

The silent raiders were swift and efficient in decimating the villagers; led by an imposing figure in a hunting outfit made of brown deerskin, they cut down everyone within their reach.

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At the top of a hill a mile and a half from the village, a small camp had been set up for two people who traveled with their golden mare.

In the center of the camp, another column of smoke wafted over a sleeping fur that had been placed off to a side, only this was the pale blue remains of a firepit that had burned down to glowing embers.

The sleeping fur was well buttoned up with the only signs of life a few strands of hair sticking out at the top end; most were black but some were strawberry blonde.

Soon, the larger of the two lumps inside the sleeping fur began to stir, and it didn't take long for the top end of the fur to be flipped open to allow some of the crisp morning air to flow down into it.

Yawning, Xena rubbed her eyes and began to extract herself from the sleeping fur, mindful not to disturb the gently snoring Gabrielle too much.

When she sat up, her astute senses immediately registered the columns of black smoke on the horizon, and she quickly pulled herself free and donned her battle leathers to see for herself what was going on.

By then, the attack was mostly over, but the experienced warrior was able to tell at once that it had been a well-coordinated, well-executed affair. The houses had been set alight by burning arrows that had been shot into the thatched roofs. The resulting fires had driven the villagers into the central square where they had been easy prey for the attackers.

"Hmmm," Xena said quietly, rubbing her chin as she was watching the carnage. *'Expertly made. I haven't heard of any new bands of marauders... not since we took care of Licantus of Crete, anyway...'* she thought, scrunching up her face.

Behind the dark warrior, soft footfalls heralded the arrival of Gabrielle who was busy lacing up her pea green top while holding Xena's bronze breastplate under her arm. "Here, love... I thought you might want it," she said and handed her lover the protective item.

"Thank you," Xena said and clicked the breastplate in place.

Gabrielle studied the smoking remains of the village and cocked her head. "We went through that village last night... it was so small they didn't even have a tavern where we could sleep. Why on Mother Gaia's green earth would anyone raid it?"

"I don't know, Gabrielle," Xena said and flipped her long, black hair out of the back of the breastplate.

"Well, whatever the cause, we need to go down there at once and help them," Gabrielle said and spun around so she could start packing up their camp.

Fifteen candelrips later, Xena brought Argo to a halt on a dirt road at the outskirts of the village and stared at the devastation. Gabrielle leaned to the side to see better and exclaimed a quiet "By the Gods" at the horrendous sight.

Up close, they could see that seven of the village's ten huts had been torched by the mysterious attackers. A penetrating stench of burning wood, thatch and flesh filled the air, and large plumes of pale blue and black smoke drifted through the village. This, combined with incredibly hot sheets of fire occasionally bursting out of collapsing houses, created scenes straight out of Tartarus.

The crackling, rumbling fires were deafening, but now and then, a crystal clear sound of a child or young adult crying somewhere out of sight wafted through the crackles, sending waves of chills down Xena's and Gabrielle's spines.

"Gabrielle, look at all the hoofprints on the ground... they were attacked by riders. We need to dismount so they won't think we're the enemy," Xena shouted over her shoulder to be heard over the crackling fires.

"Good thinking, love," Gabrielle said and quickly leaned in to kiss Xena's neck before jumping off the tall mare.

While Xena tried to calm down Argo who had become spooked by the fire and the smoke, Gabrielle grabbed her trusty staff and ran into the center of the road to be ready in case she needed to pummel someone. When Xena joined her a short while later, they quickly ran up the dirt road to get to the central square they had seen from the hilltop.

Their perilous journey through the street had hardly even begun when the house to their right collapsed and sent a firestorm of burning embers all over the street. Reacting at once, Xena grabbed Gabrielle and pulled her away from the danger, but even so, embers rained down onto their clothes and their hair.

"Ares' balls!" Gabrielle cursed loudly, frantically brushing herself off before going to work on Xena's leathers. "Ouch!" she continued, yanking her fingers back from a particularly large piece of burning thatch that was balancing on Xena's right shoulder pad.

"Thanks," Xena said and made short work of the situation by shrugging the piece off her shoulder and moving away in a hurry.

"You're welcome," Gabrielle said, sucking on her scorched fingers with a look of supreme annoyance on her fair face.

"You all right?"

Cursing and grumbling, Gabrielle eventually took out her fingers and nodded a disgusted reply. "Sure, sure..."

"C'mon, not far now..." Xena said and put her hand on her partner's shoulder to silently tell her that she should get a move on.

Neither Xena nor Gabrielle had expected the utter carnage that presented itself to them when they turned into the central square. Everywhere they looked, bodies of men, women and children littered the street.

At a water well in the center of the square, a few survivors were trying to preserve the last three buildings by throwing bucket after bucket of water onto their walls and roofs, but the sheer amount of burning embers in the air made it a fruitless task and smoke was already billowing up from the thatch.

"By the Gods...! Xena... look," Gabrielle exclaimed when she realized that a soot-stained young woman was sitting on the ground on their side of the well with two toddlers in her arms.

At the awful sights and sounds, Xena's jaw began to grind dangerously and her ice blue eyes were reduced to narrow slits. "Someone will pay for this," she said hoarsely. "Someone will pay dearly for this..."

Shouts from some of the survivors working the fireline proved that Xena and Gabrielle had been spotted, and Gabrielle quickly waved with an open hand at the men to prove that they were friendly. "Xena, try to help them with the water! I'll... I'll..."

"I'm on it," Xena said and hurriedly ran across the square to offer her help to the people in the fireline.

Gulping nervously, Gabrielle went over to the young mother, approaching her very carefully so she wouldn't spook her. "Hello, my name is Gabrielle. We need to get you out of here," she said as she put out her hand.

The young woman looked at her with a dull gaze from her greenish eyes. Her face and body were covered in soot and the left side of her dress had been torn in half, exposing a soot-stained breast. "Shhh..." she said, gently rocking her toddlers, "my boys are sleeping."

A brief look at the two children told Gabrielle a different story, but she couldn't get a single word through her painfully contracted throat. Settling for nodding, she moved to take one

of the toddlers to help the young woman up and away from the immediate danger, but her actions were refused.

"No! No, go away!" the young mother cried and shied back from Gabrielle's hands. As she did so, the child on her left arm slipped sideways and fell from her grasp, ending up inanimately in her lap. "Now look what you've done! Go away!"

Gabrielle's chin quivered badly, but she nodded and left the tragic scene behind with her hand firmly covering her mouth.

Xena - who was working the winch at the well - had watched the scene unfold but could only sigh and shake her head. Looking back over her shoulder, she could see that the flames were stronger than the effort brought forth by the few survivors, and she reckoned it wouldn't be long before the three remaining houses were lost as well.

The villager nearest to her, a man in his late thirties wearing an outfit typical of pig farmers, groaned out loud as he poured the contents of the bucket permanently attached to the end of the well's rope into a larger one.

As soon as the well's bucket was empty, Xena released the winch and waited for the splash from down below. Once she heard it, she waited a few seconds for the large stone in the bucket to do its job and get the empty container below the surface. When the rope holding the bucket became taut, she put her back into turning the winch to get it back up.

By the ninth bucket, stabs of pain shot up from her back at every turn of the winch and her hands were burning almost as fiercely as the houses in the village, but she forced herself to push the pain aside by thinking about the times in her life where it had been her who had torched a village after ransacking it.

Those dark thoughts grew inside her, and soon, her hatred towards her old, nasty self was so strong she had a tangy taste of blood in her mouth. That in turn made her give the winch such a workout that it nearly wore down its wooden hinges.

"Love...? Love...?" Gabrielle said and put a calming hand on Xena's taut muscles, but the warrior was too preoccupied with her own thoughts to hear her. Sighing, Gabrielle mopped her sooty brow and turned away from her partner.

The fireline was only made up of nine people, far below the number required to be effective, and even beyond that, most of the men and women in it were too exhausted to do the job properly. More than one bucket was dropped along the way, leading to a barrage of curses aimed at the unfortunate individual.

When a middle-aged woman nearly dropped a bucket for the second time, Gabrielle stepped in and took her place, earning herself a tired smile. With the bard's help, the fireline grew slightly more efficient, but it wasn't long before her own strength was sapped by the unbearable heat and the clouds of choking smoke that drifted across the square.

Inevitably, their efforts had been in vain as large tendrils of fire suddenly shot up from the roof of the first of the three buildings.

"Get back! Get back!" someone shouted from the front of the line, and everybody hurried back from the inferno.

The roaring fire quickly consumed the house and jumped to the next one, eating away at the thatched roof almost at once.

"We gotta go! Now!" a strong female voice shouted, and it took Gabrielle several seconds to understand that it had been Xena. Looking around in a daze to see where her partner was, she jumped a foot in the air and let out a brief shriek when the outer wall of the house they had tried to save suddenly collapsed without warning and sent a storm of burning embers everywhere.

"We gotta go!" Xena said strongly, dragging the people at the rear of the fireline away from the conflagration.

Soon, Gabrielle snapped out of her smoke-induced confusion and began to grab hold of the people nearest to her. "Come on!" she shouted as she grabbed a middle-aged man's shoulder. "Come on, we can't save it!"

The man - dressed in a blue tunic that had been colored black by the soot - grudgingly threw down the bucket he had been holding and roared out his frustrations at the raiders and the burning building.

Working together, the bard and the warrior were able to get the survivors clear of the fire and assembled in a side street the furthest away from the square. There, smoke was still billowing out of the ruined homes, but the flames had mostly died down which made the temperature more survivable.

"Have some water," Xena said, carrying a full bucket of water and a dipper she had found at the well. "You must rinse your mouth and nose and drink some water," she continued, offering each of the villagers a couple of sips from the dipper.

Scrunching up her face, Gabrielle did a quick head count and realized that the young mother with the two dead children wasn't among the survivors. "Xena... Xena! I'm going back to the square! We didn't get everyone out!" she said and quickly took off up the side street, not bothering to stick around for the warrior's inevitable rejection.

Gabrielle ran into the square, protecting her mouth and nose with her hand. Looking around, she soon spotted the young mother who had moved over to the well and was attempting to feed her sons some water.

The sight of the two lifeless children was enough for Gabrielle to choke up, but she pushed it aside and rushed forward to help the woman. "Hello, it's me again... Gabrielle. Remember me? Listen, we need to get out of here... do you understand?"

"Oh, sure. I understand," the young mother said, tickling her two boys on their tummies to get them to open their mouths while cooing with them like nothing had happened.

Gabrielle bit down hard to stop the ice cold wave that swept through her despite the barbaric temperature in the square, and she shook her head slowly as she looked at the maniacal expression in the young woman's eyes. "May I?" she said hoarsely as she tenderly picked up the first of the two toddlers.

"Sure. I'm Cryone," the young woman said with a smile. Cooing a bit more, she picked up her other son and began to rock him back and forth in her arms.

The first child was merely a lump of dead weight in Gabrielle's arms, but she pressed the toddler to her chest out of respect for the mother and the life that had been lost. "Cryone, we need to go over to that street over there... you see? The others are there already..."

"Oh yeah... sure. Gabrielle, was it?"

"Yes."

"These are my boys, Skoros and Thadeus. Aren't they lovely? They're six moons old now. Their father is still sleeping as well. He's back in our home," Cryone said and nodded at one of the burning ruins.

"Oh, I... I... Cryone, come on, we better go," Gabrielle said, looking at Xena who was striding towards them.

When Xena was close enough, she grimaced and reached for the toddler. "Gabri-elle!" she growled, but the bard simply shook her head and clung onto the child.

"Come on, Cryone. It's right over here," Gabrielle said with a smile.

Returning the smile, Cryone put her other son to her bosom and began to walk with a spring in her step that made a few tears escape from Gabrielle's emerald green eyes.

When the trio reached the side street, the remaining survivors had begun to realize how much they had lost and were sitting on the ground or holding onto one another, wailing out their grief.

The surviving villagers - five men and five women with Cryone - were of all ages, some were barely twenty summers and some were closer to fifty. Of the eight families that had

lived in the village's ten huts, only one had escaped without losing a loved one; the middle-aged man in the formerly blue tunic and his wife.

As Xena returned with Gabrielle and the bereaved mother, the middle-aged man rose to greet them. "Hello, strangers," he said and clasped arms with Xena. "I'm Beraeus, the appointed elder of Tirus, our village. We want you to know that we're grateful for your help..."

"We only wish we could have done more," Xena said and gave the man's arm a firm squeeze. "I'm Xena of Amphipolis. This is my partner, Gabrielle of Potaideia."

"Hello, Sir," Gabrielle said, still holding onto the dead child. With an apologetic smile, she went over to the spot where Cryone had sat down on the ground, and gently placed the toddler on his mother's lap.

Beraeus looked at the tragic scene and shook his head slowly. "We were forty-one people here... now... now we're... by the Gods, we're only ten left. Not a child... not a single child has survived..." he said in a voice that slowly trailed off into nothing.

The wife of the village elder - the lady who'd had problems holding onto the buckets of water - came up to her husband and wrapped her horrendously soot-stained arms around his equally filthy tunic.

Mirroring the intimacy, Gabrielle buried her face in the nook of Xena's chin and let out a long, warm sigh that made the warrior reach up and muss the strawberry-blonde locks.

Xena gave Gabrielle a little squeeze and then cleared her throat. "Beraeus, who were the attackers? Who did this?"

"W- we don't really know," Altara, the village elder's wife said. "It all happened so fast, but... they looked like Amazons."

That news made Gabrielle jerk back and stare wide-eyed at the two villagers. "Amazons?" she whispered hoarsely.

"Y- yes," Altara said. "Though not from M- Melosa's tribe, I d- don't think... Beraeus?"

Shaking his head, Beraeus took a few deep breaths before he could control his voice. "No, I don't think they were from Melosa's tribe. We used to trade with them all the time. These raiders were... were... killers."

"Were you able to-" Xena said, but she was soon interrupted.

"Oh!" Altara suddenly said, looking back at the other survivors. "Teresia...? Teresia... she isn't h- here... she w- was an Amazon. Wh- when they came to town to trade once, she m-

met a nice young fellow and th- they fell in love. She moved here. They're not here now... by the Gods, they're probably d- dead, too..."

Gabrielle's jaw was working overtime at the thought of her sister Amazons carrying out such atrocities. In her mind's eye, she saw the horrific scenes at the Amazon village when it had been attacked by a group of Licantus' Raiders, and she remembered Queen Melosa torturing the leader of the group to death - she also remembered Melosa threatening the neighboring villages with all-out war for supporting the slave trader from Crete.

Xena sensed that her partner was upset and she began to rub her arm. "I was going to ask if you were able to see any tribal markings that we can use to identify them?"

"Tribal markings?" Beraeus said, rubbing his filthy chin. "No... not exactly."

"Not exactly?" Gabrielle said.

"They wore... how can I describe it... well, they all wore brown deerskin hunting outfits, but they also had... hmmm... they all sported a black sleeve with some kind of coat of arms. It came down to their elbows," Beraeus said and touched his own left arm to illustrate his point. "I'm not sure, but I think the coat of arms may have been some kind of stylized animal. Maybe the head of a wild boar."

"A black sleeve with a boar?" Gabrielle said quietly, scrunching up her face. "I don't... Xena?"

The warrior shook her head and let out a long 'Hmmm'. "No... I don't recognize that either," she said after a little while.

Behind them, a wailing moan that quickly grew to near-insane intensity proved that Cryone had discovered that her young sons weren't merely sleeping.

"By the Gods," Gabrielle said hoarsely, unable - and unwilling - to stop large tears from streaming down her cheeks.

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The morning soon gave way to midday and then afternoon. The candlemarks flew by in a blur as the strongest of the survivors all tried to wade through the smoldering, stinking ruins of their homes to find the remains of their loved ones so they could be given a proper burial.

Tired, sweaty and covered in soot from helping the survivors, Xena stepped out into the side street and put her hands on her hips. The dark expression on her face told a story of inner conflicts, and it wasn't until Gabrielle put an arm around the warrior's waist that she loosened up - even then, it only lasted for a few moments.

"Hey," Gabrielle said quietly, squeezing Xena's waist.

"Hey."

"Do you really think the attackers were Amazons?"

Xena grunted and looked down at her partner. Gabrielle's strawberry-blonde hair had turned black from the soot, as had her pea green top, her rust brown skirt and every single exposed part of her fair skin. "I don't know, love. By the description Beraeus gave us, it very much sounded like it."

"Yeah... I just can't believe that Melosa would approve of this. She's a hard ruler, but... this," Gabrielle said and waved her hand at the carnage, "this isn't... it's... oh, I can't even find the words to express how I feel!"

"Mmmm. This is one of the worst I've ever seen. Back in my evil past, I never stayed long enough to see the fallout. Now I have," Xena said and picked a piece of thatch out of her messy hair. She felt tears sting the back of her eyes, but she knew it would be bad for her image if she were to cry so she pushed it all aside.

"Oh, love..." Gabrielle said and gave Xena a strong squeeze.

"Excuse me... Warrior?" a male voice said behind them.

Xena swallowed her dark thoughts and assumed her usual cool pose. "Yes?" she said as she and Gabrielle turned to face the villager who was dressed in an outfit typical of pig farmers - Xena instantly recognized him as the man who had been standing nearest to her at the well.

"Hello, I'm Ixionnus. Thank you for helping us. Thank you both," the villager said, wringing a filthy cap in his hands.

"You're welcome," Gabrielle said. "We're you able to find...?"

The villager shrugged and looked down. "I found my wife in our home, yes. I was out feeding the pigs when... well. It doesn't matter now."

"Oh. I'm so sorry for your loss," Gabrielle said in a trembling voice.

"We had been married for nine years," Ixionnus said quietly.

Feeling her partner tremble, Xena reached up and mussed her soot-covered hair. "Ixionnus, I know it's hard for you, but can you tell us what happened in the attack?"

"They came just as the rooster crowed. I don't know how many they were... perhaps eight? Perhaps a few more... I don't know. I've never seen anything like it... they shot burning arrows at the roofs... and when my friends poured out onto the streets, they were ready

with javelins and arrows. They couldn't stay in and they couldn't go out... I've never seen anything like it!"

"Beraeus told us-" Gabrielle said, but Ixionnus wasn't done so she kept quiet to show him respect.

"I was in the local farmer's militia when I was young, and these... these bastards were going by a military plan, I'm sure of it. Well, they had to be... we're the fourth village they've hit, after all..." As he was speaking, Ixionnus put his filthy old cap back on and pulled it down to his ears.

"The fourth village?" Xena barked hoarsely.

"Yes. Over the last moon, four villages have been destroyed by these rotten..." Ixionnus said and clenched his fists. He took a deep breath to go on, but the words wouldn't come to him. Instead, he clenched his jaw as the inevitable anger finally arrived. After a few seconds, he spun around and walked away from Xena and Gabrielle.

"By the Gods, Xena... we have to stop them," Gabrielle whispered, wiping away a few tears that drew two clear lines down her soot-stained cheeks.

By the time the nineteenth victim had been placed in the square out of sight of the survivors, dusk was slowly falling and Gabrielle knew she needed to stop for the time being to preserve her mental strength. Putting down the short beam she had used to shift through the debris, she took a step back from the carnage. "Xena..." she croaked, trying to wipe soot off her forehead but only making the smears worse.

"I know, love," the warrior said and pulled Gabrielle into a sideways hug. "Go rest for a little while. I'll find you. Okay? Don't forget to drink some water."

Gabrielle offered her partner a weary smile before nodding faintly. "I won't. Thank you."

Thankful for the permission to leave the horrendous task behind, Gabrielle stopped at the well to take a drink before shuffling wearily over to an adjacent side street. Feeling tired to the point of being dizzy, she leaned against a relatively unscathed wall. After a few seconds, she slid down the wall and buried her face in her hands.

'Why the sad look, Princess Gabrielle?' a disembodied female voice suddenly said right next to her.

Jerking back, Gabrielle tried to get up but her legs were too tired to respond so she slumped back down the wall. "Wh- who's there?"

The answer wasn't long in coming. With the familiar crackle of ozone so common among the Olympians, a female figure materialized in a cloud of green in the center of the side street. The figure was dressed in dark green hunting fatigues and she was carrying a longbow and had a quiver full of arrows strapped to her back. Her long, brown hair was elaborately braided and decorated with several, very colorful feathers.

"Artemis...!" Gabrielle croaked, pinching her arm to see if she was dreaming.

"Artemis, the Goddess of the Moon and the Hunt, that's right. And the matron of the Amazons, of course," the Goddess said, smiling coolly as her deep brown eyes sparkled in the last rays of the evening sun.

"Wha...?"

"I said, why the sad look, Princess Gabrielle? Surely you must realize that a successful campaign like this will be a strong deterrent to the enemies of our glorious Amazon Nation...?" Artemis said and made a sweeping gesture with a gloved hand.

"You call this a successful campaign? You approve of this?" Gabrielle said in a growl. While she waited for the Goddess to answer, she began to dig her fingers into the sandy ground to hold onto something.

"I most certainly do. As a matter of fact, I set it in motion."

"Women and children lost their lives here, Artemis!"

Chuckling, Artemis adjusted her longbow and walked around Gabrielle's legs, giving the bard an appraising look. "They were enemies of the Amazon Nation, Princess Gabrielle. I can see there's something you're not quite understanding. These people, these women and children, worked with the men who told Licantus of the Amazons. Do you expect us to do nothing? Come now, that's a bit naïve, don't you think?"

"Licantus is long since dead, Artemis. I was there when he was killed... by other Amazons," Gabrielle growled.

"Oh, I know. I was there, too, only invisible."

"In that case, why didn't *you* kill him?"

"Ha, that was my brother's game. And besides, I didn't shape the Amazons in my image just to let them grow weak. No, Amazons needed to kill Licantus, just like Amazons need to settle the score here and in the other villages."

Shaking her head, Gabrielle looked down at her soot-stained skirt and began to weep quietly. "Settle the score..."

"Cry if you will, but it doesn't change the fact that royal Amazon blood flows in your veins, Gabrielle," Artemis said and crouched down next to the bard. "That royal blood demands your undivided loyalty. Remember, there's no such thing as being a part-time Amazon," the Goddess continued before disappearing in a cloud of green.

Gabrielle opened her mouth to complain, but Artemis was long gone. When it became obvious that the matron of the Amazons wasn't coming back, Gabrielle sighed and leaned her head against the wall behind her.

"Settle the score..." she mumbled after a little while. "I need to settle the score, too. I need to go to the Amazon camp... I need to speak with Queen Melosa... we have to stop these attacks!" she said, suddenly thumping her fist into the ground, striking up a little plume of soot and dust.

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CHAPTER 2

The crack of dawn marked the time where the attack on the village had taken place the day before. The village's rooster hadn't survived the fires so the new day arrived silently apart from a few, scattered sobs by the survivors who had been huddled together in the side street to shield themselves from the cold.

Stoking a small firepit to prepare breakfast for them and the villagers, Xena cast a few worried glances at Gabrielle who was moving erratically in their sleeping fur.

The warrior had been up long, deciding to go on a quail hunt when the dark dreams had become too real. By the moaning sounds Gabrielle was making, Xena knew the young bard was experiencing a nightmare, too.

"Beraeus...? Beraeus?" Xena said over her shoulder at the village elder who was sitting with his head in his hands behind her.

"Yes?" the elderly man said in a frail voice.

"Please look after the firepit. My friend needs me," Xena said and put down the stoker. In two heartbeats, she was at Gabrielle's side, pulling the moaning bard into a strong squeeze, eager to get her to calm down before the nightmare could come to a head.

The tactic seemed to work because Gabrielle's movements became gradually less frantic, and eventually, she opened her eyes and offered Xena a little smile. "Hey," the bard said quietly.

"Good morning, love. A nightmare?" Xena said and kissed Gabrielle's forehead.

"Yes... a bad one. I was here... yesterday. I saw everything," Gabrielle said and looked around at the grieving survivors. "But then you came to me in my dream... you saved me."

Xena smiled wistfully and smoothed down Gabrielle's damp locks with an index finger. "That must have been when I held you."

"Well... whatever you did... thank you," Gabrielle said and stretched up so she could give Xena a kiss on the lips.

"You're welcome. I was up early and I've been exploring the area. There's a stream a little distance away if you want to wash your clothes and your hair."

"Is it cold?"

"Icy."

"Oh... maybe later."

"Okay," Xena said with a laugh and helped Gabrielle crawl out of the sleeping fur. "I found a few quails. There's breakfast enough for everybody. You need to eat something to regain your strength, love. Your face is very drawn."

"So is yours," Gabrielle said and traced a few dark lines under Xena's clear blue eyes.

"I know."

Smiling - that promptly turned into a wide yawn - Gabrielle sat up straight and stretched her back, making all her joints pop and crack. "Did you understand what I told you last night?"

"That Artemis came to you? Yes."

"And that I want... no, need to go to Melosa's tribe today. I have to, Xena. We need to get these attacks stopped before more innocent lives are lost."

"I hear you," Xena said and mussed Gabrielle's hair. "And I'm coming with you. Melosa is unpredictable at the best of times."

"Yes..." - *growl!* - "Oh..." Gabrielle said and patted her stomach.

Xena chuckled and helped Gabrielle upright. "First breakfast, then Amazons."

A candlemark later, Gabrielle pulled her travel bag over her shoulder and put out her arm. "Goodbye, Beraeus. I hope you will find somewhere to settle down. And..." - the bard looked at the forlorn figure leaning against the wall of a burned-out building - "... and I hope that Cryone will be all right, too... eventually. I can't even begin to imagine what it must feel like to lose both your children..."

"We'll take care of her for now, Gabrielle. Ixionnus, too. We'll go to the nearest trade route and try to hook up with a caravan. They'll probably be able to tell us where to go from there," Beraeus said and clasped arms with the bard and the warrior. "Xena, Gabrielle, have a safe journey to wherever you're going."

"Thank you, Beraeus," Xena said and took the village elder's arm.

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Four candlemarks later, Xena felt Gabrielle snoozing against her back as they let Argo control the pace along the forest road they were following. Around them, she could see by the large gaps in the forest that someone had been felling a large number of trees, only leaving stubs behind for the wildlife.

This went on for several candlemarks until they arrived at an artificial clearing where a group of five men were working on stripping a fallen trunk with saws and axes.

The men were very proficient and were able to strip the trunk of all twigs and branches in a matter of candlemarks. Once it had been stripped, two additional, burly men in buckskin lead a team of oxen over to it, took a sturdy chain from the back of the yoke and wrapped it around the trunk.

'*All clear!*' someone shouted after which the first of the burly men cracked a whip in the air to get the beasts to shift the prepared trunk.

One of the men working on stripping the trunks suddenly noticed Xena and Gabrielle watching them from a distance and began to shout commands to his companions. The men hurried to safety and began to draw various weapons, like crossbows and swords.

"Gabrielle, wake up, we've got visitors," Xena said and caressed Gabrielle's right thigh that was within stroking distance of her fingers.

"Uh... whut?" Gabrielle said into Xena's broad back, but she never got an answer.

"We come in peace!" Xena roared, showing the men her open hands.

At first, the shouted message didn't seem to have an impact on the men in hiding, but after a short while, the man who had spotted them rose from his shelter and walked towards them holding his crossbow ready.

Gabrielle peeked around Xena's broad back, but when she saw the crossbow, she wished she hadn't. "Is he threatening us with that crossbow, Xena?" she said, gulping.

"Yep. We're on horseback, after all. He probably thinks we're with the raiders. You better leave your staff here."

"Okay," Gabrielle said and made sure the ribbons tying her trusty staff to the saddle were holding up.

When the man - a handsome, rugged fellow in his early forties who was dressed in heavy workboots, rugged leather pants, a white shirt and a brown apron - came close enough to see that neither of the two women on the golden mare were dressed like the Amazons who had already made one attempt at raiding his town, he lowered the crossbow but kept it ready just in case. "Who are you?" he said in a surprisingly friendly voice.

"I'm Xena of Amphipolis. This is my friend and partner Gabrielle of Potaideia," Xena said in the calmest voice she could muster.

"You look like an Amazon... you, the redhead... let me see your face!"

Doing as asked, Gabrielle peeked around Xena's back and offered the man a supportive smile. "Hello, Sir," she said, showing him her open hands.

"Well... you're certainly not an Amazon," the man said under his breath once he'd had a closer look at Gabrielle's petite frame.

Chuckling, Xena patted Gabrielle's thigh and motioned her to dismount. "Actually, I'm not but she is."

"Oh..." the man said, scratching his hairline. "Hmmm. Well, in any case, you're not one of the raiders. Hello, I'm Eneas, the mayor of Palladia. These are my brothers," he continued, waving at the other men to get them to stand up.

"All four of them?" Gabrielle said once she had made it to solid ground, gawking at the four strapping men who went back to work behind Eneas.

"Ha, yes."

Dismounting, Xena quickly tied the reins around the saddle horn and adjusted Argo's belly strap that had seemed to be a bit loose on their way there.

"Listen," Eneas said, furrowing his brow into a mask of worry, "since you're coming from the west, I was wondering if-

"Tirus has been obliterated," Xena said somberly as she patted Argo's flank. The silence spoke volumes and she used it to feed Argo an apple. While the horse was happily munching on the juicy fruit, Xena went over to Eneas and clasped arms with him.

"Yesterday morning. There were only ten survivors," she continued, looking him straight in the eye.

Eneas sighed and looked towards the heavens. Behind them, his brothers noticed the change in body language and stopped working again. "I hope those bitches will burn in Tartarus," he said vehemently.

Feeling a chill run down her back at the harsh words, Gabrielle quickly clasped arms with Eneas to make him think of something else. "Has Palladia been attacked, too?"

Once Eneas had put a lid on his temper, he started nodding slowly. "Yes... but we were able to stop them. They'll be back, though... we know it."

"They raided Tirus at dawn. I'm guessing that's their preferred plan of attack," Xena said and pulled Gabrielle into a hug.

Those words seemed to trigger something inside Eneas and he furrowed his brow and began to study Xena's face and appearance. "Wait... wait a minute... are you *the* Xena? A few moons ago, a traveling bard put on a show in our tavern where he performed several scrolls that sang of a leather-clad warrior with piercing blue eyes who had turned her back on Ares and had begun working on restoring peace to our land... are you *that* Xena?"

"Yes, she is... she's a bit modest so you'll never get her to admit it," Gabrielle said with a grin. "And those were probably my scrolls... I don't mean to brag, but I managed to sell a couple of them, so-"

"We could use some of your many skills. Will you help us defend our town?" Eneas said strongly.

Xena narrowed her eyes and looked down at Gabrielle who was still grinning like a little sun. Taking a deep breath, the warrior weighed her options, but came to the conclusion that this place was as good as any to take a stand. "Yes," she said, feeling that no other words were necessary.

Fifteen candelrips later, Xena and Gabrielle had traveled to the outskirts of Palladia with Eneas and the team of oxen. As the beasts turned left off the main road and continued to drag their heavy load along a narrower, rutted path, Xena pulled Argo to a halt and moved around in the saddle.

"Gabrielle, I'm sorry I won't be able to come with you, but..."

"Oh that's all right, love," Gabrielle said and leaned in to kiss Xena's neck. "We're not that far from Amazon lands. I know my way there. Once I get to the bottom of this tragic mess, I'll come back here. Maybe I'll bring good news... who knows," she continued and dismounted Argo.

"Well, let's hope so," Xena said and put out her hand.

Squeezing it, Gabrielle shot her lover a wide, loving grin and made to remove her staff from Argo's saddle, but before she could take even a single step, they both spotted a slightly matronly woman in her late twenties hurrying towards them carrying a reed basket.

"Wait!" the woman shouted, waving her free hand at the two warriors.

When she had arrived - huffing and puffing - she put a hand on her rosy cheeks while she struggled to get her breath back under control. "Uh... Hello. I'm Iriadne of Palladia... Eneas' wife. I'm the tavernkeeper. My husband told me that you looked a little undernourished, young lady, so I've made you lunch," she said and held out the basket.

"Undernourished?" Gabrielle echoed with a smirk. Whatever was inside the basket was smelling rather good, and the insatiable bard's stomach chose that exact moment to make its presence felt with a loud *Grrrowl!*

Iriadne's face lit up in a knowing smile and she nodded enthusiastically. "A-ha! It's a bowl with some leftover rabbit stew from last night, half a spiced meatloaf, two loaves of bread, two chunks of cheese and two sealed amphorae... one with wine and one with Ouzo. Please," she said and handed Gabrielle the basket.

"Oh, wow... I... uh... thank you!" the bard said, wearing a grin that was almost wider than her face.

"You're welcome. Gabrielle, was it?" Iriadne said and put out her arm.

"That's right, I'm Gabrielle of Potaideia. This is Xena of Amphipolis... *the* Xena," Gabrielle said with a wink as she clasped arms with the woman.

"So I heard," Iriadne said, returning the wink. "Anyway, you're hereby invited to stay at the tavern. It's right up the road and to the right, you can't miss it," she continued, clasping arms with the warrior.

"Thank you," Xena said stoically.

"All right, I won't disturb you any longer. See you soon!" Iriadne said and hurried back up the rutted road.

Chuckling, Gabrielle put the basket down on the road and reached up to take Xena's hands again. "She seems to be a nice lady."

"Yes. Listen... Gabrielle... my love," Xena said, suddenly assuming a dark expression. "You've seen what these raiders are capable of. When you reach Queen Melosa's camp, you may run into some of them."

"The black sleeves..."

"The black sleeves, yes. Please, Gabrielle... please, please, please, think before you speak," Xena said quietly, squeezing Gabrielle's hands and using a tone of voice that left no doubt in Gabrielle's mind that the warrior meant what she said.

Sobering, Gabrielle sighed deeply and returned the squeeze. "I will. Xena?"

"Yes?"

"Please come down here so I can kiss you goodbye."

Without hesitation, Xena swung her leg over the side of the saddle and jumped down on the ground. Once there, she reached around Gabrielle and pulled her close - at first, they were simply content with looking at each other, but it didn't take long before they both leaned in and claimed each other's lips in a loving kiss.

"Please stay safe. I love you," Xena whispered after they had separated, running a thumb up and down Gabrielle's left cheek.

"I love you too. And I will. You have my word."

"And Gabrielle?"

"Uh... yes?"

"Go slow on the Ouzo. We wouldn't want one of your special hangovers to muddle the plot," Xena said, diving down to claim Gabrielle's lips again to stifle the inevitable outburst.

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The winding forest road was in excellent condition so Gabrielle had no problems making good progress on her way to the Amazon camp. Along the way, she took great pleasure in nipping at the delightful contents of the picnic basket, swinging her staff in various practice patterns and listening to the many birds and animals that lived in and among the trees.

Feeling inspired by the serene surroundings, she began to develop a new story in her mind, and soon, she was acting out a few of the scenes, gesturing with her head, hands and staff as she went through the scenes.

This went on for a little while, but the sight of two wild pigs digging in the forest floor at the base of a large oak tree made her scrunch up her face and stop acting. Her youthful stride became slower as she thought of the symbol Beraeus had told her about back in Tirus - the stylized image of a wild boar on the sleeves of the attackers.

From reading the ancient scrolls and diaries the last time she had visited Ephiny and the others, Gabrielle knew that the wild boar was a sacred animal for several of the northern tribes because of its tough exterior and its relentlessness in attacking its prey, but what she couldn't fathom was why Melosa had wanted help from the northern tribes in the first place.

'After all, Eponin has made sure that their tribe is a tight-knit unit that performs well in battles... Sweet Aphrodite, I still have sore spots on my thighs after the first staff practice she pushed me through...' Gabrielle thought and broke out into a giggle.

Gabrielle walked alone and in silence for the next ten candelrips, but then she heard a bird call that came from a human throat rather than a bird. The bird call was soon echoed from the other side of the forest road, and she took a deep breath to respond to it. With her hand covering her mouth, she let out a loud *coo-coo!* that was supposed to be a dove, though it sounded more like a porcupine with a nasty cold.

"Oh, that still needs some work, Princess Gabrielle," a familiar female voice said a short distance above and ahead of the bard. Moments later, a figure dressed in typical Amazon clothing - feathers, suede and leather - rappelled down from a tree and came out to greet her.

Gabrielle's face lit up in a broad, genuine smile and she pulled her curly-haired Sister into a hug. "Hello, Ephiny!" she said, giving her friend a close study. She briefly wondered about a flash of worry that drifted across Ephiny's eyes, but stowed it for later.

"Hello, Princess Gabrielle. You look great and healthy."

"Thanks. You too, Ephiny."

"Yes... we've been wondering when you'd show up again. Queen Melosa is grateful for the fact that you and Xena took care of Licantus, by the way."

"Oh... thank you."

"Where is Xena? Will she be joining you later?" Ephiny said in a voice that was just a bit too pointed to be casual.

"Well... no. No, she's staying in Palladia to help them defend it," Gabrielle said, cocking her head while she waited for her friend to digest the words and their meaning.

Ephiny opened her mouth but closed it again at once. Grunting, she put an arm around Gabrielle's shoulders and led her along the dirt road. "I see," she said after a little while. "Anyway, there's been quite a few changes to our village since you were here last."

"So I gather. What's that I hear about mounted Amazons with black sleeves?"

Ephiny stopped and gave Gabrielle a brief stare before she mellowed out again. "Oh, they're just members of a tribe from the north. They're here to help."

"Mmmm?"

"Yes. Khila!" Ephiny said, signaling one of the sentries who had been hiding in the crown of the next tree.

'Yes, Ephiny?' the Amazon said, still completely out of sight.

"I'm taking Princess Gabrielle back to our village. I'll send someone out to relieve you."

'All right!'

Ephiny took a step back from her friend but kept her hand on the bard's shoulder. "Shall we?" she said and pointed further up the road.

Fifteen candelrips later, Ephiny and Gabrielle walked in through the main gate of the Amazon village after greeting the guards. The first thing Gabrielle noticed was that the sentry box at the gate still sported the holes from the crossbow bolts it had received in the attack on the camp when Xena and she had been there several moons earlier.

Most of the huts had been rebuilt after the assault, save for a few that had been torn down to make way for new ones - all in all, the Amazon camp consisted of nearly twenty huts of varying size.

In the center of the camp, the barn where the endgame of the assault had played out still looked the same, but Queen Melosa's royal hut was comprehensively renewed and had been brought up to an opulent splendor.

"Is Queen Melosa in, Ephiny?" Gabrielle said from the curious lack of guards at the royal hut.

"No, she's on a reconnaissance mission. Come, you can stay with Solari and myself in the command hut."

Gabrielle briefly blushed as she remembered certain nocturnal events that had taken place in the bunk they had borrowed from their friends. "Oh, I..."

"Did you know that it took nearly a week to get the stench of vomit out of my bedroom the last time you were here?" Ephiny ribbed, bumping shoulders with the bard.

"Uh, oh yeah... the vomit... that was the ale. I got kinda... uh... sick..." Gabrielle said, looking anywhere but at the curly-haired Amazon next to her.

Turning right, the two Amazons went up the small staircase to the command hut. After knocking on the door and hearing a familiar voice say '*Enter*,' Ephiny opened the reinforced door and stepped into the hut. "Hey, Solari... you'll never guess who's coming to dinner."

"Who?" the senior Amazon said, not bothering to look up from her paperwork.

"Someone you know quite well, I'd say," Ephiny said with a grin.

Looking up, Solari only needed a brief glimpse of Gabrielle's familiar shock of strawberry-blonde hair before she bolted from her chair and came out to stand in the middle of the hut. "Princess Gabrielle, welcome!" she said, bowing deeply.

"Oh, will you stop with that bowing thing...? You're making me embarrassed, Solari!" Gabrielle said and pulled the Amazon into a hug.

The three Amazons laughed at that for a few seconds, but then fell quiet. It was evident from the looks on their faces that the matter of the northern warriors was just below the surface, but neither of them wanted to be the first to break the question.

"Anyway," Gabrielle said to release some of the unexpected tension. "Where's Eponin? I woulda thought she'd be here by now," she said and put her travel bag and the empty picnic basket down on the bunk she and Xena had used in the previous visit.

"Oh, I..." Solari said, looking at Ephiny for help.

Sighing, Ephiny ran a hand through her curls and went up to stand next to Gabrielle. "Our Sister has fallen, Princess Gabrielle. A moon and a half ago."

"What?!" Gabrielle said and spun around. "No, that's just impossible! Eponin is as tough as old leather! No way she's... she's..."

When Ephiny simply nodded, Gabrielle fell silent. Anger, confusion and sorrow raced through her, but the emotion that stayed with her was sadness - sadness that she didn't get a chance to bid the weapons master a proper farewell. "How?" she said quietly.

"An ambush," Solari said in a matching voice. "She was showing some of our northern Sisters the ins and outs of our local terrain when they were attacked by a group of... well, farmers."

"No way!"

"I'm afraid so, Princess Gabrielle. Eponin suffered a fatal knife wound in the struggle. She left us on the way back to the camp."

An uncharacteristic flame of fury shot through Gabrielle and she had to clench her fists to stop herself from completely losing control. "And when they came back, did someone check if one of our northern Sisters had accidentally lost her dagger?"

"Now, Gabri-" Ephiny said, but took a step back when she caught a glimpse of the murderous look in the usually so well behaved bard's eyes.

"No, Ephiny, let me speak! Yesterday, I spent the entire day helping grieving villagers recover their loved ones from their burned-out homes, homes that had been set alight by our northern Sisters! I carried the body of a toddler who had suffocated on the smoke... I helped dig out several people, men, women *and* children, who had been reduced to charred corpses from the intense heat! One of them had been an Amazon, Ephiny... and you know what? She and the others all died because of our northern Sisters."

Wincing, Ephiny tried to put her hands on the bard's shoulders, but she shrugged them off. "Gabrielle... we're at war," she said quietly.

"With toddlers?!" Gabrielle growled from somewhere deep in her throat. "With a young mother who lost both her sons within two candle-drips? Tell me, when did we allow Ares to take control over the Amazons?!"

The tension grew to unbearable levels, and Solari licked her lips and stepped forward. "Princess Gabrielle, may we explain?"

"By all means, do!" Gabrielle growled, taking a few deep breaths to cool off. To show that she was ready to listen to her friends, she went up to the bunk in the corner of the hut and sat down.

"Queen Melosa declared war on the neighboring villages after discovering that some of them had helped Licantus. After the assault on our camp, we were too few warriors to wage it ourselves so we sent out messages to all our sister tribes calling for assistance. Most of them only sent one or two warriors, but Corianyx came down from the north with her entire tribe. Scuttlebutt has it that she's the daughter of Athena. She's certainly running her warriors like a militia."

"Corianyx... so she's the leader of the Amazons with the black sleeves?"

"Yes, that's their coat of arms. The wild boar. It's a sacred-"

"I know, Solari," Gabrielle said and jumped up from the bunk. "When can I speak with her?"

Deciding that it was time to step in before things really got out of hand, Ephiny held up her hands in a calming gesture. "She's not here. After Eponin's death, Corianyx assumed the role of master-at-arms. She's with Queen Melosa on the recon."

"Hmmm," Gabrielle said, scrunching up her face. "All right. But I need to speak with her the moment she gets back."

"We'll work on it," Solari said and took Ephiny's hand in her own. "Gabrielle, I'm sure you're tired after your long trek. Won't you have a little rest? There's something Ephiny and I need to talk about in private."

"Oh, but this is your bunk and-"

"No no, just lie down. We'll be back in a candlemark. Okay?" Solari said on her way over to the door.

"Well... sure. Sure," Gabrielle said and sat down. Once the door was closed, she unlaced her boots and pushed them off. With her toes finally liberated, she swung her legs up in the bunk and got comfortable. After a few seconds, she let out a long sigh and thought of Eponin.

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Two leagues to the west of the Amazon village, Xena swung her legs over the side of the surprisingly soft bunk in the room she had been given at the tavern and started putting on her boots - she had work to do.

"How pathetic," she mumbled under her breath. "Just because Gabrielle isn't with me, I get all worried and have to lie down in the middle of the day like some... some... old fuddy-duddy. Pathetic!"

Standing up, she briefly put a hand on her stomach where the knot that had forced her to take a rest was still festering. Grunting, she started putting on her bronze breastplate and her gauntlets.

The tavern was fairly similar to her mother's with a kitchen, a communal room and a small, cozy den for the regulars at ground level, and a row of rooms on the upper floor. The main difference from the tavern she knew so well back in Amphipolis was that this one had two floors of rooms instead of just one.

The room she had been given was well-equipped with a soft bunk for two, a chair, a small desk with a wash basin and two bureaus - all in all, it was a very comfortable place.

After hooking the Chakram onto the little loop on her belt and sheathing her sword into the scabbard on her back, she went over to the small desk and snuffed out the candle. She was ready.

Two candledrips later, Xena stepped out onto the busy main street. Palladia was much larger than Tirus - or even Amphipolis - had ever been, with close to thirty single-story wooden huts and two-story stone houses laid out in a double-H pattern.

The houses closest to the centrally placed tavern were large and imposing, no doubt built by and for the town's wealthy, important people. Surrounding them were several rows of huts and houses that appeared less flashy but equally as solid.

Unlike Tirus, Palladia didn't have a central square, and that fact made Xena furrow her brow as she looked up and down the cobbled main street - she knew that without a central command base where they could coordinate the defenses, the town ran a greater risk of ultimately losing control over the inevitable running battles.

'Maybe Iriadne will agree on using her tavern as the base...? Hmm... I better ask first,' Xena thought as she began to stroll up the street.

The tree trunks that she and Gabrielle had seen the villagers work on when they came to the clearing outside Palladia had been lined up all along main street, seemingly to be used as defenses. Nodding her appraisal, Xena quickly crossed the street to get a closer look.

When Eneas noticed the warrior coming towards him, he stepped away from chopping one of the trunks into smaller pieces and dusted off the wood chips that were covering his shirt sleeves. "Hello, Xena," he said and clasped arms with the warrior.

"Eneas. Are these trunks going to end up as roadblocks?" Xena said, pointing at the near-endless row.

"Some of them. Some will become spikes like this one," Eneas said and showed Xena a nasty-looking, pointy spike that was two inches in diameter and nearly three feet long.

Xena glanced at the wooden spike, realizing that she didn't need to run her fingers along the jagged tip to know that it had been carved so finely it would be lethal for man and beast. "Against cavalry?" she said casually.

"Yes. When the raiders first tried to attack us, they were mounted," Eneas said and put the spike away.

"They used a similar tactic in Tirus. Where did you serve?" Xena said and cocked her head, trying to imagine what kind of uniform the man she was talking to had been wearing - there was no doubt in her mind that he had been a soldier at some point in his life.

Eneas laughed and ran a hand through his hair, creating a small storm of sawdust that drifted down to the street. "Is it that obvious? I was an officer in the Athenian army. A

Watch Captain to be exact, though I never saw any action as such. When my father passed away, I returned to Palladia to assume his duties as the mayor. That was five years ago."

"Well, you've definitely kept in shape," Xena said, studying Eneas' strong arms and hands. "How many people here are ready to fight for Palladia, Eneas?"

"Oh, most of them, I'd think. Of course, some are too young and some are too old. All in all, I'd say we have around sixty able-bodied men and women... yeah. Should be about right. One thing you need to remember, though, is that we're all just villagers, not warriors."

"Oh, I know," Xena said, thinking back to the motley crew of people she had held command over in Amphipolis ten winters earlier.

"By the way, we have a town council meeting tonight. If you want, I could introduce you to some of them...?"

"Good, I'd like that. I have a feeling we'll need them. Soon," Xena said darkly.

Furrowing his brow, Eneas sighed deeply and cast a worried glance across the street at his wife who had come out onto the small porch in front of her tavern to sweep it.

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CHAPTER 3

The exact moment Gabrielle had dug her wooden spoon into a bowl of vegetable stew in the mess barn, the doors were flung open and Queen Melosa strode in with her entourage.

The assembled Amazons all rose and bowed to their queen who nodded casually in return on her way to her throne at the far end of the barn.

Sitting down and picking up her spoon, Gabrielle began to study the fit, imposing Melosa. It hadn't been long since she and Xena had last seen the queen so she hadn't changed much physically, but there was a certain look in her eye that made Gabrielle wonder what was really going on at the camp.

Once a steady buzz of chattering voices returned among the Amazons who were sitting on long, wooden benches eating supper, Gabrielle dug into her stew to get some while it was hot. After a few seconds, Ephiny sat down on her left with a similar bowl of stew.

"It's pretty good," Gabrielle said chewing noisily on a mouthful of juicy cabbage, "... even if it could use some meat..."

"Didn't we have this conversation the last time you were here?" Ephiny said and bumped shoulders with Gabrielle. "We only get meat once a week. It's because Melosa doesn't eat it."

"Oh, I remember," Gabrielle said and took a long swig of her mug of water to chase down a particularly stringy piece of asparagus.

Ephiny stretched over and took a long, interested look at the contents of the mug. "Water?"

"Uh... yes. No ale for me. Maybe when I'm in a rocking chair somewhere," Gabrielle said with a blush.

"Uh-huh?"

"Yes." Looking around, Gabrielle leaned in towards her curly friend and whispered: "Like I always say, Hold the ale, keep the lunch."

"Wine, then?" Ephiny said, pointing at a large jug that had been placed in the center of the table.

Gabrielle chuckled and scooped up the last piece of carrot from her bowl. "Ah, that would be a no as well. Sorry," she said and put it into her mouth.

"Princess Gabrielle?" an Amazon said from the other side of the table.

When Gabrielle looked up, she drew such a sharp breath that the carrot got stuck in her throat, and she had to cough hard several times to get it to release.

The Amazon who had addressed her was in her mid-twenties, strong and athletic like most of the women in the mess barn, and the owner of a soft, friendly face that wouldn't have looked out of place on a teacher or a healer - but she wore a brown deerskin hunting outfit and her left upper arm was covered by a black sleeve adorned with a stylized wild boar.

Gabrielle's eyes narrowed down into a pair of emerald green slits and she put both hands on the table top, almost like she was ready to jump the Amazon. "Yes?" she said hoarsely.

"Queen Melosa wishes to see you at once," the Amazon said and pointed at the throne at the other end of the barn where Melosa was waiting impatiently.

When Gabrielle turned her head to take a look at her Queen, she noted to her dismay that two other black-sleeved Amazons were standing at Melosa's side, clearly acting as her personal guard.

From the uncharacteristic growl that came from Gabrielle's throat, Ephiny knew exactly what was going on inside her friend, and she quickly reached below the table to put a

calming hand on the bard's thigh. "Gabrielle," she said out of the corner of her mouth. "Everything in due time, okay?"

Gabrielle turned her head sharply around and stared at Ephiny for several seconds, but eventually understood that she needed to take a few deep breaths and carry on. "All right," she said and rose from the bench.

Once the two Amazons stood before their ruler, the black-sleeved warrior who had asked Gabrielle to come with her stepped forward and bowed. "Queen Melosa, Princess Gabrielle to see you."

"Excellent, Achillea," Melosa said in a voice that was slightly cooler than what Gabrielle remembered. "You're dismissed," the queen continued and waved her hand at the warrior who quickly stepped aside.

Leaning back in her throne, Melosa eyed the defiant look on Gabrielle's face and let out a few, little, telling grunts. "Hello, Princess Gabrielle," she said, cocking her head while she waited for the blonde to reply.

"Good evening, Queen Melosa," Gabrielle said and performed a respectful bow.

"Thank you for taking care of Licantus. The Amazon Nation owes you a great debt of gratitude."

Gabrielle blinked a few times and stared at Melosa's slightly elongated face. Instead of feeling proud over the accomplishment of putting an end to Licantus of Crete's terror regime, all she could think of was how the dead toddler had felt in her arms when she had carried him the day before. She managed to screw a smile on her face and mutter a quiet "We only did our duty," but she knew it looked and sounded fake.

"Now we're on that subject," Melosa said and shifted on the throne. "Where is Xena? I was under the impression that you and her were close...?"

Standing up straight, Gabrielle steeled her resolve and looked her ruler straight in the eye. "We are, Queen Melosa, but she decided to stay in Palladia to help build up their defenses."

"Hmmm. Palladia?"

"Yes, Queen Melosa."

"Interesting," Melosa said and rose from the throne to signal the end of the audience. "We shall certainly see where your loyalties lie, Gabrielle, because Palladia is soon to pay for supporting our enemies," she continued, patting Gabrielle's shoulder as she walked away accompanied by her black-sleeved personal guards who both shot the bard a cold stare.

Behind the queen's back, Gabrielle bared her teeth in a nervous grimace. A cold shiver ran down her spine, but she forced herself to remain focused and not give in to the fear that had suddenly permeated her system. *'Xena knows how to protect herself. And she's a good motivator... she'll know what to do when the attack comes... By the Gods, I need that amphora of Ouzo now,'* she thought and let out a nervous breath.

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At much the same time, Xena sat at the back of the communal room in Iriadne's tavern and observed Eneas thoroughly while he was holding a passionate speech to the members of the town council on the importance of working together for the good of Palladia, keeping the streets safe for the children and helping the unfortunate citizens who succumbed to the negative side-effects of alcohol.

'Curious place to have such a theme... they probably can't see the irony,' Xena thought as she kept a close eye on the fifteen people attending the council meeting.

They were as council members were the most - some were younger, some were older, some women, some men. Some whose elegant clothing hinted at positions at the sharp end of the hierarchy, and some whose threadbare, woolen dresses or leather aprons hinted at positions behind a pickaxe at the quarry or a saw at the sawmill.

'Eneas told me that he reckoned he could get close to sixty able-bodied men and women to defend the city, but I can't see any of these council members being able to throw a spear at a moving target,' Xena thought and began to chew on her cheek.

"... and with that," Eneas said from the other end of the communal room where he had been standing on a chair, "we've come to the main part of our meeting. I'm sure you all remember when Polymesthenes, the traveling bard from Athens, visited us a few moons ago and sang of a fierce warrior who would rather spit in Cerberus' face than to admit defeat...?"

Hearing herself described like that, Xena wanted to slap a hand across her face and groan out loud, but she knew it would look bad so she didn't.

"Well, here she is... Xena of Amphipolis!" Eneas said and stepped down from the chair.

An excited murmur rose from the council members who all craned their necks to give their Very Important Guest a very thorough check.

Sighing deeply, Xena rose from her seat and walked between the two rows to get to the front of the council members. "Good evening," she said, waving to the assembled people.

"Are you really Xena?" a female voice said from somewhere in the audience.

"Yes. Yes, I am," Xena said, earning herself a big round of applause. "Uh... thank you. First of all, before we get started... Eneas, the men and women who'll be manning the defensive positions with us need to be present... at least some of them. I don't want to repeat myself more than absolutely necessary."

With a start, Eneas came back out of the corner he had been leaning against and shot Xena a slightly confused look. "But this is the town council meeting..."

"So? I don't need to see all of them, just those you think are leadership material," Xena said and put her hands on her hips.

"Uh... I guess we can bend the regulations a little," Eneas said with a grin. "All right. I'll be back in a few candledrips. Why don't you make yourself comfortable in the meantime?" he continued and pushed the chair he had used to stand on up behind Xena.

Ten candledrips later, three men and three women had taken their seats on the front row and were looking expectantly at the leather-clad warrior.

Xena let her experienced eye roam over the six people whom Eneas believed could act as leaders in times of crisis. The men were all brawny but not thuggish, and the women looked like they could step into any of the local Amazon tribes without sticking out like sore thumbs. '*Good,*' Xena thought, nodding quietly to herself. '*There's definitely something to work with here...*'

Just as Xena was about to speak to the new people, she noticed that one of the three women - a tall, pretty brunette in her late twenties wearing a blue dress that accentuated her body rather well - was winking at her in a fashion that spelled out quite clearly that she wasn't hoping to exchange tips on knitting or floral decorations.

Caught in an awkward situation, Xena was glad that Gabrielle had gone ahead to the Amazon camp, because she was sure that the bard would have come at the hopeful woman like a lynx chasing a gray sparrow. Doing a bit of fast thinking, Xena came up with what she felt was the perfect solution to nip the woman's quest in the bud.

"Good evening, my name is Xena of Amphipolis," she said with her hands behind her back like an experienced field General. "As we speak, my partner Gabrielle is with the Amazons to try to make Queen Melosa see the error of her ways. I wouldn't expect any miracles if I were you, though."

That piece of unwanted news made the hopeful woman scrunch up her face and look down at her hands.

The woman's reaction made Xena stop and smirk very briefly before she went back to her unprepared speech. "I'm sure that most of you have heard the town gossip that Tirus was

sacked and burned to the ground. Well, it's true. We were there in the immediate aftermath and let me tell you, it was very nasty."

A nervous murmur spread among the council members and the six potential leaders until Xena put up her hands to ask for silence. "However, Palladia has stone buildings and is laid out very differently to Tirus. In my opinion, you have a better chance at defending the town and containing the fires... if it should come to that. Yes?" Xena said, pointing at the hopeful woman on the front row who had put a hand in the air.

"Xena, my name is Selena. Do you know how many opponents we're up against?" the woman said in a pleasant voice.

"I'm afraid I don't. According to the village elder in Tirus, it's not Melosa's regular Amazons who are behind these attacks. It's a new group of warriors in brown deerskin and with a black sleeve on their left arm. How many they are is impossible to predict. Maybe my partner will be able to give us a figure, maybe she won't."

"They're the same ones who attacked us," Eneas said and stepped forward. "But we managed to stop them the first time."

"Mmmm," Xena said and began to fiddle with her Chakram. "That probably means we should expect new tactics for their next attack," she said darkly.

Several of the members of the town council reacted to that by grunting or groaning out loud, but Xena calmly put her hands in the air. "Please don't despair. We haven't lost the fight yet."

The worried faces among the council members triggered a long-dormant memory at the back of Xena's mind from the dark days when she was trying to organize Amphipolis' defenses against Cortese. Then, the defeat had taken the life of her beloved brother Lyceus. She suddenly realized that if things got out of control, like they had a tendency to do with that many unknowns in the equation, the situation she found herself in could take her own life - or that of her beloved Gabrielle.

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Several candlemarks later.

The amphora of Ouzo had been opened, savored and emptied, but even that hadn't helped Gabrielle get more than a fitful slumber. For the third time in as many candlemarks, she rolled over onto her back, awakened by yet another instance of the nightmare that simply refused to go away - and with Xena not there to hold her and whisper gentle words of love in her ear, the awful dream always came to its inevitable conclusion.

Looking up, she stared at the ceiling of the command hut she shared with Ephiny and Solari. The two Amazons had gracefully invited her into their hut, but when they had

offered her the use of their bunk as well, she had refused, so now she was resting on the floor on the most lumpy mattress she had ever encountered.

The typical night-time sounds of the camp wafted in through the shut windows, prompting Gabrielle to turn her head and look at the flickering, orange torchlight that was visible around the window frame.

Since sleep was impossible to find, she decided to take a stroll through the camp and quickly swung her bare legs over the side of the mattress to get dressed. After putting on her boots, she adjusted her Amazon top to be less revealing - she was royalty, after all - and added a few colorful feathers to her strawberry-blonde hair.

With her outfit in place, she took her staff and ventured out into the night.

The Amazon camp looked much the same as it had the last time they had been there, but there was a strange vibe in the air that made it feel quite different.

Everywhere Gabrielle went on her little tour of the camp, she could see fully armed and operational Amazons of all ages and sizes working on their weapons or honing their close combat or aiming skills - in short, the camp had turned into a military base that was in a constant state of readiness.

Heavily armed sentries were roaming the paths between the huts; some were Melosa's regular Amazons and some wore the black sleeves, but they all gave Gabrielle funny looks as they went past her, almost like they weren't sure how to deal with the returning princess.

The sounds of grunting and staffs slamming together drifting past her on a nightly breeze made Gabrielle pick up the pace and head for the training grounds at the opposite end of the camp.

The training grounds consisted of several smaller arenas - mostly square, but a few circular ones as well - that were used regularly by the Amazons for competitions and to stay sharp in times of peace. Only one of the arenas was in use on this night, illuminated by four powerful torches that had been placed in each of the four corners.

Inside the square, two black-sleeved Amazons were engaged in a sparring match with staffs. As Gabrielle watched the two fighters keenly, they went through an array of high-skill maneuvers that left the bard quite breathless. Again and again, the two fighters came at each other to try to defeat the opponent, but their respective defensive skills were as good as their offensive ones so the match was remarkably equal.

Gabrielle decided that she had seen enough and turned away from the sparring Amazons, shivering over the prospect of the black sleeved warriors charging a position defended by

Xena. *'My love is better than those two... but they would wipe the floor with anyone less capable. No wonder the citizens of Tirus didn't stand a chance...'* she thought, scrunching up her face.

Resuming her tour of the camp, it suddenly struck her that she hadn't seen any of the juniors at all while she had been there, not even at supper. Making a snap decision, she turned left instead of right and went down to the end of the camp where the barracks for the junior Amazons had been the last time she was there - but when all she could find were long-vacated, empty huts, she shrugged and moved back towards the center of the camp.

The mess barn, the public bath and several other facilities were still open, but, perhaps tellingly, the one with the most activity was the blacksmith - or rather, the weaponsmith. Gabrielle stopped to take a look at the shop where every single free spot on the walls and tables had been filled by recently produced swords, daggers, heads for arrows and javelins, crossbow bolts and every other imaginable iron instrument of war.

Instead of just one blacksmith, no less than three Amazons were working in the shop; bulging, glinting women wearing very little in the way of clothing apart from leather aprons and long, protective sleeves were working at the fans and the two melting furnaces to make even more of the lethal tools. As Gabrielle was watching, one of the three weaponsmith removed a glowing hot metal rod from the oven and immediately moved it to the anvil where she began to beat it into shape with a large hammer.

At the same time, another of the smiths started to prepare the next batch of goods by putting fragments of broken swords and scraps of iron and other metals into a large pot. Looking up, the smith noticed their company and stopped working. "Good evening, Princess Gabrielle. We're honored by your presence," she said, bowing slightly to show her respect.

"Oh, just carry on," Gabrielle said with a smile, waving at the smith. "I don't want to disturb you at your work."

"Thank you, Princess Gabrielle," the smith said and continued throwing the discarded iron into the pot.

Completely mesmerized by the fascinating display of strength and skill shown by the three muscular smiths, Gabrielle didn't hear or sense the Amazons that went up to stand a short distance away from her before it was too late.

The five warriors - all dressed in brown deerskin and with black sleeves on their upper left arm - exchanged glances, especially with one woman in particular who was standing in the center of the small group.

The lead Amazon cocked her head and took in the sight of the strawberry blonde who appeared pint-sized compared to the others. With a cold smirk creasing her lips, she folded her arms across her chest and cleared her throat loudly.

Gabrielle spun around with her heart hammering away in her chest from the surprise. It didn't take more than a second for her to recognize that she had been boxed in by the five black-sleeved warriors, and she grew quite worried until she remembered that her rank still had some say in the Amazon camp, even among their guests from the north. "Yes?" she said in a voice that she hoped would be strong instead of squeaky.

"Good evening, I'm Corianyx of Ephesus. Princess Gabrielle, I presume?" the Amazon in the center said.

Narrowing her eyes, Gabrielle began to study the woman who was the leader of the black-sleeved Amazons she had come to hate in the last two days - she was tall, but not as tall as the four warriors standing next to her, Gabrielle noted. Her eyes were grayish and well-set in a face that wasn't unpretty but that possessed all the charm of a snake about to strike. She was of indeterminate age and origin and she was far less muscle-bound than anticipated, though still having an athletic frame like most Amazons.

One thing that really struck Gabrielle was the air of charisma and presence that surrounded Corianyx. Though she wore the same brown deerskin hunting outfit with the black sleeve as her fellow northern Amazons, it was easy to see that she exuded a natural authority - her confident stance and the sharp gleam in her eye were proof of that. '*No wonder some call her the daughter of Athena,*' Gabrielle thought as she took in the Amazon's presence.

"That's right, I'm Princess Gabrielle," the bard said after a brief pause.

"We haven't met yet. Welcome to our camp," Corianyx said and put out her arm.

Thinking that the leader was merely trying to be friendly, Gabrielle reached out and clasped arms with the Amazon, but suddenly realized that it was a test of her strength - moral as well as physical.

Through a snake-like smile, Corianyx kept a firm grip on Gabrielle's arm, but the bard replied to the pressure by adding plenty of her own; the muscles in her arms hardened by countless hours of staff practice.

Corianyx cocked her head and released the grip. Judging by the thoughtful look on her face, she had learned more about the petite woman than she had expected to.

"So, Corianyx... where exactly is your tribe from?" Gabrielle said, leaning against her staff.

"Well, my warriors have come from many different tribes and places in the great north. You could call us a band of misfits," Corianyx said with a small smile creasing her lips.

'I'll say!' Gabrielle thought.

"We have Amazons from the dark forests of Germania, from the windswept kingdom to the north of Britannia and even a few from the sandy beaches in Scania and the rest of the Norselands. Of course, I found many of my most faithful warriors in the west of Ephesus where I'm from myself. And you?"

"Thracian born and bred."

"Mmmm. That's a nice area. We passed through there on our way here. Plenty of sheep," Corianyx said with a grin.

"Yes. Now, if you will excuse me," Gabrielle said and stepped forward to go between two of the black-sleeved Amazons. "I'd like to go back to my hut to get some sleep."

Corianyx stepped aside and bowed slightly, a gesture that Gabrielle didn't know if she should take as sincere or a mock.

"But of course, Princess Gabrielle," Corianyx said. "We all need our beauty sleep."

On her way back to the command hut, Gabrielle had to bite down on her lips to stop herself from looking over her shoulder. She had that tell-tale niggling feeling right between her shoulder blades that told her that Corianyx and her black-sleeved cronies were watching her intently.

It wasn't until she turned right and grabbed hold of the command hut's door handle that she looked back towards the blacksmith's shop. The path between the huts was empty, but she could almost sense Corianyx' presence looking at her from somewhere in the torch-lit darkness.

Shivering, Gabrielle stepped inside and closed the door behind her.

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The second dawn after the atrocities in Tirus started roughly for Gabrielle when she was jerked quite rudely from her sleep by someone grabbing her shoulder and giving her a shake. "Mmmmh! Just... just two more candledrips, love," Gabrielle mumbled, smacking her lips.

Cracking open an eyelid, she quickly discovered that the pair of brown boots she was looking at from her position on the lumpy mattress wasn't Xena's but someone else's entirely.

"That's an interesting concept... tell me, Princess Gabrielle, does she listen to you?" a cold voice said from several feet above the boots.

Gabrielle rolled over onto her back and immediately spotted the snake-like appearance of Corianyx who was staring at her with an incredibly condescending look on her face.

Grunting, Gabrielle quickly swung her bare legs over the side of the mattress and grabbed her boots. "What is it, Corianyx?"

"A long range scout has just come in with a report that a small group of Amazons has been captured by a few peasants near Brisus. Queen Melosa has requested our presence in the royal hut," Corianyx said and went back to the door. "Are you coming... love?" she added in a sugary voice just before she left the command hut.

"Yeah, yeah... Ares' balls, I can't wait for that woman to get her comeuppance," Gabrielle growled, jumping up from the mattress and snatching her staff.

Hurrying into the royal hut, Gabrielle bowed deeply at Melosa who was standing at a map table in the center of the opulently decorated room. "Pardon my tardiness, Queen Melosa," she said with a smile that she hoped would be enough to appease the occasionally strict queen.

She needn't have worried - Melosa only had time for a grunt before she went back to studying the maps on the table. "So," she said to the scout who had arrived with the news. "In short, three Sisters are being held captive here, on a field governed by Brisus?"

"Yes, Queen Melosa," the scout said.

Melosa thumped her index finger down on the map and began to calculate the time and distance between the Amazon camp and the site. "It's not too far. Corianyx, do we know who the Sisters are?"

"Yes," Corianyx said and stepped up to the map table. "I've spoken to the healer. She confirmed that she sent two elders out to harvest medicinal herbs before dawn. They were accompanied by a warrior. Chances are they were surprised by a couple of peasants out for the same thing."

"Mmmm. We're all one tribe and we can't leave three Sisters to an uncertain fate," Melosa said and rolled up the maps. Nodding, she dismissed the scout and went back to her throne. "Corianyx?"

"Yes, Queen Melosa?"

"I want you to assemble a fast interceptor team and get our Sisters back. Use whatever force necessary. There's no need for prisoners. You understand?"

"I understand. It shall be done," Corianyx said and made to leave the royal hut but stopped when Melosa waved her hand.

"Corianyx, I want you to take Princess Gabrielle along," the Queen said with a gleam in her eye.

Hearing that, Gabrielle's jaw slammed shut like kicked by a mule. The muscles on the sides of her face began to grind incessantly and she shot Corianyx a look that would have left most other people quaking in their boots.

If Corianyx noticed, she didn't let it show. "As you wish, Queen Melosa. Princess Gabrielle, can you ride?" the northern Amazon asked, turning to the seething bard.

Grinding a bit more, Gabrielle eventually got her jaw to release and said: "Yes. I can ride," in a flat voice.

"Excellent. Come, let's find you a pony," Corianyx said and left the royal hut.

Gabrielle almost, **almost** let out an impressive curse but she kept it all bottled up inside, worried that too blue language would make her look bad in the eyes of the Queen. Instead, she took a calming breath and moved up to stand before the throne. "Queen Melosa, wouldn't it be more prudent if Solari or Ephiny were to join the mission? After all, they're already-"

"No," Melosa said, closing the debate before it had even started.

"Oh. All right," Gabrielle said and bowed deeply, registering that the queen was smirking at her.

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It took Gabrielle a little while to catch up with the leader of the black-sleeved Amazons as she was striding quite hard towards the stables - the bard's shorter legs had to work double-time to keep up with the taller Amazon.

Once inside the stables, Corianyx quickly mounted a powerful, dark chestnut mare that had been prepared for her in advance. "Achillea!" she barked, grabbing the reins.

"Yes, Corianyx?" Achillea said, stepping out of one of the boxes holding the reins for her own mare.

"Help Princess Gabrielle find a horse that suits her. Also, we better bring a spare one for the Sisters... if those old fools are still alive. All right?"

"Yes, Corianyx," Achillea said, nodding. Watching Corianyx leave the stables to coordinate the strike team outside, the Amazon went over to the rows of boxes and thought about which of their horses would suit the shorter woman best. "Princess Gabrielle, do you have riding exper-"

"Yes!" Gabrielle barked, but immediately regretted snapping at the soft-faced Amazon whom she had already met in the mess barn. *'They can't all be ruthless killers,' she thought. 'I need to stay as civilized as I can... who knows when I might need an ally.'* -- "Yes, I have riding experience. I'm sorry, my day got off to a really bad start," she continued to smooth down the ruffled feathers.

"All right, here's a mare that should be acceptable for you. Her name is Malatena. She's strong but not erratic," Achillea said and pulled a speckled horse out of the box.

Gabrielle gave the mare a quick once-over and found it to be a bit lower than Argo, which meant that she'd be able to control it fairly well. "That'll do, thank you."

Nodding, Achillea quickly put a blanket, a saddle and the harness on the mare and helped Gabrielle into a comfortable sitting position. "Okay?"

"Yes, very nice. Thank you," Gabrielle said and took a firm grip on the reins. "And my staff?"

"Right here, Princess Gabrielle," Achillea said and slid the staff into two hoops on the right side of the saddle.

The mare shook her large head twice and swooshed its tail but seemed benign enough for Gabrielle's needs, so she gently nudged its sides with the heels of her boots and allowed it to go at its own pace out into the open where they joined up with the other members of the fast strike team.

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CHAPTER 4

Half a league out of the Amazon camp, Gabrielle wished she had asked for a bit of padding. The saddle was different from the one Xena had on Argo, and the hard edges dug painfully into her thighs.

The group of six interceptors moved rapidly across the land to the spot where the scout had reported seeing the three Amazons taken captive. All along the dirt roads, Gabrielle looked for signs of a potential ambush, but the forests they rode through seemed devoid of any life.

As the forest opened up into cultivated fields, Corianyx reduced her speed and raised her arm to let the others know they should follow suit. From her position at the head of the group, she was able to see better, and she quickly spotted a small column of smoke rising behind a low, rolling hill in the middle of the nearest field. At the top of the hill, a single sentry kept a close watch on the edge of the forest.

"Princess Gabrielle?" she said quietly, waving her hand to let Gabrielle know she should come forward. Once the bard had brought Malatena to a standstill, Corianyx pointed at the smoke. "Smoke, probably a campfire. One sentry. What do you say, should we attack head on?"

Gabrielle scrunched up her face and stared at the charismatic Amazon next to her who was looking ahead quite calmly. All kinds of thoughts rushed through her mind, but one remained: *'She's testing me, that... that... snake!'* -- "Hardly. It would be better to go around. I'd say... we take the right flank," she said after scouting out the terrain.

"Oh, well done, Princess Gabrielle... I was about to recommend the right flank, though I think we should add a little twist," Corianyx said with a fake smile. "All right. Achillea, stay here with the spare horse for the time being. If there's trouble, come to our assistance or go back to the camp, depending on the strength of the opposition. If it's all clear, I'll signal you."

"Yes, Corianyx," Achillea said, holding a firm grip on the spare horse's reins.

Biting her cheek, Gabrielle watched Corianyx as she prepared the longbow she had on her back and drew an arrow equipped with a fierce-looking head from the quiver next to the saddle. "What good is that going to do, Corianyx? Surely you can't expect to hit anything on horseback?"

"Oh, I think you'll be amazed what I and my Sisters can do on horseback," Corianyx said in a steely voice. "All right! Formation! At thirty paces, break right to the flank."

When the black-sleeved Amazons all acknowledged the command, Corianyx spurred on her horse with a loud "Yah!".

Soon, the small attack group was barreling ahead in a tight formation with Gabrielle well-protected at the rear. At a hundred paces, Corianyx rose in the stirrups and aimed the longbow carefully at the lone sentry who was shouting something down the hill behind him.

Using her kneejoints to stay balanced, she kept her aim as they thundered towards a distance of fifty paces - then she released the arrow that flew straight through the air and penetrated the sentry's chest.

With the horses moving so fast, the guard had hardly hit the ground when the Amazons reached thirty paces. As one, the experienced riders forced their horses right to get to the closest flank - Gabrielle followed suit, though just a bit slower.

On their left, the hill suddenly came alive with a swarm of men appearing over the crest. Going past the surprised men, Gabrielle counted at least twenty, some with pitchforks and axes, but some with bows and arrows.

The bard had to admit - grudgingly - that Corianyx knew that she was doing, because when they cleared the right flank and got around the small hill, the men were still standing on the hilltop with their jaws halfway down their chests, ready to be picked off one by one like turkeys at an autumn fair.

The black-sleeved Amazons did just that, firing their longbows repeatedly with deadly aim. Soon, dead or dying peasants were littering the ground on the small hill. A handful of peasants threw down their weapons and tried to run away, but Corianyx quickly caught up with them and let her sword do the talking.

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Six hundred paces away in the relative safety of a small cluster of trees between two fields, three people dressed in various outfits were hiding in the shrubbery and observing the battle.

"By the Gods, Xena... you were right... they weren't fooled... by the Gods," Eneas mumbled, repeatedly rubbing the stubble on his chin as he looked at the carnage delivered by the mounted Amazons.

Xena only nodded, too preoccupied with keeping track of the strawberry-blonde Amazon at the rear of the charge to have time to speak. Just in case, she kept a firm grip on her Chakram.

The third person there was Selena who had changed into a dark green outfit to stick out less compared to her regular blue dress. Chewing on her lips, she swallowed several times to get the odd, nervous lump out of her throat. "What if they come here? What if they spot us?" she croaked.

"They won't, Selena," Xena said.

"Yeah, but still..."

Xena briefly took her eyes off Gabrielle to look at the pretty brunette who was standing next to her. "Don't worry. We'll be fine," she said calmly, putting a hand on Selena's elbow for effect - an endearing touch Gabrielle had taught her.

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The three captured Amazons were sitting on the ground with their backs to each other at the center of the small campsite. As Gabrielle flew past on Malatena, she could see that the two elders appeared to be all right, but that the warrior had been beaten and was bleeding.

Making up her mind to have some input in the battle, Gabrielle turned her horse around and rode back to the three prisoners where she quickly dismounted. Almost as an

afterthought, she pulled her staff out of the two hoops and made her way across the many ruts in the field, saving time by hopping from crown to crown.

On her way there, her sixth sense screamed in her ear to duck and she did so just in time to feel an arrow come whooshing past her, missing her back by inches.

The culprit was a curly-haired peasant in his early twenties who had run down the hill to Gabrielle's left. Trying to prepare a new arrow - though his hands were trembling too hard to be effective - the young man discovered that his bowstring had become slack from pulling it too hard in the first shot.

Groaning, he threw down the bow and charged Gabrielle with a dagger he pulled from his belt.

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In the cluster of trees, Xena let out an impressive, explosive curse - that made Selena snicker and Eneas grunt in surprise - and whipped out her Chakram. Holding it ready, she stared at the situation Gabrielle found herself in with sun-like intensity, but decided to wait a short while before releasing the circular weapon.

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Seeing the danger quite clearly, Gabrielle followed the procedure she and Xena had drilled countless times by holding the staff horizontally ahead of her and bobbing up and down on the balls of her feet.

Once the peasant was close enough, she jumped forward and performed a right-sweep to his knees and an immediate left-sweep to his ribs. Stepping back, she twirled the staff under her left arm and got ready to give the attacker an uppercut that would send him into next week, but the whack he had received across his rib cage had already rendered him incapable of putting up a fight.

Wheezing, coughing and spluttering, he dropped the dagger and took a few staggering steps away from the battling Amazon. Shortly after, he misjudged one of the ruts and fell on his knees across the next two.

The sigh of relief Gabrielle let out was real, and after she had recovered the dagger so the peasant couldn't get a second chance, she hurried over to the three prisoners to free them.

"I'm Princess Gabrielle," she said as she threw herself down on her knees and began to saw furiously on the ropes tying the three prisoners together. "If... I... could... only... get... this... dull... dagger... to... work... I'd... have... you... out... of... here... in... no... time... urgh!" she said, growing increasingly frustrated when the dagger she had taken from the peasant was too dull to cut through the sturdy rope.

"Princess Gabrielle, use this," Corianyx said, having suddenly appeared without Gabrielle noticing. Pulling her leg out of the stirrup, the Amazon leader drew a slender but very sharp seven-inch hunting dagger from her bootleg and threw it down onto the ground next to the bard.

At first, Gabrielle just stared at the dagger, almost like she was worried she may get infected by the same bloodlust the black-sleeved Amazons possessed, but the dull blade she had taken from the peasant was of so little use that she had no choice but to take Corianyx'. "Thank you," she mumbled and picked up the sharp dagger.

With the far better tool, she had no problem carving through the ropes holding the three Amazons. "There you go," Gabrielle said as she helped the two elders to their feet.

"Thank you..." -- "Oh, thank you, Sister," both elders said as one, clutching their aching, old bones that had grown quite cold from sitting directly on the ground for most of the morning.

"You're welcome. We have a spare horse for you... oh, there it is now," Gabrielle said and pointed at Achillea who was trotting around the right flank with the extra horse just as Gabrielle looked that way.

After being thanked again, Gabrielle concentrated on helping the bleeding warrior who hadn't been able to get up on her own. Looking around, Gabrielle could see that the lopsided battle was almost over; the nine remaining peasants - including the youngster she had fought - were being shepherded into a small group and forced over to the far side of the campsite.

The Amazon who had been given the task of protecting the elders was bleeding quite badly from a cut eyebrow and from a scalp laceration. Her right eye was black and blue and she was mumbling in a strange, sluggish voice. Her upper body was decorated with various cuts and scrapes, but she didn't appear to have been violated in any way other than the beating.

Gabrielle furrowed her brow and tried to raise the Amazon's head. When she noticed that the warrior couldn't focus at all, she became quite worried for her Sister's health.

Suddenly, the sound of male voices screaming in fear and pain made Gabrielle jump a foot in the air and spin around - Corianyx had ordered the black-sleeved Amazons to fire at the nine remaining peasants at point blank range. Every single one of the men were soon resembling pincushions with arrows sticking out of their throats and bodies, and they all fell down to die.

"By the Gods..." Gabrielle croaked, staring at the sight of Corianyx sitting high atop her dark chestnut mare with a cold yet victorious expression on her face. For the briefest of moments, Corianyx' visage held a chilling glimpse of the old, evil Xena Gabrielle had heard

so many horrific tales about, and she understood how it must have been for the people who faced her.

Every last inch of the bard's skin crawled, but she forced herself to get back to the bleeding Amazon. When she tried to help the warrior to her feet, she found it very tough going.

"Don't bother with her, Princess Gabrielle," Corianyx said as she came trotting over to the two Amazons. "I've seen that kind of head injury before. No matter what you do for her, she'll be a drooling idiot for the rest of her life. All four days of it."

"I'll be the judge of that!" Gabrielle barked, finally succeeding in dragging the unresponsive warrior upright. "She isn't one of yours, she's of my tribe!"

Chuckling, Corianyx flicked an imaginary piece of fluff off her deerskin sleeve. "Oh, I know that. If she had been one of mine, I would have finished her already for failing her duties. May I have my dagger back?" she said, holding out her hand.

Gabrielle briefly considered burying it in Corianyx' palm, but thought better of it. "Here," she said, handing the sharp blade back to the leader of the team of black-sleeved Amazons that had just committed yet another atrocity.

"Do what you wish with her. She's your responsibility," Corianyx said coolly before nudging her horse into a trot. With a wave, she signaled her warriors to follow her.

The battlefield they left behind was colored red from the many bodies that littered the ground. Here and there, crows had already landed and were showing an interest in pecking at the strange, inanimate objects - all they needed was a bit of peace and quiet.

Peace and quiet, or rather the lack of it, was on the forefront of Gabrielle's mind as well as she struggled valiantly to get the unresponsive Amazon up on Malatena. "No, look... look here, Sister... put your foot there, in the stirrup. Yes, that's right. Now, pull yourself up... come on, you must have done it a thousand times," the bard coaxed, pushing the injured warrior up in the saddle.

Once she was there, the Amazon swayed back and forth several times before she seemed to become a little more clear-headed and took the reins.

"Yes, that's it. Good... now hold on," Gabrielle said, wiping her sweaty brow.

Her sixth sense began to react again, but as she stepped away from the horse to look across the seemingly endless fields, she was unable to see anything that could pose a threat to her. As she scouted the terrain, her eyes were drawn to a small cluster of trees roughly six hundred paces from the battlefield, but no matter how hard she strained her vision, she wasn't able to pick out any details.

Grunting, Gabrielle shrugged and went back to her injured Sister. After a brief check to see if she would fit behind the Amazon - and finding out she wouldn't - she put her hand on Malatena's grime and led the horse away from the battlefield on foot.

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Across the barren field, Xena sighed deeply and closed her eyes. The all too brief moment she'd had eye contact with the other half of her heart had given her a modicum of comfort and hope after the shock of witnessing the black-sleeved Amazons execute the peasants from Brisus in cold blood.

Sighing again, Xena turned around and began to slap Selena's cheeks gently, hoping to get the fainted woman to wake up before they began the trek home to Palladia.

Next to them, Eneas leaned against a tree with a face that was as white as snow. "Well," he said, clearing his throat to get rid of the lump that had somehow invaded his voice box, "now we know what we're up against."

Wiping his sweaty palms on his pants, he pushed himself away from the tree and went over to tend to his horse that had been tied up well out of sight of the small hill that had turned into a bloody battlefield.

"Yes. They're ruthless," Xena said, sighing in relief when she finally succeeded in getting Selena to come around.

Still dazed, Selena sat up and rubbed her face. "Oh... I... must have fainted."

"Can't argue with that," Xena said flatly as she helped the woman to her feet. "You two should go home. I'll check for survivors, but there won't be any. All right?"

Blushing, Selena nodded and looked down at her feet. "All right. I'm sorry I fainted, Xena. I didn't know I was such a coward. You... you must think I'm pretty worthless, huh?"

"No. I only have problems with those who rejoice in the death of others," Xena said in a voice that suddenly seemed very tired. "But, Selena, maybe you should reconsider volunteering for the first line of defense. We'll be facing the full force of their attack. Mmmm?" she continued, putting a hand on the brunette's shoulder.

"You're right... I could work with Iriadne and bring you supplies or something?" Selena said, looking at the striking woman with the black battledress, the bronze applications and the ice blue eyes that looked so weary all she wanted to do was to reach out and hug her.

Xena caught the nurturing look in Selena's eyes and felt she had better get to work before the other woman would try anything silly - like hugging her. "That would be better, yes," Xena said and walked over to Argo.

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It didn't take long for Xena to establish that the peasants were all dead and that even her many skills weren't enough to bring them back to life. She briefly considered preparing graves for them, but she had more pressing things to do.

Sighing, she quickly mounted Argo and made a final tour of the dead men to perform just one more check. It was starkly evident that there was nothing she could do, so she turned her trusty warhorse around and began the journey back to Palladia.

Half a candlemark later, she felt her skin crawl in the way it typically did when a deity was studying her. The unpleasant feeling became stronger and stronger over the next few candlemarks until there was no mistaking she was under close scrutiny.

Deciding to confront whomever her observer was, she brought Argo to a halt and dismounted in the middle of the dirt road that would take her to Palladia. "No more charades!" she said strongly, putting her hands on her hips.

A few seconds later, the sound of crackling ozone and a blue cloud of energy heralded the arrival of Ares. When the God of War had fully materialized, he put his hands on the edges of his leather vest and casually strolled around Xena, as smug as ever.

Rolling her eyes, the warrior knocked her fist against her chest a couple of times. "Oh, I should have known it'd be you. I've had the burps all morning."

Ares just grinned at the insult and ran a hand through Xena's black locks but she swatted it away before he could touch anything of value.

"Did Hera steal your tongue, Ares? I can't remember the last time you were quiet for this long."

"What would you like me to say, Xena?" the God of War said in his usual deep, velvety voice.

"How about, 'see you later'?"

"No can do. How about, hmmm... remember when we fought side by side in Crete...? You and me against the horde of men hired by that scoundrel Licantus?"

"Who was one of your stooges, Ares," Xena said and arched an eyebrow.

"Details, details. No, there was one more thing... what was it?" Ares said and tried to sneak his hands around Xena's waist. Before he could do it fully, Xena had stepped out of his reach. "Oh yes, the little gift I bestowed upon you. Remember? The ability to heal yourself if

you tapped into your dark side. Why haven't you used that gift, Xena? It's really quite rude of you."

Baring her teeth, Xena turned around and shot the God a cold, surly stare. "I don't need your favors. I heal perfectly fine even without your little tricks."

"That you do. That you do indeed... however..." - Ares snapped his fingers to make the dirt road fade into a white blur. Once the whiteness dissolved, Xena found herself standing on a rooftop, looking down on the central part of Palladia in a slight daze.

It was night and the town looked like it had been under attack for quite some time. Several houses were glowing orange, and here and there, smoldering Amazon arrows were sticking out of the ground and the bodies of the people who had died defending their homes.

Flickering orange light from torches and the raging fires illuminated a fierce battle on the ground between two evenly matched opponents - a tall woman in a battledress whose long, flowing black hair whipped around as she fought, and a slightly shorter woman in a brown deerskin hunting outfit who was wielding a sword and a dagger.

"However," Ares suddenly repeated, pointing down at the street below them, "there will be wounds even you cannot heal on your own. Behold."

As Xena was watching, the woman in the brown deerskin outfit delivered what was potentially a killing blow to the other fighter with her dagger. A strawberry-blonde Amazon screamed in terror and raced to help the woman in black.

Xena grunted and looked at the God with a sour expression on her face. "Even after all this time, you still can't read me very well. If it's my destiny to die here, so be it."

"Die? Who's talking about dying? I'm talking about fighting!" Ares roared and punched the air with his clenched fists. "Striking back! Tapping into your wonderfully evil dark side and obliterating your opponent! Let her taste your steel, again and again and again! ...Ah, my words are wasted on you," he continued and snapped his fingers.

The dirt road was instantly restored along with a rather jumpy Argo. At once, Xena went over to her faithful steed and began to stroke her head and whisper soothing words into her ears to get the spooked warhorse to calm down.

"My little show was merely a glimpse of what the future may hold for you... but Xena, when was the last time you used your sword in anger? I fear that the little blonde runt is having an adverse influence on you. What's the point of even calling yourself a warrior if you never kill anyone?" Ares said, rolling his eyes.

"That woman I saw leading those brutal Amazons... is she one of yours?"

"Corianyx? Oh no, she belongs to my sister Artemis."

"Artemis?" Xena said and narrowed her eyes dangerously. "Where does she fit in?" - behind her sparkling blue eyes, Xena remembered Gabrielle telling her that she had been visited by Artemis the second morning while they were still in Tirus.

For once, Ares didn't pay attention to his favorite mortal. Instead, he buffed his fingernails on his vest and kept talking. "I think she's on a quest to restore the Amazons to what they once were. A tribe to be feared, not these pathetic, soft, girly-girly fools they've become. You know, they actually put inane parties and harvesting herbs above conquest and male sacrifice...?"

"Shocking," Xena said in a voice that positively dripped with sarcasm. - *'If that is really what Artemis wants, then Gabrielle is in even greater danger than I thought... there's no way the Goddess will allow her to foil her carefully laid plans. This isn't just convincing Melosa that she's wrong, this is going up against Artemis and all her might...'* the warrior thought, frowning her brow in concern.

"I agree," Ares said, completely missing the sarcasm and the dark look on Xena's face. "Things went wrong for the Amazons when they discovered morals and ethics. Hercules didn't help. The big nitwit couldn't even make himself kill one of their queens. More bad influences! Pah."

The unwelcome news that the Goddess of the Moon and the Hunt was threatening her love by using the Amazons for her own, political agenda sent a wave of worry through the Warrior Princess; worry that soon turned to a simmering anger just below her cool exterior.

Growling, she quickly swung herself up into the saddle, eager to get back to Palladia to organize the defenses. If the vision Ares had shown her had even the smallest grain of truth to it, she had work to do.

Unfortunately for Xena, Ares wasn't quite done yet. Grinning from ear to ear, he put a warm hand on the warrior's thigh and held on tight, even when she tried to pry his fingers off of her leg. "It's been nice talking to you, Xena. I gotta go. I have things to do and virgins to deflower... but before I leave, I'll give you a free piece of advice. Get some rest while you can. The night will be warm... but the morning will be sizzling."

With that, the God of War winked at Xena and took a step back before he vanished in his usual cloud of pale blue energy.

"Gabrielle," Xena said out loud in a hoarse voice, hoping that she could somehow send her love a telepathic message. "Please take care. This is much bigger than you realize..."

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The sun was setting in the western skies when Xena walked down the stairs from her room on the second floor of Iriadne's tavern. The familiar sounds that greeted her ears as she set foot in the busy main room gave her a little jolt as she imagined her mother's tavern being just as busy back home.

Looking around at the patrons sitting at the bar counter and at the dozen or so tables, she could see that they were largely unaffected by the day's news apart from a scattered few who had been looking a little too deeply into their mugs of ale.

Now and then, a cheer rose from one of the tables when someone had bettered his opponents in the art of throwing dice or playing cards, but the dominating sound was that of spoons or cutlery hitting wooden bowls or ceramic plates.

Delicious smells wafted in from the kitchen, and it wasn't long before Xena's stomach began to rebel over the fact that she hadn't treated it to anything for several candlemarks.

As if on cue, Iriadne stepped out of the kitchen holding a large tray with freshly baked bread. The matronly tavernkeeper was dressed in a simple dress, an apron and a bonnet that all had white stains from the flour. Her cheeks were rosy - even when racking her brain, Xena couldn't recall seeing Iriadne without rosy cheeks - and a few drops of sweat were running down her forehead.

"Phew," she said after she had put down the tray. "It's hot out there..." Using her sleeve, she quickly wiped her damp forehead and hurried back into the kitchen.

"Oh, I know," Xena said under her breath and eyed the loaves of bread. The tray was laden with no less than four different types of bread, including something that Xena was sure was nutbread. Picking up the loaf, she gave it a quick sniff to find out for certain.

Huffing and puffing, Iriadne came back into the main room carrying yet another tray; this time, she had built a little pyramid of white bread buns and thick slices of rye. "Oh! Help yourself, Xena," she said, smiling broadly at the sight of a full-grown, heavily armed and fierce-looking warrior sniffing her loaf of nutbread.

"I, uh..." Xena said, getting the same feeling she'd had when her mother had busted her looking through other people's windows back home in Amphipolis. "I haven't eaten for a while, so... and my friend loves nutbread so... uh..."

"Oh, why didn't you tell me you hadn't eaten! Go find a table and I'll bring you some supper. What do you fancy? We've got rabbit stew, beef stew, meatloaf with or without cabbage leaves, rolled roast with prunes soaked in port, Cappadocian sausages, Spartan sausages, west-Thracian sausages, spiced beef sausages, vegetable soup, beef soup with carrots and sweet peas, and finally our local specialty, pig fat spread on a thick slice of rye with salt and crunchy, fried onions on top."

"Not the last one," Xena said flatly. After thinking a bit, she settled for something she remembered from home. "Meatloaf with cabbage leaves, please. And a mug of ale."

"Comin' right up!" Iriadne said and thumped Xena's shoulder. "Go find a table, I'll be right down!"

"Thank you. Would you mind if I..." Xena said and snatched the loaf of nutbread.

"No, not at all," Iriadne said with a grin on her way back into the kitchen.

As expected, the meal had been delicious, and as Xena pushed the empty plate away, she wished Gabrielle had been there to share the nutbread with her. The thought of her love more or less alone in the middle of a hornet's nest didn't do much for her mood, so she emptied her mug of ale and pushed back her chair.

After putting the dirty dishes on the counter to help Iriadne save a few steps - another thing she had learned in her childhood, or rather, that her rear end had learned when she didn't do it - she stepped outside in the chilly evening air and looked up and down main street.

Eneas and his brothers had worked hard all day erecting roadblocks at every road into the town, spurred on by witnessing the horrors of the failed ambush. Two stripped timber logs had been placed across each street to hopefully stop the Amazon raiders from breaching the outer defenses and roaming the streets at will.

If they broke through the first lines of defense, heavily protected roadblocks had been put up at either end of main street to act as a secondary entrenchment.

'Of course... the biggest, tallest roadblock in the Known World will not stop a volley of burning arrows fired from outside the town limits,' Xena thought with a sigh.

"Xena!" a male voice shouted from somewhere behind her.

Turning around, she could see that the person calling for her was Eneas and that he had one of the men who had been assigned to scout duty with him. Waving at them, Xena set off in a fast jog to get down to the roadblock at the east end of main street.

"Yes, Eneas?" she said once she had reached and clasped arms with the two men.

Eneas put his arm around a much younger man and gave him a little push forward. "Xena, this is Linus, he's one of our long range scouts. Go on, tell Xena what you saw," he said, nudging the young man's back.

The youngster - freckled, blushing and wringing his cap - cleared his throat a couple of times before he dared to speak, but was finally able to get his vocal cords to articulate

actual words. "A group of mounted Amazons. I s- saw five, but there may have been more, I dunno. They were riding along the outer perimeter. They we- weren't threatening, but... they didn't look nice."

Xena chuckled on the inside but maintained a stoic expression so it wouldn't appear that she was laughing at the youngster. "How were they dressed?" she said, cocking her head.

"Oh, th- they all wore clothes..."

Eneas grunted out loud and gave the youngster a brief smack on the back of his head. "No kidding, Linus? What kind of clothes? Like the outfits Melosa's tribe wears when they come to trade, or...?"

"N- no, they were wearing dark brown hunting gear," Linus said, rubbing his scalp.

"The black sleeves," Xena said somberly. "All right. Thanks, Linus. You've been most helpful."

Linus bowed to the leather-clad warrior and quickly scooted away so he wouldn't risk getting slapped again.

Xena turned around and moved over to the roadblock to give it an inspection. After giving the timber logs a little kick to see if they were fastened properly, she put her hands on her hips and let out a long sigh.

"It doesn't mean they'll come tonight, Xena," Eneas said, wringing his hands.

"No. But it doesn't mean they won't, either."

Looking up at the evening sky where the last of the clouds that had been colored pink and red by the setting sun were being transformed into dull, night-time gray, Xena could almost hear Ares' words in her ear warning her of the coming night. *'A warm night and a sizzling morning, he said. That bastard. All right... so be it.'*

The long pause was enough to make Eneas nearly burst with anticipation, and he was one second from pulling out his hair when Xena finally spoke:

"Call in the men, Eneas, but do it low-key. Tell everybody what Linus saw, but make them understand that it's merely a precautionary measure. The absolute last things we need are theatrics and wailing mothers. All right?"

"All right. I'll do that at once," Eneas said. The mayor's face was quite a lot paler than it had been only candledrips before, and it seemed that the shocking fact that his town could be about to face an imminent attack from the fierce, brutal Amazons had shaken him quite badly.

"Oh, Eneas, before you go..." Xena said and put her hand on Eneas' shoulder just as he was turning around. "Selena wanted to help with supplies and things like that. Do you think you could ask her to come, too?"

"Selena? Sure... I'll do that," Eneas said and hurried up the main street.

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CHAPTER 5

For the second morning in a row, Gabrielle was rudely pulled from her sleep by someone shaking her. Growling deep in her throat, she rolled over onto her back and shot the culprit - Corianyx, once again - a murderous look. "What is it now?"

"Oh, the same as yesterday," Corianyx said with a smirk. "Queen Melosa wishes to see you at once."

Growling even more fiercely, Gabrielle swung her legs over the side of the mattress and grappled for her boots, more asleep than awake. She had an even harder time waking up than the previous day and she felt she had only been in bed for a few hours - the flickering, orange torchlight that was visible around the window frame proved that she was right.

As she climbed to her feet, she scrunched up her face when she realized it was still pitch black outside. "What's the meaning of this, Corianyx? I'm tired."

"Tired? I'd be tired too if I had spent all of yesterday tending to that babbling idiot. How is she, by the way?"

Corianyx' condescending tone made a surge of anger swell up inside the bard but she wisely kept her mouth firmly shut. "She's not well," she said after a little while. "She fell asleep and we couldn't wake her up. She came back but was even more unresponsive."

"Oh, that's too bad. Well, like I said, Queen Melosa wishes to see you. Unless you want to go on latrine duty for a moon, I'd suggest you go over there before she comes here to look for you."

"Where's Ephiny and Solari?" Gabrielle said and grabbed her staff.

"Already there. Look, I wasn't kidding about-"

"I'm going!" Gabrielle growled and barged her way past the smirking Amazon leader. Corianyx paused briefly to eye the petite yet powerful frame of the strawberry-blonde Princess, but soon shrugged and followed her out of the command hut.

The royal hut fell quiet when Gabrielle entered through the curtain. The attention rapidly centered on her, including a hard stare from Queen Melosa who wasn't looking particularly thrilled at the lateness of her visit.

Grunting twice, the Queen leaned back in her throne and made a rather impatient gesture with her hand.

"Pardon me, my Queen. I'm a heavy sleeper," Gabrielle said after clearing her throat to get rid of the worst of the growl. Seething inside, she shuffled off to the side and waited for Corianyx to join her.

"Mmmm," Melosa said and rose from her seat. "All right. Since we're all here... Gabrielle... let's work out the plans for today. Corianyx has just returned from a reconnaissance mission to Palladia where she-

Hearing the queen say the name of the town where Xena was staying sent a cold trickle racing up and down Gabrielle's back and she broke out in a slight shiver when she became aware of the possible implications.

"-learned that they're in the process of erecting sturdy roadblocks at all roads entering the town. This means we'll have to attack now before their defenses grow too strong for us to penetrate," Melosa continued, walking down the line of senior Amazons.

Gabrielle's heart began to hammer in her chest. Suddenly connecting the dots, she realized that they, and her, were about to attack Palladia.

She sneaked a peek at Corianyx who was standing with a gleeful expression on her face - she wouldn't find any help there. Looking across the royal hut, Gabrielle locked eyes with Ephiny and Solari who both appeared quite a bit more reluctant to go to war. "Queen Melosa," Gabrielle said and stepped forward. "May I be allowed to speak?"

"But of course, Princess Gabrielle. What's on your mind?" Melosa said and put her hands behind her back.

"Something that's been there ever since I arrived at the Amazon village a few days ago. Haven't we done enough now? Haven't we caused enough pain and suffering to the neighboring villages? The attack on Tirus was..." - Gabrielle paused and turned to look at Corianyx - "... highly effective. I was there. With the peasants killed yesterday by Corianyx' warriors, it is my belief that we have sent the remaining villages a strong message that they shouldn't have sided with Licantus and his cohorts. After all, the survivors from Tirus will tell stories from here to all corners of Greece about the group of Amazons who attacked them like a pack of Harpies... no offence, Corianyx."

"None taken, Princess Gabrielle," Corianyx said with a smirk.

"Well," Gabrielle continued and stepped back into the line. "I... I suppose that's what I wanted to say."

An oppressive silence fell over the royal hut while Queen Melosa pondered Gabrielle's words. Eventually - and inevitably - she shook her head slowly. "As always, you speak well, Princess Gabrielle... and I understand your reasoning... but your suggestion is inadequate by far. Palladia is the largest town in this region. By destroying it, we will prove once and for all that we, the Amazon Nation, will **never** stand idly by while our Sisters are being taken as prisoners or slaves. No."

Sighing, Melosa came up to stand in front of Gabrielle. The usually so tough and strict ruler offered the bard a wistful smile before she moved onto Corianyx. "Corianyx, prepare your warriors for a dawn raid. You must leave as soon as possible. Move fast and strike them hard."

"Yes, Queen Melosa," Corianyx said with a bow. "Our supplies and arms have been replenished. We're ready to go at once. We shall continue to use the same plan that worked so well at Tirus. After multiple volleys of burning arrows, we charge their lines of defense with our horses. Once we've breached them, I and my Wild Boars will dismount and work as ground troops. There won't be..."

As the northern Amazon ran through the details of the battleplan, Gabrielle felt her insides churn ceaselessly. Even before she had opened her mouth, she had known that Melosa would most likely turn down her suggestion, but the cold detachment that exuded from Corianyx upset her more than anything she had experienced since she had begun her travels with Xena - more than the Cyclops who wanted to have her for dinner, more than when she had found Xena more dead than alive in the snow, and even more than when she and Xena had accidentally traveled to the future where she had found scrolls that related to her own death.

"Queen Melosa," she suddenly blurted out. "I need to be a part of this mission! I need to be there to record the events for posterity."

Melosa cocked her head and shot the bard a curious glance. "Princess Gabrielle, is that wise? I mean... again, I certainly understand your reasoning, but the streets of Palladia will resemble a slaughterhouse."

"I insist, Queen Melosa," Gabrielle said strongly.

"All right. Corianyx, the Princess will travel with you and join you in the attack," Melosa said and sat down on her throne.

The leader of the black-sleeved Amazons briefly narrowed her eyes but knew better than to go against the Queen's command, so she simply bowed and said: "Yes, my Queen. It shall be done."

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Malatena, the mare Gabrielle had borrowed from the black-sleeved Amazons, pitched along at a steady pace almost like it was aware that its rider was fast asleep on its broad back. Now and then, the horse shook its large head, but even that couldn't awaken the strawberry-blonde Amazon.

At a stop, Corianyx had ordered everyone in her attack force - twenty-five Amazons in all including Gabrielle - to wrap the hooves of their steeds in cloth and to secure all items on their fatigues that could potentially alert the villagers of their arrival, like bronze or iron braces clanging against each other or the longbows on their backs slapping against their saddles.

The ever-present clip-clopping of the hooves had been reduced to such an extent that it hadn't taken long for Gabrielle to slip into dreamland - and there she had remained.

In the eastern skies, the very first rays of the new day shone above the horizon, promising that it would be a cloudy day with a small risk of a few showers.

Corianyx carefully observed the early morning sky and clouds, but came to the conclusion that the front wouldn't get there fast enough to hinder the progress of her attack. If anything, the cloud cover would ensure that the morning would be fairly gloomy.

Once the light had increased a few notches, she turned around in her saddle and began to check the readiness of her warriors who all seemed fine and eager to perform, except Gabrielle. When Corianyx' spontaneous inspection revealed that the bard's head was tilted forward in sleep, she rolled her eyes at the sight and mumbled a few choice curses in her original West Ephesian dialect.

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Meanwhile at the eastern-most roadblock into Palladia, Xena leaned against the solid logs and rubbed her bleary, red eyes. All around her, the villagers who had volunteered to serve at the roadblock were snoring merrily, a fact that had made it nearly impossible for her to concentrate on the task at hand during the darkest hours.

Stifling a yawn, she studied the morning sky and wondered if the scattered clouds would aid or hinder the progress of the Amazons - if they were out there at all.

The fatigue slowly got to her and she decided to sit down and close her eyes for a heartbeat or two. It didn't take long for sleep to eat away at the edges of her consciousness, but just as she was drifting into the twilight zone between being alert and fully asleep, a pair of emerald green orbs appeared in her mind's eye.

The orbs were unmistakably Gabrielle's but Xena couldn't fathom what they were doing there. Little by little, all of Gabrielle's face became visible in Xena's mind, and soon, the warrior could see that the bard was trying to tell her something; however, the dream was silent.

Xena tried to read her lover's enticing lips, but she wasn't able to make heads or tails out of the message. Growling, she began to shift in her sleep to perhaps give the dream a swift kick up the backside so it would cooperate.

In the dream, Gabrielle was slowly getting frustrated by the lack of contact, and she scrunched up her face and mouthed: "I love you" so clearly that even Xena was able to understand it.

With a snort, the warrior snapped out of her fuzzy state and bolted to her feet. Spinning around, she peeked over the top edge of the roadblock and saw to her great concern that a unit of Amazons in brown deerskin hunting outfits were lining up and getting ready for an attack a mere two hundred paces from the outskirts of town.

"Ares' balls!" Xena growled, punching her fist into her open palm. Spinning around again, she began to shake all the slumbering villagers awake.

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Atop Malatena, Gabrielle snorted loudly and looked around in daze as she jerked awake from the bizarre dream she had experienced for the last several candle-drips.

As it registered how close they were to Palladia, she tried to recall the dream but could only remember that she had been talking endlessly to Xena, revealing all she had learned - including their battleplans - but the warrior had seemingly not understood a single thing of it. It hadn't been until she had said "I love you" very strongly that the warrior had caught her first words of the rather lopsided conversation.

Gabrielle took a deep breath and adjusted her position in the hard saddle. Looking at Corianyx who was busy discussing the finer aspects of the direction of the wind with Achillea, she suddenly realized how close they were to opening fire on Palladia - literally.

"All right?" Corianyx said and grabbed the reins of her horse.

"All right," Achillea echoed and turned her horse around to go back to her own group of Amazons.

Within moments, Corianyx, Achillea and the other black-sleeved Amazons fanned out their horses so they were ready to charge the roadblock some two hundred paces ahead.

Shouted commands drifting towards them on the early morning breeze made it clear that they had been spotted, but if it affected Corianyx, she didn't let it show. "Ready?" she said to

Achillea who nodded in return. Turning around, Corianyx shot Gabrielle a slightly pointed look. "Stay here for now, Princess. This is merely the opening round."

Gabrielle let her dark expression do the talking. Her insides had been reduced to a hard knot of worry for Xena's safety, and as she stretched up in her stirrups, she thought she could see the briefest glimpse of the oh-so-familiar shock of black hair on the defensive line at the roadblock - but she wasn't sure her mind wasn't playing tricks with her.

The dark chestnut mare Corianyx was sitting astride seemed as impatient as its rider, and it wasn't long before it whinnied out loud and shook its large head. Smiling, Corianyx leaned forward and patted the horse's flank. As she leaned back in her saddle, she let out a resounding "Amazons, attack!" and spurred her steed into action.

The entire force of Amazons took off as one, thundering ahead in an arrowhead formation headed for the central part of the first roadblock.

Behind them, Gabrielle jumped up in the stirrups to see better, trying to hold onto the reins and press her fists to her wildly rebelling stomach at the same time. Feeling her heart hammering in her chest, she could only watch as the riders tore straight for the roadblock. "By the Gods... please stay safe, Xena..." she whispered through her firmly clenched teeth.

When the riders were at fifty paces from the roadblock, Corianyx swung her right arm in the air to invoke the second part of their plan. As predicted, the defenders had gathered at the central part of the roadblock and were thus unprepared for the charging Amazons to fan out into two equally large groups that were thundering towards each end of the timber logs.

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Xena roared out loud in anger and jumped towards the end of the roadblock she had just left. Drawing her Chakram, she pulled back her arm to release it, but hesitated. Staring hard at the charging group of Amazons, she looked at each and every one of them to make sure they hadn't forced Gabrielle along for the run.

Once she was certain her love wasn't there, she let the Chakram fly with deadly accuracy into the center of the group headed for her end of the roadblock. First one, then another black-sleeved Amazon cried out and fell off her horse - even with two warriors missing, the Amazons kept charging.

Xena deftly caught the Chakram as it returned to her hand and quickly hooked it onto her belt. Looking to her left, she could see that the villagers were petrified and in no state to fight back, so she jumped in and picked up a crossbow that had been left unattended.

With no time to get a perfect aim, she just pointed the deadly weapon at the middle of the group and squeezed the trigger. The bolt tore through the air and nicked one of the Amazons on her arm, but it wasn't enough to stop her progress.

When the horses finally arrived at the roadblock, they came to hard stops which sent a storm of loose gravel and dirt onto the villagers and Xena who had to duck and shield her eyes and face.

As usual, the Warrior Princess had moved with lightning reflexes, but even so, a piece of gravel had smacked her on the head, and she could feel a stinging sensation from her hairline just above her ear. A quick touch confirmed it by making her fingers sticky with blood.

Roaring out loud, Xena unhooked the Chakram again and fired it towards the other formation of attacking Amazons. This time, she was able to get two more, but like before, it wasn't enough to scare them off.

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"Javelins!" Corianyx roared and drew her own from the left side of her saddle. Moving her horse up to the edge of the roadblock, she repeatedly stabbed the lethal instrument downwards, hoping to hit someone in the cloud of dust that was only slowly dissipating.

When she felt the metal tip of her javelin impact on something, she put more pressure on it to make the unfortunate man or woman suffer even more. A male voice crying in pain proved that she had indeed been successful.

Looking down her line of warriors, Corianyx made a quick count of the empty saddles and came to the conclusion that they couldn't get more out of the feint. "Fall back! Fall back!" she roared, waving her right arm in the air.

As one, the black-sleeved Amazons spun their horses around and galloped away from the roadblock, leaving their four dead or dying Sisters behind.

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The villagers - who had cowered on the ground to a man during the attack - jumped up and began to shout and cheer over the apparent victory, save for two who had been injured by the javelins in the last wave. Throwing their hats in the air, they began to dance around with each other and shout curses at the withdrawing Amazons.

Whooping loudly, Eneas came over to Xena and wanted to pull her into a hug but the warrior brushed him off. "We won, Xena! With your help, we won the day!"

Xena grumbled severely and chewed on her cheek to stop herself from speaking her mind. Instead of answering Eneas, she tore herself free from the celebrations and performed a forward flip up onto the timber logs to see better.

The cloud of dust had settled which left a clear picture of the outcome of the brief conflict - four Amazons were lying face-down on the ground in pools of blood, all victims of her Chakram.

Xena knew it was too good to be true, and when the supposedly fleeing Amazons stopped their horses roughly two hundred paces from the town limits, she knew exactly what was coming.

"Stop and listen!" Xena barked in the voice that had worked so well when she had been a battlefield commander. "Eneas! Slap your men into shape! This is far from over! They're merely regrouping, can't you see that?"

"But Xena-"

"No buts, Eneas! Tighten up the defenses and follow the plan we made. Now!"

For the first few seconds, the mayor of Palladia didn't know whether he should follow the orders or not, but then he realized that the fierce warrior had far more experience than him on such matters. "A- all right..." he said frantically. "M- men, come with me... we h- have work to do... in a hurry!"

A wave of confusion hit the celebrating men, but after a hard glare from Xena, they jumped into action and began to pull out the fire beaters and the heavy barrels of water they had prepared.

Satisfied that at least one of her orders was being followed, Xena jumped off the logs to check on the four fallen Amazons.

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With a "Whoa!" Corianyx pulled her dark chestnut mare to a stop next to Gabrielle and quickly turned it around. "How about that, Princess? Wasn't that exciting to watch?"

Gabrielle simply shot her a look that would have killed every normal mortal stone dead.

"No? Well, I thought it was exciting," Corianyx said and patted her horse's neck.

"And that? Was that a mosquito bite?" Gabrielle said, smirking so hard that her lips nearly curved off her face as she pointed at the bleeding cut on Corianyx' right upper arm.

Looking down as if she hadn't noticed it before, Corianyx broke out in a chuckle when she spotted the blood seeping out of her torn deerskin outfit. "Yes, it must have been. I certainly didn't feel it until now."

"Pah," Gabrielle said with a sour expression on her face.

"Achillea!" Corianyx barked and turned her horse away from Gabrielle. "Achillea, it's time for step two."

The other Amazon nodded and moved back to the warriors who had been reduced in number but who were still a force to be reckoned with. "Line up!" she shouted, reaching down to take an arrow from the quiver on the right side of her saddle.

To the sound of many bows being pulled, Corianyx went back to Gabrielle and patted the Amazon royalty on her shoulder. "Oh, do watch, Princess Gabrielle. This is where the fun starts," she said once she had noticed that Gabrielle wasn't paying any attention to the important bits.

Grumbling, Gabrielle tore her eyes away from the faint figures at the roadblock and looked over her shoulder. What she saw made her blood freeze over.

On Achillea's command, an Amazon ran along a line of no less than seventeen archers - who all had their longbows strained to their breaking point - and set alight the tufts of flammable tow that had been molded onto the arrowheads.

All archers were aiming in the general direction of the town, and as the arrows began to burn, they visibly tensed up.

The air was heavy with tension and Gabrielle could barely stand to think of what was about to happen. With her lips reduced to two colorless lines in her face, she looked at Corianyx who raised an arm high in the air.

"Release!" Corianyx roared, lowering her arm with a swoosh that was replicated tenfold by the sounds of seventeen longbows releasing their deadly load.

Gasping, Gabrielle jerked her head around to follow the progress of the burning arrows. The Amazons were veteran archers and all arrows were screaming straight through the air on a direct collision course with the roofs of the nearest buildings.

One after the other, the burning arrows thumped down onto the thatched roofs, and it didn't take long for flames to shoot up from three different buildings.

"Reload!" Corianyx barked, and soon, the whole nightmarish scenario repeated itself.

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"Bastards," Xena cursed under her breath as she watched the roof of the building nearest to the roadblock catch fire. Soon, two more buildings had been hit by the burning arrows and were smoking heavily. Even as she was looking at one of them, flames shot through the roof and ignited the thatch.

It didn't take long for pieces of burning thatch to start raining down upon the villagers and Xena, and she cursed again and ran over to Eneas who was watching the fires with wide, uncomprehending eyes.

"Eneas you have to... Eneas? Eneas!"

"Wh- whut?"

"Take as many men as you need, go in there and extinguish those fires! On the double!"

"B- but-"

"Now, Eneas, or there won't be anything left to be mayor of!" Xena said, stepping out of the way of a particularly large piece of thatch that came sailing down through the air.

"But...?"

"Move!" Xena said, put her hands on Eneas' shoulders and gave him a strong push towards the nearest building.

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After four of the five planned volleys had been launched, only two buildings next to the roadblock were visibly on fire. From atop her mare, Corianyx could see white smoke billowing out of the open roof of the first house they had hit which most likely meant the fire had already been doused.

The second and third houses were still burning, but the frantic activity near the roadblocks hinted at concentrated efforts to put those out, too.

Annoyed by the unexpected resistance, Corianyx tapped her fingers on the tack and moved out her lower jaw like in deep thought. There was something she had missed, but she didn't know what.

"Corianyx," Gabrielle said, inching her horse closer to the leader of the black-sleeved Amazons. "Wouldn't you say this is a sign from Artemis that we should give up the attack and pull back to the camp?"

"Hardly. It's more likely she's telling us it's time to up the stakes. Achillea!"

"Yes?" Achillea said, holding her horse ready behind her leader.

"Send two, fast volleys directly at the roadblock. As soon as you've launched them, we go into an all-out attack. Understood?"

"Yes, Corianyx," Achillea said and hurried back to the archers to bring them up to speed.

Working hard at controlling her increasingly impatient mare, Corianyx turned to Gabrielle and flashed the bard a wide, evil grin. "Gabrielle, how are your close combat skills? We're going to charge their roadblock now. All of us. I'll be right behind you to check that you do your Amazonic duty and kill as many you can."

In that moment, Gabrielle made up her mind. She realized that she would not be able to get through to Queen Melosa's human side as long as Corianyx and her Wild Boars were there to pull the queen in the opposite direction.

'Finally I see this damned dilemma in a crystal clear light,' Gabrielle thought. 'Either I make sure that none of the black-sleeved Amazons leave Palladia alive... and... and I can't just kill them all in cold blood... or I have to switch sides during the battle and fight against my Sisters... but with Xena. Yes... that's what I've got to do!'

"That's very grand of you, Corianyx," the bard said out loud. "My close combat skills are just fine. I can stand my ground if I have to."

"Oh, excellent. I was beginning to worry that I needed to babysit you," Corianyx said just as the first of the two additional volleys flew through the air over their heads on its way to the roadblock.

The impacts of the burning arrows on and near the timber logs created the exact scenes of confusion and panic that Corianyx had been hoping for, and with a loud "Amazons, attack!" the attack force thundered forward once again.

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Baring her teeth in a grimace, Xena fell down onto her knees and threw handful after handful of dirt onto the horrible, burning shoulder wound that the villager next to her had received in the last volley.

The arrows had hit at random and the top layer of the logs were burning, but worse was that three men had gone down with arrows in their chests or guts.

She cursed and swore in several different languages and dialects when the flames refused to go out no matter what she did - in the end, she simply yanked the shaft out of the man's shoulder and threw it away in a display of crude, but effective battlefield surgery.

Behind her, Eneas suddenly cried out in a terrified voice and pointed out onto the dirt road which made her whip her head around and peek over the edge of the burning roadblock.

With a surprised cry, she pulled it back down and watched wide-eyed as a hoof came sailing over the logs in the exact spot where her head had been mere fractions of a second earlier.

The hoof was quickly followed by a pair of forelegs and then the rest of the horse that landed heavily on the other side of the roadblock.

"Ares' balls!" Xena cried and twisted herself around to get out of the precarious position she had unwittingly found herself in. Just as she moved along the roadblock, another horse came sailing over it, but this time, it was accompanied by a javelin stabbing downwards.

When the razor-sharp iron tip missed Xena's neck by mere inches, she reached up using her lightning reflexes, grabbed hold of it and yanked downwards with all her might, hoping to catch the Amazon off-balance - and she did just that.

Screaming, one of the black-sleeved Amazons tumbled off her horse and was instantly trampled by its hind legs, ending up with a crushed rib cage as her reward for joining the wrong cause.

"Enough of this!" Xena cried and drew her Chakram. Popping up from her hiding place, she pulled back her arm and got ready to let the weapon fly at the next rider.

Gabrielle felt not only time but the rest of the world as well slow down to a crawl as she and her borrowed horse were in the middle of jumping over the burning roadblock.

Out of nowhere, a feral-looking figure dressed in a black battledress and with long, flowing black hair rose up holding a glinting, circular weapon.

As Xena pulled back her arm, seemingly in slow motion, Gabrielle locked eyes with her lover and sent her a message that she hoped was enough to stop her from launching the Chakram.

Feeling every single one of her heartbeats, Gabrielle's eyes were transfixed on Xena's ice blue orbs and then the Chakram, hoping, praying, begging that she could evade the powerful weapon if it was thrown at her - then the moment was over and she landed on the other side of the roadblock and thundered up the road and out of sight of her lover.

As the two horses tore past Xena, she let out an explosive burst of air and felt her insides quiver like a bowl of fish guts. The Chakram suddenly felt like it weighed a ton in her hand and she struggled to keep it there. With a head that was spinning worse than when she had spent some time in Gomorrah, she crouched down and sprinted over towards the tavern.

Barreling down main street, Corianyx was standing upright in her stirrups and aiming her longbow at some of the people scurrying away from them. Once she released the arrow, it screamed through the air and embedded itself in the back of a man who hadn't been fast enough in getting away.

Corianyx yanked her horse around to change direction. Moving over to the other side of main street, she quickly counted the number of Amazons who had been able to clear the roadblock; it turned out to be most of them. "The windows! Get the windows!" she barked,

pointing her longbow at the rows of unshuttered windows on the first floors of the houses that were nearest to them.

Her Amazons quickly followed orders and fired several volleys of arrows in through the open windows - some were dry, but some were prepared with flammable heads. Soon, smoke started billowing up from several of the stone houses lining main street.

"Excellent!" Corianyx roared and pulled her javelin. Yanking her horse around, she began searching for suitable targets but had to duck when a crossbow bolt tore past unpleasantly close to her head. Turning around again, she quickly spotted the two villagers who had fired at her, and she spurred her horse into action and went after them with the iron tip of her javelin pointing ahead.

All around Corianyx, the surviving black-sleeved Amazons lived up to their fearsome reputation by stabbing people at random with their javelins and firing burning arrows at the buildings and in through the windows. It wasn't long before main street had turned into Tartarus on earth with sheets of fire spewing from the houses and dead villagers littering the streets.

Even though the villagers tried valiantly to defend their town, they were hopelessly outclassed by the experienced Amazons and had to pull further and further back from main street, leaving it fully exposed to the Amazons' campaign of terror.

Caught right in the middle of this insanity, Gabrielle tried to stay out of as much of the drama as she could, but the smoke, the crackling fires, the blood and the constant yelling and screaming from all around her spooked her almost as much as her horse, and she knew it was time to get out while she still could.

She quickly dismounted and grabbed her staff before slapping Malatena's rear quarters to get it to bolt. Once she was alone in the side street, she ran back to the corner of main street and began to search for Xena, pressing herself against the side of the building she was standing next to to present as small a target as possible in case one of the villagers - or Corianyx - decided she was an opponent.

Meanwhile further up the street, Xena came back out of Iriadne's tavern after shouting to the panicking, rosy-cheeked innkeeper that she should close all her shutters at once. Looking around at the carnage, she held her Chakram ready, but the smoke was so thick it was impossible to tell which of the faint shadows she could see running around belonged to Amazons and which belonged to villagers.

Crouching down, she set off in a fast run that quickly took her to the other side of main street. The smoke was obviously just as thick there, but it gave her a different look of the situation, and she was able to see that two women had been pinned down behind one of the long-forgotten barrels of water.

Xena cursed out loud and sprinted up the side of the main street, but before she had time to rescue the women, they had been found by two javelin-wielding black-sleeved Amazons who had dismounted and were roaming the streets to pick off any survivors. The two women screamed in fear and pleaded for their lives, but it didn't stop the Amazons from skewering them with their javelins.

"No!" Xena roared, whipping back her arm. A split second later, she released the Chakram which flew through the air on a direct course towards the two Amazons. When it returned to her hand, it was slick with blood.

Nodding grimly, Xena jumped over the bodies of the two Amazons to check on the women hiding behind the water barrel, but they had lost their lives as well.

A crossbow bolt suddenly clanged off the stone wall right next to where Xena was crouching down, and she let out an impressive curse and ducked into the smoke to get out of the firing line.

Gabrielle tried to press herself even further into the wall of the building; Corianyx was only ten paces away from her, sitting atop her dark chestnut mare and barking orders left and right. 'If she sees me, she'll kill me on the spot,' Gabrielle thought and left her hiding place to run up main street, away from the Amazon leader.

Then her luck ran out - just as she ran past the next side street, three villagers came the opposite way and they all bumped into each other at the corner.

"Amazon! Amazon!" one of the men shouted and drew an old, rusty short sword.

"No, wait!" Gabrielle cried, but the men had already charged her. Reacting fast, she moved her staff up to block the first clumsy swing, but that left her exposed to the attention of the second man who very nearly sliced open her belly with a dagger. "Wait! I'm not-" she shouted, but the men weren't interested.

Knowing that she had to defend with all she had or face certain death, Gabrielle pulled all the defensive and soft offensive moves she knew. Moving forward, she blocked several swings and jabs and then performed a leg-sweep on the first attacker. As he fell flat on his rear end, she continued the fluid movement, twirled the staff and poked its butt into the gut of the second attacker who let out a long burst of air and doubled over.

This left the third villager, a young man who seemed more at ease with the sword. He came at her with a violent stab that would have skewered her completely if she hadn't stepped aside in time.

Much as it pained her, Gabrielle understood that she needed to be more aggressive with the young man to be able to walk away, and she swiftly twirled the staff and clonked him twice in rapid succession on either side of his head.

As he crumbled to the ground out cold, Gabrielle let out a sigh and spun around to get away - unfortunately, her actions had been seen by another group of villagers, and as she ran further up main street, she was quickly cornered by several men and women who began to shout abuse at her and threaten her with old swords and pitchforks.

Down the other end of main street, the battle had taken a turn for the worse for Corianyx and her Wild Boars. Through Xena's Chakram and the crossbow bolts that screamed through the air from all sides, she had already lost twelve warriors, and by the looks of pain and suffering on the faces of several of the others, that number was about to go up.

Although the thatched roofs had burst into flames, the stone structures near the center of the town had prevented the fires from spreading as quickly as she wanted, and that in turn meant that the villagers weren't giving up as easily as those in the less well-protected townships had done.

Grumbling, she yanked her horse around and began to plan their exit - then she saw Malatena, Gabrielle's horse, come riderless towards her. Cursing out loud, Corianyx grabbed the horse's reins and pulled it close to check for blood on the saddle or its flanks. When she couldn't find any, she cursed even louder and understood that she'd been had.

"Achillea! Achillea!" she barked, not seeing her second-in-command anywhere. When the Amazon with the soft, friendly face didn't show up, she cursed all the Gods and Goddess she could remember and headed back towards the roadblock at the far end of main street. On her way there, she continuously called out the signal to fall back and regroup.

Realizing that the attackers were retreating, the villagers got up from their hiding places along main street and began to cheer wildly.

One after the other, the surviving Amazons - only eight warriors remained - sailed over the roadblock on their horses and disappeared up the dirt road. Leaving in a cloud of dust and gravel, the black-sleeved warriors were soon out of sight.

Except one: Achillea who was crawling along the cobblestones on the right side of main street with a cut on her right thigh and a left arm that had gone numb from a wound that bled profusely from the inside of her biceps. Grunting, she moved along slowly, hoping to find somewhere to hide before the villagers spotted her.

In the end, Xena found her before she could make it to safety. After Achillea had bumped into a pair of black boots, she rolled over onto her right side to look up at the imposing figure whose sword was pointing straight at the Amazon's heart. "You got me... now kill me and be done with it," Achillea croaked.

"No. You're a prisoner of war," Xena said and sheathed her sword. Looking around to see if there were any other surviving attackers, she spotted Iriadne who was standing outside

her tavern, wringing her hands. "Get up," she continued, grabbing Achillea by the scruff of her neck and dragging her to her feet.

"All right, all right... slowly..." Achillea croaked, limping across the street.

"Where is Princess Gabrielle? I know she was with you when you came," Xena said briskly as she dragged Achillea towards the tavern.

"I don't know. We got separated. I saw her horse not long ago... she wasn't on it. She's probably dead."

"No, I would have known. Iriadne!" Xena shouted at the innkeeper who immediately shuffled over to the two warriors.

"Yes?" Iriadne said, still quite rosy-cheeked.

Xena forced Achillea down on the ground and pushed her knee pad into her spine to tell her that she should stay there. "Where's your husband? This Amazon is a prisoner of war. I'll bet she's got a lot of things to tell us."

"He's further up the street... oh, I just heard they've captured another one!" Iriadne said, wringing her hands. "She knocked out three of our boys with some kind of staff but they-"

"Where?!" Xena barked, forgetting all about the injured Amazon at her feet.

"I d- don't know... further up the str- oh..." Iriadne said but stopped when she realized that she was talking to empty space - Xena was long gone, thundering up the street.

Shying back from the black-sleeved Amazon, Iriadne didn't know what she was supposed to do, so to cover all eventualities, she hurried inside, grabbed her favorite rolling pin and hurried back out to keep an eye on the prisoner.

The unruly group of villagers was impossible for Xena to miss, but the crowd that had formed like vultures circling a prey was so thick that she had trouble pushing her way through.

When she was finally able to get inside the circle of spectators, she growled from somewhere deep in her throat when she realized that the villagers had tied Gabrielle's hands behind her back and had forced her to kneel on the ground with the three spikes of a rusty pitchfork resting across the bare section of her back below the suede top.

"Let her go. Now!" she growled hoarsely, stepping forward to push the pitchfork away from Gabrielle's back.

At first, the man holding the farming tool wouldn't comply, but an ice blue glare that sent a clear message of a painful, messy death convinced him otherwise.

"Oh by the Gods, Xena!" Gabrielle cried, shuffling around on the cold, hard ground. "I'm so glad to see you..."

"Me too, love. C'mon, let's get-"

"No, wait!" another of the villagers said. A man in his late fifties stepped forward holding a rusty, old sword. "What in Tartarus do you think you're doing? She struck me down with her staff! My knees are black and blue!"

"She's not with them," Xena growled and helped Gabrielle to her feet. Turning her around, Xena quickly unraveled the rope and threw it away.

'That's easy for you to say!' another villager said hidden somewhere in the crowd.

The rope had left angry red indents on Gabrielle's wrists and she rubbed them furiously to get the numbness to go away. All she wanted to do was to kiss and hug her love, but she didn't particularly feel like showing that kind of emotion in front of the aggressive crowd. "Iriadne knows I'm not with them. And Eneas, too. Where is he?" Gabrielle said, looking at the flushed faces around her.

"I'm here! Come on, friends... let me through... let me through, please," Eneas' voice was heard to say from the other side of the circle. After a few seconds, Eneas showed up in the center of the ring and put his hands in the air to calm down his fellow villagers. "Yes, it's true... I saw her with Xena when they came. She's all right."

Hearing that, the crowd seemed to deflate like a leaky wineskin, no doubt disappointed they wouldn't be lynching anyone after all.

"Thanks, Eneas," Xena said and did what came natural to her: pulling Gabrielle into a strong hug, she leaned down and claimed her lips in a long, unbridled kiss that left the men blushing and the women swooning.

Scratching his neck, Eneas turned to look at the man with the rusty, old sword and the black-and-blue knees. "Uh... that should answer that question. Satisfied?"

The other man just grumbled and hobbled away.

Once Xena and Gabrielle separated, they wrapped an arm around each other's waists and let broad, genuine smiles grace their features. "Are we done here, Eneas?" Xena said, pulling Gabrielle into a sideways hug.

"Yeah, I guess. We've got a lot work to do, but... yeah. Go get some rest, Xena. You've deserved it," Eneas said and clasped arms with the warrior.

"Thanks. Come on, Gabrielle. There's someone I need you to see."

"Uh... okay?"

Leaning in, Xena whispered in Gabrielle's ear: "One of the Amazons. She's down at the tavern."

As they strolled down the street to get away from the unruly crowd, Xena repeated the sideways hug from earlier. "I've missed you so badly," she whispered.

"And I've missed you, my love. But that man was right... I did hit him with my staff," Gabrielle said thoughtfully.

Xena scrunched up her face and began to move a few damp locks out of Gabrielle's emerald green eyes. "Well, you had to-"

"I'd feel better if I... if I... well..." Gabrielle said and let out a very tired chuckle. "To be honest, I'd feel better about the whole thing if... and I could show the villagers that I repent being part of the attack, so..."

"Love, I can't understand a word of what you're saying..." Xena said with the biggest shrug imaginable.

"It would be better for all of us if I spent a couple of days in the town jail," Gabrielle said so matter-of-factly that Xena had to do a mental double-take.

"You... uh... what?" the warrior said, coming to a dead stop in the middle of main street.

Gabrielle stood up on tip-toes and kissed Xena's lips again, but unlike the last time, the warrior was singularly unresponsive. "You know, just to show that I don't pose a threat."

"It's noble, but it won't take care of our biggest problem, love. The leader of the black-sleeved Amazons got away. They'll be back, and in greater numbers."

"I know. Her name is Corianyx, by the way. A real snake," Gabrielle said with a sour grimace.

"Rubbed you the wrong way, did she?"

"Oh, yes! She woke me up in the middle of the night! Twice!"

"Hmmm," Xena said and resumed walking down towards Iriadne's tavern. All around them, the villagers were returning to their homes to view the damage and to begin the slow, painful process of rebuilding all that had been destroyed - and to build funeral pyres for those who had lost their lives.

"Oh! Achillea!" Gabrielle suddenly exclaimed when they were close enough to the tavern to see that Iriadne was still guarding her prisoner with a rolling pin and plenty of fervor. "She's Corianyx' second in command," she continued.

"Good. In that case, she'll have even more to tell us," Xena said in a steely voice.

"She was one of the few of the Wild Boars who treated me with respect... I'm... I'm actually glad to see that she made it through alive," Gabrielle said and quickly closed the distance between herself and the injured Amazon.

"Hello, Achillea," she said, crouching down next to the warrior.

Coughing a few times, Achillea wiped her mouth with the back of her hand before looking up. As she recognized Gabrielle, a flash of comprehension raced across her face. "Princess Gabrielle," she said over a new cough. "Why am I not surprised to see you walking around like you own the place...?"

"Oh, that's a long story. Xena?" Gabrielle said, gazing at her partner with a hopeful look in her eyes.

Sighing, Xena chewed on her cheek for a little while before shrugging and putting a hand on Iriadne's shoulder. "Thanks, Iriadne. We'll take it from here."

"You're welcome, Xena. As soon as I've swept the floor, I'll start on the lunch. I think people will be hungry!" Iriadne said and hurried inside her tavern.

"Mmmmm-yes," Xena said and crouched down next to Achillea. "Amazon, this is your lucky day. Just down there, there are people who want to use you to test their hanging tree... do you understand what I'm saying?"

"Yes. Thank you."

"Don't thank me yet. You are a prisoner of war and will spend the next few days and nights at the magistrate's office until we figure out what to do with you. Now, come inside and let me look at your wounds," Xena said and put her hands under Achillea's arms, mindful not to exacerbate the Amazon's injury.

Once Achillea stood erect, Gabrielle took the Amazon's other arm but stopped and chuckled dryly at the sight of the black sleeve being soaked in dark red blood. "Looks like the boar has been slain..." she said, but her voice trailed off into nothing when she realized that the head of the beast was still very much alive.

Xena didn't need to be a mind-reader to parse the dark look on her partner's face. Once again, she did what came natural to her and reached over to gently caress Gabrielle's cheek. "We'll get her, love. She'll pay for all this, that's a promise."

"Mmmm. Let's see if we get the chance," Gabrielle said quietly, helping the hobbling Achillea climb over the doorstep and into the tavern.

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