she realized that the captain was busy with a prostitute, she wished she had.

Narrowing her eyes at the hideous sight of a naked, overweight man - reminding her of a beached whale - on top of a young woman in tattered clothes, Xena put her hands on her hips and assumed her usual authoritarian stance. "Put your pants on and listen to me, captain. We're assuming control of your ship," she barked.

"Wh-what? Who in the flaming levels of Tartarus are you, woman? You can't have my ship!" the captain said, moving back from the woman underneath him but not bothering to get dressed.

"Watch me," Xena said and grabbed hold of the fat captain's arm. Pulling him upright, she dragged him out of the cabin and across the deck - as naked as the day he was born - before she pushed him against the railing with her arm across his throat.

"What are you imbeciles waiting for...? Kill her!" the captain shouted to his crew, but they didn't react at all.

Looking over her shoulder, Xena chuckled darkly when she realized that the captain was on his own. "I think you should have paid them better. Now, you're just shark food," she said, took a quick step back and kicked the captain in the gut with such force that he made a backflip over the railing and into the water below.

As he came to the surface, cursing and swearing like a true sailor, Xena just gave him a mock salute before turning away from him. "Boys, you have a new captain," she said to the sailors who were all gawking at her.

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A half-candlemark later, Xena and Samman, one of the Pannonian Amazons, pushed the gangway away from the Falcon and gave the command to take the ship to sea.

When she felt the ship begin to move, Gabrielle hobbled out of the cabin she had claimed and pulled Xena into a squeeze. "We're going home," she said, yawning.

"Yeah," Xena said and returned the squeeze. "Nothing much will happen now. Why don't you take a rest? I'll wake you up when we get close to Lavrion."

"No, I can't... the juniors..."

"Can take care of themselves for a while. Go on, you need the rest. You look awful," Xena said with a chuckle, wiping some grime off Gabrielle's temple.

"Oh, thank you very much! Sweet Aphrodite, I don't know why I put up with you sometimes," Gabrielle said, slapping Xena's gut.

"Because you love me?"

"Mmmm... probably."

Before Gabrielle had time to go back to the cabin, Ares showed up in a flash of blue and began to strut his stuff in front of Xena and Gabrielle. "Didn't I tell you Licantus would die?" he said in a condescending tone.

"It's not like you to leave in the middle of mayhem and bloodshed, Ares," Xena said in a tired voice.

"You're right, it's not... but I just had to spread the word, you know. Now, the entire Known World knows that you're back where you belong, Xena. At my side."

Xena opened her mouth to complain, but before she could get a word across her lips, Ares raised his hands in the air. "I know what you're going to say. But don't forget that you owe me. You owe me for several things, like fixing his wound," he said, pointing his thumb at Iacobius who was standing at the railing, looking out over the ocean. "But of course, if you want to watch him roll over and die where he stands, just say the word and I'll revoke the cure."

"You'd do that, wouldn't you?" Xena said hoarsely.

"Oh, Xena, do you even have to ask?"

"No."

Hooking her arm inside Xena's, Gabrielle turned away from the God to show that she wasn't in awe of him. "Come on, Xena... let's get some rest."

"Which reminds me," Ares said, following the two women. "Haven't you forgotten about the Pride of Antiochia? You know, the ship that's mooring off the coast of Spinalonga as we speak, expecting to haul a load of shackled Amazons back east...?"

"We're not going anywhere near Spinalonga, Ares. It's of no concern to us," Xena said.

"Ohhh, I see. Well, in that case," Ares said and closed his eyes. A nasty grin briefly played on his lips, and when he opened his eyes again, they were just a little bit darker than they had been moments earlier. "The standards of the Syrian boat builders must be slipping. Seems like the Pride of Antiochia just got a massive hole in its hull. I guess they're going down. Oh well. Better luck next time."

Looking at the God with a horrified expression on her face, Gabrielle opened and closed her mouth several times trying to find words that would explain what she felt deep down inside. "You... they... you can't just... what if..."

"Boy, she's really articulate, huh? Looks like you didn't take her for her oral skills, Xena," Ares said with a broad grin. "Now, if you will excuse us... Xena and I have something important to discuss," he continued and waved his hand, making both he and Xena vanish in thin air.

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Arriving at the Halls of War, Ares made himself comfortable on his throne by sitting across the seat and letting his leather-clad legs dangle off the side.

"Remember the last time you were here, Xena? It wasn't all that long ago. In your time, I guess it was three winters or so... in my time, just a heartbeat."

"I remember," Xena said quietly, studying the many frescoes on the walls that portrayed the greatest mortal warriors. When she found her own icon at the end of the hall, she had to look away.

"We were a great team back then... we were a great team in this fight, as a matter of fact. Don't you think? You wouldn't happen to have a little battle lus-"

"NO!"

"Just a thought," Ares said with a grin. Sobering, he sat up straight and looked down at his entwined fingers. "On a more serious note, I'm proud of you, Xena. I'm proud of your fire, your anger... in short, your dark side. And I'm proud that you're not afraid of tapping into it."

"It's nothing to be proud of, Ares! I have tried to lead a life without violence... "

"Oh, sure you have."

"... but violence always finds me!"

"Xena, Xena, Xena," Ares said and jumped off his throne. "Violence always finds you because you are who you are... and what you are. You can never change that. Even when you allowed yourself to grow old and frail, you

couldn't escape the darkness... but now, with the gift I've bestowed upon you... " he continued as he slid closer to Xena.

"What have you done with me? Stop being so damn cryptic, Ares. Tell me straight!" Xena said, clenching her fists.

"Xena, my dear... I have granted you the second best thing after immortality."

"If you think you've granted me invulnerability, may I remind you that this," Xena said and grabbed hold of the tear in her leathers, "hurt like Tartarus on a bad day... ?"

"Oh, I'm sure it hurt, Xena. But it isn't there now, is it?"

"You said that you-"

"No, I didn't. Your gift isn't invulnerability, Xena... I've simply granted you the ability to heal any wound, even a potentially fatal one. However, it only works when you tap into your dark side. Yes, that's right. When you fight for yourself, you're just as mortal as any other warrior... but when you fight for me," Ares said and clenched his fists, "You. Are. Unstoppable... Invincible."

"But how would-"

"Let's say you're not fast enough to catch an arrow shot at you. Let's say it penetrates your arm or your shoulder... or Zeus forbid, your lovely bosom. That would be a major owie, wouldn't it? Well, by responding with anger instead of terror, you could just pull out the arrow and use it as a toothpick. Wouldn't even leave a scratch."

Xena furrowed her brow and looked at the little nick on her finger where Gabrielle had drawn her blood as a test. Running her index finger across it, she could feel that the small scar was still there.

"Yes, that's still there. You bled because you didn't use your dark side to control it. If you had, say, slapped hamster girl around for nicking your finger, it wouldn't have been there now."

Sighing deeply, Xena looked up at the God and wondered if he understood that he had given her the perfect motivation to remain on the path of light. *'He said that I would still bleed if I was injured fighting for myself... but that's exactly what I want! By bleeding, I'd prove to myself that I was still human, with human emotions and weaknesses... and not the heartless, soulless killing machine I had turned into before I met Hercules... and Gabrielle.'*

Thinking of her lover highlighted another facet of Ares' message, and she began to bite her cheek. "Ares... would I be able to heal wounds on other people?"

"Well... if we made a new clause to our agreement, I could easily extend your many skills to include that. In the meantime, you could always try. Oh, yes. You and Gabrielle will die eventually, but it'll be a while... even without using your dark side to heal wounds. Just imagine, maybe we'll have five or six decades together!"

Hearing that, Xena felt a cold shiver race up and down her spine that refused to go away until it had made the entire run from her neck to her rear end. "What about Gabrielle?" she said quietly.

"What about her? She'll grow old, too. Oh, but you needn't worry about the garden gnome, Xena. She'll follow in your footsteps soon enough."

"Now you're being cryptic again, Ares!"

"Could be... could be!" Ares said with a dark grin. "Anyway, my work here is done. I've told you what you need to know. I trust you will exploit it to the fullest! Close your eyes, Xena, I'm about to give you another little birthday present."

Before Xena had time to voice her dissatisfaction, Ares waved his hand which made Xena disappear from the Halls of War.

Grinning broadly, Ares went back to his throne and flung himself into it. A few seconds later, he leaned his head back and let out a loud laugh over the exciting adventure he had just taken part in and the even more exciting prospects of the immediate future.

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Instead of returning to the Falcon like she had expected, Xena found herself standing in the docks at Lavrion, the port town she and Gabrielle had used as a starting point for their journey to Crete.

A second later, Gabrielle showed up next to her, quickly followed by Iacobius who was leaning back with his hands in the air, still pulling hard to get a rope taut.

"Whoa...!" he said, falling backwards onto his rear when he noticed where they were. "What in Tartarus is going on here...?"

"This is all Ares' doing," Xena said and grabbed hold of Gabrielle before she could fall over. Looking at the discolored bruise on Gabrielle's knee and the nasty scrape on her back, Xena briefly considered testing her new skill, but the urge only lasted for a few heartbeats - deep inside, she knew there just had to be something Ares hadn't told her.

"What's wrong, Xena?" Gabrielle said and reached up to caress her lover's cheek.

Moving in under Gabrielle's shoulder, Xena helped the bard take the weight off her knee, and together, they began to hobble towards the Hestian mission at the end of the busy street. "I'll tell you when we're alone. Come on, love, we need to get your injuries looked at."

"No, wait... what about the Amazons?" Gabrielle said, looking behind her to see if Ares had transported them across the South Aegean as well.

Shrugging, Xena paused briefly but then continued. "Yakan and the others will be fine... I hope. The sailors will know how to get here and they're not stupid enough to go up against an entire army of Amazons. After your injuries have been treated, we'll come back here and wait for them. It'll only be a few candlemarks. Okay?"

"But Cheris and the other juniors...? They need me-"

"Gabrielle," Xena said darkly. "We need to get your knee looked at by a skilled healer. Now. Do you understand me?"

Sighing, Gabrielle nodded and leaned against her partner. "Yes. It hurts."

"All right. Let's get to the Hestian mission. They'll have the remedies we'll need."

Two steps later, Xena realized that she didn't have her bag with her, and she looked up and roared into the heavens: "Hey... Hey! My bag with all our stuff! Ares! I want my bag!"

'Catch!' Ares' omnipresent, disembodied voice said, creating a crack of thunder that rolled across the docks and made the experienced fishermen look up in surprise at the deep blue late

afternoon sky.

Moments later, Xena's bag came flying down towards them, going at the same speed a common buzzard would on a strafing run.

"Oh! I got it!" Iacobius said and stretched out his arms. When he finally caught the bag, the weight was so great he took a nosedive onto the coarse surface of the street - but he managed to hold onto it.

"Thanks, Iacobius," Xena said and took the bag.

Coughing and spluttering, Iacobius got on his feet and dusted off his body armor. "You're welcome, Xena. Well, I guess this is where our paths split."

"Looks like it. Goodbye, Iacobius. Thanks for giving us a helping hand," Xena said and stretched out her free arm.

Iacobius clasped it at once and then reached in to do the same with Gabrielle. "Like I said, you're welcome. I don't think I would have stayed there for much longer, anyway."

Smiling at the soldier, Gabrielle punched his chest and pulled him into a half-hug. "Goodbye, Iacobius. Maybe we'll meet again some day," she said when Iacobius pulled back.

"Let's hope it'll be under less strenuous circumstances!" Iacobius said and laughed out loud. After waving at the two women, he turned around and walked towards the first of the taverns, hoping to find a ride out of Lavrion.

As she and Gabrielle continued walking down towards the Hestian mission, Xena looked down at the bard who was struggling valiantly against the stinging ache in her back and the pains shooting up from her knee. She briefly considered telling Gabrielle about the things Ares had told her, but realized that she wouldn't feel comfortable doing it.

'I won't tell her. It'll only make her rue over things that are out of our control... no, I won't tell her. Instead, I'll... I'll bury the Destroyer of Nations once and for all. Ares' so-called gift will never come to be unless I call on it myself... and I won't. I love her too much for that,' Xena thought, allowing a brief smile to play on her lips.

Noticing at once, Gabrielle gave Xena a little squeeze with the hand she had wrapped around the warrior's waist. "Oh, it's so good to see that smile. What's on your mind?"

"Only that I love you."

"Oh... that's nice. I was thinking the same thing."

"That you love yourself?"

"Hardee har har," Gabrielle said and tried to bump shoulders with her lover. "That I love you, of course."

"Then everything is right in our little corner of the Known World," Xena said and pulled the bell wire next to the door at the Hestian mission.

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THE END.