Conquering Xena

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Conquering Xena

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Chapter 1

It was night-time and Xena, the Conqueror gazed from her castle window, admiring her handiwork. It gave her an unspoken thrill to know that all roads led to her Kingdom in Greece, from Gaul to the Far East to the Roman Empire. Simply put, all of the Known World. The panorama before her was a testament to her wondrous power.

The high full moon gave her an excellent view of the bodies in the dark and she could hear their pitiful moans, anxious to be released to their ultimate deaths. Those who had dared to question her authority hung limply from their crosses and the ones with broken legs were envied by the ones without. At least their agony would come to an end much quicker than the other foolhardy souls.

Out of the corner of her eye, she watched a crucified figure, already assumed to be dead, come alive and open her eyes. The woman wore a dark cloak that surrounded her golden, almost flaxen hair, giving her the appearance of a halo’s aura. The woman released her arms and somehow managed to yank her wrists from the ropes that bound her. She stretched her arms above her head, then fixed a stare in Xena’s direction. The Conqueror gasped as the woman freed her broken legs from the wooden cross and leaped to the ground as if she’d never been hurt at all. She strode purposefully toward Xena’s castle with her dark cloak flowing loosely behind her. Xena irrationally feared for her life.

A few moments later, a knock sounded on Xena’s door and the warrior bolted upright in her massive bed. She leaped to her feet and reached for her sword all in one motion.

"Come in," she called as she hid behind the door anticipating the moment her sword severed the blonde woman in two. She raised her weapon in a high arc.

"Good morn—" was all the unsuspecting servant managed to utter before Xena’s massive blade sliced through his back, quickly sending him to his death. The tray of food clattered to the floor, scattering all its contents.

The Conqueror narrowed her eyes at the innocent victim. That’s what he gets for sneaking up on me, she rationalised. She raced to the window in the early dawn of first light and scanned the field of crucifixes. She searched for the blonde woman but found no person similar and the spot where she had been was cluttered with other victims, all men. Perplexed, she called to the guards to drag the carcass from her room and ordered a fresh tray of food.

All day, Xena’s mind wandered back to the blonde woman who had descended from the cross. She supposed it had been an oracle’s vision but it had been so vivid as to appear real. She had never been prone to visions and had trusted only what was in front of her. Visions and dreams were for the weak and she was prone to kill oracles whose prophecies didn’t agree with what she deemed was her path with destiny.

A knock on the door interrupted the Conqueror’s thoughts. It was Darphus, her Second in Command.

"There’s trouble with the prisoners," he announced.

"Go on."

"There’s an agitator."

"So? You know what to do with them," Xena said dismissively. It was clear she was bored with the
entire subject.

"She’s an Amazon."

"An Amazon?" Xena queried. She wanted to hear more.

"Yes, Xena. Our spies say she’s Queen of the Amazons," he stated triumphantly, pleased with himself that he could bring the Conqueror such wondrous news. "A lot of good that title’s going to do her around here," he added sardonically.

"The Queen, is she?" Xena’s eyes narrowed as her mind conjured up visions of destroying the former Amazon nation once and for all. She had recruited quite a number of their finest warriors into her ranks but she knew there were still a few rebellious bands scattered about. However, they wielded no real threat except when they entered Xena’s domain trying to stir up trouble. The Conqueror knew there was a simple solution to this little problem. Kill them all.

Xena, the Conqueror awoke with her wrists bound by steel manacles. She found herself naked and cold, even though she was in the comfort of her private inner sanctum. She yanked on the chains and they echoed futilely in the quiet room. She called but no one came to her rescue. She began to envision a vividly detailed torture for each and every man and woman of her Royal Guard and fantasised about how long she would prolong their agony. The longer, the better. It wouldn’t be the first time she’d slaughtered every single member of her personal protectors.

"No one can hear you, Xena," a woman’s voice spoke behind her. Xena turned around to face her captor. The chains chafed her wrists but she ignored the excruciating pain. She wanted to see who had the audacity to intrude on her castle and live to tell the tale.

"You!" Xena exclaimed when she caught a glimpse of her captor. It was the same woman who had freed herself from crucifixion. "How did you get past my guards?!"

The woman counter circled around Xena, forcing the warrior to swing the other way. The woman stood close behind Xena and murmured in her ear.

"They’ll all have to die, won’t they, Xena?" she cooed. "Yes, you imagine what torture each of them will endure and you won’t let any of your minions do it for you, will you? The last time was exquisite, I’m sure. Too bad I wasn’t a witness. But this time, you’ll want to inflict every wound yourself. It’s the only way you will be able to feel anyth–" The woman’s words were cut off as she landed solidly on the ground, her legs kicked out from under her by the warrior. The woman laughed at Xena even as a foot stomped her in the belly. She rolled over and caught her breath, rubbing her abdomen to soothe the pain.

"I guess you really are as vicious as your reputation, Xena." The woman smirked as she stood up to face the warrior, miraculously recovering from the malicious blows. Her lips were just inches away from Xena’s mouth and the warrior wasn’t sure if the woman was just plain stupid or courageous well beyond mere mortals.

"Who are you?!" Xena spat out.

The blonde circled back around Xena and whispered. "I’m the woman of your dreams, Xena." Her sensual whisper made the Conqueror shudder and a spark involuntarily ignited her loins. "And your worst nightmare," the mysterious woman added.

Suddenly, the room was silent and Xena was released from her bonds, collapsing in a heap on the
floor. Xena stumbled to her feet and sought out her sword and battle armour. Indeed, today would be a good day for a kill.
Chapter 2

For Krykus, the Captain of the Royal Guard, the battle in the Courtyard seemed to go on for countless candlemarks. From the moment Darphus had informed him in the early morn that Xena proclaimed the fatal round robin, he knew his life was forfeit. There had been an intruder into Xena’s private quarters the night before, and as a consequence, all guards were instantly sentenced to their deaths. No man or woman had ever survived. Not against Xena.

It was a great honour to be a member of Xena’s personal guard, and being Captain was the best, however, for the dreaded round robin, it was the worst. He would be kept alive the longest, the lucky ones had already been put out of their misery. All thirty members of the Royal Guard were dispatched to the arena and they lined up in order of prodigious skill to take their turn engaging the self-appointed Executioner. And the Executioner was Xena, the Conqueror herself, fully dressed in her battle armour. She rarely needed to go into combat anymore, but her brutal workouts were legendary and it was sheer mercy that anyone survived. However, in a round robin, the sole survivor was always Xena. Krykus stood last in line, as being Captain, he was possessed with the most adept skills in the Royal Guard. But no matter, he knew he was a dead man.

The burden of captain was that Krykus was personally responsible for all intruders, but he had no idea what woman Xena was talking about. There had been no intruder upon the castle and he had investigated the matter himself and everyone said nothing out of the ordinary had happened. Except for the poor unfortunate servant who had simply been in the wrong place at the wrong time. No one knew of a woman who had entered Xena’s domain, and yet the Conqueror had insisted. Stupid paranoid bitch, Krykus fumed to himself. It wouldn’t be the first time Xena had been excessively paranoid behind her own castle walls.

Krykus steadied his nerves, held his head high, and resigned himself to his fate. He stoically waited as one by one, the woman formerly known as the Warrior Princess, gutted the relatively weak and strong with equal abandon. Dead soldiers littered the Courtyard and the crowd cheered on the Conqueror’s dastardly deeds. When he was the last warrior standing, Krykus was finally called upon to succumb to her sword.

Xena honed in on her prey. Her hair dripped with sweat from the exertion of battle, but she was hardly tired. An icy wall sealed itself around Krykus’ heart and his courage seeped out of him when he was confronted by twin pools of steely blue. Xena’s eyes shone with a murderous lust that rendered her completely unrecognisable. It was as if Ares himself had taken possession of her soul and there was little hope for Krykus’ survival. A feral smile creased her lips and it was clear that Xena thought of the Captain as merely a mouse to be toyed with. Krykus had no chance and he knew it.

Xena and Krykus waltzed a deadly dance with the Conqueror in the lead. She slashed right, then left, then right again, and repeated her moves, concentrating the wounds on his right arm, his swinging arm, and it weakened the limb severe enough to force him to nearly drop his weapon. But he didn’t. Blood poured from the open gashes, but Krykus was too frightened to notice for fear he may miss a thrust by the Warrior Princess. Before he had a chance to think, another gash sliced open his left arm and a stab to his right thigh almost made him sink to his knees. However, his pride refused to let him go down, even if he knew he wouldn’t be standing much longer.

Then he spotted an opening, and thrust at the Conqueror. But in the blink of an eye, she was somersaulting over his head and landed behind his back, planting a solid blow between his lungs. He felt the air wheeze out as his face smashed into the hardened earth, breaking his nose on contact.
"Get up," he heard Xena say as she landed a hard kick to his side. Despite, the thickness of his leather uniform, he was sure he heard a few ribs crack with the force of the blow. As he inhaled air, his lungs confirmed it. He willed himself to get up for what he knew would be his last time.

"Get up!" Xena repeated and landed another blow with the hilt of her sword to his lower back, a blow that made him jump up violently and swing wildly in her direction. However, his weapon sliced through nothing but air and she caught him square between the legs forcing him to upchuck his lunch. He crumpled to the ground, landing face first, barely conscious that half of his face was smeared with vomit mixed in with his own blood. Xena kicked him again so that he rolled over on his back and he came face to face with the most feared demon in the Known World.

The Conqueror jumped on the Captain and straddled his hips.

"Who is she?!" she screamed as she backhanded him across the face, his blood and teeth splattering her armour. It was with great agonising effort that Krykus tried to make out what Xena was saying. Even as pain wracked his entire body, he remembered why he was here. Why the Conqueror would execute him at any moment. The woman. A phantom. No one had seen her. Except Xena. But no matter, he knew he would soon be on a boat giving up his fare to Charon.

"No one got in! I swear!" he heaved, clinging on to the remotest hope that Xena may yet spare his life.

"Are you calling me crazy? She was there, damn you! Now who was she?!!"

"There was no woman! By the g–!" he exclaimed as tears rolled down his cheeks, his grandiose bravado be damned. His throat constricted with a rising panic and all that his field of vision encompassed were two dark blue eyes boring a hole through his skull. He knew a blade across his throat would soon follow.

"Yeah, right. Say your prayers, coward," she stated evenly. The blood gurgled in his throat as Xena sliced the blade across so swiftly that Krykus thought he was still speaking. The words died in his throat as his last gasp of air was released.

The Conqueror lay in her bed, but could not sleep. The day’s events left her veins surging with a blood lust she hadn’t felt in several moons. She was restless and plagued by thoughts of the visions she’d had recently that featured the elusive phantom woman. Even a warm luxurious bath had not quieted the flames that burned within her.

A short time later, Xena awoke to the chafing of metal against her wrists. She yanked on the chains, in a panic that the new guards had not fared much better than the old.

"Xena, the Conqueror," the now familiar voice purred from behind. "Your blood is boiling now, isn’t it? But you can’t satiate your passions, even though they’re raging out of control. They wash over you, up and back and down again."

"What do you want?!" Xena asked, exasperated that she was unable to solve the puzzle presented by the enigmatic woman. She futilely tried to twist away from the steely grip the woman held on her waist. Not that she didn’t enjoy the soothing human contact, but she didn’t want to admit to her captor that her touch heightened the raging lust that swept through her.

"I’ll tell you why I’m here, Xena.” As the woman spoke, her hands fluttered across Xena’s supple muscles, tracing a sensuous path along her stomach, her sides, and the curve of her breasts, stopping just short of massaging Xena’s nipples that stood hardened and aroused.
"You will be assassinated very soon."

"Oh, great. Another oracle," Xena answered sarcastically.

"There will be a girl who will be presented in your court. You will sentence her to die, to be put on the cross. If you put her to death, you will surely die. You must keep her alive, Xena."

"And why should I believe you?" Xena queried. She tried hard to focus on a scenario where someone would be close enough to assassinate her. But the woman’s wandering hands distracted her from thinking rationally.

"You have many enemies, Xena. The girl will come to you but you must spare her." The woman’s breathing increased as her fingers sought Xena’s pointed nipples. Dextrous fingers squeezed and twisted the erogenous points. Xena gasped when the blonde’s fingers wandered further down and found her sopping mound. She dripped with the blood lust that consumed her and she was helpless to control her body’s response. Then the woman’s fingers drove inside her, propelling her to savage new heights. Her eyes glared with contempt as this intruder into her life had transformed her into a raving sexual maniac. In self-defence, she asked a question.

"How will I know the girl? There are many in my court," she panted.

"She will be an agitator."

"An agi–?" Xena was cut off as the blonde woman smothered the Conqueror’s mouth in a searing kiss. The warrior reciprocated, her mouth inexplicably wanting to devour the smaller woman. She surged against the restraints that bound her and needed to press her full body against her captor. The blistering fire spread through Xena in a fierce assault as she drove hard against the aggressive fingers. It was as if she were possessed simultaneously by Aphrodite, the Goddess of Love and her mentor, Ares, the God of War. The heat that drove her depleted everything in its wake and she was no longer Xena, The Conqueror or Xena, the Warrior Princess or even Xena of Amphipolis but merely a slave to the passions that the blonde woman awakened in her. Finally, she reached the pinnacle of her climax and tumbled headlong into the dark abyss of ecstasy. She collapsed against the manacles, sweaty hair strands hung loosely around her face and her dark bangs matted against her forehead. The blonde woman released Xena from her grip.

"Like I said before, my precious warrior, I am the woman of your dreams and your worst nightmare. Remember that."

She planted two tender kisses on each of Xena’s eyes and another one full on her mouth. When Xena opened her eyes, the woman was gone and she found herself in bed, her fine silk sheets thrown off, her body sizzling beneath a thin film of sweat. She lay back in bed, and though utterly exhausted, she stayed awake until first light, basking in the afterglow.

"Just what you think you’re doing, Callisto?"

"Whatever do you mean, Aphrodite?"

"You’re supposed to be preparing her for Gabrielle, not turning her into a sex maniac!"

Callisto threw her head back and laughed. "It suits her, though, doesn’t it? She’s such a sexy sex maniac, don’t you think?" Her eyes gleamed with the memories of invading Xena’s dreams.

"I didn’t release you from the vortex just so you could screw everything up. Gabrielle will be here very soon, so get on with it already."
"Yeah, yeah, whatever," Callisto answered, waving her hand dismissively. "You didn’t say I couldn’t have a little fun along the way. And besides, we’re going to do this my way. Unless you want me to tell Ares what we’re up to...." She let her words trail off in an undisguised threat. It was true that Aphrodite had offered her a lot, but that didn’t mean that she couldn’t appear to have the upper hand.

"You wouldn’t dare!"

"Don’t dare me, ’Dite, you won’t win."

"All right, we do things you’re way, but get on with it already. We don’t want Xena to be a complete lunatic by the time Gabrielle arrives."

"No we wouldn’t want that, would me?" Callisto said derisively, rolling her eyes. "Personally, I think she’s a bit loony to want the irritating little blonde in the first place," she sighed. "But that’s another problem for another day. Now leave me alone, I’m about to make my grand entrance."
Chapter 3

Xena, the Conqueror was awakened by a knock on her door. A servant, accompanied by the food taster, entered with a tray of food. She sat upright but stayed under the sheets as she was too exhausted to do much more. Her weariness over the past week was taking its toll and the darkened circles under her eyes were a testament to that. If her personal servant noticed, she judiciously kept her mouth shut as previous minions had been known to be slain in mid-sentence.

Xena began to eat the food deemed suitable by the taster. Pieces of her dreams, both vivid and elusive haunted her. They weren’t exactly nightmares as the sexual escapades were immensely satisfying. However, there was an ominous undertone to them and a sense of foreboding that troubled her. Even though she couldn’t remember the details, she instinctively knew that something unforeseen was about to happen and that her life would be irrevocably changed. She just had to be aware of everything going on around her, even to the point of extreme paranoia. She laughed to herself at the thought, as extreme paranoia seemed to be her constant state of mind.

Xena rose from the bed and prepared herself for the morning court session. The proceedings of the Court would soon fill up her morning. Xena, the Conqueror was the self-proclaimed judge, jury and Executioner. Depending on her mood, the slightest infraction such as begging outside the castle entrance could be met with a severe punishment of forty lashes. Not many survived the brutal flogging, but Xena’s rationale was, at least they wouldn’t be begging anymore.

There were also advantages to being the sole ruler of the Court. She had her choice of the finest men and women in the land. Men and women who would do anything to stay alive a few more days, including pandering to Xena’s exotic sexual habits. They all hoped to win Xena’s favour, but inevitably, they would falter and be put to death anyway. The women fared a much better chance than the men, but nonetheless, the Conqueror became easily disenchanted with the desperate people who paraded through her Court. Regardless, they were at least engaging enough to relieve the tension and boredom of her everyday life.

Sentries lined the path as Xena, the Conqueror made her way to her weekly appearance in the Courtyard. Xena sat atop her throne in all her splendid glory. A staircase separated her from the commoners as she awaited the first prisoner to be brought before her.

"Bring out the prisoner!" Darphus ordered.

Two guards dragged a blonde woman out into the light of day and threw her at the foot of the Conqueror’s throne. The woman’s face was hidden from view as she kept it buried in the dirt, but something familiar about the flaxen blonde hair caught Xena’s undivided attention. After a few moments, she spoke.

"What is your crime?"

The blonde lifted her head and the Conqueror instantly remembered who she was. Xena gave no outward sign of recognition except a raised eyebrow and a quick flash in her eyes. But it was enough. She couldn’t conceal it from the woman of her dreams and in that moment she knew the blonde would soon become her consort.

"We caught her trying to break into the castle," Darphus stated.

"What is your name?"
"Callisto. Callisto of Cirra."

"Now why would you want to intrude on my castle, knowing you would be caught?" Xena queried, her curiosity piqued. Despite her ultimate plans for the woman, she had to at least go on the pretence of meting out an appropriate sentence. After all, the woman had been discovered as a trespasser and that infraction couldn’t be allowed to go unpunished.

"I must speak with you, Your Royal Highness," Callisto addressed Xena with a title that appealed to the Conqueror’s massive ego. "I have a personal message for you," she stated enigmatically.

"From the gods, I presume," Xena announced, her mouth half-cocked in a bemused smirk.

The mysterious woman certainly had an allure in real life that at least matched the aura in her dreams. And she certainly knew how to address the Conqueror with the proper respect. She decided to assign the usual public sentence of forty lashes as the price for trespassing, however, she knew no whip would mark the lovely blonde’s back except her own. The woman had just become her pleasure slave even though Xena had no intention of allowing her plans for the woman to become public. She whispered her ultimate decision regarding the woman’s fate to Darphus.

"The penalty for trespassing is forty lashes. Darphus!"

"Forty lashes! Take the prisoner back to the dungeon!" he barked.

Xena waited in her private quarters for her new pleasure slave to be presented to her. Her silk robe, a gift meticulously designed by her dead lover from the Far East, hung loosely around her body. She wore nothing underneath it save the tattoo above her belly etched by Lao Ma’s own hand. For a moment, a fleeting memory of Lao Ma’s death at the hands of her own son passed before her and Xena swiftly suppressed the thought. She didn’t need to be thinking of Lao Ma at a time like this, although Ming Tien’s long and painful death gave her immeasurable satisfaction. She consciously brought herself back to the present and the matter at hand.

After a while, the prisoner was presented to Xena wearing only the leather wrist cuffs and a collar that marked her as the Conqueror’s pleasure slave. Callisto had been washed and scrubbed so that her fair skin glowed with a pinkish hue and each new cycle brought about a lustre and fragrance that the servants knew would suit Xena’s exotic tastes.

"So, what’s your message, slave?" Xena asked casually, although there was an unmistakable curiosity that tinged her words.

"You will be assassinated."

"Oh, that’s original," Xena said derisively.

"I know who causes it," Callisto continued. She gracefully sauntered close to the Conqueror and hovered at her side.

"Do you now." Xena leaned back in her comfortable chair, mildly amused by the woman’s foolish bravery. To her surprise, a warm flush swept through her at the near proximity of the enigmatic woman. She was forcefully reminded of her persistent dreams and her body was instantly alive with a sensual resonance.

"She’s an agitator. They say she’s the Queen of the Amazons," Callisto whispered.

An Amazon? Xena thought to herself. The blonde slave now had Xena’s wholehearted attention.
Darphus had mentioned this so-called Queen as well.

"And how do I know that you aren’t the agitator? That you aren’t the Amazon calling herself the Queen," Xena spat out the last word with unmitigated disgust.

"Because I’m here to fulfill your every whim, your every desire, however you want, whenever you want. Isn’t that what you chose me for? To be your pleasure slave? You want to conquer me, don’t you, Xena? I could never kill you, my precious warrior."

Callisto’s melodic voice soothed Xena’s awakening libido. The words sounded vaguely familiar and she recognised some of them from her dreams. But she knew if she wasn’t careful, she could fall prey to the enigmatic woman’s charms. The blonde planted soft kisses on Xena’s cheek and led a trail to the Conqueror’s mouth. For a moment, their lips were locked in a soulful exchange of erotic power, and Xena allowed herself to succumb to the slight slave’s lascivious spell. But then, she wrenched the woman away and hurled her to the ground. She planted her foot firmly on the blonde’s chest.

"Next time you want to kiss me, you’ll have to ask me nicely," Xena declared. "Now I don’t know what your secret little plan is, but you won’t get away with it." As Xena spoke, she smoothed her bare foot between Callisto’s breasts, her toes wandering over to her nipples and stimulated the tips into arousal. "I don’t think you’re here to kill me, no, there’s something else you want." Xena allowed the blonde to massage her leg, her hands drifting up to the warrior’s knee. "Don’t worry, slave, I’ll find out what it is soon enough, or you’ll die from my trying. But for the moment, you are here for my pleasure."

Xena released her foot from Callisto’s chest. The blonde was instantly up on her knees and the Conqueror allowed the slave to leisurely discover the warm, wet folds between her legs.

"Xena knows who you are," Ephiny whispered to Gabrielle. The two women spoke quietly in the remotest corner of the crowded cell. They had been jailed for several days now, their only "crime" being that they had spoken out against the Conqueror. They had long since been branded as Amazons but they had hoped to keep Gabrielle’s true identity a secret for as long as possible.

"How?"

"A spy," Ephiny replied. They surveyed the other prisoners and tried to decipher who might be the culprit. The original plan of assassinating Xena by posing as a consort would have to be seriously reassessed. Someone must have known Gabrielle from the outside and in an effort to gain the Conqueror’s favour, revealed the pertinent information. Luckily, their plan was only in the initial stages and they had time to resort to their alternate plan. Hopefully, they could still recruit the former Amazons in Xena’s guard to assist them.

"You are to appear before her in the Courtyard tomorrow," Ephiny added.

"Where I will be sentenced to the cross," Gabrielle declared. It was a statement that both women knew to be true as surely as the sun would rise the next day.

"Yes, I know," Ephiny said sadly. Tears brimmed her eyes as she stared down at the ground. The Queen took Ephiny in her arms and hugged her tightly. After several long moments, she pulled away and held her by the shoulders, forcing Ephiny to look her in the eye.

"Ephiny, my dear friend," she said, her own eyes brimming with tears. "I never told you how much our friendship has meant to me. Especially right after Terreis was killed. You know she was the
world to me and I couldn’t go on. If you hadn’t been there for me, The Nation wouldn’t have survived."

"To lose your mate like that can be the hardest thing. I was doing what any friend would do," Ephiny explained.

"And I’m sorry I never told you how much that meant to me. But listen, Ephiny. You have to carry on without me. If my death is a stepping stone to freedom for the Nation, so be it. But, please don’t give up. The consort plan can still work."

"Don’t worry, Gabrielle, I’ll go on with the plan."

"It won’t be long before she tires of the new one, and as we all know – "

"She has a weakness for blondes." They both exchanged wry grins as Ephiny finished Gabrielle’s thought. Everyone was well aware of Xena’s propensity for fair haired women.

Gabrielle’s tone grew serious again.

"Did you find out who the blonde woman was?"

"Her name is Callisto of Cirra."

"Never heard of her. Does anyone know her? Can she help us?"

"I doubt it, no one knows much of anything about her. How she gained an audience with the Conqueror so quickly is beyond me. I don’t remember seeing her here in the dungeon. And why she’s not dead yet…I don’t know. She must have inside help."

Both Gabrielle and Ephiny looked at each other for a moment, each trying to hold in their laughter.

"Blonde!" they exclaimed in unison.

Gabrielle returned her attention to the treasonous plan once more.

"Don’t tell anyone the new plan just yet. I didn’t expect that Xena would find out about me so quickly."

"Well, she didn’t become the Conqueror of the Known World by accident."

"Ephiny, here, take my bracelet. I’m giving you my right of caste. Xena thinks if she kills me, she can kill us all. You take over but no one must know, at least for now. Wait at least a week before you proceed with the alternate plan. You probably won’t have much more time than that."

"Gabrielle?" The Queen of the Amazons lifted her eyes to meet Ephiny’s. "I just want you to know, I think you’ve been the bravest Amazon Queen I’ve ever known."

The Queen swallowed her tears and held her Amazon sister in a long fierce hug.

The two women slept side by side in the dank dungeon until the guards came to get Gabrielle for her audience with the Conqueror.
"Bring out the prisoner!" Darphus ordered. The guards brought out a reddish-blonde haired woman clad in ordinary peasant’s clothing. They roughly pushed the prisoner along, dropping her in a heap at the foot of the staircase that led to the Conqueror’s throne.

"What is her crime?" Xena queried.

Gabrielle lifted her head from the ground. "I spoke," she said contemptuously.

"She incited the people against you, encouraged them to revolt," Darphus elaborated.

The agitator! Xena thought. The alleged Queen of the Amazons! The one whose neck she was supposed to save, according to the new slave. Well, we’ll see about that, she sneered. Xena descended the steps of her throne, closely followed by her Lieutenant, Darphus. It was on the most rarest of occasions that the Conqueror was in such close proximity to the commoners, but she had to see for herself what this Amazon Queen was made of.

"Get up," she ordered. Gabrielle struggled to her feet.

Xena placed her hand on the prisoner, smoothing back the hair from her forehead. It wasn’t until Xena grazed her thumb against the Amazon’s lip that Gabrielle defiantly jerked her head away and bravely met the warrior’s piercing gaze. Xena was not amused, however she held her emotions in check. The prisoner was fortunate that the Conqueror was feeling magnanimous and allowed the Amazon a final word before she imposed a sentence.

"I gave voice to the people, the fearful, the starving, the ones who disappeared in the night, never to be seen again," Gabrielle declared. Xena feigned compassion for those who got trampled under her ironclad rule. The Amazon continued her impassioned plea and turned around to address the crowd. "Have you no dignity? No rights? A right to live, to be free from harm!" she pleaded.

"I guess they don’t hear your voice," Xena answered cynically when there was no response from the crowd. She admired the woman’s uncommon bravery but she couldn’t allow malcontents to stir up trouble amongst the peasants, no matter how adorable the blondish redhead appeared. And she could think of more creative ways for the Amazon to channel her passions.

"I’m not the only one, you can’t break our spirit!" Gabrielle boasted. Xena knew exactly what the Amazon alluded to and she took it to be the threat that it was.

"The cure for spirit is fear, you’ll serve as an example, put her on the cr–" Xena paused in mid-sentence. For a fleeting moment, words from a dream came back to haunt her. "If you put her to death, you will surely die." No matter how much she wanted to kill every Amazon in sight, her own self-preservation served as a control mechanism. For now, the so-called Queen of the Amazons would live, but only until Xena decided what was to be done with her.

"No, wait. The cross is too good for the agitator. Forty lashes will do," Xena announced. "We’ll see how much spirit she has then. The sentence will be carried out tomorrow at first light," the Conqueror added. She ascended the staircase to take her rightful place on the throne.

"You cannot allow her to be whipped, Callisto," Aphrodite pleaded. "Xena must be stopped, things are only getting worse." The Goddess of Love could feel her voice rising in a panic, but she took in a deep breath to calm her nerves. She knew if Xena wasn’t stopped, the precarious balance between
love and war would teeter dangerously out of control. She had explained the situation to Callisto and couldn’t understand why the blonde didn’t feel the same sense of urgency. Sometimes she wished she could be free of the restraints of being a goddess from Mount Olympus with their strict rules and codes of conduct, then she wouldn’t have to put up with unpredictable lesser gods like Callisto to do her dirty work. But she supposed that Callisto having nerves of solid iron served her well when the fledgling goddess had been a mortal.

"I know, I know, you said that already. If Xena kills Gabrielle now, it effects all the other timelines, blah blah blah, ad nauseum. I need some time to think."

"Well, think quick, you don’t have much time. Xena said forty lashes at first light and she wants to be there herself. You know Gabrielle won’t survive the ordeal, few ever have."

Aphrodite had never realised how precarious Hercules’ balance of good and light against Xena’s dark impulses affected her very own existence. And in his absence, the monster in Xena was simply out of control. She shuddered to think of her own weakening powers and how it wouldn’t take long before Xena and Ares conquered all realms across the universe. Only the stay of execution with Callisto’s help could begin to bring the world order back in balance. But that was only the first step, they still had a long way to go.

"I know! I know, already! But you know how stubborn Xena can be and with her ego...." Callisto’s thought trailed off. "She wants to be there herself and destroy the little pissant who dares to call herself ‘Queen’".

"But you have to, Callisto! You’re the only one who can."

"What’s the matter? Getting scared, Aphrodite? Afraid Ares is going to win the War of Love and you’ll be left with only the power of a mere mortal?"

Aphrodite cringed inside at Callisto words. She knew she was playing with wild fire when she enlisted Callisto’s aid, but that didn’t stop the evil goddess’ tongue from twisting like a blade straight through her. She was heartless. "Callisto, you should be afraid too. You won’t get your chance for redemption if she dies."

"Honestly, ‘Dite, you’re so good at stating the obvious," Callisto said sarcastically. "But there’s no need to panic. Don’t worry, I’ll talk her out of it. Leave me now, I have to think."

"You can’t kill her, Xena."

The Conqueror sat in her most comfortable chair while her slave brushed the length of her hair from behind. Callisto loved this part of being Xena’s pleasure slave and she knew Xena enjoyed being stroked as well. Even so, the blonde goddess knew that her time left with Xena would soon come to an end. She cherished being the Conqueror’s sole consort, but she knew that once Gabrielle arrived, Xena’s attention would be elsewhere. She wasn’t happy with all that she had to give up, and she found it especially ironic that she would be responsible for the getting the two lovebirds together, but in the end, it would be well worth it for a chance at a new life, a life that didn’t end with her being trapped in a vortex. She had yet another chance to make the rage she lived with evaporate into thin air, as if it had never been born. She had made a mess of things the last time, but this time would succeed. However, with the few days she had left of being a goddess posing as a mortal, she would make the most of it.

"I saved her scrawny little neck, didn’t I? She’s lucky she’s not hanging around outside my window as we speak," Xena chuckled at her own joke.
"Forty lashes will kill her and you know it. You can’t do it," Callisto repeated.

"And why not? Because she’ll send an assassin? Big deal! I’ve killed several in my lifetime."

"It only takes one, Xena. Look at what happened to Caesar. He had no idea you’d set him up."

"Caesar was a fool! So much for destiny." she snorted.

"But wouldn’t it be better to keep her alive and sabotage their plans?" Callisto kneaded the tense muscles in Xena’s neck and upper shoulders. The Conqueror was much too tense and Callisto intended to do everything in her power to get her to relax.

"Maybe. Go on." Callisto knew it was rare for Xena to discuss the matters of the Court with one of her minions but the goddess’ intrusive dreams and persuasive powers all culminated into making Xena susceptible to her suggestions.

"What if you convinced her little band of Amazons that the Queen has decided to join you. What if you made her your consort? What if you then made an alliance with all the Amazons? Then you will be able to kill the renegades with the Queen’s sanction. You can wipe them all out from the inside. But if she doesn’t survive the morning, plans are already underway to assassinate you. Trust me, Xena, they’ll succeed."

"You know this? How?"

"I have my ways, my precious warrior" Callisto whispered in Xena’s ear. "But believe me, there are many in the palace who would side with the Amazons if you killed their Queen."

"All right, I’ll let her live to see another day."

"Good," Callisto said. She pulled Xena’s hair away from her neck and trailed a line of soft kisses along the hollow of her neck to her shoulders. Her hands slipped under the Conqueror’s robe and settled on the soft mounds of her breasts. Xena turned her head and captured the slave’s mouth in a heated kiss, pulling the blonde over her shoulder and onto her lap. The naked goddess straddled Xena’s hips and her hands returned to the luscious mounds under Xena’s robe. The warrior withdrew from the kiss and yanked Callisto’s hands away, guiding them behind her back as one strong hand held them in place.

"That’s better, slave," Xena murmured as her other hand danced a slow waltz along Callisto’s delicate curves, across her ample breasts, along her muscular stomach, and finally came to rest between her legs as she stroked the wet hairs that covered her soaking mound.

"It doesn’t take much for you, does it, slave?"

"I stay ready, my sweet." Callisto leaned forward in an effort to entice Xena to explore further. "Just for you," she moaned. She moved close to Xena’s ear and whispered, "Take me, warrior. Conquer me."

"Ah!" Callisto gasped as Xena jerked sharply on her wrists forcing the slave to sit upright, her back as straight as a board. Her breasts were at the same level as Xena’s mouth and the warrior closed her lips over a protruding tip. She swirled her tongue around the erogenous nub stimulating the blonde goddess to tantalising new heights. Simultaneously, her fingers delved between the slick folds and slipped over the sensitive centre of nerves again and again.

"You really want to be conquered?" Xena asked huskily, her breathing hampered by the voluptuous mounds of flesh that soothed her face.
Suddenly, Xena bit down firmly on the nipple as two fingers plunged inside Callisto.

"YES!" Callisto screamed as the Conqueror invaded the most intimate of places. She was invaded again and again and she threw her head back in sheer rapture. She rocked against Xena’s fingers in a desperate race with time. Xena released her grip on her wrists and locked lips with Callisto in a fiery kiss as her hand held a tight grip on her long blonde hair. Xena’s thrusts became more urgent, more insistent, more driven and simply inescapable. Callisto soon soared over the edge and into the realm of absolute elation.
In the pre-dawn hours before first light, Gabrielle, the Queen of the Amazons, lay in her private cell and awaited her impending doom. She pondered her life and the Fates that led her to this dismal place. She couldn’t help but feel like a failure. She was supposed to lead the Amazons out of the darkness and overthrow Xena’s throne. She had known that was her destiny and yet, in a few hours, she knew her life would come to an abrupt end. Despite her bravado to Ephiny about carrying on the fight, she wasn’t so sure the Amazons could succeed. Her death could be the catalyst that would spark a successful uprising against the Conqueror, but on the other hand, it could also evolve as Xena had predicted, frightening any and all who dared rebel against the Conqueror. She had been much more optimistic a week ago, before the spy revealed her true identity and sped up their covert plans. And with Xena having a new consort, it didn’t help matters in the least.

Forty lashes. Everyone knew that only the ones with near super-human strength ever survived Xena’s forty lashes. It was a quicker way to die than the cross and yet more ruthless. The Conqueror seemed to favour the cross of late, but Gabrielle was certain Xena’s method of death had been chosen in no small part because of her title as Queen of the Amazons. The Conqueror wanted to make an example out of Gabrielle and a flogging would be a graphic display of what happened to dissidents. Xena was heartless with the whip and enjoyed watching her prey be tortured for as long as humanly possible. Only intervention by the gods could save her victims but they didn’t seem to listen to the torturous pleas. Gabrielle’s fate was sealed. She would die at the murderous hands of Xena.

How had things gotten so out of hand? Gabrielle wondered. The Amazons had generally kept to themselves and protected their territory with fierce devotion. At first, there were rumours of Xena’s army marauding the surrounding lands until her army squeezed a tight grip on their territory, forcing the Amazons to take refuge elsewhere or to join forces with Xena outright. Gabrielle’s band chose to stay and fight. Terreis, her lover, had been killed in battle. It was an honourable death as was her life and Gabrielle would always be indebted to Terreis and the Amazons, who had saved Gabrielle’s home village of Potedeia from Xena’s slavers.

As repayment, she devoted her life to the Amazons and soon became devoted to her mate, Terreis, as well. In her mate’s final battle, she gave Gabrielle her right of caste as the Amazon warrior gasped her last breath of air. When Terreis’ sister, Queen Melosa died in battle as well, Gabrielle became sole heir to the throne. But emotionally, she was in no state to take power and only Ephiny’s level-headedness kept the Nation stable. For several moons, Gabrielle was a mere figurehead as Ephiny tackled any and all problems during the transition. If Ephiny hadn’t been there as her rock steady support, the Amazon Nation would have surely been torn apart. Instead, they were able to regroup under Gabrielle’s command. It had been a great honour for the farm girl from Potedeia to ascend the throne following Melosa before her.

In retrospect those were the glory days, a simpler time for all. Before Amazon turned against Amazon and followed the Conqueror’s ways. Those were the days before Xena became the Conqueror, before she murdered Caesar. His had been the last empire to fall. It was only a matter of time after Xena formed an alliance with Lao Ma, the ruler of the Far East. And when she was murdered by her own son, well, Xena just took what she deemed was rightfully hers. All the kingdoms in the Far East. Caesar was a fool to think he could woo Xena away from the intoxication of absolute power.

The Amazons didn’t intend to woo Xena away from her throne. They intended to kill her where she sat. The idea of planting a consort had been Gabrielle’s when she had been become aware of Xena’s
predilection for fair-haired women. She had volunteered for the job herself as she deemed it much too dangerous to hand over to just any Amazon. It was her idea and she would take full responsibility. But now, all those plans had been cast aside and Ephiny would take her place. She felt as if she had let all her Amazon sisters down.

Gabrielle’s train of thought was interrupted by a visitor to her cell. From the proceedings in the Courtyard, she immediately recognised him to be Darphus, Xena’s Second in Command. He was alone. She rose from the iron slate that served as a bed.

"Well, it looks like the Conqueror has taken a liking to you and you’ll live to see another day."

Gabrielle was relieved to hear it, but said nothing. It was clear that Darphus wanted something from her.

"A pity, really. I was looking forward to your flogging. Sometimes Xena takes all the fun out things. Tell me, Amazon Queen, does the Queen scream as exquisitely as her warriors?"

"What do you want?" Gabrielle spat out, she didn’t need to hear what sick pleasure Darphus might have gained out of her tortuous death.

"It seems that Xena has summoned for you." The soldier feigned boredom with the conversation, but Gabrielle knew it was merely a ploy to get her interest. Unfortunately, it worked, she was highly intrigued by Xena’s plans for her. The original plan of posing as Xena’s consort and poisoning her may still work after all.

"And?...."

"My guess is she wants to make you her consort. I was wondering, how would you feel to be subjected to her every whim, her every need, her every desire?" he asked lecherously.

"I’ll deal with what I have to if it means staying alive."

He laughed. "I guess you haven’t heard about her... um..." he paused, "how shall I phrase it, her exotic tastes."

"Like I said, I’ll deal with it. Now, are you finished?"

"Well, there’s one other thing." Darphus paused in that maddening way of his to get her attention. Gabrielle just wished he would get to the point. "I thought you might like to know, Ephiny’s dead. It seems she had a plan to assassinate the Conqueror. You know anything about that?"

"No," she said simply, careful not to reveal a thing. Her heart broke at the news, if it was true, but she would have to hear it from someone other than Darphus to believe it.

"I guess you don’t know anything about the poison then, either." He studied her face, hoping for a sign of recognition. Gabrielle conveyed nothing.

"No I don’t," she stated flatly.

"It won’t work, Amazon. Xena will simply make you her food tester, if she doesn’t smell it first, that is."

"I have no intent – " Gabrielle began. Darphus held up his hand to cut her off.

"Don’t! Admit it, Amazon, you need me. And I need you. If you help me, I’ll help you. We both
have at least one thing in common. That’s to see Xena dead. Now all you have to do is lead her in the right direction. I’ll do the rest."

"I’m listening." Gabrielle knew that Darphus had no intention of letting her live even if his traitorous scheme panned out. However, if she didn’t live past Xena’s death, any other ruler was better than the Conqueror and she had no doubt that her Amazons could overthrow Darphus in the end.

Gabrielle entered the Conqueror’s private quarters. Her tattered peasant clothing stood out in stark contrast to her lavish surroundings. She suddenly wished she had been able to take a bath before meeting with Xena as the exotic aroma in the room made her feel more dirty than she really was. It was clear Xena had the upper hand in the most primitive of ways.

Xena rested on a majestic divan. Behind her, a slave with long flaxen hair, the same one from the Court the previous week, stood behind her mistress and massaged her shoulders. Her nudity, along with the leather wrist and ankle cuffs clearly defined who she was, the Conqueror’s pleasure slave. Gabrielle was impressed by the extravagant ambience but was careful to exude an air of neutrality. The room was decorated with the finest wares of Xena’s conquered lands, from the Far East to Gaul and even some items from the local Greeks. The Conqueror herself wore a robe that had the distinct markings of Asian hands. She presumed it had been a present from Lao Ma. In spite of herself, Gabrielle’s gaze fell upon the supple thigh exposed to the bright mid-day sun.

"So, Amazon, tell me why I should let you live." It was a question the Amazon knew had no correct answer and she also knew if the Conqueror had truly wanted to kill her, she’d be dead already. Xena simply wanted to be entertained and Gabrielle would oblige her. She knew her greatest gift was her loquacious oral skills and she would use that endowment from the gods just long enough to fulfil her destiny.

"There is no reason I can give you that would change your mind if you intend to kill me. You can strike me down, but will you be able to strike down your pain? If you wipe out every Amazon in the known world, will you be able to wipe out the hatred inside you? It’s your hatred that will lead to your ultimate demise, not my death. My death will simply make me a martyr. And my people will live on long after you are gone. You cannot kill who we are."

Xena’s back stiffened and her face broke into a deadly smile. The slave ceased kneading her shoulders.

Gabrielle inwardly cringed at the ire that flashed through Xena’s eyes but consciously kept her poise. She had no intention of backing down and from Xena’s reaction, it became apparent that the Conqueror wasn’t used to anyone speaking to her with such brutal honesty. In spite of her healthy fear, Gabrielle was nevertheless mesmerised by the warrior’s natural beauty.

"Leave us," Xena gestured to Callisto as she rose from the divan. The slave’s hesitation did not go unnoticed by Gabrielle, but she was much more preoccupied by the formidable presence of the legendary Warrior Princess staring down at her from just a short distance away. The Amazon held her gaze for several moments, but found an excuse to turn her attention to the lingering slave. Callisto took her time leaving the women in silence.

"Do you always show such a clear lack of respect, little Queen? Do you even realise who you are talking to?" Xena circled close behind the smaller woman in an attempt to intimidate the Amazon by using her size and stature. Gabrielle’s stomach closed into tiny knots but she stood her ground against the imposing warrior. Despite her resolve to succeed in her plans to free her people and dispose of the Conqueror, she found herself drawn in by the allure of her raw sensuality.

Xena dropped her voice to a low dulcet tone and spoke close to Gabrielle’s ear. Both hands rested on
her shoulders and the Conqueror’s touch burned clear through her thin clothing. "Let’s see, you think I should let you live because if I don’t, your Amazons will try to kill me in your name. Is that right, little Queen?" Xena pulled Gabrielle’s hair away from her neck and continued to let her fingers comb through the long tangled hair. It was enough of a distraction that, for a moment, Gabrielle didn’t realise she was supposed to be answering a question.

"Yes, it could – " Gabrielle stopped in mid-sentence as she felt Xena’s lips brush her neck. "happen," she finished. The Amazon Queen, who had been known as an expert in negotiations and diplomacy with the many dealings she had as the leader of her Nation, castigated herself for falling for the oldest ruse known to humanity. Sexual power. She was supposed to be formulating a plan to destroy the Destroyer of Nations, but her body paid no heed to her mind. Her face flushed hotly and a wave of heat rolled through her, finally settling in her loins. She knew she was being swept away by Xena’s seductive charms but her body refused to listen to the logic of her mind.

"No, my little Queen, I won’t make you a martyr. That’s what the Amazons want the most and what you’re most willing to give them. No, what I want is your dignity, your respect, your heart, even your soul. I want you to love what you hate the most. Me."

Xena stopped her gentle kisses and Gabrielle discreetly brought her breathing back to normal.

The Conqueror walked back to the divan and crossed her legs. Gabrielle regained her composure but not before her eyes glanced momentarily over a well-developed thigh carefully exposed for her benefit.

"Go find a servant who will show you where the baths are. And tell the slave to present herself. I have need of her," Xena said and turned away, effectively dismissing Gabrielle from her presence.
"Is she going to help us?" Velasca asked Darphus when they found a discreet corner of the castle to talk.

"She says she is," Darphus answered in a hushed tone.

"You don’t trust her, do you?"

"Of course not! But if she helps us even a little, our plan can still work. We’ll kill her later."

"And the Amazon Nation will be ours." Velasca’s eyes lit up. When she rebelled against the Amazon Nation and joined Xena’s army nearly a year ago, she had no idea she would find herself in a position to overthrow the mighty Conqueror. But since the opportunity fell in her lap, she had no intention of passing it up. She looked forward to seeing those pitifully idealistic Amazons grovelling at her feet.

"Exactly. Any word on Ephiny? Do you know who helped her escape?"

"Yeah. Eponin and Solari. They must have found out that we knew."

"Not surprising. Where are they?"

"They disappeared. My guess is they left the castle with Ephiny."

"Yeah, you’re probably right. Did you send out some soldiers to find them?"

"Done."

"Good. Even if we don’t find them, their Queen is as good as dead anyway."

Well into the late hours of the night, Xena could not sleep. The warrior turned on her side and watched the gentle breathing of her slave, secured by chains from her leather cuffs to the four posts at each corner of the massive bed. She was in a deep slumber, worn out by the long hours of lovemaking the warrior had subjected her to. Xena examined the fair skin marked by red welts and abrasions that were a testament to the Conqueror’s voracious appetite. However, the slave had not been able to satiate the inner fire that still burned within her. That fire could only be extinguished by the golden redhead who had visited her quarters earlier in the day.

It disturbed her how unnerving the blondish redhead had been. No one had dared to be so disarmingly honest with her since she’d become the Conqueror. Long ago, the love of her life, Lao Ma, had tried to get her to harness her inner demons and it worked for a time, but when her lover was murdered by her son, Ming Tien, no one, god nor mortal, could stop her. Xena had fully embraced the dark side, encouraged by her exalted mentor, Ares, the God of War. He seduced her beyond all rational thinking and she had conquered any and all who stood in her way. Amongst the carnage lay her heart, shredded to pieces by Lao Ma’s death. She couldn’t even bear to be with another who even remotely resembled the Asian woman. She made sure only blondes would be allowed to satisfy her erotic needs and they were entertainment, pure and simple. She sealed off the entrance to her heart and had been unable to feel anything except malevolence. That is until now. Now it was the Amazon who had found a way to seep into her soul unbidden.

No! Xena berated herself. No one would capture her heart the way that Lao Ma had. No one would
make her go through that anguish again. If the Amazon Queen thought she could seduce Xena into letting her go free and leading her people in revolt, she had better think again. Xena had no intention of allowing herself to be swayed by the little Amazon, however, her own plan could still work to perfection. It wouldn’t be long before she had the little Queen on her knees and handing over the Amazon Nation to her on a silver platter.

Nevertheless, she wondered what was so special about the Amazon. Had she met her before? She didn’t seem familiar except in the vaguest sort of way. Although Xena had impeccable skills at controlling herself, she found herself aroused by the magnetic appeal of the brave little Amazon. When she played with the woman’s tangled hair, she had imagined letting herself go wild in those tresses, however, it was an image she would never share with another living being. And it didn’t go unnoticed by Xena that the Amazon had been equally aroused as well.

Xena reached over the side of the bed and grabbed her phallus, adjusting the leather strips around her waist.

"Get up," Xena said. The slave’s eyes flew open in an instant and the Conqueror smothered the slave’s mouth before she could speak. She positioned herself over the slave’s wide open thighs and slid the phallus along the length of the slave’s entrance. Xena was pleased to find it well lubricated and recalled the slave’s pronouncement that she always stayed ready for the Conqueror. It was exactly what Xena needed.

"What is your name, Amazon?" Xena asked, breathing harshly into Callisto’s ear.

The slave gasped, "I’m not---". Her response was cut short when a strong hand smacked against her thigh.

"I asked you, Amazon, what is your name?" Xena buried her face in the wavy locks of the slave’s flaxen hair. Her lips grazed her neck and she breathed in her scent, likening the smell to that of the Amazon.

"They say her na– my name is Gabrielle. It’s Gabrielle."

"Well, Gab-ri-elle, tell me this, can Amazons be conquered?"

Callisto moaned aloud and thrust her hips off the bed. However, the chains held her securely in place and Xena didn’t accommodate her. She teased the slave mercilessly as she held back from the wet entrance.

"Answer me, little Queen. Can Amazons be conquered?" Xena repeated.

"Yes, they can. Please! Take me!" Callisto panted. Xena thrust the length of the phallus inside the slave, all the while imagining it was the Queen of the Amazons. The familiar clanking of chains echoed throughout her chambers as the blonde slave writhed beneath her. Their bodies move in a single rhythm that would soon climb to an inevitable crescendo.

"Say my name, Amazon," Xena panted. She wanted to hear the little Queen scream her name.

"Oh, yes! Xena! Conquer me!" Callisto heaved breathlessly.

"Say my name again, little Queen."

"XENA!"

Xena moved faster inside the slave, envisioning that it was the Amazon’s sweet lithe body
completely surrendering herself to the Conqueror. The harness built a friction against her pleasure spot and she knew it would soon drive her over the edge of ecstasy and into the realm of sheer bliss. But she wanted to hear her name one last time.

"Say it!" she grunted, her breathing erratic and ragged.

"XENAAAAA!!!! Callisto screamed as her voice reverberated throughout the walls of the castle.

Well into the late hours of the night, Gabrielle could not sleep. She slept fitfully and tossed and turned on the hard bed in the servant quarters. No matter how hard she tried, she could not block out her encounter with the Conqueror. The images played over and over in her mind and they all coalesced into a beautiful portrait of the infamous ruler. Finally, she gave up and simply allowed the visions to wash over her, along with the conflicting emotions that duelled in her heart.

Inevitably, her mind wandered back to the slave who was privileged enough to pleasure Xena in her lascivious desires. She was surprised at her own jealousy that wanted to take the slave’s place. She knew the plan was to become Xena’s consort, but it wasn’t supposed to include the notion of falling in love. She thought she had insulated herself against the Conqueror’s whimsy and had thought she had fully prepared herself. She had heard about Xena’s exotic tastes and knew that the Conqueror could be quite cruel, but her cheeks flared with an unexpected urge to succumb to Xena’s dominating powers. She wistfully remembered the strong hands that burned through her thin clothing and a soft moan escaped her lips. She pressed her hand between her thighs in an effort to quiet the blazing inferno that Xena had sparked in her.

No! Gabrielle berated herself. She couldn’t allow Xena to control her this way. What was it about that woman that pierced through the armour that she had built around her heart? She had not taken a lover since Terreis was killed nearly three years ago. She had focused all her attention on saving the Amazon Nation, but it seemed as if in a single meeting, her soul had come alive with a new awakening. If truth be told, she had thought the Conqueror would be more cold, more demanding, more ruthless, similar to the coldhearted Xena who passed judgement in the Courtyard every week. Instead what she got was a sensuous creature who used all her powers of persuasion to seduce Gabrielle away from her original plan. But it wouldn’t work. The Amazon Queen decided that it wouldn’t discourage her from her mission.

Despite her newfound determination, Gabrielle still could not sleep. Eventually, her hand travelled to the warm patch between her legs. Unexpectedly, she found herself wet and in need of attention. She envisioned what it could be like if the Conqueror allowed her to please her in the very same way that she knew a consort must. She continued to rock back and forth against her fingers as she neared her climax and thought of Xena’s thick dark hair and luscious full lips. She imagined the warrior’s sultry voice whispering her name in her ear. She was startled to hear a woman’s voice coming from the castle hallway. The woman screamed out Xena’s name. Gabrielle knew it was the pleasure slave. Xena, she murmured quietly, and drove herself headlong over the edge and into the vast well of her passions. Within minutes, she was asleep.

"How much longer do I have to watch those two slobber all over each other?"

"Calm down, Callisto, it won’t be much longer," Aphrodite replied soothingly. "They still have every intention of killing each other and things are still spiralling out of control in the other realms. You know Xena has a nasty habit of killing first, then asking questions later."

"Tell me about it. I lived through Cirra, remember? I thought you put some kind of spell on them or whatever it is you do. They were all but drooling over each other, acting like stupid fools. It was
enough to make me puke."

Aphrodite’s face lit up with a bright smile. "I know! Isn’t it beautiful?" she cooed as she clasped her hands together. "Their love transcends all, even Death and the many strands of the Fates. It’s a wonder to behold!"

"Excuse me, Goddess of Mush, I’ve heard all this before. Yeah yeah yeah, we know they have the hots for each other. But why do I have to stick around to watch?"

"Hey, you shouldn’t complain. Xena took out all her passions on you, didn’t she?"

"Yeah, but she was thinking about that Amazon slut the whole time," Callisto muttered bitterly. Nevertheless, her face broke into a lecherous grin as she remembered their ravenous love making. She loved the untamed Xena who surrendered to the most primal animalistic urges lurking inside her.

"Look, I’m sorry, Callisto, but you’ll just have to hang around a while longer. Xena is still intent on wiping out the Amazon Nation, thanks to you. Why did you suggest that anyway?"

"Just thought I’d make things a little more interesting. After all, she is the Destroyer of Nations, isn’t she?" Callisto laughed. "But what are you complaining about, I got her to spare Gabrielle, didn’t I? Who cares why?"

Aphrodite shook her head. "Never mind. You’ll just have to stay close until I’m convinced they won’t kill each other."

"You mean until she dumps me for the irritating blonde."

"Well, yes. Then you go back and it will be as if you never met Xena."

"Yeah, yeah. Whatever."
Chapter 7

**Another Realm**

In a busy tavern in Athens, a lone woman warrior sat unmoving in a corner, save to take another gulp of port. Although weapons were normally checked at the door, the warrior was permitted to keep hers. No one dared ask for them as she allowed only the serving girl within an arm’s length of her table. She stared at nothing, observed nothing, asked for nothing except more port. In fact, the lone word she’d spoken since she had entered the tavern was "another" as she gestured for a refill. After the first time, she had simply held up her mug. The proprietor didn’t dare approach or ask for dinars from the woman known as Xena, the Warrior Princess. The telltale maniacal glint in her eye told him that he’d be dead before he hit the floor.

From another corner of the tavern, a man and a woman discreetly observed the beautiful warrior woman. The man held a mug of port in his hand, the woman sipped wine. Neither of them really drank much of anything as gods and goddesses didn’t need spirits to sustain themselves.

"Admit it, 'Dite, you’ve lost," Ares taunted. "Solan’s dead, Gabrielle’s as good as dead. Hell, even Hope is dead." He thought for a moment. "Well, sort of. Tell you the truth, I didn’t think the do-gooder had it in her. But if she hadn’t killed the evil brat herself, Xena surely would have." He chortled, his eyes beaming with admiration.

Aphrodite blanched. "Why do you say Gabrielle’s as good as dead?"

"Don’t you see that gleam in Xena’s eyes? That wonderful murderous sparkle? I’ve seen it before, she intends to kill the one who betrayed her."

"Gabrielle?!" Aphrodite asked incredulously. "But she loves her!"

He smirked, "What’s love got to do with it? 'Dite dearest, you are so incredibly naive."

"But how could she kill her?"

"Because," he paused. "She loves her. Gabrielle’s lucky she left Kaleipus’ hut when she did. If she had stayed a moment longer, she’d be dead as we speak. She should be thankful to Callisto that Xena was able to exhaust some of her, uh…hostility."

"Yes, I know, so much hatred," Aphrodite said sadly, shuttering as she remembered the encounter between Xena and her arch nemesis.

"It took all of Xena’s self control just to remain civil at the funeral."

"I must admit, it surprised me that she was so calm," Aphrodite confessed.

"Calm? That was a volcano waiting to erupt. It’s still bubbling beneath the surface. What do you imagine she’s thinking now?" Ares queried.

"I don’t know, but she looks like she’s about to snap."

"Wrong. She’s already snapped. She’s thinking about all the people who’ve betrayed her before: Caesar, Nasika, Borias, Petrocles, Larissa. Gabrielle has just joined that dubious list, but she’s hurt Xena the worst."
"Because she’s truly in love with her, she gave her whole heart to her."

"Exactly. And what does the irritating blonde do? She ripped her heart to shreds."

"But she loves her!" Aphrodite insisted. "That should be worth something!"

"Yeah. Something. They say there’s a thin line between love and hate, and Xena’s is thinner than most."

"How much longer do you think she’ll sit there? She’s been there for two days already."

"My guess is another day or two, then she’s off to hunt down Gabrielle. She’s taken refuge with the Amazons."

Ares sounded more confident than he actually felt. From past experience, he knew Xena was quite capable of following the path he’d laid out, but he also knew Gabrielle was an unpredictable element in Xena’s life that he had no control over. Xena had never before given herself so completely to another. Aphrodite may very well win this round, unless he did something to prevent it. He made a decision that if Xena didn’t intend to go after the irritating blonde, he would make sure that she would.

"I wish there was something we could do," Aphrodite sighed. She’d have another talk with Callisto.

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*Meanwhile back in Xena, the Conqueror’s realm*

"A prisoner’s escaped," Darphus informed Xena.

"Who?"

"Her name was Ephiny."

"And...?" Xena knew there was something more that Darphus wasn’t saying.

"She was an Amazon. Two guards helped her escape." He hesitated a moment. "Solari and Eponin."

"Wait. Don’t tell me, let me guess. She was in the same cell with this self-proclaimed Queen."

He nodded.

"I’m disappointed in you, Darphus. I thought you kept a better watch on things."

"I didn’t – "

Xena cut him off. "Find them, or your life is forfeit." She turned away from him without another word.

Darphus knocked on the door to the servants’ quarters where Gabrielle slept. The Amazon answered the door freshly bathed, but she still wore the peasant clothes she’d been arrested in two days before. It meant that the other pleasure slave still held Xena’s favour and it worried Darphus. He was used to Xena taking her pleasures the night of their arrival, but not this one. Xena was saving her for something and it made him nervous.

If his plan was to work, he had to move before the Amazons came back to rescue their Queen. Not that they would succeed, but he was worried that Gabrielle wouldn’t be in a position to help him. His plan was predicated on Xena taking the Amazon to the hot springs on the full moon, just three days
away. Otherwise, she would be useless to him. The other slave was unapproachable, but the Amazon.... He had something she wanted. A chance to save her people.

Darphus also knew he had to work fast, Xena was too smart. The Conqueror already knew the Amazons would be back for their Queen and he was sure it wouldn’t take long for her to figure out that a plan for assassination was being conceived as well. After that, the rest would lead directly to Darphus. Somehow he had to speed things up.

"So, either Xena likes the peasant look these days or you haven’t replaced the other blonde just yet.” Darphus leered at Gabrielle, imagining the luscious curves beneath the tattered clothing. He would be loathe to admit it, but he was partial to Amazons, their athletic bodies appealed to him. Not that any one of them was ever interested in him, he usually just took what he wanted. After Xena, of course. But when all was said and done, he would take what he wanted from this one, too.

Gabrielle seemed to consider her words carefully before she spoke, ignoring his undisguised lechery.

"These things take time, if I move too fast, she’ll get suspicious. It’ll be too obvious if I rush her, especially someone in my position. I’d like to stay alive if I can help it."

Someone in her position, Darphus laughed to himself. He knew, of course, that she meant being Queen of the Amazons, but the soldier also knew that it made no difference to anyone except an Amazon. He couldn’t believe how high and mighty those women warriors could be sometimes. He couldn’t wait to wipe those arrogant women off the face of the earth. This one would be the first to go, and he’d be sure to do the deed himself.

"If you wait much longer, we’ll all be dead," he said. "Xena’s no fool."

"Why? Did something happen?"

"No, I just know Xena. And trust me, she’s smart, so be careful."

Xena, the Conqueror had sent the slave to fetch the Amazon and patiently waited for her arrival in her private quarters. She was already beginning to tire of the new pleasure slave, who had survived ten days. It was longer than most but nonetheless, Xena’s focus had wandered elsewhere. Her curiosity had been piqued by the Amazon, who presented an interesting challenge to the warrior. If the little Queen thought she could seduce Xena to do her bidding, she was sadly mistaken. It wouldn’t be long before Xena trapped the Amazon in her lair. The little Queen had been told she would be summoned, but Xena waited well over a candlemark to grant an audience. She was going to enjoy this game.

If what Darphus said was true about Ephiny, that would mean that the Amazons were waiting for a message from their Queen. They may even be stupid enough to try to rescue her as the few remaining Amazon warriors were devoted enough to foolishly risk their lives. Even in defeat, the Amazons claimed superiority. She was determined to squash that smug demeanour out of the little Queen. She smiled at the notion of making the Amazon fall in love with her, taking over the tribe of warrior women and then destroying any and all Amazons who didn’t accede to her authority.

Xena wondered who this Ephiny was to the Queen. Her Second in Command? Her protector? Her best friend? Her lover? Unexpectedly, a pang of jealousy surged through her. She suddenly felt a sense of rage that anyone else would be privileged enough to caress her Queen. Ephiny was already a dead woman because Xena had come to regard the little Amazon as one of her many possessions. Now all she had to do was take what was already hers.
Gabrielle waited patiently in her quarters. She had been told that Xena would summon for her but that was well over a candlemark ago. The longer she waited, the more anxious she became. It was an effective strategy Xena employed and she knew she should calm down, but she couldn’t. The fate of the entire Amazon Nation rested on her shoulders and she worried that she would fail.

The Amazon smoothed out her peasant skirt. She wished Xena had given her some new clothes, goddess knew, she could afford it. Despite having had a thorough bath, she still felt grungy underneath the ragged material. She imagined what it would be like for Xena to run her hands along her body, shedding the peasant clothing as she went. The scenario continued to play out in her mind as she imagined that she would slink to her knees and pleasure the Conqueror in the most intimate of ways.

Stop! Gabrielle reminded herself. Xena is the enemy. She’s needs to be destroyed, she told herself half-heartedly. Nevertheless, her face was radiant with unfulfilled desire. It had been too long, she mused. Terreis had been gone for three long years. Despite plenty of offers, she’d never wanted anyone to fill the empty space. Xena had been the first woman to awaken her dormant libido and it excited and shamed her at the same time. She was supposed to be leading her people as Queen of the Amazons not behaving like a love-sick young girl at Springtime.

Gabrielle had to admit that she had expected Xena to be a demonic harpy rather than a charismatic seductress. She wondered what events in her life had conspired to transform her into a vanquishing monster. Maybe underneath her protective walls there was a feeling human being and Gabrielle could find a way to penetrate the dark exterior. Maybe, just maybe, there was hope for Xena after all.

"The Conqueror will see you now," a servant announced, startling Gabrielle. She self-consciously straightened out her clothing and walked down the castle hallway with the dignified air of an Amazon Queen.
Chapter 8

Gabrielle found Xena, the Conqueror soaking in a hot tub surrounded by an array of candles on the wooden edge. Steam rose above the water and the Amazon consciously avoided looking beneath the surface. Instead, she chose to occupy herself with the many items that swayed her attention away from the warrior’s nude body. How she ever thought her covert plan could work was beyond her comprehension. Xena had been known to possess many skills and it was obvious using her innate beauty was one of them.

"Would you hand me that towel over there?" Xena broke the silence. As she emerged from the water, streams of liquid cascaded down her nude form. The water’s level reached just below the warrior’s navel and wisps of steam clung to her skin. Rivulets of water trickled from her long dark hair like raindrops sliding off leaves after a summer storm. Mesmerised, Gabrielle remained unmoving.

"The towel?" Xena pointed with a smirk on her face. Gabrielle’s heart drummed erratically in her chest, the beat tightening like a vice around her vocal chords. Her gaze remained fixed on the warrior and dazzling twin pools of cerulean blue. By the gods, Gabrielle wondered, was she this radiant before? She couldn’t remember.

"Maybe you could walk over to it and just pick it up, I’ll do the rest," Xena advised.

"Oh!" Gabrielle exclaimed, a nervous giggle erupted from her lips, so flustered was she by Xena’s nudity. With her cheeks reddened from embarrassment, the Amazon took a moment to regroup, her focus resting on anything but the Conqueror. Finally, Xena covered herself with a deep blue robe, the sheer material covering nothing at all. An intense heat burned between Gabrielle’s legs and she didn’t know what was worse. To be burned by a candle or by a torch, but in the end, she knew she would still go down in flames. The Amazon Queen swallowed hard and concentrated on her breathing.

The Conqueror sat on the edge of the bed, her favourite dagger in hand. Before her stood Gabrielle at the threshold of conquest. Xena sliced the front of the Amazon’s tattered clothing and watched the little Queen’s eyes smoulder with an equal mixture of fear and desire. Xena’s nerves always tingled when she played this power game, especially when a tinge of doubt coloured her victims’ demeanour, wary that they would survive the experience. She had to admit that sometimes for her sex and death merged into one and the fine line blurred itself irreparably. But somehow this little Queen was different. The Conqueror had every intention of keeping her around for awhile. If nothing else, she would be a perfect ransom for the Amazons and if Xena kept her as her consort, the others would most certainly back off.

Regardless, Xena was enamoured with the effect she had on the woman. The Amazon seemed to be receptive to the slightest whisper or caress by the warrior. No one had been as genuine or as amenable since Lao Ma. Most of her lovers were too afraid of displeasing her and thus hardly relaxed enough to enjoy her affections. Except the last one, of course, who seemed as though she wouldn’t be frightened of Zeus, King of the Gods, himself. But, no, this Amazon was very unique. She seemed to strike the perfect balance between fear and respect, with a healthy dose of hedonistic cravings mixed in.

"They say your name is Gabrielle," Xena stated casually. The top of the Amazon’s clothing had been discarded and Xena watched the sway of the little Queen’s breasts as she breathed in short heaving gasps.
"Yes, it is," Gabrielle answered, her voice shaky, her eyes magnetically drawn to the swell of Xena’s breasts. It didn’t go unnoticed by the warrior that the Amazon was having a hard time not peering through her sheer robe.

"Gabrielle, Queen of the Amazons." Xena’s blade severed the remains of the material that once clung to Gabrielle’s hips as a skirt. The only piece of cloth left was her britches. Xena reached for them as well.

"Now tell me, Gab-ri-elle, what would the Amazon Council say if they knew I made your passions surge like a raging flood?" Xena tossed the remaining cloth to the floor so that the Amazon Queen stood bare before her. Gabrielle gasped audibly.

"What if they knew you stayed with me willingly?" Xena murmured. She pulled the Amazon close to her and pressed her lips between her ample breasts. She licked the soft flesh and her mouth wandered its way to an erect nipple. Her tongue snaked around it, twirling the extended nub between her teeth.

"Oh!"

"What would they think of their Queen sleeping with the enemy and loving every moment of it?" Xena whispered.

"I don’t know," Gabrielle finally admitted.

"Oh, I know," Xena said emphatically. She leaned back on the bed, pulling Gabrielle on top of her. She smothered the Amazon’s mouth, engulfing the naked woman in her arms. Her hands explored every part of Gabrielle’s lithe curves and Xena knew that when all was said and done, she just might keep this one around for a while. Xena rolled Gabrielle onto her back, their mouths locked in a battle of passion. The warrior’s hand followed the rippling muscles down the Amazon’s abdomen, finally coming to rest on her most prized possession. The Conqueror emitted a low moan. The Amazon Queen was more than ready for her.

"Tell me, Amazon, does your lover make you overflow like this?" Xena asked as her fingers delved into the wet folds and easily slipped inside. "Does Ephiny make you hotter than the flames in Tartarus?" she hissed.

"Ephiny?" Gabrielle panted in confusion. With lightning quick speed, Xena reached for the leather cuff attached to a bed post and secured Gabrielle’s wrist. The Amazon struggled against the chains, but the effort was futile.

"Oh, don’t bother struggling, little Queen," Xena whispered in Gabrielle’s ear. "You don’t really want to get away from me, do you?" Gabrielle continued to grapple half-heartedly with the cuff. Xena took her time tightening the other cuff and soon she had the Amazon chained to her bed and striking a beautiful pose. The Conqueror sat on her knees between Gabrielle’s legs, keeping them unfettered and wrapped around her waist.

"I ask you again, Amazon, do you get this passionate with your lover?" Xena rubbed her hands over the supple muscles of the smaller woman’s stomach, raising goosebumps along the sweaty flesh. Gabrielle sucked in air between her teeth.

"No," she said quietly.

"I didn’t think so." Xena grinned. She loosened the ties that bound her robe and crawled over Gabrielle’s prone body. Her breasts hung close to the Amazon’s mouth and Gabrielle strained
against the cuffs to reach them. The Conqueror teased her mercilessly, letting the flesh barely graze her lips. The Amazon Queen writhed beneath her and her emerald eyes grew dark with an unfulfilled yearning.

Xena buried her face in the hollow of Gabrielle’s neck and inhaled the sweet fragrance of the blonde Queen.

"Tell me what you what, little Queen," she moaned as she licked the side of her neck. "What you need...."

"I need you, Xena!" Gabrielle panted breathlessly. Xena mewled a wordless response, every nerve tingling by the way Gabrielle said her name.

"I know you do, my little Queen."

Xena’s lips scorched a path down the Amazon’s voluptuous curves, her open mouth devouring anything and everything in its path. Gabrielle splayed her legs, further encouraging Xena to take what she wanted, to take what she needed. The Conqueror reached the furry triangle and feasted on the Amazon Queen like an untamed hungry wolf. Her tongue explored the flooded cavern and flickered over Gabrielle’s pearl of passion again and again.

"Yes, Xena!" the Amazon heaved and cinched her legs tightly around the warrior’s head. The Conqueror moaned into the wet cave as Gabrielle’s cries sent her past the point of sheer bliss. Her tongue kept up a steady rhythm, a familiar rhythm that matched the ancient beat of time, until she plunged two fingers inside that soon sent Gabrielle over the edge and into virtual oblivion.

"May I ask you a question?" Gabrielle asked. She broke the long silence as each woman took time to regain their strength. Gabrielle remained anchored to the bed post while Xena wrapped an arm and a leg around the smaller woman.

"Yes?"

"Why did you mention Ephiny?"

"She’s your lover, isn’t she?"

"No."

Xena lifted her head to look Gabrielle in the eye, checking to be sure she was telling the truth.

"You’re telling the truth, aren’t you?"

"Yes, I am."

"So, who is she then?" Xena queried, intent on wiping out any and all who dared to put so much as one hand on her Amazon.

"My best friend. I don’t have a consort."

"Yeah, right." Xena smirked. When Gabrielle shook her head, Xena realised she was serious. "You’re serious. But what kind of a queen doesn’t have a consort?"

"There’s more to being a Queen than having consorts," Gabrielle said quietly. She paused thoughtfully. "No one’s interested me much since my lover died three years ago."

"So what made you finally break down? Perhaps you and your little band of Amazons had a plan to
become my lover and then poison me. Is that it?"

"No," Gabrielle lied. "You’re just..." she paused, "...different. I thought you’d be different."

Xena scrutinised the Amazon, knowing full well she was lying. But it didn’t matter. The little Queen would not succeed in her plan to poison the Conqueror. Starting at the next morning’s meal, she would be sure to make her the personal food taster. In the meantime, she would be held in ransom so that the Amazons would stand down and withhold from an attack. Even still, she would be loathe to give the precious Queen up.

"Your friend, Ephiny," Xena said with distaste, "has escaped and I’m sure she’s waiting for a message from you right now."

"She did?! How?"

"She had help. Don’t worry, they’ll be coming to rescue you, I’m sure. But it would be a foolish move. So what shall we tell her?" Xena asked with a hint of humour. "That the Amazon Queen is all tied up and can’t come to the Courtyard?"

"No." Gabrielle paused for a long moment, an unspoken question in her eyes. "We’ll simply tell her we’re still in negotiations."

Gabrielle grinned. Xena laughed, then closed her mouth over the Amazon’s, their mouths duelling once again in a passionate dance.

"Let me pleasure you this time, Xena."

A smile spread across the Conqueror’s face. It wouldn’t bother her one little bit if their entire night was spent improving diplomatic relations.

Callisto discreetly left the room where Xena and Gabrielle made love. She’d only been there a few minutes, but it was enough to get a clear picture of what was going on. Xena was acting like a foolish girl struck by Cupid’s arrow. It sickened her, but she knew her mission was still incomplete. The bargain she’d struck with Aphrodite was to ensure that Xena would spare the irritating blonde’s life, and things were slowly but surely moving away from that path. However, Xena still had every intention of securing the Amazon Nation as her own and Callisto could easily envision Gabrielle’s death at the end of that strand of fate.

Callisto dressed herself in the servant’s garb provided for her. Her days as Xena’s pleasure slave were clearly over. Words from a dream swirled around her, "I’m the woman of your dreams, Xena. And your worst nightmare." The blonde goddess knew she had already fulfilled part of her destiny, now it was time for the rest.
In the middle of the night, Gabrielle awoke from slumber to the comfort of Xena’s larger frame. After their rapturous lovemaking, the Conqueror had freed her from the bed posts. The Amazon had awakened several times throughout the night, only to find the warrior cradling her like a fragile newborn.

Gabrielle was amazed by the tenderness the warrior had shown her and a warmth closed over her heart remembering their night of exquisite passion. She examined the warrior’s slack features in the moonlight and could hardly believe that this was the same woman who had sent thousands throughout the Known World to their deaths. It was a cruel trick conceived by the gods in that, for a moment, Xena seemed so beautifully innocent. In spite of the dangerous predicament she found herself in, Gabrielle never wanted her time with the Conqueror to end. She wanted to be with Xena forever, but she was not so naive to think that the warrior would not slay her the moment she found out about the nefarious scheme she and Darphus were planning against the pre-eminent ruler. She thought long and hard about how she would alter their fate.

The covert mission called for Gabrielle to lead the Conqueror to the hot springs where Xena spent every full moon. The Amazon was supposed to keep Xena preoccupied until Darphus and his cronies could make their move. At this time yesterday it seemed like a simple enough plan, but not today. Today things had changed dramatically. Today she didn’t want Xena dead. Today, she was hopelessly in love.

Gabrielle’s mind raced with the possibilities of an alliance with Xena, an historic alliance between the Conqueror and her people. To her dismay, every path she envisioned seem to lead to the edge of a plateau with Gabrielle and the Amazon Nation crashing to the rocks below. But there was one possibility that stood out amongst the rest and she returned to that seeming impossibility again and again. Finally, she thought to herself, stranger things have happened in her life and she could have hardly predicted that the long and winding road could have led her here. Here, to Xena, the Conqueror’s bedstead, with a woman she was crazily and madly in love with. Gabrielle began to make plans to take the next step, even though it could very well cost her life.

The first thing she had to do was stall for time. She mentally prepared the message she would deliver to Ephiny at first light, then fell back into a deep sleep.

Xena, the Conqueror awoke in the middle of the night from her slumber. She extricated her arms from around the Amazon Queen, smiling to herself at the perfect fit. She was amazed by her own tenderness and a warmth enveloped her heart that the little Amazon had pierced through the labyrinth of walls she’d constructed over the years. No one had weaved their way through her soul since Lao Ma and she had sworn no one ever would again. But now it was too late. The Amazon Queen was already there and Xena was powerless to stop her.

Xena found her way over to the castle window where she’d admired her handiwork nearly a month ago. She had been proud the last time she’d seen the bodies hanging from their crosses, their dying and pitiful pleas had given her an unspoken thrill. It had been absolute proof of the power she wielded over the Known World. Now, it merely sickened and disgusted her. She suddenly wished her life was much simpler and uncomplicated. She was tired of the weight of her responsibilities. She wished that she could spend the rest of her life with the Amazon, away from the politics and intrigue of her sovereignty and their Nation. But that could never happen, she knew. As the Conqueror, she also knew she would be forced to kill Gabrielle. Sadly, Xena took in a deep breath, shut out the
sorrowful moans and walked away from the window. She snuggled up behind the smaller woman, savouring the last few days she would spend with the Amazon Queen.

Ephiny and the Amazons waited on the outskirts of Xena’s castle in the early mist of first light. They had travelled through friendly trees and only at night. They had received a message from Gabrielle, and Ephiny was relieved that the Amazon Queen seemed to be healthy and alive. What she was planning was extremely risky, given Xena’s temperament, but as she had told Gabrielle before, she’d never known a braver Amazon Queen.

The message was cryptic enough, but Ephiny understood it completely. At the light of the full moon, the Amazons would enter the castle as friend or foe, either to take over Darphus’ forces because Xena was dead or to ally themselves with the Conqueror. Ephiny wasn’t sure how the Amazon Queen would pull that one off but she had great confidence in her best friend and knew that no matter what, a great change was about to come.

"Darphus wants to kill you," Gabrielle announced as she washed Xena’s back. The two women bathed in the hot tub in the early hours of the morning.

"Darphus?" Xena snorted over her shoulder. "He doesn’t have the guts."

"He has help and there’s a plan underway right now," Gabrielle spoke carefully and slowly, her heart thumping in her chest. Xena turned around to face the Amazon.

"And who’s helping him?" Xena asked calmly. Her eyes narrowed into tiny slits and her mouth upturned into a smirk.

"I.I.I...don’t know," Gabrielle faltered. "But they’re going to ambush you in the hot springs at the full moon." Xena spoke slowly. "You don’t know who but you know all the details? That’s rather convenient, don’t you think?"

"I was going – " Gabrielle’s words were cut off as Xena’s fingers punched two dents on both sides of her throat, effectively cutting off the flow of blood to her brain.

"So, the Amazons are in a plot to assassinate the Conqueror. I thought you were just a little too good to be true," Xena sneered as she coolly interrogated the smaller woman.

"NO!!! Xena!!!" Gabrielle gasped, struggling mightily for air.

"No, what? The Amazons are not in on the plot or you’re not too good too be true?"

"I’m here…to…help!" the Amazon managed to spit out, her face turning blue from lack of oxygen.

"Is that right, little Queen? You mean help me to my death!"

"No! Xena! Let…explain!" Gabrielle was starting to see spots in front of her eyes and she panicked that it all might end right there.

"Explain what? You’re an Amazon but – "

"I love you!" the Amazon cried.

Xena paused for a moment, then mercifully, she released the points of blockage. Gabrielle collapsed on the side of the tub, sucking in deep breaths of air. Xena grabbed her by the hair.
"Now, tell me what’s going on, Amazon," she snarled.

"They want to kill you," Gabrielle confessed between heaving gasps. "They wanted me to help, and I agreed to help them. I wanted to help my people." Gabrielle swallowed hard and gained better control of her breathing. She took in another deep breath before continuing. "But you weren’t what I expected." Finally, she added quietly, "I don’t want you to die."

"Oh, that’s big of you," Xena said caustically. She let go of Gabrielle’s hair and barked out an order. "Go get dressed." Xena waited in the tub for a few more moments before climbing out after her. The two women dressed themselves in a deadly silence, each of them completely lost in her own thoughts.

The Conqueror lay in bed with her eyes wide open, watching the moon rise until it was high in the sky. It cast a peaceful glow over her castle, however, there was hardly peace in her kingdom. Gabrielle slept beside her. Xena watched the smaller woman toss and turn fitfully in her sleep and the warrior suspected that she was having nightmares from the turn of events. All day long, Xena had warily watched the woman, never letting the Amazon out of her sight. Whatever the truth was, she would find out soon enough. The Amazon confessed to sending a message to Ephiny stating that the Amazons would be here to help defeat Darphus. Xena didn’t believe it for a moment but let it pass, confident that she could play this game and keep her life intact. Darphus, however, wouldn’t survive the full moon. With that scenario running through her mind, she dozed off into a restless slumber.

"Xena, the Conqueror," the familiar voice rang out. Xena found herself once again manacled by heavy metal cuffs in her bedroom. She tried to twist around to face her nemesis, but the blonde woman held her firmly in place. Gabrielle slept undisturbed.

"Xena, Xena, Xena," Callisto whispered in that exasperatingly seductive voice of hers. "I told you, Xena, I’m the woman of your dreams. And your worst nightmare."

"Release me from this!" Xena barked. She wasn’t in the mood to play Callisto’s tiresome games.

"Hmm, Xena, the Conqueror. Are you sure you can still claim that title?"

"What are you talking about?" Xena sneered.

"Hmm, let’s see. That little girl in your bed conspired in a plot to kill you, then she sent a message to the Amazons and they’re supposed to come to your aid to defeat Darphus. You know, if I was a betting person, I’d bet it’s a message to attack and take over the castle."

"Get to the point, Callisto."

"My point is, why is she still alive, Xena? Why is that little brat still alive when anyone else would have been dead before they could say, "Xena, the Conqueror."

Xena didn’t answer. She had no rational reason why the Amazon still lived, all she knew was she couldn’t bear to kill her despite her outburst in the tub earlier.

"I’ll tell you why, my precious warrior. She’s alive because she’s guilty."

"Guilty?"

"She’s guilty, my sweet. Guilty of conquering Xena. Isn’t that right?"

"What are you saying?"
Callisto pressed her full body against Xena’s nude back and she lowered her voice to a sultry tone, lulling Xena onto a melodic wave of tranquillity. "She’s conquered you, Xena. Here," Callisto covered one of Xena’s breasts. "Here." She covered the other one. Her hand travelled down to the apex of Xena’s legs, where the triangle of hair was prominent. "And here," the blonde goddess gestured as her fingers played with the coarse hairs momentarily. Xena let out a soft moan. "But most importantly, she’s conquered you here," Callisto’s palm pressed between the hollow of Xena’s breasts. The beat of Xena’s heart forged out an acknowledgement.

"You’ll have to kill her, Xena. You can’t have someone like her conquer you, can you? You’re too good for her. She lies, she cheats. Oh, you don’t believe for a moment that Ephiny is merely her best friend," Callisto spat out the last word with the utmost disdain. The blonde goddess continued with her charges against Gabrielle. "She plays games. And you let her toy with you, Xena. My delicious warrior, you know what to do with her, don’t you?" Callisto murmured hotly in Xena’s ear. "Kill her!"

"No, I can’t!"

"You can’t?! Why, on Gaia’s green earth, not?! You’re the Conqueror. Xena, the Conqueror. Ruler of all the Kingdoms in Greece and all the Known World. Who would stop you? Who would question?"

"I can’t!" Xena repeated, anguish squeezed around her throat.

Callisto wrapped her arms around Xena’s waist, soothing the warrior with the touch of a goddess.

"And, why not, Xena? What is it you’re afraid of?"

Xena shook her head but could not speak. The words had never been uttered in her long and remarkable life. Not with M’Lilla, or Borias, or Nasikka, or Marcus. Not even with Lao Ma. Those words had simply never crossed her lips.

"I love her!" Xena blurted out, the words tumbling out of her like dice on a gaming table.

Callisto circled in front of Xena and planted a soft lingering kiss on her lips. "My sweet and luscious warrior, that’s all I needed to hear you say," she said and disappeared without a trace.
Chapter 10

Another Realm

Xena finished off her last mug of port and left the tavern. After four straight days of consuming liquid spirits, nothing seemed to fill the aching black hole in her heart. She walked dazedly through the village, oblivious to the furtive glances and frightened people accommodating her path. Without giving it conscious thought, she made a decision to go to the mountains. Far away from her memories, far away from the Amazons where the liar had taken refuge, far away from those who had dishonoured her trust.

With Argo an unwilling companion, Xena trudged up the mountain with a grievous heart and devastated soul. After a while, the snow and thin air cleared her head and froze her bones, but she remained numb to its consequence. The freezing temperatures matched the cold blackness that boxed her in like a wooden sarcophagus. She railed at the Fates for giving her son back to her, but then let him be snatched away by the demon’s daughter. She wailed a tortured song, a song without words, because no words could ever subdue the seething beast inside. And nothing could give her back her son. A scream of anguish erupted from her lips once again into a vast expanse of empty white. Nevertheless, only a blank nothingness coloured her soul.

Xena’s spine rippled with his presence. She could always feel Ares before he made yet another intrusive appearance.

"Nice vocal," he said, "but you sure can’t dance to it." As if Xena felt like dancing, she thought wryly. "I feel your pain okay," he continued without regard for the obvious torment he was causing. "But how much longer before you start doing something about it?"

"My son is dead, you soulless bastard! What can I do about that?!" she spat out, livid that Ares wouldn’t leave her alone in her despair.

"Just goes to prove what I’ve been telling you all along. No good deed goes unpunished. Saving people, defending the weak, trusting somebody who betrayed you."

"Gabrielle..." Xena intoned, mystified that she was able to speak the ungrateful wench’s name.

"This whole atonement kick you’ve been on lately, it’s not you. You’re full of fire, bending the world to your will. Full of rage and revenge. Accept it, Xena. Embrace it. You know what to do. Who to kill."

Yes, Xena thought to herself. Miraculously, the vacuum of numbness slowly shed itself like a silk robe before a warm bath. Suddenly, everything was revealed to her in crystal clarity. She knew what she had to do. What must be done. The deceitful bitch would die. That was surely the answer. That would certainly obliterate her pain. The unspeakable agony she’d lived with since she’d found Solan’s dead body would evaporate. Her son had been found murdered by the evil child of the demon. The liar would pay for this and surely she must die.

Suddenly, Xena felt alive with an invigorating determination. Her eyes twinkled with sweet revenge. Ares was right. The conniving bard should pay for the sins of her past.

Back to Xena, the Conqueror’s Realm

For the first time in countless moons, Xena awoke refreshed and energetic. Likewise, it was the first
time she had recalled an entire dream with Callisto, the enigmatic pleasure slave. She remembered being chained to manacles right in her own bedroom and she’d been forced to confess her love for Gabrielle. In the dream, she’d been terrified to utter those three cherished words, but as the sun crept slowly above the horizon, she knew those words were the building blocks for a dramatic change in her life.

Xena peered down at the Amazon Queen who slept at her side. She studied the relaxed features of Gabrielle and the way she curled against her shoulder, wrapping an arm neatly around her waist. The warrior was once again impressed by their perfect symmetry. She thought long and hard about how she would proceed. She wanted this woman in her life but she could not imagine a world where she, as The Conqueror, could maintain peace and a true alliance with the Amazons. And would their people be in favour of Gabrielle’s personal alliance with her? she wondered. The idea seemed preposterous.

The warrior considered how much courage it took for Gabrielle to confess her role in Darphus’ covert plans to assassinate her. Somehow, she must have had faith that Xena would not slay her on the spot. She professed her love for the Conqueror but Xena questioned how someone could risk so much with such a volatile temperament as hers. Maybe only love could do that, she mused.

The warrior gently shook the Amazon awake. They had much to discuss on the first day of the full moon.

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Another Realm

Xena galloped along, swiftly edging closer to the Amazon village. She knew the reigning Queen would be protected by her Amazon sisters, but nothing would deter the Warrior Princess in her mission of destruction. The closer she got to her destiny, the more urgently she spurred Argo on with greater and wider strides.

As the sun gained a high perch in the sky, Xena crossed the border into Amazon territory. A greeting party descended from the trees, but Xena was in no mood for civil formalities. The fearless warrior easily fended off the four Amazons who dared to impede her progress. All four warriors slumped on the forest floor clutching their wounds and quietly slipped through Death’s dark door. The Warrior Princess galloped at breakneck speed the rest of the way to the centre of the village virtually unharmed.

Angry dust kicked up around Argo’s hooves and Xena saw nothing but a swirling hurricane of hatred. She recognised no one except those that would stand in her way of capturing her prey. Later, she would vaguely recall Ephiny being there as was Joxer but there was nothing save the vision of herself cradling her dead Solan that incited her fury. All she saw was the bright red mane of the one who caused the death of her only son. She lassoed the demon at the ankles and dragged her off behind a stolen horse.

Xena sped away, ignoring the cries of those who would stop her. She was keenly aware of the course’s obstacles that she swept her victim through - fire, water, rocks and mud - but she didn’t care. Gabrielle would pay for the death of her son and she would pay dearly. She knifed through the wind towards the great waters, tasting the salty mist in her mouth. It matched the bitter taste of vengeance on her tongue.

The Warrior Princess slowed to the edge of the cliff and dismounted. Her victim was unconscious. She surveyed the terrain and chose a perfect precipice from which to cast down the one who’d deceived her. The one who’s death would fill the vast empty darkness that had sucked the life right out of her. She untied the bard and lifted the smaller woman over her head. She took a few halting
paces to the edge of the chasm and prepared to send the demon crashing into the waters below.

"VENGEANCE!!" she roared.

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**Back to Xena, the Conqueror’s Realm**

"Why did you risk your life like that?" Xena asked as she brushed Gabrielle’s golden red hair. The Amazon sat between her legs on the edge of the bed.

"What do you mean?"

"I could have easily killed you, you know." Xena thought pensively, remembering the many people she’d slain for far less a crime than conspiracy.

"Yes, I know, but I didn’t want you to die. It was worth it to tell you how I felt."

"You were willing to risk your life that much? You were willing to die just to tell me how you felt?" Xena was incredulous that anyone would risk so much for her. She was used to people walking on eggshells around her, frightful of saying the wrong thing at the wrong time. It wasn’t easy being around the Conqueror, not knowing when her anger would strike. And here was this brave little Amazon risking everything, her life, her people’s lives, her entire Nation just to admit her feelings for Xena. It made no sense.

"I knew there was some good inside you, Xena. I knew you wouldn’t kill me, even though for a moment I wasn’t sure."

"Yeah," Xena snorted, ashamed in retrospect that she had almost murdered the only person that mattered to her anymore.

"We can do a lot of good together, Xena," the Amazon said softly.

"I don’t know," the warrior said skeptically. Gabrielle turned around to face her. She touched the Conqueror’s cheek with the back of her hand.

"Together, we can do anything." She planted a soft kiss on each of Xena’s eyes, closing them with her sensuous lips.

"We’ll see," Xena said quietly, almost lost in the promise of the Amazon’s dazzling emerald eyes. Clearing her throat, she regained her composure. There was still much planning to be done.

"Okay, here’s the plan," she said.

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**Another Realm**

"Aphrodite! Do something!" Solan shouted. He watched in horror as his mother held Gabrielle high over her head on the edge of the craggy cliff. He tugged on the goddess’ sleeve, and screamed at the top of his lungs, tears streaming down his face. He wanted to run to his mother and beg her to stop, that everything was gonna be okay, that his death had been determined by the Fates long ago, but he couldn’t. Aphrodite had said that Xena wouldn’t be able to hear him and she was right. But Aphrodite was a goddess, for Zeus’ sake, surely she could do something.

"I’m sorry, I’m not allowed to interfere, Solan," Aphrodite insisted, even as she was fearful that Ares would win in the end. She knew it had been that soulless bastard who pushed the right buttons to
transform Xena into a raving maniac.

"But she’s going to kill her!"

The boy was right, Aphrodite knew. She couldn’t just stand idly by and watch Xena kill Gabrielle. Everyone knew that the two of them were meant for each other and should always be together. But how far could she go without invoking the ire of Zeus. Nevertheless, she figured if Ares could instigate war, she could instigate peace. Surely, there must be a way. A flash of brilliance gave her hope.

"Wake up, Gabrielle," she whispered into the wind.

Gabrielle awoke from her unconscious state to find herself held aloft by the strong arms of the Warrior Princess. She kicked Xena in the head forcing her to drop the bard. Then the Goddess of Love and Solan watched in horror as Gabrielle and Xena faced off against each other with the bard charging at the warrior screaming "I hate you!!" Then both women toppled over the edge of the precipice and into the turbulent waters below.

"No!!" Solan yelled.

"Enough!" Aphrodite shouted. With a wave of her hand, the two women were surrounding by a blinding white light and safely carried off into the healing water of the Land of Illusia.

Solan raced to the edge of the cliff and saw nothing. He expected to see two broken bodies floating on the surface.

"What happened to them? Where are they? Are they dead?" he asked Aphrodite, confusion etched in his youthful features.

"They are safe. For now," she added mysteriously.

"What do you mean?!" Solan asked with breathless excitement.

"I mean, they are in a place where they’ll be able to work things out. If they don’t survive that, well…” She let the thought trail off. "It’s the best I can do under the circumstances."

"Where did you send them?"

"It’s called the Land of Illusia."

"Like a dream?"

"Well, it’s more real than that. We’ll just have to wait and see."
Chapter 11

In the depths of Xena’s castle, warriors who remained loyal to the Queen guided Ephiny and the Amazons through a hidden passageway. With the assistance of those who posed as guards for the Conqueror, they decisively eliminated the loyalists to Darphus. The fortress crackled with the tension of the treasonous lieutenant’s mutinous web while Xena’s domain remained vulnerable to an outside invasion.

Stealthily, the Amazon warriors made their way to the hallway that led to the hot springs chamber. They observed several soldiers lined up against the walls as they awaited orders from Darphus as he, Velasca and two other soldiers listened to the amorous noises coming from the private chamber. Ephiny recognised Gabrielle’s cries and hovered from afar waiting for Darphus to make his move.

Darphus, Velasca and two soldiers had surreptitiously followed Xena and Gabrielle through the corridor to the special chamber that enclosed the hot springs. Xena’s Second in Command steeled his nerves for the inevitable showdown with the Conqueror. His blood surged with anticipated triumph and his mouth watered with the pungent taste of victory. He savoured the knowledge of history marking him as the man who had conquered the most loathsome ruler in the Known World – the Conqueror. He imagined that the commoners who hated Xena during her reign would worship him in humble thanks as he sat aloft a golden throne, basking in the power of absolute sovereignty. But first he had to make sure the wicked bitch was dead.

As the small band of assassins crept ever closer to the chamber entrance, they were careful not to make any undue noise. They heard the passionate cries of Xena’s lover and it was clear to them how the Conqueror was engaging the Amazon Queen.

"Oh, Xena!" Gabrielle panted breathlessly as her muffled voice drifted through the solid wood doors. Darphus rolled his eyes at the smirking soldiers. He envisioned that the Amazon Queen would soon be writhing beneath him when he seized the spoils of victory. He had to hand it to Xena, though, she sure knew how to please her lovers.

Gabrielle’s cries grew louder. "Yes! Xena! YES!!" she wailed. It was obvious that the woman was within moments of reaching her imminent climax. With a quick nod of his head, Darphus gave the order and the sound of soldiers crashing against the door reverberated throughout the mist filled chamber.

The first thing that confused Darphus when he burst through the wooden doors was that no one was in the water. The stone slabs that surrounded the bubbling waters were lined with burning candles. Steam rose from the pool obscuring a clear vision of the apparently empty chamber. Perplexed, he glanced around and only had a split second before two fingertips stabbed at the main artery in his neck. He clutched at his throat, wheezing for air.

"You didn’t think I’d be stupid enough to fall for this, did you?!” Xena snarled. She slammed Darphus back against the door closing off the other soldiers. Only Velasca and two others managed to gain entrance and Xena had her sword withdrawn and imbedded into the first soldier’s stomach before he realised he was even wounded. She sliced her blade the length of his abdomen and he crumpled wordlessly to the ground. The other soldier managed a weak parry before a wicked gash to his throat left him gurgling in his own blood. Moments later, he joined his comrade in a heap on the floor.

Meanwhile, Gabrielle and Velasca faced off against each other in the foggy chamber. The Amazon Queen held her own and Xena kept one eye on the smaller woman, instinctively feeling overly
protective of her new lover.

"Xena, it’s…not…” Darphus gasped, knowing full well Xena didn’t believe a word of it and his life would soon come to a disappointing end. Coming from outside the closed chamber, he heard muffled sounds of clashing swords and crazily wondered why his soldiers would be fighting amongst themselves. What he didn’t know was that the Amazons, led by Ephiny and accommodated by other warriors loyal to the Queen, had attacked Darphus’ forces and trapped them in the East wing that housed the hot springs.

But none of that mattered now, Darphus was in a desperate fight for his life. With great effort, he reached for the hidden dagger he used in emergencies. For a moment, Xena glanced behind her to check on Gabrielle and Darphus arched his hand toward her neck. A heavy cloud of defeat settled over him as he became painfully aware that he would not live to witness the Conqueror’s death. He focused on the throbbing vein in her neck that would drain the lifeblood out of the evil daughter of Ares.

Gabrielle and Velasca continued to parry as evenly matched combatants but Velasca began to wear down the Amazon Queen and knocked her to the hard slate floor. Xena turned back to Darphus just in time so that the blade missed her neck but imbedded in her shoulder. Her own sword reflexively found its way across his throat as she deftly severed Darphus’ neck, unleashing a stream of blood that spurted out of him like wine from a skin. It was only after she saw the life seep out of his eyes that she realised how deeply the knife was imbedded in her and how much blood she was losing. Dark spots punctured her vision and the last thing she remembered was Gabrielle yelling, "Xena! Behind y—" as the clank of a sword’s hilt thudded against her skull. Soundlessly, everything became murky and the smooth stone of the chamber floor came up to meet her.

A quarter moon later, Xena and Gabrielle lay beside a warm campfire. With great relief, they had finally escaped the sounds of the celebrating commoners and all that was heard was the echoing symphony of night creatures. The flickering flames cast a peaceful tranquility around them as Gabrielle redressed the wound behind Xena’s shoulder. Even though the blade penetrated deep into the muscle, it was a fairly clean laceration and Xena seemed to be a quick healer. She shuddered when she recalled how terrified she had been when Velasca rendered her wounded lover unconscious. After all they’d been through, there was no way she could stand to lose Xena now. Without thinking, Gabrielle had flung a dagger into the heart of the surprised renegade and rushed over to the prone Xena. The warrior regained consciousness and directed them to a secret passageway that led outside. Gabrielle helped the warrior onto her tan Palomino and the two women galloped away from the castle and the Kingdom of the Conqueror, leaving the Amazons to battle with those who wanted power for themselves under Darphus’ command. The battle raged on for days and in the ensuing chaos, Xena’s fortress was burned to the ground. Everyone had presumed that Xena and Gabrielle, as well as Darphus, were dead and the messenger god, Hermes himself, couldn’t have spread the news of the Conqueror’s death any faster.

When the smoke cleared, the Amazons were proclaimed the new rulers and in the aftermath of Gabrielle’s death, Ephiny assumed command. A new world order was promptly declared, one in which those who chose to rule themselves, were free to do so. Gabrielle was pleased with this turn of events but had yet to discuss with Xena the path chosen for them by the Fates.

"So what do you want to do now?" she asked Xena, broaching the subject they had long avoided. She had finished redressing the wound and sat facing the warrior on their shared bedroll. Xena lay on her side, resting her shoulder.

"I don’t know. I suppose you could go back to the Amazons, they’d welcome you there. Your mission’s accomplished," Xena replied with a wry grin.
"What?!" Gabrielle exclaimed. "Xena, listen to me. I don’t want to leave you. If I go back to the Amazons, I’m not going alone. I won’t go without you."

"You know that would be impossible. They’d kill me on sight. I wasn’t exactly a friend to the Nation."

Gabrielle brushed the hair away from Xena’s face and kissed her gently on the lips. "Well, I guess it’s just you and me then."

"You’d give up being their Queen just for me?" Xena asked incredulously. Nothing about this young woman, the pride of the Amazons, made any sense to her. In fact, there was still a strong element inside her that was highly suspicious of Gabrielle’s unconditional acceptance. And yet she wanted nothing more than to be rid of both their former lives and start a new path with the golden redhead.

"Yes…and…anything…else…I…can…think…of." The Amazon punctuated each word with a kiss to the back of Xena’s hand.

"So what do you want to do?" Xena asked, clueless as to which direction the life of a former Conqueror of the Known World would take.

"Well, how about if we try to help some of these people out. We could roam the countryside and right old wrongs."

"You’re kidding, right?"

"No, Xena, I’m not. We can do it." Gabrielle gripped Xena’s hand in a tight squeeze.

"But I’ve done some terrible things. I’ve killed so many people. I’ll never be able to wash their blood from my hands."

"Maybe not, but you have to start somewhere. Why not right here and now?"

Xena was silent for a long moment. "I don’t understand you, Gabrielle. You have so much waiting for you back with the Amazons." She wanted to add that as Queen, Gabrielle could have her pick of any woman as well. But the timbre in her voice and the pregnant pause spoke volumes. She knew there was no need to speak her thoughts aloud. "You can help a lot of people there too. Why me?"

"You might not see it, Xena, but there’s goodness in your heart. Or else you would have killed me when you had the chance."

"You really believe that?"

"I wouldn’t say it if I didn’t."

Xena smiled and closed her eyes. Suddenly, she felt utterly exhausted, the events of the past few days culminating into the colossal weight of sleep.

"Well, well, well. Isn’t this a cozy little scene?" Xena’s eyes flew open and she tried to turn towards the familiar voice of her former slave, however, her movements were hindered by the manacles at her wrists. Xena was shackled to a branch high above her head, her feet planted firmly on the ground but her body stretched to its limits. Nevertheless, she ignored the searing pain in her shoulder. A cool breeze made her wonder how and when she had been stripped of her clothing. She could see Gabrielle sleeping peacefully on their bedroll, oblivious to the drama that was unfolding. Callisto hovered behind her and whispered in her ear.
"You didn’t think you could get away from me, did you, Xena?"

"What do you want?!!" Xena demanded through gritted teeth.

"I told you, my sweet," Callisto purred. "I am the woman of your dreams. And your worst nightmare."
Chapter 12

The Conqueror’s former slave girl circled around to face her. Callisto was dressed in the shiny black leather of a warrior with a deadly sword strapped across her back.

"Well, Xena, I see you’ve finally done it."

"Done what?!" Xena spat out.

"You’ve given everything up for the irritating blonde. Even your title. The Conqueror." Callisto suddenly burst into gales of laughter. She tossed her head back and her long dishevelled hair waved in the dark light of the moon. Xena wondered if the enigmatic woman might be insane. "The Conqueror!" she roared. "She sure conquered you, didn’t she, Xena!" Her loud laughter resonated throughout the quiet forest but Gabrielle remained deep in slumber.

"How long do you think it’ll be before she turns you over to Ephiny?" Callisto asked, regarding the sleeping Amazon with unequivocal hatred.

Xena said nothing, although she had wondered countless times since she and Gabrielle left her Kingdom about Ephiny and the Amazons. She knew that word had spread that both she and Gabrielle were dead, but lingering doubts haunted her during the past few days and at any moment she had expected the inevitable descent from the trees by the devotees of Artemis. And yet...it was as if the golden redhead had filled an empty space in her she hadn’t known existed. Xena had never been happier in her life.

"You really don’t believe that fairy tale about Ephiny being her friend?" Callisto said with disgust, "Oh, and she’s in love with you, too?" she queried. "She’s setting you up, Xena!"

"Shut up!" Xena warned, her blood boiling with frustration. It was utterly humiliating that she had to endure the degrading taunts by this insane madwoman. However, a secret she would take to her grave is that Callisto possessed the unique ability to penetrate all her defences and strike the rawest sensual nerve.

"What do you want, Callisto?!"

"Oh, nothing much, Xena. Just your soul." Callisto’s face broke into a wicked grin. "Oh, and to torture you. You know, Xena, you should be on your knees thanking me. Of course, that would be a little difficult in your position," she laughed. "But I’m the one who got you two little lovebirds together. With a little help from a friend. She promised to send me to a place where I’d never cross paths with you again, but I couldn’t let that happen." For a moment, the blonde goddess gazed off into an unseen realm. She paused to think of what her life would have been like without Xena in it. Without the Warrior Princess’ invasion of Cirra, she might have lived a less dangerous life, a less hate-filled life and maybe her emotions would have been more under control. But that wasn’t her, and she knew it. That life would never have been possible. She addressed Xena again, "For a moment, it was tempting but I couldn’t allow you to go on your merry little way. And besides, I’d have no reason for living."

"You’re crazy!"

Callisto glared at Xena with contempt and swiftly withdrew a dagger from her leathers. For a moment Xena swore that Callisto would send her to her death. It couldn’t all end here, could it? she silently railed at the gods or the Fates, or whoever had led her down this dangerous path. For one
bewildering moment, she wished that neither Gabrielle nor Callisto had ever been brought before her Court. Then, she would still be the Conqueror.

"No, I’m not crazy, Xena, but if I am, it is you who made me this way." Callisto watched as a mask of confusion clouded the warrior’s face. She leaned forward and slid the blade down the front of Xena’s lithesome torso. The blade left a line that descended the valley of her cleavage and her skin erupted into tiny goosebumps, bringing her nipples to instant attention. Xena’s eyes lidded over with a rapturous bliss but she fought her arousal and was troubled by the effect the blonde warrior was summoning deep within.

"Poor baby, you have no idea who I am or how much I mean to you. In any lifetime, Xena, you will pay for the sins of your past. Forever."

Xena was breathing heavily, her body unable to control its passions.

"Kill me now, then, if that’s what you want," she panted.

"Oh, no, no, Xena, Death won’t be enough for you. Don’t you see? I want you to live so you can endure the same torture I’ve suffered all these years. Now tell me, Warrior Princess, does the little brat know how I talked you out of giving her 40 lashes?"

Xena avoided Callisto’s piercing gaze and stared glumly at the ground. She warred with the conflicting emotions inside her and tried not to think of the endless tortures and nameless faces.

"You mean you didn’t tell her how much you wanted to see her whipped by your own lash? And how much of a thrill it would have given you? Hmm, it must have slipped your wicked little mind. But I can just imagine how exquisitely she would have screamed. Can’t you?"

"I’ve changed!" Xena shouted with a force borne out of guilt.

"Oh keep telling yourself that, dear, and maybe someday you’ll believe it."

Xena didn’t answer. She knew Callisto spoke the truth and there was no defence for her heinous impulses. Callisto continued with her graphic depiction of Gabrielle’s imagined torture, "...then, when you were finished with her, you would have come to me, anxious to expend your excitement in the most exotic of ways – "

"Shut up! Callisto!" Xena warned.

"Or you’ll do what?" Callisto moved close to Xena so that her lips were just inches from the warrior’s succulent mouth. One hand grabbed the thick mane of Xena’s dark hair. "You know you can’t resist me, my sweet," she whispered. Then she smothered Xena’s lips with her own, forcing her tongue inside. The Conqueror tried to fend off Callisto but her grip was too strong. Xena found herself succumbing to the blonde goddess as her body gyrated against Callisto’s black leathers, the smooth material melting into her heated skin. Callisto’s tongue searched and destroyed all resistance and Xena was powerless to go anywhere except wherever Callisto wanted to take her.

A radiant figure appeared at the edge of the campfire.

"Enough!" Aphrodite shouted. With a wave of her hand, a huge vortex opened up and illuminated the coal black sky as bright as the dawn of first light. Gabrielle awoke with a start and leaped up from the bedroll. She dazedly scanned the encampment that suddenly had two blonde women fighting over Xena.

"Xena!" Gabrielle gasped, when she saw Xena tethered to a tree by steel manacles. Her hair dripped
with sweat and a thin film covered her naked body. Her head hung limply forward. Gabrielle wanted to run to her lover and release her from her confines but the maniacal blonde warrior stood in her way.

"I thought we had a deal," Aphrodite reminded Callisto.

"Deal, schmeal. You think I was going to let Xena walk away and live happily ever after?" She stood protectively in front of Xena, not wanted to give up her most prized possession just yet.

"You have no choice," Aphrodite warned although she hoped her false bravado wasn’t apparent to the demented Goddess of Evil.

"Yes, she does." Ares, the God of War, appeared out of thin air. "What do you think you’re doing, Aphrodite? You know you’re not allowed to interfere. Daddy will be furious when he finds out." He crossed his massive arms in front of him contemplating if he should tell Zeus or not. He just might be able to use this little faux pas somewhere down the line.

Aphrodite was afraid to answer. She knew she had been caught red-handed and she couldn’t think of a way to disentangle herself out of the suddenly complicated situation. Ares addressed Callisto.

"Very good, Callisto. We don’t want her going off with that little…little…whatever she is," he gestured dismissively in Gabrielle’s direction.

"My thoughts exactly," Callisto smirked.

"Oh, so now you’re on her side, Ares?" Aphrodite taunted.

"Well, she does have a few redeeming qualities, in any realm. And besides, she is the Goddess of Evil," he chuckled.

While Aphrodite and Ares debated the redeeming qualities of Callisto, the blonde warrior eyed the entrance to the vortex and prepared to make her move. Without warning, Callisto released Xena from her manacles and when the dark warrior collapsed in her arms, the goddess propelled herself and her charge headlong into the eye of the vortex. Momentarily, the vortex closed in on itself and the encampment was plunged into darkness once more.
Chapter 13

Callisto traced her finger along Xena’s jaw line. What a wondrous beauty to behold, she marvelled. As soon as Callisto and Xena appeared on the other side of the Vortex, the blonde goddess had been forced to cast the warrior into a deep sleep. She needed time to think. She didn’t know how long she could keep Xena in her possession, but she was going to make the most of her fortuitous opportunity.

Callisto left Xena for a moment and found her way over to the Pool of Reflection. She revelled in the stricken look of anguish on Gabrielle’s face. It was that look which made her irrational actions well worth it. Callisto pondered her rash behaviour and watched as Ares and Aphrodite bickered over her escape.

"Now look what at you’ve done!" Aphrodite accused the God of War.

"Me?!" Ares replied indignantly. "You’re the one who released her from the Vortex, or are you too vain to admit Callisto outsmarted you. Looks like there’s an annoying gnat in your love potion." Ares smugly reminded her.

"So you think you would have controlled her better, brother dearest?" Aphrodite retorted.

"Quiet!" Gabrielle screamed. "That’s all you two can do is stand there and bicker? You have to do something!"

From her view from the Vortex, Callisto cackled. She knew that both Ares and Aphrodite didn’t have the guts to chase her into the Vortex. Who knew, they might get stuck in here forever too. For Callisto, Eternity was an excellent bargain price to pay for Xena.

"Uh, Gabrielle, there’s, um, nothing we can do," the Goddess of Love hesitantly admitted.

"What do you mean? ‘nothing you can do’, you’re gods from Mount Olympus, aren’t you?" Gabrielle’s voice was edged with panic and fear. She refused to believe that Xena was really gone.

"Yes..." Ares started. "But the Vortex is forbidden. There’s no way to follow her in there."

"Yes, there’s no way," Aphrodite agreed, eager to go along with Ares’ twisted fabrication until they could figure out what to do. Her auspicious plans had gone awry in the worst way. She was beginning to understand why the gods weren’t permitted to interfere in mortal’s lives. Things could become a tangled mess in a hurry.

"Well, who is this Callisto anyway? Is she a goddess?"

Ares and Aphrodite exchanged worried glances.

"It’s complicated," Ares replied. "But let’s just say she’s an old enemy of Xena’s. She’ll do anything to make sure she’s miserable."

"I see. So are you two going to rescue Xena?"

"We’ll discuss it," Aphrodite said. She nodded at Ares, "Let’s go." Both she and Ares vanished into a misty cloud.

"No, wait!" Gabrielle yelled into the dark forest but the only answer was the echoing sounds of night creatures.
When Callisto returned from the Pool, Xena lay nude and unmoving on the ground. Callisto examined the warrior’s many scars and brushed aside her bangs, studying the thick scar hidden just below her hairline. The scar was obscured by fine dark hairs but it stayed lighter than her bronze skin. Callisto moved further down the warrior’s body and licked the most recent gash on her shoulder from Darphus. It was fresh and tender but the goddess’ healing powers sealed the wound and all that remained was a vertical line that bore witness to her survival.

Another zippered line traced the swell of her breast. Impulsively, Callisto licked the well-worn wound, noting the rugged and disfigured mark. She traced her finger down to the mark of birth just below the scar and even further still, her palm came to rest on the evidence of an arrow that pierced through Xena’s side. Ouch, that must have hurt, the goddess surmised, the corner of mouth turning up into a half grin. Callisto’s tongue found its way across the warrior’s abdomen and she allowed her mouth to take a long meandering path to the dark wet patch between the Conqueror’s legs.

Xena, the Conqueror sat in regal glory on her throne. She wore her majestic robes that signalled her dignified reign of power. Four Amazons surrounded the Amazon Queen and they all danced before her in swirling seductive movements. Xena watched intensely as Gabrielle danced especially for her. The sway of her hips and the curves of her breasts made an unbidden heat rise in Xena’s cheeks. She loosened the sash on her royal robes and reached inside, caressing her unencumbered breasts. Her breath quickened and the gathering moisture between her legs made her almost wish the dance could be over so that the Amazon could pleasure her most intimate place. She spread her legs slightly inviting Gabrielle to join her as soon as the dance was over, but the Amazon Queen continued dancing. Her green eyes smouldered in the reflection of the candlelit room as she allowed the sweet tension to be prolonged for as long as possible. Xena adjusted her robe and was grateful that she’d had the foresight not to bother with undergarments on this evening. Mercifully, the dance ended and the Amazon Queen dropped to her knees in front of the Conqueror. She greedily dove into the sweet flowing nectar and sank deep into the steamy entrance. She lapped at the juices and swept her tongue over the covered bud, enticing it to come out of hiding. Xena writhed on her throne, with her eyes closed and her head thrown back. She held Gabrielle’s head in place, not wanting the Amazon to stop but knowing that if she didn’t stop, she would climax much faster than she expected. In the end, she gave in to her body’s desires and a burst of fire swept over her as she collapsed into the arms of the golden throne.

Xena opened her eyes. She had never left the Vortex.

"My, my, my, but are you a passionate warrior," Callisto grinned as her lips hovered just inches above the Conqueror’s mouth. Xena elbowed the goddess’ neck and threw her head long over her, sending Callisto spiralling to the ground. The warrior scrambled to her feet.

"What are you doing?!” she demanded.

"Just giving you what you wanted, Xena." Callisto answered innocently.

Xena took in a deep breath and relaxed her body. She stood upright facing Callisto with more confidence than she felt. Suddenly, everything came back to her. She wasn’t the Conqueror any more and she had run away with Gabrielle, but now this goddess or demon or whatever she was had kidnapped her and brought her here, wherever here was. She was still without clothing but she acknowledged the pain from the wound in her shoulder was gone.

"Where are we?” Xena asked, stalling for time and hoping to find a way out of this mess. Callisto grinned. "There’s no way out, Xena. You’re stuck with me now. You want to know for how long? Forever!” She laughed. Xena ignored her.
"Can I at least put on some clothes?" Xena figured at least her armour would help her think.

"Well, I kind of like you naked," she teased. "That’s how you dressed me, isn’t it? Your naked little slave with nothing on except two sets of cuffs and a collar." With a wave of her hand, Callisto adorned Xena in an exact replica of her "outfit" as the Conqueror’s pleasure slave. A black leather cuff on each wrist and ankle with a collar to match.

"Yes, that’s better," Callisto purred.

Without warning, Xena zeroed in on Callisto and attacked her at mid-torso. She knocked the wind out of the blonde goddess, who landed hard on her back, banging her head into the solid ground. The warrior leaped atop the prone goddess and pummelled her chest, backhanding her face with several hard slaps. For a moment, Callisto was stricken with unmitigated fear but then she broke into laughter, hauling Xena off of her and sending her clear across the barren landscape.

"Here! You want to fight?" Callisto tossed Xena her sword and withdrew her own.

Xena ran straight at Callisto, wildly swiping at the blonde’s right arm, knocking the sword out of her hand. The warrior struck a vicious blow to Callisto’s jaw and the goddess once again landed on her back. The Conqueror dropped to her knees and raised her sword with two hands and pierced a gaping hole into the middle of the goddess’ solar plexus. Callisto’s eyes opened wide with terror as she futilely reached for the sword protruding from her chest. Slowly, she closed her eyes and her body went limp, her arms dropping at her side.

Out of breath, Xena gazed down at the motionless goddess. She surveyed the unique netherworld and wondered how she would escape now that Callisto was dead. A shimmering pool caught her attention and she wandered over to drink some water. What she didn’t notice was that behind her Callisto opened one eye and her mouth formed into a smirk.

Gabrielle waited in the forest for two days and two nights but nothing happened. She kept hoping that maybe Ares or Aphrodite would come back but her silent pleas were answered with nothing but silence. Finally, she made a decision to go back to the Amazons, at least to give her a chance to regroup and maybe find a way to rescue Xena. On the third day, she gathered her belongings and mounted the Conqueror’s horse, Argo.

As each day brought her closer to Amazon lands, she pondered what she would tell Ephiny. The newly crowned Queen of the Amazons would be expecting her to arrive with Xena, but Gabrielle’s tale was much too fantastic to believe, unless Ares or Aphrodite wanted to stand as witnesses. Better chance for snow to survive the flames of Tartarus, she mused.

The steadily trotting hooves of Argo gave Gabrielle a comforting rhythm that afforded her time to think. It was hard to believe that less than two full moons had passed when she’d first conceived of the plan that would lead to the Conqueror’s demise. No one could have believed that her plan would work but somewhere along the line, all her plans were thrown askew. Yes, the Conqueror had been defeated, but it was really an abdication rather than a clear cut victory. Gabrielle was personally responsible for that and she was sure all of her Amazons sisters were revelling in her glorious triumph.

As Gabrielle crossed into Amazon lands, she made the Sign of Peace. None of the patrolling warriors wondered why she was alive, as word amongst the Amazons had spread that she wasn’t dead. If they wondered where Xena was, they said nothing. She was escorted directly to Ephiny’s hut and her secluded quarters.
"Thank the gods you made it back safely." Ephiny said as soon as they were alone. Gabrielle and Ephiny held each other in a long comforting hug. "I’ve missed you," Ephiny whispered.

"Me too." Gabrielle answered, her eyes brimming with tears.

After several long moments, the two women gathered in their emotions. Ephiny was the first to speak.

"Where’s Xena? I thought you were going to bring her back to stand trial."

"We were on our way, but you won’t believe what happened," Gabrielle answered.

"Is she dead?"

"Not exactly," Gabrielle replied sadly.

"What do you mean, either she’s dead or she’s not," Ephiny queried, confused by Gabrielle vague answers.

"She was kidnapped by an evil goddess and I don’t know how to get her back. Ares and Aphrodite won’t help me."

"Ares and Aphrodite? What do they have to do with it? If Xena’s still alive, she has to stand trial. The gods can’t intervene with something like that!" Ephiny was livid that Xena just might get away with all the atrocities she had committed against the Amazons due to intervention by the gods. It wasn’t fair.

"I know they can’t," Gabrielle reasoned. "But this wasn’t a goddess from Mount Olympus. It was that Callisto woman."

"The pleasure slave?!" Ephiny asked incredulously.

"Yes."

"Gabrielle, why don’t you start from the beginning and tell me what happened."

When Gabrielle finished telling the fantastic and bizarre tale, Ephiny undressed the Amazon Queen and led her to the bed.

"You must be exhausted, you need some rest," she assured the redhead.

"Ephiny?" Gabrielle asked in a small voice. "Can you stay with me tonight?"

"Yes, of course, my Queen," Ephiny smiled. Gabrielle invited the blonde Amazon to join her beneath the blanket. Ephiny complied. "Just hold me," she whispered.

The two women slept in the comfort of each other’s arms deep into the night.

Xena watched the entire scene with a growing fury inside. She was half mad with jealousy as well as a monstrous anger at herself for being so stupid. How could she have fallen in love with such a conniving and deceitful woman? Callisto had been right all along. Gabrielle had set her up. She was almost amused at the irony that she had done almost the exact same thing to Caesar, except he had the misfortune of being stabbed in the back. At least she had survived, but just barely. Nonetheless, she knew if she could figure out a way to get out of this purgatory Callisto had brought her to, she could form a new army and start all over again. And she knew the first place she would be headed
would be to Ephiny and Gabrielle’s Amazon village.

"See, I told you so, Xena."

Xena whirled around to find a perfectly healed and healthy Callisto standing behind her. The warrior gritted her teeth but said nothing. She was still thinking of how many tiny pieces she could cut the Amazons into.

"I’ll make a deal with you, Xena. You help me figure out how to get us out of here and I’ll make sure you get your Kingdom back. Oh, and, with my talents, tracking down Gabrielle won’t be a problem at all. Not at all."
“So why did you appear before my court?” Xena asked Callisto. They sat across from each other around a campfire Callisto created in the vacant vortex. Fortunately for Xena, Callisto restored her armoured leathers and the warrior adjusted the gauntlets on her forearms as she mentally formulated a plan for their escape.

“It’s a long, boring and complicated story,” Callisto replied wearily.

“It appears we have plenty of time,” Xena said sardonically. “Am I supposed to remember you?”

“Not really, but you have a lot to answer for.”

“What happened, I killed your family?”

Callisto laughed long and hard. “Oh, I like this Xena!”

“What?” Xena asked, confused by Callisto bizarre reaction.

“You don’t mince words, do you? Let’s just say we share a long history and I’m making up for lost time.” Callisto smiled evilly. “I must say, though, that your brutal honesty is refreshing.”

“What do you want from me? I mean after we leave here, I start a new army, win my Kingdom back, destroy the Amazons. Then what?”

“That’s a good start.” Callisto stood up and circled behind Xena. She rested her hands on Xena’s shoulders and bent down to whisper in her ear. “You need to fulfil your destiny, Xena. You were on the right track, and for a time I thought I could change things. But I can’t change what’s in your heart. Neither can Gabrielle.” Callisto felt Xena’s back and shoulders stiffen with the mere mention of the Amazon’s name. “Think of it this way, Xena. You’ve fallen off your horse but there’s no reason you can’t get back up and ride. I want to take that glorious journey with you. You are my destiny now.” The goddess pulled back Xena’s hair and brushed her lips lightly against the delicate hairs lined on her neck.

“Don’t,” the warrior murmured. Callisto ignored her. “Don’t resist me, Xena. I can make you forget everything that’s happened.” The goddess’ soothing words melted Xena’s resolve to refuse her charms. Suddenly, she didn’t care about anything or anybody. Only Callisto’s melodic tones beckoned her down a familiar dark path she had not wanted to yield to for quite some time.

With an unexpected force, Xena whirled around, grabbing Callisto’s wrist as she stood. She twisted it and held it away from the goddess’ body. The blonde smiled seductively, unfazed by Xena’s unrelenting grip on her wrist. “I can you give what you want, Xena.” She paused.

“And what’s that?” Xena asked, mightily holding back her wilful desires.

“Peace.”

With that final word, the warrior yanked Callisto close to her and smothered the blonde’s mouth with her own. Xena swooped her up into her arms, and carried her to an open space on the barren land.

The plans for escape were put on hold for quite a while.
Gabrielle soaked in a steaming hot tub and soothed her exhausted and aching body. It had been days since she’d had a good night’s sleep. Two full moons had passed and finally there had been word of Xena’s return to the land of the living. She had wanted to discreetly seek out her beloved, but the news from the surrounding lands had been devastating. What started out as seemingly wild rumours were confirmed as Xena’s army stormed the land in the name of the Conqueror. With Callisto by her side, they had steadily marched through the nearby countryside and it didn’t take an oracle to figure out that Xena and her army were headed directly for Amazon territory. The Council had wanted to form an alliance with the neighbouring Centaurs, but just three days before, they received word that the Centaurs had been viciously attacked by Xena’s army. No one was spared. Those not willing to work as slaves were killed with brutal savagery. The Amazons were surrounded and a message from the Conqueror demanding the surrender of the Queen sealed the fate of the Amazon Nation.

Tears rolled down Gabrielle’s cheeks as she wondered what had happened to change Xena back. Things were happening too quickly. It appeared that Xena was lost to her forever. She cursed the Fates and the gods for allowing Callisto to intervene. Gabrielle had been perfectly willing to give everything up for Xena and the Conqueror seemed willing to abdicate her title as well. It was true she had originally planned to bring Xena to the Amazons to stand trial, but that was when her auspicious plan was first conceived, before she’d fallen inexplicably in love with the notorious warrior.

Ever since she’d returned to the Amazon village and her throne, she had held out hope that Callisto would release Xena and somehow she would find a way to return to the warrior’s side. In the meantime, she couldn’t bring herself to admit to Ephiny that she had truly fallen in love with the Known World’s greatest enemy. She went through her daily rituals that being Queen of the Amazons entailed but nothing held her interest. She thought only of Xena. Several times Ephiny asked her what was wrong but she sealed the truth of her love for Xena in a dark corner of her heart. And she was miserable without her.

Gabrielle dunked her head under the water, washing away the tears that welled in her eyes once more. She recalled the message from Xena. It said,

"Queen Gabrielle, the Amazons are surrounded. You, alone, are to surrender to the Conqueror at First Light. No escorts. Or else all will be killed."

Everyone knew this was no idle threat. To a woman, each vote in the Council objected to the conditions of Gabrielle’s surrender. No one wanted the Amazons to give up without a brave fight. For most of the Council meeting, Gabrielle said nothing. She admired the Amazons’ fierce bravado but a brave dead Amazon was still dead. She acquiesced to the Council’s ruling but covertly made a decision to circumvent their plans. Unless she met with Xena alone, the situation was hopelessly bleak. Gabrielle resigned herself to her fate as she knew there was only one way that this could all end. But before she died, she needed to speak with Xena.

"Ares, you have to do something!" Aphrodite pleaded. The God of War sat in his throne picking imaginary pieces of dirt out of his fingernails with a dagger. He knew the mere fact that Aphrodite chose to visit him in his own temple hailed his triumph as surely as any battle on the field.

The God of War chuckled. "Let’s see, Xena’s back to murdering and pillaging and destroying everything in sight with her new sidekick, the Goddess of Chaos, and you want me to do something?!" he roared. "No thanks, sister, I’m having the time of my life. Why don’t you talk to her?"

Aphrodite was silent. She couldn’t even begin to sum up all that had gone wrong since the start of her so-called ingenious scheme. What was happening now was much worse than she could have
imagined. Much worse.

Ares looked up from his fingernail-picking and raised an eyebrow in recognition. "She can’t see you anymore, can she? You appear before her but she ignores you. She’s blinded by her hatred," he jeered at her triumphantly.

Aphrodite looked away, unable to admit defeat to her despicable brother. "No," she answered softly.

"Don’t you see? This is her Fate, her Destiny, she belongs to me, Aphrodite. It’s in her blood."

"Well, so am I!" Aphrodite declared indignantly, vanishing into thin air as his diabolical laughter echoed throughout the sacred temple.

"Yes, I know all about it, Aphrodite. Gabrielle will soon need my protection," Artemis said.

"Will you help her? I mean, she and Xena belong together, not this Goddess of... of... whatever she calls herself."

"Chaos." Artemis filled in the blank. She wasn’t happy with the turn of events and she was especially angry with Aphrodite for starting this whole mess. She could protect Gabrielle, but only for so long. They would need help to turn things around. A lot of help. "We’ll need to ask for help, you know," she said aloud. "And since you got us all into this predicament," she paused. "You’re going to be the one to ask."

Aphrodite took in a sigh of resignation. Deep down, she had known it would come down to this. All along she had managed to escape her father’s wrath, but this time she might never be forgiven.

Xena hesitantly walked through the echoing chamber. She looked up at the towering walls and saw no ceiling. It was dark and she couldn’t see where she was going. She wore her sleeping shift and the slap of her bare feet echoed in the silent chamber. She had no idea where she was or where she was going.

"Are you guilty!?" a disembodied voice roared.

"What?" she asked confused.

"She doesn’t even know what you’re talking about," Ares laughed.

"Guilty of what?" Xena asked. The voices swirled around her and faces appeared as they spoke.

"She’s never done this before," Aphrodite said defensively.

"She’s has no idea what you’re talking about," Ares boasted.

"Yes, she does, she’s admitted it once before," Artemis declared.

"What are you talking about, guilty of what?!" Xena cried. She put her hands to her ears as she shouted. "It’s Callisto! She makes me crazy!"

"Look! She can’t even admit it. She blames Callisto!" Ares shouted gleefully.

"I’ve committed so many crimes! I’m sorry!" Xena confessed.

A soft voice spoke above all others.
"Xena, you’re not on trial for your crimes, but are you guilty?"

Xena looked up to see the face of the softspoken woman. It was Gabrielle.

Xena eyes shot open. She looked around her and remembered where she was. She was in her tent with Callisto. Two full moons had passed since they escaped from the vortex. They had been travelling for several days as they gathered and trained soldiers for the invasion into Amazon land. She relaxed back into the bedroll, turning on her side away from Callisto. She didn’t want the blonde to know that she had been dreaming about Gabrielle again. She hated to admit it, but the blonde goddess’ magical touch drew her steadily away from Gabrielle’s memory but no matter how hard Callisto tried, she could not blot her out entirely. Night after night she dreamed about her beloved Gabrielle, but this was the first one she had remembered so clearly. What could she be guilty of, she wondered. She knew she was guilty of many things and yet she knew that the guilt of her many crimes was not what the dream was about. If she was guilty of anything, it was that she missed Gabrielle. Despite Gabrielle’s betrayal, she loved her and would be willing to forgive her if only she could see her face to face. Xena knew they were on their way to destroy the Amazons but the closer they got to Amazon territory, the more she thought only of the good times she’d had with Gabrielle. She remembered how her heart melted just being around her. Before Callisto intervened, they had planned a life together without the Amazons or her army. It was supposed to be just the two of them, together. Her note of surrender demanded the Queen’s solitary presence but she knew the Council would never allow such a condition. Nevertheless, it was worth a try. She had to speak to Gabrielle alone at least one last time.

As the half Moon rose in the sky, Gabrielle crept through the trees of the Amazon lands. The note had said First Light, but she had no intention of waiting that long. She hoped to catch Xena off guard by getting there several candlemarks ahead of time. She felt like a spy amongst her own people but she knew this was the only way. She had stopped at Artemis’ temple on the way and asked for protection by the Moon Goddess. To her surprise, Artemis appeared before her, warning her that Xena knew all about Gabrielle’s plan to return her to the Amazons for trial. To Gabrielle’s great relief, she finally understood Xena’s relentless march. Nevertheless, the harrowing culmination of the past few weeks welled up inside her and she tearfully confessed her dark secret. The secret of her love.

"I know you love her, my child. But love is never something to be ashamed of," the Moon Goddess reassured her. "If you love her, that is what you must tell her."

"If she doesn’t kill me first," Gabrielle replied, doubting that so simple a plan could work. Nevertheless, she would not want to live without Xena.

"I will protect you as much as I can. But remember, you must speak from your heart. That is the only way you will reach hers," she added.

Afterwards, Gabrielle snuck around behind the small structure and escaped through the trees. She figured by the time the other Amazons discovered she was gone, she’d be deeply entrenched in Xena’s encampment.

Gabrielle spotted several soldiers lining the perimeter. Silently, she waited for the perfect time to elude their protective ring. She used the time to think of what she would say to Xena and how she could convince her to put down her sword. It was a daunting task. Finally, there was an opening and she slipped through their defences and made her way to Xena’s tent. She wriggled under a loose flap and gazed from the bottom of the bedroll where she found Xena asleep. She kneeled at her side and reached out to touch the warrior’s dark hair.
"Well, well, well, if it isn’t Queen Gabrielle," Callisto announced. Gabrielle glanced behind her when a fist slammed into the side of her head. Stars danced before her eyes and then everything black.
Gabrielle patiently waited for a sign of First Light. After she’d been knocked unconscious by Callisto, she awoke to find herself being dragged to a tent occupied and surrounded by twenty or more of Xena’s soldiers. Dazedly, she had resisted little while the evil goddess bound her to the pole in the centre of the tent. She had heard Callisto boastfully inform the soldiers that she was Xena’s merchandise, clearly indicating that she was to be touched by no one except the Conqueror herself. After Callisto left, Gabrielle was stoically ignored by one and all.

The Amazon Queen surmised that Callisto had cast Xena into a deep slumber and rendered her oblivious to the waking world. Normally, the Conqueror would have awoken within a blink of an eye, but Xena never stirred. Nevertheless, Callisto apparently wanted Gabrielle alive but she wasn’t sure why. Maybe it was because Xena would never forgive the goddess for not allowing her the sole privilege of killing the Amazon herself or maybe it was simply that Callisto wanted to witness the Conqueror lay waste to Gabrielle once and for all. However, none of that mattered now. All she could do was have her final words with Xena and hope that she could penetrate her darkened soul like she’d done once before.

In the candlemarks of pre-Dawn, Callisto knew this was her last chance. She lay beside the Conqueror as she slept in their tent on the bedroll. The blonde goddess was aware that no matter how much her godly powers held the Conqueror spellbound, Xena would never truly be hers. She watched Xena sleep and her eyes fluttered with the activity of dreams. Sadly, Callisto knew that the dreams were certainly not about her. The goddess knew it was only a matter of time before Xena chose Gabrielle over her once again. She saw how Xena’s eyes lit up with anticipation that the Amazon Queen might be brought to her. If Callisto had her druthers, she would have simply invaded the Amazon home base without so much as warning aforethought and she encouraged Xena to do so. But Xena wouldn’t listen, and instead demanded that the Amazon Queen be brought to her. When Gabrielle showed up in their tent, Callisto knew then that she couldn’t hold back the current of Fate that always seemed to bring Xena and Gabrielle together, no matter what universe they were in or what the circumstances. While the Amazon was held captive in another tent, Callisto bid her final farewell to her beloved warrior.

Callisto examined her lover’s beauty while she slept. She committed the peaks and valleys of her features to memory knowing that this would probably be her last few moments alone with Xena. She wanted the Conqueror to forget about the irritating Amazon entirely but Callisto knew the dreams of Xena’s former lover haunted the warrior and permeated her waking hours like a grey cloud in a tranquil blue sky. The goddess vowed to strike a bargain for when all was said and done, and it would be as if she had never met Xena of Amphipolis nor Xena, the Warrior Princess, nor Xena, the Conqueror in her brief wayward life.

Xena opened her eyes, blinking away the grogginess of sleep.

"Is she here yet?" she asked excitedly, propping herself up on her elbows.

"Shh, shh, don’t worry about that now, she’s fine," the blonde goddess hushed, pushing Xena back down on the bedroll. She stroked Xena’s bangs away from her face and melted into the kaleidoscope of her crystal blue eyes. "She’s being taken care of." Callisto covered Xena’s lips with a searing kiss making the Conqueror forget all that had gone before. The blonde made Xena know only her goddess touch, her divine kiss, her godly love, her unholy obsession. Her hands gracefully relieved Xena of her leather tunic, along with her britches. Callisto relished the hunger in Xena’s response as the warrior rose up to meet her roving hands. Carnal sounds of pleasure emanated from the
"Oh Xena, my love, you’re so precious," Callisto murmured as she nipped and licked the smooth skin of Xena’s neck. Her hand gently parted Xena’s thighs and she dipped her fingers into the silky wetness she found there.

"Don’t stop, Callisto," Xena pleaded. Her breathing was becoming ragged and the blonde goddess enjoyed the effect she was having on the so-called Conqueror of the Known World. She would miss this passionate woman, she mused. The fierce warrior who writhed beneath her sent currents of lust raging through Callisto and she cherished the power her goddess touch provoked. Her mouth found its way across Xena’s breasts and Callisto lingered at a hardened tip, flicking one back and forth between her teeth. The dark warrior arched her back, lifting her torso off the bedroll while loud moans echoed the blonde’s relentlessness. She released the tiny nub and left an imprint of swirls through the film of sweat covering Xena’s stomach. Callisto inhaled the scent of Xena’s desire and dove into the lubricated mound.

"Ohhhh..." the Conqueror moaned, spreading her legs wider to accommodate the goddess’ fervent appetite. Callisto lapped at the overflowing juices and focused merciless pressure on the erect nodule. Xena thrashed wildly against her and held the blonde mane firmly against her mound. However, Callisto didn’t want the Conqueror to take control, she wanted this last time to be hers. And she wanted to leave Xena with an everlasting impression. She pulled away from the warrior’s sopping triangle as Xena let out a sharp cry.

"Don’t stop!" she gasped.

Callisto smiled slyly. "You’re hardly in control now, Conqueror," Callisto taunted. She wanted the warrior’s complete surrender.

"Don’t leave me this way," Xena moaned as the goddess moved off the bedroll. Callisto had no intention of leaving the warrior unfulfilled but first she stood back to admire her prized possession. The goddess took her time removing her leathers, wallowing in the powerful intoxicant of Xena begging her to vanquish her aching desires. A depraved smile crossed Callisto’s lips. Now this is how she wanted to remember her radiant beauty, she thought.

"Don’t worry, Conqueror, I won’t leave you unfulfilled, but I must say I’m enjoying your distress," she smirked.

"Please, I need you," Xena breathed heavily.

Callisto approached the warrior and smothered Xena’s mouth with her own. Her body covered the bigger woman’s and the goddess slid her own wet centre against Xena’s thigh. She held the warrior in place with a yank of her thick hair and two fingers slipped inside Xena’s warm entrance.

"This is my cunt, Conqueror," Callisto declared.

"Yes," Xena groaned, arching her pelvis against the smaller woman’s hand.

"And this cunt of mine will not be fulfilled by any other."

"All...yours," Xena panted.

"Really?" Callisto queried, her eyes glistening with the possibilities. Maybe she could still get her life back. "Will you do anything for me, my sweet?"

"Yes! Anything!"
Callisto knew that it wouldn’t take much to bring Xena to the brink of ecstasy, but she wanted to prolong that indulgence for as long as possible. She slowed her pace and embedded a third digit inside Xena and the warrior eagerly obliged her thrusting fingers. The steady rhythm drove the Conqueror wild with lust, her hands gripping the tops of Callisto’s shoulders, but again, the blonde refused to be rushed.

"Please, Callisto, I need to…” the Conqueror teetered on the verge of frenzied desperation.

"Xena, the Conqueror pleading for mercy. Do you know that you’re just simply gorgeous when you beg?” the goddess mocked. A guttural sigh escaped Xena’s throat as Callisto’s hand kept up a slow steady pace. She knew she was driving the warrior to near madness with her frivolous conversation.

"Please!” Xena insisted, her jaw working noticeably as she gritted her teeth. Callisto grinned when she detected a trace of anger in the warrior’s voice. Now that was the Xena she knew from before and the one she most wanted to conquer.

"Oh, you’ll get your wish, my pet, but first...." Callisto licked the length of Xena’s jaw, coming to rest at the base of her neck. She balled her hand into a fist and manoeuvred it inside the Conqueror’s flooded cavern as the steaming walls engulfed her small hand like a well-worn glove. Xena grunted. She instinctively arched her back and spread her thighs wide, inviting the goddess to invade her most private domain.

"There will be no one who can fill you like I can, will there, Xena?” Callisto breathed heavily into the warrior’s ear.

"No one…yes…fill me…please,” the Conqueror moaned.

Xena bucked wildly against Callisto as she thrust her fist into the very core of her being. The goddess’ own juices lathered Xena’s thigh as she matched the carnal beat of her lover’s pace. Xena raced to the edge of absolute bliss but Callisto slowed down not wanting her to peak before she’d extracted a little promise out of the lust-crazed warrior.

"Don’t slow down, I’m almost there!” Xena nearly screamed, her chest heaving from the strain.

Callisto laughed. "Oh, I know, my sweet, but you forget, I love to see you writhing in torment."

"Please, Callisto, don’t stop, I can’t take it. It’s just that it feels so good," Xena tried to sweet talk the blonde into continuing.

"Yes, I know, my luscious beauty." Callisto smoothed Xena’s matted hair away from her face, admiring the dark beauty that was the exact opposite to her own. "And what would you do you make me continue?"

Xena didn’t hesitate. "Anything!” she heaved.

"That’s exactly what I wanted to hear." Callisto kissed the warrior’s full lips, pushing her tongue inside as their mouths duelled for dominance. The goddess continued the rhythmic movements of her fist inside Xena and built a friction that was soon to explode. The tempo of her own climax against Xena’s thigh quickly paralleled the warrior’s throbbing beat.

"Come for me, Conqueror, come for me," Callisto hissed.

"Oh, yes! Callisto! yes!” Xena wailed. She bucked frantically against Callisto’s hand and she carried the blonde goddess along for the ride. Xena’s inner walls squeezed and convulsed against Callisto’s hand and she revelled in the sheer pleasure of driving Xena delirious with desire. Drops of sweat
poured down Callisto’s face and her hair became a scraggly wet mess. The sound of Xena screaming her name sent her over the edge and then the warrior arched her back one final time. Callisto steadfastly held her grip as the two women reached the pinnacle of paradise together.

Afterwards, Xena held Callisto in her arms until the beginning signs of First Light.

"Xena?"

"Hmm?"

"Promise me something?"

"What’s that?" Xena asked quietly, apparently still exhausted from their early morning tryst.

"Promise me you will grant me my last wish."

"Your last wish? What do you mean?" Xena leaned up on her elbows to face the goddess.

"Just promise me, okay? When they come for me, you’ll bargain for my last wish."

"Well, what is it?" Xena queried, confused by Callisto’s strange request.

"I can’t say but you’ll know when the time comes. Just promise me that, okay?"

Xena laid back down on the bedroll and kissed the top of Callisto’s head, "I promise," she whispered.

Callisto was content with the promise she’d extracted from Xena but she knew that her fragile hold on her darling warrior would soon slip through her fingers like the elusive granules on a sandy beach. Nonetheless, she was delighted that her final farewell would leave Xena with a lasting memory, whether they remembered each other or not.

The two warriors dressed and prepared themselves for the encounter with the new prisoner, Gabrielle, Queen of the Amazons.

The Conqueror entered the tent, immediately prompting all soldiers to stand at attention. With a nearly imperceptible tilt of her head, she dismissed everyone from her sight and the silent and obedient soldiers departed in single file. Only Xena, Gabrielle and Callisto remained. As soon as the Conqueror laid her eyes on Gabrielle, her heart threatened to squeeze her throat shut. She swallowed hard to force down her emotions. She was surprised at how much she had missed the Amazon and a twist of guilt seized her. How could she allow herself to be seduced by one when her heart clearly belonged to another? she wondered. The only threadbare excuse she could claim was that Callisto was a goddess and it was nearly impossible to resist her alluring charm. A wisp of a dream swirled around her as she remembered a question, "Are you guilty?" Xena answered silently, "Yes. I love her." Finally, she realised the meaning of the question. Callisto rudely interrupted her reverie.

"Here she is, Xena. Gabrielle, Queen of the Amazons," Callisto mocked derisively. She stood to Gabrielle’s left while the Conqueror hovered on her right. The Amazon’s gaze fixed unwaveringly on the ground. She was clearly frightened by her predicament. "Kill her!" the goddess’s eyes gleamed triumphantly.

"Hold on, Callisto, there’s plenty of time for that later. Isn’t there, little queen?" Xena lifted the Amazon’s chin. Their eyes met, and for a moment, the warrior was held captive by the mesmerising windows of Gabrielle’s soul. She found herself wanting to get lost in the emerald ocean and press her lips against her succulent mouth. There was something about this woman that seeped into her
soul but first, she knew there were things she needed to find out.

"I don’t know," Gabrielle answered, her voice subdued and hoarse.

"Xena, she doesn’t expect to live, does she? She and the Amazons are as good as dead right now!" Callisto goaded.

"Quiet!" Xena growled. The warrior was growing weary of Callisto’s meddling. Suddenly, she wanted the goddess out of the tent and out of her life. She only wanted to turn her wholehearted attention to the Amazon Queen. Xena knew it was Gabrielle who invaded her dreams and it was she who enlightened her spirit. Although there had been a place for Callisto at her side, it was clear she only knew death and destruction. Xena released her hold on Gabrielle’s face and turned her back to the prisoner. She needed some answers but first she needed to get a grip on herself. She nonchalantly took in a few deep breaths, then after a few moments, she turned to face her captive.

"Gabrielle, she’s right, you know, by rights you should all be dead. But I want to hear your side of the story. Is it true you intended to take me back to the Amazons, only to be held for my crimes against them? Or were you really in love with me?"

"Yes," Gabrielle answered meekly.

"See, Xena? She admits her betrayal! You meant nothing to her!" Callisto exclaimed.

"No!" the Amazon shouted. Gabrielle spoke fast but faltered midway. "I mean yes, I was supposed to take you back but that was in the beginning, before...before..."

"Before what?" Xena asked. She crossed her arms defiantly and waited for an explanation.

"Before I rescued you, Xena," Callisto interjected. "She was going to lead you right into their little trap!"

"Xena," the Amazon spoke with soft resignation. "I don’t know if you’ll believe me, but I swear by the gods this is the truth. Yes, I was supposed to — "

"She’s lying!" Callisto broke in again.

"Shut up! Callisto! Let her talk," Xena said through gritted teeth. Callisto seethed with fury. Even though she knew that this would happen, it was hardly comforting to know the truth and then have it happen. She’d lost Xena once again.

Gabrielle continued, "The plan was for me to seduce you, forge an alliance and then bring you back to the Amazons for trial. But none of that happened. You seduced me, Xena," the Amazon quietly admitted. "You were the one who gave up everything for me and I was going to as well, but then... um, things happened, and...I don’t know, things just got out of control." She paused for a moment, gathering the strength to continue. "I want to be with you, Xena, just you, no Amazons, no army, no one else, just you." Gabrielle looked down at the ground again.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, she loves you," Callisto chimed in.

"And how do I know you’re telling the truth this time?" Xena queried, still not entirely sure if she should believe Gabrielle, but she very much wanted to.

Gabrielle was silent for another moment. "I don’t know. All I know is that I don’t want to live without you. I wrote a few words for you and if you still want to kill me after I have my say, then go right ahead. I can’t take it anymore."
Callisto rolled her eyes. "Oh, for the love of Aphrodite, here comes the mushy part. Xena, I can’t believe you’re going to listen to this nonsense."

Xena glared at the blonde goddess, trying very hard to ignore her caustic tone. "Go ahead," she said to Gabrielle.

Gabrielle began:

If you ask how much I love you
How can I explain?
I need you, my dark warrior, like roses need rain
If you ask how long I’ll love you
Let me tell you true
Until the last of Never, I’ll still be loving you
I’ll love you until the flowers forget to bloom
I’ll love you until the honey has lost its perfume
I’ll love you until the bards run out of rhyme
Until the last of Never and that’s a long long time

Callisto watched with growing jealousy the effect Gabrielle was having on Xena. She couldn’t take it anymore as her rage reached a boiling point.

"Oh, so she’s a bard now?!" Callisto interrupted.

Xena knew that Callisto was angry but she also knew that her heart belonged to the woman with the melodic voice. Her heart was laid waste by her charms and she knew that some strand of Fate tugged at her soul. The Conqueror knew Gabrielle spoke the truth.

"Let her finish, Callisto!" she barked.

Gabrielle continued:

I want you to hold me close
And never let me go
When you hold me close
My heart melts like April snow
I’ll love you until the moon refuses to rise
I’ll love you until the oceans turn barren and dry
I’ll love you until the sun has lost its shine
Until the last of Never and that’s a long long time

Tears streamed down Gabrielle’s cheeks as she finished and the warrior’s eyes brimmed with tears of her own. Xena stepped toward her, intent on releasing the Amazon from her bonds. They were completely unaware that Callisto had withdrawn her sword. But just as an enraged Callisto made a certain deadly thrust towards Xena and Gabrielle, the Conqueror turned in time to see the sword mysteriously vanish from the goddess’ hand. Confused, Xena, Gabrielle and Callisto all gasped as a thunderous white flash materialised into Zeus, King of the Gods.

"All right, all right, Callisto, you’ve had your little fun," he said wearily.
Chapter 16

Xena’s tent glowed with the powerful aura of Zeus, King of the Gods, but swiftly the bland colour of the canvas faded away into a bright room that seemed to be lighted by the very presence of Apollo himself. The Sun God wasn’t there, but a few of the other ones were. One by one they showed themselves - Aphrodite, Artemis, and Ares. Xena instinctively knew that they had all journeyed to Mount Olympus. The high expansive walls exuded immense power to all who passed through and Xena recognised the majestic hall from her dreams, but why they were brought here, she had no idea. Protectively, she steered Gabrielle behind her, shielding her from the formidable pre-eminence of the Olympian gods. Callisto simply resigned herself to her fate.

"Why have you brought us here?" the Conqueror demanded.

Zeus ignored her question. "You have chosen well, my child," he said calmly as he nodded his head in Gabrielle’s direction.

"You can’t be serious!" Ares interjected angrily, disregarding the significant edge in the realm of power Zeus held over him. His father’s wrath was well known but despite his bravado, Ares knew Zeus held a special place for his malevolent son.

"Face it, Ares, your beloved Xena chose love above all else," Aphrodite boasted.

"Yes, and now the balance of all the realms has been restored," Artemis agreed.

"Not with her still running around," Ares chided, as he cocked his head in Callisto’s direction. He chuckled to himself as if he were the only one to get the inside joke. Even though he considered Callisto his enemy as well as his rival for Xena’s affections, he admired her dogged determination to weave through space, time and an alternate reality to get revenge on her dark nemesis.

"Yes, so what will you do with me, Zeus? You know no confinement can hold me," Callisto stepped forward to confront Zeus, showing neither fear nor deference. It was clear to all the gods that the fledging goddess had an uncanny ability to escape any prison known to her, be it Tartarus, the Labyrinth, the Vortex or any number of caves. "And you know that I’ll never give up in my quest for revenge. Oh, she’s infatuated with the little brat for now, but how long do you suppose that will last?"

The Conqueror stepped forward to speak. Zeus shot up his hand to silence her.

"All right, Callisto, you’ve proven your point, what do you want?" he asked the blonde goddess.

Callisto smirked, surprising even herself that Zeus would accede to her demands. She crossed her arms across her chest and boldly presented her case.

"The only way for me to forget about your precious Xena…" she said, waving her hand in a dramatic fashion towards the warrior. "…is to make it so I never met her. Make it so the Warrior Princess bypassed Cirra altogether. Make it so she never torched my village to the ground. Make it so her army never burned my mother and my sister to an unrecognisable crisp. Make it – "

"I get the picture, Callisto," Zeus interrupted.

"You can’t do that!" Artemis protested. "She deserves to be punished!"

"Sure he can, my dear sister. Unless you have a better idea," Ares offered. He envisioned the
villainess being taken out the picture, thus leaving his magnificent warrior all to himself.

Artemis had no answer, but after all the hurt Callisto had caused Xena and especially Gabrielle, she wanted something far worse to happen to the unruly goddess than a second chance.

"She should be granted her last wish," Xena spoke in a hushed tone, so soft that mere mortals could not hear her, but the gods clearly did. The warrior finally understood Callisto’s puzzling request earlier in the morning. After what she, as the Conqueror, apparently had done to Callisto and her family, she should at least grant her that much. It was especially deplorable that she couldn’t even remember when or how it had happened. But she was certain the goddess spoke the truth.

"Make it so she never met me," Xena declared.

"I agree with Xena," Aphrodite admitted. "Callisto should get a second chance. It was she who got the two of them together in the first place. And besides, that was our original bargain."

"If I were you, Dite, I wouldn’t bring up your ingenious scheme," Artemis glared at the Goddess of Love. "We wouldn’t be in this twisted mess if you hadn’t decided to wreck havoc with the Fates."

"The Fates? You call Xena throwing Gabrielle over a cliff, the Fates?! It was true they were having some problems, but then Ares decided to intervene – "

"Me?! I don’t know who’s worse, you or Artemis!" he roared. "You’re both intent on throwing those two into each other’s arms at every turn!" Ares was livid that Aphrodite tattle-taled on him to Zeus. Xena and Gabrielle exchanged puzzled looks. They had no clue as to what the gods were babbling on about. When had Xena toppled Gabrielle off a cliff?

"I did not!" Artemis fumed.

"They did that on their own!" Aphrodite protested.

"Silence!" Zeus’ voice boomed in the expansive room. He waited for his bickering children to calm down and demanded some semblance of order. "It doesn’t matter who got whom together," he said. "The point is, they’re together now and they belong together. Don’t!" he raised his hand, addressing Ares without looking at him, "contradict me." Ares was about to speak but his father’s tone stopped him.

Zeus continued. "Now, all of you will, beginning with right now, cease meddling in these two women’s lives. They seem to want to make a new start. And they’ll get it. As for Callisto," he waved a hand in her direction. "She’ll get another chance too. It will be as if she never met the Warrior Princess. My decision is final." No one dared to quibble with him. Zeus then turned to Xena, the Conqueror.

"What do you intend to do with that army?"

"We’ll surrender to the Amazons immediately."

"And as the Queen, Gabrielle, what do you intend to do with Xena’s army?"

Artemis took a step forward, anxious to answer for her favoured mortal. Zeus held up his hand for her to be silent.

Gabrielle spoke for the first time and it was almost as if being in the presence of the Olympians had taken away her most useful asset, her voice. She cleared her throat and swallowed hard. "If I may, I don’t want to go back to the Amazons, and I don’t want Xena to surrender."
"Gabrielle!" Xena exclaimed.

"Let her speak," Zeus said.

"I would willingly abdicate my throne if it meant being with Xena. But I don’t want her to be the head of an army either. There’s been enough killing already. I’d just as soon as live out lives our quietly rather than go back to that."

"That would be impossible, my child," Zeus reminded her. "Xena cannot simply walk away."

Nevertheless, Zeus pondered Gabrielle’s proposal. If so many lives weren’t at stake, he could see Gabrielle’s proposal working, but he couldn’t allow it. It would mean altering yet another timeline and he wasn’t about to do that. He grinned imperceptibly as he realised why Artemis was so fond of the girl. She had to have immense bravery just to even ask him. He turned his attention back to Xena.

"Xena, you’ve been asked this question many times and I will ask it yet again, are you guilty?"

The Conqueror studied the patriarchal god and contemplated her answer. She squeezed Gabrielle’s hand for courage.

"Yes, I love her," the Conqueror said quietly, holding the King of the Gods’ steady gaze. She realised that saying those words out loud no longer frightened or shamed her. Of all the crimes she had committed in her illustrious past, this one she was proud to be "guilty" of.

Ares snorted while Aphrodite clasped her hands with glee. Callisto merely yawned.

"And you, Gabrielle, do you love her?" Gabrielle nodded and opened her mouth to speak. She paused when Zeus continued. "Do you love her enough to overlook her murderous history? To overlook the crimes she’s committed against the Amazon Nation? Can you even begin to forgive her?"

All eyes were upon the Amazon Queen who had, up until that moment, been known to wholeheartedly devote most of her life to the glory of the warrior tribe.

"Yes, I can," she said convincingly. "I know her past and I’d be willing to live with it if she can." Gabrielle turned to meet Xena’s gaze. She swallowed back the emotion welling up in her throat and continued. She lowered her voice and spoke directly to Xena as if she and the warrior were the only two beings who existed. "All I know is that I’ve never been more complete than when I’m with her. She’s the other half of my soul and I couldn’t bear to live without her."

The Conqueror leaned toward the Amazon, "I’ll always be here," she said. Their lips met in a soft fiery kiss.

"Oh, puhlease!" Callisto sighed.

Zeus intervened. "Those are very pretty words, but I’m afraid they won’t be enough," he informed the affectionate couple. Xena and Gabrielle pulled away from each other.

"Xena, your days as the Conqueror were spent destroying every Nation your army encountered. You killed without warning and condemned without concern for the life of your prisoners. There is only one way to atone for your past."

Xena swallowed hard, realising suddenly that the atonement for her past was not going to be easy. "Go on," she said.

"According to Amazon law, you are entitled to a fair trial. And further to that law, if you are found
guilty, the penalty is forty lashes.”

"No!" Gabrielle gasped. Even though she knew by all rights Xena should stand trial and be punished for her crimes, she didn’t want that to happen to her beloved warrior. Gabrielle silently pleaded with the goddess who had protected the Queen and her Amazons through so much.

Artemis shook her head, then looked away, unable to meet Gabrielle’s wistful eyes. She was powerless to do anything to help them this time.

Xena betrayed no emotion, somehow already knowing that it would all come down to this, and rightfully so.

Callisto cackled in the background. The other gods remained silent, each of them realising how deadly serious Zeus was. They all had their own reasons for wanting Xena to remain alive, but Zeus’ word was final in this matter.

The King God continued. "If you survive the lashes, you will be free to live the rest of your life in peace with Gabrielle as you both see fit. That is also in keeping with the laws of the Amazons. However, during all of this, there will be no intervention by the gods. I repeat. None." He eyed each one of his meddling children to emphasise his point, each of them silently acknowledging an agreement.

"Oh, wouldn’t I love to witness that!" Callisto gleamed.

"Quiet!" Zeus hissed.

"Oh, Pops, you take all the fun out of everything," she pouted.

Zeus ignored her recalcitrant behaviour and addressed the Conqueror. "Xena, do you agree to the terms?"

"Yes, I do," Xena answered without hesitation. She stood proud and regal, shouldering the weight of her responsibilities during her life as the Conqueror.

"Xena, you can’t!" Gabrielle exclaimed. "You’ll die!" The Amazon knew that very few had ever survived forty lashes. Could Xena survive? It was too much for her to bear although she was quickly resigning herself to the fact that Xena would most probably be hunted down and killed anyway. She would either face her crimes now or forever be stalked wherever she went. Her hopes that Zeus would send them back in time were dashed by the gravity of his proposal.

"Zeus, please, isn’t there another way?" she pleaded with the King of the Gods, hopeful that there was at least one last chance she could convince him.

"No. Both you and Xena have declared that love will conquer all. This is the way you will prove it. Now go. All of you."

And with a dismissive wave of his hand, everyone disappeared from Mount Olympus.

The Punishment Court overflowed with Amazons. There wasn’t a soul amongst them who hadn’t known who the prisoner was or what her crimes had been. Most curious were the rumours that floated about that the Amazon Queen was truly in love with the former Conqueror of the Known World. The entire village was abuzz with the latest developments surrounding the ultimate fate of Xena. She had adamantly refused a trial, and so had resigned herself to the ancient punishment of the fatal forty lashes. The more romantic rumour for her surrender was that she wanted to prove her love
to the Queen, but the more cynical amongst them believed that it was merely a ploy by Xena to convince a sympathetic Gabrielle to spare her life at the last minute. So far, it hadn’t happened and the Amazons singularly watched with growing astonishment and disbelief that the fearsome warrior would willingly succumb to her dire sentence.

Xena relaxed into the manacles that restrained her. Surrounded by nameless faces, she imagined that they were all the victims she had crucified during her indisputable sovereignty. Despite her considerable fear, she held on to the threadbare lifeline that adjoined her to Gabrielle as she stood in the middle of the Punishment Court and braced herself for the pain that would soon assail her. She was decorated with the headdress she wore frequently as the Conqueror and as she awaited the ultimate penance for her crimes, the headdress was the final humiliation. Nonetheless, it was deemed by Amazon law that there must be a public symbol of her identity. The rest of her attire consisted of a thin tan-coloured shift. It hung loosely around her torso and she knew that the flimsy material would soon be mere strips of cloth when they were through.

Xena spotted Gabrielle atop the dais along with the rest of the Amazon Council, including Ephiny. The Queen of the Amazons held her face expressionless except for the message that could only be described as pure love for Xena. It was a look the warrior knew well and she held that look as it caressed her soul in the moments before her damnation was to begin. Xena closed her eyes and memorised the face of the woman for whom she had given up everything. She knew none of those things meant anything to her if she couldn’t be with Gabrielle. And if she couldn’t be with her love, she didn’t want to live. Her ultimate sacrifice was at hand.

The Punisher moved into place behind Xena and awaited a command from Gabrielle. The Queen pulled down her official headdress over her face, in effect declaring the proceedings to commence. "Begin!" she announced.

Xena never knew how long it lasted or if she even succumbed to the entire penance. After the first few strokes, she withstood the pain by simply surrendering to it. She knew to resist would only prolong it and so she let it wash over and comfort her in a dark haze of nothingness. Too late, her nerves tried to numb themselves of all feeling and she was vaguely aware that rivulets of blood circled around her torso. She couldn’t feel the trickle but she saw droplets splatter to the ground. Her tattered shift was sticky and refused to separate from her flesh. She was only vaguely aware that she had once worn it as a whole piece. At some point, her head piece crashed to the ground.

Slowly, but surely, an unrecognisable sensation engulfed her. It snaked its way through every raw fibre of her being and her nerves sang in unison like a well-trained angelic choir. It interloped its way through her muscles, through her veins, and through her flesh until finally, it seized her in an unyielding grip. Eventually, she felt nothing at all. Then she heard a voice she supposed belonged to her that gathered from the pit of her stomach and seem to burst forth directly from the bowels of Tartarus. She hadn’t even been aware that she had held in any emotion at all. But then she couldn’t hold back any longer and a voice, her voice, spewed out of her like a volcanic eruption. It reached for the heavens high above her and the depths of Hades’ realm far below her. She screamed and screamed until a heavy shroud of darkness entombed her and all was quiet once again. Somehow, peace had found her.
Six full moon cycles had passed since the Amazons triumphed over the woman formerly known by many names - Xena of Amphipolis, the Warrior Princess, the Destroyer of Nations, and most recently, the Conqueror of the Known World. The Amazons celebrated the success of the new era and not one of them would have believed what had transpired if they had not seen it for themselves. Nonetheless, Xena herself became the spoils of victory according to the strict letter of Amazon law. The warrior's army had been peacefully dispersed, returning the men and women to their homes to rebuild a new future. Few would have recognised the lithe, tall servant and consort of the Amazon Queen to be one and the same woman as the Conqueror. Ultimately, they all reasoned, it was poetic justice. The Amazons had truly conquered Xena.

Gabrielle spied the warrior as she scurried around the table, serving the Amazon Council their evening meal. Xena's long dark hair covered most of the marks on her back but when the strands separated, the scars were clearly visible even after such a long period of time. The warrior had confided to Gabrielle that they were physical reminders of all she had given up. In addition, they were badges of honour she would proudly wear for the rest of the natural life.

The Queen thought back to the terrifying day when Xena repaid her debt to the Amazon Nation. That day and the ensuing days that followed would forever be etched in her memory. After the beating ceased, the warrior had been released from the manacles and taken to the Healer's hut. There she remained for nearly a quarter moon, lapsing in and out of consciousness for several candlemarks at a time. Miraculously, Xena withstood the brutal beating by the Punisher, but for several days she had been close to paying for her sins with her life. Nevertheless, Gabrielle had been fully prepared to drink a potion of Nightspain if Xena didn't survive. She had meant it when she told everyone that she didn't want to live without her beloved warrior.

Thinking back on that harrowing night, Gabrielle had been required to preside over the festivities that marked the beginning of a new era and the vanquishing of an old foe. But she handed over all diplomatic formalities to Ephiny, leaving Gabrielle as a permanent fixture at Xena's bedside every day from dawn until dusk.

When Xena awakened from her feverish state, Gabrielle welcomed her back to the land of the living with a gentle smile. Xena's lips were parched and the Amazon quickly drew up some water for her to drink.

"I'm still here?" Xena asked softly, her throat hoarse and ragged. She took a sip of the cold liquid.

"Yes, you are!" Gabrielle exclaimed. She leaned forward to plant a soft kiss on her lover's lips. "Promise me one thing?" she whispered.

"Hmm?"

"Don't ever leave me again."

Xena's lips turned up in a crooked smile, "I promise."

"Are you hungry? There some broth if you want it."

"Starving." Xena tried to sit up but she only managed to sink back awkwardly onto the bed. "How bad is it?" she winced, ignoring the strips of bandages that crissed-crossed her back.

Gabrielle looked away, blinking back tears. She was reluctant to admit how close to death Xena had
"Come on, tell me honestly," Xena cajoled.

"You lost a lot of blood and your back will never completely heal. You'll always have the scars. The Healer says you can apply ointments after the scabs go away but they will never completely go away."

"What about crippling? I feel so weak. My legs. They're so stiff."

"That's just because you've been lying around doing nothing for a quarter moon." Gabrielle tried to sound optimistic and managed a weak grin. She wasn't sure how much of Xena's former strength would return but she didn't want to admit how many times the warrior's spine had been hit during the beating, accidentally or otherwise. In the back of her mind, she had feared that Xena may even be crippled permanently.

"Don't worry, the Healer says you'll be fine. You just need some rest and then you'll need to walk off the stiffness." Actually, the Healer had said that it was entirely up to Xena how much of a recovery she would make, but Gabrielle knew that Xena wouldn't be able to lie around for very long.

"But, right now, my warrior princess, you are going to stay in bed until you regain your strength. And you are going to follow every single order the Healer gives you. That's an order. Remember, nobody in the Amazon village disobeys the Queen."

"I wouldn't dream of it," Xena smirked.

Gabrielle had filled a bowl with broth and spoon-fed the weak warrior. "Regain your strength," she encouraged. "Then after that, we're going to put you to work."

The Queen was jostled out of her distant memories as Xena made her way to her side at the head table. She admired the sculpted muscles the warrior had developed during her recovery and marvelled at the tremendous will Xena had to live. Gabrielle made no attempt to hide her lustful gaze as her servant approached. Everyone knew that Xena belonged to her. The consort wore a tiny leather skirt but she was not permitted to wear britches unless they had to journey on horseback. Cuffs branded with the Queen's markings adorned her ankles and wrists and she worked bare-breasted until she retired to Gabrielle's hut at nightfall.

The Queen leisurely finished her meal and grabbed Xena by the hand. She pulled her servant downward and tasted the sweet surrender she found on her lips. Her hands roamed freely under her skirt and she massaged the bare round buttocks. She imagined that the warrior was more than ready to satisfy her erotic pleasures later that night. Gabrielle had spent the entire day lighting a fire between her legs and she was anxious to immerse herself in that smouldering blaze. Xena squeezed Gabrielle's shoulder acknowledging the touch of ownership and she uttered a small murmur. Not surprisingly, Gabrielle's mind wasn't on her meal or the company of the other Amazons. It was on later in the evening when Xena would have her all to herself. With the formality of the evening meal almost over, she sent her consort to the Royal Hut.

"Go prepare yourself," Gabrielle instructed. She watched the lithesome warrior as she strolled out of the eating tent. She found it especially ironic that most of the people in the room would simply assume that she would have her way with her accommodating consort. Little did they know that it was Gabrielle who couldn't wait to succumb to the fearsome warrior she would do anything for.

It took Gabrielle nearly half a candlemark to make her way across the compound. She was gracious and civil as numerous people expressed their gratitude to the Amazon Nation. Nevertheless, her
stomach fluttered erratically as she anticipated Xena waiting for her. Her mind was hardly on the duties of being the Amazon Queen. Finally she managed to slip away, once again shunting aside diplomatic relations to Ephiny, her Second in Command.

Gabrielle stood at the entrance to the hut and took in a deep breath before she entered. She smiled to herself as she realised how nervous she was. It never failed to get her blood racing to a fever pitch when she thought of who awaited inside her quarters. And it wasn't a subservient concubine.

"You're late," Xena declared when Gabrielle entered the hut. The Queen gasped when she noted the empty bed. She heard Xena behind her, but didn't dare turn around. The Amazon Queen held her breath as Xena closed the space between them. Her knees felt weak and after a few moments, she let some much needed air into her lungs. Her face flushed hotly, knowing that the fiery warrior who had conquered her heart was dressed in full warrior garb. It was an outfit she wore only behind the Queen's closed doors.

"Do you realise I've been waiting nearly a full candlemark?" Xena asked with slight exaggeration. The warrior wrapped a blindfold over Gabrielle's eyes. The snug fit prevented the Queen from seeing anything except darkness, adding yet another layer of eroticism to her already colourful imagination.

"I...I...I'm sorry---" Gabrielle began, unable to concentrate on anything save the warrior pressed against her back, breathing down her neck. A distant memory from when she first met Xena as the Conqueror and the amorous effect she'd had then claimed her now. She wanted nothing more than for Xena to take her swiftly and passionately.

"I've been waiting all day to remove this," Xena said as she reached for the Amazon's regal ensemble. Strong hands unhooked her suede and leather vest. Gabrielle shivered as the warrior's callused hands roamed along her sides purposely avoiding the hard nipples that leaped to attention. The contoured metal of Xena's armour pressed against her back and her eyes strained against the tight band. She ached to catch a glimpse of the dark-haired beauty.

"And this.....," Xena continued, hovering so close to Gabrielle that her hot breath grazed the fine hairs on her neck. The warrior unhitched Gabrielle's skirt and she let it fall freely to the ground. All that remained were her britches and Xena ripped them off with a show of strength that left Gabrielle panting for air. She took in a deep breath, struggling to maintain her composure. If not for Xena's steadfast support, she would have drifted to the ground like the lightest feather from a bird's wing.

"That's better," Xena announced when Gabrielle wore nothing save the thick cloth over her eyes. She grasped a clump of the Amazon's hair and turned her mouth towards her. Xena's lips crushed Gabrielle's and the Queen eagerly accepted the carnal invasion. The warrior slipped her tongue inside sweeping away any and all resistance.

"Oh, Xena," Gabrielle moaned. Her naked body sank into the warrior but Xena held her ground like an unmoving tree. However, her brawny fortitude only served to excite the Amazon further.

"Taste how anxious I am for you," Xena whispered as she steered Gabrielle to her knees with a slight push on her shoulders.

Gabrielle groaned. Her legs trembled as she slid to her knees in front of the warrior. Her hands followed the outline of the Xena's strong physique and she imagined what her warrior looked like in her full battle ensemble. Finally, her hands found their way under Xena's leather skirt and she noted with glee that the warrior didn't bother with britches. Gabrielle inhaled the smell of her arousal and awaited for further instruction from Xena. The warrior said nothing, but simply guided Gabrielle between the leather strips and she eagerly delved into the heated triangle.
Gabrielle gripped Xena's thighs tightly and her tongue darted in and out of her wet centre, lapping up the fragrant juices. Xena leaned back against the hut's door, spreading her legs to accommodate Gabrielle's insistent tongue. She held the Queen's head steady as Gabrielle swept over her bud of pleasure again and again.

"Ahhhh, yes...." Xena moaned. Gabrielle knew the warrior was close to fulfilment and she sped up her unrelenting efforts. After a period of time, Xena's heaving sighs marked the beginning of ecstasy that sent the warrior over the edge and into the realm of perfect bliss.

Several moments later, Xena regained her composure. She hoisted Gabrielle to her feet and guided her to the bed. The Queen obeyed without question, laying face down on the bed as she anticipated Xena's next move. She squirmed on the soft mattress, never sure what surprise the warrior had in store for her. She knew what she wanted but she was never quite sure if Xena would grant her wish. At other times, Xena would take her somewhere she hadn't even thought she wanted to go.

"Up," Xena commanded. The warrior kneeled behind her on the bed and lifted up Gabrielle's torso so that the Amazon was on her knees as well. Xena's armoured vest had been removed but her leather tunic stuck to Gabrielle's sweating body. The Amazon spread her legs to accommodate Xena's roving hands.

"Now, my little Queen, how many Amazon warriors do you think has any idea that their leader is perfectly willing to get on her knees for her consort? Not once, but twice in one evening?" There was a hint of mirth in her tone and the irony of the entire situation was not lost on Gabrielle. She didn't know what was more erotic, being on her knees for Xena or the fact that everyone knew Xena was her servant. She smiled into the pillow as Xena's hands massaged Gabrielle's breasts that hung enticingly from her torso. She pinched the pert nipples to erection and Gabrielle found it increasingly difficult to concentrate.

"Do you know what I've been wanting to do to you all day?" Xena queried.

"No, what?" the Queen asked playfully.

"I've been wanting to spread you out on the food table and take you with my phallus." Gabrielle groaned into the pillow, vividly imagining herself being thrown across the table and serving herself up to Xena. "And while you were face down, I would watch everyone while everyone was watching us," Xena continued as her fingers explored the wet folds between the Amazon's legs. They became more and more slippery as Gabrielle envisioned what Xena would have done to her at the celebratory meal. "Then everyone would know that you are mine. All mine." Shivers surged through Gabrielle as she heard the provocative tone in Xena's voice. No one would ever own her like Xena.

"You'd like that, would you, my little Queen?" Xena asked, her breathing becoming noticeably ragged and uneven. Gabrielle grunted in response when she felt Xena's unmistakable phallus hovering at the entrance of her well lubricated centre. The Queen knew it would only take the slightest push from Xena for it to easily slip inside.

"Yes, Xena! Please, take me now," Gabrielle pleaded as she swayed her hips invitingly for Xena's benefit. Her hair hung limply in wet clumps and sweat poured down her face. Swiftly, Xena entered her and Gabrielle screamed with delight. The warrior entered her again and again with sure and deliberate strokes. Soon her thrusting became fast and furious, but Gabrielle managed to keep pace. It had been weeks since Xena had taken her so completely and the pent up frustration released itself more quickly than usual.

"Yes, yes!" she wailed. Finally, a wave of rapture washed over her and a ringing sensation engulfed
her from head to toe. A spent and exhausted Xena collapsed on top of her in a heap.

Xena brushed away the fine hairs from her lover's face. She kissed her eyelids shut and murmured, "I love you, Gabrielle."

"I love you too, Xena." Gabrielle smiled and squeezed her arm tighter around Xena's waist. Despite where they both came from and after all they'd been through, she could hardly believe they were together at all. Nevertheless, she knew that they belonged together for all eternity.

"Xena, can I ask you a question?"

"Hmm?"

"Do you ever wish you were still the Conqueror? That things had turned out differently."

Xena thought for a moment before answering. "Not when I'm with you," she said. "That's all I want. Is just to be with you."

"And I with you," Gabrielle answered.

The Amazon Queen propped herself up on an elbow and gave Xena a kiss full on the mouth. There would be no sleep that night, there was much celebrating to do.
Epilogue

Another Realm

Ares and Aphrodite peered down from the cliff as they watched Xena and Gabrielle appear out of nowhere onto the shoreline. For a few moments, the two lovers regarded each other with doubt and confusion.

Gabrielle spoke first. "We're home," she said.

"At last," Xena replied. They hugged each other tightly and then began splashing in the shallow waves, disregarding the deluge of sand and water that commingled with their clothing.

"Well, you finally got your wish, sister dearest," Ares jeered. "They made it through Illusia all right, but for how long? They have a lot of making up to do." Despite his father's admonishment not to interfere, he wasn't about to start listening to his father now. Besides, he'd discovered that there were other, more powerful gods than Zeus, the so-called King of the Gods.

"Yes, they do, but I think they're going to be all right," Aphrodite beamed. She was thrilled that Xena had been able to say goodbye to her son. However, she knew that Gabrielle's unresolved feelings towards Hope could become another problem somewhere in the future. But she didn't want to think of that now. She only hoped that both Xena and Gabrielle could put their most trying times behind them. Nevertheless, she would never admit her fears to Ares in a million moons. Right now, the most important thing was that the balance of all worlds had been restored.

As the two entities vanished from the cliff's ledge, the sound of laughter drifted up from the beach below.

A twelve-year-old girl and a same aged boy played roughly in the mid-day sun. Not a single cloud marked the landscape of the high cerulean sky. Nonetheless, in the far distance, a dastardly rainstorm poured down on the troops of Xena, the Warrior Princess. Thunder and lightening scared away all living beings and it forced Xena's army to retreat into the caves that pocketed the eastern slope of the hills. Their ultimate destination was the sleepy village of Cirra that lie just over the horizon in the next valley. However, it would be several days before Xena's army would be freed of Zeus' wrath. Not that Xena was overly superstitious but she took it as a sign from the King of the Gods not to venture into the Cirran Valley. And besides, the road was knee-deep in mud and her horses would not be happy trudging through it. When the rains let up and the mud was solid enough to traverse, the Warrior Princess' army marched in the opposite direction of the valley, following Apollo's chariot to the west. Xena reasoned that there were countless other villages exactly like Cirra that her army could raid. The small farming village held no special allure for her.

The little girl, Callisto, was oblivious to the rainstorms that deluged Xena's army or the momentous decision that had just changed her life forever. She ran through the trees chasing her adventurous playmate, Theodorus. He was her best friend and he was so much fun. He was the only boy that didn't mind Callisto ordering him about. Even her sister hated when Callisto told her what to do, but Theodorus never did. He was her most devoted friend and he was always eager to go on mischievous escapades with her. They shared everything, even secrets, and he taught her lots of things that girls her age weren't supposed to know. Like how to climb trees, spy on grownups and how to use a weapon. He even forged a dagger for her when Tresephus, the blacksmith, thought it was for him. It was a secret only he and she shared and she treasured the dagger above all else, sleeping with it under her pillow at night. The other townsfolk didn't think that a girl should be a
warrior, but Callisto didn't care. Everyone had heard tell of the great woman warrior who travelled the land and conquered all. She was feared by many, and yet admired by so many others. From Callisto's point of view, she inspired awe. Someday, the little blonde girl dreamed, she and Theodorus would leave Cirra and travel the world. Just like Xena, the Warrior Princess.

THE END

CALLISTO'S FAREWELL

POSTSCRIPT: If Callisto had been a bard, this would have been her goodbye to Xena.

Love will abide, take things in stride
Sounds like good advice, but there's no one at my side
Time washes clean, love's wounds unseen
That's what someone told me, but I don't know what it means
Cause I've done everything I know
To try and make you mine
But I think I'm gonna miss you for a long long time

Caught in my fears, blinking back the tears
I can't say I had you when you never let me near
And I never drew a true response from you
Or the way you felt for the goddess you never knew
Cause I've done everything I know
To try and change your mind
And I think it's gonna hurt me for a long long time

Wait for the day, I'll go away
Knowing that you warned me of the price I have to pay
Life's full of flaws, but who knows the cause?
Living in the memory of a love that never was
Cause I've done everything I know
To try and make you mine
But I think I'm gonna love you for a long long time

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