



Two brief notes:

1. This story involves a slightly different view of the Xena and Gabrielle characters from the H:LTJ episode "Armageddon Now, Part II." It was inspired solely by a spoiler for that episode written by Michelle (Mickisix), for which I'm very appreciative.
 2. Although there is quite a bit of overt subtext, there is no graphic sex in this story.
- Della

PART I

"I have just returned from the traitors' cell, Princess. I have their confession."

Muffling a slight yawn with one hand, Xena used the other to pinch the end of the parchment between finger and thumb, taking care not to touch the grime-covered hand of whichever member of her royal guard this was. She spared him a glance, remembering vaguely. Edran or something.

She turned her attention to the note, an eyebrow beginning a slow ascent as she read the words carefully. Finally, lips pursed, she looked up at the man who had been charged with interrogating their newest prisoners.

"Edran," she drawled, noting the usual stiffening of the spine when she addressed one of her underlings by name, "do you know how to read?"

The guard shook his head. "No, Princess."

"Uh huh." Xena casually tendered the note to the man standing attentively by her side. While he read it, she noticed for the first time that Ennaus had shaved off his sideburns and beard, another indication of the early spring they were anticipating; her aide usually kept the natural insulation until later in the year. The severe cut of dark brown hair was still there, but now there was nothing to mask the bright crimson inching slowly up his face.

We confess to resisting the notion that any citizen is inherently superior to any other.
We confess to deploring a regime that enforces its will through intimidation rather than seeking a consensus through mutual respect.
We confess--

"This is an outrage!" Ennaus exploded. "The man who penned this insult--"

"--should be writing my speeches," Xena interrupted dryly. She reclaimed the note from her aide's shaking fingers and returned her attention to the guard, who was beginning to feel a bit edgy.

"I want whoever wrote this brought here," Xena ordered, flicking the paper. "Now."

A clenched fist slammed against the guard's chest, and he departed. Xena took a moment to peruse the so-called confession again. Very clever, she congratulated the unknown author, thinking that, in a way, it was unfortunate that all the clever ones had to die.

The closer the big man drew to the prison, the angrier he became. That bitch had written something bad on the paper, he just knew it. Had made him look a fool to the Warrior Princess. No one did that to a member of the Royal Guard.

"You."

Six young faces turned toward the gravelly voice, instinctively moving closer to each other as Edran shoved a heavy key into the lock, their hands clasped in an unconscious display of unity.

"Back off," he growled. "You," he repeated, jutting his index finger at a young woman with honey red hair near the center of the cell. "Come with me."

The group closed in beside her. "Why?" she asked nervously. As if she didn't know.

"Because I said so." He turned his snarl on the others. "The rest of you, back off, or Harn and I will back you off," he said, indicating the cell guard with a jerk of his head.

A young man stepped out from the group. "No. She's not going anywhere."

The speaker was just the type that had always rubbed Edran the wrong way: Tall and scrawny, like he'd never done a real day's work in his life; brainy, probably; and too smug for his own good. Women probably fell all over him, swooning over light brown curls that, to Edran, just made him look like one of them.

"Raubert, don't be foolish." The red-haired woman placed a hand gently on her protector's cheek. "Hey, this is what we've been waiting for, right?" she said, smiling weakly.

"Gabrielle--"

She took his hand between hers. "We knew this would happen, Raubert. I'm ready." She gave each of her comrades a sincere smile. "I'm glad to have known all of you," she said, then hurried through the cell door and toward her fate.

The outer door to the prison clanged shut, and Edran dutifully waited until he heard the bolt wedged firmly into place before advancing on his prisoner.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

Without warning, the guard's fist struck her squarely on the jaw, knocking her to the ground.

She pressed cool fingers against the side of her face, providing little relief from the burning sensation, and forced herself to meet her assailant's gaze. "Why . . . ?" He did not reply, and a horrible thought entered Gabrielle's head: There was to be no trial, legitimate or otherwise; the Conqueror's guard was simply going to beat her to death.

"I'll show you what happens when someone disrespects the royal guard," the big man muttered. He reached down and yanked the girl to her feet, drawing back his hand again.

"Come."

Xena rose and prepared to meet the parodist who had converted a supposed confession into a brazen diatribe against her Realm. The door swung open and a slight form was propelled into the room, aided by a shove from the guard.

The girl stumbled forward a couple of steps before regaining her balance, and then, like all of the Conqueror's first-time guests, willing or otherwise, her mouth fell open at the breathtaking splendor of the ruler's quarters, struck dumb by the brilliant interplay of paintings and rugs and flowers of every imaginable color.

Xena studied the prisoner with mild surprise. A young slip of a girl, no more than twenty years old, whose face currently bore one or two distinguishing features of recent origin. "What happened to her?" she asked.

"She resisted your command to be brought here," Edran said, confident that the girl would not risk another beating by revealing his lie.

Xena eyed him through narrowed lids. The soldier was a bad liar, but was at least smart enough to personalize the girl's alleged disobedience. Both qualities -- his clumsy lying and his unexpected craftiness -- irritated her, and she tucked away the information for another day. First things first.

She returned her attention to the prisoner. "Have her cleaned up and brought back here," she ordered, dismissing them both without another glance.

To her relief, Gabrielle's escort in the bath and back to Xena's chamber was not the hostile guard, but instead an agreeable matron who appeared to listen to her nervous monologue and tended her wounds with care and did not try to hurt her.

The older woman rapped twice on the door and opened it, using her elbow to give a subtle nudge to her ward, who took the hint and stepped reluctantly into the chamber. Hearing the door closing behind her, Gabrielle swung her head around, disappointed to see the woman backing out of the room. Alone now, she thought.

"Well, you're more presentable now," Xena said. She ran her gaze down the simple, knee-length white tunic that had replaced the young woman's peasant garb. Oh, yes, Xena saw now, definitely a woman, perhaps a few years older than Xena had initially estimated.

"Ennaus," she said, her eyes still on the other woman, "go check on the arrangements for this evening." He did not reply, and she looked over to see him staring at their guest. "Did you hear me?"

Ennaus had seen the spark in the Warrior Princess' eyes when she first laid them upon the peasant and, unless he was mistaken, Xena was attracted to the girl. An annoyance, but no

threat. The Conqueror had never confused transitory pleasures with the higher needs of the Realm. "Yes, Highness," he said.

"When you pass the kitchen," Xena added, "pick up some scraps for our extra guest here."

"Yes, Princess." Although Ennaus was the only member of the Conqueror's staff from whom a salute was not required, public relations dictated a respectful bow before the aide pivoted to make his departure.

"Oh, and Ennaus . . ."

He turned back to her.

"Take your time."

He lowered his head and withdrew, shutting the doors behind him.

"Ennaus doesn't like it when someone insults the Realm," the Conqueror said to her prisoner. The tone was neutral, but the other woman stayed fully alert. "And you are?"

"Gabrielle of Potedaia."

"So, Gabrielle of Potedaia," she said, mocking the girl's proud tone, "I understand you wrote this 'confession' for yourself and your fellow traitors."

Gabrielle's mind raced. Would it help or hurt to acknowledge responsibility?

"When I ask a question, I expect an answer," Xena snapped.

Gabrielle tensed, rebuking herself for freezing up after so long spent preparing for this moment. From the instant she had been summoned by the guard, through the beating outside the prison, through the silent march to the castle, through the bath that had cleansed her sufficiently to be presented to the Conqueror, Gabrielle had steeled herself to do this.

How many times had she and her comrades fantasized aloud about what they would do in the unlikely event they ever found themselves face to face with the Warrior Princess? They would not cower before the beast, they had vowed. They would shout their beliefs, their despair, their hatred, preferably before an audience if they could draw the attention of any listeners, sympathetic or not.

This was Gabrielle's chance. She would never have another.

"You didn't ask me a question," she said. Not exactly a declaration, but a first step.

Xena's lip curled. "So I didn't," she said. "Perhaps that's why I have a hard time communicating with your type. Everything has to be spelled out for you, is that it?"

"No," Gabrielle said. "The truth reveals itself."

"How poetic."

Her disdain did not go unnoticed by the prisoner, but Gabrielle's heart was thudding too wildly for her to bother with taking offense. Here it comes . . .

"You have a rather distinctive style," the Warrior Princess continued. "In fact, when I read this" -- she held up the confession -- "I was reminded of another fascinating piece of literature I ran across a while back."

Xena drifted over to a jewelled box on the mantle above the fireplace, fully aware that her guest's tension was escalating with each delay in the questioning. With tantalizing deliberation, she opened the lid and took out a parchment, unfolding it as she walked to her throne. She settled into its ornate depths, making herself comfortable for her recitation. "Stop me if you've heard it before," she said sarcastically.

"What is a leader?

A leader may be defined by his words, or his deeds, or his methods. But a true leader may also be defined by what he doesn't do.

A leader does not steal the voices of the people by punishing those who only wish to express true concerns.

A leader does not tax the poor and elderly til their death, without compassion, without exception, simply to line his already bursting vaults."

Xena looked up from the text. "I could go on, but I think you know how it ends."

The hammering of Gabrielle's heart was becoming painful. She kept her eyes trained on a dark knothole in the floorboard beneath her toes.

"This garbage was spewed by a man in the western quadrant last month," Xena said. "He managed to escape the guards who heard it," she added, still irritated about that display of incompetence, "but when we find him, he'll receive the usual punishment for treason."

The cross, Gabrielle shuddered. More than one of her associates had shared that fate over the years. An image of her mother's loving face materialized in Gabrielle's mind, and she calmed a little.

Xena studied her listener. "I might be willing to exchange his life for that of the person who wrote this," she said, curious as to which the woman would choose. Xena had often seen idealism fade when a captive found his own head on the block.

A long moment passed, and Gabrielle realized that the Conqueror was waiting for her to respond. She swallowed her fears, telling herself it didn't matter what she did now; she was probably going to die today anyway. "If I were you, I would be searching for those guards," she said.

"Oh?" Xena replied archly to the unexpected remark. "And why is that?"

Gabrielle shrugged. "There is nothing in that document that refers to the Warrior Princess. I would ask them why they assumed it was about you."

Xena stared at her, then held up the seditious exposition on leadership. "Who wrote this?" she demanded.

"Someone who believes that everyone should have the right to express his own beliefs," Gabrielle replied, her green eyes burning into the ruler's. Knowing that the fate awaiting her in Xena's dungeon would be unaffected by anything that happened here had strengthened her resolve.

"His?"

"Or hers," Gabrielle conceded. She held the other woman's gaze, waiting for the inevitable question.

You wrote it. That much was plain, but Xena held back. Not yet. She would know what she needed to know soon enough; in the meantime, the girl was at least a temporary distraction from an otherwise tedious day. The Conqueror had long ago determined the most strategic placement for her armies throughout the territories, the most effective means of enforcing her laws, the most persuasive methods for demanding her tributes and the loyalty of her people. Now, too many days were filled with routine affairs of government. One problem with being a successful ruler, she thought, no great conflicts to stir the blood.

She strolled over to the refreshments table, her gold-fringed robe swaying sensually with her movements. "You know, it's selfish for people to spout such tripe," she said, removing the lid from a carafe and inspecting its contents.

"Selfish?" Gabrielle gaped at her.

"It detracts from a ruler's other duties," Xena replied. Light golden liquid filled two cups to their rims and Xena set the bottle down, turning back around. "It takes a great deal of effort to rule over lands this size," she said. "Your petty complaints surely don't warrant more attention than the hundreds of thousands of people who depend on me for their survival."

Gabrielle pressed her lips together, trying to decide whether the Warrior Princess was in fact inviting a debate with her. Xena raised an eyebrow invitingly, and Gabrielle plunged ahead.

"Our complaints" -- she stopped to correct herself -- "the complaints of those who fight for their rights are not petty," she said. "Truth is not petty. Justice for all, not merely those who curry your favor, is not petty. Freedom to speak out against oppression is not petty."

Xena listened to the words flowing from the young woman's mouth, and almost smiled. This woman would not keep from the cross for long. Much like a newly hatched asp, she was tiny, but would soon develop fangs. Her eyes flickered over the woman's physique. One difference, she observed: Baby asps were never attractive.

She returned her attention to the impassioned speech which didn't seem to be in danger of ending soon. "--and if they had freedom to chose, to forge their own paths, they wouldn't be dependent on you or anyone else for their survival," the woman continued. "But I suppose that would--"

Gabrielle abruptly cut short her harangue, suspecting that she was about to cross the line, if she hadn't already. She swallowed at the comprehension of what she had just done.

"Well," Xena said, "you certainly have a lot to say."

"The people have a lot to say," Gabrielle replied. "I just give them voice." Careful, she thought. She was dangerously close to admitting something she hadn't been asked yet.

"So what does that make you, some sort of bard?"

Gabrielle considered her answer. A bard? No, bards created their own words, drawing from within to paint pictures of events real and imaginary. When she was growing up--before Xena's army had taken Potedaia in its brutal sweep of Chalcidice--Gabrielle had occasionally tried to convince her parents that she was destined for something more than the inevitable pre-arranged marriage, tossing out the suggestion once that she could become a bard. Her parents had brushed off such unconventional notions, but Gabrielle had never completely abandoned the idea.

Until four years ago.

Since that day, Gabrielle no longer conjured up whimsical narratives, no longer dreamed of performing her own tales of the gods' misadventures to a packed auditorium. Now all she wanted was to give voice to the unheard. The words were theirs, not hers; she was merely the means of conveying them.

"A scribe," she decided.

"You just write what others tell you," Xena said, a hint of skepticism in her voice.

"Yes," Gabrielle replied. To her, it was true.

Xena held out the second cup. "Have some wine," she said.

"No, thank you."

"Have some wine," she repeated.

It would be supreme irony, Gabrielle recognized, to survive lecturing the Warrior Princess only to draw her wrath by declining her hospitality. "Thank you," she said, stepping forward to accept the gift.

Xena dropped onto a couch and patted the place beside her. Gabrielle eased herself down, half-wondering how far from the dark-haired woman she could settle without committing offense, and half-wondering how Xena had managed to plop down like that without spilling any of her wine. Unlike the ruler, who reclined leisurely against the overstuffed cushions, her guest remained stiffly at attention.

Why doesn't she just get it over with? Gabrielle wondered. Did it give the Conqueror greater pleasure to toy with her victims before sending them to the cross? She sipped her wine. Or the block..

Gabrielle took another healthy gulp of wine, failing to associate the light buzz she was beginning to feel behind her eyes with the fact that she hadn't eaten or slept for two days. She hadn't had alcoholic beverages often in her life -- who could afford it? -- but even her untrained palate appreciated that this one was excellent.

Her mind drifted back to the previous subject. Would it be the cross, or beheading? Or some other method she hadn't thought of? For some reason, it was suddenly essential that Gabrielle know. "How would you have me killed?" she asked.

Xena's hand stilled, cup raised part way to her lips, and she searched for signs of impudence in the other woman, who followed up her unexpected question with another generous taste of the grape.

"Specifically," Gabrielle articulated with care, "would it be the cross? Or would you have my head chopped off?" Another thought occurred to her. "Or do you even decide ahead of time?"

"Well, I'm having a few ideas at the moment," Xena said, but she had lost her audience. She straightened, watching with interest as the blonde head drooped . . . slowly . . . slowly . . . until finally it pitched forward into Xena's lap. The scribe's arm flopped over the side of the couch, her glass falling from lifeless fingers. No wine left in it to spill onto the rug, Xena noted.

She stared down at the -- exhausted? drunk? -- rebel snoring into the folds of her royal robes. Well, this is a switch, she thought. She'd never had one fall asleep on her beforehand.

Xena opened her mouth to shout for a guard, then chastised herself for being lazy. Oh, what the hell. She picked up the petite bundle and carried it to the four-poster bed in the curtained bedroom, pulling back the coverlet with one hand while balancing her load with the other. She deposited the woman on the sheets, tossed the coverlet over her, and returned to the comfortable couch.

"I told him that was fine with me, if he wanted to see his mother's head on a pike." Claius laughed loudly at his own joke, then tore off a hunk of pheasant with his teeth and washed it down sloppily with a swig of ale.

Xena smiled encouragingly, mindful that it had not proved easy to find commanders willing to live year-round in the desolate western region. She would tolerate a certain amount of boorishness so long as Claius tolerated the dry weather of that isolated territory.

Suddenly a sleepy blonde woman emerged from Xena's bedchamber, yawning as she ran a hand through her hair. She blinked, realizing when everything came into focus that she was being stared at by seven pairs of eyes, five curious, one angry, and one -- Xena's -- unreadable.

Nervously, she looked at Xena. "Am I . . .," she glanced at the six newcomers, ". . . supposed to go now?" Free to go? she was really asking.

Xena noted the lustful expressions of her regional commanders, and smiled slyly. She knew how to work a crowd. "No, come join us. You must be hungry," she said. "I certainly am."

Gabrielle hesitated for a moment longer, then cautiously approached the only person in the room that she knew. Crossing her ankles, she began to lower herself at the foot of the Conqueror's throne, but Xena circled her waist and drew her down onto the wide arm of the chair.

It felt strangely secure sitting beside the former warlord, now queen of all warlords, and Gabrielle discreetly scanned the six men in their company, easily concluding that she wouldn't want to be alone with any of them. One of them, the one who had been with Xena earlier, was glaring at her as if she were Medusa, and the others were leering as if she were the evening's entertainment--

She stiffened. Oh, the gods! What if she was the evening's entertainment?

Xena felt the woman's body tense, and wondered what had brought it on. She gave the scribe a light shove. "Get some more ale for my men," she said, smiling alluringly at her guests, "and wine for me, with a glass."

"Make it two jugs, girl," Claius added.

And how am I supposed to carry all that? Gabrielle wondered. Oh, of course--two trips. I guess their legs have withered from all that riding, she groused.

She hoisted one of the jugs from the refreshment table, and was startled to see that the Warrior Princess was now beside her. "I don't want you spilling it," Xena said, excavating a chilled wine bottle from its basket.

Gabrielle ignored the implication that she was incapable of carrying a bottle of wine and instead glanced at the rowdy soldiers, one of whom was busy illustrating some questionable tale for the others with crude hand gestures.

"Xena," Gabrielle began. "I mean, Princess." She waited to see if her slip would be excused, and was encouraged when Xena arched an eyebrow, wordlessly permitting the question to continue. "Why are those men looking at me like that?"

'Like what?' she was tempted to ask, just to make the scribe say it. Xena smiled at the thought. "You're not for them," she replied, correctly perceiving the nature of the young woman's concern. Not tonight, anyway, she added mentally, keeping her options open. That western position was very hard to fill

She was somewhat curious, though, as to just how naive this intense young woman might be. "They're looking at you that way because they think we were together in the bedroom," she continued, casually handing a second jug to Gabrielle. "They're picturing my hands on your body."

The jugs dropped to the table, and Xena smirked. Wine bottle and glass in hand, she glided back to her throne.

"Why don't you ask them?"

Ennaus glowered at her. There. She had done it again. Interrupted them -- again.

This was the second time, and on neither occasion had Xena made any move to silence her, physically or otherwise. He had expected to see the back of the ruler's hand draw blood from the girl's flapping lip, but to his dismay, Xena had almost seemed to heed the intrusions. Why hadn't Xena sent the girl back? She'd had her pleasure already. Unless she was planning to

keep her overnight Hades. Couldn't the Conqueror ignore her libidinous impulses just once?

"Since you've narrowed it down to two choices, and you don't care which one," Gabrielle said, wagging an index finger in the general direction of the commander in question, "why don't you ask the people you're supposed to be leading or commanding or whatever?" Hopeless, Gabrielle decided; how could they expect things to improve when the Realm's rulers couldn't even see the obvious?

Xena exchanged speculative looks with her northern commander. "Up to you," she shrugged. "Just don't let them think it'll become a habit."

Endless crudities and exaggerations later, Xena's attention drifted to a guard who stood, hand poised above the hourglass, waiting for the last grain of sand to drain before turning it over for the fourth time since the Conqueror's guests had arrived. She could feel herself beginning to tire, whether from the rather single-minded conversation of her soldiers or the copious flowing of wine, she wasn't sure.

She looked over at the scribe, who had long since fallen asleep, head propped against the back of the throne, her soft snoring drowned out by the carryings on of the Realm's good-humored commanders.

Xena rose. "Whaddaya say we call it a night, fellas?"

Her guests had not risen to command-level positions in Xena's army by being slow to recognize an order. Stiff from hours on the floor with very little motion except the bending of elbows, the men rumbled to their feet.

Xena tapped the scribe's shoulder with the back of her hand and smiled when the young woman jerked awake, momentarily confused as to her surroundings. Memory returned quickly enough, and Gabrielle climbed off the arm of the chair, wondering what was going to happen to her now.

"You didn't introduce us to your little friend, Xena," Claius declared, his eyes wandering up the girl's calves to the hem of her tunic, then continuing upward on a speculative journey.

"Oh, sorry, fellas," she said. "This is Gabrielle of Potedaia," she pronounced meticulously, extending a palm toward the young woman.

"Potedaia, eh?" Claius laughed. He massaged his damn right leg that had fallen asleep on him. "They put up a hell of a fight, didn't they, Xena?"

Icy green eyes pierced him. "The Potedaians fought honorably," Gabrielle said.

Xena's eyes narrowed at the insinuation, and she snapped her fingers to catch the attention of a guard. "Take her back to her cell," she ordered.

"Her cell?" Claius laughed again. "Hell, should have figured," he said, giving Gabrielle another lewd inspection. "How 'bout a going-away present, Xena?"

Gabrielle glared at the Warrior Princess. She would kill herself before being sold by the Conquering Tyrant or anyone else.

Xena jerked her thumb toward the door, and the scribe was dragged from the room.

Five bodies huddled closely together under the shared blankets, trying with little success to generate some warmth in the damp enclosure that had become like an icebox in the hours since the sun went down.

A young man on the outside stared unseeingly at the wall, his thick brown curls cradled against a bicep. From the sound of it, Nyus had finally drifted off to sleep. Raubert let himself be amused briefly at the thought that surely Nyus's snoring must violate the rules against excessive noise in the cells. He closed his eyes again, and prayed that sleep would take him.

A loud metallic scraping sounded from the cell door, and he jerked his head toward the entrance. He was used to the darkness, and instantly recognized the figure shoved into the cell and to the ground.

"Gabrielle?" he whispered.

"Yes," she replied, careful to keep her own voice down.

A hand curled around her shoulder. "Are you all right?"

Gabrielle almost laughed, from relief that she was still alive and the realization that she was, indeed, all right. Xena had never asked her to confirm her authorship of the speeches. Gabrielle would not have lied, and the answer would have meant her death. She closed her eyes, grateful for the interruptions of wine and soldiers that had spared her life.

"I'm fine, Raubert," she replied.

"What happened?"

Gabrielle's eyes were becoming accustomed to the darkness, and she could see her cellmates crammed together on the hard, frozen floor, with probably little more than a bowl of porridge -- if that -- in their stomachs. What could she say? That her interrogation at the hands of the Conqueror had involved a bath with scented oils, fresh pheasant and expensive wine, nestling in a luxurious bed, capped off with conversation with the Warrior Princess herself, who, in this isolated setting, had proved rather charming?

"Nothing," she said. "I'm fine. Go back to sleep." Seeing no signs that he intended to heed her request, she added, "Please, Raubert. I'm really tired." She groped for the edge of a blanket and slipped under it, already feeling a chill beginning to set in.

"Here." He shifted his position so that she was sandwiched between him and another warm body. Gabrielle drifted off to sleep easily, not noticing when his arm slipped around her waist.

"By the gods, Gabrielle -- she beat you?"

At Celice's exclamation, Gabrielle instinctively raised her fingers to a walnut-sized lump on her forehead. There were others, she knew, and discolorations, and she wondered briefly why none of the Conquerer's guests had mentioned her battered face last night. Of course-- they just assumed Xena had done the damage herself, perhaps even while--

She shifted her thoughts away from the humiliating images the soldiers apparently had been conjuring up while she sat beside Xena. "No, it was the guard."

"Doesn't matter whose hand it was, we know who controlled it," Raubert spat. "That bitch!"

"Shh!" Gabrielle glanced toward the cell door. If one of Xena's men heard him, they would all pay the price. "I'm not saying she wouldn't have done it," she explained, "but I don't think she knew about this."

Raubert exchanged looks with Celice, gnashing his teeth. One problem that Gabrielle had had as long as he had known her was a frustrating tendency to give everyone the benefit of the doubt, even soulless demons like the Warrior Princess. Somehow that failing had never affected her persuasiveness, though, and over the past couple of years, Gabrielle had become the movement's most effective speechwriter. Her pen would glide across the parchment with amazing steadiness, and then, due to the unfortunate reality that the people of Corinth placed more confidence in male orators, Raubert and the other men would try to do justice to her words.

He dropped the subject, content to have the beautiful blonde woman near him again. It would make the passage of time in the dank prison almost bearable. Gabrielle smiled at him, and an answering smile rose by its own volition. Yes, almost bearable.

Xena sank back into her throne with an extended sigh. Bored again.

At times, the Warrior Princess longed to be back at the head of an army, living off the land and the thrill of the attack. Closing her eyes, she fantasized a desperate soldier crashing in to warn of an invading force, and could almost feel the bloodlust coursing through her veins.

She opened her eyes. No desperate soldiers today, or yesterday, or the day before. She slid her hands down the silk garment clinging to her limbs, and reflected on the soft bed beyond her bedroom curtain, and admitted to herself that being back on the road might have a few drawbacks.

She tapped her fingers absently against her thighs.

She could stage another contest, but the last few had been disappointing. She could have taken any of those gladiators with one hand tied behind her back. Hell, she had taken them with one hand tied behind her back. The current crop had been harvested from a foolish crew who had sought to ambush their ruler as she traveled between capitals. They had gotten as far as looping one wrist around her waist when the legendary Conqueror's temper showed itself. The few survivors now served as examples as well as periodic entertainment for Xena and her cabinet.

Xena puffed air through her lips again, and then a thought occurred to her.

The familiar sound of a key rattling in the lock alerted the cell's occupants, who rose nervously. They weren't due for a latrine break any time soon, and weren't likely to get one when it was due.

"You." Edran barked at the woman in the center of the group. "Come with me."

Gabrielle hoped the guard wouldn't risk inflicting more damage on her after the Conqueror had noticed last night. "Why?" she asked.

Edran laughed. "I should try you out myself," he growled. "It's not often the Princess beds someone twice."

Gabrielle heard a collective gasp, and raised her hands reassuringly. "She didn't."

Edran laughed again at the girl's denial. He'd heard it straight from Claius's mouth.

"It's not true," Gabrielle insisted, a little more adamantly. Gods, how disgusting.

"Come on." Edran jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "The Princess says you're to eat with her."

Gabrielle shook her head. "No," she said. "I'll eat with my friends."

The thick guard gawked at her. He'd never had one refuse before; most had more brains, and more regard for their skins. Now what? He didn't think it wise to try his usual method of persuasion, not after the Princess had questioned him about the girl's bruises last night.

He weighed the problem for a long moment, then slammed the cell door in their faces and stomped off.

Raubert clasped her arm. "You shouldn't have done that, Gabrielle," he said soberly. "He'll be back."

"I'm not a slave to be ordered around," Gabrielle said. Better to receive another beating than have her friends believe she was being singled out for special treatment, she thought, especially after the guard's vile aspersions.

"Where is she?"

Edran hesitated, hating the girl for putting him in this position. "She . . . would not come, Highness."

Xena stared at him. "Would not come?" she repeated. "And did you ask her politely?"

"Yes, Highness," he answered, missing her sarcasm.

The blue of the Conqueror's eyes darkened. The inconceivable insolence of that woman

In less time than she had hoped, Gabrielle heard the heavy footfalls of the guard returning. She kept her eyes closed, once again taking comfort in her mother's image.

"By the gods!"

Gabrielle's head jerked up at Celice's exclamation, and she found herself looking directly into the eyes of an angry Warrior Princess. Her stomach turned over.

"Open it," Xena directed, nodding her head toward the cell door. Edran hastened to comply, and Xena strode inside, quickly familiarizing herself with the layout. It had been a while since she'd been inside the prison. Usually, its occupants were brought to her, either to her quarters or the sentencing block in the square.

After what seemed like an eternity, the Conqueror's gaze landed on the reason for her visit. "You disobeyed my order," she said evenly.

The scribe shook her head, unable to speak. She had badly misjudged the situation.

Xena turned to Edran. "Remove her and kill one of the others."

"No! Oh, gods!" Gabrielle threw herself at the ruler's feet, clasping a sandal in her hands. "No . . . please . . . Warrior Princess . . . I'm sorry." She pressed her lips against the top of Xena's foot. "It won't happen again. Please," the latter barely above a whisper.

The Conqueror's expression remained unchanged as she watched the traitor beg. Finally, she pulled her foot away. "Take her out," she said. She waited until the other woman looked up at her. "You'll not disobey me again."

Gabrielle shook her head, tears trailing down her face.

Her point made, Xena spun around and nearly collided with the heavy guard, who had edged closer for a better view of the wench's humiliation. He scrambled out of Xena's way, then almost bumped into her again when she stopped unexpectedly, her nose wrinkling in distaste. "Get her cleaned up," she instructed, "and have this place scrubbed down. I'm sick of the stench every time I want to interrogate a prisoner."

The matron had been a little more creative in dressing her ward this evening, Xena observed, noting with approval the light blue tunic cinched at the waist with a twined gold belt. The young woman's hair was braided in an attractive, loose style; even the sandals were new. Hmm. This was not an employee preparing a sacrifice for the Conqueror's use; this was loving attention. She likes her.

Xena made a mental note to reward Melba's attentiveness. Just as the Conqueror punished incompetence, she remembered good service.

"Come here," she said, and the prisoner walked forward soundlessly until she stood a few feet away, her eyes downcast. "Sit down." Settling across the table from her guest, Xena looked at the scribe over the rim of her glass. "Don't you have anything to nag at me about tonight?"

Gabrielle shook her head.

Xena studied as much of the other woman's face as she could see. This wasn't insolence; the woman was truly terrified of her. Xena frowned. She had intended to teach her a lesson in the cell, not silence her completely.

What could she say? Order the prisoner to argue with her? Tell her she wouldn't really have had her friend killed? That wasn't true, and they both knew it. Xena would have let the order stand without a second thought but for the scribe's grovelling.

The Conqueror had finally found something she couldn't order: genuine interest in talking to her. She grimaced, never having encountered the situation before. Maybe a direct question . . . "Did one of my guards beat you?" she asked.

No answer.

"Nothing you say will leave this room," Xena assured her.

Gabrielle pursed her lips, then finally nodded.

"Why?"

"I don't know."

Xena pressed her fork into a cube of ham. "You didn't provoke him?"

Gabrielle shook her head. "I said I'd go with him. But when we got outside . . . he just . . ."

Xena made another mental note. Aloud, she said, "I'm sorry."

Gabrielle looked at her with mild skepticism.

"I don't tolerate disobedience," Xena said, "but I don't have prisoners beaten without reason."

"Right," Gabrielle muttered, raising a spoonful of corn to her mouth.

"Do you have a contrary opinion?"

Gabrielle debated with herself. If she got into this, it could only make things more difficult, but she couldn't let an outrageous lie like that go unchallenged.

"You're free to say anything you want," Xena said. "In this room," she clarified.

"How can you say you don't inflict pain on anyone without reason?" Gabrielle erupted.

"Because I don't."

"The fields are lined with your crucified victims," the scribe said.

"There were reasons."

"Hmpf." Gabrielle speared at her ham angrily.

"You have no idea what it takes to run a kingdom, let alone one that spans half the known world," Xena said. Gods, this woman annoyed her. Why had she thought it might be fun to subject herself to this again? "Keeping its borders safe, the people protected--"

"Protected? From whom? You've killed more Corinthians in the past three years than any marauding enemy could hope to take out." Gabrielle felt her temper rising, and struggled to tamp it down. For whatever reason, the Conqueror had conferred immunity on her for this meal, but there was a limit to what she could expect to get away with.

"Do you have any specific examples of things I've done that don't meet with your approval?" Xena asked. "It's difficult to answer blanket condemnations." Which is probably why you use them so much in your speeches.

"The people of Cattera are starving; why won't you give them any assistance?"

Xena waved her hand impatiently. "That's something I *haven't* done; tell me about something I have done that's criminal or diabolic or whatever you call it."

"All right. You had us arrested because we-- because you thought we were speaking out against the Realm." She took a sip of wine to keep her throat from drying up. "Don't you want to hear other people's viewpoints? Wouldn't it help you make your decisions?"

"I have no difficulty making decisions, and the right ones," Xena said. "If I want input, I have consultants. Most people are ignorant or self-centered. For example, did you know that the Caterrans knew they were building on a flood plain? My engineer advised them against it, but they decided their harvests would be richer. Should I reward them for their recklessness?"

"Should you let them starve?"

"I can't feed everyone. People have to be self-sufficient."

"But you don't let them be self-sufficient. And you don't know what people go through when they have to struggle to stay alive."

"I know," Xena disagreed. "I've been those people."

Gabrielle shook her head. "Not any more. Not for too many years. You've lost touch."

Xena bristled at the allegation, but didn't have a ready response. "I have not," she said finally.

"How much does a bushel of leeks cost?"

"How much does a mace cost?" Xena countered.

"People don't need maces."

"They needed them when the Persians tried to overrun us," Xena reminded her. "And the Horde."

Gabrielle's mind went back to the stories she had heard about the Horde. At the time, the people had been grateful to the Warrior Princess for taking them on; now they compared her to them.

"How many more Greeks would have been slaughtered if my forces -- with my maces -- hadn't protected them?" Xena continued.

"A government can't live in the past. You have to be prepared to help people through their problems today. You may have consultants, but I doubt if any one of you knows how much a carpenter makes in a year, or how much it costs a family just to eat."

Xena felt her blood stirring; quarrelling with this woman was nearly as stimulating as a well-executed sword fight. Unfortunately, she was slightly better equipped for swordplay. "Yes, I do," she said, irritated that that was the best she could come up with.

"Do not."

"Do, too."

"Bet you."

Xena blinked. "You'll bet me?" This was getting ridiculous.

"Yeah. Come on," Gabrielle challenged. She was really getting into this, forgetting for a moment that the woman she was taunting happened to be the ruthless Conqueror.

Xena pursed her lips. "Bet what?"

Gabrielle hesitated only an instant. "Our freedom." Deep green eyes held hers. "If I win, you let us go."

"Uh huh." Xena crossed her arms. "And what do I get if you lose?" She raised an eyebrow, tempted to make a suggestion of her own. The glow on the other woman's face from the childish contest was quite provocative, stirring the thought in Xena's mind that the scribe would be equally lively in other settings. It occurred briefly to the Conqueror that she could take what interested her without a wager, but for some reason that scenario didn't particularly appeal to her.

"You get to win." Xena stared at her, and Gabrielle laughed. "OK, I didn't figure you'd go for it, but it was worth a try." Gabrielle ran her tongue along her upper lip, further mesmerizing her host. "How about a blanket?"

"A blanket?"

"We've got two blankets in our cell for six people," Gabrielle said. "And no fire."

Xena wondered if it was the same for all prisoners, or whether the guards were having a little fun with the new inmates. "How have you been staying warm?"

"Ha." Gabrielle rolled her eyes. "We haven't. I thought I was going to freeze to death last night."

Xena felt a brief twinge.

"So, a blanket if I win," Gabrielle continued her planning. "If you win . . ." She tried to think of something.

Hmm. What would annoy the scribe the most? Xena wondered mischievously.

"If you win . . .," Gabrielle said again, as if repeating the words would inspire her.

"You write me a poem. And sign it."

Gabrielle's eyebrows rose. "A poem?"

"Yeah. Something funny." Xena held up a hand. "Something I'll think is funny."

The women eyed each other. "Deal." Gabrielle extended her hand, and Xena shook it. "OK, get me some paper," Gabrielle said, rubbing her hands together. Xena gave her a look, and Gabrielle quickly rephrased it. "Um . . . I mean, do you have any paper?"

With a smirk, Xena rose to fetch a box of parchment along with quill and ink from her desk.

"Wow." Gabrielle stared longingly at all that blank parchment. That could hold a year's worth of speeches, she calculated, keeping that thought to herself.

Ten minutes later, the door to Xena's chambers flew open, and the Conqueror thrust a square of parchment at a surprised guard. "Have Tova indicate the cost of these items," she instructed, then retreated back inside.

The guard dutifully went about his task, returning a short while later with the requested information. Before he had even completed his knock, the Conqueror had yanked the door open, snatched the paper from his hand, and slammed it shut again.

The women sat beside each other on the couch adding up the figures, then checked the final tally against their own estimates. "Six dinars," Gabrielle declared triumphantly.

A crumpled ball of parchment hit the back of the fireplace. "Stupid game," Xena grumbled.

Awkward silence followed, Gabrielle's normal exuberance at winning a bet dampened considerably by the recognition that she had just angered the Conqueror with her impulsiveness. "May we still have a blanket?" she asked finally, wishing they didn't need one so desperately.

"No." Xena shouted for a guard. "Take her back to her cell," she ordered.

Gabrielle opened her mouth, but decided she'd better let it go. She had been making bad mistakes with the Conqueror all day.

The cell's other occupants were surprised to see her back much earlier than the previous night.

"Gabrielle!" Raubert clasped her hands. "You're--" He paused to run his eyes down her new clothing. "Wow. You look beautiful."

Gabrielle chuckled. "I'm lucky I don't look dead," she said. "Two nights in a row," she marvelled, shaking her head. Two nights in a row she could have killed me and she didn't.

"What did she do to you?" Raubert caressed her hand.

"Nothing. We got into an argument, made a bet, and then she got mad when she lost and threw me out."

Her friends stared at her, wide-eyed, torn between admiring Gabrielle for her bravery and fearing that she had lost her senses completely.

The loud tromping of boots alerted them to more unwelcome news. Three guards? "You must have really ticked her off," Raubert whispered nervously.

"Everyone out!" The speaker's helmet identified him as a captain.

"Oh, gods," Celice uttered. "Everyone?"

"You heard me. Out!"

"Where are you taking us?"

"Out."

"Why?"

A hard shove encouraged them to make their way down the corridor. As they reached the outer door, the captain held up a hand. "Which one is Gabrielle?" No one spoke, and Belile grunted. "It's either you" -- pointing at Celice -- "or you" -- his intended target. "Answer the question."

The scribe stepped forward. "I'm Gabrielle."

Belile drew a cloth sack from the corner. "From the Conqueror. Said she accepts your original terms. Said to give this to a carpenter or something."

Cautiously, Gabrielle reached a hand into the bag, hoping it wasn't a severed head or anything. A confused expression crossed her face, and she drew out a head of cabbage. Handing it to Raubert, she reached in again and pulled out a jar of honey. She smirked, now knowing without looking what else would be in there: A leek, an apple, some butter, and -- it escaped her for a second -- oh, yeah, some flour.

"She said to tell you that next time there will be no mercy." He opened the door. "Now, out, all of you."

The six scrambled out the door and melted into the City. Belile watched the little blonde woman run, wondering why she didn't just drop the bag. Its contents, a few common staples, were of little value; why did she struggle to carry it with her while she fled? Women.

He turned to his men. "Help me block off the first cell," he ordered. "The Princess visited the prison today--"

The guards blanched.

"Yeah, lucky for you she didn't catch you taking a nap," he needled them. "She said she didn't appreciate freezing her fingers off in the cell. She wants fire pits installed."

Emor grunted. "She never comes down here," he said. He couldn't even remember the last time, except today, apparently. "No one's ever in those cells but the damn prisoners. Seems like a--"

The captain halted his stride, waiting with narrowed eyes for his soldier's next words.

"--good idea," Emor finished.

"I'm sure she'd be thrilled to know you agree with her. Now, get to work."

PART II

Gabrielle opened the door to a tall, hooded stranger.

"Yes?" she asked, a little warily. She could no longer afford the trusting nature she had had in the years before she joined the protest movement. It was too dangerous now.

A gloved hand drew back the hood, and Gabrielle's mouth fell open. "Xena?" she gasped, forgetting the presumption of using the Conqueror's given name.

"Can I come in?" Xena asked.

"Uh-- of course," Gabrielle stammered. She stepped back to make way, then poked her head outside. No guards waiting to spring, so far as she could see.

Xena surveyed her surroundings. This is where the scribe lived?

The young woman's entire home was confined to a square footage considerably less than a single room in Xena's palace. A small wall fireplace, crudely adapted for the makeshift quarters, but apparently providing adequate ventilation, had no difficulty warming the tiny space. Filling the entire west corner was a narrow bed, above which hung a curtain that could be drawn for privacy. Rumpled sheets indicated that the scribe had been awakened by the arrival of her early-morning visitor.

To Xena's immediate left was a three-drawer chest that apparently contained all of the woman's clothes; at least Xena didn't see anything else that could hold them. A washbasin rested atop the chest. No private facilities, of course; she supposed the scribe had to wander down the alley when the need arose.

Her inspection ended on two wooden chairs placed in close proximity in front of the fireplace. For socializing -- or plotting -- the ruler assumed; handmade pillows had been placed in the seats for extra comfort.

Gabrielle closed the door. "How did you know where I live?" she asked. Xena arched an eyebrow, and Gabrielle grimaced. "Oh." The ruler of most of the known world would have her sources, she supposed. She wondered what else Xena knew about her.

"Um, please sit down, if you want." Why are you here? Gabrielle wanted to scream, but instead she held her hand out for Xena's cloak, taking the time to appreciate the remarkable garment. Dark wool, silk lining, not really that heavy considering how thick it was. Gabrielle ran a finger across the intricate gold stitching on the sleeves. "This is beautiful," she said.

"You want one?" Xena asked casually.

"Oh,--" Gabrielle rolled her eyes, chuckling. "What am I saying? Nevermind."

"Why not?"

"Me with a coat like this? My friends" -- accomplices, Xena translated -- "would think I'd gone over to the other side."

"Maybe they'd just think you have a wealthy lover," Xena joked, a little surprised when the other woman seemed to take the remark seriously.

"Right," Gabrielle snorted. "Then they'd know something was wrong."

Xena settled into one of the chairs, extending her long legs in front of her toward the fireplace. This wasn't so bad, she decided; kind of toasty. In a way, it reminded her of the days when she had led her army in the field, instead of by proxy.

"Oh, yeah?" she said. "And why's that?"

Gabrielle didn't answer immediately, being preoccupied at the moment with a quandary: The chairs were closer together than usual, having been moved to facilitate sweeping and not yet returned to their original positions. Should she leave her chair close to the Conqueror's, which might be a little awkward, or move it farther away, which might be a little obvious?

Her dilemma was resolved when Xena patted the other chair, impatient for her host to make herself comfortable so that she might be comfortable. It had been many years since Xena had ventured out on a regular, non-royal, non-conquering visit, and it felt foreign enough as it was.

"Why is that?" she repeated.

"Pardon?" Gabrielle had forgotten the question.

Xena hadn't. "Why wouldn't your friends believe you have a wealthy lover?"

Gabrielle studied her fingers, which seemed to be constructing some sort of steeple, a slow blush rising up her throat. She didn't particularly care to discuss her lack of opportunities in

that sort of thing. Everyone knew the Conqueror had never had that problem; she would just laugh at her. 'The cause is first and only,' Gabrielle always insisted. That was why she wasn't interested in any of the young men who approached her, why she hadn't ever--

She glanced up to see Xena still waiting for an answer. "Well," Gabrielle said, "I mean, it's just that I'm so busy"

"Doing what?" Xena asked, smiling. As if I don't know. She was kind of curious, though: How did one support herself by rabble rousing?

Gabrielle met her gaze. "Charity work," she replied, and both women smiled.

"Is that enough to support you?" Xena asked.

Sensing that Xena really was interested, Gabrielle nodded, spreading her hands to indicate their surroundings. "It's not exactly the lap of luxury," she said, "but it's plenty for me."

"How . . . ?" Xena puffed out her cheeks, not sure how to ask it.

"How does charity work support me?"

Xena nodded.

"People . . . contribute," Gabrielle answered carefully. "I get . . . enough for this room" -- she hoped Xena wouldn't deduce from the comment that the room was donated -- "and food, and some clothing." She pointed to the simple floor-length skirt she was wearing.

"Nice," Xena acknowledged. And it was. Carefully cut and stitched, but neither a color nor design that would accentuate the scribe's natural beauty. No, something deep green would be better, Xena thought, with a sharp V neckline. She imagined how striking Gabrielle would look, then pictured her slovenly guards drooling over the same sight. The fantasy neckline moved a few inches up the blonde woman's chest.

Xena turned her face toward the fireplace, which crackled satisfyingly. Folding her hands across her stomach, she noticed a small square of parchment on the hearth, apparently the result of someone's poor aim. She leaned over to pick it up, intending to toss it in the flames, then brought it closer to examine it.

The scribe snatched at the paper, but Xena drew her hand out of reach and continued to study the drawing. A tall woman with long dark hair, royal dress, and sandaled feet; nothing out of the ordinary--except, perhaps, the two prominent fangs protruding from the woman's mouth, dripping some substance she assumed was supposed to be blood. The blood of the people or some other tired cliché, she supposed.

Gabrielle couldn't read Xena's expression as she looked at Mica's caricature, and a sense of dread began to set in. How could she have forgotten for even an instant that this woman was the Conqueror?

Xena held up the sketch. "Did you draw this?"

Gabrielle shook her head.

"Not a good likeness." Xena tossed the drawing to the floor, dismissing it, then directed her cool gaze at the scribe.

Gabrielle suspected that the warrior would honor some sort of truce for her home, for tonight anyway, but it didn't matter; she could not have resisted what she was about to do anyway. "I have a better one," she said.

Narrowed blue eyes followed the scribe over to a writing table, where she pulled open a drawer. Gabrielle rifled through a stack of loose papers, pausing at the sudden realization that drafts of some of her speeches were in there, parchment too precious a commodity to use only one side. Casually, she shifted her body, positioning it between Xena and the table, effectively concealing the contents from the Conqueror's view.

The young woman's movement, and its purpose, did not escape Xena's attention, and she was tempted to storm over there, yank the drawer out and empty its contents on the floor. For now, she remained in her seat.

The scribe had apparently found what she was looking for, and she walked back holding out a slightly worn square of parchment. There, in black and white, was a sketch of the Warrior Princess, astride a magnificent palomino mare. Xena turned the paper over, squinting at some long-faded words . . . flour, nuts . . .

She flipped the paper over again. No date, no clues in the sparse background. It could have been any valley.

"Potedaia," Gabrielle answered, and Xena's head jerked up. The blonde woman was staring intently at a red weave on the fireplace rug. "We heard you were coming, but some of us thought what we had heard wasn't true," she said. The things they had said were inhuman, too horrible to be true. "My sister and I sneaked up the west hills, and I saw you with your men. On your horse."

Xena knew where this was headed, but waited for her to continue.

"Your army came the next day." Gabrielle closed her eyes. "Potedaia isn't there any more." She reached for the sketch, running her eyes across it unnecessarily--the image had been seared into her memory those four long years ago. "My father and sister were killed by one of your men. He ran them through with his sword, even after my sister tried to surrender." The scene ran through Gabrielle's mind, as painful as if she were witnessing it again at this moment. "My mother was taken for the slavers," she continued tonelessly. "I never saw her again."

She held out another parchment. Against her better judgment, Xena found herself looking down at the head and shoulders of an older blonde woman, below which was some intricate calligraphy. Hecuba of Potedaia.

Gabrielle took back the drawing and carried both parchments to her desk.

Xena stood and grabbed her cloak, fastening the clasps efficiently. "Traitors against the realm will hang in the square," she said, levelling an icy gaze at the scribe. "And all who stand with them."

Gabrielle stared back at her, then nodded once at the declaration of their mutual enmity. She held open the door, and her visitor stepped outside into the harsh glare of the rising sun.

Xena strode away from the stone building, cursing herself for the drunken impulse that had brought her to this hovel. A dozen or so mugs of ale, tossed back between scuffles at familiar dives during the night, had persuaded her that the traitorous mouse might prove interesting company for a few minutes.

She scowled. She hadn't perceived the lateness of the hour, and now she would have trouble getting into the castle unnoticed. She could get past her own pathetic guards undetected, that much was certain, but Ennaus would have been by already for a morning briefing. Although ordinarily he knew better than to look behind the bedroom curtain, he unquestionably would have done so when the ruler failed to acknowledge his presence, if only to yell at him to go away.

She tucked the hood more snugly around her face, not nervous but cognizant of the awkwardness of explaining her presence in this part of the city. There were no soldiers' haunts here, nothing but run down tenements and walled enclosures that people like her -- Xena's lip curled -- pathetically called homes.

She rounded a corner and headed away from the castle.

Gabrielle hurriedly tossed another stack of papers in the fire. The wooden box was now empty, save for two drawings: One a golden-haired woman with loving green eyes, and one a fierce black-haired woman astride a horse.

Gabrielle brought the first sketch to her lips, and replaced the treasure gently in its container. The other drawing she held up longer. A memory surfaced of two girls peering over the top of a hill, watching a woman in dark leathers give orders to her men, and Gabrielle could almost remember feeling . . . something, some fascination for this woman who was unlike anyone she had ever seen before.

She hadn't been prepared. She always had quill and ink knotted into her belt, but she didn't have any parchment with her, except for a new recipe the blacksmith's wife had sent home for Hecuba.

Gabrielle had quickly unfolded the square, holding it flat with one hand as the other moved swiftly across the page. Later that evening, Lila had centered the parchment on their shared bedstand while Gabrielle carefully placed a heavy sack of flour on it, working out how they might wipe off the inked words from the back of their prize tomorrow.

Three days after the attack, when she regained consciousness at the home of a stranger, the first of many who would show her kindness in the following months, Gabrielle had found the drawing in her pocket. She hadn't intended to keep it, but in her desperation to save her mother's portrait from the flames, she had accidentally snatched both parchments. Looking at it, Gabrielle had, without hesitation, known where she needed to go: Corinth, where she would devote her life to destroying the existence of the woman who had destroyed hers.

In some ways, Gabrielle mused, it was hard to reconcile the woman of her illustration, a monster who stood by while her men sacked and burned a grossly outmatched village, with the intelligent, at times engaging, woman she had spent two evenings with, who had let her go for no other reason than that she had been bested in a wager

Gabrielle stared at the drawing a while longer before dropping it back into the box.

Thwack!

The Conqueror backhanded another challenger into oblivion, then downed her prize in a single gulp. Suddenly the doors burst open, and three of her Guard entered the darkened tavern.

About time. She had been waiting for them to 'find' her for hours.

One of the men advanced, while his two colleagues hung back nervously. Cowards, she cursed. They should rot in her dungeon.

"Princess," the brave one bowed, "Lord Ennaus wishes to know whether you would like an escort back to the castle, if you are . . .," he glanced at the bodies lying in various stages of hurt, "finished here."

"Whatever," she mumbled. Not bad looking, she supposed. Too bad she was so out of it. "What's your name?"

"Esor, your Highness."

"Whatever." She slammed her empty mug down and steadied herself with a hand on the counter. Whoa. She hadn't been quite this wasted in some time. She started toward the door, her balance slightly less assured than usual.

"Wait!" The distressed cry of the tavernkeeper's apprentice reached her from behind the bar. The girl spread her hands out, indicating smashed tables and chairs, a gaping hole in one end of the counter, and other remnants of the devil woman's visit. "The damage"

Esor stiffened. How dare she! Did the fool not know whom she addressed?

The girl shrank from the hostile glare of soldiers, taking refuge in the bleary-eyed but comparatively calm gaze of the woman who had wrecked her uncle's establishment. She swallowed, but the certain beating she would receive from her uncle overrode the speculative harm that might befall her at these strangers' hands.

"Do you know who I am?" Xena asked.

The girl held her breath, afraid to admit that she didn't. "Please," she said, her voice quivering. "We don't have the money to repair this."

Xena studied her. Pale complexion, red-gold hair; under the flickering light of the wall torches, she looked almost like--

"Insolent girl!" Esor took a step forward, but Xena's bark stopped him.

"Here!" She drew a small coin purse from beneath her cloak and launched it at the far wall, gold coins spewing across the floor as it burst open. "Take it. I've got thousands more of these. 'Lining my already bursting vaults,'" she quoted disdainfully. "She'll line the square with the others," she muttered to herself.

The guards looked at each other. Who knew what she was talking about?

Word that the Princess had been out for a night of lively entertainment travelled through the castle, and the place was deadly silent as servants tiptoed about their chores, not wanting to be the one to accidentally wake her.

Xena dozed on and off, no longer sleeping off her binge, but unwilling to drag herself from the warm comfort of her bed.

"Princess?" Her aide's too-loud voice carried through the cloth curtain.

She draped a forearm across her eyes. "What."

"Princess, we must discuss matters of castle security," Ennaus said, pressing ahead in spite of her mood. Secretly, he was thrilled; if Xena had amused herself with a soldier last night, she would not be in such a foul temper today.

Xena closed her eyes. One thing she did not need right now was another lecture about her occasional nocturnal outings, the only real fun she had these days. Most of the time, anyway. She wouldn't make last night's mistake again. "Later," she yelled.

Ennaus smiled. "Yes, Princess." He had the information he wanted anyway.

Potedaia isn't there any more.

Good. One less problematic village in her way. Xena wondered how the so-called scribe had escaped the raid. Ran, probably, she thought uncharitably, then admitted that it was unlikely. That woman, even before she was a woman, would not willingly have abandoned her family.

Xena wished she knew which of her soldiers had disobeyed orders and killed the man and girl trying to surrender. Not that it was a much better fate, but they should have been sold to Canzas along with the old woman, whatever her name was. A recollection of elaborate handwriting -- Hecuba of Potedaia -- forced its way into her consciousness, and she jumped to her feet in search of a distraction.

Judging by the position of the sun, they would be leaving for Sparta within the hour, she noted. She was looking forward to this. A month or two away from the suffocating walls of Corinth and its ungrateful residents was just what she needed.

She paused before the window and looked out at the peasants scurrying about their business, forming a colorful potpourri of baskets and rugs and robes as they moved along. This was one

reason she had ignored the urgings of her second in command to take an inside chamber. It would have been safer, yes, but even more isolated than she already felt at times. What was it that irritant had said? Out of touch.

Far more annoying than the scribe's accusations was the fact that Xena was still thinking about them. Who cared what some mule-headed traitor thought? So, she was attractive--beautiful, in fact, if one could get past that mouth. So were hundreds of other women who would gladly accept an invitation to the royal chamber. One body was just as warm as any other between the sheets.

Xena turned her attention back to the street scene outside, her eyes settling on a stooped woman, far more gray than black in her hair, who was leading a stubborn goat down the passageway. Xena's fingers clung lightly to the curtain as she watched other pedestrians navigate around the tussling figures.

In a way, the goat symbolized her subjects, Xena thought: Useful in some respects, but stubborn and thick-skulled. You could not reason with a goat; getting its attention and obedience required a firm hand. Yet still the woman struggled to convince the goat with words to cooperate. Foolish hag; her task would take all day if she didn't lay a hand on the animal.

Behind them, a stocky young man, a trader by the looks of him, strode briskly up the narrow street, and Xena's eyes narrowed. She recognized the walk--not his in particular, but the arrogant gait of those whose time is more valuable than others'. Annoyed at the obstruction in his path, the trader shoved the old woman aside and she lost her grip on the rope.

Xena craned her neck for a better look at him before returning her gaze to the woman, who was being helped to her feet by friendly passersby. The goat had scuttled only a few feet away, and a little girl held up the leash to her. A hand pressed against her side, the old woman resumed her battle of wills with the four-legged creature; a complete waste of time, as far as Xena was concerned, but she supposed the little scribe would wax eloquent about the old woman's trials or such. She smiled slightly, picturing green eyes ignited with indignation, or passion, or delight, whatever the emotion of the moment might be.

A long moment later, Xena whirled around and strode to the door. "Have Achias report to me," she directed.

The two guards nodded respectfully, trading speculative glances after the door closed. The words were never spoken aloud, but it was no secret why Xena kept the ex-soldier on her payroll. Achias would pay Xena a visit, and within weeks or even hours a problem of Xena's would conveniently be solved: A disobedient king would be found on his throne without his head; an uncooperative landowner would vanish from his home without a trace.

At times, members of the guard speculated -- well beyond the castle walls -- on how a man with only one arm could be so effective. His appearance probably lulled his victims into lowering their guard, they figured. Of course, no one knew it was Achias, because no one ever saw anything, but everyone knew. The junior guard hurried to fulfill his assignment.

Xena poured two glasses of port in anticipation of her guest's arrival. The man had been an exemplary member of her second army until a shoulder wound had weakened his sword arm to the point where Xena had to send him home before he lost it. Too late, as it turned out.

She smiled. Achias was quietly loyal, discreet, a killer without conscience, and the closest thing Xena had to a friend.

"Highness, your carriage--" Ennaus halted, irritated to see that smug henchman standing beside Xena, both bent over a map.

"Do whatever it takes," the Princess was saying. Achias nodded, fully understanding the scope of his authority.

"Princess?" Ennaus tried to gauge where Xena's hand had been resting on the map, but she straightened casually and rolled up the document.

"Join us, Ennaus," she said pleasantly. "We were just about to have some more port."

Behind her back, the two men grudgingly acknowledged each other's presence, Ennaus openly irritated at his exclusion from whatever was going on, Achias with that same damn non-expression he wore whether he was plucking a flower or slitting a man's throat.

"Another time, Highness," Achias said. "By your leave" He bowed, and withdrew.

Closso arrived late to the meeting, but his news could not wait. "The Conqueror was attacked on her way back from Sparta," he interrupted breathlessly.

All eyes in the group widened.

"And?" Raubert held up crossed fingers.

"Three of her escort were killed, but Xena was not injured," the guard said.

"Damn."

"Raubert! You don't mean that," Gabrielle said.

He looked at the scribe as if she had just announced that the sun never rose in the summer. "Of course I mean it. Who here wouldn't love to see the Conqueror dead at his feet?"

"At our feet, yeah," Timmor chimed in, "to kick her rotten corpse to pieces."

"Nice image," Gabrielle said. "How do we know we'd end up with any better?"

"Because there is nothing worse," Raubert reasoned, encouraged by several nods of agreement.

"Well, I agree that she's . . ." Gabrielle wasn't sure what she wanted to say. "She's"

"A heartless bitch?"

"A rabid dog?"

"She's harsh," Gabrielle said, ignoring the suggestions. "But look at what's happened in the months she's been gone. The pogrom in Carmal, hundreds of desert dwellers massacred. The attacks on the newcomers by the Corinthian purists, a dozen killed last week alone." She ticked off horrors on her fingers. "The--"

"Nothing compared to the terror she's inflicted over the years." Marcus waved her off. "Remember the Saldan rebellion?"

Yes, she did. Stories had travelled fast and far of thousands of civilians overrun by sword-wielding cavalymen on the Conqueror's order. "I still think you're too unfeeling," she said, with less confidence than she had felt earlier. "Isn't it better to give Xena a chance to learn the error of her ways than simply to wish her dead?"

"Right, Gabrielle," Timmor said. "She's gonna change her ways after all these years. Did you hear about Cormus?"

"I was there," she replied, recalling vividly the man's broken body hanging from the cross. Horrible, yes, but what did they expect Xena to do to someone who fired a crossbow at her? she thought. Had Xena let that go unpunished, her life would be in constant danger, wouldn't it?

Raubert smiled down at her, placing a gentle hand on her shoulder. "You're so naive sometimes, Gabrielle."

She jerked away from his touch. "Just because I don't agree with everything you say doesn't make me naive," she snapped. "Let's just get on with the meeting."

In the northeastern region of Xena's realm, a man in full Guard regalia dismounted and dusted himself off. He strode confidently to the door, where he was met by a nervous lord of the manor.

The visitor removed his feathered helmet and tucked it under his arm. "Terellis of Duche, I bring greetings from Xena the Conqueror," he said.

Terellis paled. So his guards had reported it correctly. The stranger's words were polite, but everyone knew that an unexpected visit from Xena or one of her agents never bode well.

"An honor," he replied, recovering from his shock sufficiently to bow. He straightened, and swept an arm across the extensive grounds. "My humble abode is yours for as long as you wish to stay."

Achias stepped over the threshold into a decorative entryway. "This will not be an extended visit," he said. It had taken the emissary longer than he had expected to track his prey to this estate, and he wanted to head out without further delay. "You have something the Conqueror wants."

The Warrior Princess was carried smoothly into the square, two well-muscled attendants lowering the pallet carefully to the ground.

Xena swept her gaze over the sizeable crowd. Always good attendance at a sentencing, she observed dryly. For most, it was a way to satisfy perverse curiosity; people wanted to see a man killed, even as they turned away.

For others -- and Xena suspected she could name at least one -- viewing a sentencing was a way to personalize the ruler's cruelty, to paint more vivid pictures of her depravity. The image of a blonde woman scribbling across a blank parchment slipped into her head, and she found herself scanning the crowd for a particular face. She would be here, of course, working her way toward the front as the sentencing progressed like a good little scrivener.

"Hamron!"

The captain of the guard called for the first condemned man, who was hauled forward and deposited in the dirt at the Conqueror's feet.

"A thief, Highness," the captain explained.

Xena sighed. "You know the penalty for theft," she said in a bored tone. "Your hand has offended the Realm." She jerked her head, and two guards hauled the struggling man to a platform, securing one arm across its diameter, immobilizing it even as the man fought desperately to pull away.

The executioner handed a razor-sharp implement to his apprentice, who was expected to work his way through lesser limbs before earning the right to take someone's head. The axe swung up and over the younger man's head, and Gabrielle closed her eyes, the nauseating sound of metal severing flesh and the prisoner's screams temporarily overwhelming her senses. No matter how many of these she attended, she could never become accustomed to them.

Xena watched with indifference as the thief, now unconscious, was carried to the healer's. Movement caught her eye, and she spied Achias making his way toward the spot where she had expected to see him. Xena secretly studied the woman with him, reluctantly shifting her attention to the next prisoner, whose name she had missed.

"A violator of women," Belile pronounced.

Xena's lip curled. She thought she had made it more than clear her intolerance of such conduct, particularly since an attack on the Doge of Marguelle's daughter during his visit a year ago had ended in an ill-advised attempt to lay siege to the City. Messy business it was, finally forcing her to cut the Doge's throat and replace him with a less aggressive counterpart.

Achias handed the woman beside him a square of parchment folded carefully in two, a light wax seal binding the two edges together. "Don't lose that," he said. She peered down at the paper and back up again, but he was gone.

"You know the penalty for rape," Xena declared. "Your pathetic manhood has offended the Realm." With a jerk of her head, the criminal was dragged toward the hospital. Too much blood loss had killed the last one by mistake. Xena hadn't been particularly bothered by his fate, but she had her system, and certain punishments were now meted out under the healer's direct supervision.

"She must be tired today," Raubert said behind his hand. "No lectures about how 'this should serve as a warning' and all that."

There was no answer from Gabrielle and he leaned down to repeat his comment, pausing at the look on her face.

Gabrielle stood frozen, staring in disbelief at a woman standing a dozen yards away. Pen and parchment slipped unnoticed from the scribe's fingers, and she started slowly forward.

"Mother?" she whispered.

"The final prisoner, Highness, is--"

Belile was interrupted by a scream from the crowd, as all heads turned to see two women clasped tightly together, crying.

"What the--"

The captain's growl was forestalled by a soft command. "Let it go, Belile; it seems harmless enough. Continue."

From his carefully selected vantage point amid the assembly, Achias studied his commander closely. Subtly, almost undetectably, yet unmistakable to one who had known her for years, the Conqueror's glance was returning again and again to the two women clinging to each other at the edge of the crowd. Hmm

Gabrielle wiped gently at her mother's face with the back of her fingers, still in shock. Hecuba tensed, and Gabrielle took her hand.

"What is it?" she asked, bringing her mother's hand to her lips, then pressing the other woman's palm to her cheek.

"The man who brought me here," Hecuba said. "He'll be back."

"Who was it?"

"My owner."

Fresh tears rolled down Gabrielle's face. Her mother, still a slave? Were they just passing through Corinth? She would not lose her again now; she would follow them wherever they went. Gabrielle reached for her mother's other hand, but it was balled tightly into a fist.

"What's the matter?" Hecuba uncurled her fingers, and Gabrielle noticed the parchment. "What's this?"

"I don't know. He gave it to me before he left."

Gabrielle brought it up to inspect it, slipping a finger between the edges to break the seal.

"Gabrielle, don't!" Hecuba gasped.

"It'll be all right. We'll tell him it was an accident."

Hecuba stared at her. It was obvious that her daughter had never been a slave, for which she thanked the gods.

Gabrielle edged her finger through the wax and unfolded the paper. She read it, then mutely held it out to her mother, who shook her head anxiously. If her master saw them--

"It's a declaration of freedom," Gabrielle said. She closed her eyes, then brought the parchment up to read it again. Those were the legal words; Gabrielle had borrowed them once from an emancipated slave's certificate to issue a blanket declaration of freedom of all Corinthians from Xena's tyranny.

The signature on this document was sloppy, but it was embossed with an official seal that would prove the claim were anyone to dispute it. Oh, gods. She took her mother into her arms again.

Another convict was tossed before the Conqueror, requiring her full attention. Damn it. "What is his crime?" she asked irritably.

The man looked up at her. "I spoke."

"He incited the people against you, Conqueror," Belile said.

Xena rose from her platform and approached the captive as he struggled to his feet. "Are you guilty?" she asked, actually stalling for time. The penalties for speaking against the Realm were unambiguous, and Xena had never hesitated to enforce them, but she wasn't particularly in the mood today.

She contemplated the prisoner a moment longer, wondering idly if this was a friend of the scribe, who was probably still watching from the crowd. For the first time in her reign, the Conqueror felt a hint of indecision. Too tired, she decided. She hadn't had much opportunity for rest since returning from Sparta; perhaps she should postpone the sentencing until--

She felt it almost as she heard it. The crowd went silent, holding its collective breath as Xena wiped the spittle from her face. An instant later, she had drawn a sword from the captain's sheath and impaled the traitor through the chest. She tossed the bloody weapon to the ground, returning to stand in front of her pallet.

"His heart offended the Realm," she shouted. "Know this: All who speak against the Realm will die like this dog."

She lowered herself to the pallet, and was transported back to the castle. Nearly a quarter league in the distance, a mother and daughter held hands as they walked toward the younger woman's home, having left the horrors of the sentencing square far behind them.

"Highness." The soldier saluted. "We raided one of the traitors' meetings," he reported proudly. "Caught nearly a dozen of the bastards."

Xena straightened in her throne. "Where was it?"

"Where was what, Highness?"

She gritted her teeth. "The - meeting," she said slowly.

Eban's brow furrowed. The Princess didn't seem to be as pleased with this news as he had anticipated. Just his luck to catch her in a bad mood.

"On the east side. A house behind the mausoleum. We burned it."

Xena nodded. "Good work. Nearly a dozen, huh?"

The soldier gulped. He'd overstated it a little, not expecting her to quiz him about details. "Well, Highness, eight, I believe."

Xena smiled supportively. "All orators?" All men, in other words?

"Seven of them, Highness. One was a girl."

"A girl?" Xena uncrossed her thighs slowly, diverting part of Eban's attention, then recrossed them with equal deliberation, capturing the rest of it. "Are you sure she was with them?"

Eventually, Eban registered the question. "Oh -- yes, Highness. She had quite a mouth on her. Belile says that you have arrested her before."

"I see." Xena sat back and gripped her thighs. She had done all she could. She had warned them all what would happen if they were arrested again. The scribe would now join her friends in their fate, and this muddled interval in Xena's life would finally be over.

It was far too distracting -- and ultimately dangerous -- anyway. In Sparta, she had nearly made use of a willing housemaid until something the girl said or did brought the scribe to mind and kept her there. Cursing the interference of a woman thirty leagues away, Xena had ordered the servant back to her own quarters. Over the next weeks, honey gold hair and green

eyes would flash unexpectedly into her brain while she was attempting to conduct business -- "Excuse me, Highness, you said Potedaia again" -- until finally she just gave up and cut short the visit.

She needed this to be over. To spare the woman would be to lose credibility with her own men and the citizenry, and would only encourage other dissenters. It wasn't an option, no matter how much Xena desperately desired to do it. She sighed at the inadvertent admission. Yes, she wanted to spare Gabrielle. She wanted the scribe to be here instead, with her, talking to her, smiling at her.

She cringed at an image of Gabrielle on the cross. She could at least spare her the pain and indignity of a lingering death. "I'll see them," she said.

The guard took a deep breath. His captives were important enough for the Conqueror's personal attention. A true feather in his cap.

"Let's go," she said.

The soldier's jaw dropped. Now? She was going to the prison herself? He could not have asked for a greater honor. "Oh." The Conqueror was standing at the entrance, waiting for him. "My apologies, Highness." He hurried out the door and down the hallway.

There was a firepit in the cell now, Gabrielle noticed. "This is new," she said conversationally, acting the good host for the Athenian dissidents who shared her cell. "They spoil us here." She laughed half-heartedly. "I'm really sorry about this; your first visit to Corinth and you're arrested." The other irony, that she had been the one appointed to share speeches and ideas with them, hadn't occurred to her. "That's basically what it's like here."

She knelt beside the pit, testing the kindling for dampness. At least they wouldn't freeze to death before they were executed.

"I warned you."

Gabrielle whirled around to face the Conqueror's piercing blue eyes through the cell bars.

"I told you that this time there would be no mercy," Xena said.

The scribe could not speak, but it didn't appear that the Warrior Princess would be interested in anything she had to say anyway.

"I am sick of your interference and your insolence," Xena continued, directing her remarks to all the prisoners. Almost as an afterthought, she added, "I have no choice." She turned to her captain, who had hustled to the prison at word that the Conqueror was paying another unannounced visit. "Hang her in the square at dawn," she ordered, and then disappeared again into the darkness.

Gabrielle sank to her knees. She had heard about the brutal slaying of an orator at the sentencing last month, but somehow had thought, had hoped, that it was an instinctive reaction to being spat upon. That wouldn't excuse it, but Gabrielle thought she could at least

understand it. The Warrior Princess had been a creature of instinct nearly all her life; she couldn't be expected to change that overnight.

But this-- this wasn't instinct. Gabrielle closed her eyes, feeling a sense of loss that had nothing to do with her impending death. When the guards came to separate her from the others, she went without protest.

Xena put aside the question of why she was doing this. For the hell of it, she had tried to persuade herself. Because she was bored. Because it was a challenge. Unfortunately, she knew better. It was because she couldn't think of any other way to keep the scribe alive.

She had given up trying to understand why she gave a damn about what happened to the woman from Potedaia. They had not spoken since Xena's ill-fated visit to that cramped basement months ago, when the scribe had made clear her utter contempt for the Conqueror. Since then, Xena had seen her from a distance at sentencings, at proclamation days, and, in somewhat of a surprise, at a non-lethal wrestling exhibition over which Xena had presided.

On one occasion, Xena had taken a chance and met the scribe's gaze, which to her astonishment was more curious than hostile. The women had stared at each other until, with a grin, the scribe had raised her quill and parchment menacingly, causing Xena to laugh in the middle of announcing an outbreak of anthrax. After that, despite her aide's strong disapproval, the Conqueror had scheduled weekly outdoor events of one type or another throughout the summer, and had seen glimpses of red-blond at all of them.

Portions of treasonous speeches had also been found or transcribed, and Xena had no trouble identifying the passionate hyperbole of one scribe in particular. She grinned, remembering the time she got wind of an imminent oration and quickly announced a change in whatever minor policy it was, just to imagine the scribe's consternation at having spent all that time writing a now useless speech. That one had gotten her a raised eyebrow and crossed arms from the end of the platform, and ultimately, when Xena answered with a wide-eyed expression of innocence, a laugh.

Smiling at the pleasant memories, Xena fastened her cape. Whatever the reason, be it involvement of the Fates or simply her own bad judgment, she felt an inexorable connection with this woman, and more alive than she had in years. She could no more change her plans tonight than she could refrain from breathing.

She pursed her lips. First and foremost: No killing. The death of a Royal Guard had automatic repercussions under the law, and the scribe would hardly be appreciative of freedom that came at the cost of a hundred lives.

Mask drawn tight across her eyes, Xena drew her legs across the sill and dropped from her window to the earth below.

The first of . . . ten prison guards, if she recalled correctly, opened the outer door to a hard fist that sent him flying. A figure clothed entirely in black, long sleeved shirt tucked into formless pants that cinched around calves at the bootline, darted inside, spent a few seconds seeing to the bolt, and headed deeper into the prison.

The next two never saw her. Asleep on the job, Xena noted, making a note to discuss discipline with Belile; two quick jabs and they were out of her way. She could feel her blood beginning to boil; it had definitely been too long since she'd had some fun.

The prisoners pressed their faces against the bars, curious about the commotion down the hall that they could hear but not see. Seven members of Xena's guard had surrounded the intruder, lashing and stabbing at the form that constantly eluded them, who now leapt into the air and took out three of them with slashing kicks.

"Get him!" Belile shouted. Xena spun away from him to slam an elbow into one of her men, swiping with a torch at four others who charged at the same time. The brief distraction was enough for Belile to lunge in with his dagger, feeling a satisfying plunge into flesh.

A spark of fear coursed through him when, other than a sharp intake of breath, the warrior made no sound as the knife sank into his back. By the gods, it hardly even seemed to slow him down.

Xena spun around, knocking two more guards off their feet. Her timetable had just been sped up; she needed to get Gabrielle and get out before she lost too much blood. Nice shot, Belile. She might add weapons training to his responsibilities.

Time seemed to pass slowly as she battled her way into the cell area, until finally the last of the outer guards fell beneath her boot. A jolt from the hilt of a confiscated sword floored the cell guard, and she bent to retrieve the key from his belt.

There she was, the condemned woman, segregated from the others in accordance with custom. The cell door swung open with a twist of the key, and Gabrielle rushed out.

"What are you doing?" she gasped. The man had to be insane, taking on Xena's Guard like this. The Conqueror would have his head. She opened her mouth to offer a further warning, but was stopped in her tracks at a glimpse of bright blue eyes through the mask. Familiar eyes.

Gabrielle brought her hands to her mouth. "Wh--?"

Xena placed her hand across the scribe's, and shook her head. Gabrielle snapped out of her trance just as Xena dropped the key ring onto the unconscious guard's chest.

"Wait." Gabrielle pulled back from her rescuer's grasp. "What about them?" Xena stared at her. "You can't leave them."

Xena snarled. Did the ingrate not know the risk she was already taking? She shook her head again and pulled at the young woman's arm.

"No!" Gabrielle grabbed Xena's sleeve and pulled the taller woman down to whisper urgently in her ear. "They'll think it was someone I know. What'll I tell them?"

Godsdamnit! Xena glared at her, than stomped over to the guard and retrieved the keys.

"No -- not that one," Gabrielle cried, seizing Xena's hand as it reached for the cell next to the scribe's. Its occupant had regaled Gabrielle more than once with the nature of his crime,

describing, in graphic terms, what he would do to her if he could get into her cell. "Over here."

A minute later, seven more radicals were free and running -- the wrong way. Xena spoke into in the scribe's ear.

"Wait! This way!" Gabrielle shouted. "Follow us."

The escapees swept through the back door and over the wall, scrambling up the temporary stone block ladder that Xena had constructed before her grand entrance. With a grunt, the Warrior Princess positioned a solid boulder against the door; she had already jammed the bolt in front to where it would not likely come free before breakfast.

Gabrielle watched the last of her colleagues leap from the top of the wall, then pivoted to see Xena propped casually against the wall. "Hey, come on! We've got to go!" she said.

"I agree," Xena rasped. "But I'm not going to make it over that wall."

Gabrielle reached out to her, staring with shock at the blood that coated her hand. "Oh, gods, Xena, you're hurt."

"No kidding." The old Warrior Princess was going soft, Xena thought disgustedly; in the old days, a wound like this wouldn't have taken her out for hours. The sound of a battering ram slamming against the back door brought her back to the present, and she wrapped an arm around Gabrielle's shoulder. "Let's go." She jerked her head toward the south. "This way. There's a--" She took a breath, too fatigued to explain. "You'll see."

It was a good idea, Gabrielle realized; she hadn't even seen the abandoned irrigation canal until she literally stumbled across it. She assisted Xena into the crevice and to the ground. "What happened?"

"Stabbed in the back," Xena chuckled. The concept seemed rather funny, all things considered.

"I'm glad you find it so amusing," Gabrielle said, moving Xena's shirt aside to get a better look at the wound. "Oh, gods." She raised a hand to her forehead, smearing blood across her skin and hair. "I don't know what to do. What should I do, Xena?"

"First, relax," Xena said calmly. "This isn't a bad wound."

"How do you know that? You can't even see it."

"I can feel it, and I've had a lot worse. I'll show you the scars some day."

"I don't--"

"Trust me," Xena said, and Gabrielle swallowed the rest of her objection. "I need some bandages and some clothing."

"Clothing?"

"I can't show up with bloodstains after what happened."

She heard the sound of cloth rending, and some wadded up portion of Gabrielle's outfit -- her skirt, Xena assumed -- was pressed against the wound. She ground her teeth together, reminding herself not to take out her discomfort on her companion.

"Can't you say you were attacked or something?"

"And ruin my reputation?" Xena joked. She tried to shake her head, but gave up on it. "Too hard to explain. Gabrielle," she said, "I need something to bandage--"

"OK, OK, I'll get some." Gabrielle raked a hand through her hair. She thought she recognized where she was now. "I'll go get some," she said again. "OK?" She waited for Xena's nod, slipping off her belt to tie it loosely around the compress.

Gabrielle raced through the streets, her mind reeling with scenarios of vindictive soldiers coming across a helpless Xena, not recognizing her before they ran her through. She quickened her stride, already feeling as though her heart were going to burst. Lack of oxygen to her brain disoriented her for a moment, but finally she located the eagle statue that marked the house.

Raubert opened his door to frantic pounding, shocked to see the beautiful blonde woman covered in blood, her clothing torn, almost incoherent in her panic.

"What?"

"Bandages!" she repeated. "Cloth . . ." She gulped for air. "Bed linen . . . anything!"

"Gabrielle, what's--"

"No time!" she shouted, shoving him aside to tear through his closet. She yanked out several thin towels, then remembered Xena's other instruction and hurried over to a dresser, pawing through drawers until she had compiled a more or less complete outfit. "I need these," she said. Wait--would she need to sew up the wound? Xena hadn't mentioned it, but maybe she had assumed . . . "Needle and thread," she said.

Without thinking, Raubert gestured toward a small basket in the corner. "Gabrielle, are you--"

"I've got to go," she interrupted, taking a couple of long, slow breaths in preparation for the return trip. She stepped out into the night, precious bundle stuffed under her arm, and turned back quickly. "Thank you, Raubert. I owe you."

Then she was gone. Raubert closed the door, wondering what exactly she owed him.

"Princess!"

Xena pivoted slowly at Ennaus' call.

"Princess, we have been searching for you for hours. The--" He eyed her warily. "May I ask what you are wearing, Highness?"

"A souvenir, Ennaus," she replied. "Of a rather . . . impressive . . . and . . . vigorous young man." She smiled suggestively. "Pretty good fit, don't you think?" She twirled around, gritting her teeth at the excruciating pain the display was costing her. "I would have expected the trousers to be larger," she added with a wink. She resumed her journey down the hall, hoping the hesitation in her stride would seem the result of overindulgence in activities of several varieties.

Ennaus did not care to hear the details of the Warrior Princess's latest conquest, and was pleased that he had just the news that would dampen her good mood. "While you were away, Princess, someone attacked the prison and released the traitors."

Xena spun around. "What?" Blue eyes flashed, the emotion in her performance enhanced by the nearly debilitating pain spiralling through her body. "Am I surrounded by sheer incompetence?" she shouted. "Can I not indulge in a single evening's pleasure without being humiliated by yet another example of it?"

The need to lie down was overwhelming; if it wasn't in the next few minutes, it would be here in the hall. Xena wished she could have sneaked Gabrielle in with her. Gathering up one last reserve of energy, she stormed down the hall and through the doors opened hurriedly by her chamber guards. "I want Belile brought to me at first light," she ordered.

The doors closed behind her, and she sank to the floor.

Xena took a deep breath. It was now or never. The old woman was probably there, but Gabrielle would just have to talk her way out of it. That shouldn't be a problem, she grinned. Just as she raised a fist to knock, the door swung open and Gabrielle shrieked.

"Shh. It's me," Xena said quietly.

"Gabrielle?"

Gabrielle ducked her head back inside. "It's nothing, Mother. A friend of mine with a message." She stepped outside and shut the door.

"How'd you know I was here?" Xena asked.

"I ought to make something up," Gabrielle said, matching Xena's grin, "but I didn't know. I was actually, um" She tossed her head toward the far end of the alley.

"Oh. Sorry. You better go ahead."

"Walk with me." Gabrielle took Xena's arm. "I'm glad to see you. I never got to thank you."

"No need."

"Yes, there is. You risked your life for me."

Xena wondered if she should point out that she was the one who had imposed the death sentence from which the scribe had been rescued. Gabrielle tightened her grip on her arm, and Xena smiled. "Aah, I was bored anyway," she said.

"Oh. Nevermind, then." They grinned at each other. "Did your back heal all right?"

"It's getting there. Wanna see the scar?"

"Yeah!" Gabrielle's smile faded. "Oh--you were kidding, weren't you?"

"Well, not if you really want to see it."

"Well, you did promise to show me all your scars once," Gabrielle said, then blushed at the way that sounded.

They had reached the outbuilding, and Gabrielle stepped inside. A minute later, she emerged again and they strolled, arm in arm, back to her quarters. "OK--let's see it," Gabrielle said, stopping beneath a torch-light.

"I'll have to pull down my leathers," Xena warned.

"Oh." Gabrielle's eyes widened. "That's OK, it's not-- I don't want you to feel uncomfortable."

"I don't care," Xena said, and she didn't. "I just wanted to make sure that you . . . that you knew that."

"Well, I, uh, certainly don't mind that, I mean I don't care one way or the other," Gabrielle sputtered. "I'd kind of like to see it, but . . ."

Xena unwrapped her cloak and pulled on the two straps until her leathers were at mid-waist, holding the front against her breasts.

"Wow, that's amazing." Gabrielle traced a finger along the indentation. How could a tear in her side that big make a scar that small? Without conscious intent, her hand strayed across the surprisingly smooth skin of the Conqueror's back. Amazing . . . "Oh--sorry." Gabrielle drew her hand back as if Xena's back were on fire.

Xena hadn't been bothered by the scribe's exploration. At its abrupt end, she pulled the straps back up and shrugged into her cloak, hesitating before drawing down the hood. She opened her mouth to say something, then shut it again. "I need to head back," she said.

"How about a goodbye kiss?" The words were out before Gabrielle could stop them. "Uh, you know, like friends do all the time." She looked up uncertainly. "We are friends, aren't we?"

Xena nodded slowly at the recognition. Yeah, she guessed they were.

"I mean, we don't really know when we'll see each other again," Gabrielle rambled on, wishing she hadn't opened her stupid mouth to begin with. "Just to, you know, sit down and visit or something."

Xena smiled. "Right." She leaned down and lightly pressed her lips against the other woman's, and then she was gone.

Gabrielle leaned against the door, reliving the too-brief moment their lips had met. It wasn't enough. She popped her head into the small room. "I've got to help someone out, Mother," she said. "I'll be back later this morning." She dashed to the corner and looked both ways, hands on her sides. Which way would Xena have gone?

Countless streets and corners later, Gabrielle was pretty sure she was still making her way toward the castle, but she was beginning to think that following the Warrior Princess -- or, more accurately, trying to follow -- hadn't been the best idea. She wasn't very familiar with this part of the city.

The sun was a good hand or more above the horizon now. Gabrielle held her hand in front of her eyes, shading them, and her eyes widened. Was that the castle? Hades, she was a lot closer than she thought. Xena would undoubtedly be inside the walls by now.

A sound behind her alerted Gabrielle that she was not alone, and she turned to see two men advancing on her. She whirled back round to see another pair approaching, closing off her only avenue of escape.

Xena encircled her knees, tucking her thighs into her chest. She hadn't fully understood how much she wanted the kiss until it happened; now she could think of nothing else.

The Conqueror surveyed her domain from her perch atop the roof of the armory, unable to bring herself to end the experience by returning to the realities of government. She needed to get back to the castle soon, or Ennaus would discover her gone. Too many unexplained absences would eventually trigger the aide's curiosity.

A woman's scream caught her attention, and her head jerked toward the sound. Her mind was too focused on the scribe; the terrified cry almost sounded like--

Another high-pitched shout, abruptly smothered, propelled the Warrior Princess from the roof to the street below and down the block at top speed, her fears confirmed at the sight of four dead men tearing at the most beautiful creature in the world.

"Aiyiyiyiyi!"

The men spun around to see a hooded attacker flying at them, blue eyes nearly red with rage. She wrenched the sword from the closest of them and thrust it through his chest, nearly severing his shoulder when she yanked out the blade.

Freeing his hands to defend himself, a second man threw Gabrielle against the hard rock wall and drew his own sword. The weapon was raised to strike when Xena lunged, her sword tearing through soft abdominal flesh. Within seconds, she had cut down the remaining two, revelling in the satisfaction of her blade piercing one son of a bitch's throat, severing the other's head from his body with sufficient force to drive the corpse ten feet away.

"Gabrielle." Xena cradled the scribe's head in her lap as she examined her. From over her shoulder, she saw the beginnings of a crowd, three guards trailing behind. From city patrol, she noted, not the jail, which meant they were unlikely to recognize the injured fugitive.

An older woman knelt beside them. Poor girl, Beltha thought; not much older than her own daughter. "Is she all right?"

From beneath the pointed cowl of her cloak, Xena peered at the bloody gash in Gabrielle's skull. The wound was not fatal; with some basic care, she would be all right.

"You there!" The guards were calling to her. "What's happened here?"

Xena took the woman's hand and placed it over the wound, then placed her own over it.

Beltha had seen the nervous glances over the hooded man's shoulder. Wanted by the law, probably. "I'll take care of her," she said. "Go."

A brief squeeze of the stranger's hand was all the thanks Xena could give. Resisting the urge to kiss Gabrielle, she rose and leapt to the roof of an adjacent building.

"You! Stay where you are!"

She ignored her guards' futile instructions and jumped to another roof, and then another, soon disappearing from their sight.

Circling around, Xena landed across the alleyway on a rooftop directly behind the guards. Another woman had joined the first beside Gabrielle, and they were securing a brightly colored cloth to the scribe's forehead. The guards leaned over the three women, apparently conferring about the situation.

Xena monitored their efforts until, reluctantly acknowledging the sun's position, she returned to the empty walls of the castle.

Ennaus breezed into the Conqueror's chamber to find her seated upon her throne, wrapped in her favorite striped robe. His favorite as well.

"Good morning, Princess," he smiled.

"Hardly," she retorted. "What's all the racket?"

"A mere fracas, Princess. Nothing of concern."

Blue eyes narrowed at him. "I didn't ask your opinion, Ennaus, I asked what the noise was. Anything that wakes me from a pleasant dream is my concern."

Ennaus reddened, nodding to acknowledge that he had overstepped his bounds. "A girl, I am told, wandering around looking for trouble."

"Hm." Xena plucked an apple from a basket at her side. "Found it, did she?" She polished the fruit on her robe.

"Yes, Highness. Four men obliged her."

"Where are they now?"

"Dead."

"Dead? The girl did it?" She sank her teeth into the sweet pulp.

Ennaus shook his head. "No, Highness. Reports are of a cloaked man who came to her aid and then disappeared."

"How noble," Xena said, sounding bored with the topic already. "And the girl?" She took another bite.

His shoulders moved up and down. "Dead, I expect."

Xena's head jerked up. "What?"

"They saw no reason to bother with her," he said. "She was just a peasant, probably a woman of the streets. They dispersed the crowd, and notified the street cleaners." That apple in Xena's mouth was looking awfully good, Ennaus decided.

"But she was--" Xena lowered her gaze, seemingly inspecting a bruised area on the fruit, fear and anger battling her mind's efforts to stay calm. "She was injured; she had to be."

"I suppose so," he conceded. "But we cannot permit peasants to assemble around the castle walls." He reached into the basket. "What concern is it of ours, Princess? You've not trifled with disputes between peasants in the past."

"She was near the castle grounds, Ennaus," she said. "An odd place to be at that hour alone, even for a woman of the streets. She may have been witness to something." She threw her apple core in the fireplace. "I want her found and attended to immediately, then send the healers to me." A thought occurred to her, and she added, "No need for you to be bothered, though; have someone else handle it. I want to discuss the Akkadian situation with you."

He nodded, glad that the Princess did not expect him to see to this troublesome girl personally. A waste of time for all around, as far as he could tell, but Ennaus was not one to question the Conqueror's instincts. They had served the Realm well throughout the years.

He swept out of the room and Xena sprinted into her bedchamber, slinging the robe onto a chair, easing out of her leathers and into more traditional attire. She wished she could have gone to Gabrielle herself, but there would be word soon.

Instead, the sun had nearly reached mid-sky before the doors finally opened to admit two ancient women. About time, Xena thought, meeting them half-way across the room with her arms crossed. She had been waiting for their report all damned morning. "Yes?"

"You sent for us, Highness," said what appeared to be the elder of the two, no small achievement. Xena raised an eyebrow, and the woman continued, "About the girl brought in this morning."

"Yes. What is her condition?"

"The peasants had bound her wound, but she lost a fair amount of blood," the healer began.

Because those cretins left her there to die. Xena unconsciously clenched her fists. She would find out who they were, and--

"She will recover, but it would be best to keep her another day, Princess."

"Whatever." A look passed between the elders. "Is there a problem?" Xena asked.

"She" The healer pressed her lips together. "It does not appear that she has money for our services, Princess."

Zeus. Indigents -- peasants, as Xena had always referred to them -- were not permitted to receive care from the castle's skilled doctors. She walked slowly toward her throne, searching for a way out of this situation. Gabrielle's health came before all else, and to Hades with the suspicions of Ennaus or any other--

"Princess." The healer looked at her sister again, encouraged by the other woman's nod. "We are not busy today. We have spare beds, and we don't mind sharing our gifts with those who cannot pay. If you could--"

Of course. It was a familiar plea, the healers pestering her once a year or so about donating medical care to the peas-- the poor.

". . . at no cost to the Realm."

Xena raised a hand. "Enough!" She whirled around. "I am tired of this constant nagging from you crones." She flicked her hand impatiently. "Do what you wish. I have no interest in what you do in your spare time. Just be certain that no employee of the Realm goes without," she warned.

"Oh, yes, Highness, thank you, Highness," the women uttered excitedly. Finally--their prayers answered.

Ennaus frowned. Free medical care for the peasants? What next?

"When the girl is able to talk, alert one of the hospital guards," Xena said. "I want to know why she was there." The two elders exchanged smiles, and Xena's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Has she regained consciousness?"

"Momentarily, Highness. She was rather light-headed and did not say much," the healer answered, "but I suspect you will find her no threat."

"Explain yourself," Xena ordered, concealing the relief surging through her. Gabrielle had been awake, for a while at least. She wondered if she could get away from Ennaus long enough to--

"She did not witness anything which could pose a danger to you, of that I'm certain," the older woman said.

"That doesn't answer my question."

"She was rather disoriented"

"Get on with it."

"She said only that" The healer shrugged, smiling. ". . . she wanted another kiss."

Xena turned to hide the crimson that was making a rare appearance in her cheeks. "Useless information," she said, waving them away.

Another kiss, huh? Xena grinned. She thought she could handle that.

"I doubt if they'll try that again." Xena's other guests joined the nobleman in enjoying his joke on the fools who had trampled his pasture.

Xena smiled. The morning had been pleasant enough, but unsatisfying. Something was missing, the same something that was missing from everything she did now.

A guard arrived with her daily messages, and she motioned for him to read them aloud, tiring almost immediately of the recitation of routine invitations and petty problems of lesser kingdoms.

Reaching the end of the parchment, the guard hesitated.

"What?"

He licked his lips. Why did he have to be the one to relay this to the Conqueror? "I'm sorry, Highness. It's--" He shook his head. This had to be a mistake. "It's nothing, Highness."

Achias smirked. Wrong answer.

"Nothing?" Xena asked, leaning forward in her throne. "It's on my message scroll?"

"Yes, Highness."

Ennaus shot daggers at the witless guard who had been stupid enough to mention whatever it was in the first place. It was probably some lascivious remark from a recent bedpartner that no one cared to hear. He wished Xena would just let it go.

"The Conqueror's messages are not important to you?" Xena continued.

"No! I mean yes!" the guard stammered. He held up the scroll, clearing his throat. "There will be fresh pomegranate at the market today."

Xena blinked. Pomegranate? What kind of idiotic-- Unless . . . "How was this message delivered?" she asked.

"A woman from the market. She said you had requested to be informed."

Achias eyed his old commander, a suspicion beginning to form.

"Yes," Xena said. "That will be all. Tell Tova I will accompany her to the market today." Noting the raised eyebrows of her guests, she shrugged. "I've been having a craving."

"We select only the finest produce," Tova assured the Conqueror for the fourth time, seeking confirmation from her assistants.

"I'm sure of that," Xena said. "I am not being critical; I simply felt like joining you."

"But--"

"Tova . . .," she warned.

The other woman clamped her mouth shut.

Behind them, a silent figure tracked their progress.

Xena stood at one end of the circus that was Market Street, unhappily taking in the hundreds, perhaps thousands, of women who had chosen this day to go shopping. "Where are the pomegranates?" she asked.

"At that booth, Highness," Tova said. "And those," pointing to several others, "and down there."

Xena pursed her lips. "Great."

Barely noticing agitated patrons scrambling to let her through -- Oh, the gods! Was that the Conqueror? It couldn't be -- Xena ambled over to the first booth Tova had indicated, peering down at a bunch of little red fruit. She picked one up, frowning. Just how did one identify a ripe pomegranate?

Achias watched the scene with some interest. A homemaker now, was she? He didn't think so.

Xena replaced the thoroughly squeezed and shaken object in its bed under the merchant's anxious gaze. Did her selection displease the Conqueror? Not quite satisfied, apparently, her picky customer proceeded to the next stall.

"I believe this will meet with your approval, your Highness," a sultry voice said from close beside her. A small hand offered up a plump pomegranate for her inspection.

If he had not been paying such close attention, Achias would have missed the brief flash of white that accompanied Xena's acceptance of the fruit. She scrutinized it, apparently finding everything to her satisfaction.

It was all beginning to add up: Tracking down the address of some peasant girl for reasons Xena did not disclose, buying the old slave woman only to have her released, and now a clandestine rendezvous that Achias was certain had little to do with a sudden hankering for pomegranate seeds.

The Conqueror's little helper made a well-timed exit, and Achias watched Xena stuff produce into a cloth sack provided by the excited merchant. The ex-soldier could predict what would happen next: Xena would hand the sack to her kitchen staff and stroll casually away from the market, taking the first private (she thought) opportunity to read the note, a brilliant smile illuminating her face while she hastened toward a pre-arranged destination.

Achias watched Xena nearly break into a run, and resumed his surveillance. In for a dinar . . .

.

Gabrielle nervously set a bowl down on one edge of the small table. "It's not exactly pheasant," she apologized. "I don't really have--"

"It smells wonderful," Xena interrupted, smiling. "And I get tired of pheasant." She wouldn't have cared if it were hedgehog. She was just thrilled that Gabrielle's mother would be away for the afternoon, grateful to whoever's sister it was who had failed to return to Corinth when expected. She had been deprived of Gabrielle for too long, including an eternity spent tucked into the alcove across the alley waiting for the old woman to finally leave.

Gabrielle smiled back at her, but still felt self-conscious. How stupid to invite Xena for lunch--Xena, who enjoyed elaborate meals every night prepared by the finest chefs in Corinth. "It's just soup," she said, feeling more foolish by the second. Stupid.

Xena raised a spoon to her lips and blew on the hot liquid. "Mmm. It's very good."

"It's--" Gabrielle turned away abruptly, embarrassment paralyzing her vocal chords.

"Hey." Xena caught her around the waist. "What's the matter?" She stood, maintaining the physical contact. "It's truly wonderful," she said quietly.

She slipped her other arm around Gabrielle's waist, waiting for signs of understanding, and acceptance, of what she was really saying. Arms slid behind her neck, telling her all she needed to know, and Xena slowly lowered her head.

Gabrielle closed her eyes at the feel of Xena's lips on hers. She tightened her embrace, drawing Xena in closer, deepening the kiss, breaking away for only a few seconds to catch her breath and then diving in for more.

Xena's thoughts of a gentle approach flew out the window, and she placed her hands on Gabrielle's breasts, swallowing the other woman's sharp cry. Gods, she wasn't sure she could make it to the bed.

Achias rolled his eyes. How had he gotten himself into this?

He waited long enough to make sure it wasn't a false alarm, then slipped down the passageway. Not happy at all, he approached the old house, telling himself that Xena would thank him for this.

Right.

Shaking his head, Achias tromped down the stairs and pounded on the lower door. There was no reply, and he slammed his fist against the door again.

Finally, the one he expected to see -- a little out of breath, disheveled, her blouse hooked unevenly -- answered. "Yes?" she said, a bit testily.

He shoved the door open the rest of the way and strode past her. "Xena." His head swiveled from side to side. Where the heck was she?

"What in the name of Zeus are you doing here?" Movement registered from the corner of his eye, and Achias chuckled. Damn, she was good. Standing against the side wall the whole time, and he couldn't see her. Now that he could, he noticed that the Warrior Princess' armor was nowhere to be seen, and the shoulder straps of her leathers were seriously askew.

"The old woman is headed back this way," he said.

Gabrielle's eyes widened. "My mother?"

Aha. Thought so.

"Godsdamn it," Xena growled. Not now, for Zeus' sake! "How much time do we have?"

Achias shook his head. "Only a few blocks." He looked over the tiny blonde woman whose hair needed to have a comb run through it. Like you'd want to hurry with this one anyway, he thought.

Xena hauled her armor up from beside the bed and buckled it into place, sliding her bracers over her forearms, all the while watching the scribe pour untouched soup back into the kettle and return the second spoon to its box. Under Xena's admiring eye, Gabrielle bent over to straighten the coverlet on the bed.

"Come here," Xena said. She positioned Gabrielle away from Achias' view and unhooked the other woman's blouse.

"Xena"

Xena placed a finger to her lips, then rehooked the buttons in correct order, unable to resist brushing her palms against Gabrielle's breasts.

"Oh, gods, don't," the scribe whispered. "This is hard enough as it is."

Xena gave her a lop-sided smile. "Sorry. Just didn't want you to forget." She fell into Gabrielle's sea green gaze. "Achias, go stall her for a minute. Do your beggar act or something." She just needed one more minute.

"Not a good idea, Princess," he said. "She'll know me."

Gabrielle looked over at him. "Know you? Know you from where?"

Uh oh. Achias had just assumed that the girl knew, and was 'thanking' Xena for the present.

"Oh, my gods." Gabrielle stared at Xena. "It was you?" Gabrielle buried her head in her hands. "We couldn't figure it out." She shook her head. "I should have . . . I never . . ." Gods, it was so obvious now.

She threw her arms around Xena's neck, and once more Xena cursed the fates for their cruel timing. She leaned down for a goodbye kiss that brought both their passions roaring to life again, reluctantly breaking the contact to hurry outside with her godsdamned pain-in-the-backside friend. At the junction of alley and street, the pair casually moved aside for an older blonde woman who rounded the corner and continued down the alley.

They trudged toward the palace in complete silence, until Xena couldn't take it any more. "Not one word, Achias," she warned, shooting him a look.

He raised his hands, hurt at his old friend's suggestion that he would make fun of her. "Of course not."

Xena pressed her lips together and picked up the pace a bit.

"You'll hear nothing from me."

Her eyes narrowed.

"Nope. Not one word about Xena the Conqueror fleeing from the mighty Hecuba."

She jerked her head around. "Achias, have you ever wondered what it would be like to lose your other arm?"

Mindful of what he had interrupted only a few minutes earlier, Achias concluded that discretion was the better part of valor. Wonder if whistling's off limits, too. He unpuckered his lips--better safe than sorry.

Incredible. Far beyond anything the scribe could ever hope to put into words. The few minutes Gabrielle had experienced of the Warrior Princess's lovemaking had exceeded a lifetime's imagination.

Gabrielle blushed at the recollection of her own clumsy efforts, mortified now at losing all semblance of control, burying her face in the irresistible mounds of flesh hidden beneath Xena's leathers, getting her hand caught in a shoulder strap as she tugged desperately on it, nearly knocking Xena off her feet as she tried to pull her down to the bed.

Xena hadn't complained, but she would have enjoyed herself more with someone more experienced, someone a little more in control, Gabrielle knew. Still, she thought back to Xena leaning over her on the bed, forearms on either side of her head, back arching luxuriously as the scribe's hungry mouth found her--

"Gabrielle?"

Nine curious gazes were focused upon her. "Um, I'm sorry What did you say?"

"Come on, Gabrielle, this was your idea," Marcas said. "What do you think would make Xena squirm the most?"

Gabrielle's eyes widened.

"Should we address it to Xena, or the Realm?"

"We, the people of Corinth, demand that Xena agree to a debate on public issues of the day," Raubert suggested.

Oh, yeah, the debate. One of the scribe's contributions to last month's agenda. Xena would never agree to it, of course, but the refusal would provide nearly as much fodder. Gabrielle pictured Xena standing tall on a platform, wind sweeping through her dark mane as she spoke passionately

"Gabrielle?"

"Sorry," she mumbled. "I just can't -- I'm not myself today," she said. "I'll catch up with you later." Grabbing her wrap, she peeked cautiously out the side door, making sure there weren't any surprises waiting for them. She needed to think.

"Highness," Ennaus said again, striving to be patient with his queen, who was in a royal mood this evening.

"Why are you wasting my time with this?" Xena snapped. "Can't you take care of it?"

"I could, Princess, but typically you would address the matter personally, since it involves one of your chosen."

Xena scowled. "Chosen or not, he needs to learn to handle things on his own."

"But Princess, he is hardly in a position to take on Tarouf. Daron's army numbers only--"

"Nine hundred. I'm well aware of the armed forces within my realm, Ennaus."

"Of course, Highness."

Xena pressed two fingers against her head.

"Are you unwell? Perhaps you need--"

"I know what I need," she snarled. And it's not here. Her thoughts returned to gentle hands . . . moist lips . . . soft skin . . .

The ruler did not elaborate, and Ennaus thought it best not to push the issue. He knew the Warrior Princess well enough to figure out what she thought she needed, although he didn't remember her ever being quite this worked up about it before.

Xena's mind travelled through back alleys to a basement with a single candle in the window. Would she be there if--

"The delegation from Senturia will be here within the hour, Princess." Ennaus looked up from his notes and blinked at the sheer hostility in the ruler's expression. "You do recall issuing the invitation?" he reminded her diplomatically.

In answer, Xena stormed into her bedroom, hurling layers of clothing around as she changed. A steady stream of expletives attended her efforts, increasingly strident and creative with each passing minute.

Ennaus frowned. He hoped the Princess' temperament would improve before the landowners arrived to discuss her latest inspiration from out of the blue, this time to limit ownership of olive groves in the valley. Who cared if all the groves were controlled by a few noblemen? They knew better than to extort members of the Realm with their pricing, and were useful collaborators. The aide simply could not see why Xena had taken it upon herself to interfere.

A thunderous crash -- "Godsdamnit!" -- came from behind the bedroom curtain, and Ennaus expelled air through his lips. At this rate, the Senturians would be lucky to end up with a single tree.

PART III

Maybe she hadn't deciphered the message correctly. She never had been very good at word games. From beneath a faded shawl, Xena secretly scanned the street again, appearing to any who cared to notice her as a tired old woman resting on a convenient bench.

'By all the gods' leave'; didn't that mean the pantheon? She ran alternative interpretations through her mind until a familiar stride caught her eye.

Gods, even her walk is exciting, Xena reflected. Much more of this and to Hades with caution--she would carry Gabrielle back to the castle and immerse herself in the scribe until neither of them could see straight.

She tensed slightly; Gabrielle had spotted her, favoring her with a quick smile without breaking stride. Warm blue eyes followed the blonde woman to the stoop of a nice two-story brownstone in the middle of the block, where she fished around in her bag and drew out a metal key. She slid it into the lock and disappeared inside, leaving the door slightly ajar.

Xena accepted the invitation, springing from her perch and reaching the stoop in half a dozen brisk strides. No sooner had she crossed the threshold than a compact body flew at her, arms and legs twining around her, lips crushing hers. Xena reached behind her to shut the door, but Gabrielle beat her to it, slamming it shut with her boot.

"I swore I was going to take it slow," Gabrielle gasped, "but I can't."

Xena knew the feeling.

Mouths still pressed together, she carried her precious cargo down the hall, her brain intermittently trying to focus on where to go. The scribe's hand unwrapped from around her neck and grabbed at a doorway. "In here," Gabrielle said against her lips. "Guest room."

Xena lowered both of them to the bed and proceeded to live her most exquisite dream, stroking and tasting and revelling in Gabrielle's magnificence. Knowledgeable hands caressed Gabrielle's breasts through her blouse, then without any barrier as Xena unhooked the garment and explored the skin beneath.

Gabrielle's initial impatience had transformed into sensuous delight, her body responding eloquently to every touch. She watched through heavy-lidded eyes as Xena straightened and removed her clothing, then brought her hands to the waistband on Gabrielle's skirt and drew off the last obstacle to a sea of smooth skin for her consumption.

Arms wrapped around each other, the women moved together, passion alternately surging and receding as Xena controlled their ascent. Savoring another sumptuous kiss, she slid a hand down the inside of Gabrielle's thigh. Gabrielle yielded to the gentle pressure, sighing in anticipation, and then she gave Xena everything.

Later, Xena did the same for her.

"Whose place is this?" Xena asked, more to hear the scribe's voice than out of burning curiosity.

Gabrielle smiled at the vibrations from Xena's chest against her ear. "Francia, my friend's uncle. He's in Athens with his mother."

"How'd you get the key? And more important, how long's he going to be gone?" Xena's mind was already processing a number of compelling scenarios.

"My mother's been tending his plants," Gabrielle replied to the first part of Xena's question, hesitating an instant before answering the second. "They've been gone about a month." She placed a hand on Xena's breast to keep her from shooting straight up. "I didn't know about it until yesterday," she explained, kicking herself having been so oblivious. Gods, she and Xena

could have been-- No. No sense beating herself up for something she couldn't do anything about now. "I told Mother I'd be in this area anyway today--"

"For one of your plotting sessions?" Xena smiled.

"--so I could take care of it for her," Gabrielle continued, ignoring the interruption. "They're expected back tomorrow."

Damn. Still, the one day they had been given would be forever burned into Xena's memory.

"Francia's an old skinflint," Gabrielle said, tracing a finger across Xena's breast.

"Mm?" Xena's attention was slightly more tuned into the scribe's wandering hand than the absent homeowner's stinginess. "How's that?"

"He leaves his mother home alone all day. She's older than my grandmother."

"How old's your grandmother?"

"Actually, she's dead." Xena tensed, and Gabrielle kissed her shoulder. "She died ten years ago," she said, nuzzling her way to Xena's throat. "I meant that she's older than my grandmother was when she died."

"This place isn't cheap," Xena observed.

"No, but he is. Francia has plenty of money; he just doesn't like to part with it." Gabrielle ran her fingertips over a particularly sensitive area of Xena's torso, enjoying the sensation and the answering moan. "Of course, he doesn't have as much as you do."

Xena shifted on the bed, Gabrielle's seductive motions threatening to derail her train of thought. "I use it to buy favors," she said, waggling her eyebrows to make clear just what kind of favors she had in mind.

Gabrielle moved slightly so that more of her body covered the taller woman. "You mean I could have charged for this?" she asked.

"What makes you think I would have paid?" Xena's smile vanished as a flicker of doubt crossed her young lover's face, and she ran a palm down the smooth skin of Gabrielle's back. "I don't have enough money to pay what you're worth," she said, rewarded with a happy smile from the scribe. "Guess I'll have to raise taxes. 'People of Corinth,'" she rehearsed, "this is for a good cause." Her hand continued down past Gabrielle's lower back, squeezing deliciously round flesh. "Make that two good causes," she amended. She flipped Gabrielle onto her back, bringing her lips to the other woman's breast. "Mmm. Three . . ."

She made it to seven before losing count.

Gabrielle nestled her face into Xena's throat. "We've challenged you to a debate," she said.

Xena stroked her hair. "I thought we weren't going to talk politics tonight."

"Mm. I know. I'm just warning you."

Xena smiled. "You know I can't do it," she said.

Gabrielle inhaled the scent of her lover. "I know." Her eyes drifted open as she thought about it. "Why not?"

Because agreeing to a debate would be a sign of weakness, Xena thought. "Verbal persuasion isn't my strong suit."

"Oh, I don't know. Your lips have me totally swayed."

"Really," Xena purred, having been thoroughly won over by Gabrielle's oral skills herself. "Are you sure you don't need a little more convincing?"

Gabrielle smiled. "Wellll, I may start to have doubts a little later," she said, "when I've recovered."

"So, what's with the joke?" Xena asked.

Gabrielle's brow furrowed. "The joke?"

"How were the ruins of Chalis created?" she paraphrased. "Xena took a pleasure trip."

"Oh." Gabrielle grinned sheepishly. "Saw that, did you? How'd you get hold of one of our newsletters?"

"I'm interested in everything you write," Xena answered, "and no changing the subject."

"We thought a little humor might help make people less intimidated of you," Gabrielle said, and more likely to speak out.

Xena tightened her arms around her scribe. "You're going to get me killed," she mumbled, making herself comfortable for a little nap.

Gabrielle's eyes remained open long after her lover had dozed off. Going to get her killed? Would making Xena seem more human also make her seem more vulnerable? Curled up in the warrior's strong arms, Gabrielle thought about what she was doing.

"Gabrielle, what are you doing?"

"Hm?" Gabrielle looked up from the second page of her text.

Timmor pointed. "What's this?"

"Telling people about the tax change."

"The Warrior Princess gave us a glimpse of mercy at the last Proclamation Day," he read aloud, "declaring that those over seventy years of age who do not possess their own source of income are now exempt from taxation." Others in the group walked over to them, curious.

Gabrielle raised her eyebrows. "What's wrong with it?"

"Why are you putting that in?"

"I thought people would want to know."

"Why?"

"Why?" Gabrielle spread her hands. "Because Xena implemented one of the reforms we've been advocating."

"Hardly," Timmor retorted. "Seventy? How many reach that age?"

"It's a start," Gabrielle said. "There used to be no exemption."

"That's not the point." Timmor held up the scroll. "This represents the voice of protest; why are we singing the Conqueror's praises in it?"

"It's hardly singing her praises," she said. "Don't you want people to hear both sides? I thought that's what we've been complaining about."

"She has plenty of opportunities to tell her version of things; we don't. We can't spare the room for this. There's too much more they need to hear about the Conqueror's heavy hand."

"It's one sentence long," Gabrielle said slowly. "I think there's room." It is my parchment, she was tempted to add, but that would just raise more questions. She had convinced them without much effort that a wealthy benefactor had bestowed the gift upon her, which was technically true -- "you'll be safer if you write more and speak less," Xena had insisted -- but the scribe's story wouldn't withstand close scrutiny. Xena is providing us with the means of inciting her people against her, the scribe thought resentfully, and you don't want to give her even a single sentence of credit?

Timmor opened his mouth to offer another rebuttal, and Gabrielle slammed down her quill. "People who pursue their own agendas without acknowledging contrary evidence lose credibility," she said. "If we acknowledge when Xena does something positive for the people, it enhances our position in questioning her policies in other areas. Otherwise, we appear as rigid as we accuse her of being."

Timmor rolled his eyes. He knew better than to argue with Gabrielle, and they needed her to write the rest of the letter, so he supposed they'd have to put up with this latest idiosyncrasy. One of these days, though, he was certain that Gabrielle's trusting nature would come back to haunt her.

No

Gabrielle slid her hand up to Xena's shoulder and squeezed it lightly to get the Warrior Princess's attention, which at the moment was focused entirely on the mind-searing kiss they had been sharing for long minutes now.

Gabrielle reluctantly drew her mouth away. "Xena"

She closed her eyes as she felt warm lips take up new residence on her throat.

"Xena . . . ," she tried again, this time shoving a little to encourage voluntary compliance, well aware that she would not be able to move the bigger woman off her if Xena insisted on staying put. "I need to get the door."

"Let it go." Xena had waited nearly two weeks for this opportunity to be alone with her little scribe; she wasn't going to let a minute be wasted by some uninvited visitor, who, like a cow, was too dumb to stay out of the rain. She kept Gabrielle's body pinned gently beneath hers.

"Xena." Gabrielle dodged the impending kiss. "They can see the candle through the window. If I don't answer, they'll think something's wrong."

Her lover's dark hair cascaded down to the pillow, creating a luxurious curtain around their faces. Xena pressed her forehead against Gabrielle's, then rolled off her. "Make it fast," she said.

"I will," Gabrielle promised. She slipped into the silk robe Xena had given her -- highly touchable, as Xena characterized it, but plain in design so as not to attract too much attention -- cinched the curtain around the bed, and tied the belt of her robe into a loose knot. "Don't start without me," she whispered through the curtain, laughing at Xena's growled reply.

"Don't count on it."

Still smiling, Gabrielle opened the door. Even with his raincoat on, she instantly recognized Raubert's wayward curls. "Celice said your mother is tending hers tonight," he said. "I thought maybe we could talk."

Gabrielle's mouth opened, but her mind had gone blank.

The young man jerked a thumb over his shoulder and laughed self-consciously. "It's really pouring," he said. "Can I come in?" He began to step across the threshold.

Gabrielle pressed a hand gently against his chest. "No, Raubert. I'm sorry."

The smile left his face. "Why not?"

"Raubert, I'm" She couldn't think of any way out of it. ". . . with someone."

Even as his mind struggled with denial, he saw hanging on a peg near the fire a long, dark cloak, much too large to belong the woman standing before him. His eyes travelled to the curtained area concealing Gabrielle's bed. "Who is it?"

Gabrielle shook her head. "That's not important, Raubert."

"Not important?" He stared at her in disbelief. How could Gabrielle think that anything about her wasn't important, especially the name of the man who had stolen her affections? Not important? "I demand to know who is here with you," he said.

The Warrior Princess's sharp hearing easily picked up every word, and Xena slipped out of bed.

"Raubert, please don't do this," Gabrielle said softly.

"I'm not the one doing this," he said. "You are. Why have you never said anything?"

"There was no need," she replied. "My private life does not affect our work. You know that's important to me."

Crossing her arms, Xena shifted her weight from her right leg to the left. She was growing tired of this dialogue. Send him packing, Gabrielle, she silently urged. They had better things to do.

"But I love you, Gabrielle."

Oh, Hades. Xena was tempted to peek out through the cloth. How would Gabrielle handle an admission like that? She edged closer to the curtain, concerned by the scribe's silence.

"I'm sorry, Raubert. My heart--" The golden voice paused, and Xena cocked her head, wondering what was running through that blonde head of hers. "My heart is not for you," Gabrielle finally said. "Raubert, please go. We can talk about this tomorrow." Silence. "Please."

Reluctantly, her rejected suitor retreated back into the downpour, and Gabrielle returned to bed.

"You know he'll wait outside to see who leaves," Xena said.

Gabrielle nodded. "Can you stay a while longer?" she asked.

"Well, yeah, I thought we --" The scribe rolled over to face her, and Xena realized that her amorous aspirations for the evening had been dashed. The young woman was too upset, her heart breaking over someone else's broken heart.

Damn. Their opportunities to be together were rare, and to have a wonderful evening interrupted by the misdirected romantic wailings of a little boy irritated her. Xena pictured a few of her options if she did indeed encounter loverboy waiting outside when she left.

She extended an arm and Gabrielle scooted over to her, resting her face in the soft indentation near the taller woman's shoulder. Her arm slid across Xena's waist, and the two women gradually drifted off into restless slumber.

When Xena awoke, it was to find herself wrapped along the length of Gabrielle's smaller body, one arm across the other woman's stomach, another beneath her neck, a leg draped across her thigh. Her face lay against the back of Gabrielle's shoulder, and she fought the

temptation to bite into that soft flesh. Instead, she compressed all her limbs, trying to draw the other woman further into her, loving the sound of Gabrielle's contented sighs.

An hour before the sun would rise, Xena peered down at a man sleeping in the alcove across from Gabrielle's door. His curly brown head was propped invitingly against the rock wall, and Xena reflected on how easy it would be just to reach down and

After a short indulgence in her fantasy, she grudgingly continued her silent journey home.

Half a dozen guards burst into the spacious quarters, forgetting in their exuberance the inadvisability of bursting in on the Warrior Princess without warning. The pointy end of a sword pierced the skin of the first man's throat.

"Princess . . .," he begged, rigid where he stood.

No danger here, Xena concluded, except that one of the fools might hurt himself. Rats. "What is it?" she demanded.

Another soldier, wrists bound, was forced to his knees before her.

"A traitor, Highness. He was working with the dissenters."

She recognized him, of course; Xena made it a practice to be somewhat familiar with all members of her guard, although Clossos was not one of those with whom she had been most familiar. She had long suspected that Gabrielle and her friends had a source in the castle, and from the propaganda she had read, Xena had narrowed the field in her own mind to a member of her guard. She congratulated herself on her deductive skills--now, what to do about it?

The guard closed his eyes, hoping desperately that he could retain sufficient dignity to keep from relieving himself on the Conqueror's floor. He was a veteran of the bloody northern region campaigns, but no man in Xena's Guard feared mere battle as much as the Conqueror's fury.

"I'll interrogate him myself," Xena said, to the delight of her bloodthirsty guards. "Wait outside."

Their grins faded. "But, Princess--"

"Do you have a hearing problem?"

Anxious to assure her that they did not, the six men made a hasty exit, and Xena scrutinized the man who had betrayed her.

"Who have you been working with?" she asked.

Silence.

Xena pressed her sword into his chest. "Answer the question or I'll cut your heart out right here."

The guard's clenched jaw was beginning to ache, but he didn't care.

"Actually, I think I'll have you tied to the post first," she said, wondering if the specter of forty lashes would loosen his tongue. "Do you have a family, Closso?" She circled around him. "Perhaps I should bind your mother to the post. You know I'll do it," she hissed.

He uttered a strangled sound, blood trickling down his chin from where his teeth had punctured his lower lip.

A dark boot caught him squarely in the ribs. "Is it worth your miserable life to refuse me what I want to know?"

He nodded slowly.

"All right. In that case, stand up."

He rose, prepared to be dealt the fatal blow. At the same moment, the doors opened and Ennaus stormed into the room and up to her prisoner.

"Come in, Ennaus," she said sarcastically. "You may join us," she called to the other guards, and they filed in, glaring at the condemned man's back.

"I'm pleased that you uncovered a traitor within the castle," Xena commended them. "Closso has indeed been working with the underground movement for some months now." She paused. "At my instruction."

"What?" Ennaus erupted.

Closso froze, not sure he was hearing what he was hearing, and not sure why he was hearing it if he was.

"Several months ago I asked Closso to infiltrate the resistance," Xena said. "He has done well," she said, smiling at the man who still faced the far wall. "I have learned much valuable information from him, but I assume it was a public arrest."

The guards nodded nervously.

"That's fine," she assured them. "It just makes it more convincing."

"Princess, I must protest!" The vein in Ennaus' neck was bulging precariously. "You should not have engaged in this operation without my knowledge!"

Xena swung her head around to fix a steely blue gaze on him.

"Are you telling me what I can and cannot do?" she asked in a dangerously low voice.

Ennaus bit his tongue, his outrage not completely overriding his self-preservation instincts. "No, of course not, Highness," he said. "It's just that it would be helpful to me in providing for your security to know of such operations."

She cut the ropes binding Closso's wrists and then circled around to face the informer, who gaped at her with confused gratitude. "You know you can't remain in my service now," she said. He nodded. "Give him some money," she said over her shoulder, "enough to make a fresh start." She stared meaningfully into the soldier's brown eyes. "Somewhere besides this city, I would suggest." He paled, the unspoken message received loud and clear.

She placed an arm around Closso's shoulders, seemingly escorting him from the room with genuine affection. "Mycra," she called, "why don't you help Closso get his things, and see that he leaves the castle safely."

"Yes, Princess."

Xena brought her lips close to Closso's ear. "Tell your friends: The next one dies."

"Why'd she let him go?" Marcas demanded again.

Gabrielle threw up her hands. "For the tenth time, who knows? She was in a good mood. She didn't want a public scandal. We may never know." She exhaled loudly in frustration.

"Whatever the reason, Closso is still the same man we've known all along, and he can still be a valuable member of this group, if he's willing to risk it."

Timmor shook his head. "No. We can't trust him now."

"What are you talking about?" Gabrielle shouted. She glanced over at the former guard, who leaned forlornly against a far wall, looking as run down as the abandoned structure in which the emergency meeting had been convened. "Closso has risked his life for us time and time again," she said, lowering her voice. "Why should we banish him for a simple act of humanity by Xena?"

"For that very reason," Marcas said. "Xena's not human. If she spared him, it was for a reason."

"What are you suggesting? That Closso is going to betray us?" This was unbelievable. "If he was going to do that, he could have handed us over at any time over the past months."

"He wasn't beholden to her then," Timmor said. "And how do we know this wasn't part of some scheme of hers?"

"Closso has been lying to us the whole time?" Gabrielle asked incredulously.

"Maybe not," Timmor conceded, "but he may not have known he was being used. Maybe she knew of his involvement all along and planned this to fool us into keeping him around."

"I agree," Raubert said.

"I don't believe this." Gabrielle glared at him, then appealed to the others. "Are you buying this? Would you do this if it was Timmor? Or Raubert?" Or me? She closed her eyes, recognizing defeat in their silence.

She sat silently on the dusty floorboards as Raubert and Timmor walked over to Closs. Overcoming her cowardly instincts, she forced herself to meet her friend's gaze before he was led outside to hear their decision.

"OK, we change the message system," Marcas said. "The meetings will now be posted on the fifth day of the week, rather than the second, and at . . ." He held up his hands. "Any suggestions?"

"The castle wall?" Celice offered, drawing laughs from several in the group.

"That'd be great," Marcas said. "Right under the bitch's nose."

Gabrielle had had enough. "I've got to go," she said.

"Wait! We have to choose a place."

The scribe was on her feet now. "You choose," she said. "I don't want to have anything to do with you people right now. I'll get word later."

Xena groaned and pressed Gabrielle harder against the bricks, covering the smaller woman almost entirely within the folds of her cloak.

Gabrielle's hands clutched at her back as she breathed into Xena's chest. "Xena . . ."

Xena rested her cheek on Gabrielle's hair, kissing the top of the scribe's head as her own breathing calmed. She closed her eyes. This couldn't go on. Making love to Gabrielle against a wall in a squalid city alleyway as if she were a common prostitute. This wasn't how Xena had wanted to bid her lover goodbye before her upcoming trip to Akkad.

At times, she almost regretted reuniting Gabrielle with her mother. The older woman rarely felt the need to leave the scribe's small quarters for any extended period of time, which virtually eliminated any chance the lovers had of spending time alone there.

The narrow bed, when they had use of it, was a haven for them. The Conqueror was too well known to sneak into an inn anywhere in Corinth, and they hadn't figured out a way to get Gabrielle safely outside the city limits. They had talked once about a trip to Athens -- "in a covered carriage," Xena had suggested, with lascivious intent.

"Great -- just you, me, and a dozen guards," Gabrielle had observed dryly, and neither of them had broached the depressing subject again.

"Gabrielle . . . ?" Xena whispered into her lover's hair.

"Mmm . . ." Gabrielle clung tightly to her, partly from a desire for closeness, partly from a lack of strength in her legs. Her hands slid down to Xena's hips.

"Would you care if I sent your mother back to Duche?"

Gabrielle drew back and looked up at her.

"Teres says she hadn't expected to be gone that long," Marcas reported. "More than two months."

"Seven weeks three days," Gabrielle corrected absently. She dipped a quill into dark magenta ink, her tongue playing along an incisor as she contemplated her choices. Tyrannical? No, too harsh. The Xena she knew wasn't tyrannical. Oppressive? She grimaced, noting with some frustration that becoming intimate with Xena had ruined some of her best words.

"She'll not be out much til the weekend," Marcas said.

The weekend. Gabrielle smiled. Surely Xena could slip away by then. The gods had smiled on them while Xena was on her trip, and Hecuba now served as a live-in companion to Francia and his mother. The old miser had managed to trip over a one-armed almsman on the stoop outside his house, and would be recovering for some time from a broken arm and leg. A true misfortune, Gabrielle had agreed, but one which would cost him very little and, more importantly, would allow the scribe to test the durability of her old bed and the Warrior Princess again.

"She's busy preparing for the wedding," Marcas continued.

All heads turned toward him. "Wedding?" Gabrielle asked.

He nodded. "Xena is to marry Phillip of Akkad. He returned with her."

Gabrielle stood motionless, quill in hand, staring at her associate as if he had transformed into a hydra.

"Yeah, I know," he said, misreading her expression. "It'll reinforce her stranglehold over that territory, and add sixty thousand new troops to her army."

"Marry?" Gabrielle said weakly, a little slow in processing the information.

Marcas shrugged. "He doesn't seem any improvement over her," he said, "but--"

"Marry?" Gabrielle repeated.

She appeared to be addressing him, sort of, and the dark head nodded again. "Teres says they've been together every night since she returned."

Gabrielle felt around with a hand for something to sit on, then decided rather abruptly to make do with the floor. Xena getting married. Xena spending every night with this man. Gabrielle felt ill.

Long minutes later, she reached for the parchment. Tyrannical, she penned carefully.

"A visitor, your Highness."

"Who is it?" Xena reclined against the back of her sofa. Not that oaf again, she hoped. The man acted as though he'd never had a woman before.

"The mystic you sent for, Highness."

Xena sat up. She hadn't sent for any mystic. "Let me see that." She unfolded the note, and worked to keep a smile from her face. Perfect. "About time," she said. "Send her up."

The guard reappeared a few minutes later with a veiled guest, who entered the room and bowed to the Warrior Princess.

"That will be all," Xena said, tapping her foot impatiently while the moronic guard took forever getting the door shut. When she heard the latch click, Xena moved.

Before Gabrielle knew what was happening, she lay naked on the thick fur rug in front of the fire with Xena kneeling above her. Xena untied the belt of her robe to reveal that she wore nothing underneath, having taken advantage of the few minutes it took the guard to fetch her visitor in order to save a few minutes after her arrival.

She lowered herself onto the scribe, and brought her teeth to the soft flesh of Gabrielle's neck, her body beginning gentle but urgent motions. There would be time later for the seamless, passionate kisses that Gabrielle thrived on, Xena promised silently; at the moment, she couldn't wait.

"No." Gabrielle placed the palm of a hand on Xena's face.

"Mm?"

"Xena, no!" The smaller woman pushed against her chest.

Xena drew back. What . . . ? "What's the matter?" she rasped.

"We need to talk."

For a single instant, Xena considered her position. Gabrielle lay beneath her, helpless against her strength. She could simply take what she wanted

She gazed down into the trusting eyes looking up at her. Oh, Hades, what was she thinking? Not with Gabrielle. Never with Gabrielle. She rolled off the smaller woman and sighed.

Gabrielle had seen the conflicting emotions cross Xena's face, but let it pass. Nothing mattered right now except-- "Are you going to marry Phillip of Akkad?"

Xena stared up at the ceiling. This is what Gabrielle wanted to talk about, now of all times? "Yes," she replied, wondering how much discussion Gabrielle had in mind for this visit, and how much other things. Surely she had missed it as well

This couldn't be happening. What an idiot, Gabrielle thought, crossing her forearms over her head. She should have known that Xena didn't-- Didn't what? Didn't love me, she admitted.

Xena propped her head on an elbow, which afforded her an excellent view of her lover's luscious body. "Gabrielle, what's this about?" she asked.

"Have you been with him since you returned?"

"Yeah." Xena rolled her eyes. "And that idiot attache of his."

Gabrielle stared at her. "Both of them?"

"Yeah, most of the time . . ." Where was this going?

"You've been to bed with both of them?" Gabrielle asked in disbelief.

"To bed?" Xena repeated, laughing. "Hardly. Didn't your mother ever warn you about buying a cow when you can get the milk for free?" She smiled. "I find men more malleable" -- well, that might not be the right word, she thought with a smirk -- "when they're desperate."

"Are you going to sleep with him when you're married?"

"That's usually part of the bargain," Xena said. She scooted a little closer to the other woman, whose nakedness was continuing to give Xena's own body ideas. "But that's just business. It won't keep us from enjoying ourselves." She trailed a finger down Gabrielle's side.

"Yes, it will," Gabrielle said, capturing the stray finger in her hand and returning it to its owner.

"What are you talking about?"

Gabrielle couldn't believe that Xena didn't see it. Didn't see any problem at all, apparently. She would just be married and bedding this man every night, tossing Gabrielle a crumb now and then, but hey, no big deal.

It is no big deal to her, she acknowledged, because she's not in love with you. Gabrielle had been in denial for all these months, refusing to examine how she felt about Xena, trying to tell herself to live for the moment, that she liked Xena's company and Xena liked hers, and that was all that mattered. The time of reconciliation was at hand, though, and one thing had become horribly clear: She was deeply in love with the Warrior Princess.

"I can't . . . be intimate with someone who's married," she said.

Xena bit back a groan. Gods, did Gabrielle have to be an idealist about everything?

"Gabrielle, you're not being reasonable," she said. "Akkad is one of the largest and best armed territories in the Realm. There have been rumors that they were considering breaking ties with us. That would mean war."

"I understand that."

Xena raised a hand into the air, allowing it to drop to the floor. "Then you see how crucial this alliance is."

Gabrielle nodded again.

"So . . . ?"

So, I'm in love with you, and I can't stand sharing you with anyone else, business or no business, Gabrielle thought. "So, nothing," she replied. "I just can't deal with this situation."

"What situation exactly?"

"You married, sleeping in a man's bed."

"Actually, he'll be sleeping in my bed," Xena said. "Except when we're in Akkad."

"Gods!" Gabrielle slammed her hands down on the rug.

"What?"

Gabrielle sat up and scanned the room for the clothes she'd been wearing when she arrived. "Nothing. Nothing at all. Just forget it, OK?"

If forgetting it meant getting on with their reunion, Xena was all for it. However, judging by the fact that Gabrielle was now picking up pieces of her clothing, things didn't look promising along those lines. "I don't want to forget it," she said. "I want to understand what's bothering you."

Gabrielle stepped into her skirt and adjusted the belt. "I can't handle--" She tried to figure out how to put this so that Xena wouldn't laugh at her. "I can't handle being compared to this guy."

Xena laughed. So much for that idea, Gabrielle thought crisply. She slid an arm into the sleeve of her blouse.

"Gabrielle, I'm not going to be comparing you with anyone. Phillip is a bore, and I doubt if I'll recall any encounter a minute after it's over."

"That's what you think, but you won't be able to help it. You'll leave my bed and go to his, and I just can't compete."

"Oh, you can compete, Gabrielle," Xena grinned. "You're way ahead of the pack."

Gabrielle continued to dress, and Xena knew she would have to do something more; she just couldn't figure out what.

"What do you want me to do, Gabrielle?" she asked, extending a hand toward the other woman, who was now lacing her short boots.

Gabrielle looked at her. "Nothing, Xena," she said sadly. "You have to do what you have to do." And so do I. She reached for the white wraparound garment that would complete her disguise.

"Wait." Xena rose. "Please. I don't know what you want. We've talked about this. It's not safe for people to know about us."

Gabrielle nodded in acknowledgement.

"Your life would be in danger, from my enemies, maybe your own allies--"

"My friends would never harm me."

I wouldn't be so sure, Xena thought. She had known more friends who had turned on each other than she hoped Gabrielle would see in her lifetime. "They're not all your friends," she said. "You don't know every unhappy person in this City, but they would all know you." Xena decided against mentioning the potential risks to her own life if she were viewed as weak, if she were to ally herself officially with someone who offered no army, no strength, no iron hand.

"So what are we going to do?" What are you going to do, Gabrielle? Xena heard no reply, and she held out a hand. "Don't leave just yet, Gabrielle. I've missed you."

"I've missed you, too." Gabrielle could not look up; there would be too much written on her face, she knew.

"Stay with me a while, Gabrielle. Talk to me." Tell me everything.

Gabrielle stared at the floor for a long moment, thinking about everything Xena had said. Finally, she looked up at her. "Is it really that impersonal?"

"Yes."

"No feelings, no desire? Just like checking something off a shopping list?"

"It really is." Xena laid her hands on Gabrielle's shoulders. "It doesn't occupy your mind at all. It's like relieving yourself."

Gabrielle chewed on her lip, and finally nodded. "I guess I can do it," she said to herself.

Xena beamed. "I know you can." Her eyes wandered down to Gabrielle's lips, wondering if she was ready for a kiss.

"Mother has been living at Francia's while he's down with a broken leg," Gabrielle said. "After next week, I'll be with her there."

"You're moving?" Xena asked, confused. Why would she do that, when they would finally have the scribe's quarters to themselves?

Gabrielle nodded. "Francia has offered to keep Mother on after he's recovered."

Xena pressed her lips together. Apparently, the scribe didn't quite grasp the concept: Mother gone, bed free. "That's nice, Gabrielle, but there's hardly room for both of you in that guest room. Besides,--"

"I'm not staying in the guest room," Gabrielle said, seemingly intent on examining her fingernails. "I . . . Francia wants a companion."

"A companion?" Xena drew her hands back.

"For him."

"What kind of companion?"

A corner of Gabrielle's mouth turned up. "Oh, gee, for checkers, I think."

Her audience was was not amused. "Gabrielle, if this is--" The blonde woman raised her head, and Xena was startled by the look in her eyes. She couldn't be serious.

"I told Francia no last week," Gabrielle said, "but if you're right about this, I can separate the act from the emotion." She sighed. "I needed to get realistic about things anyway."

Xena was not prepared for this development. "I thought you said he's twice your age."

"Yeah," Gabrielle nodded. "That's why we won't be getting married."

"Excuse me?"

"Francia thinks it would be unseemly for him to marry someone my age."

"And it's more seemly just to--" Xena remembered they were talking about Gabrielle here "--carry on with her?"

Gabrielle's shoulders moved up and down. "He's worried that his friends'll think I'm just after his money if he married me."

"You are just after his money."

"Well, yeah, but they don't know that."

"He wants a trophy to show off."

"I don't care." The scribe walked over to the refreshments table and poured herself some water. "He's promised me, and I believe he'll keep his word."

Xena took a deep, calming breath. "Gabrielle, he'll probably keep your mother on after he's back on his feet anyway. He'll be used to being waited on. It's hard to go back. I know."

"And then what?" Gabrielle asked, raising her hands. "My mother's not a young woman. You know I don't make any money; who'll take care of her later on? She'll need a place to live, money for medical services, to live on--"

"I'll buy you a house," Xena interrupted. "Two houses. And provide for her care and her support."

Gabrielle shook her head. "I can't count on that. Who knows where you'll be in a year?"

"Oh, thanks," Xena said. "Do you think I'll make it to my bed tonight?"

"I don't mean that you'll be dead or anything. I mean who knows where we'll be? We may not be seeing each other any more at that point."

Where in Hades did that come from? "Why wouldn't we be?" Xena asked.

"We have other pressures, other commitments. We'll both be married or living with someone else by then. You may have tired of me . . ." Before Xena could interject, she added, "I really don't want to leech off of you anyway, Xena."

"Gabrielle, a lifetime's support for you and your mother wouldn't put a nick in my vaults. You of all people should know that."

"I'm not going to take money from you," the scribe repeated.

Xena raised her hands. "Why not?" This was absurd.

"It's a matter of pride. You can understand that."

"So instead you're going to earn it on your back from this Francia clown? His own private little concubine?"

"It won't be just that," Gabrielle said stiffly. "My mother and I will tend his house, and he may let me help with his business."

"And you'll lie down for him."

"Yes."

Xena crossed her arms. "I won't allow it."

Silence, then, "I'm going to assume you didn't mean to say that."

"You're not whoring yourself to some two-dinar swine when there is no need." Xena marched over to a small chest and pulled out a sizeable purse. "This is more than enough to take care of both of you. Take it."

Gabrielle shook her head.

Xena threw the bag across the room, and strode angrily to the window. "I'll gut him, Gabrielle," she said.

"Why?"

"Why? Because I'm not having his hands on you." Xena yanked the curtain aside.

"You have no claim on me."

"I have a claim on everyone within my Realm."

"Oh, well, as long as I know whose property I am," Gabrielle fumed. "I guess I can lie under the Conqueror and stare at the ceiling as easily as I can with Francia."

Xena clutched at the window sill. She didn't want to be having this argument. She just wanted to sit on the couch with Gabrielle in her arms. She remembered lying wrapped around Gabrielle on a rainy night, doing nothing but holding her while she slept, and feeling a sense of peacefulness she had thought was long dead. Why couldn't things just be like that again? "Don't do this, Gabrielle."

"Why not? It's just business."

Hearing her own words thrown back at her, Xena sighed. "You can't compare us, Gabrielle. I've used my body for years to get things I wanted. You haven't."

"I'll get used to it. It's meaningless, right? I've made up my mind, Xena; I'm going to accept Francia's offer."

"No, you're not," Xena said. If Gabrielle thought she was kidding about having the man killed, she was gravely in error. He wouldn't make it past his front door tonight.

Gabrielle studied her lover's back for a moment, then said quietly, "Xena, I want you to picture me in bed with Francia."

What in Hades did she think she'd been doing for the last ten minutes? Another vision of some sweaty bastard on top of Gabrielle, grunting and panting, flashed into Xena's head, and she tightened her grip on the wooden slats.

"Think about me lying there, under him," Gabrielle continued. "I'm not enjoying myself, I'm not loving him, I'm just lying there while he does what he wants. I'm only doing it because he'll take care of my mother."

She wished that Gabrielle's voice, and the sickening images it was invoking, would stop.

"Is it meaningless to you, Xena?"

She shook her head.

"Will it be meaningless to me when you're lying beneath your husband?"

Xena closed her eyes. "I have no choice, Gabrielle. I have to do what I believe is best. I've devoted my life to creating and maintaining this Realm. It's the only thing that matters. Don't ask me to choose between you."

"I love you, Xena."

Don't do this. "I can't change who I am, Gabrielle."

"I know that," Gabrielle said. "But who are you, Xena?"

The Conqueror gazed out at thousands of low lights, torchlight, firelight, and moonlight all merging to radiate a faint glow over Corinth. Her City. The Capitol, the seat of government and commerce for the thousands of leagues under her rule. All the battles, all the killing, all the sacrifice in her life had been to one end, which lay stretched before her as far as the eye could see.

Behind her, Xena knew, she would not see the symbols of her reign, or a star-lit sky that blanketed all she ruled. She would see one woman with blonde hair and green eyes who expected Xena to place her above all she had coveted for many years.

The silence deepened as Xena stared out into the dark.

"Hey, lighten up, Gabrielle--always remember that things can't get any worse," Timmor joked.

Gabrielle brought both hands to her forehead and massaged her temples.

"It's only Proclamation Day, you know, not--"

"I know what day it is." The day that Xena would announce her alliance with Akkad. The end of Gabrielle's life as she knew it.

"Are you feeling all right?" Hecuba took her daughter's hand.

"I" Gabrielle swallowed, but the lump in her throat continued to grow. She should tell her. "Mother"

"Hey, gang!"

"Evan!" The men clasped the newcomer's forearm. "Long time no see. You going to the square?"

"Oh, yeah. I'd hate to miss whatever policy she's going to announce that I'm going to violate."

"No policy," Timmor said. "She's announcing her marriage."

"Marriage? You're kidding. Who would have her?" The men thought about that for a minute. "I mean have her for a wife," Evan said, and they laughed.

"Someone who'd never met her before," Raubert said, as the group ambled toward the arena.

"Yeah," Marcus agreed. "If I saw her sitting on a log, and I didn't know who she was, I might consider her company for a couple of hours."

"If I saw her and didn't know who she was, she would be sitting on a log," Timmor said crudely.

The men laughed again and Gabrielle cringed, but their vulgarity gave her a convenient excuse to suggest that she and her mother let the others go on ahead. She shot a disapproving look at Raubert, then dropped back to walk beside the older woman.

They arrived in time to commandeer standing space at the base of the stage. "Gabrielle, up here!" Marcas waved her toward them. "Where's your mother?"

"What? Oh." Gabrielle shook her head. "She went back."

"Went back? What's the matter?"

"I told her"

"Told her what?"

Tears filled Gabrielle's eyes, and she swallowed painfully. You are not my daughter. The words, replayed in her head a dozen times now, had been like a fist to the scribe's gut.

She leaned against the platform, failing to notice the soldier from Xena's advance guard until his boot landed against the side of her skull. "Off the stage!" he barked.

She laid a hand against her head, fighting back more tears.

"Do you want to talk?" Raubert asked.

Gabrielle shook her head. She should, she knew, but she was too close to losing it already; she wouldn't get through it.

Trumpets blared, and the low buzz of conversation subsided as the assembly awaited the appearance of their leader.

"Gods" Timmor whispered appreciatively. Why did such a corrupt harpy have to be so incredibly good-looking?

It was true. Gabrielle's heart overflowed at the sight of the Warrior Princess dressed in shimmering robes of blue and purple and white intertwined to striking effect.

"People of Corinth," Xena shouted, "today is the beginning of a new era." She paused to allow her words to be echoed into the crowd by strategically placed criers, and motioned to a bearded man in a king's floor-length, dark purple robe standing behind her.

Their proximity gave Gabrielle her first glimpse of the man. He wasn't that tall, really, or athletic, and there wasn't much to look at, face-wise, except for that unruly beard. Perhaps Xena had been right, she thought, he didn't look like much competition.

"We have reached a valuable partnership with our rich and powerful ally to the south." Xena again gave the criers a few seconds to catch up. "The Realm has this day executed a mutual defense pact with the good people of Akkad. We have pledged our forces for the Akkadians' protection, and theirs to us." She clasped Phillip's hand and raised it above their heads.

"Akkad remains a welcome and valued part of the Realm." She paused again, this time for applause from the crowd.

Ennaus waited, arms crossed, for the rest of the proclamation. Relations with Akkad had become a farce. What was the point of suddenly granting concession after concession to this little toad when the territories were to merge anyway?

From the corner of her eye, Xena spied her scribe standing near the stage, and made a silent inquiry. Gabrielle nodded, and Xena smiled.

"I have a second announcement," Xena shouted.

"A second announcement? Where was the first?" Raubert whispered. "What about the marriage?" The others met his question with a shrug, except for Gabrielle, whose gaze was riveted on the Warrior Princess.

Silence settled across the arena as Xena seemed to hesitate.

Ennaus eyed her suspiciously. What was going on here?

What was the matter? Gabrielle's heart raced. They had rehearsed this speech several times; surely Xena hadn't forgotten it?

"I have come to realize that there are those who desire greater input and insight into the workings of their leadership," Xena said, and Gabrielle let out her breath. "Along with this, I have learned many other things."

Xena paused for the criers to do their job, and Gabrielle's brow furrowed. These weren't the words they had written.

"I have learned to value those I would have struck down for speaking out, to appreciate the strength of those I would have considered weak, and . . . to love those I would have turned away."

Gabrielle brought a hand to her mouth. Gods.

"From this day," Xena resumed the prepared text, "no one within the Realm will be punished merely for speaking their beliefs." She waited, but, to a man, the criers stood motionless, their mouths hanging open. She sent the nearest one a pointed look, and he hastened to communicate her message to those behind him. "A Citizens' Committee, consisting of three individuals elected by the populace, will be invited to the castle once each month to relay public concerns. All policies of the Realm will be open to review."

Xena paused again. Almost done. She would rather face a dozen cyclopes than relive this experience, except for what was about to come.

Ennaus gaped at her. What was she doing? Did the Princess foolishly think this would somehow strengthen her rule? A gross miscalculation. Why had she not consulted him?

"This is incredible," Marcas gasped.

"We will embark on this new journey together," Xena shouted. "You" -- she gestured toward the crowd -- "me" -- she placed a hand on her chest -- "and the woman who has taught me these lessons." Striding to the edge of the stage, she held out a hand. Gabrielle placed her smaller hand in Xena's palm and allowed herself to be pulled up onto the stage. "Gabrielle of Potedaia."

Gabrielle nervously looked out at the mass of humanity packed into the arena, which was deathly quiet as the shock of Xena's announcements sank in. Xena placed a hand on her shoulder, squeezing it gently to reassure her lover. At almost the same instant, the crowd erupted, roaring their approval for the Conqueror's proclamation. Gabrielle ventured a glance at her companions, but they were nowhere to be seen.

Four women entered the busy market street, two younger blondes making a beeline for the exotic fruit stand, no cessation of their endless stream of chatter in sight, while their elders crossed to visit with the spice merchant. An easy-going guard hovered a reasonable distance behind, taking care not to wander within earshot.

"And some cinnamon, I think," Tova said.

"Really? That's a new one."

"The Conqueror's friend likes it."

"Hmpf."

Melba stiffened slightly at the woman's tone, wishing not for the first time that another spice merchant would set up shop in the market. "The cinnamon," she directed.

"Why bother?" Kohra knelt to retrieve a pouch from beneath the counter. "How long do you think it'll be before the Conqueror tires of the slag?" she shouted up.

"Watch your tongue," Melba said.

The merchant hauled herself back to her feet and waved a hand dismissively. "Pffh. Like you haven't said the same things." She sought confirmation of her perspective from the occupants of the neighboring stall, who nodded enthusiastically. "She warms the Conqueror's bed, doesn't she?"

As Gabrielle's personal servant -- "companion," Gabrielle had insisted -- Melba was well aware that the women did indeed share a bed. And from the occasional tell-tale marks on her mistress's body, as well as her own experience as a human being, Melba knew what they did in that bed. That much was true; the merchant's implication that that was all Gabrielle was to the Conqueror was not.

"I've heard all about it," Khora continued. "The girl ingratiated herself with our young men, and then turned on them."

"It's not true."

Melba spun around at the whispered protest, her heart breaking at the tears in Gabrielle's eyes. She hadn't heard them approaching. "Child--"

"Heard it straight from the horse's mouth," Khora insisted, wondering vaguely who the pretty new palace servant was. "course, I always said those boys were foolish. They had no chance against Xena. Too naive. They should have suspected the girl from the beginning."

The scribe shook her head, unable to speak.

"Hell, her own mother won't have her."

Gabrielle turned and fled.

Tiron saw his charge running from the market as if Ares himself were after her, and he choked on the banana he had been enjoying, spitting out the rest of it as he bolted after her.

"Stupid woman!" Melba spat. She shoved the goods back across the counter and grabbed Tova's arm. They would do without before buying from such a vile creature.

"Two additional guests; yes, Highness, that won't be a problem," the cook's apprentice said. She chewed on her lip, wondering if she should mention the adjustment, and then wondering what would happen to her if she didn't. The Conqueror always seemed to notice everything. "There has been a slight change in tonight's menu, Highness," she said.

"Why?"

"Um, I believe that we are low on cayenne, Highness."

"The menu has been set for more than a week," Xena said. She didn't particularly care what they fed the minor dignitaries joining them for dinner tonight, but incompetence was inexcusable in any venue.

"Yes, Highness."

Xena raised her hands. "Well?"

"I . . . don't know, Highness. A misjudgment, perhaps. It's never happened before."

The girl -- Betta, Xena recalled -- was starting to perspire. What was going on here? "Send Tova to me."

"Highness," Esor said after the girl left. "If I may"

"Yes?"

"I heard there was an incident at the market this morning. There may be a connection."

"What kind of incident?"

"I don't know. Tiron did not say."

"Tiron? That's Gabrielle's guard."

"Yes, Princess."

Xena rose slowly from her throne. "Gabrielle was at the market today?"

"Yes."

"And there was an incident?"

"Yes."

"Was she hurt?"

"Not to my knowledge, Highness." Esor was beginning to regret his intervention; the rage in the Conqueror's expression was intimidating, even if it wasn't directed at him. "But she was . . . upset, I believe."

Xena's lip curled. "I want Tova and Tiron in here now," she demanded. "And anyone else who was there."

Gabrielle poured more wine for their guests. "I'm sorry," she said again. "Xena's usually very prompt. I'm sure she'll be here any minute." She smiled again. As guests went, Belthor was one of Gabrielle's favorites. Grandfatherly in appearance, if not in temperament -- his rather fresh suggestion to her earlier came to mind -- he was charming, friendly, and just begging to have his cheeks pinched.

"No problem," he said. "From what I hear, it might be better to come by tomorrow anyway." He winked at her, but the girl seemed confused.

"What did you hear?"

"Just that Xena went berserk down at the market this afternoon." Three nods of agreement from his companions confirmed the statement.

The smile faded from Gabrielle's face. "Down at the market?"

"Yeah. Tore up a couple of stands. When we came through, they were still picking up the pieces." He shook his head admiringly at the Conqueror's thoroughness; the place looked as though a windstorm had ripped through it. "Do you know what it was about?"

Gabrielle closed her eyes. "I think I probably do."

The doors swung open to admit the Warrior Princess, a stunning figure in dark leathers and cape. Without preamble, she said, "Belthor, no offense, but I'm not in the mood for socializing tonight."

"None taken, Princess. I was just thinking the same thing." He tipped another wink at Gabrielle. What a little beauty, he thought. Might ask Xena if she's taken already

Xena crossed over and greeted the scribe with a familiar kiss.

Oops. Nevermind. Belthor and his entourage took their leave, unnoticed by either woman.

"I take it you heard."

Xena nodded.

"It was no big deal, really."

"Gabrielle." Xena placed her hands on the other woman's shoulders. "There's nothing I can do about hateful people. I would give anything to spare you from them, but they became part of your life when you became part of my life."

"It's not your--"

"Wait," Xena interrupted. "There is something I can do about what they say. When anyone suggests that you aren't the most important person in my life, that I only want you because you're incredible in bed--"

Gabrielle laughed.

--and I do mean incredible," Xena whispered, leaning in to nibble her ear, "then I can do something about that."

"Yeah, smash up their booths, apparently."

"I mean to prevent it." She took Gabrielle's hands. "Marry me."

Gabrielle slid her arms behind Xena's neck and buried her face in the taller woman's chest. "I knew there was a reason I loved you," she said after a long silence.

"Do you remember what it was?" Xena grinned.

"No, not right off. That kind of thing tends to slip one's mind." Xena could feel Gabrielle's smile against her skin.

"Gabrielle, you know there isn't any one thing I love about you," she said solemnly.

Gabrielle looked up at her.

"There are two." Xena grabbed the scribe's breasts.

"Sex maniac."

"Oh, so you remember now."

"It's coming back to me." Gabrielle planted a soft kiss in the valley between Xena's breasts.

Xena didn't know how much Melba was paid, but after tonight it would be doubled. Gabrielle was simply breathtaking in a flowing green gown that accentuated her curves and the shimmering gold of her hair.

She followed the scribe's movements. The way that dress slid over her hips . . . Gods. Xena wondered if Gabrielle would consider it tacky to take her on the altar before the ceremony got underway. Yeah, probably, even if this was only the private joining that would precede next week's highly public service in the coliseum.

She looked down skeptically at her own attire. Even thoroughly cleaned and oiled and shined, leathers and armor just couldn't match up to this. Maybe she should have--

"You look gorgeous," Gabrielle said. "You are more beautiful every day."

Xena opened and closed her mouth, desperately wanting to say the same and more to Gabrielle, but not able to put it into words.

"Thank you." Gabrielle smiled understandingly. "Oh, before I forget, I've invited everyone back to our quarters for an all-night celebration," she said.

Xena froze. "What?"

"I thought you'd enjoy it; some of your regional commanders are in town already for the ceremony, and those arms dealers from Alturis are still here, so I invited them, and--" Gabrielle paused at the dejected look on her lover's face. "And I'm kidding," she finished.

Xena ran her tongue along the inside of her cheek, then leaned over to whisper in Gabrielle's ear a single word, "paybacks." Gabrielle's eyes widened as her imagination played out several scenarios, all of which were rather appealing.

Xena's eyes flickered over the small group. "Your mother?"

Gabrielle shook her head. "She's not feeling well."

"Do you want to postpone this?"

"No," Gabrielle said. "I don't think she'll be feeling well for some time."

"I see. And your friends?"

"Not well either." Gabrielle smiled weakly. "I think there's something going around."

Xena nodded. She knew how it was not to have any friends, but the difference was that the Warrior Princess had never had any friends to lose, and had never cared. This was much harder on Gabrielle.

The priest placed his hands on the dais. "Are we ready to proceed?" He took a deep breath, and prepared to perform the sacred marriage rites for a merciless dictator whose reaction to a

single slip up would likely be swift and fatal. He would have to remember to have a word with whichever gods had blessed him with being on duty at the temple when the Conqueror's guards came looking for a cleric.

"Yes," Xena said.

Melba sniffled, dabbing at her eyes with a small handkerchief. Later that evening, she seized the registrar's quaking hand -- "Give me that" -- and relieved him of his feathered quill. She dipped the quill into fresh ink and inscribed in clear and precise letters, "On Solstice Eve in the Fifth Year of the Reign of Xena, Gabrielle of Potedaia and Xena of Amphipolis were joined in the presence of Melba of Corinth, Achias of Athens, and Ennaus of Belzar." She wiped at a tear with her knuckle.

"Xena asked me to bring you here, Consort." Tiron bowed to indicate that he would not be joining her.

The scribe grinned. Wonder if Xena's in here with a surprise The Conqueror occasionally liked to live up to her title in unexpected locations. "Thank you, Tiron," she said. "Um . . .," she reddened, "if Xena's in there, you probably won't need to stay" Tiron nodded, congratulating himself on maintaining the dignified expression that befitted the position of Consort's Guard.

Gabrielle stepped through the door, and was shocked to see a familiar figure seated in the center of the room. "Mother!" She ran to the older woman and grasped her hands, which jerked away from the touch. "Are you all right?"

"I was brought here against my will," Hecuba said.

Gabrielle sighed. "I'm sorry." She straightened, smiling unhappily. "Xena's idea of trying to be helpful."

"I'd expect as much from that creature."

"She's not a creature," Gabrielle said. "If you got to know her--"

"I know her. I've known her every day for the five years since she murdered my husband. Your father. And your sister."

How could Gabrielle explain that this wasn't the same Xena? She knew it in her heart. "I loved father," she began, "and Lila--"

"I used to believe that. I don't any more."

"Oh, gods." Gabrielle clutched at her chest. "How can you say that?"

"You've married the woman who killed them," Hecuba said, disgusted. "You speak for her. You've chosen her over your family."

"She's part of my family too, now. Mother, please, I can't stand this." Gabrielle began to cry. "Please don't leave me. Not when I just found you."

"She found me, you mean. Xena the Conqueror, my new owner. What was I, payment for your services? You make me so proud."

"It wasn't like that."

Hecuba rose. "Am I free to go?"

"Of course." Gabrielle nodded sadly. "But please don't."

Tiron opened the door at insistent pounding, surprised when the old woman stalked out. "Consort?"

"Take her wherever she wants to go," Gabrielle said in a hoarse voice. Tiron studied her uncertainly; the Consort was hunched over, her back to him . . . Maybe he should go get Melba.

Tiron rounded the first corner, the old woman's arm in hand, only to run squarely into the Warrior Princess. Seeing Gabrielle hurrying down the hall, obviously crying, Xena motioned the guard to back away.

"Listen, you can hate me the rest of your life. I'm fine with that," she said. "You don't have to like me or even tolerate me. But Gabrielle is your daughter, the same little girl that you raised to be a beautiful, caring woman. Think about what you're doing to her."

She walked away, pausing as she passed the guard. "I understand the old woman's shoulder has been causing her pain," she said, grateful to Achias for the intelligence. "Have the healers see to it and then let her go."

Xena crossed her legs, and Gabrielle glanced at her. It appeared that the Conqueror had little interest in the topic of this conversation. Ennaus tapped his quill, annoyed that Xena had even deigned to allow the man to make his pitch. He shot a glare at the small blonde woman who was hovering over Xena. He suspected he knew who was responsible for this waste of time.

"We understand that the region is arid," Winton acknowledged. "But we believe we can build on it. We can enhance the value of some of the Realm's unused land." He looked up as the young woman poured him another glass of water with an encouraging smile.

"It would deplete the valuable resources of the Realm," Ennaus said.

The old man shook his head. "We do not ask--"

"If the area were colonized, soldiers of the Realm would be required to leave the border to oversee their activities," Ennaus said, this time to Xena. "The western region is vulnerable to overland attack. It's difficult enough to maintain our border guard there."

"That's true," Xena agreed.

"Winton, would any of your men be willing to sign up for the guard?"

Ennaus glowered at the Consort's question. She had now essentially made her wishes known to Xena, an obvious attempt to influence the decision.

"Yes, yes, that could be done," Winton assured them.

"A large colony would provide an extra layer between the border and Greece, wouldn't it?" Gabrielle asked.

"And extra problems," Ennaus countered.

Xena considered the aged petitioner, a finger pressed against her lips. "Fifty men, three years' service each; another fifty after that," she said. "Fair wages, board, and yearly visits home."

"Oh, yes, that would be quite satisfactory," Winton said eagerly.

"Highness--" Ennaus began.

"Write it up," Xena said.

An hour later, Gabrielle escorted the grateful gentleman down the corridor. "Thank you," he said, bringing her hand to his lips.

"Thank Xena," Gabrielle said. "It was her decision."

He met her gaze. "As you say, Consort."

She gave a final wave to the happy citizen and headed back up the hall. At the entrance to their quarters, three men stood next to Esor, and Gabrielle's eyes lit up.

"Raubert!" She laid a hand on her friend's arm. "Hi, Timmor." She didn't know the third man with them. They did not reply, and she drew back her hand. "Are you here to see Xena?"

"We are the Citizens' Committee," Raubert said.

"Really?" She beamed at him. "That's wonderful."

Timmor addressed the guard. "Please announce our presence to the Conqueror."

"Um . . .," Gabrielle tentatively held out a hand to him. "How is Celice?"

"We're here to see the Conqueror," Timmor said, "not her whore."

Gabrielle recoiled, and the men went on past her into the room.

"The Citizens' Committee," Esor announced to his queen. He showed the men to the long couch and indicated they should sit down.

"All right." Xena positioned herself comfortably in her throne. "I'm listening."

Some time later, she sneaked a look at the hourglass that still appeared to be half full, wondering if perhaps it had become clogged. Yes, perhaps the recent humidity had--

". . . and the tax collectors have taken it upon themselves," Raubert read from the prepared script.

She smothered a yawn. These were the grand orators? Gabrielle could lecture circles around these guys in her sleep. Which reminded her "Where's Gabrielle?"

"In the kitchen, I believe, Highness," Esor replied.

Xena smiled. "Would you ask her to join us?" She turned back to the trio. "Continue," she invited, wishing that Ennaus had stuck around for the meeting. His usual negative interjections would at least spice up this relentless monotone.

The guard returned shortly, bowing as he delivered his message. "The Consort says that she is in the middle of testing a recipe and would prefer to join you later, if that's all right."

"I see." Xena regarded her guests. Her attempt to break the stalemate between the two women from Potedaia had not gone well, and she had received a gentle but pointed lesson from Gabrielle about interfering. Still, Xena would not tolerate disrespect for her Consort any more than she would for herself.

"Tell her--" Xena shook her head and reached for a square of parchment instead, scrawling a short message for the guard to deliver. Xena leaned back and crossed her arms, studying the newly constituted Citizens' Committee, a committee that she created, that she permitted to exist

"Let me tell you something," she said. "Gabrielle stood with you and fought beside you and was a good friend to you for years. She did nothing to betray you, even when she thought it would mean her own death." Steely blue eyes burned into theirs. "But if friendship and loyalty mean so little to you, then remember this: She's the best chance you've got with me. I trust her judgment, and she's a lot more likely to see your perspective than I am." She leaned forward in her throne. "So I would suggest you weigh how you treat her against what you hope to accomplish."

"So, now you've summoned her for us to grovel, is that it?" Timmor asked.

Xena smiled. "No one 'summons' Gabrielle," she said. "I've asked her to join us because I like her company, and I refuse to be without it simply because my guests are uncivilized."

A moment later, Gabrielle glided into the room and over to the throne, leaning down for a chaste kiss from her lover. Perched on the arm of the ruler's throne, the scribe spent the rest of the meeting listening carefully to the Committee's grievances, recognizing most of them, not trusting her voice sufficiently to offer any comments of her own. She would give Xena her perspective later.

After the delegation departed, Xena slid an arm around her waist. "Thanks for coming back," she said.

Gabrielle smiled. "I'd have to have ice in my blood to resist someone telling me she needs me by her side," she said.

"Mm hmm." Xena tugged her onto her lap. "And I know for a fact that you don't," she said, drawing her lover's head down. There was nothing chaste about this kiss.

"Oh, gods . . . Xena . . ."

Ennaus stared at the two of them, together, on Xena's throne. The younger woman knelt, straddling Xena's thighs, her blouse lying crumpled on the floor. Xena's left hand was circled around her back, the right not immediately visible. Ennaus could make out the dark hair of Xena's head over the scribe's shoulder. The entire scene was repulsive.

Xena's head jerked up, and she stilled her motions. "Out."

Her face was flushed, Ennaus noticed, and not from anger. So that was what the Warrior Princess looked like while taking her pleasure. He looked at the scribe's stiff back. Embarrassed, was she? As well she should be.

"Get out," Xena repeated. "Now." As the aide reached the door, she added, "Knock next time."

The Realm is Everything.

The Conqueror had dictated and enforced that philosophy for many years, and Ennaus believed with all his being that she was right. A threat to the Realm must be eliminated at all costs, and a threat to Xena was a threat to the Realm.

But this time the Conqueror could not see the threat, even though it was right before her.

On her lap.

The scribe, as Xena called her, was the clearest danger the Realm had faced through all of Ennaus' years of service, six long, wonderful years as the Conqueror's aide de camp, privy to all matters of state, the Conqueror's ears and eyes and voice. There were no secrets between them.

Knock next time.

Since the other woman's entrance upon the scene, Xena had shown increasing signs of susceptibility to her consort's will; her judgment was no longer reliable. Allowing the woman's friends and others to criticize the Realm openly put them at risk from their allies and enemies alike, as well as their own citizenry. It was only a matter of time.

He bore no ill will toward the Consort.

Oh, gods . . . Xena . . .

But the Realm was Everything.

"No, this is really nice," Gabrielle said, still a little surprised at the aide's suggestion of a walk together. She forced herself to smile at him, trying to put behind her the awkward scene he had witnessed the other day and concentrate on the lovely day instead.

"I'm pleased," Ennaus said. "In many ways, we have the same goals, you and I."

Gabrielle thought about it. "I suppose so. We both want what's best for Xena and her people."

For Xena, Ennaus amended. "There is a difference between us, though," he said.

"And what's that?" Gabrielle asked. They rounded a corner, their guard escorts following a discreet distance behind.

"I know what's best for Xena, and you don't."

Gabrielle wasn't quite sure if she was hearing correctly. "Um, I'm sure you have your opinions, and of course many of them are valid, but I'm not sure if that's entirely true."

"I'm afraid that it is," Ennaus said, "and it's a very serious matter. Your influence over Xena is unhealthy."

Gabrielle stopped. She hated to pull rank, but did Ennaus think she wasn't going to tell Xena what he said?

"Frankly, I don't know what your motives are," Ennaus continued, his smooth voice far from soothing to the scribe. "But I do know that if the situation were allowed to continue, it would inevitably bring about the downfall of a glorious regime. Ultimately, it would mean the death of Xena, and I can't allow that."

Gabrielle shook her head. What . . . ? Looking around, she realized to her distress that they had wandered onto a deserted street, but at least the guards were within shouting distance.

"I just wanted you to know why I have to do this," Ennaus said. At his signal, the guards converged on them. "You know what to do," he said. "Then kill her." One of the men nodded, and slammed the hilt of his sword into Ennaus' jaw.

Xena raced up the stairs and through Ennaus' open door. "What happened?" she demanded. "Where is she?"

The aide shook his head. "I don't know, Highness. I'm sorry."

"What happened?" she repeated.

"There were eight or nine of them. My guards were only a few yards behind, but they were on us without warning. They took her and ran." Ennaus held a wet cloth to his jaw. "I recognized two of them from the prison."

"The prison?" Xena repeated. "They were with Gabrielle?"

He nodded. "Dissenters. They believe she betrayed them."

"I know."

"I'm truly sorry, Princess."

Xena sighed. "It's not your fault, Ennaus. I should have seen it coming." She clasped his shoulder. "She'll be all right."

"Of course, Princess."

Outside in the hall, she advanced on Tiron. "Why the hell weren't you with her?"

The guard paled. "I'm sorry, Highness. She was with Ennaus and his guards; I thought my presence would be unnecessary."

"You are never to leave her side," Xena said furiously. "I should have your head."

"Yes, Highness." A painful knot formed in the guard's throat. She was right; he had failed the Consort.

"Round up a hundred peasants and take them to the square," Xena ordered.

"Do you want--"

"I want the first hundred you see. I don't give a damn who they are."

Palace guards scrambled to execute her directive, and within minutes the Conqueror stood on a platform looking out at a hundred captives and twice as many spectators, the two groups separated by a ring of soldiers.

"My Consort has been attacked," she declared, confirming rumors that were already spreading through the city. Her eyes swept across the crowd, pausing when they fell upon Gabrielle's mother. Was she here out of concern, or to gloat?

"Someone must pay for this crime." Xena sensed anxiety building in the crowd, which gave her some undefined surge of satisfaction. "For every hour that I am without my Consort, a hundred Corinthians will die," she shouted. "Men -- women -- children."

Screams rose from the crowd, and the Conqueror's troops tightened their half-circle around the captives.

Xena scanned the people cowering before her, and her gaze landed again on the woman from Potedaia who had the same eyes as her lover.

No. Awareness struck her with almost physical force. If Gabrielle was still alive, she would never forgive the measures Xena had taken to get her back. And if she wasn't -- Xena's gut seized -- this could not be Gabrielle's memoriam. Tears filled her eyes, and she sank to her knees. She could no longer make out any of the faces in the square, but it didn't matter.

The crowd stilled as the Conqueror bowed her head, and watched as a one-armed figure climbed onto the platform and laid his hand on her shoulder.

"She wouldn't want this, Achias," Xena whispered.

"No, she wouldn't."

"I don't know what to do." Xena knew no other way way to communicate with these people.

"What would she want you to do?"

Achias was about to ask the question again when he heard Xena's soft answer, "Ask for help."

He could imagine how lost the Conqueror felt; this was a trial that neither of them had ever faced before. Achias stepped toward the end of the stage. "The Conqueror has rescinded her previous order," he called. "You will not be harmed."

The guards eyed each other; even as close as the two were known to be, Achias could not override Xena's clear directive. They stayed their ground.

Achias recognized the situation immediately. "You'll have to tell them," he said.

Xena took a deep breath and got to her feet. "I am asking for your help," she shouted. "Gabrielle is a caring and compassionate woman who has long fought for the good of others, heedless of the danger to herself. Whatever your feelings for me, she doesn't deserve this." She closed her eyes. "Anyone who can help me . . . you may name your price."

She held up a hand. "Release them."

She stood motionless, deep in thought, while the relieved Corinthians scrambled to safety. After a few minutes, she looked at her friend and said quietly, "Achias, I don't think I've been looking at this the right way."

Rows of Xena's Guard stood rigidly at attention, waiting to be addressed. The Conqueror had lost it on the square, they'd heard. A few of the more bold among them even claimed that Xena had cried, but the seniors closed their ears to such slander. That kind of talk could get one's tongue removed.

Not a single head among the well-trained troops moved at the sound of the castle door opening. The Conqueror, looking magnificent as usual in her now-customary leathers, strode to the center of the common.

"You know what happened this morning," she said deliberately, walking from one end of the first row to the other. "Your job is to find my Consort." Her voice was low and even, but her

men had no difficulty hearing every word. "I want to explain what will happen if she does not return to me alive." Making slow progress, she met the gaze of each man in turn. "I will devote every resource of this Realm to hunting down the men who took her." Mid-way through the second tier now, she resumed her monologue in the same deadly tone. "I will find them, and I will exact a punishment upon them that reflects the cost they have inflicted on me."

Several of the men blanched. They remembered stories, sworn to be true, of three men drawn and quartered merely for injuring a tavernkeeper in Amphipolis, although no one ever knew her connection to the Conqueror, and Xena had not even visited the woman's establishment when she passed through Thrace.

"And on their families," Xena continued. "I will see their mothers" -- meeting another soldier's eyes -- "their wives" -- another -- "their children" -- and another -- "hanging from the cross."

"Man, Xena is totally gone on this." Achias sat, cross-legged, next to the young guard. He detached a canteen from his belt and offered the other man a drink, but the soldier declined.

Achias stretched his legs out on the grass. "Ifram, isn't it? This your search quadrant?" Not many places to hide a young woman in this barren patch of land, he noted.

"I finished mine; I'm just catching my breath."

"No luck, huh? Same here. We've torn the city apart, but it's like they're a step ahead of us. Hey, maybe one of us has her." Achias laughed. The guard didn't respond. "It's gonna be one hell of a mess when Xena gets hold of 'em," he continued. "Ought to draw a good crowd." He studied the youth. "You don't look so good, son."

Ifram swallowed. "Xena . . . when she spoke to us . . . it's like she's seeing right inside you." He looked over, and discovered for the first time exactly who the man was seated beside him. Achias. The Conqueror's friend.

An extended silence passed, and then Ifram spoke again. "What do you think would happen if . . . if someone told Xena where to find the girl? Would she still kill him? And his family?"

Achias shrugged. "Don't know. Depends, I guess." He spoke the next word casually. "Alive?"

"I don't know. I mean, I wouldn't--"

"Where is she?" Achias towered over him.

Ifram buried his head in his hands. "Oh, gods."

"Is she still alive?"

"I don't know. We were . . ." He shook his head. "We were too afraid that Xena would . . . But if Ennaus finds out she's still alive . . . We don't know what to do."

"I can answer that question," said a low voice behind him.

"Conqueror!"

"Where is she?"

The guard's jaw moved, unable to utter any sounds.

"Tell me where she is," Xena demanded, dragging the man up by his shirt. "If she's still alive, I may let you live." Or I may not, she thought. Another silence followed, and she backhanded him. "Tell me now, you son of a bitch, or I'll tear you limb from limb right here." She struck him again. And again.

"Please?"

"What?"

"Could I--" Gabrielle cleared her throat. "Could I please have some water?"

Muted footfalls sounded, and Xena pressed herself against the side of the cave. She motioned silently, and two men eased forward until they were next to her. Navigating in almost total darkness until they could see the reflection of flames on the opposite wall, the three readied themselves.

"Thank you." It was Gabrielle's voice again, and Xena tried to calm herself. "Could I stand up? Please? I can't feel my legs."

Her self-restraint evaporated, and Xena charged around the corner.

"Plan B," Achias whispered, and he and Tiron followed her lead. "Oh, Hades," he said disgustedly, seeing Xena surrounded by half a dozen of Ennaus' henchmen. He resheathed his sword and sat in front of a small hollow in the cave wall.

"What are you doing?" Tiron yelled.

Achias patted the ground beside him. "Watch and learn, son."

Tiron hesitated, confused, but the man's absolute confidence persuaded him to have a seat, and together they took in the show. "Heads up!" Achias called, and they leaned away from each other to dodge a stray . . . limb of some sort, Tiron decided. He watched, mouth open, as the Conqueror utterly decimated the men who held her lover captive.

"Are you sure it's safe for us to be in here?" he asked.

"Oh, sure--" Achias began, only to be startled by a shrill battle cry from the Warrior Princess. The two soldiers looked at each other, but before they could make a strategic retreat, Xena had driven her sword through the last of her prey and dropped to her knees beside Gabrielle.

She hurriedly untied the other woman's hands and feet and drew Gabrielle to her, stroking her face, sobbing into dusty blonde hair. "Gabrielle . . ."

Achias tapped Tiron on the shoulder, and they slipped away to buy each other a drink.

Ennaus entered Xena's chambers, a little surprised to find her indoors while the manhunt continued. She had neither eaten nor slept since removal of her consort, further evidence of the detrimental effect the younger woman had.

Xena clutched at the arms of her throne, two strong instincts -- satisfying her desire for revenge, and fulfilling her promise to Gabrielle that she wouldn't kill the traitor where he stood -- warring for control.

"Hello, Ennaus," she said. "I'm glad you're here. I have something to show you."

The curtain to her bedchamber moved, and Achias emerged, followed by--

Moving faster than Xena had thought him capable of, Ennaus bolted out the doorway, past surprised guards who were uncertain whether to stop the Conqueror's aide or assist him.

"Let him go," Xena shouted.

Gabrielle laid a hand on her shoulder. "Thank you. I just don't think I can take any more violence right now."

"I know," Xena replied. She slid her arm around Gabrielle's waist. Over the scribe's shoulder, Xena met the inquiring gaze of her old friend.

Achias nodded, and drifted out the door.

"What are you doing this morning?" Xena picked up a bracer from the seat of her throne and slid it over her forearm.

"I'm going to see Mother."

"Ah." That explained the hours of dedicated scribbling in bed last night while Xena twiddled her thumbs.

Xena exchanged glances with the guard. Another fun-filled escapade in which Gabrielle would arrive at the brownstone, the door would open, she would get a few syllables out to her ancestor, and the door would slam shut again.

Gabrielle had taken to writing out her thoughts now in lengthy missives, the first of which had been torn in two by the old woman, Tiron reported. The following week, Hecuba had again closed the door to her daughter, but had held it open long enough for Gabrielle to toss her letter inside, which led the glowing scribe to speculate for much of the evening that she might have read it. Yes, she might have, Xena agreed.

"Will you be back before they leave?" Gabrielle asked. She tied a ribbon around the thick stack of parchment and walked over to stand beside Xena.

"I hadn't planned on it," Xena said, "unless you want me to."

"Nah, I'll be fine. You have a good time kicking soldiers' butts."

"Training," Xena corrected. "I'm just helping Belile with a little arms training. It's not a competition or anything."

"Uh huh." Gabrielle remembered the last time Xena had returned from "helping out" with a training exercise, sheets and towels flying everywhere when Gabrielle was tackled unexpectedly from behind by an overheated Warrior Princess. She turned up her face for a quick peck, which her lover provided.

"If Tarouf gives you any grief," Xena hooked the buttons of her cape, "tell him that he'll return home to nothing but scorched earth."

Gabrielle remained silent.

"Gabrielle"

"I will convey the level of your displeasure to him."

"Gabrielle, you have to be willing to use the threat of force, especially with someone like Tarouf. He's already ignored the polite note someone suggested I send asking him to pretty please get his men off of Daron's land."

Gabrielle pursed her lips. "Oh, yeah? Well, I seem to remember that 'pretty please' has worked for you before."

"Yeah, but I had more to gain," Xena replied, smiling.

"OK, I think I can handle it." Gabrielle thrust an index finger forward. "Capitulate, Tarouf, or Xena the Conqueror will seduce your wife, hack your limbs off an inch at a time, and strangle you with your own intestines."

"That's more like it." Xena arched an eyebrow. "Tarouf's wife, huh? Wonder if she's any good."

"I'll let you know."

Xena grinned. "Awfully confident about our negotiating skills, aren't we?" She sheathed her sword. "Tell you what; you get Tarouf to agree to withdraw his men within thirty days, no conditions, no threats, and I'll let you have your way with me tonight."

Gabrielle crossed her arms. "Tonight and tomorrow night."

Xena sighed. "Oh, all right." She gazed at her little blonde spitfire. "You drive a hard bargain, scribe. Tarouf doesn't stand a chance."

And he didn't. The defiant king might smirk initially upon hearing that the Consort would be handling the negotiations instead of the Conqueror, but ultimately he would emerge from the room, stunned, lucky to have retained the clothing on his back. It was a thing of beauty. Xena smiled. As was life.

END
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