

When There Were We

By Link

Disclaimers:

The characters of Xena, Gabrielle, Ephiny, Solari, Eponin, and Ming Tien of course belong to Rob Tapert and company. Everyone else mentioned below are figments of my own imagination. Except, of course, any gods, goddesses and ancient creatures of lore – those are figments of very dead people’s imagination that we maintain for various reasons. Oh – and non-fictional people like Caesar Julius Caesar who, as X:WP taught us, was real enough to get publicly killed... and come back to life to rule the world and get killed again.

Reader Rating:

If this were a movie, I’d give it a PG-13 rating. There is some cursing, implied as well as stated lesbianism, and violence all thirteen year olds have more than likely experienced on television (at least) by now. There is no sex (I’m still too shy for public intercourse). There is, however, public nudity, but your level of offense or pleasure will depend on your own powers of visualization... considering this is a pictureless book.

Other:

This is the second of a set of three stories spanning roughly five Xena: Warrior Princess years (heh!); it’s not necessary to read the first to understand the second. But in case you’re interested, the first story is called “From a Dark Wood Rising” and can be found most easily if you click Back right about now. If you’d like to send a note, I do like e-mail (really, it’s like getting a Christmas present you don’t have to wait 360+ days to open!):ee_2_me @yahoo.com

Enjoy!

(oh, p.s., just in case you don’t enjoy, that e-mail address doesn’t work...)

I

“My Queen! You have returned!”

A tall, well-built woman with long, tightly curled, blonde hair stepped from behind a large cypress tree. The jubilant smile spreading on her deeply tanned face belied the fiercely tense muscles that had flexed and tightened should the unexpected visitors prove a problem. Quietly the tall warrior, Ephiny, Regent of the Greek Amazons, removed the arrow from her bow, dropped it casually over her shoulder back into its quiver and shouldered her bow before opening her arms wide to the smaller of the two guests.

“Ephiny! It’s so great to see you!” greeted the young, blonde Queen Gabrielle, with a strong hug. Though she was much smaller than the Regent, Ephiny was always surprised how much stronger the young Queen’s body had grown with their every encounter. The Regent easily stood a head taller than her Queen, but once their hug broke, she receded in posture enough to make herself seem more of an equal.

Looking up meekly, Ephiny reached out her leather clad hand to grasp the forearm of the dark haired woman standing squarely by the Queen’s side – the mighty Warrior Princess, Xena. Holding each other in a firm, strong grip, the women smiled and bid each other a fond hello.

Gabrielle watched as the friends greeted each other, then looked around in anticipation of the sentry emerging from their points of concealment. Because Ephiny was Regent, acting as Queen in Gabrielle’s absence, there was always a small contingent of guards surrounding her. Gabrielle was puzzled when no one else appeared.

“Ephiny, are you alone?” the blonde asked tentatively.

The grim, purposeful expression Ephiny had become so used to wearing due to her position resettled itself on her face. Though the woman was a couple years younger than Xena, the toll of hard work and concern for a nation was paid in the appearance of age beyond her years. The woman sighed as she spoke, annoyance touching the edges of her deep voice.

“No, the guard is nearby, but I’ve told them to remain hidden and unobtrusive until I return to the village.” She paused, watching as her friends’ eyebrows lifted in question. “The young one you brought to us a year ago-”

“Kaija?” Gabrielle interrupted.

“Yes, Kaija. She’s proving to be more work than we bargained for.”

Before Gabrielle could start firing off questions, Ephiny lifted her hands to stay what she knew would be a charge into a long story and told the visitors to follow her back to the village. “I’ll explain there, after you’ve eaten and gotten settled.”

Gabrielle bounced after Ephiny, starting a new line of questions asking after Solari, – Ephiny’s second in command – the progress of the training warriors, and how the new head-cook had fared. Xena hung back a moment, examining the woods, listening, scanning – she knew they were being watched by more than the Royal Guard. She said nothing and moved on after the Queen and Regent.

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The Greek Amazons encompassed a huge region; the land they claimed stretched for leagues. Three major roads ran by Amazon borders, and a trained eye could find the footpaths off of those roads that could be followed to cross the borders. It was not possible, however, for any person to take two meandering steps onto Amazon land without being espied. Sentries abounded and, like

the Guard surrounding Ephiny and her guests, they were invisible. They could watch a person from the time he stepped onto their land, communicate all the way back to the mainstay, and have him surrounded by a full detail without him having recognized anything other than common forest surroundings in a matter of minutes.

The Greek Region was the Capitol Province of the Amazon Nation. At its height it had supported about twenty-five thousand women. When Gabrielle inherited rule it supported only a fraction of that, around three thousand. Several smaller villages dotted the outskirts of the capitol village, farmers and shepherdesses who needed to be outside city walls to lead their lives. At the region's heart was the mainstay, the Rome of the Amazons. An outer wall of thirty-foot tall, spiked posts surrounded the village. Four gates positioned at either direction were guarded by sentries atop towers who were easily some of the best archers in the world. Behind this wall was a second wall, approximately twenty feet of space between them; the second wall was even taller, an easy forty-five feet high, and the gates allowing access through this barrier were offset with each of the outer wall gates. Anyone trying to storm the capitol would be trapped inside the chasm between the walls, at the mercy of whatever the Amazons decided to rain upon them. Inside, the village was an organized and sprawling urbanity. There were schools, taverns, a mess hall and community center, modest hut homes, training fields, a library and the centerpiece of it all, the Temple of Artemis, a massive stone structure dedicated to the patron goddess of the Amazons. It was a green city, with a cultivated plaza, trees and fields, even a lake was surrounded by the city walls; since more than half of the region's population lived within city limits, sufficient space was needed to accommodate them and give them a sense of freedom and openness.

The village was abuzz with the arrival of the Queen in no time. Ephiny suspected the notification the sentries had handed back over their chain of communication had been delivered to the village before their group had gone more than fifty feet. As the woods receded, the Royal Guard appeared one by one, surrounding the small party, six in all. They donned the blue sashes indicative of their position. The women were grim faced, mind set on their duty. While it was their shift to guard the Regent – and now the Queen – there was only the steadfast protection of the heads of the Amazon Nation to be attended to, and nothing else.

Though she never said, Gabrielle liked being surrounded by the Royal Guard. The Royal Guard was comprised of women who were not only some of the best warriors the Nation had to offer, but also the most single-minded. Gabrielle felt almost untouchable being encircled by women whose sole mission in life from beginning of shift to end was her protection. Not every warrior could keep such an acute focus, and having that attention dedicated to her helped Gabrielle feel distinctly empowered.

Xena, on the other hand, felt smothered by them. Their hawk-eyes constantly flitting from the Regent to the Queen to herself to the woods and surrounding land in anticipation of trouble made the Warrior Princess nervous and uptight. She preferred spending time with the Elite Guard, the absolute best warriors of the Nation. They were identified as they roamed the village by their black sashes. The Elite Guard, like the Royal Guard, were excellent warriors, but they were also exceptionally well rounded. The oath made by these women swore their lives to the protection of the Nation in body, mind and soul. Their service required all aspects of defense and attack; at

any given moment they had to be able to act as a full leader of the Nation, planning warfare, leading the troops, negotiating treaties. These were the women expected to take charge of the Amazons if ever anything happened to the heads of state. They were stalkers, trackers, snipers, spies, and they were the ultimate pillars of defense for the capitol of the Amazon Nation. No one wanted to come face to face with one of the Elite Guard, and definitely not face to face with more than one of them.

The other women that served the Nation in the military were either warriors or trainers. The warriors wore red linen belts while the trainers wore yellow. Warriors and trainers were those who did not pass, or did not want to take, the Guard Exam. These women were the bulk of the Nation's army.

Every woman served the Nation in some way, if not in the military then by trade or craft. Many worked the land, growing food for the village. Others were blacksmiths, carpenters, seamstresses, scribes. For its size, the main village held as many castes and workers as Athens or Troy before it was destroyed. But unlike the big cities of the Outer World, the Amazons experienced no strife between the trades, no squabbling for wealth or position. They respected each other and everyone's place as sisters.

Xena and Gabrielle both liked coming to the village: Xena for the chance of different sparing partners and Gabrielle for the sense of community. The Amazon mainstay was the only place both warrior and bard retired their traveling clothes to dress as the other women. Xena removed her armor and leather gear in exchange for the dark, satin-like linen tunics and pants. She wore her tunic like the warriors: the linen was draped over her right shoulder, leaving her left breast and arm bare, the easier to shoot a bow and arrow with the right breast virtually tied down. The black sash she chose to wear crossed over the shoulder to the waist where it was brought across the body and tied to leave the excess dangling if drills weren't in the immediate forecast. She also got the chance to buy new boots, which was always a welcome shopping trip – no one made boots like the Amazons.

Gabrielle chose to wear the white tunic that most of the non-warriors wore, covering both breasts but leaving her arms bare. Her sash was the only article of clothing that announced her rank: a thin woven strip embroidered with the seal of Artemis – a long arrow crossing a bear paw. It was always a question why Artemis had chosen the bear as one of her mortal bodies, especially since bears couldn't be found anywhere near Amazon lands, but it was the will and choice of the Goddess, and that was all that truly mattered.

Once the visitors had unloaded their gear, bathed, dressed and eaten they were ushered over to Ephiny's hut. Xena and Gabrielle waited outside the intricately carved door, engraved with Artemis' seal, for the guard to announce their arrival. 'Protocol,' Xena thought disgustingly, 'always this stupid protocol. She knows we're coming, I don't see why she doesn't just leave the door open.' Xena watched as the guard standing at the door stiffened her already rigid stance to signal that Ephiny was coming to the door.

The Regent hadn't changed her clothes, though she'd removed the majority of her weapons and hunting gear. She'd had plenty of time to wash and eat if she had wanted while she waited for

her guests, but Ephiny had spent the majority of that time pacing in her hut. She was trying to decide how she was going to explain the situation to them. She frowned. There was no way to tiptoe around the subject, she'd have to tell them outright. Of course, deciding that didn't help her either, because then there became the matter of *how* to tell them outright.

"Walk with me?" requested the Regent after opening the door. As they started walking away from the hut, several of the Royal Guard who had been lounging nearby rose to follow. Ephiny held up her hand; she didn't need their watch. She wasn't planning to leave the village, and even if trouble found them she knew Xena would be more than enough protection in addition to her and Gabrielle's own skills.

The village was quiet in the midday – being the hottest time of day persuaded most women to retire to their huts for a couple of hours before resuming their work. Ephiny knew this was the best time for their conversation, which would most likely go unheard because very few people were just out and about.

"So you mentioned Kaija," Gabrielle began, breaking the tension she could feel building a wall between her and her Amazon sister.

"Hmm," was the only reply Ephiny made. She was quickly rethinking her strategy – perhaps beating around the bush wasn't such a bad idea after all.

"Tai'gee is showing great promise," Ephiny said at length. Neither Gabrielle nor Xena interjected a protest at her avoidance, so she continued. "She's done very well in her junior training – you'd almost think she was brought up like the rest of the tribe children."

"That well, huh?" cooed Gabrielle. Ephiny didn't give her praise to just anyone. "She's a smart girl – I knew she'd be ok here."

Ephiny nodded slightly, venturing a sideways glance at each of her companions. They were watching the ground before their feet, letting her lead the conversation. They kept step with her, and she kept a meandering pace through the village. She took in a breath and decided to keep beating. "Yes, in fact she's going to start guard training right after Exams."

That got their attention. Both Xena and Gabrielle looked up in evident surprise.

"So soon?" Gabrielle's voice was a touch higher in pitch in comparison to her last statement, but the change fit her amazement. Ephiny must really be impressed with Tai'gee.

Xena thought back over the young rascal she had first encountered in Cresca, a fiesty, vibrant little vixen with hair that would have been a rich and dark black had it not been bleached to a brown/black mix by the sun. Her eyes were the same hue as her hair, glinting one color then the other depending on the light. She was average height, lean, nothing out of the ordinary for a young woman well worked in the outdoors. She had a good hand for a bow and knives, Xena remembered, and the girl definitely knew a great deal about traps and poisons. Before they'd left Cresca with two young girls in toe, Xena had been worried Tai'gee would be well on her way to

assassinhood if she and Gabrielle didn't do something. The Warrior Princess wasn't surprised Tai'gee was blossoming under the heavy pressure of the Amazon training; the girl had been cut for it.

“Yeah, she's learned everything so quickly and with such determination I see no reason not to move her up. She's bested two of our Yearies already in trial spars.”

‘Not bad,’ thought Gabrielle. The Yearies were the first year guardswoman trainees. After a year of training, which was what it took usually to accomplish most of the stringent goals of the Guard, the Yearies took their Guard Exam – a grueling four-day test of strength, intelligence and perseverance. Very few completed the test, and how far a woman got determined what kind of ranking she got as a warrior; the farther a woman made it into the test, the higher position they had in the general military. Those who passed were evaluated on their performance to decide if they would be in the Elite or Royal Guard.

“So I take it her written education is going along well, too?” ventured Xena. The warrior knew combat smarts was one thing – the ancient knowledge and wisdom of the Amazons was wholly something else. It must be embraced, accepted and understood to its fullest extent before any woman could take the oath uniting her with the Nation. Usually the oath was taken at the end of twenty cycles of a woman's life if she was raised from birth in the Nation and passed her Knowledge Exams. Otherwise it was taken when the adoptee felt she had mastered the ancient traditions and teachings as bestowed upon the Amazons by Artemis herself, and no one could become a true Amazon warrior until she was an Amazon. Tai'gee had been in the village for a little over a year, and with such intense warrior training it didn't seem likely that she could have found time to learn so much from the scrolls as well. Xena thought Tai'gee was smart, but perhaps she had underestimated the girl's real intelligence.

“She's also seemed to become very good... friends with Amana, one of our Yearies.”

Both Xena and Gabrielle looked at each other. The Warrior Princess pressed her lips together tightly, forming a thin line of concern. Gabrielle asked for both of them what Kaija thought of that.

The Regent sighed. There was nothing else she could do to stall. She turned them all onto an outer path that skirted the edge of the main village, sure they would encounter no eavesdroppers there.

“We are having trouble with Kaija,” Ephiny began at length. She paused to read any expressions in the faces of her friends, but could discern none. She continued, taking a deep breath. “Kaija's animalistic nature is too much for us. She refuses to sleep in a hut, she can't stay still in the classroom, she has no patience for training – she won't even let us teach her weapons, though quite frankly she doesn't seem to need them. She hunts her own food, even after the huntresses have brought back plenty.”

“So she's a little wild,” Gabrielle cut in. “Most of the tribe children were restless at her age. She just needs time.”

The taller blonde looked at her sister gravely. She wished it was that simple, or that she and the rest of those in the village had the patience to wait for Kaija. “It’s more than that Gabrielle. Kaija – when you brought Kaija and Tai’gee to us they were inseparable. They stayed in the same hut with Hameena as guardmother. They ate together, played together, sat next to each other in school. Then Tai’gee got more into her education and training... Kaija started pulling away. She stopped participating with the village. When I asked her why she was skipping training and school she said she found them of no use. I explained to her that if she did not pass her Knowledge Exams she wouldn’t be able to become an Amazon. She wasn’t phased.”

“What did she say?” asked Xena.

“She asked what would happen when she became an Amazon. I said that she would be united with us in spirit by the knowledge of Artemis – that her place in the Nation would be cemented forever and no matter what she would always be one with us, a sister, family.”

“And?...”

“And she just didn’t get it, Xena.” Ephiny stopped walking along the path and ran her hand through her thick curls. They were at the outer most edge of the village, very close to the woods. “She doesn’t understand loyalty and commitment. She doesn’t understand teamwork or responsibility or unison. She comes to no celebrations or festivals – she hasn’t made any more friends. Most of the children are terrified of her.”

“Do Kaija and Tai’gee spend any time together at all now?”

Ephiny shook her head solemnly at Gabrielle. “Not hardly at all. Tai’gee has been spending so much time with Amana and her friends, plus her education and training. Perhaps if Kaija tried to be a part of those then they would have opportunity and reason to spend time together.”

There was a long, contemplative silence between all of them. Gabrielle was saddened by the loss of friendship between Kaija and Tai’gee. When they had left them with the Amazons the two were as Ephiny had said – inseparable. Gabrielle thought surely that the two would spend the rest of their lives in each other’s company. With as much as Tai’gee fawned over Kaija it didn’t seem like she would easily have her head turned by someone else, and especially not walk away from Kaija altogether.

Xena mulled over Kaija’s behavior. That she showed she was half cat was definite. Her father, Cerebrius the Protector Sphinx, would probably have been very proud of her for not forgetting or denying her feline heritage. But when she and Gabrielle had left Kaija in the Amazon village, the girl had progressively shown that she was quite capable and willing to embrace and pursue her human qualities. Not killing Thalkus, the demented highpriest of Cresca, after he callously murdered her father was evidence enough of that. ‘Has she truly regressed again into the more animalistic drives of her composition?’

Ephiny took in another breath, deciding to tell them the last bit about Kaija's behavior. "And she's started stealing," the Regent said quickly.

"Stealing?" both Xena and Gabrielle exclaimed. "How do you know? What is she stealing for?"

Ephiny gave them a moment to settle down then explained. The thefts had started out small enough at first: pots and important utensils from the kitchen, jugs of wine from the tavern. Then more important things started disappearing: the training weapons, the teaching scrolls, most recently the Mask of the Queen.

"Stolen?" Gabrielle squinted at Ephiny.

"Well, missing. We always manage to find whatever's been taken, but things are getting harder and harder to find." Ephiny shook her head. "We just can't tolerate this kind of belligerence. She's going to have to leave."

Xena frowned while Gabrielle protested. The young Queen promised to talk to Kaija, find out what was going on. She was sure something could be worked out. Ephiny knew her young sister and friend would make that lament. The Regent had already planned on giving them the length of their visit to try to rectify whatever they could. But once they left, if Kaija's behavior did not improve and stay improved she would have to leave.

"One half moon once you've gone. She's got till then."

Gabrielle nodded, but Xena wasn't finished yet. The thefts bothered her.

"Ephiny, how is it that you know Kaija is the thief?" queried the warrior.

"She's been seen on every occasion. Someone has seen her running into the woods with whatever she's pilfered."

"And you said you found everything again?"

"Yes. The kitchen supplies were just outside the village by the lake. The scrolls along one of the cliff ridges to the north; the weapons scattered around one of the southern fallow fields – all kinds of foolishness. But even though we've found everything, that doesn't excuse the deed. And we've still to find the mask. That's what I was looking for today when you arrived. This could be seen as a threat to the Nation – some advocates have started pushing to have her tried."

"But Ephiny, it's just child's play," Gabriele cut in.

The Regent held up her hands. "She's not a child, Gabrielle, she's nearly as old as Tai'gee. People have gotten hurt looking for these things – not seriously thank the Goddess, but more than a few eyebrows are starting to be raised in my direction. I can't keep ignoring the situation." There the Regent paused. She turned to walk back to the village, Xena and Gabrielle matching her step. "You two are her last chance," the woman finished.

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The rest of the walk back to the village was silent between the three friends. Because Apollo had well begun his turn towards the underside of the earth, most of the workers had resumed their day's chores. Most of the off duty warriors were hard at work around their own huts, making repairs, gardening or helping others do the same. As they passed the tutorial building, the sound of voices in unified recital wafted to the passersby. Ephiny turned them towards the building to drop in. They spied for a moment on the older class – Tai'gee's class – as the recital of the Oath to the Ideals of Artemis wound down. These young women had finished a morning of training while the younger class had their lessons. The classes switched places in the afternoon. With Xena and Gabrielle leaning on either side of the door and Ephiny by one of the back windows only the instructor noticed their presence.

"You were given the problem yesterday," came the age deepened and wavery voice of the head instructor. "What have you decided is the solution?"

Xena scanned the room, noticing Tai'gee was sitting by the window opposite them, not seeming to be paying the least bit of attention. As Ephiny had said, Kaija was no where to be seen.

The instructor started calling on random tables for their solutions – the teams the girls worked in were designated by table, three girls to a team. There was some whispering in Tai'gee's group between her partners, followed by some very sour sideways glances towards Tai'gee. The instructor noticed and called on them.

"Your solution?"

Tai'gee started to stand up as was custom when speaking to the instructor, but a loud squelching of wood on wood sounded as another of the girls shot up quickly, almost throwing her chair over.

"Mikal and I came up with the answer," said the girl with a voice so high-pitched it was almost only a squeak rather than intelligible words.

"And?..." the woman prodded, folding her arms. Tai'gee remained half standing, half sitting, staring in disbelief at the girl who was speaking.

"We decided it would be best to do as the scrolls said and trap the Romans in the southern pass with a rock and log slide, as was done in the past with invaders from the south."

"Mmm. And this is what you all decided?"

The speaker shot a wicked look at Tai'gee who was still in her awkward position. "No," she spat. "Tai'gee had her own ideas... as usual."

Gabrielle recognized the ‘teacher’s look of disapproval.’ As a child she’d hated that look; the discomfort it endorsed hadn’t waned much as an adult either.

“The goal of the assignment, as with all the group assignments, is to come to a consensus. Working together. The only way to do that is to communicate. Communication is what makes our Nation strong, and what will keep us together. When that fails, we fail. Am I understood?”

The class affirmatively answered as one. The instructor looked as though she would continue on to the next table, but turned back to Tai’gee as an afterthought. “Incidentally, what conclusion did you draw, Tai’gee?”

The dark haired girl stood up completely, looking neither happy nor disappointed to be singled out. In a clear voice she gave her answer. “The scrolls do say the original attack by the southerners was diverted by a rock slide, but further reading told that the method was ineffective. There was not enough debris to completely block the pass and it allowed the invaders a set of steps essentially which they mounted to a second level and continued through the ravine. The rest of the army that didn’t go over the slide backtracked and took an alternate ravine, attempting to surround the First Guard in an ambush.”

“That is not a solution,” the instructor announced flatly.

“No ma’am. I think with the limited amount of debris available it would have been better to have made a sprawling landslide, littering the ground so the army was slowed down instead, then rain arrows on them from above where it would be safe and easy to pick them off.”

“But that’s no different than having them hindered by climbing over the rockslide in the first place!” one of Tai’gee’s tablemates protested. “We’re still picking them off as they were slowed down by the rockslide.”

The instructor raised an eyebrow acknowledging the legitimacy of the argument. She glanced at Tai’gee for rebuttal.

“Actually, the way the ravine was shaped where that rockslide was placed would not have allowed an appropriate angle for attack. The intruders were sheltered by the ravine walls because they pinched in at the top. If the slide had been started after that area the walls open back out and we could’ve effectively shot them down. At the same time we wouldn’t have had to divide our force up to take a position at the back of the invaders to cover that secondary situation.”

The class was quiet, waiting for the acceptance or denial of Tai’gee’s response from the instructor. The older woman kept her face impassive for several moments, then smiled her approval. “Good work.”

Tai’gee merely nodded and sat back down, looking out the window again like nothing had happened. The girls sitting next to her sulked in their seats.

“There is never only one way to wage an attack, or defense for that matter. Just because something was done one way in the past doesn’t mean it worked, doesn’t mean it was the best choice, doesn’t mean it was the only way it could have been done. You didn’t have to read outside the assignment to be able to see that the initial attack wouldn’t have worked – but I’m glad you took the time Tai’gee.”

The instructor went on around the class, challenging the other solutions. Gabrielle, Xena and Ephiny all looked at each other pleased with Tai’gee’s performance.

“She’s grown,” Gabrielle pointed out as they walked away.

Xena agreed. Few people, aside from Roman officials, knew their actual age. She guessed herself to be a little over thirty, Gabrielle a little over twenty, and Tai’gee to be not much younger than Gabrielle. From her vantage, she could definitely tell that Tai’gee had matured in her year with the Amazons. Her body was fuller, stronger, not as willowy as it was when they’d brought them from Cresca. Her hair was pulled back in a neat and secure braid, exposing a very sophisticated face, neatly arched eyebrows and eyes that had developed a stern expression rather than their original wild indignance. “She’s pretty,” the warrior said.

Gabrielle swatted her partner lazily in the stomach. Xena just shrugged. “I call it like I see it.”

Back at their hut, Gabrielle entered into the cool darkness. Sitting on their bed, which was separated from the rest of the room by a subtle partition, she pondered over everything they’d heard that afternoon. Xena joined her after closing the door and removing her sword, which she insisted on keeping with her, even in the relative peace of the village.

“What do you think?” Gabrielle asked her as the woman approached.

“I think...” the woman began in a sultry tone, “we’ve got a whole house to ourselves...”

“Xena, I’m serious! I mean about Kaija and Tai’gee.”

Xena flopped down on the bed next to the blonde. “They’ve got their own homes.” She curled up on her side with a wildly seductive leer, and made no further effort to continue the conversation. Gabrielle, without even realizing what she was doing, immediately laid back, curling into Xena. The warrior smiled and wrapped a long arm around her partner.

“Well, I guess there’s nothing really we need to do about Tai’gee, she seems like she’s doing fine...”

“Hmmm...” Xena rumbled into Gabrielle’s hair, weaving her nose through the golden tresses to nuzzle her neck affectionately.

“But Kaija...” Gabrielle went on, oblivious to Xena’s administrations. “I figured she might have a little harder time here, but not like this. She’s not doing well at all.”

“Neither am I,” Xena sighed.

“Xena!”

“Well, you know Gabrielle I’m quite capable of doing this on my own, but given the circumstances I wouldn’t mind some company.”

Turning onto her other side to face her displeased lover, Gabrielle gave Xena a no-nonsense look. “You know good and well Tai’gee is going to come by here as soon as her classes are done.”

“And?” A dark eyebrow raised in challenge.

“Hedonist.”

“Oh and you’re not?”

Gabrielle tried to look offended but the uncontrollable blush ruined the effect. Xena only chuckled at her while leaning in to place a gentle kiss on the end of her nose. Then she lowered her aim and placed a gentle kiss on her lips. Then she deepened the kiss, and moved closer as Gabrielle responded in kind. But before they could go any further there was a solid knock at the door. Xena growled an objection.

“I told you,” Gabrielle chided and pulled herself up from their embrace. Grumpily Xena got up, stalking to the partition to call the visitor in.

Slowly the door opened, flooding the room with the rich light of the evening sun. First a tall shadow splayed onto the stone floor, then a leather boot appeared, and finally in stepped Tai’gee. Once fully in the room the girl stopped and knelt before them, head bowed.

“What are you doing?” Xena asked dryly.

Gabrielle walked up behind the warrior and placed a hand on her shoulder. Kneeling subjects had long lost its appeal to Gabrielle – it was a mere frustration at this point. ‘Protocol,’ she thought sourly. ‘It’s so annoying sometimes.’

“I’m kneeling before my Queen,” Tai’gee explained hesitantly.

“You didn’t kneel before me a year ago,” Gabrielle reminded her. “You don’t need to do it now.”

“B-but protocol-”

The young blonde grinned as she stepped around the warrior. She held out her hand to the girl to help her up. “In here, protocol doesn’t count,” she laughed. The woman pulled the girl close and gave her a strong hug, asking how she had been.

“Great!” Tai’gee exclaimed. “I’m so happy here!” She paused a moment to give Xena a strong arm shake and beamed at them both. “I’ve got so much to show you two – to tell you about! Everything is so amazing here. Look!” Tai’gee pulled at the loose ends of the orange sash tied at her waist. “This means I’m in junior military training for the Elite Guard! Ephiny told me herself she thinks I’m ready. All I have to do is pass my Knowledge Exams.”

Gabrielle laughed at the girl’s enthusiasm. “Yes, we’ve heard some about your accomplishments. You seem to be doing very well here.”

“Yeah,” added Xena, “we even got to see you at work in the classroom this afternoon.”

Tai’gee blushed. “Yeah?”

“Pretty impressive about the canyon pass,” Xena complimented.

Tai’gee thought she saw the warrior’s smile slip slightly as she spoke, but shrugged it off as a shadow from the changing light. She continued to smile. “Well, at least you were impressed. My team wasn’t very happy with me.”

“Nobody’s usually happy about being shown up,” said Gabrielle. “Don’t let that stop you from doing what’s right though. They’ll come around.”

Tai’gee waved her hand in dismissal. “I’m not worried about them much. We’re always contending one thing or another. I think they just don’t like that I’m not a tribe child like they are.”

Gabrielle’s smile faltered slightly. “But, there are some here who like you regardless, right? Friends?...”

The grin on Tai’gee’s face was renewed with the turn in conversation. In her excitement she reached for Gabrielle’s hands. “Gabrielle, I’ve made so many friends. Very good friends. Amana is the one who got me interested in the Elite Guard. She’s a Yearie. When did you get here? Did you walk by the training grounds? You might have seen her with the children. Dark brown hair to the middle of her back – she usually keeps it braided. She’s a little taller than me, stronger definitely and-”

“Hey slow down,” Gabrielle laughed. “Information overload here!”

Tai’gee could feel the rush of heated blood running up her neck and into her cheeks. She released Gabrielle’s hands, realizing for the first time she had been clasping them tightly, and took a step back. “Sorry,” she apologized sheepishly. “Sometimes I get a little carried away.”

“That’s quite alright,” grinned the blonde. She slipped a little seriousness into her tone though. “I’m glad you’re making new friends. Actually though I was hinting about Kaija. How is she?”

Tai'gee's eyes fell immediately, her smile pressed into a thin frown. From the rise and fall of the girl's shoulders Xena could tell she was taking deep breaths apparently to calm herself. When the girl looked up again her face was hard and devoid of the enthusiasm with which she had just been bubbling over.

"I don't think Kaija likes it here," said Tai'gee. The flatness of emotion in her voice was sad to both the Warrior and the Queen. The last time they had seen Tai'gee and Kaija together they lived and breathed for each other.

Gabrielle stepped forward and put a hand on Tai'gee's shoulder. The sudden tension in the girl's body surprised her, as did the look of ice set into her eyes. "We had heard there were some ... problems." Hesitation made the bard falter. She looked earnestly at Tai'gee, trying to see past the cold expression that put a chill in the room. "We want to help. We came to help. Maybe you could help us too, since you know Kaija better than anyone."

"When did I ever know Kaija?" The explosion of fury made Gabrielle jump back. Xena straightened reflexively and took a step forward.

Tai'gee's eyes blazed with anger. Her fists were clenched tightly by her sides, her voice boomed in the small hut. She looked from the startled Queen to the solemn warrior and threw her hands up. With a forcible sigh of disgust, Tai'gee stormed out of the hut, leaving Gabrielle to look quizzically at Xena.

Xena's calm contralto filled the room, its deep resonance cooling the angry fire that Tai'gee had left. "I guess that means 'no' on the help bit." She shot an obvious leer at the stunned Gabrielle. "We should've stayed in bed."

II

Xena had told Gabrielle she wasn't hungry for dinner – only a partial untruth. The warrior could have eaten if she wanted, but the large, gawking crowd she knew would be in the dinner hall staring at the both of them while they ate did a lot to fill her appetite. She had tried to understand in the many ways what Gabrielle had told her – she was their Queen, Artemis' spokeswoman, and Xena was her own legend. The Amazons didn't get to see their Queen everyday, nor did many of them have the opportunity to see, much less meet, the great Warrior Princess.

"That doesn't mean they have to act like god-struck children and watch our every move. It's annoying Gabrielle."

"I know my warrior," Gabrielle had once answered with a comical pout, "but if you're going to be my...consort... some pains will have to be taken."

"Consort," Xena sniffed, as she brought herself back to the present. Gabrielle had paid for that quip with a night of passion neither of them were soon to forget. Perhaps tonight Xena would remind her bard of her position as consort. 'But for now,' thought the warrior, 'I need to find Kaija.'

The village was quiet in the waning light of evening. Most of the women of the village had gone to the dining hall, leaving their work and chores done for the day. Those who did not eat in the dining hall were busy making their own dinners at their huts. Usually these were the women who lived farther away from the plaza and didn't want to make the walk. Others had children and didn't always want to bother with carrying their own plus the youngster's tray through the rabble of hungry Amazons. One hut Xena passed tried to contain the song of a young mother to her infant. She could also hear the sounds of pots and wooden plates being moved about and knew the mother's lover was home to cook for the family.

As the warrior strolled through the village, she gave her mind to her thoughts. She had never talked to Gabrielle about children, not even to ask if Gabrielle had wanted a child of her own. Xena frowned at the remembrance of Hope. She didn't count that demon as Gabrielle's true child, only an evil creature that housed itself in her bard until it could emerge into the world. Gabrielle had said she loved Hope; that she was her daughter no matter who her father was. Xena didn't see it that way – a real child of Gabrielle's would not be capable of doing evil, just like her mother. She wondered if Gabrielle wanted the opportunity to raise a child, maybe even her own child. Xena wondered if she wanted that for herself.

'That would mean settling down,' she thought grimly as she passed another hut warm with family inside. 'I'm not ready to do that yet. I don't think I've earned it yet.' After a long moment of reflection on the acts of evil she had performed only a handful of summers before she sighed. The memories seemed so far away in their reality, yet so close in their realization. That meant they weren't totally behind her yet. She still had more to do.

'But Gabrielle won't stay somewhere and start without me. I'd never be able to talk her into that. And I'd never want to leave her,' she admitted to herself. 'Oh well.' The warrior took a deep breath to help clear her mind. 'A discussion for another day.'

The warrior turned off the main road and headed in the direction of the woods. The trees were Kaija's biggest comfort, and where she felt the most at home – if she were to be found, that was the best place to start looking.

Just before entering the woods however, Xena thought she heard a shout – faint, and probably only audible because she was down wind of it. She heard it again and another, and decided someone was in the throes of an argument. She turned into the wind and decided to investigate. The warrior followed a small footpath – probably a trail worn by cautious deer – to a bend. Hopping over a fallen tree and maneuvering through some dense vine growth, Xena pulled back a few branches of undergrowth and saw Tai'gee pacing back and forth, flailing her hands in the air. A young woman sat on a log watching her. This new girl wore her throw-over in the fashion of the warriors, and donned the white belt of the Yearies. A long brown rope of hair swung back and forth as she watched the pacing girl in front of her. Xena was now upwind of the two and couldn't make out what it was Tai'gee was saying.

'Too bad,' thought the warrior. 'I'd like to know what you're so upset about.'

She continued to watch as Tai'gee stormed for a few minutes then finally stopped her tirade, her back facing her audience. The seated woman, whom Xena decided must be Amana, rose, and gently folded Tai'gee in an embrace, kissed the back of her head and stroked her hair. Xena frowned. It was none of her business who Tai'gee fell in love with, but her intuition told her there was a better match.

A few more minutes' wait saw Amana speaking softly to the girl in her arms, only indicated by the constant nodding of Tai'gee's head. With a final kiss between the couple, they turned to leave. Xena rose to leave as well and suddenly became aware that someone else had been watching the scene – and that someone was very, very close to her.

For a split second her instincts took over, trying to feel out the presence of the other spy. Her eyes snapped towards a large tree branch half-hidden in darkness by shadows of branches and twilight. In the same instant a shudder in the branches told the warrior she had spotted her prey and now had to catch it.

The warrior bolted through the darkening woods, jumping over sticks, clumps of bushes and undergrowth, the inevitable downed tree. She could hear the rustling of leaves and twigs, first above her then in front of her, then above her again. She was chasing an excellent woodsperson, skilled at taking to the trees and ground, doubling back as easily as charging forward. Every so often the warrior stopped in her tracks, needing to find the direction of the last sound made by her fleeing spy. There would be silence, the sound of her rapid breathing, the night breeze picking up through the treetops. Then the finely tuned warrior body would redirect itself to the present hiding place of the spy and the chase would begin again. After the third such pause Xena conceded.

“Look, I know you can see me, and I know you can hear me,” said the warrior to the night-darkened woods. She took a moment to see if her announcement would be acknowledged. There was only silence. “I'd really appreciate it if you just came out.” Still only silence. “Or we can just keep doing it your way,” she muttered under her breath. “What's it gonna be?”

A bough over her head groaned then was quiet, as was the rest of the woods; odd for a warm summer's evening. ‘Well, I guess we were making enough noise to scare off a hydra,’ the woman quipped to herself. Her instincts told her to look up to the bough above, but her brain refused the impulse. She would have missed the dark figure deftly swinging down to the foliage in front of her before disappearing again into the night. In a few long strides Xena stood in the last place she'd seen her prey. Maneuvering by a few saplings she found what she knew she would – a maze of possible escape routes: a roughly running stream; a barricade of trees; a thorny tussle of wild rose bushes; a rocky overhang.

‘Maybe tomorrow,’ and she turned to head back towards the village.

~

“So what did you find out?”

Xena unlaced one of her boots and bent to remove it while Gabrielle finished pouring the last of the hot water into the tub. While all Amazon homes had plumbing that allowed a very efficient and convenient flow of water from the nearby lake, the water still needed to be heated over the fire if one was to take a hot bath.

“Wouldn’t it be great if there were two pipes? One for cold water and one for hot water,” Gabrielle had mentioned once.

“Don’t get greedy. What would you need a hot water pipe for when you can heat it fine over the fire?” It was a light admonition, but it had earned a mischievous grin.

“Well, for one thing I wouldn’t have to wait so long to give you a bath,” purred the bard.

Xena smiled at the recollection as she unlaced and removed her other boot. If Gabrielle was anything for sure it was a tease. The warrior had her own mischievous grin under control before Gabrielle came over to sit beside her on the straw filled mattress.

“Well,” Gabrielle began heavily. “Very few of the Amazons seem to know anything about Kaija – just that she’s half animal and seems to be all trouble. To be honest Xena, I don’t think they want her here.”

“Could you blame them Gabrielle?” asked the warrior as she worked to untie the black knot at her waist. Gabrielle pushed the woman’s hands aside and undid the knot, maneuvering either length of the sash around her friend’s waist to untie the knot on the other side before tugging one end to pull the length of fabric from her shoulder. The throw-over, now loose from its bindings, hung limply over its wearer, threatening to fall at the slightest movement. Gabrielle thought of tugging at the fabric to give it a little encouragement, but her more pressing thoughts about Kaija made her frown in contemplation instead.

“Kaija’s not a bad girl,” the bard said finally. She stood and allowed Xena to remove her own sash, not noticing right away that the warrior’s throw had gracefully slid to the floor. The woman lifted the blonde’s tunic over her head and stared appreciatively at the half naked form in front of her. A well muscled back rippled before her, enticing the warrior towards thoughts far away from what should have been her present concern. Unable to resist her urges, the warrior reached out to massage the bard’s shoulders, earning a pleased sigh at the touch.

“I know she’s not a bad girl,” agreed Xena quietly. She wanted to drop the whole ordeal until morning, however feeling the knotted tension in her partner’s muscles told her she needed to pay attention to the matter a little longer. “But she’s not making it easy for other people to see that by the way she’s acting.”

Gabrielle lolled her head to the left, allowing Xena easier access to a particularly sore area just above her shoulder blade. The strong hands and smooth pressure worked quickly to ease away the pain, then eased to more delicate caresses. Gabrielle knew what those caresses usually meant, but the bitter looks and comments she had received from so many of her Amazons at

dinner just by mentioning Kaija's name afforded her no peace of mind to submit to the sensuous appeal. Reluctantly the Queen turned to face her friend.

Dazzling, slightly demure blue eyes warmly greeted concerned and troubled green ones. Long, thin fingers reached up from the blue-eyed figure to lightly brush the young round face of worry, a thumb softly trying to work away fret lines over an eyebrow.

"You know," came the deep, husky voice, "you shouldn't frown. It makes you look old beyond your years."

The green eyes deepened in their concern and glanced away. "Sometimes I feel old beyond them," she answered with a weary sigh.

"Hey, don't worry ok?" When the green eyes didn't return her gaze, Xena's delicate touch reached out to turn the face of her lover back to her. "Look, Kaija knows we're here – we'll find her. We'll talk to her. We'll figure something out alright?"

"You saw her?"

"Not exactly. She kind of led me on a little cat and mouse chase through the woods."

"How do you know it was her?"

"Believe me, it was her. I didn't bring her back you'll notice."

The admission brought a smile to the lips of the Queen, immediately smoothing away the lines of worry. "Oh, did the Warrior Princess get bested at a game of chase?"

The warrior returned the chiding smile with a lopsided grin of her own. "I let her get away. You know, bees and honey and all that... give her a little ego boost."

"Yeah right." Gabrielle rolled her eyes and took her lover's hand. "Come on little Miss Generous – let's get you wet."

"Well, that'd sure boost my ego!" chortled the suddenly giddy woman.

~

Xena was up candlemarks before her companion, as always. The previous night's bath had evolved into a heated water fight and then to a heated massage and finally into other, more sensual activities, leaving both women happily exhausted and excessively clean. Gabrielle, Xena knew, would need at least two extra candlemarks of sleep in addition to her regular dosage to recover her spent energy. Xena, however, found that usually no matter what she did during the night she was always up before dawn – barring of course the occasional case of severe heat exhaustion accrued from practices of saving small countries and large kingdoms from war, pillage, the odd god or other major disasters. A night of passionate love making didn't exactly

count as a major disaster, but the warrior did concede she usually slept more soundly on those blessed nights than any others.

The Warrior Princess gazed through sleep hazed, loving eyes at the open and peaceful face of her lover. It was not a rare sight to see such an expression, for the young bard maintained the same expression even when awake. The difference was that while Gabrielle slept, Xena found she could examine her bard's visage without the distraction of mesmerizing green eyes staring back at her.

"You know, sometimes I really wish you'd blink more," the warrior had half chided the bard one afternoon.

"Oh yeah? Is that supposed to improve my vision or something," came the unsuspecting reply.

"No."

"Then why do I need to do extra blinking?"

Xena had stopped their less than brisk pace to look earnestly at the shorter woman standing next to her. "Because," she said in a quiet, deep throated purr, "perhaps then I won't find it so easy to get lost when I look at you."

The answer had clearly taken Gabrielle aback, and Xena watched with no small degree of amusement as the normally very chatty woman rifled her hand through her sun-bleached blonde hair while trying to think of something to say. The warrior had moved on down the road, alleviating some of the other woman's embarrassment caused by the bemused expression regarding her.

"Of course," Xena began again once Gabrielle had caught up with her, "then I'd just be miserable at not being able to see those beautiful eyes as much – even for the space of a blink."

That had earned a squeeze of the hand from the smaller woman and a soft kiss. "And they call me the bard," said Gabrielle quietly. "I think you just pretend to be a warrior so you don't get conned into storytelling at every tavern we pass!"

'I only say what I feel,' thought Xena as she finished the pleasant memory with a lingering look. 'What you inspire me to feel.'

"Me too," said a muffled, sleep laden croak.

Sharp blue eyes snapped to attention, carefully searching Gabrielle's face for a hint of the movement that had formed the words. There was none, no change in breath, not even a twitch of movement behind the closed lids.

“Must still be sleeping,” Xena mumbled while untangling herself from her bard. Reluctant to leave the warmth beside her, Xena pulled herself from the warm, stiff bed and moved to begin the morning.

Another look at the woman curled up into a ball of contented sleep reaffirmed to Xena that the blonde would not be functionally awake any time soon. The warrior had plenty of time to dress and visit the mess hall before the bulk of the breakfast crowd showed up. Since she didn’t have to struggle into her leathers and armor Xena had much more time than usual. ‘Argo’ll probably have some energy she’ll want to burn off this morning.’

With a final, securing tug, Xena finished lacing up her boots, quietly crossed the hut and closed the door gently behind her as she left. She chided herself for her stealth; it would take much more than a shuffle of boots and strapping on of sword to wake Gabrielle. The bard slept very heavily, at times, so heavily not even Xena’s brief scuffles with intruders in their camp stirred her. Xena was in turns amazed and wary of this ability of her bard: amazed at the fact she could sleep in utter peace through almost anything while Xena usually jumped from her sleeping skins at a rustle of leaves; wary because such deep sleep made her vulnerable, and much more difficult to defend. The blonde had gotten somewhat better at dragging herself to full attention when Xena woke her up, but attention and awareness were two different things.

Outside, the gray light of predawn created the illusion of sluggish beginnings – and in any other sleepy village, the illusion may not have been at all. But in the main Amazon village, bustle had already begun. There was much to be done before daybreak if everything was to start officially at dawn: teenagers were to be standing at attention at the training fields, children in the classrooms, warriors on the sparring fields or patrol, and all crafts and trades women naturally began their labors at dawn. For all that to get going on time, everyone had to be fed, clothed, weapons and tools inspected and prepared, homework and lessons organized. A plethora of activity was dimmed by the gray morning light, but that was probably a blessed manipulation to any still groggy eyes.

Xena entered through the back of the dining hall, closest to the serving line, so to get a light breakfast and get out before being encased by fawning, wide-eyed warriors. The head cook, Minosha, spotted the dark haired woman’s entrance and bent her graying head towards one of her assistants. The youngster bounced off to a side panel and returned with a small leather bag, which the older woman promptly handed to the approaching Xena.

Long fingers accepted the bag and vibrant, blue eyes looked at it with more than a little confusion. “Good morning Minosha,” she greeted. The warrior was aware of the many pairs of eyes looking up at the sound of her voice and groaned internally. She hoped she didn’t have to partake in too many social niceties with the head cook or her dreams of a quick escape would be dashed in a quick trap.

“Breakfast and lunch,” said the cook by way of greeting. A twinkle of mischief shown in her old eyes and the woman nodded to the bag in Xena’s hand. “Get out of here.”

“Thanks. How-”

“The Queen mentioned you weren’t much for social dining. Go on before you don’t have a choice.”

Grateful didn’t begin to express Xena’s newfound affection for the silver-haired cook. But the look on the elder’s face let Xena know profound expressions of gratitude weren’t necessary. Turning on her heel, Xena left quickly. ‘Just in time too,’ she said to herself, noticing a couple of women who’d gained the courage to come over, probably to ask her to join their table. Not that she wanted to come off rude or haughty, but there were really only so many tell-us-about-the-time-you’s a person could take.

~

Xena stopped back by the hut after she’d spent some time pampering Argo. Gabrielle had risen by then and was getting dressed, Xena could see through the window as she approached. ‘Hmm, gonna have to get a curtain...’ Not that she minded the view, but their bedroom window faced the plaza; Xena didn’t care to share that scene. She was pleased her trademark glare had its intended results on the women walking by when they immediately found other things more interesting to observe... like their shoes. When she rounded the corner for the door she got another surprise. Two Royal Guardswomen were perched on either side of the porch, spears firmly grasped, eyes forward. ‘Greeeeeat.’

“What are you two doing here?”

“The Queen has returned, Honored Consort. It is our duty to provide Guard for her,” answered the one closest to her. She was a pickle-faced blonde with a broad, sturdy body. The other was a tall brunette with blue eyes and a nasty scar running straight down the middle of her chest.

“Right. And who advised you of this duty?”

“The Council, Honored Consort,” the blonde responded immediately.

Xena nodded. Ephiny knew better than to foist Guard on them while they were here. Xena refused to be hawked while she was in the village. She’d have Gabrielle dismiss them since they would probably spout some kind of protocol at her if *she* tried. She shouldered past them and entered the hut.

“Hey!” her partner greeted her warmly. “You’ll never guess what I dreamed last night!”

Xena smiled. “Nope, I probably never would.”

“Tsk! Well, it wasn’t a dream so much I guess as remembering that time you were telling me to blink. Remember?”

Xena stared at her in surprise.

“It was nice to wake up to,” Gabrielle continued, oblivious to Xena’s expression. “What have you been up to?”

“I... went to check on Argo; had the stable master turn her out to the paddock. Thanks for your clout with the cook by the way.” Xena wiggled her food sack at her.

Gabrielle smiled.

“There’s Guard outside. Wanna get rid of them?”

“You know Xena, I was considering that...”

A dark, arched eyebrow raised. “But?”

“But, I thought maybe if Kaija saw us respecting the rules maybe she would follow suit...”

“Riiiiight...”

“Don’t worry, I’ve already sent the ones for you away. You won’t be accompanied unless you ask for it.”

A devilish grin spread slowly across the warrior’s tanned face, showing pearly teeth in the morning light. “I’ve got all the company I want right now.” She traced a seductive line up Gabrielle’s bare arm with her fingertip, watching the goosebumps dance up in her wake. Gabrielle moaned slightly at the touch and closed her eyes. “Unfortunately...” she said, pulling her finger away.

It was like a bad note in a good song. Gabrielle’s eyes popped open. “What unfortunately?” she demanded.

“Unfortunately, I can’t enjoy that company as much as I would like because I’m a jealous lover who doesn’t like to share,” Xena smirked with a nod towards the window.

Gabrielle looked to the window, seeing many of her passing subjects looking into her dwell with no pretension of veiled inspection. The blush was immediate. “I’ll get that window secured today,” she said in a small voice. Xena only chuckled. “So what’re you doing today?” Gabrielle asked, trying to regain her composure.

“Well, goal number one is to find Kaija. I’d ask Tai’gee where the most likely place to look would be, but I think she might still be upset. I saw her spouting off to someone last night I can only guess was Amana.”

Gabrielle frowned as she gave her forehead a light scratch. “I don’t understand why she blew up like that. Something must have happened between them.”

Xena did nothing to hide her ironic expression. “I don’t think anything’s happened between them; I think Tai’gee feels guilty for what’s not happening between them. I suspect Kaija’s not as estranged from her as we think.”

“No? Why’s that? And why do you keep staring out the window? We aren’t doing anything for anyone to be looking in.”

“Odd huh? And that’s exactly what Tai’gee was doing yesterday in her class. I have a feeling her three-person group had a silent partner.” Xena tapped her nose. “I’m going to start looking over at the training fields: Tai’gee’s morning classes should be getting underway about now.”

Gabrielle grinned at her friend. “You’re so clever.” She held out her hands to her for an embrace. “S’one of the things I love the most about you.”

“Well, I’m glad I’ve got a list,” Xena said with her own grin. “That way if I lose one of those qualities I have others I can rely on.”

Gabrielle leveled an exceptionally sober gaze at her partner. “Xena,” she said with the utmost sincerity, “if there is one thing I know about you it’s that you would not lose anything you did not choose to give up.”

Xena was speechless at the sentiment, knowing it was the dead truth, and not wanting to admit it was the dead truth. It was a heavy burden, a heavy responsibility, because one day she would lose, and despite Gabrielle’s confidence, she would either lose by giving it up, or because it was taken from her – and if there was a force that could take it... that scared her.

~

The training grounds were at the southern end of the village, large open spaces filled with women in various stages of combat indoctrination. The Amazonian Military was nothing like any fighting force Xena had ever seen, nothing like she’d ever led. The Romans had developed their own strategies, choosing formations that accommodated their long pikes and short swords. The Persians and Scythians had perfected their cavalries, though there were none as good as the Moors on horseback. The warriors from Chin relied on stealth and had mastered hand to hand combat, turned it into an art, blurred the line between deadly assault and dance. But the Amazons purposefully chose disorder, or rather the lack of organization. They specialized in guerrilla tactics, using their environment to their every advantage, and blending into that environment whenever possible so that no matter where they ended up, combat with them was like engaging ghosts. They communicated with each other with various signals: the huntresses, Elite Guard, and scouts were so proficient in their alternate communications that to listen to them was like listening to another language. Amazons chose not to go hand to hand if possible – oh fight to the death, absolutely, but if they could use a weapon, any weapon, that was the most preferable. Therefore, they trained with as many weapons as they could get their hands on. Xena had seen, on many occasions, an Amazon wrench the weapon of an opponent from his hands and use it against him better than he had used it himself, even if she had never touched such a tool before in her life. Adaptability was the greatest Amazonian strength.

That day, there were several groups training in various techniques. The more advanced an Amazon warrior got, the fewer opponents she faced; at least in her field conditioning. In the infantry, like in any army, the warrior was expected to charge into battle, anticipative of attacks from one to three or four opponents at a time. The Guards were like officers, as close as Xena could compare, expected to lead but more so to engage the more difficult opponents, the more seasoned the fighters of the opposing force, one on one. It was not uncommon to find Guardswomen sparring with each other for hours. Amazons measured their fighters by their tenacity – if an enemy died while grasped in her own death grip, the belief was that she would be assured a place next to Artemis.

Tai'gee's class was working with cho-bows. There were about twenty of them drilling in unison under the watchful gaze of a yellow-sashed warrior. They moved together, with mostly precise positions and transitions. Xena stayed on the edge of the field, unnoticed given the size of the acreage and the focus of the occupants. As she finished her approach, Tai'gee's class finished their drills and moved into light sparring. The student in which she was most interested was fairly easy to spot – Tai'gee was easily the tallest and most attractive one of her class. She and two others moved together to the perimeter of their class, fairly close to the treeline that surrounded the training fields. They began striking each other's weapons with relative softness just to get the feel of a blow and acclimate to the sound of a hit. Xena scrutinized their movements for several minutes and noticed something very curious.

The instructor had noticed Xena standing at the edge of her class. She was intrigued, to say the least, that the dark woman had chosen her class to watch. Intimidated that this woman, renowned throughout all the world for her lethal skills, was studying *her* class. Shocked, when dazzlingly blue eyes looked up, meeting her own gaze directly, and with the slightest of nods, asked her permission to join. Of course she consented, but it took a moment to gather her senses and nod back.

Tai'gee's partners stepped away from her immediately once they saw Xena approaching them. Their weapons dangled loosely from their fingers, awe dribbled from their gaping mouths. Tai'gee, for her part, kept her face controlled, though Xena didn't miss the intensity in the girl's eyes before she lowered them. "Honored Consort," the partners said in unison and then bowed slightly. Tai'gee followed suit a half second later.

"Mind if I join you for a few rounds? It's been a while since I've played with cho-bows." Xena softened her request with a smile, and the young trainees nodded taking several more steps back, automatically electing Tai'gee to the position of opponent. The girl clenched her teeth before setting her face to determined and took a defensive position.

~

"Ow."

“It’s not broken.” Xena thumped the lurid bruise spreading across Tai’gee’s upper arm. She’d caught the girl in the tender spot where her two major muscles wrapped around each other, rendering her fingers senseless and promptly disarming her.

Gabrielle had just started touring the village when she spotted Xena and Tai’gee standing toe-to-toe in a match the girl was bound to lose. The Queen knew her partner enjoyed the challenge and exhilaration of a fight, but she never knew the warrior to pick out an opponent she would downright destroy. Picking on children was not her thing. Piqued, she’d redirected herself to observe, then ran over as soon as she saw the disarming blow coming and heard Tai’gee’s howl of pain. Tai’gee’s class, which had gathered around to watch, was quickly dismissed by the instructor – who was quickly dismissed by Xena. Queen and Champion knelt by the stricken girl’s side.

“Just because it’s not broken doesn’t mean it hurts any less,” Tai’gee hissed at her through gritted teeth.

Gabrielle shook her head, knowing the truth of that. She’d twisted her ankle once so badly she was sure it was broken. It made no difference when Xena told her it was “just a sprain.”

Xena thumped the bruise again, and Tai’gee shot her an evil look. A slight smile twitched at the edge of the older warrior’s lips. “Kinda hard to defend yourself when your attention is divided, huh?”

Gabrielle raised a golden eyebrow at the girl. She could see by the look in her dark eyes that Tai’gee had every intention to keep her silence. They sat together on the morning damp grass, Tai’gee clutching her arm at the elbow, trying to work her fingers; Xena crouched in front of her, one hand loosely wagging a cho-bow, head cocked to the side in mock sympathy; Gabrielle kneeling, inquisitive but quiet.

“Kinda hard to watch your opponent when you keep... looking away from the attack,” Xena continued. Tai’gee still refused to answer. “I’d find it really difficult to keep up in a fight if I kept glancing off into the woods.” Here the young woman shot the Warrior Princess a dirty look, at which the warrior smiled in full. She tapped the girl’s leg with her cho-bow. “Call her over.”

“It’s not what you think,” Tai’gee said.

“Just do it.”

After glancing at Gabrielle, Tai’gee lifted her voice towards the woods. “Come out.”

There was a rustle of leaves and then a woman appeared from the woods. Thick chesnut-colored hair billowed in the wind. The woman was tall, taller than Tai’gee but shorter than Xena. A brilliant white sash encircled her body. Xena waited; frowned, but waited.

“Xena, Gabrielle. This is Amana,” Tai’gee introduced. Once the woman was by Tai’gee’s side, she looked at both with open judgement before bowing her head.

“My Queen,” the woman greeted Gabrielle evenly. Gabrielle returned the nod, glancing to Xena to see that she noticed Amana’s effort to ignore her.

“Amana usually watches our class. She’s a great teacher. She helps me practice so I can be ready for Guard training.”

Xena sucked on her teeth, displeased. “I see.”

Gabrielle stepped in. “Tai’gee, we’re looking for Kaija. Do you have any idea where we could find her?”

“No,” she answered flatly.

“Tai’gee-”

“Look, I said no.” Tai’gee’s eyes flashed with irritation. “Everybody’s looking for her; you know damn well she can’t be found unless she wants you to find her.” Amana lifted a hand to the girl’s back, whether to support or calm her Gabrielle wasn’t sure.

Xena bit her tongue. “How about you get a message to her then.”

“What makes you think I can find her? Just because-”

“Be quiet.” Xena’s order cut through Tai’gee’s protest like a glowing sword through silk.

Gabrielle cut in again. “Tai’gee why are you being so obstinate? We’re here to help. You and Kaija were very close; what happened?” Green eyes earnestly tried to meet black ones, but they refused to make the connection.

“My Queen, I don’t think-” Amana began to say.

“Nobody asked you.” The warrior gave the Yearie a measuring glare designed to wither any opposition – which it did most effectively. Xena lifted a finger to Tai’gee. “Tell Kaija I want to see her by the end of the day. If she doesn’t get the message or doesn’t follow through, I guarantee you’ll never participate in another day of training so long as you’re on Amazon land. You got that?” Tai’gee’s glowering silence was affirmation enough. Xena turned and stalked off, Gabrielle following after taking a long look at Tai’gee and giving a dismissing glance to the woman at her side.

“How long do you think till we see her?” Gabrielle asked quickly as she caught up to her aggravated friend. Abruptly the tromping warrior pulled up, causing Gabrielle to run into her at full speed. “Oooof!”

“Not long,” Xena breathed.

Gabrielle peeked out from behind her human wall to see what had stopped them. She caught her breath, utterly floored.

From the shadows in front of them, created by a small bunch of saplings at the edge of the tree line, a pair of brilliant golden eyes stared at them. Each eye was split by a black, oblong pupil, and hooded lids did nothing to hide a glowing intensity. Where Xena’s eyes could be a frigidly belittling pair of icy chips, these glittering orbs left an observer paralyzed. They shifted ever so slightly and in agonizingly slow motion, a black leather clad leg of pure muscle emerged from the darkness, then a broad shoulder, and finally a deeply tanned face draped by a significant mane of thick brown hair. A black leather vest with a deep neckline fit to her torso like a glove, baring massive shoulders and arms that extended into leather palm gloves ending in large, square, strong fingers. The only adornment she wore was a black stone arrowhead attached to a sturdy leather thong, flanked by two iridescently white feathers.

Gabrielle expected a deep, thudding drumbeat as each strong step brought the figure closer to them. In a word she was daunting. She could feel her mouth gaping open, but when she tried to close it, it only slid back to gape. In front of her she could feel Xena trying to control her own reaction.

Mentally kicking herself to get started again, Xena spoke in a deep burr. “Hello Kaija.”

Kaija had grown in the year they had spent apart. She’d grown by inches, perhaps as much as half a foot, and Xena could see for every inch of height, she had packed on an easy five pounds of solid muscle, maybe more. While the Warrior Princess was all attitude and slashing strength, Kaija had acquired a silently radiant command of brawn. She had no attitude, the sinew cording throughout her body had no need for the mental assistance of intimidation.

She leveled bright, intelligent eyes on them. Obvious muscles clenched in her jaw as the massive mandibles worked to grind her teeth. “You will not threaten Tai’gee,” she rumbled at them.

It was as much a statement of fact as a threat. Xena smiled inwardly; her suspicion proved accurate. As far as Kaija was concerned, Tai’gee was hers. Something in the electricity passing between Gabrielle and herself let her know the blonde realized the same thing: ‘Going after Tai’gee was the fastest way to bring oneself face to face with a very protective, very possessive Kaija.’

“Of course not,” Gabrielle burred, stepping completely from behind Xena now. She had regained herself and her natural enthusiasm was taking over. “Kaija, it’s so good to see you! Look at you!”

The blonde held out her arms in invitation of a warm embrace. Kaija studied her deliberately for a moment and Gabrielle thought she would refuse her welcome. Instead, Kaija reached out a

hand, preferring the traditional forearm shake. Gabrielle maintained her smile as she acquiesced, and Xena stepped forward to offer her own arm in greeting.

“It’s good to see you Kaija,” she said with a smile as the girl gave her arm a firm squeeze.

Kaija’s face remained tight and controlled.

Gabrielle continued with happy questions. “So how are you doing? Are you finished with your growth spurt or what? I mean, look at you! Wow!”

Golden orbs flicked to her. “I think I am done.” They flicked back to Xena. “Why are you here?”

The blonde scoffed. “Kaija, are you kidding? It’s been more than a year. We promised to come back to see you – see how you’re doing...”

“I am sure you have heard.”

‘So much for a happy reunion,’ Xena mentally murmured. “I see nothing’s changed in the no-minced-words department. We want to talk to you Kaija, if that’s alright with you.” Xena didn’t break eye contact with the youth, watching as golden eyes very subtly slipped past her, apparently to see what Tai’gee was doing. When they tracked back to her, Xena saw agreement filter into the flaxen orbs and she put a directive hand on Gabrielle’s shoulder to start them back towards their hut.

Gabrielle figured nothing had changed with Kaija’s hearing either, so as quietly as she could whisper she said, “Xena, I don’t think you let her win last ni-”

“Shht, let me have my illusion.”

~

Gabrielle dismissed the two guardswomen once they arrived back at the hut. She could see on their faces they dearly wanted to stay to hear whatever they could, but she and Xena would never get anywhere if Kaija thought she had an audience. The young woman was supremely private. Kaija waited patiently in the middle of the room by the dining table.

“Kaija, what’s going on with you?” Gabrielle was the first to speak. “When we brought you here... what’s happened?”

“I do not fit in,” she answered point of fact.

“Well you aren’t going to fit in if you don’t make an effort. And what’s this about you stealing? You aren’t a thief.”

Kaija was quiet for many moments, studying Gabrielle with a shielded expression. “It would seem the Amazon capitol is no different than Cresca. There are people who do not want me here.”

“We want you here.”

“I realize that. Artemis has lain an enchantment so I cannot leave this land unless you or Ephiny lets me.”

Gabrielle quickly looked at Xena who gave a small shrug and explained, “We wanted to make sure you hung around long enough to get comfortable.”

‘Quite a cage for someone you say you do not consider an animal. No?’ Xena could see the thought in the youth’s eyes, in every tensed and angled line of her face – at that moment the sphinx in her was pawing for the chance to catch them in the ruse and hurt them with it, but Kaija let it go – and that was in her eyes as well. Xena bit the inside of her lip.

“Kaija, why aren’t you going to school?” Gabrielle moved away from the window to come face to face with her guest.

“I know what I need to know.”

The blonde could feel her frustration building. It was no wonder Ephiny was at her wits’ end if these were the answers she’d been getting for the last several months. “How do you expect to pass your Exams if you don’t go to school? You won’t be an Amazon if you don’t pass.”

“How is being an Amazon different than being just me?”

Xena let Gabrielle field that one, though she was definitely ready to step in. “Being an Amazon means you have a family, Kaija. It means you have an entire community, a network there to support you and look out for you. Family Kaija, isn’t that what you wanted? People you can connect with, remember? Share life with, come to understandings with.”

“I understand many things.”

Xena couldn’t stay quiet any longer. “Oh? You understand many things huh? Do you understand you are about to be expelled from this village? Do you understand that there are people here who want to put you on trial for stealing the Mask of the Queen? You could go to jail – *Amazon* jail. Z’at what you want?”

Kaija looked away, boredom shown in every part of her body. “It does not matter what I want.”

“Why doesn’t it matter? Tai’gee seems to be doing very well here, looks like she wants to be here. Why is it different for you?”

“Because I am not Tai’gee,” Kaija snapped at Gabrielle. “I am not human, I am not what they want here. I am trouble.”

“You are making trouble,” Xena shot back. Frustrated she rubbed her brow with a shaking hand. Beside her, Gabrielle let go a deep breath, and together they took the time to compose themselves.

“Look Kaija, we’re here to help,” Gabrielle tried again, soft and understanding. “What is it you want, huh? What can we do to help you?” She saw something flinch in the girl’s body, a pain she thought. She went with it. “What would make you happy?”

Xena raised an eyebrow at Kaija’s slow response, and the other raised at the slight drop in tone in her voice. “There is nothing.”

“Come on, there’s got to be something,” said Xena. “What – what do you do all day? Ephiny says you don’t go to school, you don’t participate in the training drills, don’t eat in the mess hall. So, what do you do all day?”

Kaija looked at Xena warily. “I learn from my surroundings. I do not need to be in rooms and on little patches of grass to keep busy.”

Xena looked down, pulled her lips over her teeth and took a steadying breath. “You’re saying an awful lot to not tell us anything. What’s up – is it Tai’gee and Amana?”

A muscle jerked, but Kaija said nothing. Gabrielle had had enough. “Look, whatever the deal is, the stealing’s got to stop. Give the mask back.”

Kaija nodded and left, the absence of her palpable presence left Gabrielle and Xena feeling like a large and obvious piece of furniture had been removed.

“That was unproductive,” Gabrielle sighed and returned to the window. Kaija walked across the village, back towards the training fields. People moved from her, giving her a wide space. She couldn’t promise *she* wouldn’t do the same. Then – “Xena, come here!”

Together they watched as a little blonde girl ran right up to Kaija, launching herself at her. In one smooth motion, Kaija reached out and lifted the girl easily with one hand, pulling her up to sit on her hip, never breaking her stride. The child wrapped her arms around Kaija’s neck and seemed to be talking animatedly; the half-sphinx and child continued through the village without a single acknowledgement to anyone or anything else.

“Leave it to Kaija to befriend the kids,” said Xena gently.

“But Ephiny said they were all afraid of her.”

“Obviously not all of them. Something is not right here,” she said. “What are you doing this afternoon?”

“The Council is meeting. I thought I’d join them. You?”

Xena waved a long, tapered finger to encircle the village. “Think I’ll just take a look around. Ask some questions.”

Gabrielle nodded. “This is strange Xena. Even for our usual amount of strange…”

Xena agreed with a nod then gave her partner a light kiss. “I’ll see you for dinner, ok?”

“Hey Xe?”

Green eyes were beseeching and confused. Xena offered a small smile of comfort and a secure hug. “We’ll figure this out,” Xena promised into golden hair.

~

Tai’gee walked hand in hand with Amana to her Guard training class before going to her own lessons. They left Tai’gee’s hut from the midday break in plenty of time to amble through the plaza towards the fields. Uncharacteristically Tai’gee was very quiet – not that she was particularly chatty like Gabrielle, but Amana had noticed her lover didn’t really like walking in silence.

“What’s on you mind?” The taller, chestnut haired warrior asked.

Tai’gee flipped her long braid over her shoulder before answering. “Xena and Gabrielle.”

Amana hummed in acknowledgement.

“I was so excited they had come back – I was so excited to show them everything I’d done this year. It seems all they’ve noticed is Kaija’s failures though, and they’re bent on blaming me for them.”

“I’m sure they’re not blaming you,” Amana offered. That was met with a plaintive look. “No, really. I mean, they brought that cat-girl here with all these plans-”

“-don’t call her that.”

Amana rolled her eyes, but continued: “They brought *her* here with all these grand ideas, and she’s ruined them. It’s a pretty big embarrassment to them. They’re probably just looking to salvage what they can from their mistake.” Amana spoke with confident matter-of-factness and gave Tai’gee’s hand a reassuring squeeze.

Tai’gee chewed her lip. “I – I don’t think – it couldn’t have been a mistake to bring Kaija here. There was nowhere else for us to go.”

Amana lifted her face to the sun, soaking in its warmth. “I’m not saying it was a mistake to bring *you* here. Obviously I don’t think that at all.” She grinned at her lover, but Tai’gee still looked unhappy. “Look, you know you didn’t have anything to do with her messing up, so why should you care? She’s screwed herself; let her pay for it. That’s life.”

Tai’gee was soundly dissatisfied. She had been very proud of her own accomplishments and ecstatic to hear Ephiny’s thoughts of her performance, but Xena and Gabrielle’s arrival had also served to remind her that both she *and* Kaija were supposed to be thriving in the village. She felt guilty she was on the edge of being initiated as an Amazon and Kaija was still running around like a wild beast. If she was totally honest with herself, she wasn’t convinced she wasn’t to blame for Kaija’s behavior, and that admission ran her through with guilt. When Kaija stepped from the woods after Xena’s threat, Amana had hissed, “What’s she doing here?” “Watching me, like always,” Tai’gee had answered immediately, though not aloud.

As they strolled through the plaza on their way to the fields, she spied a familiar, leather clad form moving easily across the square, the body of a little blonde girl held securely in her arms. It was rare that anyone saw Kaija these days, especially out in the open city proper. Tai’gee flinched slightly at the sight of Kaija, a combination of compunction, surprise and awe welling inside her. Tai’gee thought she’d grown to be eye-stoppingly attractive – a brand of exotic on the same level as Xena’s own attractiveness. Kaija had also acquired a self possession that radiated from her and shown in every movement of her body – or rather, the self possession she had realized back in Cresca when Aries had informed her of what a powerful being she was had matured. While Tai’gee was still a good six inches taller than Kaija, she could easily understand why anyone would see her childhood friend as scary and overtly intimidating. Beside her, Amana released a disgusted grunt and wrapped an arm around Tai’gee’s shoulder as though to protect her from seeing her old friend.

The blonde child seemed to be talking nonstop to Kaija, exuberant and animated. Kaija nodded periodically, but it didn’t look like the girl needed any encouragement to keep going. Once they reached the edge of the plaza, Kaija said something to the girl, to which the child nodded vigorously, then smacked her lips against Kaija’s in a kiss even Tai’gee could hear. Kaija set the girl down smoothly and she ran off in the direction of the sparring fields for her battle classes. Kaija watched her go and then seemed to feel being watched. She turned to look across her shoulder, right at Tai’gee and Amana.

Tai’gee’s breath caught. She wasn’t sure if she should wave or ignore her. Amana made the decision for her, turning them away to walk down an alley and out to the fields a different route.

“I wonder if Cypress knows Pi is spending time with her like that,” Amana asked derisively.

“Pi?”

“Pi is Cypress’ daughter. Cypress is Ahmon’s girlfriend.”

Tai’gee nodded. Ahmon was Amana’s cousin. She suspected Ahmon was going to hear about this exchange. Tai’gee didn’t share Amana’s vituperative intent however – instead, her only

thought was that Pi didn't get in trouble or forbidden to see Kaija; 'Kaija loves children,' she thought with fondness.

III

"So, the mighty Warrior Princess has come to grace our little village with her legendary presence," a supremely condescending tone purred from a shadowed alley. A petite and buff woman stepped deliberately into the light, arms crossed, a twitching frown pulling her mildly attractive features into a plainly sour expression. "Oh please Warrior Princess, won't you please throw your chakram thingy and make us all ooo and ahhhh at your skill?" she jeered.

Xena pulled up short to watch her antagonist's approach. She was used to having fans as well as foes following her every move in much the same ways. She suspected if she'd never become the warlord she used to be, she would still have a sound group of adversaries who were just jealous of her: she was smart, sexy and strong – who didn't want to be all that? She was also confident and rarely rose to teasing. Easily removing her chakram from its holster at her side, Xena flung the gleaming weapon to ricochet off the sign over the blacksmith's and on a beeline for the teaser. It neatly sliced through the black sash tied across the woman's back, ricocheted again and came back to remove the throw-over tunic all together before returning to the hand of its master.

"Oooo" was easily heard from a gathering crowd followed by snickers and giggles.

"For Zeus' sake woman, I was just playing!"

Xena smiled broadly. "Hello Eponin, it's good to see you again."

"Well, I'm glad you like seeing me. Not that I would've said no to a private audience, but damn Xena, did you have to cut me out of my clothes?"

Xena laughed aloud. "You'd better have said no; I hear the Queen of the Amazons is *much* scarier."

"Yeah, I'll bet," Eponin mumbled as she tried to arrange her clothes and re-tie her sash to hold the tunic closed. Grumbling she managed some measure of decency before extending her arm in greeting to her friend. After which, her tunic and sash revolted and joined her shoes. Xena didn't bother hiding her smile. "Teach me to tease the animals," Eponin grouched.

"Hey!"

Eponin gave Xena a sly grin before gathering up her clothes turned rags and beckoning her to follow her. "What are you up to this fine day?"

"Gabrielle's gone to the Council meeting, so I thought I'd spend the afternoon asking around about Kaija."

“Ah... That won't be fun.” Eponin's hut was at the edge of town, not far from Tai'gee's. The gutsy Guard wasted no time darting in for replacement clothes and bouncing back out to rejoin her friend. “She's not a popular person around town.”

“So I've heard,” said Xena as she started them on a lazy walk. “What I don't understand is how it got to be that way. I thought you guys were looking out for her.”

“Hey we were! Well, as much as she would let us. I mean, Xena it's damn hard to spend time with someone who's as good at disappearing as the gods and hardly talks when she is visible. Honestly, after a couple months of it, we just got used to her not really being around. It's just the way it was. No one seemed to mind... until things started disappearing.”

“That's another thing...” Xena paused, looking around the bustling village common. “Kaija's not a thief. This doesn't fit.”

Eponin rubbed the back of her neck, not really wanting to be the one to bust Xena's bubbly perception of the village's biggest pain. “Well... she's been seen Xena. I mean... she wasn't particularly subtle about it.”

“Who's seen her?”

Eponin shrugged. “I don't know exactly for each case. A girl named Aeaxis reported her once I think. Then Ahmon was the one who saw her taking the weapons. I only remember that because she was furious she had to come up with a different schedule for that afternoon's training.”

They resumed their walk and were shortly outside of the tavern. Eponin nodded Xena in for a drink. “Hmm. Just seems really trite – not like Kaija at all.”

“How do you mean?” asked Eponin sincerely.

“It's just not her. She's smarter than that – one, to get caught, but two, to put stuff she'd want to hide in an obvious place. Come on – scrolls on cliff shelves, pots by the lake, weapons on the sparring fields? That's just... asinine.”

Eponin absorbed that and nodded. “Asinine isn't quite the word I'd use to describe her. I mean... that'd be like calling you cuddly.” Eponin grinned.

“You know, I just realized why I stay away from the village...”

~

The Amazon Nation was huge. It consisted of five major tribes spreading across the world, besides the capitol tribe in Greece. The largest and most powerful tribe were the Greek Amazons. The others included the Northern Tribe and two Eastern Tribes – one farther east than the other –, a tribe not far to the west and a southern tribe from the continent south of the Mediterranean Sea. When Artemis created the first tribe of Amazons, Gabrielle suspected the

goddess had no idea how widely the lifestyle would spread, nor that it would resonate with so many women whether or not they were born directly from the first line of Amazons. For her part, Gabrielle never expected to be Queen of such a massive power. Thousands of women across the world were the subjects of Artemis, and therefore Gabrielle's subjects.

Her choice to travel with Xena rather than stay and actively rule the Amazons was weighty when she'd made it, but had she known about the Amazons what she now knew, the decision may well have been impossible. Gabrielle loved Xena with every fiber of her being, and that love was what had made her initial decision so easy. But now she had become aware of the issues of the Amazons, of their enormity, and had she had that same awareness then – or had to make her decision now – her distress over her choice between the love of her life and a Nation that loved its Queen would have been overwhelming.

Her solution in leaving the Amazons was to instate Ephiny as Regent. In addition, Ephiny would have a Council to provide a connection with the subjects. The Council was to help express the various voices of the people, letting Ephiny hear differing opinions and ideas before making her decisions. The only time Gabrielle had seen a Council or tribunal used in the past was for issues that created a conflict of interest for the Queen. With this new Council, Gabrielle felt she had given more say to the people, letting them be more involved with their government.

That afternoon was going to be the first time Gabrielle had seen her brainchild at work. She'd not for a moment doubted the brilliance of the Council's role in Amazon government; even Xena had said it was a great idea. She was truly unprepared for what she would encounter.

"We are not going to waste another afternoon going on about Kaija. I'm sick of it," Ephiny said firmly.

"But Ephiny, the mask has yet to be recovered. It's been a month – far longer than any of the other things."

"*Stolen* things," one pug-nosed woman specified to the gray-skinned priestess' previous comment. Gabrielle felt her skin crawl as she studied her.

"Look, Kaija is well aware of the severity of her actions and Gabrielle has assured me she's working to correct them. We all agreed to give her and Xena a chance to work things out."

Here the Council turned en masse to face the Queen, and some looks were definitely bitter. Gabrielle waggled her fingers at them in greeting.

"You have talked to ... her?" The woman sitting next to the pug-nosed Council member asked with an obvious, curling lip of disdain. Her hair was auburn in color, stringy and reminded Gabrielle of a scraggly-haired dog. Gabrielle decided to answer her with a charming smile.

"Yes. Kaija's a good girl – I'm sure this is all just a misunderstanding."

Pug-nose adopted an even stronger look of repugnance. She also elected a tone similar to one a person would use to explain some tender emotion to a child she didn't like. "With all due respect, Queen Gabrielle, you haven't been here to experience all the turmoil this behavior has caused. This belligerent disruption doesn't just affect the people who were robbed."

"That's right," a fourth woman who sported an obnoxious amount of jewelry added. "Lessons have been interrupted, meals have been cancelled, training sessions-

"Look, I understand all that," Gabrielle said with force. The look on her face brokered no more dissension. "I'm handling it. Understood?"

Murmurs of assent went around the room, but a general air of dissatisfaction remained as Ephiny tried to move the focus to other topics. "The Summer Solstice Festival starts in a moon. We need to start forming details to get ready. I don't want this put off till the last moment like last year."

"What about the Knowledge Exams," the gray-skinned priestess asked in her naturally quiet voice.

"What about them?"

"Right now they're three weeks from yesterday, which means we'd be adopting new members at the same time as the Festival, just like last year..."

"Right." Ephiny massaged a temple. "Would anyone be opposed to moving them up?"

"Ephiny, to make any difference in the scheduling, we'd need to move the Exams to next week." This was from the only red-headed woman of the group – a woman short of height but heavier than most of her fellows. "Then we'd have to have the Inductions right after. That would leave three weeks to get ready for the Festival."

"Three weeks is not a lot of time to get ready for the biggest Amazon affair in seven years," said Pug-nose. Oooo, Gabrielle definitely did not like her; she'd have to find out her name from Ephiny.

"What needs to be done to prepare? I don't see why three weeks wouldn't be enough time. We should give the Inductees ample time for their tests," said Gabrielle.

Pug-nose and her neighbor both rolled their eyes, making noises of incredulity. Ephiny shot them a loud look of disapproval, but they didn't bother to look chastised. "We have to build stages, make repairs to our outer wall, make camp space for all the visitors..." the stringy-haired woman explained snidely.

"How is that different from every other year?"

Several snorts resounded in the room. Ephiny, to her credit, ignored them and patiently explained that all of the Regents would be coming to this Festival. “It’s the Gathering of the Nation. We’re going to be inundated.”

Gabrielle felt her eyes widen in realization. “I see.”

“We’ve started expanding the borders of the city,” Ephiny continued, “to accommodate the Regents and their entourages. But there are all kinds of security issues, and our warriors will need to do extended tours – quite frankly, this might be too big an event for just our military.”

The redhead added to that, explaining the graduates from the Exams would be inducted immediately. “Once they are officially Amazons they will be eligible to be warriors.”

“The testing class this year is about fifty. There’s no reason not to expect a one hundred percent pass rate,” said the priestess.

Pug’s friend muttered, “as long as the distractions are kept at a minimum.”

Gabrielle and Ephiny exchanged glances, but otherwise didn’t acknowledge the sarcastic remark. “Xena and I are here, and we’re happy to help in every way possible. She would be an excellent choice to lead the security details.”

A tall, hawkish woman by Ephiny’s side stiffened at that offer. Gabrielle recognized the woman as Ahmon, Ephiny’s Champion. “Right now I’m leading those preparations,” she said tightly, “but I’ll be glad to incorporate whatever suggestions your Consort may have.”

The blonde bristled at Ahmon’s use of Consort over Champion. She was getting very tired of the undermining, trite comments, but her patience for belittling commentary where Xena was concerned was extremely limited. Not, of course, that she felt it belittled Xena to be her Consort, but where Xena’s reputation as the world’s greatest warrior was concerned, no one had a leg to stand on. Xena had worked hard to be indomitable and she’d worked harder to be socially responsible with that indomitability – Gabrielle would not tolerate some two-dinar warrior who had never seen the scary side of battle try to demean *her* warrior’s success.

Ephiny recognized the spark of anger Ahmon had ignited in Gabrielle’s eye, and tried to bite back a smirk at the retort she knew would come.

“Ahmon, isn’t it?”

‘Here we go...’

“Xena is more qualified to establish a defensible, working embattlement than any person in all of Greece. She will not be making suggestions – she will be giving orders, and I expect you to see those orders are executed. Do I make myself clear?” Though her voice didn’t raise in volume, Gabrielle may as well have been yelling, the force of her words hit them so hard.

Ephiny was impressed beyond anyone else in the room. Gabrielle, whose strength of spirit she had never doubted or questioned, had just, very effectively, demonstrated how much she'd cultivated that spirit. Sure, she'd always been spunky and headstrong, but honestly, when Gabrielle received Teresa's Rite of Caste, there was practically no support among the Amazons to follow the chatty stranger as Queen.

"W-will you be joining us, Queen Gabrielle, for the Festival?" asked the priestess with something of a glint of rapture in her eyes.

"Of course-" "Gods I hope this is ok with Xena-" "and frankly I am highly offended I wasn't notified that such an important event was coming up."

"With all due respect," Pug-nose half rose to express her own indignation, "we cannot just send our citizens out to track you down to parts unknown and give you updates-"

"-You did turn over care of the Nation to us," her auburn-haired friend added. Gabrielle decided she didn't like her either.

"Point taken," she conceded, "but I am here now and I will be a part of these proceedings."

The room was quiet with the pronouncement which the Queen took as acceptance, but Gabrielle didn't delude herself into thinking there wasn't any tension amongst the Council members as they adjourned the meeting.

"Congratulations," Ephiny smiled at her blonde friend in the late afternoon sun. "That was the most orderly Council meeting we've had in a long time."

Gabrielle felt a distinctly icky residue on her skin as she left the Council chambers. "Ephiny, *that* is the Council you chose to help you?"

"No actually – we had an election. I thought it only fair that if the Council was going to be the voice of the people, they should be chosen by the people. That was the top five."

Gabrielle nodded absently as she replayed the meeting in her mind. She firmly disliked the woman with the smashed nose. Gabrielle wasn't sure if the woman's forehead was overly large or her eyebrow was overly low, but the overall effect was serpentine. In fact, the woman looked like a snake that had run full speed into a wall. Ephiny laughed out loud at her description.

"That's Saikus. The stringy haired woman next to her is her friend Rachel. They're the most difficult members, although it didn't always used to be that way. They're practical to a fault."

Gabrielle held back her grimace, but expressed she didn't think their practicability was what was offending her. "Who are the others?"

"The bejeweled one is Mendon, she wears what she makes as advertisement; the red-head, a trainer, Pellope; and the last, the priestess Cree."

Gabrielle nodded; it seemed like a fair mix of the various castes actually, and she liked that. “And why is Ahmon your Champion and not Solari?”

Ephiny’s tight curls trembled slightly. “She didn’t want that position, and truthfully I didn’t want her to take it. There’s no one here I would trust more to take over leadership of this tribe – she’s a leader, not just a bodyguard.”

Gabrielle smiled – even with all Ephiny’s efforts to speak of Solari in purely diplomatic, warrior fashion, the Regent could not keep her true affection from touching her words. She suspected the same was true of herself when she talked about Xena.

Ephiny continued, as they strolled through the dusty streets. “All I needed in a Champion was a dedicated warrior, a good fighter. That’s Ahmon. Solari and Eponin are my private Council, my family.”

“That’s wonderful Ephiny! Are you and Solari going to have a joining?”

The Regent blushed, but maintained a dignified posture. “We haven’t decided that yet. Speaking of family, what is Xena doing this afternoon?”

“Following you two.”

The deep voice behind them startled them both, and laughing blue eyes met them as they wheeled around.

“Gods Xena, must you always be so sneaky?”

A smug, broad-shouldered shrug was the reply. Ephiny chuckled. “It’s good to have you both back.”

“Back?” A dark eyebrow arched in question.

“Oops. Um... I’ll just leave you two to talk. Gotta go let the teachers know they’ll be giving Exams in a few days.” With that, Ephiny squirreled off, leaving Gabrielle with Xena in the middle of the plaza.

“That stinker.” Gabrielle looked chagrined. “Umm... I kind of committed us to stay through the Solstice Festival to get everything ready.”

Xena waited a beat, just to make Gabrielle squirm. “Is that what all the buzz is about?” She cracked a bemused grin. “That’s fine. I figure it’ll take at least that long to figure out Kaija’s problems and get her straightened out.”

Gabrielle sighed with relief. She'd never made such a huge decision for the both of them, and honestly it had made her very uncomfortable not having talked to Xena first. But it had worked out, and she hugged the warrior gladly.

“Um... I also turned over the Capitol's security to you.” Neat, white teeth bit nervously on a pink lip.

Xena's voice rumbled against Gabrielle's ear as she pressed it to her chest. “Did you now? So I guess that means I get to yell at some wimpy warriors, huh?”

“Just make sure we don't have any deserters. Apparently the entire Nation is coming to visit – we don't want to be short-staffed.”

Xena hummed. “I wouldn't expect the Northern Amazons. They were pretty decimated the last time I was up there. Too few to travel.”

“From the sounds of it, I doubt we'll notice they're missing.”

~

Xena was busy. Xena was more than busy, she was swamped. She'd gathered the entire Elite and Royal forces for a meeting in the plaza early the next morning. Four weeks, she'd told them, and then they would be flooded with more people than they could count. All of the leading governing officials would be there – security from the time those officials stepped onto this land until the time they stepped off was paramount. Each Regent would have a contingent of Royal Guard assigned to her and they were to guard her like she was Gabrielle. The Elite Guard would be swarming the entire countryside, right up to the borders.

“It'll be no secret to those that live close to our borders in the Outer World that we've got something big going on here; they'll know to stay away. Therefore, any male you see in our woods you will arrest. There will be a holding pen constructed at each direction for you to incarcerate detainees. We'll take no chances.

“I want the reinforcement of the outer wall completed in five days,” Xena said firmly. “We've got other things to do than pound on that wall.”

There were some groans and scoffs, but those doing it had the sense to not let themselves get caught.

“The mainstay is, of course, the focal point for the festival – we will be safest here because this is where everyone will be. What we need to secure are the outer rim villages and watch for any signs of invasion.”

Xena added that Gabrielle had placed a curfew for the week of and surrounding the Festival. This was met with loud protest. One dark, unamused eyebrow raised challengingly in the gray morning light and the grumbling ceased immediately. “The mainstay will be closed to entry and

exit during dark hours. Anyone caught breaking curfew will be arrested. Like I said, security first. Anyone who doesn't respect the security of this Region is obviously an enemy and will be dealt with *as such*," she punctuated. Their silence moved from begrudging to rapt; Xena's implied threat rang heavily in their ears. "You will be responsible for our protection – to do that effectively you have to wear that responsibility like a charge from Artemis." She paused. "Because it is."

She explained the warrior caste would be instrumental, basically the Guard would be managing the warriors' efforts. "You're overseers not slave drivers," Xena reminded them. "Don't ask them to do anything you wouldn't do yourself. Don't let me find out you're taking advantage of your position."

With that, they'd started on the wall. Xena wanted every rotted, broken and split post replaced, platforms reinforced, and towers secured. All eight gates into the mainstay received new bindings, sharpened tips, and oiled hinges – no small task considering they were over thirty and forty feet high.

In conjunction with overseeing the environmental security of the region, Xena began attending the Guard drilling sessions. Once a warrior passed her Guard Exam, her drills and practice sessions doubled. There was a reason they were referred to as the Elite Guard. Xena walked in on one of Ahmon's classes and took great pleasure in dressing down her and her entire class for the sloppiness in their performance and presentation.

"You are the members of the premier fighting force in the world, the champions of this Nation, defenders of the Capitol and the High Queen!" she bellowed. Her voice carried not only over the Guard she rebuked but halted the children's classes on the neighboring fields. "You should look like it when you sleep! No one should put a foot on this land with weapons in better condition than yours. If you can't manage that, you don't belong here," she said fiercely. She'd dismissed them all to return in fifteen minutes with "Pristine!" ringing in their ears. She'd given Ahmon a measuring glare before turning to leave, not bothering to dismiss her.

"You keep goading her and you're going to have trouble Xe," Gabrielle said to her that afternoon over a late lunch. It had been three days since Xena had taken over the military, and with all of the activity, this was a rare opportunity for the Royal couple to spend some time together.

"I don't care if I goad her. Ephiny made a mistake picking her as her Champion. The only reason I haven't dismissed her is that it would embarrass Ephiny. As soon as Ahmon blows her top, Ephiny will have reason to get rid of her and it won't demean her as Regent." Xena popped a grape into her mouth and contentedly crunched on the juicy fruit. "Shouldn't be long now," she said as she tried to control the juice.

Gabrielle shook her head, a small smile playing around her lips. She decided to change the subject. "Exams are tomorrow. I haven't seen hide nor hair of Tai'gee."

"Probably studying, not that it'll do her any good." Xena took in a deep breath and spit out the grape seed – jettisoned it actually, out of the nearby window where it bounced off one of the

Guards. “What the - ?” the woman exclaimed in confusion. Xena laughed quietly, looking back to Gabrielle with impish glee.

Green eyes rolled. “Why wouldn’t it do any good for her to study? Unh-uh, no more spitting.”

Xena mocked crestfallen and let the seed dribble down unimpressively to her plate.

“Absolutely incorrigible,” the blonde smirked.

“Because this is a test of cultural knowledge – life as an Amazon, what it means to be an Amazon.”

“Ah... sounds like something you can’t study for.”

“Exactly. It’s not like you recite some dates, oaths and proclamations perfectly and you’re in. You either can show you know what it means to be an Amazon, or you can’t.”

“And she only gets one chance. It’s only been a year for her here though – do you think she’s taking it too soon?”

Xena shrugged. “She thinks she’s ready. She knows the consequences if she fails. You gonna eat that?”

Gabrielle possessively pulled her quail closer to her, a distinct ‘mine’ look on her face. Xena opted for more grapes.

“Heard from Kaija?” the Queen tendered.

“Nope.”

Gabrielle munched thoughtfully on her dinner. “We still gotta do something about her.”

Xena only hummed as an answer.

“Let’s invite her to dinner tomorrow.”

That got a raised eyebrow and an ‘are you serious’ look.

“Yes I am. It does us no good to say we need to talk to her and don’t have her around to talk. Besides, she might need the company since she’s probably not taking the exam.”

Xena swallowed her mouthful and chased it with a bitter draught of wine. “I’ll see what I can arrange.”

In addition to being leaders of women's independence and self-sufficiency, the Amazons were a kind of historical stewards. Secret libraries had been built to house historical, philosophical, and scientific documents – knowledges acquired from all over the world. Literature, paintings, musics, poems epic and otherwise, were all kept and preserved, copied and re-copied to avoid destruction.

There was only one library inside the capitol; it was next to the Temple of Artemis. Like the Temple, it was built of stone, the only other stone building in the village. It wasn't nearly as big as the Temple, not even by a third. Gabrielle was always reminded of the Temple of Athena when she looked at the Library, only it had closed in walls between the columns. It was never intended to be the great main library of the Amazons; it housed only those documents and artifacts directly pertaining to Amazon history and law. Everything else was sent to other libraries within the Region and without. Gabrielle recalled a woman telling her not to put all of her fish cakes in one basket – though the woman wasn't trying to be particularly wise at the time, she took it as a good bit of advice. It appeared the Amazons did as well.

Gabrielle liked coming to the Library – it was one of her most favorite places on Amazon land. It was always quiet inside. The windows, placed high above in the walls almost to the roof, somehow only invited in the bluish light of day, giving the Library a pleasant and calm aura. But the main reason Gabrielle liked the Library was because she could be completely saturated with the scent of aging scrolls – nothing smelled like treated papyrus.

That afternoon, after her lunch with Xena, Gabrielle wanted some peace. The daily meetings with the Council were tiring, and she was starting to feel a rabid impatience with their contumacious bickering. Xena was fully immersed in her new position as General, and, if she was honest with herself, Gabrielle was lonely – if that was going to be the case, she was at least going to be lonely in an environment that was a whole other kind of homey to her. There was just something heady to her in being surrounded by generations of wisdom and insight, of lives and thoughts from people she'd never meet but could know quite intimately through their works.

Winding her way through the stacks of literature, pottery and masonry, Gabrielle came to her favorite little alcove. To her surprise, it was inhabited. Further to her surprise, it was inhabited by Tai'gee, who sat idly at a petite wooden table, hands folded before her in thought. The younger woman looked up at the sound of footsteps and offered a small smile of greeting.

"I like it here," she said softly, but her voice still echoed off the walls. "It's peaceful."

Gabrielle nodded agreement before asking if she could join her. Tai'gee indicated the bench opposite her and the Queen sat, neatly swinging her legs over the bench to face her companion. "How's your arm?"

Tai'gee shrugged. "Fine. I don't heal as fast as Kaija, but it's nothing that'll stop me from doing what I have to do."

Gabrielle nodded. "Do you come here often?"

“Not as much as I used to,” she admitted. “Kaija and I used to spend a lot of time in here, reading. Doing homework together. Hameena almost always had to come get us from here for dinner,” she said with a warm chuckle. “That seems like such a long time ago now.”

“I know what you mean,” said Gabrielle with her own laugh. “If Xena asked two people if they’d seen me and got two no’s, she knew I’d holed up in here. Every time she’s come to get me I had buried myself in scrolls.”

They enjoyed a moment of peace together before Gabrielle hazarded her next question. “So... what happened?”

Tai’gee glanced up, though did not look directly at Gabrielle before dropping her eyes again. On a hefty intake of air, she said she didn’t know. “It just got weird...”

“An Amazon cannot hurt another Amazon, yes?”

“It would be against Artemis, you know that Kaij.”

“What is worse, to hit someone or trick someone?”

“They’re both bad, but the trick can be worse depending on how many people it hurts or how badly it hurts someone. Why?”

“Tricks seem unreal – not physical.”

“Well, they aren’t physical necessarily – they’re like lies. They can be dangerous and mean, or they can be needed to keep someone’s feelings from being hurt. Depends on the scale.”

“A sister would not harm a sister; she could not do that, right?”

“Kaija, we’ve talked about this before. Are you worried about someone hurting you?”

“No.”

“Have you seen someone hurting an Amazon?”

“I – n-no.”

“Why did you miss class today?”

“I could not go.”

“Why not? We were supposed to present our report today.”

“I... had something to do.”

“What?”

“I... I cannot say.”

“Kaija, they’re saying you took them! Why would they say that?”

“They do not know...”

“What don’t they know? I tell you who doesn’t know – I don’t know. You’re making me look like a chump.”

“No-”

“-Yes you are. Ugh – forget it. You need to get things figured out, and quick.”

She kind of disappeared after that. No one really saw her in the mainstay unless she was stealing something," Tai'gee finished.

Gabrielle sat quietly in the deepening blue light, considering what Tai'gee had said. "What do you think all that meant? It's awfully strange."

"I don't know." The irritation in Tai'gee's voice was obvious. "I hadn't thought about it much. Sounds to me like she was looking for permission to cause trouble."

"You sound pretty angry with her. You didn't think it was weird? I mean, I've never known Kaija to do anything without reason... She's very purposeful."

Tai'gee gave her table partner a frank look. "First of all, it just sounds particularly weird because you're getting the highlights. All of this was a gradually escalating strangeness. And secondly, honestly, you don't know Kaija. You spent some days with us over a year ago. I grew up with her. She's mischievous and shifty, she can be absurdly random and obnoxiously aloof."

"Well, of course you would know." Gabrielle folded her hands together.

Gabrielle stayed seated and pensive while Tai'gee pushed her bench back from the table and started to leave. As an afterthought she turned back. "Do you even care how I'm doing? Does that matter at all to you and Xena?"

Gabrielle was surprised, and it showed in her voice and face. "Of course! Of course Tai'gee. We're very happy you're doing well here. I'm sorry we haven't made that clear to you."

The youth didn't look wholly convinced; she looked like she didn't think Gabrielle really got her point. "I realize Kaija is supposed to be the ultimate human – a superwoman or something, and Cerebrius saw me as her pet. And what you've made clear to me is that you see me as just Kaija's friend, her shadow or hand holder. I'm not a pet, I'm not a babysitter. I'm responsible for myself, just me. I am my own person."

Gabrielle was speechless for several moments. She hadn't expected a lecture – but then she recalled what Xena had told her about lectures. "Are you trying to convince me of that? Or yourself?"

Tai'gee disappeared among the stacks, without further commentary. A shaft of sunlight stabbed the darkness and disappeared just as quickly as the main door to the Library opened and closed, signaling the young woman's exit.

IV

Finding Kaija proved ridiculously easy. She had parked herself at the school building, under the window, listening to the Exam being administered inside. The girl didn't look pleased Xena had spotted her, and even less so when the Warrior Princess beckoned her over. Reluctantly, she abandoned her post.

“Not helping anyone in there are you?” asked Xena with quiet warning.

“No. Just listening.”

“Wanted to find out how Tai’gee did without her knowing?”

Xena didn’t expect Kaija to answer that one, which was why she was surprised when the smaller woman admitted to it with a slight nod. Xena studied her companion for several moments – it was easier now that she was a little taller than Gabrielle. It was also easier since Kaija had her mane pulled back in an intricate arrangement of braids. Without her thick, wild hair flying about her face, Xena could make out thin worry lines tracing around the youth’s eyes. ‘Very interesting.’

“Who did your hair for you?”

“I did.”

Xena looked at her with frank disbelief. “Your hair is too short for you to have done it yourself like that. Gabrielle’s takes at least an hour to get it right and that’s nowhere near as complicated as yours.”

“I did, and Pi helped. She is very good at braiding.” Xena asked who Pi was with her eyes. “She is my... friend.”

That made the Warrior Princess very happy; she smiled her pleasure. “So you have made some friends! That’s great Kaija!” She gave her an approving slap on the arm. Kaija offered a shy, tentative smile. “Listen, Gabrielle wants you to come over for dinner tonight.”

Kaija immediately started to protest, but Xena’s expression silenced it just as quickly. “You can invite Pi if you want-”

“No. She has other arrangements.”

“Ok. Well, two fingers before sunset. Come to our house.”

Xena could see Kaija really, really wanted to say no. But the girl held her tongue and accepted the invitation. The warrior moved off to make rounds and check on the progress of her preparatory endeavors, wondering who Pi was and looking forward to meeting someone who liked Kaija enough to braid her hair.

~

Gabrielle was happy to dismiss her Guards once dinner was brought to her hut. She was eager for the privacy with Kaija. Xena had sent a messenger by earlier to let her know she would be in

late, probably missing their dinner entirely. That was alright; perhaps this way Kaija wouldn't feel like the focus of an inquisition.

She finished setting the table just as Kaija arrived. She smiled at the reticent knock at the door. She was very happy to see Kaija had dressed down as well – meaning she was wearing a pair of sturdy hide pants and matching tunic rather than her usual leathers. Gabrielle bypassed Kaija's outstretched hand and pulled the younger woman into a sincere hug. And boy was there a lot of her to hug – Kaija had become a significant being, all rippling muscle and feline athleticism. She was shorter than Kaija now, which still surprised her – really it was unheard of growing six inches in a year... as an adult!

"I hope you're hungry," Gabrielle grinned. "There's enough food here to feed an army." The blonde didn't miss the narrowing of golden eyes at the description. "Just a figure of speech," she tacked on. "Have a seat."

Uncomfortable pretty much sized up their entire dinner. Gabrielle wasn't sure if it was the context, the content or the company that was making Kaija antsy, but by the time the Queen pushed back her plate her companion was practically crawling out of her skin with agitation.

"What is it?" she'd finally demanded.

Golden eyes flicked to her. "Exams are done."

'Ah. I see.' "There won't be any results until at least tomorrow, Kaija," she said gently.

"I know," the youth mumbled, but finally – *finally* – she settled down in her seat. Gabrielle felt the majority of her own tension release her shoulders.

"Do you spend a lot of time watching Tai'gee?"

Kaija's lips always pulled awkwardly over her fairly large incisors, but when the girl pulled them tighter to make a thin lipped frown, the big teeth bulged obviously under the skin. "I watch many things," she answered cryptically.

"I'll bet – but do you watch them with the same intensity as you watch Tai'gee? With the same concern?"

Gold eyes looked suddenly nervous. "I – I do what I can."

Gabrielle kicked herself for the way she'd asked that. "No, no Kaija – you aren't her guardian; I'm not accusing you of not being there for her." Kaija waited for more. "I'm asking if you notice feeling differently watching Tai'gee as opposed to anyone else. Is she special to you?"

"Tai'gee is my friend." Kaija's expression was as succinct as her statement. Gabrielle felt her patience ebbing but refused to give up. She slumped back into her chair.

“How do you feel about Tai’gee, Kaija? When you see her in class, in training, walking with Amana?”

Kaija was quiet. She looked down at the table, played with a wrinkle in the cloth Gabrielle had spread over it, and said nothing. She stayed that way for so long Gabrielle decided she wasn’t going to answer. She was going to give it up; it was obviously impossible to get through to her. She was surprised to hear Kaija speak and her heart fell at her tired, despondent tone.

“Sometimes I see the ones in the class who do not like her. They do not treat her nicely, and it makes me angry. She will stiffen her back and ignore them, but she holds her finger a certain way,” Kaija demonstrated, “that is when she is not happy. It makes me sad. I know I would not treat her that way. She goes to Amana to be held, and Amana will do something I see Tai’gee will not like, a touch or a look. I know how to do it how she will like it. But she looks at me and she does not want me to. It makes me hurt.” She waited a moment, then pressed her hand to her chest. “Here.”

It was the most Kaija had ever said to Gabrielle. Her natural conversation style was clipped and to the point, and Gabrielle had struggled in their first introductions to believe the girl wasn’t just plain rude. She wanted to savor the confession for the wealth of verbal currency it had bestowed upon her. But she needed to acknowledge it, at the very least so Kaija wouldn’t think Gabrielle didn’t appreciate her effortful attempt at open conversation.

“Kaija,” she began softly, then stopped to scoot her chair to sit by her, “What you’re describing – that’s love.”

The youth’s braided head shook no, but not in denial. “No, Xena said love was good. Happy. To make each other happy.”

Gabrielle needed to extend herself to Kaija, connect with her, so she took the girl’s hand in both of hers. “This is so hard; how do I explain something that is just so... not explainable?”

“Yeah Kaija, happiness is the motivation, and when the relationship is good happiness is the reward. But you have a special kind of love for Tai’gee that can hurt an awful lot when things aren’t going right between the two of you.”

Green eyes peeked into gold ones to check for understanding, and found only an open regard. ‘Yikes.’ “So... this kind of love gets painful when you see the person you love get hurt and not get what she needs to really feel better. It can get really lonely when she’s not around, and no one else can fill the loneliness like she can.” Gabrielle nodded several times, encouraging Kaija to do so as well if she agreed. She did.

“And sometimes, when you look at her, do you feel something else in your body? Like not painful, but maybe something like you’re *really* glad to see her?”

“Yeah,” the youth answered thickly.

Gabrielle nodded and squeezed Kaija's hand. "That's called being in love, Dear."

Kaija looked confused. "I do not understand."

Gabrielle took a deep breath and as she let it out said, "and more than likely you never will. No one does. I think Aphrodite made it that way on purpose – we can only enjoy it if we give ourselves over to bewilderment and incomprehension."

Kaija was clearly lost. Gabrielle rose to light a few candles while she still had enough daylight to see by. She brought one with her back to the table.

"Kaija, unfortunately there is no way I can explain to you what being in love is. It's inexplicable. But some of the things you're experiencing are jealousy, rejection and loss, and frustration. It aggravates you that you don't get to make Tai'gee happy, that you're not friends like you were before."

Kaija made a very sour face. "I do not like those...feelings. Are these what my Pawpaw wanted me to do something about? To fight against these?"

"Is that what you've been doing? With the stealing and delinquency?"

Kaija clenched her mouth closed and committed to nothing. Gabrielle frowned. "I know these things are hard to deal with Kaija and it can feel better to try to get back at the ones you think are hurting you, but you can't react that way. I mean, you don't want to be expelled do you?"

Something like determined defiance flickered across Kaija's face and eyes. Gabrielle felt something slide into place.

"You don't feel like there's anyone here to stay for," she said. Kaija's pursed lips were answer enough for her.

Gabrielle's thoughts scrambled to come up with something to negate that. There had to be something here for Kaija besides Tai'gee – which *she* of course knew. This was the best place for Kaija to learn of community and family, to explore her emotions and get an education – but none of those meant much to a broken heart. Only love mattered. Then – "What about the little girl you like?"

Kaija snapped to attention. "What?"

Gabrielle smiled at hitting her mark. "Yeah, the little girl with the blonde hair I saw you with the other day." The blonde could feel Kaija's energy bristling and her smile faded. 'Maybe that wasn't such a good idea after all.'

"How do you know her?" Kaija asked with a sharp edge.

“I – I don’t. I just saw her run up to you the other day.” Swallowing, she tried to salvage what she could from her faux pas. “All I’m saying is that if you get expelled you won’t be able to see her. It seems like you like each other a lot.”

“Do you not think I know that?” Kaija snapped angrily making Gabrielle jump. “They would not be able to catch me anyway. I could stay if I wanted,” she said much quieter, almost introspectively. Then she turned back to Gabrielle. “Thank you for dinner. It was very good.”

With that, she pushed back from the table and left, again leaving a noticeable void where she had been seated. Gabrielle was still reeling from Kaija’s outburst when Xena walked in some minutes later.

“Smells good in here – hope you have leftovers. Looks like I missed Kaija, huh?”

“Yeah,” Gabrielle nodded weakly then got up to bring Xena’s food over, using the movements to settle herself. Once that was done she launched into a recap of her own dinner and after-dinner conversation.

“If I had my guess, I’d say the girl’s name is Pi. Apparently she and Kaija are friends,” Xena explained around a bite of bread. “Figures she’s a kid. She say anything about the mask?”

Gabrielle sighed, very tired of that conversation. She told Xena no and the Council had pushed the issue again that morning. “We’re going to need it for the Festival.”

Xena expertly striped the meat from one of the smaller bones of her rabbit with her teeth, then sucked on it before tossing it aside. “I don’t see what the big deal is anyway. Velasca destroyed the original with her fire tantrum. It’s not like it’s a centuries old relic.”

“No, it’s a centuries old *emblem*, as you well know,” Gabrielle said with some admonishment.

Xena didn’t bother to look concerned. “So make another one.”

“Xe, you know we can’t do that. For one thing it wouldn’t be right, and for another it would let Kaija think she can get away with that behavior.”

Xena sucked her teeth loudly. “No it wouldn’t. It would take away the power she thinks she has by keeping it. You’re at her beck and call because you want it back – if you make your own,” she made a puffing noise, “no more power.”

Gabrielle conceded the point. “But we should still try to get it back from her.”

Xena finished eating and unceremoniously wiped her hands on her shirt, earning a disapproving grimace from her partner. “We’ll be finished building the stage for the inductions tomorrow. You can have those as soon as you like.”

‘Well, that’s some bit of good news I can give to the Council,’ Gabrielle thought blandly. She wasn’t content however – everything with Kaija really bothered her; especially that the youth was in love with her childhood friend who didn’t appear the least bit interested in return. That night, while Xena slept, she lay awake thinking about her and their dinner. The more Gabrielle thought about it, the sadder she got. This wasn’t the life she had hoped for Kaija and she was determined to do something about it.

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Everyone knew who had taken the Exam. Everyone knew the price of not passing it. It had been ordained years before that a delegate would come personally to each candidate to inform her of whether she had passed or failed. All of the candidates had to wait in their huts, which kept the news private; any who failed had the option of leaving the grounds during the initiation ceremony while everyone else’s attentions were distracted. Tai’gee sincerely hoped she would not have to spend the night packing – she didn’t know what she would do if she failed.

There was no reason she should have expected notification before midday. That knowledge didn’t help her sleep however, or keep her from being up at dawn. As she paced the width of her small, dirt floor hut, she had many nerve wrenching moments of doubt. ‘What was I thinking taking that exam after little more than a year? Everyone else was a tribe child – twenty plus years of cultural exposure. There’s no way I passed on so little knowledge. But, no wait, I felt good about all of my answers. There was nothing I didn’t know.’ She’d recited, explained, and defended for most of the day, only a small portion of the exam being written. She was worried she’d go hoarse before finishing, which would have disqualified her. But she hadn’t. She’d stood straight and tall and told herself no matter how she answered a question she was going to own her response like it was armor blessed by the Goddess. Tai’gee promised herself confidence would not be her downfall. She felt that no matter if she flubbed a question, if she looked like she believed and supported her answer one hundred percent, the evaluating committee would probably embrace it as well. ‘Look like you’re right and you’ll be right,’ she had told herself.

Thoughts like those made it even more difficult to bounce back and forth between the terrifying doubt and the convinced confidence. It was beyond nerve-racking – it was maddening. She just needed to know one way or another... and then her mental voice would say almost jokingly to her: ‘Paaaaaatiencce,’ and she’d turn her pace and start back the other way.

The knock on her door startled her. Suddenly all of her desires to know one way or another evaporated – she didn’t want to know at all. On shaky legs, Tai’gee went to her door and slowly pulled it open, waiting for the nondescript warrior’s answer.

“Follow me.”

‘Hunh?’

There were warriors walking all over the village knocking on doors. It felt profane to be out during notifications. Tai’gee noticed she was the only one, however, of the candidates outside. ‘Oh Goddess, I must have failed.’

Her sense of dread changed back to confusion when she realized the warrior was taking her to the Queen's hut. The guard knocked on the door then knelt on the doorstep, followed by an uneasy Tai'gee. She felt her pulse skyrocket when Gabrielle answered, dismissed the warrior, and invited her in without a single word.

The blonde Queen made no offer of hospitality to her guest as she re-entered her hut. She circled her dining table and took a seat, pinning Tai'gee with a look that said 'stay put.' She watched Tai'gee's throat work nervously.

"Do you remember Kaija's wish? The one she made before we got here?"

Tai'gee felt herself stiffen in defense. She set herself just as she had during her Exam, confident if nothing else.

Gabrielle answered her own question. "She wanted to know emotions – love. She wanted to know friendship. Why hasn't that happened?" Gabrielle set a challenging look in her eyes, but kept accusation out of her tone.

"I am not her keeper."

Gabrielle glanced down to her untouched cup of tea, ran her finger along the rim. "You are awfully concerned with not being blamed here. I'm just asking. Why aren't you friends anymore?"

"We are still friends!"

A gold eyebrow raised skeptically. It only served to increase Tai'gee's aggravation, but Gabrielle didn't care. "Friends stick by each other Tai'gee. Where have you been?"

The dark haired girl's naturally deep voice cracked with hesitation. "I – you don't understand."

"Explain it to me."

"How would you be able to convince everyone that you fought for good if Xena kept acting like the Destroyer of Nations? How far do you think you'd get if you acted like that was ok with you?"

"So you abandoned her so you could be a more convincing Amazon."

"I didn't abandon her-"

"-Tai'gee..." Gabrielle closed her eyes, scratched above her eyebrow with a well-manicured finger. She was sad and it made speaking difficult, not to mention that trying to get Tai'gee to see how Kaija felt about her without actually telling her was like tiptoeing over very brittle seashells. "I'm not trying to blame you for anything Tai'gee." At the youth's glare, Gabrielle

reiterated that sentiment. “I’m worried. Kaija’s learned a lot and those feelings you both wanted for her are emerging without direction. I think that’s why she’s having the trouble she’s having.”

Tai’gee’s indignance finally subsided leaving her just as spent as Gabrielle. With a wave of her hand she explained her position. “Look, I’ve worked for this. If Kaija doesn’t want this too, I can’t force it on her. Kaija’s a smart person – I can’t believe she’s doing all this and she doesn’t understand the effect it’s having. That says to me it’s the effect she wants.”

It was quiet in the hut after that. Dust floated and glistened in the air around them, illuminated by the mid-afternoon sun. Gabrielle absorbed Tai’gee’s statement. She sipped at her tea. She knew Tai’gee was right, and when the younger woman apologized, Gabrielle felt a profound loss.

“I’m sorry things are working out the way they are, I really am. I wonder all the time what I could have done differently, but... I don’t know. Kaija is who she is. I have to be who I am.”

The blonde head nodded a little, her long tendrils waving about her head like silk in a breeze. “You’re right. And it appears you were born to be an Amazon. The priestesses have never seen such an amazing performance from a candidate.”

Gabrielle smiled, waiting for the words to register with the girl. Tai’gee’s eyes grew wide. “I passed? I’m an Amazon?”

The Queen rose from her seat, beaming and invited Tai’gee into a very happy embrace. The girl could have crushed her with the strength of her excitement. “You did more than pass Tai’gee, you blew them away. They told me they would prefer you to be an advisor than a warrior. Congratulations.”

Tai’gee was ecstatic. “I have to go tell Amana! This is great!”

Gabrielle’s smile slipped a little, but she held it as best she could. “The initiation is tomorrow at midday in the lower glen.”

Tai’gee wasted no time running from the hut to spread her good news. Gabrielle had barely been able to give the girl all of the instructions for the ceremony. She was happy for her. Not as happy as she could be about things, she thought, but she figured she would have to accept it. Life didn’t always work out to happy endings for everyone.

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Xena was pleased with the progress of the reinforcement of the mainstay. The outer wall had been fortified successfully. It seemed her speech to the Guards had trickled down to a majority of the villagers, who had turned it into a pep rally. The village buildings were being touched up and repaired, fresh paint was applied, care was being taken in gardens and decorations. They wanted their capitol to *look* like the seat of government she had reminded them it was: thriving, powerful, rich and vibrant. Xena was glad to see the revival.

In her daily rounds, the Warrior Princess made an explicit point of passing the taverns on several occasions. She had made it very clear that no warrior would be allowed so much as a swallow of wine, mead or cider as long as she was on duty. She'd confiscated many 'waterskins' and unequivocally doled out several jail sentences to offenders. Since it had been almost a week since making that decree, Xena believed that was plenty of time for her point to have been absorbed. Just to be sure, she stopped by each tavern to check.

She heard harsh whispering before she rounded the back of a tavern wall, which pulled her up short.

“-rd she passed-”

“What now then?”

“What about the mask?”

“She’s not giving it back.”

“It doesn’t make any difference – they’ve given that cat girl all kinds of leeway with that. Gabrielle keeps saying they’ll get it back – she’s got the village convinced it’s not an issue anymore.”

“You think she’s told them?”

“No, she wouldn’t risk that.”

“So what’re they gonna do?”

“I’ll let you know.”

“You know what’s going to happen right? They’re going to try to get that beast back into admissions.”

“Yeah, despite the fact that *no* one wants her here.”

“It’s not fair. Why’d they have to come back? We were almost rid of her!”

“Hey, don’t give up yet.”

“Come on, you know they’re like damn Midas – everything they touch turns to gold. Nobody wants her here but they get whatever they want.”

“Well, we’ll just have to show them it’s not about them. This is what *we* want.”

“Yeah, this is our Nation; not their petting zoo.”

“We shouldn’t even have to point that out. We shouldn’t even have to say to our Queen we’re not a delinquent dumping ground.”

“Just goes to show you what happens when people aren’t around – they don’t see us for who we are. We’re not valued.”

“Hey, speaking of values – how about some family values.”

“Hunh?”

“I found out-”

“-Come on, let’s go to the house, it’s hot out here.”

“Yeah, ain’t that a bitch they’re going to have the induction ceremony tomorrow during this heat?”

“Are they? How stupid is that? People’ll be p..ssin... ou... lef...”

The voices faded as they moved away and before Xena got around the corner the group of four had disappeared. ‘Interesting,’ she thought. She, of course, wanted to know who the dissenters were, but more importantly what they were going to do to show her and Gabrielle Kaija wasn’t wanted. Questions abounded: Who were they concerned about that had passed the Exam?, Who had the mask that wasn’t giving it back?, What was too risky for who to tell, and what did that have to do with the mask? Xena had the sneaking suspicion that the missing mask might be something much more complicated. And somehow Kaija tied into it.

She wasn’t surprised by the prejudice really – there were factions of Amazons that were particularly resentful of their sisters because of their romantic interests. Ultimately, it was silly, not to mention self-destructive, for one group to want to cast out the other group because they preferred men over women. Xena knew enough Amazon history to know *that* civil skirmish had left a deep seeded discomfort that flared up repetitively over the centuries. Even Velasca had used it to incite the Amazons against Ephiny a couple years ago because she had borne the child of a centaur, not just a man. But the need for children – daughters – always won out; if the Amazons were going to last they needed new blood. She supposed she would just have to remind them of that when they protested against Kaija.

V

‘You could call it hot,’ Gabrielle thought, ‘but I might just call it sweltering.’ She reminded herself she was standing on an uncovered stage in the middle of an open glen; it might not be as bad as it felt. ‘Ugh, yes it is.’ She pushed sweat slick bangs back from her forehead and began the Parade of Initiates.

One by one, all of the candidates walked across the stage to receive Gabrielle's blessing and become full members of the Amazon Nation. After receiving the blessing, they moved to Ephiny to recite the Oath and Pledge, binding their hearts and souls to the service of Artemis and her sisters. Ordinarily, initiates would receive the blessing from one of the higher priestesses, and give their Oath to the Queen, but since Ephiny had been ruling the Nation in Gabrielle's absence, she and Ephiny decided it would be more appropriate to do the steps this way. While Gabrielle was the Queen, the Greek Amazons lived their daily life under the leadership of the Regent. Gabrielle still maintained the closest relationship of any of them to Artemis, via her position as The Goddess' First Daughter – which made receiving a blessing from the Queen all the more meaningful. The Council waited off stage to congratulate each initiate as she walked off stage and give her a white sash if she had chosen to enter Guard training. It was not a fast ceremony by any means and Gabrielle did not envy Ephiny's position of listening to fifty separate Oaths. Gabrielle had promised the stoic Regent that she would get as much mead as she wanted for that.

Xena stood off stage as well, in her typical arms-crossed fashion, bored but watchful. The crowd wasn't as big as she thought it might be, but she appreciated that. She had talked Gabrielle into having the ceremony at midday so the celebration wouldn't spill over into nighttime indiscretions. "I don't want any qualms or excuses for duty tonight or tomorrow," she'd said.

Still the glen was full of happy, colorful women, cheering for their daughters, sisters and friends. She recognized Amana in the crowd, and ruefully had to acknowledge the warrior was very much taken with Tai'gee. She cheered wildly as her lover crossed the stage and beamed with pride as she turned to her neighbors to shake forearms. If that was what Tai'gee wanted, who was she to argue?

A movement at the back of the glen caught her eye and she squinted to make out a buckskin clad form. It was Kaija, no doubt come to see her friend's initiation. She stayed back by the treeline, completely unnoticed by the rest of the crowd. Xena bit down on her full lip. 'Kaija should be up here.' She thought of the conversation she'd overheard the day before and felt herself scowl. If people didn't want her here, if Kaija got herself banished, she would have to think of somewhere else for her to go. She briefly entertained the idea of Kaija traveling with them, but dismissed it. Kaija needed a place more stable than a life on the road.

Pulling her attention back to the ceremony Xena put those thoughts on hold. Kaija wasn't banished yet and there were at least a few people who wanted her here. She'd work with that first.

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"We can leave the stage up, it'll be used during the Festival," Xena directed. "But the decorations have to come down."

The newly-made Amazons were immediately put to work. They hadn't minded however, because it was their first detail as Amazons *and* they were being overseen by Xena, Warrior Princess. Cleanup couldn't have been more enthusiastic.

Tai'gee had moved to strip the statue of a bear not far from the stage. It had been positioned to look proprietarily over the crowd and stage, draped like a warrior but with a white tunic and belted with a silver link chain. Reverently she removed and folded the linen, offering her full concentration to make sure she didn't leave a crease in the fabric. She noticed the heavy footsteps coming up behind her, but didn't pay them much attention. Only when Xena's silken voice lifted to congratulate her did she turn to meet her Queen's Champion.

"Thank you."

"How does it feel?" the warrior asked through her smile.

Tai'gee smiled herself, her white teeth flashing with joy. "I can't even describe it." She shrugged her shoulders in speechlessness. "I'm an Amazon," she grinned widely.

"Yes you are. Seems you had quite the cheering section, too."

Tai'gee blushed before admitting she'd made a few friends while she was here.

"I'd say so." Xena looked deliberately towards the end of the glen. "You even had some old friends here."

"You mean Kaija? I saw her back there."

"Glad she came?" asked Xena guardedly.

Tai'gee nodded. "Yeah. Maybe seeing what it's all for will help her, you know? Show her what it's all about."

Xena accepted that. "She's still there."

"She is?"

"I think she's waiting for you." Before Tai'gee had a chance to say anything more, Xena told her she had dismissed the others for the day. "When you're done here, why don't you go say hi?"

Tai'gee watched Xena walk off. She stood, holding her folded linens, wondering if Xena's suggestion was more like an order. She got slightly nervous with the suspicion Xena had arranged this meeting to try to get them back together. Then she admonished herself – she shouldn't be nervous about seeing Kaija; they were supposed to be best friends. Tai'gee had everything she wanted, she shouldn't feel threatened.

Tai'gee approached Kaija quietly, not with stealth, but with a quiet reverence for the peace already established. Kaija's back was turned to the glen, and if the girl heard Tai'gee coming she gave no indication. Standing behind and beside the contemplative figure, the newly-made warrior tried to think of a way to start conversation. 'It used to be easier,' she thought wistfully. 'We used to talk about so much.'

With a sigh, Tai'gee decided to break the silence. "Thank you for coming to the ceremony. I saw you here."

Kaija took a moment then nodded, but didn't turn around. "It was good to see. You fit in well here." She spoke softly and with effort, as though choosing each word with special care. Tai'gee remembered Gabrielle's words and wondered if they weren't true. 'Maybe there is more emotion there than I know.' She wondered if Kaija was sad she wasn't an Amazon now, and that shot a pang of regret through her.

"You know Kaija, I'm sure you would fit in a lot better if you came out more; let the other's see you and talk to you; participated with things. I know a lot of people who are curious about you."

With a slight turn of her head, already dark circles under Kaija's eyes shaded over to become much darker. "You told me to stay back."

"Well – I was wrong. I didn't understand how this place worked, how the people work. People do want to get to know you Kaija."

"I do not think so." Kaija shook her head, her tone getting heavier and flatter. "But it does not matter. I will be gone soon."

'She seems so tired, like her limbs are deadweight, lethargic. I've only seen her like this once before.' Eyes growing wide, Tai'gee tried to keep her voice even as she spoke. "Kaija, what do you mean you'll be gone soon? Are you planning to go somewhere?"

"Probably not," the girl mumbled.

Tai'gee took a step forward. "Then what do you mean? Why would you be gone soon?"

"I can not follow her off the land. Do not let them off the land-"

"Kaija you're mumbling. Kaija, look at me. Kaija? Kaija!"

Tai'gee darted forward as Kaija tilted to the side, unprohibited and careless. Tai'gee frantically tried to secure the girl's attention, but the rolling gold eyes refused to focus. As the warrior tried to wrap her arms around her quickly sinking friend, her hand brushed something hard and wet. Looking down she saw the shafts of two arrows and the carefully carved handle of a knife. The etchings were traced with red viscosity, sticky, thick and abundant.

“Kaija, who did this? When? How long have you been sitting like this?” Tai’gee fairly shouted into the girl’s ear. “Kaija – can you hear me? Oh come on Kaija, wake up please!”

But Kaija didn’t wake up. She started to shiver slightly which began to move into a heavy tremble.

“Kaija, please just hold on – hold on till I can get some help. Goddess, who did this to you?”

The shudders began to subside, and large dilated eyes slowly pulled open. “Kaija,” Tai’gee called hopefully. “Kaija, I’m right here, can you hear me?”

“Tai’gee. I love you. I always have.”

“Kaija, I can’t hear you. Who did this? What are you trying to tell me?”

“That I love you. That is all.”

“What? Kaija? Come back, come on, come back! Kaija, open your eyes! Somebody! Somebody help! Please don’t – just don’t leave me, Kaij. Somebody help us!”

Xena came bursting from the forest, followed very closely by Gabrielle and Ephiny. Skidding to a halt by the fallen girls, the Warrior Princess assessed the situation hastily. Gabrielle gasped behind her and Ephiny pulled in a deep breath, letting out a soft moan.

“Lay her down flat Tai’gee,” Xena directed calmly. “Prop her legs up on the log. Who did this?”

“I don’t know, she couldn’t tell me. She was talking to me and got quieter and quieter, then she just fell over.”

Tai’gee placed her shaking hands under her arms, looking into the ashen, motionless face of her friend and tried not to let her body collapse into the tremors of terror that were lurking just at the edge of her self control. She decided her best defense against that was to keep talking. “We were talking. She said she was going to be gone soon, then something about falling off the land or getting off the land – it didn’t make any sense, and then she just faded out. She tried to say something else a minute ago but I couldn’t understand her.”

Kneeling by Kaija, Xena placed a hand lightly on the girl’s shoulder, shook and called her name. She raised her hand to put the back of it under the girl’s nose, but it was too breezy to find a faint sign of breathing. Looking down at the bloody configuration she frowned deeply.

“She’s been bleeding for a long time.”

“Xena,” Gabrielle approached and knelt beside her lover, “what can we do? What do you need me to do?”

Xena just barely stopped herself from shaking her head, the futility of the situation was staring her right in the face. Not only had Kaija been struck hours ago but the girl hadn't sought any help – even a miracle from the gods couldn't save someone who had no will to live. Making up her mind and screwing up her determination against her anger and frustration Xena leaned over to do what she could.

“Gabrielle, I need needle and thread; get a fire going. Tai'gee, water now.” This last command was barked sharply, snapping the stunned girl back to attention. “Water,” Xena repeated and tossed her empty waterskin at the girl, then turned to her patient. “Ephiny, get one of the healers.” Ephiny looked up a moment, then darted for the woods towards the village.

Stepping up quickly and quietly to her friend Gabrielle touched the tense shoulder of the warrior and knelt beside her again. The Queen handed her a needle and several strands of her own blonde hair. When Xena eye-cocked her question to the blonde, Gabrielle quickly said, “I don't have any thread on me – best I could do.”

Shaking her head the warrior looked up to find Tai'gee, but she hadn't returned with the water yet. “What is taking her so long? And where is the rest of the patrol? Ephiny shouldn't have had to go all the way back the village.” Gabrielle only shrugged.

“So what do you think?” Gabrielle ventured while Xena threaded the needle with one of the hairs.

“Hold this,” the warrior handed the needle off to the blonde. She began tearing her tunic into strips, tossing longer pieces off to the side and keeping the smaller ones close at hand. “I think we've got our work cut out for us,” she answered at last. “Where in Tartarus is that girl?”

Gabrielle started to get up to find Tai'gee or the necessary water, but just then Tai'gee returned, followed closely by Amana. Xena frowned even more, but ordered Tai'gee to hurry with the waterskin. “Give it to Gabrielle and stay back over there.”

“But – but I thought-” the girl stammered.

“Do it now,” the warrior growled. “And keep quiet.”

After Tai'gee had backed away with her friend, Xena told Gabrielle to pour some of the water down Kaija's throat. “We need her body to start making blood again as quickly as possible.” She used the remaining water to clean the dried blood away from the protruding weapons. “Now that I can see what I'm doing, let's get these out.”

One of the arrows was just below her ribs, very close to the girl's stomach. Xena assumed the organ hadn't been punctured since Kaija wasn't vomiting blood. That arrow was the least of her worries. The second arrow was much lower, at her pelvis. From the blood stain she guessed it had grazed the wall of one of the big arteries leading to Kaija's leg. A full sever would have killed Kaija in a matter of minutes, her blood gushing like a waterfall forced through one of the Amazons' piping structures. As Xena moved the arrow slightly the blood did begin to flow

liberally; ‘so it’s resting on the cut it’s made, holding it closed.’ She grimaced. And the point was just in front of the pelvic bone, which meant she couldn’t finish pushing it through. Pulling it out would be very risky. The knife was going to be the best place to start. It wasn’t embedded very far, but it was at an odd angle, like it had been stabbed in from a high place. It too was just embedded in flesh – and Xena realized Kaija’s massive amount of muscle had probably saved her life...again.

Steeling herself, Xena gripped the knife handle and tugged up firmly. With the sickening schick only a knife embedded in flesh can make the weapon came free. Quickly wiping the blood away from the blade and handle as best she could, Xena tossed the knife over to Gabrielle. “Heat it.” Xena inserted her fingers into the knife hole to feel exactly the path the blade had cut. ‘No heavy blood flow, that’s good.’ Xena could feel Kaija’s thready pulse squeeze lightly around her fingers. It was amazing really – she could feel Kaija’s body trying to heal itself around the wound, but she could also sense its exhaustion. Glancing down she saw the girl’s necklace – the arrowhead caught her attention with a dim red glow. “Hold on little one. We’ll get through this.” She did wish she believed herself more than she did though.

After using the knife to cauterize its wound, Xena moved around quickly to the uppermost arrow. Snapping off most of the shaft, she used the remaining twig to push the arrow completely through, taking the heavy head from Kaija’s back and pulling the shaft free. She tossed both pieces over with the bloody rags. After cauterizing the second wound, Xena moved to the last arrow. Gabrielle joined her in contemplation after replacing the knife in the fire.

“It’s a very heavy head,” Xena explained. “A warhead, big and square. See the hole? It’s cut and plugged the main artery, here. I can’t push it out and I can’t let it stay. Where is Ephiny?”

“Can it wait? I mean it’s already been so long, would some more time make that much difference?”

Xena sighed. “I think so. The more Kaija is moved, the more that wound keeps jostling – blood’s not just flowing out, it’s seeping into her body.” She sighed again, then set her face. “I’m going to pull out the arrow, then plug the cut with my finger. Hand me that needle when I say.”

In one rapid jerk Xena yanked the arrow out, wincing as a sizeable chunk of muscle came with it. It was sickening, but necessary. Two fingers jabbed into the gaping hole. She unsheathed her breast dagger with her free hand, deftly using the blade to make a lengthening incision. When she asked for the needle, Gabrielle promptly handed it over, careful not to hover too close and block the light.

“This is the smallest we’ve got?”

Gabrielle nodded. “It’s the only one we’ve got – I’m lucky to have had it with me.”

“Not lucky enough. It’s too large – I’ll just shred the artery with it.” Growling in frustration, Xena looked at the needle again, reconsidering. ‘No, I can’t use this.’ But with every heart beat

the artery would slip in Xena's hold, and the escaping blood made it more and more difficult to hold. "Where is--"

On cue, Ephiny and Cylene emerged from the trees, followed by two Royal and two Elite Guards. "Sorry," the Regent panted. "I had to go all the way back."

Moving to them quickly, Cylene assessed the situation. Nodding purposefully the young healer asked for the details.

"That arrow cut the artery – it's not big, but..."

Without hesitation the healer turned to the Guard and told them she needed gum sap and some aloe leaves. Two took off for the woods. "We can't sew it," Cylene explained, "the pulse will cut the artery around the thread. We have to plug it long enough for the wall to seal itself." Once the Guards returned with the request, Cylene went to work.

Xena periodically blotted blood away as Cylene needed. She could feel Gabrielle and Ephiny standing close by, both of their concentrated stares energizing the air around them. Glancing up she saw Tai'gee also watching intently, wrapped in Amana's arms. Amana watched without expression, Xena thought; maybe with subtle curiosity, but she couldn't be sure.

Despite the need for alacrity, Cylene was painstaking in her deliberate procedure, leaning over so closely to Kaija's wound she looked like a scavenger grabbing its share of the carcass. Cylene scraped some of the sap from the broad leaf the guard brought, and squeezed some juice from the aloe leaves before mixing it all with her finger, careful not to make it too watery. Gently she smeared the sap across the cut then pressed a small piece of the broad leaf against the glue-like sap.

"Ok," she said at last, "we won't burn this one closed. We'll need to remove the casing in about six hours to avoid infection. Should be healed enough by then. I brought some poultices for swelling and infection. That's going to be the biggest hazard at this point. We should wait till dark to move her, let her body heal some first."

Xena nodded and stood. "Thank you Cylene."

With detachment, Cylene wiped her bloody hands on a clean rag. "Don't thank me yet. I did what I could, as did you, but it's not up to us anymore."

"How is she?" Tai'gee asked from her sideline, taking tentative steps toward the group.

The healer addressed the group at large. "Sleeping right now, which is best. She's lost a lot of blood over a fairly long period of time. Her body was shutting down."

"But will she be alright?" Tai'gee pressed.

Cylene looked grave, as did Xena, knowing the truth of the situation. “If she is to survive, three things must happen. One, the blood has to get replaced, fast. Two, she has to stave off infection. Three...” The healer looked at Xena.

“What? What’s the last one?” insisted Tai’gee. Xena nodded at the healer.

“She has to want to survive.”

To Xena and Gabrielle’s extreme consternation, Tai’gee sighed. “Good,” the girl breathed easily, “she’ll be alright. Her body heals really fast, and her instincts won’t let her do anything but survive. I’ve seen it lots of times before – it’s like magic; she’ll be fine in no time.”

The Warrior Princess barely contained a raging retort. Beside her she felt Gabrielle hold back too, a shudder passed through her as she clamped her jaw shut. Xena did appreciate that at least Tai’gee noticed the less than approving responses to her comments, but her look of confusion was irksome nonetheless.

“Amana,” Ephiny called to the Yearie standing discretely behind Tai’gee. “Why are you here?”

“I’m not on duty Regent Ephiny. I was taking a walk, waiting for Tai’gee to finish her duties when I heard her shout.”

Ephiny’s hazel eyes were as hard as her scowl. She pinned Amana with a severe glare. “So you tell me, as a Guard contender, you allowed your Regent to run unaided back to the village?”

Tai’gee looked down while Amana attempted to keep a dignified expression. The Yearie made a point of keeping her eyes on Ephiny rather than acknowledge Xena’s studious stare. Ephiny continued. “That will add weight to your evaluation. Now, answer carefully; you say you were walking when you heard Tai’gee shout. Was there anything else you saw or heard?”

“No Lady Regent, there was nothing else until I found Tai’gee going for water.”

Ephiny let it go. She ordered her two personal guards to stay with Kaija and help bring her to the village at dusk. Gabrielle sat down next to the unconscious girl. Xena continued to study Amana.

Tai’gee chose that moment to step forward. “Regent, will there be an investigation?”

“Of course.”

“I would like to be involved, if I may,” the youth stated firmly.

Ephiny considered her for a moment. “I suspect you will be.” She turned to leave, followed by the remaining guards.

Stormy black eyes watched the retreating entourage and repeated Ephiny's last words. "I suspect you will be.' What in Tartarus is that supposed to mean?"

"I don't know," answered Amana who moved to embrace her lover. "Sounds like she's going to be throwing a lot of accusations around."

Gabrielle started to give a very stinging reprimand but Xena gave her arm such a hard squeeze the blonde could only swallow a squeak of pain.

"What do you mean?" asked Tai'gee.

"I mean what I said. She all but accused me of having something to do with this. 'Answer carefully.' Why doesn't she just try me now? And in front of everyone, too. Just because someone took a shot at her pet."

Gabrielle did jump up then. "Hey!"

"Amana!" Tai'gee protested.

"What?" the Yearie maintained. "It's true. No one likes her except you two and the Regent. All it looks like to everyone else is pet-sitting; like this is some kennel." She all but spit the end of her criticism at the Royal couple's feet.

The conversation Xena had overheard the day before came rushing back with cacophonous alarm bells. She was barely able to control herself. She clenched her fists so tightly the white of her knuckles seemed to emit light. 'If Amana had something to do with this, I'll kill her with my bare hands,' her dark side growled in her mind. The guards standing at the edge of the clearing timidly put their hands on their swords and looked nervously at each other. "Who are we going to need to guard?" the brunette whispered to her dark skinned companion.

"Enough," Xena snarled.

"Amana, I think you should go." Gabrielle stalked up to the lanky Yearie. "Now."

"I'll go when-"

"You'll go when your Queen tells you," she snapped back. "And I said now."

Amana's scowl was bitter, but she turned and stomped off without a look back. Xena thought she heard something to the effect of "in name only" being mumbled angrily by the retreating figure.

Tai'gee looked between Amana and Kaija, trying to decide what to do. Xena leveled a dangerous glare on the youngest woman. "There was a time there was no decision where Kaija was concerned," she got out between grinding teeth.

“Why are you angry with me? I haven’t done anything!”

“THAT is exactly my point!” Xena moved as though she were going to strangle the girl, forcing Tai’gee to step back involuntarily. Gabrielle jumped in to take away the target of Xena’s building murderous rage.

The petite blonde nodded the girl off to the side, strategically placing herself between her and Xena. She took a deep breath to settle herself.

“Tai’gee, you’ve accomplished a lot here, but we didn’t bring you two here for just your benefit. We brought you here because Kaija needed a home and friends. It doesn’t look to me like she has either. In fact, it looks like she has less than she came here with.” She paused to see if any of it had sunk in for the girl. Unsure, she continued. “Do you remember when we’d first met the both of you? Xena called Kaija more animal than human and if you could have, you would’ve killed her for it. But Amana just now…”

Tai’gee looked to the place where Amana had disappeared into the woods. “She was just angry. She didn’t mean it.”

Gabrielle pressed her lips together tightly. “Hopefully that just means you’ve learned forgiveness.” She blew a heavy sigh. “I’m going to be frank with you, and I’m sorry for it.” She took a steadying look back at Kaija; Xena was kneeling beside her, checking her forehead and trickling water into her mouth with a stick. “*If* she lives through this, we’re going to take her away from here – from you.”

Shock, confusion, anger – her final expression became indistinguishable. “Take her where?” she asked quietly through grinding teeth.

“It doesn’t matter. Does it?”

“Why are you acting like I shot her? It’s not my fault!”

“She doesn’t want to live Tai’gee!” Gabrielle shouted at the girl; it was either that or slap her. With slightly more control, she said, “she was sitting there, letting herself bleed to death. She doesn’t think she has anyth- anyone to live for. What part of that don’t you get?”

Tai’gee stamped her foot in childlike frustration. “Stop trying to make this my fault. She’s grown, and she’s half cat; I am not her keeper!”

Gabrielle’s face went cold. “No. You’re supposed to be her friend.” She turned to join Xena, too mad to say anything else to the girl. She must have looked every bit as angry as she felt because Xena immediately put out her arm to hold her by her side – a rare public display of affection. Tai’gee’s stormy departure was only witnessed by the guards.

~

Dusk came slowly. Gabrielle sat by Kaija's side, holding her hand. She wanted Kaija to wake up, to see the vibrant golden eyes so she could be sure Kaija would be ok – but on the other hand she wanted Kaija to stay asleep because she was sure once the girl woke up she would be in a world of pain.

“Last time she was stabbed she slept all night and was out hunting deer the next morning,” she said with a meek smile to Xena who was pacing around them.

“I have a feeling this may be a little different.”

The deepening sunlight glinted off Gabrielle's blonde locks, shimmering as she shook her head no. “This doesn't make any sense, Xena. Who would want to kill her? Why? All this for a few pranks?”

Xena frowned. This wasn't about a few pranks, she was sure of it. “She's a threat to someone here.”

“But who could feel threatened by her? She's hardly around – and when she is, she stays hidden and watching from the shadows.”

Xena looked at the glen again – Kaija had been here, all the way at the back of the celebration, completely unnoticed by everyone. She recounted the tavern conversation she'd overheard to Gabrielle. “But I have no idea who those four were. They sounded young, around Tai'gee's age.”

“And Kaija was apparently worried about being attacked – she kept asking Tai'gee if an Amazon could or would hurt another Amazon. You think that's why she wanted to leave? To get away from whoever was trying to hurt her?”

She said no. Xena took in a deep breath and blew it out in a heavy, laden gust. The air was getting crisper as night approached. “If she was worried about her health she would've called for help. She just sat here.”

Gabrielle looked back down at Kaija. The girl's face was slack, nothing so much as a twitch behind her eyes. “Why?” she asked, gently placing her hands on either side of the girl's face. “Why didn't you just say something? We would've helped you.”

“She didn't want help,” Xena said. “Especially ours. She hasn't wanted us here since we arrived. Like *we're* a threat to her.”

“Xena that's just silly. She knows we wouldn't hurt her.”

“She might know that we wouldn't intentionally hurt her. But we might be getting in the way of something else.”

“Like what? Keeping her out of trouble is hurting her? Xena, this doesn’t make any sense. How is our being here, keeping a girl, who doesn’t spend any time with anyone anyway, out of trouble a threat to her?”

“They don’t want her here – that was the point,” Xena snapped. “They don’t want her in admissions, they don’t want her hiding out, they don’t want her around. Apparently she’s inclined to agree with them, and we’re preventing that.”

“That’s unacceptable.” Gabrielle stormed up from her position. A strong finger jabbed defiantly at the ground in protest, “I do not accept this. She is a child, lost and alone; she doesn’t deserve this.” Fat tears brimmed over, spilling down hot, angry cheeks. Xena moved to her partner, encircling her in strong, gentle arms.

“Shh-sh-sh-shhhh... I know. I’m scared too love. But we’ll fix it. I promise. We’ll fix this.”

Xena was reluctant to take Kaija back to the village, but as Gabrielle pointed out, if infection did set in they would need all the help they could get. Kaija hadn’t woken up or even stirred the rest of the day, which Xena feared might be a sign of the young woman’s struggle to come back to the living. “I’ve seen this before – it’s like a sleeping disease,” the warrior explained softly to her partner. “They sleep and can’t be woken, but they don’t die as long as they’re fed. I’ve seen them stay like this for weeks.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. It’s like they’re shocked out of their bodies and their spirit, if it finds its way back, is deciding whether to re-enter the body... or not.”

The village was quiet, even for a quiet night. Xena spied many shadowed and back-lit personages watching their slow trek to the healing hut. She had no doubt everyone in the village, down to the youngest children, knew about the attempt on Kaija’s life. Disgustedly she wondered how many would be rejoicing, whether or not Kaija died. Begrudgingly, Xena admitted Kaija’s behavior wouldn’t have encouraged much sympathy, but she believed most of those approving of the attack would instead be clamoring for justice and encouraging Kaija to fight her way back if they knew the girl like she did. Confirmation of the village’s dissonance came with Ephiny’s late night visit to the healing hut. The Regent called Gabrielle and Xena over to talk.

“How is she?”

Gabrielle answered. “The same. Cylene removed the gum thing earlier and was really impressed with the results. So far no fever, so that’s good.”

Ephiny nodded with reserved approval. “I’ll pray to the Goddess that remains so. I don’t think she’s going to get much support from the village. The Council isn’t willing to prosecute whoever did this.”

“What?” both Xena and Gabrielle exploded. The smaller woman immediately lowered her voice and hissed her protest. “How can they? Murder was attempted on Amazon land. Defense of Amazon life is the first Rite of Artemis. How can they turn away?”

The gravity of her position exhausted Ephiny and it showed in her tired, cracking voice. “Kaija is not an Amazon. They don’t feel it is their duty. If an Amazon is responsible, she has not transgressed against a sister.”

“But what if it was Xena lying there? The Council wouldn’t disregard the attack then, would they? I’ve seen warriors tried for shooting unarmed, surrendering Roman soldiers, for gods’ sakes! How can they justify this?”

“That’s what I explained to them,” Ephiny insisted. “But they argue for all the good Xena has done for the Nation. Kaija has been trouble for us since she arrived. I had no defense for that.”

“The defense is that it’s not right,” Gabrielle stamped impetuously. Xena raised a hand to rest lightly on her shoulder, absorbing some of the tension there. “So it means nothing that she is an Amazon initiate? They’re saying she has no rights?”

“The truth is they were ready to dismiss her. They feel now the village is voicing its wish to banish her as well.” Ephiny sighed, then sank heavily into one of the padded wooden chairs in the corner. “I’ve tried everything I know to try. They want Kaija to leave as soon as she’s able.”

Gabrielle sighed too, grumpily forcing a hand through her fine blonde hair. “I know you’ve tried Eph. It’s not you I’m frustrated with. Xena, what’re we going to do?”

Xena had been considering this the whole time. “The Council isn’t willing to support Kaija,” she said slowly, ponderously. “But what about supporting itself?”

Ephiny and Gabrielle looked confused. Xena continued. “The Council may have been about to dismiss Kaija, but they hadn’t done it yet. Which means someone – if it was an Amazon – was trying to take the judgement out of the Council’s hands; a vigilante. And this vigilante is willing to go to the extent of murder. I’d say that’s something pretty serious to think about.”

Gabrielle nodded. “Even if they don’t prosecute on Kaija’s behalf they should do it at least to protect their own authority. Gods – that just sounds so disgusting.”

“But it might be our only play,” Ephiny added. Standing, the Regent smoothed out her robes and turned to leave. “I don’t think there will be another attack on Kaija, least likely here. But just in case, there is a guard at the window and door. You two don’t have to stay for her protection.”

Xena smiled her thanks. “We appreciate it Eph.”

~

The last time Xena had been in a hall of health was at the Temple of Esclepius, with Galen praying over the bodies of dead, dying and wounded soldiers. Gabrielle had gotten hurt in a pointless war there, and Xena had almost lost her lifemate. Almost. Almost was much too close. All of Xena's expertise in battle surgery had amounted to nothing – she had been reduced to a tearful and panicked plea to Gabrielle's soul not to leave her. "Fight!" And if Gabrielle hadn't been as strong as she was, if Gabrielle had lost... she honestly couldn't say what she would have done. She would never have been whole again, and though she'd promised the little bardlette chipping her way into her closely guarded heart that she would not become a monster, fighting that battle alone would have been unfathomably more difficult. She'd never wanted to set foot in another hospice again after that night; she never wanted to be enclosed in the fears and dark possibilities of life that those type of buildings attracted – she didn't want to be surrounded by people prostrate and supplicant to "Please."

But that was exactly the kind of building she was now in; pleading for a life, though not her bard's, that was still precious. Running long, graceful fingers through her dark hair, Xena resettled her elbows on the windowsill, staring out at the night darkened and despondent village. The guard was standing just off to the side of the opening. Behind her Gabrielle heaved a heavy sigh and pulled an empty patient bed closer to Kaija's. "What a mess," she said sadly. "Just everything... a mess."

"Yeah. But most important is that Kaija makes it through this. And that's going to be a lot harder without Tai'gee."

Gabrielle pulled some extra blankets from nearby shelves. "Maybe we were wrong Xena," she ventured pensively. "Maybe they aren't meant to be what we thought."

"Do you really believe that?" asked Xena, throwing a doubtful look over her shoulder.

"No, not really," Gabrielle admitted. "But Tai'gee is so focused on Amana and so not focused on Kaija."

Xena turned away from the window. "Yeah, and you were married to a man once."

"That's true," she mumbled.

Coming over to rub strong arms affectionately, Xena chuckled softly. "I'm sorry. The point is that sometimes people need some time to find themselves and their proper path."

Gabrielle turned in her lover's arms. "But that's why we brought them here. It looks to me like they're finding all the wrong things. Least of all each other."

Xena smiled wider then. "That's exactly what I thought many times about you."

"You did?"

“Oh yeah. When you marched off back to Potedia; when you went to marry Perdicus; when you were deciding whether to stay and be Queen. But each time we found our way back to each other. And I think we always will as long as we’re able.”

Gabrielle hugged the tall warrior to her tightly and even moreso when she felt the hug returned.

“We just need to keep Kaija safe. I think Tai’gee will come around,” said Xena as she stroked Gabrielle’s fine blonde hair with soothing caresses.

“I hope so.”

~

By the next afternoon infection did set in, and as Xena feared, it was the artery wound that became infected. The arrowhead they had left suspended around her neck glowed brightly, red like a hot coal, but it was cool to the touch when Xena fingered it, cold in fact.

“The infection is being pumped throughout her body; it’s going everywhere, her lungs, her heart, her brain...” Cylene informed them with a straight face.

“What can we do? Is there anything?” Gabrielle had been frantic since discovering the girl’s rabid fever. She’d nearly scared Xena to death with her frenetic scream for help.

Cylene, with that damnable professional gravity merely shook her head. “The leeches didn’t work. I’ve never seen a person survive once infection reached the blood. Usually takes a day or so. It might be more humane if-”

“No.” Both women squashed the attempted suggestion definitively.

Xena paced the length of the room in thought, hands clasped tightly behind her. “Once I met a warlord from Britania who said his army had suffered a terrible defeat. His two closest friends had been gored, like most of the others. Of the ones that survived the battle, all they had left to offer was stale, moldy bread to eat. He refused to give it to his friends, but he said the lesser soldiers who ate it, they survived the infection. He swears by that bread – says he cost his friends their lives.”

It was a blessing that it happened to be between serving hours at the mess hall. Only Minosha and her undercooks were in the building cleaning up, cooking, getting prepared for lunch. The silver-haired head-cook looked up when daylight flooded her hall, ready to shout at whomever dared to come in during off-hours. Nothing peeved her more than earlybirds or latecomers who came to beg for food because they missed serving time. Her scolding died on her lips however when she recognized the unmistakable silhouette of the Warrior Princess, Queen at her side, Regent on the other. Wiping her hands hastily on her apron she bustled over to meet them.

“Minosha,” Xena greeted.

“Xena. Your Ladyships. I heard about the girl. Damnable thing, I was sorry to hear about it. Girl may’ve run off with some of my crockery but that don’t deserve none of that.”

Gabrielle was grateful for the kind words. “Thank you Minosha. It’s nice to hear some people have some sympathy for her.”

The hefty woman hummed. “You all need something to eat? Ain’t really got lunch up yet, but there’s some bits left from breakfast if you’d like.”

“Actually Minosha, we’re hoping you might have something a little older than breakfast...”

Happy portliness led the way to the very back of the kitchens, just before they exited out to the animal pens. Minosha had indeed kept bread past prime, using it as fodder for the pigs and fowl. “They’ll eat anything, they don’t care. And if you ask me, they’re better off for it. No pampering, no punnies.”

“That is exactly what we’re hoping for.” Xena thanked the cook and they made their way back to the healing hut.

They soaked the bread in milk and mixed it with a little honey – honey because Gabrielle felt bad for giving the girl molded bread, even for the promise it portended. Carefully they fed it to her, and again in the morning, midday and evening the next day. Gabrielle stayed by Kaija’s bedside, watching, waiting with almost childlike hope that the prescription would work like magic and Kaija would just wake up.

Xena was tired, as was Gabrielle, as was Ephiny. But they would stay up with Kaija as much as they possibly could – there was no telling what could tip the scale, and they weren’t going to let it be a lack love and support. Tai’gee hadn’t come to visit Kaija at all since the previous afternoon. There was no telling what impact that might be having on the unconscious girl.

“Many things can get worked into our dreams, even as we are alive – imagine what visions the dead must see.” She remembered the passing bard who’d spoken of a beautiful princess cursed to sleep until her true love took pity on her enough to venture to Olympus and ask Zeus for help. She hadn’t liked the bard, and she hadn’t really liked the story – in fact, she hadn’t remembered either until that moment. But she did wonder where Kaija might be, or what the young woman was thinking, feeling, dreaming... deciding.

The next day, at midday, after the Queen had fed her patient again, one of the guards at the door cleared her throat softly and stepped inside. “My Queen... there’s someone here.”

‘Who could be here that needed an announcement?’ The one person that came to mind made Gabrielle’s heart skip excitedly and she bounced to the door, ready to greet Tai’gee, only to stop cold and stare at the tiny blonde girl kneeling at the doorstep. “Yes?”

Deep blue eyes looked up, startling Gabrielle for a moment – they weren’t piercing like Xena’s but they were distinct in hue. Her hair was a wispy, pale blonde, pulled back into a loose braid.

Her face and body were thin, not meager, but she looked like a child with a certain frailness one wanted to protect her from by carrying her all day. “Can I see Kaija?” she asked, hissing through the hole of a conspicuously missing front tooth.

‘This has to be’ “Pi?”

The child was surprised, and bowed her head again. “Yes, Queen Gabrielle.”

The image of a happy girl barreling into Kaija who smoothly picked her up and walked through town with the burbling child danced across Gabrielle’s memory, and she hiccuped on a sob. This was Kaija’s first and only visitor, her first and only Amazon friend, and she was probably no more than six years old. She didn’t think Kaija would want her little friend to see her like she was, nor did she want to destroy that image of Kaija for Pi, especially if Kaija died. Kneeling down slowly, clasping her hands in front of her, Gabrielle explained in a wavering voice that Kaija was very, very sick and couldn’t see anybody right then.

“Kaija doesn’t get sick,” the girl said plainly, looking up from her bow. There was a glint of mistrust in her blue eyes, of defense. Gabrielle warmed up to her immediately.

“Well, Kaija doesn’t get sick very often, but she is sick now-”

“I know what happened. Someone tried to kill her. But you can’t kill Kaija, she wouldn’t let someone kill her.” *Of course* this was Kaija’s friend; Kaija would be the only one to find the single person in an entire village of hostility that was as fervent and direct as she was. There was so much trust and belief in Kaija radiating from the little blonde, Gabrielle felt tears of true sympathy.

“Kaija walks me to class now, sometimes,” Pi continued when Gabrielle didn’t say anything more. “She...” Fat tears started brimming in her eyes, and in an effort to keep them back, Pi lowered her head again. It didn’t work, and she impatiently pushed herself to stand before the Queen, little fists balled up, chest heaving. “She’s *my* friend! When can I see her?” she demanded. The guards by the door giggled. Pi shot them both equally dirty looks then glared back at Gabrielle, who was still trying to figure out what to say. “Everyone laughs at her, even though she’s nice to everyone,” she said through her angry tears. “She keeps people from getting hurt, and no one cares. She said that was ok because it only mattered that they’re safe.” Pointing an accusing finger at the guard with a nasty scar running down her chest, Pi hiccuped through her sobs, “I saw her save you.”

Gabrielle turned to watch the smile on the guard’s face fall to nothing. When the guard’s eyes darted nervously to Gabrielle and saw her watching, the woman straightened her stance and snapped her attention forward, forcing her gaze to stare at attentive nothingness.

“What does she mean?” asked Gabrielle. “What do you mean?” she turned to Pi again.

“She was walking with the woman Kaija came with, and they stepped in a trap. Kaija got them out,” she said with amplified dignity. Looking again at the guard, she added, “You didn’t even say thank you.”

It was Gabrielle’s turn to rise and stare at the guard. “Is this true?”

The guard hesitated to respond. “Yes, Lady Queen.”

“What trap? Why was there a trap on Amazon land?”

“It wasn’t a trap My Queen-”

“-Kaija said-”

The guard shot a belittling look at Pi. “-It wasn’t a trap, it was an accident. She must have been mistaken.” Gabrielle merely waited for more. “It was a foggy day in the woods,” the woman explained quickly, “and we tripped over some tools someone had left in the leaves. We started to fall down a ravine but th- uh – Kaija caught us.”

“I see.” Gabrielle was openly skeptical but asked nothing more. “You are dismissed.” With a stiff salute, the guard shuffled off, leaving the remaining guard, Gabrielle and Pi all standing on the doorstep looking at each other.

“They weren’t tools,” Pi pressed. Gabrielle lifted her hands to stay whatever else the girl was going to throw out. She didn’t want to talk about this anymore out in the open, and not without Xena. Pi, not knowing the intricacies behind Gabrielle’s command, bowed again. When she rose, an expression of outrage and insult were petrified on her little face. “I have to go to class,” she said quickly, then turned and ran away. Gabrielle sighed heavily before turning back into the hut.

~

For three more days they uncomfortably fed Kaija some version of molded bread. Finally the fever broke. Whether that was a good thing remained to be seen – Kaija still did not wake.

“It’s amazing – an infection of the blood and she survived,” Cylene marveled the next week after returning from a call to an outer-rim village. “I can’t believe it. She’s alive.”

“Well, she’s got a pulse and she’s breathing, but I wouldn’t go much farther than that,” Xena said tentatively.

“If it weren’t for those two things, I’d think she had already died,” Gabrielle confessed tiredly. “I don’t see how she can survive much longer anyway – she’s practically wasting away as it is.”

Kaija had begun to look quite emaciated, Xena admitted to herself. She was gaunt and sallow, with an expressionless face that really would have looked no different in death. Her hair had

gone limp and was starting to thin. The arrowhead at her neck seemed to get brighter with each passing day, and Xena and Gabrielle took turns guessing at its meaning. The best they could come up with was that it was a reflection of Kaija's soul fighting to hang onto its mortality. Oddly there was no change with the feathers, gifts from Kaija's father when he died, delivered to her by Athena. Xena figured if the arrowhead was showing some activity, the feathers should too...

"She's so weak now." Gabrielle shook her head sadly. "This is awful. I hate it. I just hate it."

Xena had moved to comfort her, wrapping her in long, strong arms. The Warrior Princess hadn't realized how sapped her bard had become until then. In a moment of grief, Gabrielle began to sob uncontrollably into Xena's chest.

The passing weeks had been very difficult for all of them. As the time passed the village became less interested in Kaija's condition, and so ultimately did not support an investigation into her attack. The Council finally decided that, while it did not support Amazon vigilantes, further action on its part would come to no prosperous end. Ephiny had been furious. Even between her efforts as Regent and Gabrielle's as Queen, the Council would not be moved. Tai'gee had not visited Kaija once in the three weeks of Kaija's confinement, and the girl's indifference or cowardice ignited a simmering rage in Xena that grew hotter and hotter with each passing day.

"We can't make her come – and even if we did, that wouldn't do any good if she doesn't want to be here," Gabrielle had reasoned a couple days earlier. Xena had seen Tai'gee passing in the square, laughing with Amana, and the dark woman had been so angry she'd broken one of the patient beds in half with one crack from her fist. "She's obviously made her decision. If Kaija's going to move on, we have to, too." Gabrielle pulled Xena away from the window and they'd gone to dinner in Ephiny's hut.

Gabrielle had yet to relate Pi's visit to the healing hut to Xena and Ephiny, and took the time to do so over their dinner.

"A trap? What kind of trap?" asked Ephiny.

Gabrielle shrugged. "One involving 'not tools' and a ravine. I didn't ask Pi more about it there in the open. I think we should talk to her though. What do you think, Xena?"

Steely blue eyes flicked from Queen to Regent and back. "I think that explains why Kaija was worried about an Amazon hurting another Amazon," she stated definitively.

"How do you mean?" Ephiny, who hadn't been aware of that particular issue, set her unfinished dinner aside.

"Tai'gee said Kaija had been asking if an Amazon would hurt another Amazon, a sister would hurt a sister. Obviously Kaija was asking for a reason; we assumed she was worried about someone attacking her. But if she found a trap in the woods--"

Gabrielle shook her head. “Xena, Tai’gee only just became an Amazon – she – oh shit.” Realization hit her like a landslide. “Kaija’s been worried someone’s trying to hurt Tai’gee.”

“Or kill her,” added Xena

“Wait, I don’t understand,” said Ephiny. “What’s going on?”

Xena weighed the new information carefully, turning it about like she was handling the most fragile of precious things. “Think about it. Kaija knows there are a lot of people who don’t want her here. She also knows she can’t leave unless you or we say she can. So whoever doesn’t want her here sets her up for expulsion – either gets her to steal things and make a nuisance of herself or just makes up reports of thefts. But more than likely, Kaija doesn’t want to leave because Tai’gee is here. So they blackmail her – threaten harm to Tai’gee unless Kaija gets expelled.”

“So Kaija’s been watching after Tai’gee all this time? To keep her safe until she’s inducted as an Amazon?” Ephiny made her conclusion warily. “That seems like an awfully grandiose conspiracy to me.” She thought about it some more. “But it makes sense I suppose,” she conceded, “especially once the attack is added in – with Tai’gee now a consecrated Amazon, they don’t have any more leverage, so they go after Kaija directly.”

“Still,” Gabrielle pressed after taking a sip from her wine cup, “why would someone want Kaija gone so badly they’d want to kill her, or Tai’gee, or anyone for that matter.”

“Prejudice,” Ephiny suggested frankly. “People have done worse and more out of hate.”

“We need to find that guard. If that was a trap she and Tai’gee got into, she might be more involved in this,” said Gabrielle.

Xena rose, her chair scraping loudly against the floorboards. “I’m going back to the healing hut. It doesn’t sound like we can trust the Guard as much as we thought. We should watch after Kaija ourselves.”

~

‘No more lessons.’ That was one of Tai’gee’s biggest pleasures from having passed her Exam. Her lengthy classes and homework assignments were replaced with tours of duty – namely, marching the wall. The West Wall to be exact, and she had the morning shift to start with. As she proved herself and gained more experience as a warrior, she would advance to later shifts, potentially more demanding walls as well. She was honored that she got to start her duties at the actual gate, rather than marching along the long stretch of platform behind the second wall looking out over the western woods. The gate was where the activity was.

Despite the reprieve from hours sitting in a classroom, those hours were replaced with Guard Training. Every afternoon after the zenith break, Tai’gee reported to the sparring fields for

grueling drills, obstacle courses, full contact sparring – anything that would leave the trainees bruised, potentially bleeding, and definitely exhausted. She loved it.

She'd also fallen into a tense routine with Amana. The Yearie would be waiting at her hut for Tai'gee to return from the wall; they would spend the couple hours of peace they could get resting and cuddling, and then they would walk together to the fields. Amana would teach her afternoon children's class and once they were finished, they met for dinner. While it was a regular and simple schedule, Tai'gee could feel a subtle chaffing in spending all of her free time with Amana. It wasn't that she didn't like Amana's company, but she noticed Amana seemed insistent, needy, even a little desperate for Tai'gee's attention. Two weeks after her induction, Tai'gee found out why.

What many Amazons didn't realize about the space between the walls was that it was an amplifier. Sound echoed off the back of the outer wall and the front of the inner wall and right into the ears of the watching guards. Private sentiments, rumors, gossip, plans – the sentries had heard them all. Tai'gee's introduction to the "Channel of Secrets" began with one woman's disgust over a Guard Hopeful's apparent abandonment of the Regent. "Why is she still in the running – that's what I want to know. She should've been arrested, tried and removed from Contention. She's obviously unfit."

"Well, would you want to run all the way to the common to save the life of that cat bitch?" her companion asked.

"Doesn't matter. Her focus is the Regent – and Queen now that she's back. I can tell you there's no one in my unit who'd want her as a battle sister."

"Hmm... you know, even after all that, that animal is still alive I heard."

"That's because she's got a god's favor. I heard Athena made her immortal."

"If she's immortal then why is she still in the healing hut? That's stupid."

"Hiding I bet. Xena keeps her locked up so no one else'll shoot her!"

They continued to laugh as they passed through the inner gate into the Capitol, under Tai'gee's feet. She felt a strong sympathy for Amana's plight – being regarded as an unfit warrior would have killed Tai'gee. But if she was honest with herself, *she* wouldn't have been in Amana's position. Her first thought when her lover had found her in the woods was that she should go see if Xena needed any help – when she'd said as much, Amana refused, wanting to help Tai'gee instead. At the time, Tai'gee had been glad to have Amana by her side, but as soon as Ephiny had called Amana out Tai'gee knew her friend had made the wrong decision. Now she suffered for it; being outcast by her friends and fellow warriors was no doubt spurring Amana to hold even tighter to her relationship with Tai'gee.

More significant, however, were Tai'gee's torrential emotions towards Kaija and her infirmity. The impact of this new knowledge was much stronger than the fleeting condolence Tai'gee felt for Amana, and that incurred a thoughtful grinding of teeth.

Tai'gee knew Kaija wasn't immortal, but Athena had granted her an extraordinary capacity to heal herself. If her ability was overwhelmed, Kaija would die; otherwise she would be back to her normal health in record time. That's what bothered Tai'gee the most – if Kaija was healthy, there was no way she would stay sequestered indoors, even for her own protection. 'However,' she added to herself as she did an about face and walked in the opposite direction, 'Xena and Gabrielle are the most determinedly persuasive people in the world. If any earthly force could keep a half feline teenager indoors, they would be that force.'

Amana had told her already there would be no investigation, a tidbit of gossip she'd picked up from her cousin Ahmon. Tai'gee had been profoundly disappointed to say the least, but she'd beaten her sense of unfairness back with the club of public opinion. Had Kaija attempted to ingratiate herself with the Amazons perhaps the Council would have seen fit to investigate. But she was a nuisance to them. Tai'gee refused to acknowledge the voice in her mind that screamed the wrongness of that excuse, and, with a dismissing stamp, about faced again, feeling the tails of her new white sash flick behind her.

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After four weeks of nursing and waiting, Kaija died. Xena had found her still, cold body in the same position as always – on her back, face expressionless and gray, but there was no rise and fall of her chest, no heartbeat, no more hope. Xena couldn't say she was surprised – Kaija had been reduced to skin and bones; a lifeless, spiritless skeleton. Gabrielle had been inconsolable, and even the stoic Ephiny turned away from the bed in tears.

"She fought for a moon – few Amazons ever experience a trial like that, even for a week. She will have an Amazon funeral – if you both wish," Ephiny said.

Xena and Gabrielle had both agreed. Carrying Kaija's body to the funeral pyre was not difficult – she had come to weigh as much as a dog. Gabrielle and Xena carried the girl themselves, Xena singing as they walked, the long moaning song of passing that only she could sing to perfection. Women stopped what they were doing to investigate, because they hadn't been aware one of their sisters had died. When they realized it was the cat girl, many of them turned their heads.

The news had reached Tai'gee as she was pulling vegetables from her garden for dinner. "What's that singing," she'd asked Amana over her shoulder.

"Sounds like Artemis' Death Rite," the warrior answered as she stretched her neck to see. One of the school girls in her battle training class walked by purposefully hurried, trying not to look at Amana.

"Hey Diocese, why is someone singing Artemis' Death Rite?"

The girl answered quickly, without stopping her brisk stride. “It’s Xena. They’re burning the cat girl.”

Tai’gee dropped the yam she had just pulled. “What? Kaija’s dead? She can’t be...”

“I thought she’d’ve died a long time before now,” Amana snorted. She turned to help pull more potatoes from the ground.

Tai’gee stood slowly, feeling sick and sluggish. She had to go – she had to see for herself. She ran from the yard, recklessly through the main street, tripped over several people in the square and headed down the road that would take her to the sparring fields – the place where funerals were held. “We like to hope that we can preserve the great skills of our warriors by continuing our daily lives where they’d last lain,” one of the priestesses had explained to her at her first funeral. Running for all she was worth, Tai’gee staggered onto the sparring field, out of breath and clutching her stinging sides, only to find they’d taken the pyre to the far end, by the woods, and the fire had already been lit.

“No!” She started to run across the field, but Amana caught her up from behind.

“No Tai’gee – let her go. What good is it now?”

“No Amana, let me go! I have to go see her!”

“I’m not letting you go over there Tai’gee. She’s gone. It’ll do no good. Just let her go.”

“No! Amana, no! Kaija!”

Tai’gee woke struggling, though she was alone in her bed. Her dreams were getting worse. Amana had stopped sleeping over at Tai’gee’s hut, tired of having her nights disturbed and no explanation of what her lover was dreaming. “If you don’t want to tell me fine, but I can’t help you if I don’t know what you’re fighting.”

But Tai’gee couldn’t tell her. It didn’t feel right. She felt she was being punished in her dreams for the crimes she was committing during the day – it wasn’t right for her to share that punishment with another, or to try to have it alleviated. The guilt Tai’gee felt over Kaija was palpable to her and the longer she lived with it the heavier it got. The weight of it had bulged three times the day she saw Xena’s smoldering glare on her as she walked by one day, laughing. She’d refused to go to that half of the village again for an entire week just to avoid the mighty, raven-haired warrior.

Considering what Gabrielle had said to her earlier about Kaija’s emerging feelings, Tai’gee realized she was missing the very thing she’d been waiting for so long to experience with Kaija. Then when Gabrielle had asked if Tai’gee was happy with her life, each passing day had brought more and more doubt. She wasn’t even sure when she’d first pushed Kaija away, or why. ‘No, I know why. Because I met an attractive Yearie who wanted to give me everything I was tired of waiting for,’ she thought bitterly.

She did love Amana. Amana was kind to her and she felt good inside her protective embrace, even enjoyed the sometimes overtly possessive demeanor. She felt special and wanted; loving – showing love and seeing love – wasn't nearly as difficult with Amana as it had been with Kaija. Kaija wasn't even aware of what love was.

So Tai'gee had told Kaija to stay back in the shadows, explaining she'd be safer and happier not diving into her newfound humanity all at once. Tai'gee had squashed the little voice that would have told her she was being selfish and unfair the moment it had cleared its throat to protest. Everyday she'd tried to justify to herself not telling Kaija to come out of hiding with the same paltry reasons Kaija accepted from her at face value. Once the other Amazons started showing fear and suspicion towards Kaija, it made it easier for Tai'gee to support her own, initial instructions. She'd briefly wondered if it had gone too far when Kaija started asking her if an Amazon would hurt another Amazon, and that cursed little voice whispered to her that she'd set the village against her friend. But when Kaija started stealing the questions made sense – Kaija wanted to make sure they wouldn't retaliate against her for acting out.

Life without Kaija's constant presence wasn't particularly difficult for Tai'gee either. With Amana's attentions, her enthrallment with training and the pressures of her classes she hadn't any time to miss her. But after Gabrielle's discussion about Kaija's feelings and the threat of losing Kaija permanently – whether by death or being taken away by Xena and Gabrielle – Tai'gee had been obsessed with Kaija. Thinking of her almost every moment and dreaming about her every night was driving her mad. She wondered if she would ever really have noticed Kaija again had Gabrielle not said anything – which, if the answer was yes, told Tai'gee she wouldn't really have minded Kaija's absence. 'But I don't want her to die,' Tai'gee's inner voice screamed. Even if Kaija wasn't there everyday, having the option of seeing her was comforting. "But when she's lying there dying you can't go see her?" Tai'gee asked herself out loud. 'But that's not her. That's a shell.' She sighed roughly, throwing her blankets back. Getting out of bed, she stomped around her small room. 'You're just making excuses. If she's a shell it's because you made her that way. She trusted you, and you abandoned her, just like Gabrielle said. Gods. When did this happen?' When the next question came to mind she froze. 'What had Kaija been to me before this that I could just dump her like that?'

The truth was that Kaija had been everything for Tai'gee, *her* reason to live. She'd seen the world and all it promised in Kaija's eyes since they'd first met in the woods. Her heart, as a child, had screamed outrageously when her father had tried to kill the little wild thing, and it screamed at her now with the same force and passion. No one had provided for Tai'gee like Kaija had, finding food and fuel when everyone else in their village had relied on stores. Tai'gee's aunt and uncle had been authoritatively supportive, letting her know their love by telling her what she could not do. Kaija had been a constant source of adventure and spontaneity. And education – Tai'gee had learned how to hunt and ultimately became quite good at guerrilla warfare. And when the village rebelled against Kaija's father and the hunters came for Kaija, Tai'gee had never felt a drive and purpose so strongly as she had then to protect the only friend she'd ever had.

Now that friend had been hunted down, shot, stabbed, and was fighting for her life by herself. Xena and Gabrielle were there too, but they weren't the same, Tai'gee admitted. They hadn't been to Kaija what Tai'gee had been; and Amana wasn't to Tai'gee what Kaija had been. Not only had Tai'gee been wrong to treat Kaija as she had, she'd been blind. Kaija was the only person who sparked her passion for life. Amana had turned her eye, got her attention for a while, but there wasn't the thrill to live in Amana's arms like there was just sitting next to Kaija. There was only comfort there, a comfort Tai'gee had never known before, but all the same that's all it was. Kaija hadn't grown into her ability to provide that for Tai'gee when Tai'gee had met Amana. 'And now I might never know it from her.'

Tai'gee balked. That wasn't right – it couldn't be right. Kaija was an infinite part of her life. Why had it taken her so long to see that? Only to see it now when it might be too late. 'No –it's not too late.' She wouldn't let it be.

Tai'gee bolted from her house and headed straight for the healing hut, tripping over and crashing into everything that was in her path. She'd startled the two guards set to watch the hut, and the one at the door wasn't sure if she could let Tai'gee in.

"Get out of my way. I have to see her," Tai'gee ordered while she panted.

The guard stood at ready, unmoving. "I – I don't think I can."

Tai'gee reached up to move her but Xena intervened. The tall, dark woman stood silently behind the guard, scrutinizing the out of breath person trying to barge into the hut. Even in the darkness and shadows, Tai'gee could feel those cool, calculating blue eyes boring into her.

"I need to see Kaija," Tai'gee said to her in as firm a voice as she could muster. Conviction was hard to demonstrate with a lack of oxygen.

The guard, who hadn't known Xena was behind her, stepped aside, in deference to whatever decision Xena might make. After a moment more, Xena answered. "Yes, I believe you do."

The dark woman stepped aside, allowing Tai'gee entrance into the softly lit room. Still breathing heavily, Tai'gee entered, saw Gabrielle keeping vigil at Kaija's bedside. The younger woman avoided looking directly at the blonde, and so missed the kind, relieved smile the Queen shown on her as she stepped up to the bed. She also didn't notice Gabrielle move away to join Xena on the far side of the room. She only saw Kaija, small, vulnerable, lifeless.

"Oh Kaija," she hiccuped as she came to kneel on a chair by the bedside. "Kaija..." Tai'gee took up the girl's cold, limp, unfamiliarly bony hand in hers and began to rub it between her own. "Kaija, I don't know if you can hear me, but I know you're in there. And like the coward I am, I'm going to tell you everything now while you're sleeping, because now I have the courage to tell you, and I might not have it later." She took a deep breath, trying to steady her wavering voice and watering eyes.

“You have to come back to me Kaija,” she whispered. “Because I love you and I need you, and the world needs you. You are everything to me that I believe in. I was wrong to ignore you like I have, and I see that now – and I see *you* now. I see us. You have to wake up so I can show you. I will stay here and fight with you Kaija – and as long as you want me, I’ll be by your side.”

Breaking into tears and throwing everything she’d just said out to Artemis in prayer, Tai’gee kissed the cold hand held in hers and held it against her cheek. She pressed the inside of Kaija’s hand firmly against her face, absorbing the cold from it, and hopefully replacing it with the warmth of her love. She realized she’d been hoping her confession might magically undo Kaija’s horrible spell, but nothing changed. So Tai’gee sat in the quiet room, crying off and on, continuously rubbing Kaija’s hands between hers, praying, while Gabrielle and Xena stood back, arm in arm, watching over them.

VI

Once Tai’gee took up a vigil by Kaija’s bedside, Xena and Gabrielle felt they could venture back out into the village to handle various businesses. Gabrielle returned to the Council meetings, making every case and plea, advocating to have Kaija reinstated into the admissions process. Xena had a different goal. She had every intention of finding the attacker, Council or no. If the Amazons wouldn’t prosecute her – and Xena was sure it was an *Amazon* – then she would do so in her own way.

The glen was Xena’s only starting place. She recovered the arrows she had removed from Kaija’s body and took the ivory handled knife Gabrielle had wisely held onto. The stage was still up, everything was just as it had been the day of the attack. The meadow was undisturbed, birds sung happily, the sky was as blue as every other day that promised no rain. The persisting drought preserved the purity of the crime scene, much to Xena’s advantage. Even a heavy dew might have washed away the slightest shred of evidence, and Xena was sure shreds would be all there was to find.

The grass that had been trampled and crushed where Kaija’s operation had taken place was back to standing, the red stains of her blood still coating the upright blades had turned to an ominous black in its continued exposure. The log also maintained its large smear of blood, indicating Kaija’s extended suffrage.

When Xena arrived at the glen, she went with the intention of following Kaija’s bloodstains back to where she was shot. But she could never find the trailhead. The largest puddle of blood was on and around the log where Kaija had just sat and bled. There were no drops on the ground, twigs, leaves or branches of the forest edge in front of the log. With as much as she was bleeding, if she’d come to the glen already wounded there should have been a trail.

“Which leaves it that she was shot here.”

The Warrior Princess stared at the log, turned to stare at the glen, then turned back again to stare into the forest. Xena was a tracker, skilled in the ways of hunter and hunted; and she was

flummoxed. “It doesn’t make sense. Her back was to the clearing – she wouldn’t just leave her back open like that.”

The sun blazed down against her back. The heat was especially intense against the black sash wrapped across her body. A light perspiration was building across the warrior’s forehead and between her breasts – which reminded her of the heat of the ceremony. It was just as hot and even more crowded; all the more reason for someone like Kaija to stay in the woods, or at least be facing all the commotion. Seeing Tai’gee’s induction was the whole purpose of Kaija’s being there in the first place, so why would she have her back to it all? Long legs folded neatly as Xena squatted in front of the log to stare into the woods; her skin virtually crawled with the exposure behind her. She felt her ears prick at the sound of approaching footsteps. Looking over her shoulder she saw Eponin and Solari coming towards her.

“How’s it going?” Eponin called out.

“It’s not,” Xena growled in frustration. Rising, Xena went over to greet them, offering her arm to Solari whom she hadn’t seen yet.

“We were so sorry to hear about Kaija,” the tall and substantial woman offered. Solari was a quintessential Amazon, Xena thought: huge, broad shouldered, able to carry her own weight and then some across her shoulders. Her personality was one that lived in plain reality, every bit a person she would want at her side in battle. “What can we do?”

“I don’t know,” Xena admitted. “This is the strangest situation I’ve ever seen.”

“You’re tellin’ us! Attempted murder and our Council denies it? It’s ridiculous. And Kaija...”

“How is she?” Solari’s quiet gaze touched one of the tender strings that Xena rarely let anyone see. She tried to disguise her shaking hands by crossing her arms.

“She’s still asleep. She doesn’t look good, and I can’t say I’d be surprised if...”

“But what about her favor? I thought Athena had blessed her,” said Eponin.

“Yeah well, her wounds are completely healed; there’s not a mark on her from these,” Xena answered while holding up the arrows and knife. Solari reached out to take one of the arrows for examination; Eponin studied the knife. “And she’s long survived the infection and fever. It’s so senseless,” Xena continued. Instinctually this was not a place Kaija would bring herself to die, where anyone could see her. Kaija handled everything she did with specific intent – if she wanted something she set herself up to get it. If she wanted to die, Xena was sure the girl would have found some secluded space where she wouldn’t have been disturbed. “But if she’d wanted to live, she was only feet away from help.”

Solari and Eponin took it in turns to study the area themselves then agreed. “You know,” Solari ventured, “we don’t know Kaija very well, but I gotta say from what I do know of her... she’s too intense for this.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, she’s practically a god right?” Eponin looked openly at Xena. “I mean, she’s not immortal or anything, but come on, she’s not human. It’s just like you said – all this behavior would just be so beneath her; and for someone to want to kill her for it, that’s just as incredible.”

“Yeah, that’s what Gabrielle and I gathered. I think there’s something more going on. What do you two make of those?”

Eponin looked again at the knife in her hand. It wasn’t a basic bone handled hunting knife. It was a masterpiece, an object of pride – an expensive weapon of art. Whoever owned it would be missing a very large investment piece. Not only was the handle made of ivory – rare in their part of the world – but it was carved in such a way that it seemed the maker was trying to leave the last artistic endeavor of humanity for the next dominating organism by which to judge mankind. Great birds, trees, and something that could pass as either wind or river flowed across the hilt, ultimately forming an eagle head for the handle. The blade was just as exquisite. About ten inches long, it was pounded out in the fashion of the swords from Chin. Iron folded over and over itself, making ridges so fine and so sharp it never needed sharpening.

“Wow.”

“Yeah, wow,” Xena said. A weapon like that could easily go for thousands of dinars – and Xena knew there was no such thing as a wealthy Amazon. That didn’t work to her advantage however. If there had been rich women in the villages, had wealth been common, the buyer of this artifact would take every opportunity to show it off. Since that wasn’t the case, this knife was probably stolen and rarely brought out from hiding. No... this was the kind of weapon that was coveted, concealed and cherished – only brought out when the risk of its viewing would be at a minimum.

“So what is ‘wow’ doing in Kaija’s gut?”

“Isn’t it odd that the knife *and* the arrows were used against Kaija – one’s a close range weapon, the others are for distance.” Solari mused aloud; coming up with a scenario where she would use both against a person was difficult – especially if she’d already left her opponent with two massive arrows sticking out of her. She looked at the arrow she held. It was heavy with a war head that she knew they didn’t use in their army.

Xena smiled slightly. “So you see what I’m dealing with here.” She turned back to the woods in a swift jerk, throwing her hand at the foliage in front of her. “These woods are so thick with underbrush you can’t see a thing. It’s like she was sitting here staring at a wall while a party went on behind her.”

Beside her, Eponin bent slightly to squint into the trees. Even for a practiced eye, the spaces that afforded sight into the darkness and shadows of the interior played havoc with efforts to focus. “It’s different when you’re in there – but out here it’s hard to see.”

‘Wait.’ “Wait – Kaija could see.” Rising, Xena peered into the interior. Her eyes began to strain trying to adjust to the various shadings and shadows. “Kaija’s eyes would have adjusted well – the dappling wouldn’t have bothered her at all.”

“So what are you saying,” said Solari. “She was looking at something?”

“She might have been watching something – or someone – in the woods,” Xena breathed as enlightenment dawned. Quickly she circled the log again, staring at the ground looking for prints, tracks, traces of anything, but there was nothing, no sign of a struggle. Solari and Eponin looked on curious but quiet. Xena moved again to the treeline, searching for anything – a broken twig, a boot impression, but again nothing. “She was attacked here. Whoever attacked her did it from the woods, and Kaija stayed here watching her. That knife – give me that. Sit down there on the log,” Xena pointed to Eponin then backed into the woods.

Standing in the underbrush, just feet from where Kaija would have been sitting – ‘no, Kaija must have been standing to get shot in the pelvis like she was’ – Xena looked out into the clearing. She had a very good view, not only of Kaija, but of the entire ceremony if it were happening right at the moment. She looked down, and found what she’d been looking for all along – a trace of blood on a broad fern leaf, dark. Kaija must have been stabbed first, then stepped out of the woods to the log. ‘So Kaija might well have been with her wounds because she was holding her attacker at bay.’

“Xena, what is it?” called Solari from the sunlight.

“Eponin, stand up,” Xena directed from the shadows. Confused, the small guard did so. Xena played a scene in her mind. ‘Someone stabbed Kaija here in the trees. Kaija backed up into the clearing, stopped at the log watching, silent. Why silent?’ Xena closed her eyes to better imagine the scene – ‘I’d just stabbed her, she’s backing away from me, if she yells there’s an entire clearing of Amazons here to come after me. She’s doing me a favor by not saying anything. Well, I’d take advantage of it, start backing up.’ Staring at Eponin, Xena started taking steps backward, going farther into the woods. The view became more obstructed but it was still clear enough to take a good couple shots at someone at or near the log. ‘She’s still staring at me – no one’s noticed her; I can shoot her now and get away with it.’ At this distance, the heavy arrowheads would have pulled the shot down, explaining the relatively low striking points on their target.

“Xena?” Solari had followed the warrior a little way into the woods. “What is it? What did you find?”

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Gabrielle paced in the Queen’s hut. She was angry, confused, disbelieving. “That is absolutely incredible. Why would she do that?”

Xena could only shrug. “I don’t know.” They were heavy words for her, uncomfortable words. She hated not knowing anything. “Someone who felt threatened enough by Kaija that she felt she had to get rid of her. And someone Kaija didn’t really want to get caught.”

“That’s just... Xena, something is so wrong with that. Kaija wouldn’t want her murderer caught? It makes no sense!” Gabrielle stamped. The hut was too crowded for an echo, but the force of her frustration easily bounced from person to person. Solari sat at the dining table, hands clasped in front of her, head bent in thought. Ephiny and Eponin leaned against the wall behind her.

“I think,” said Ephiny gravely, “the only way we’re going to solve this is for either victim or criminal to talk.”

“Yeah, and we can’t count on either one of those any time soon,” added Eponin darkly. Realizing what she said she jerked a look over to Gabrielle and apologized quickly. “I didn’t mean-”

“It’s ok Ep,” Gabrielle said with a small smile. “We don’t know what will happen with Kaija. Honestly, I don’t know how much longer she can survive like she is.”

Ephiny sighed, rubbed tired hands over her hot face. “It’s good Tai’gee’s with her now – at least that’s some progress.” Everyone nodded agreement. “It’s boiling in here. Let’s go get dinner.”

Tired, and feeling a degree of futility none of them appreciated, the Royal Entourage shuffled off to the mess hall.

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Amana came to the healing hut two days later with her cousin. Amana’s face was stormy, her stance at the doorway angry and agitated. Ahmon played thug at her side, eye-cocking her challenge at the Guard. Amana demanded Tai’gee come outside to talk. Gabrielle looked kindly over to Kaija’s bed where Tai’gee had slid a chair over and was bent sleeping, head propped on Kaija’s hand. The Queen shook her head at Xena who stepped over to fill the doorway as a massive wall of rejection.

“She can’t come out right now,” the Warrior Princess stated succinctly.

“What, have you got her tied up or something in there? I want to see her,” said Amana.

A thin, dark eyebrow raised slightly. “I said no. She’ll come out when she’s ready.”

“‘When she’s ready?’” repeated Ahmon sardonically. “And when might that be?”

Xena spared a dismissing glance for the Champion, and thought better of what she’d like to have said. “Couldn’t begin to tell you. So unless you’re bringing flowers and well wishes for the sick, I suggest you go ask someone else out to play.”

Ahmon's glare held electricity. She made a step towards Xena, but Amana stepped up to intercede. 'Oh no, let her,' Xena thought with garish glee, 'I'm just itching to squish the little pissant.'

"Look, I was just worried about her because I haven't seen her in a couple days. It's not like her to just disappear. I wanted to know if she's ok."

Amana's tone wasn't hard or harsh. If Xena wanted, she could take it as an earnest concern for her lover. But there was also a complacency that pricked Xena's suspicions, which made her think the young warrior more likely was just trying a different tactic to get in.

"I'll let her know you came by and your concerns." Xena's tone was no less firm, and she gave no way in the door. Conceding, both Amazons turned and stalked away.

Coming back inside, the tall woman smirked at an unimpressed Gabrielle.

"She obviously doesn't know Tai'gee well at all – disappearing for more than a couple days was routine for her," the blonde scoffed.

"Yeah well, she mostly just wanted confirmation of where Tai'gee was."

Tai'gee's head jerked up then, bleary eyed and obviously startled. The young woman looked quickly at Kaija, then, completing her check, sighed and rubbed her face in frustration.

"Nightmare?" asked Gabrielle.

Looking over to her friends she sighed again, exhausted. "No, I – I thought she moved. Probably me though." She stood to stretch sore, stiff muscles after a night of awkward sitting.

"Amana came by," Xena related indifferently.

"She did? To see Kaija?"

"Not exactly. She said she was worried since she hadn't seen you in a couple days."

"Oh. Did she stay long? She didn't wake me up."

Tai'gee looked questioningly at Xena, then Gabrielle when there was no immediate answer. Gabrielle just shrugged. "She didn't bring flowers; new policy for visiting privileges."

Tai'gee snorted with a smile, though she tried not to. "Bet that went over well."

Xena bit back a particularly nasty continuance, but did cock the young warrior a lopsided grin. "You ready for breakfast?"

“Yeah. Lemme feed Kaija first though. You two can go on ahead if you want, I’ll catch up.”

Gabrielle handed Tai’gee a bowl with Kaija’s breakfast already made: a porridge-like concoction of smashed rice and peas, milk and honey. It wasn’t bad, and they traded between cornmeal mash and beans, syrup, lentils – whatever they could give Kaija that would be easily digestible but varying in nutrients. Tai’gee took the bowl and positioned herself to sit behind Kaija and let the limp body lay back against her chest. This way Tai’gee was able to reach around and spoon feed her, using a hand to work the food down her throat. Xena and Gabrielle both left once she was situated, content they would be ok.

It was slow work feeding an unconscious, unresponsive person, and the first couple times she had tried she’d made a huge mess. She’d felt terrible doing it, and even worse because she knew Kaija would hate being spoon fed like a baby, nursing like a kitten. Finishing, Tai’gee slid from the bed and gently laid her friend back down. As she pulled the blanket up, something shiny caught her eye. Looking up, she found Kaija’s eyes were open, rolling slightly, but roving around the room.

Tai’gee’s heart leapt. “Kaija? Can you hear me? Kaija?” She spoke quietly, carefully, as if she wasn’t really trying to wake a sleeping person. Dull golden eyes rolled over towards Tai’gee’s but slid closed before they reached their target. “Kaija?” There was no response, she was sleeping again.

Excited, giddy, frantic Tai’gee’s hands began to shake with hope, the muscles in her throat contracting trying to lock down any of that hope lest it get away. After a moment she regained enough presence of mind to think of Xena and Gabrielle then ran to their hut as fast as she could.

Gabrielle dropped her spoon in fear as Tai’gee came bursting through the door; her heart sank and she could feel the blood rushing from her face. Xena just froze and waited.

“She – she opened her – eyes,” the young warrior panted, excitement and lack of air choking off anything else she might have said.

Slowly Gabrielle and Xena turned to look at each other, then in an instant of agreement they jumped from their places at the table, turning over their chairs in haste and ran for the healing hut, Tai’gee trying her damndest to keep up.

Kaija remained asleep and unwakeable for the rest of the morning, but early in the afternoon her eyes opened again, briefly. This time it was witnessed by all three of them. “Thank the gods!” exclaimed Gabrielle. “Kaija? Can you hear us?”

Xena’s eyes immediately tracked to the arrow point still laying in the center of Kaija’s chest. It seemed to have dimmed from the bright red of the weeks before, and she smiled. It must be some kind of health indicator, and if it was returning to its normal black – or at least the golden internal glow that it always seemed to possess at the least; ‘I’ve never actually seen it just be black’ – then Kaija must be, too.

Again Kaija's eyes were unfocused and roaming. Cylene came in, checked her pulse and held her eyelids back. She smiled slightly.

“Amazing.”

“What?” demanded Tai'gee.

“I think she's coming out of it. It'll be slow but her heartbeat's strong and her eyes are responding well.”

And it was slow; it was several days before Kaija could stay awake for a full candlemark at a time. Cylene told them to give her more food and as much water as they were comfortable giving her. As Kaija was able to stay awake longer, it became easier to feed her. She didn't talk much, saying that her chest was heavy. Tai'gee refused to leave her side, promising to be there every time Kaija awoke. Ephiny had excused her from her new-Amazon-warrior duties when she first took vigil at Kaija's bedside. The Regent had even come to visit on several occasions encouraging Kaija to get well. Kaija worked into feeding herself again, and one day, very sheepishly, requested raw meat. Gabrielle had let go a loud, joyous and boisterous laugh. “Yep! She's going to be just fine!”

~

Amana sulkily pushed back her empty mug. She'd been mercilessly shunned by her peers after the glen incident. No one wanted to partner with her in drills and suddenly everyone had plans when she suggested going to lunch or dinner together.

‘Stupid fucking cat,’ she groused into a freshly filled mug, barely even noticing how closely her dipping nose came to being buried in the overflowing foam. ‘I get caught flatfooted on account of her and my life goes to Tartarus. Like anyone cared about the dumb beast before then.’

Not that anyone cared about her now – well, except Tai'gee apparently. But the news of Amana leaving Ephiny unassisted spread like wildfire through the Guard, then through the Yearies. Now she was Guard Hopeful non-grata.

‘And Xena.’ Amana's lip raised in a reflexive sneer as the Warrior Princess' image flickered across her mind's eye. ‘Not even an Amazon but everyone treats her like she's fucking Artemis. Keeping me away from Tai'gee. Probably brainwashing her. Wouldn't be surprised if she started all that talk in the Guard about me because I didn't lament over her stinking pet.’

“Be careful or you'll choke on all those uncharitable thoughts,” a cold, silken voice spoke directly into her ear.

Slamming her mug onto the bar in surprise, Amana wheeled, coming nose to nose with a very predatory Xena, blue eyes glittering in challenge.

“What do you want,” Amana tried to say, but it came out as more of a slur than she intended. ‘Damn, how many have I had?’

Though the bar light was dim and made dimmer still by the dark wooden walls and furniture, Amana could still make out the impassive twitch of Xena’s eyebrow. ‘Ugh. I do not like you.’

“People who drink a lot alone at a bar tend to have a lot on their minds. Anything you want to talk about?”

Emboldened by her inebriation, Amana puffed out her chest and slipped off her stool to face her unwanted companion. “You don’t scare me,” she huffed.

“Hey! I don’t want no trouble in here!” The barkeep, much more convincing in masculinity than femininity, sidled over with a short club in hand, hovering it just below the bar. “Whatever problem you two got, take it outta here.” Ice blue eyes shot the woman a withering look, and she meekly added “Please” to the end of the demand turned request.

“Yeah Xena; wanna take this outside? You like to thump little junior trainees – lessee how you do against someone better off.” Amana lifted her hands in a defensive, drunken posture. At which Xena smirked without an inkling of concern.

“From what I hear, you were the first of the two Yearies Tai’gee bested not long ago.”

That earned her no points from the *Xena Fan Club – Amana Chapter*. Sneering at the raven-haired warrior, the younger woman made to push off Xena’s shoulder on her way out.

“Hey,” the barkeep yelled again, “you forgot your tab!”

Amana didn’t bother turning around as she bullied her way out of the tavern and into the night. Unimpressed, Xena left several coins on the counter before following the woman out.

“You wanna fight Xena?” she shouted over her shoulder as she sauntered down the dusty road.

“No.”

“Then why’re you following me? ‘Cause that’s what I want – a good shot at you. You takin’ everything from me, I figure you owe me somethin’.” Clumsily, Amana turned around mid-stride to glower at her pursuer. Moonlight glinted off her hair, creating a pale halo. Xena thought Amana might look intriguingly serene if she weren’t so intoxicated. “You’re probably not even that tough without all your fancy... stuff.”

‘Great, just how I wanted to end my day; chasing after a drunk Amazon who thinks she can kick my ass. Some things I really don’t think I deserve.’

Long, muscular arms crossed ever so casually, and Xena’s cool composure was the perfect antagonist for the irate woman before her. Xena watched as her face screwed up, getting ready

to yell something no doubt flagrantly obscene. Before Amana could avail herself of her slanderous talent however, Xena pointed out that she was making a scene. “Public displays go into your Evaluation don’t forget.”

Amana’s teeth clacked as she closed her mouth hard and looked around them. Sure enough, quite a few people had dallied about, not quite gathering but definitely rubbernecking. She was sober enough to know she couldn’t afford that exposure. In an attempt at reasonable, she looked back at Xena. “What do you want?”

“Come with me – we need to talk.”

There were more than a few disappointed spectators.

~

Amana was no help. That she didn’t like Kaija was obvious, but Xena determined the woman didn’t have the balls to try to kill her. She was no one special, Xena surmised, and never would be – much too plain for Tai’gee. She was also the type that would never see that.

“Recognize this?” Xena held up the knife practically under the warrior’s nose. She smirked when the brown eyes crossed trying to see it before figuring out they needed a greater distance for focusing. Teasing drunks could be fun sometimes – not to mention rewarding for having to endure their belligerence.

No, Amana hadn’t seen it before, and she didn’t see anyone in the woods before finding Tai’gee. Nor did she know of anyone who would really go after Kaija. “I don’ know nothin’,” she slurred, alcoholic fumes permeating the space between them. Xena’s nostrils twitched. “All I know is you got my girlfriend and you got no right keepin’ me from her.”

“I’m not keeping you from her, Amana. I’m keeping you out of the healing hut.”

“You won’t let Tai’gee out-”

“She doesn’t want to come out. She’s got a sick friend to care for and she’s taking that seriously. Unlike you seem to take anything.”

Bleary brown eyes tracked to meet clear blue ones. “What’re you talkin’ about?”

“Why didn’t you help Ephiny?”

“I didn’ know-”

“Bullshit,” Xena spat.

Amana gave Xena a dower look in the moonlight and spoke in a lazy huff. “If you’ll shudup a minute-” Xena conceded. “-Thank you. I didn’ know she was there. I was in the woods by the

stage when Tai'gee shouted – far – I was lookin' for flowers waitin' for her to get done. Didn' even know she'd gone all the way down to the other end. Then when she called I ran – Tai'gee was just goin' for whader when I got there, I wen' wither." Her mouth was getting cottony and thick as she spoke, making her words even more muddled. Her disgust was still plainly evident, as was her sense of injustice. "Everyone blames me for leavin' Ephiny, I wasn't even on duty. Where were her guards anyway? Ones s'posed to be there, hunh?"

Xena let Amana stumble off after that. The woman had a point – where were Ephiny's Guards? She didn't recall if Ephiny had told her Guards to leave her for the afternoon since she'd originally planned to spend it with her and Gabrielle after the ceremony. She hadn't thought of that before. Stepping from the shadows, Xena decided to pay Ephiny a visit.

~

"Trinka and Nexus, but I told Ahmon to tell them to stand down the rest of the day. Gabrielle promised me a whole casket of beer – I wasn't going to have them watch me drink it."

Xena rubbed her tired eyes. She wasn't getting anywhere, and it was getting late. Ephiny had been about to go to bed when Xena knocked on her door. Solari was out on patrol for the night, leaving them alone.

"But there should have been some patrol around – we all kept saying it. Where was everyone?"

"Xena, it was a celebration. We were inside the walls..."

"Z'at the kind of outfit you run here?" Xena looked at Ephiny past her hand while she massaged her temple. At the Regent's downward glance, the Warrior Princess continued. "I'm not talking about your full entourage. I'm talking about the basic patrol. You should have run into someone before getting all the way back to the common. I haven't changed those schedules."

Ephiny yawned, one of the full body kind that took the yawner out of commission until it was over. "Ahmon'll know. She designed the patrol shifts. I'll ask her tomorrow at the Council briefing."

One dark eyebrow lifted then lowered again to a frown. "Another one? Do you really meet with the Council everyday?"

Blonde curls bounced with Ephiny's lazy nod. She held out a hand, much like Xena's in grace and size, in a lax gesture. "It's a big Nation. Always something to talk about. Although it seems we spend a good portion of every meeting debating over Kaija."

"Keep stalling them. Make sure none of the healers give them reports."

"Yeah, yeah. Under control."

Xena smiled deprecatingly as Ephiny yawned yet again. Apologizing, she took her leave, heading back to the healing hut where she suspected Gabrielle was sitting with Tai'gee.

~

Gabrielle wasn't in fact with Tai'gee. When Xena passed by the dark window of the healing hut she could hear voices inside, whisperings in the dark; Tai'gee and Kaija from what she could make of the unintelligible murmurs. A slow smile moved across her face, one of happiness and of apprehension.

The Council would not be moved on its resolution to expel Kaija. The last thing she wanted to tell a recovering coma patient was that she was going to be homeless again. Xena had no ideas of another willing people who might accept her. The Centaurs had adopted her own son, Solan, by her request years ago, but he was human; one of many that regularly lived in the Centaur village. Kaija was part lion, a hunter, a carnivore. While the mighty horsemen were great warriors and could be fierce fighters, they did so only as a last extreme. Pacifists by nature, even their diet avoided meat so they would not have to kill another animal unnecessarily. Kaija would not be happy with them. Xena decided the only thing for them to do was to re-instate Kaija with the Amazons, whatever it took.

~

The moon was full and its pale, bright light glowed through the open doorway of the healing hut. Kaija sat up in her bed, leaning back against the wall. She was not sleepy this night; in fact she felt her primal instincts to go hunting stirring, a restlessness she had not felt in a long time. She felt much stronger now than she had when she'd first woken up. She had even heard the healer talking with Tai'gee earlier, saying that she had gained back a lot of weight which was a good sign. Kaija hadn't noticed she'd lost weight.

She had been asleep a long time they told her, which worried her immensely. She had no idea what had happened while she was asleep, but she had no doubt it was everything she had been trying to avoid.

Looking down at Tai'gee who slept, head cradled on her arms, Kaija let go a heavy breath. Her face looked soft in the moonlight, Kaija thought. Her dark, fine hair had come loose from its braid in wisps, and locks of curls hung as a decorative frame. She wanted to touch her hair, she realized – it looked different somehow than she remembered. The lighter colors bleached into the dark tresses by the sun were indistinguishable in the moonlight, but Kaija didn't think that was what was different. Reaching out slowly, Kaija very lightly, cautiously, fingered one of the curling locks sprawling across the bed, before reaching farther towards the braid, stroking the restrained tendrils. Kaija was intrigued – she knew she'd touched Tai'gee's hair hundreds of times, and Tai'gee hers, braiding and unbraiding, tying on thongs and ribbons, crowning with flowers and woven twigs. But she'd never been so interested in just touching it, just touching Tai'gee. Her stroke had become firmer now, and she began to play with the fine, singular hairs around Tai'gee's ears. Tai'gee, feeling the touch in her sleep, turned into it and sighed contentedly. Kaija watched as her friend awoke, blinking slowly as she came to wakefulness.

“Hey,” the dark-haired woman greeted groggily, “you’re up.”

“Not sleepy,” Kaija answered softly.

Tai’gee laughed a little. “I guess not; you slept enough to last you the rest of your life.”

Sitting up straight in her chair, Tai’gee stretched fully, then sat back to study Kaija in the moonshine. The healer was right; Kaija had gained back a lot of weight and quickly, especially once she’d started eating meat again. She almost looked back to herself again, except for her pale skin and paler face – the sun’s effects had vanished and her healthy, golden glow was gone. “How do you feel?”

Kaija continued to look at Tai’gee, openly studying her. Why had she not noticed before how beautiful Tai’gee’s voice was, mellow and full. After a moment’s pause – which Tai’gee took to be a self-evaluation – Kaija said she felt fine. “I want to go outside.”

Tai’gee grinned. “I bet you do. Do you want to go now? It might be better to start in the dark.”

“No; we can just sit for now.”

Tai’gee looked curiously at her friend. “Are you sure you’re ok?”

Kaija took a deep breath, nodded, and brought her gaze down, focusing on the undyed fabric she wore as pants. “I have missed you,” she admitted quietly.

Tai’gee couldn’t bring herself to look at her friend. “Kaija... I’ve... been a total ass. You deserve so much better than the person I’ve been to you.” Fiercely she wiped at her eyes, then folded her arms in a huff, slouching in her chair. Kaija reached out a hand to her. When the young, dark-haired warrior looked questioningly, Kaija motioned for her to take it. Hesitantly Tai’gee did, and once she was close enough, Kaija reached up with her other hand and wiped away the tears from Tai’gee’s face.

“You are not an ass,” she said precisely.

The tears came uncontrollably then. “You don’t understand – all this time – and the Council – they – they-”

“Shh.” Kaija gently put a finger to her friend’s lips, stilling the miserably tumbling explanation. “I know all about the Council. I heard Ephiny and Gabrielle the other day. If they want to expel me, they can. Might make some things easier-”

“No!” Tai’gee stamped sharply against the wood floor. Fortunately there were no other patients there to disturb. “It’s not fair. This is all my fault. And if you go then I’m going too.”

Kaija shook her head in a sad, forgiving gesture. “No. You have a life here; you are an Amazon now. And Amana. You are happy here.”

“Not without you I wouldn’t be. I don’t care about any of this – without you I wouldn’t be whole.”

They were quiet for a few moments, still holding hands. Kaija sighed into the darkness. “This is your life; you have everything you wanted. Why would you give that up?”

“Because I didn’t have everything I wanted. I mean – yes, there are things here I like, people I like and a life I like, but when I realized I might lose you forever, I... nothing, no one can ever replace you Kaija, and I doubt I would ever know happiness again without you. All of this – it’s just a little while. You are forever to me.”

Kaija pulled Tai’gee closer, inviting her to sit on the bed with her. Hopping up, Tai’gee pushed back to lean against Kaija, reversing the position she had used to feed her unconscious friend just days earlier. Kaija’s arms offered comfort and support – as she regained muscle there would be strength and protection there as well. Tai’gee relaxed into Kaija’s chest, her head leaning against Kaija’s shoulder, while Kaija’s chin came down, bringing them cheek to cheek.

“I won’t let you leave without me,” Tai’gee vowed in a whisper.

Kaija couldn’t help it – she began to purr. The soft vibrations tickled Tai’gee’s ear and she giggled. “Goddess, I haven’t felt you do that in a long time!”

“Yes well we have not been laying out in the cold trying to keep from freezing in a long time,” Kaija answered sheepishly. She took in a deep breath and thought she’d better ask her question quickly, before she lost her nerve. “What about Amana?”

Kaija could feel Tai’gee’s heart skip and her body tense at the mention of her lover’s name. She was uncomfortable asking, and even more uncomfortable with Tai’gee’s anxiety.

“I need to talk to her.”

“If you want to be with her you should stay, Tai’gee. You should hold onto someone that... you know...”

“Know what?” Tai’gee pushed.

“That... you... love,” she managed haltingly. Her cheeks were burning, and Kaija was sure Tai’gee could feel the heat they radiated.

Tai’gee squeezed Kaija’s arms and pressed back into her even more. “I am.”

“No – I mean-”

“So do I.”

It was Kaija’s turn to freeze. She could feel the pinpricks of nervous sweat breaking out on her skin. Her heart hammered. She thought she might faint.

“Kaija relax – you’d think I’d just told you I was with child or something.” Tai’gee laughed softly, reached up to pat Kaija’s cheek affectionately, then nestled farther into Kaija’s embrace. Kaija knew Tai’gee could feel her heart racing; the farther she leaned back the more it amplified. But she seemed content to let things go, and soon was asleep in Kaija’s arms. Kaija stayed awake for a long time, her mind reeling and diving like a giddy swallow. Kaija wouldn’t let Tai’gee leave the Amazons; not only because she liked it there, but also because she was safer. That made her position more urgent – she was going to have to do something, and do it quickly. Not until the dawn started to color the inside of the hut with a soft morning gray did she finally drift into a light, troubled sleep.

~

“So Tai’gee and Kaija looked pretty cozy this morning...” Gabrielle smirked at Xena who was sitting on their bed sharpening her sword. The warrior didn’t look up at her lover, which just added fuel to Gabrielle’s burning curiosity. “Come on Xena! Do you know something about it?”

“Maybe.” The rhythmic stone against metal continued, not missing a beat.

“Xenaaaa! You went by there last night, didn’t you? Did you hear anything? See anything?”

A dark eyebrow raised. She loved to tease Gabrielle, and when she did, she was ruthless. Even now Gabrielle was resigning herself to sulk in frustration, which Xena always thought was an adorable pout. “What does it matter what I know? They looked cozy – that’s good enough.”

Gabrielle apologized. “It’s just so exciting – I want to know if it’s real.”

Xena offered a smile. “I think it’s real. Which means we’ll have to find a place for the both of them all over again.”

Gabrielle couldn’t contain her ecstatic grin. Then she began thinking, tapping her chin as she paced idly around the room.

“Uh-oh. I know that look.”

“I was just thinking...” Gabrielle mused.

“Yep, that’s the look.”

The blonde spared an indignant tisk at her partner then continued, “I was thinking that Tai’gee is an Amazon now. If she took Kaija as a lifemate...”

“There would be a lot of hard feelings here about that,” Xena stated. “Amazons don’t like it when their rules get turned on them.”

“I know, I know.” Gabrielle flounced down next to Xena on the bed. Her frustration made her tone sharp. “But what are we going to do? Where can they go? If only they would give Kaija another chance – it wasn’t fair for her the first time; *especially* if she was being blackmailed.”

The Warrior Princess sighed. “I’m trying to think of something. And you’re right, Kaija did have a lot stacked against her, but as open-minded as Amazons can be about some things, they can be pig-headed asses about others. I think our only chance to get Kaija back in is to expose the blackmailing and get Kaija back out in the open.”

“They still haven’t gotten the mask back – they don’t seem to even care about all that any more. And Solstice is next week.”

“They’ll want it then for sure.”

Gabrielle got a particularly sour look then. “Maybe we should tell her not to tell them where it is until they agree to give her another chance.”

Xena patted the woman on her leg affectionately. “You know we can’t do that.”

“I know. I’m just feeling a little vindictive at the moment. Come on, let’s go see if they’re up yet.”

Xena dropped her freshly sharpened sword neatly into the scabbard strapped to her back. “Don’t you have a meeting with the Council now, about the Festival?”

“Oh no, I forgot about that! And they’ll want to know how Kaija’s doing.”

“Keep stalling them. They know she’s awake, but-”

“-she’s still too weak to leave and it would kill her to expel her now.” Xena’s smile warmed her as only a lover’s quiet praise can. Moving to the closet to retrieve her meeting robes, Gabrielle asked over her shoulder what Xena was going to do.

“I’m going to pay the smithy a visit; ask about the arrows. Solari said they don’t use them in the general army so they may have been a special order which might just lead me to our little hunter.”

“Why don’t we just ask Kaija now that she’s awake?”

“I’m not ready yet. And I have a very strong feeling Kaija will not be willing to tell me. She was willing to let the person go after all.”

“So you’d rather have enough information to force Kaija’s hand if she doesn’t cooperate.”

“Pretty much.”

Gabrielle frowned. “That could get tricky too, Xe. She’s a smart girl. Not that I doubt your skills for a minute, but I expect Kaija will not appreciate being cornered.”

Xena nodded in agreement. “I expect you’re right. But I’m more concerned with a murderous bully getting away to do the same thing to someone else in the future who isn’t half as blessed as Kaija is.”

“You know, that reminds me – whatever came of the inquiry of the door guard from earlier?”

“We couldn’t find her.” The blue of Xena’s eyes became rigid as she went over that bit of information again. “It appears she’s skipped town.”

Gabrielle didn’t bother pointing out the obvious suspiciousness of that. She tucked a blonde lock behind a delicate ear before crossing her arms before her. “Was she one of the guards on duty when we were at the glen with Kaija?”

“I think so. Ahmon told Ephiny she dismissed her personal guards for the day, like Ephiny had requested, then took another group of guards on a food run to prep for the Festival. She figured the group usually scouting the area in and around the glen was the best group to take since the Initiation would have been going on, etceteras etceteras...”

Gabrielle’s frown was deep and every bit expressive of her discontent. She made no myth of the fact that she did not like Ahmon. The hawkish woman set the petite blonde’s nerves on edge, and she stopped trying to deny that she wanted Xena to throttle her every time Ephiny’s warrior looked at them funny. Even though Ahmon hadn’t given her any reason to the contrary, Gabrielle did not trust her.

“I’m off to the arm’s master; I’ll meet you at the healing hut for lunch. Ok?”

After Xena left, Gabrielle remained standing in their home, chewing her lip in thought. The ever present dust glistened in the ever present sunlight, floating listlessly to nowhere in particular. ‘Daylight fireflies’ Gabrielle had dubbed the winking lights as a child. The floating molecules reminded her of gold, shining, shimmering, deceptive in all that it promised. Gabrielle abhorred deception.

~

The blacksmith doubled as the arms master, Xena knew, and the massive woman certainly looked the part. Wide shoulders, long face, hands the size of a bucket, the graying-haired woman was tall enough to look down at Xena. The Warrior Princess knew very little about her; her name was Hepidiusus – everyone called her Hep. She was born to Roman slavery. She and her younger brother escaped; Xena wasn’t sure what happened to him or how Hep came to live

with the Amazons. She also wasn't sure how a woman as large as she was could possibly have such a highly pitched voice. It was a fight to keep the smirk back when the mouse of a voice asked Xena what she wanted.

Xena pulled one of the arrows she had taken out of Kaija from her belt. "What can you tell me about this?"

Something hissed in the dark and sooty background, and the big mallet Hep was using clanged down on the anvil she was using it against. A meaty hand snatched the arrow, squinted at it, turned it in her fat fingers. "I don't make these. I buy them – last batch from a Spartan. Only one Amazon I know good enough to shoot 'em with any accuracy – that's Ahmon. Too heavy for everyone else."

Xena nodded. "Anyone other than Ahmon have them?"

Heavy brows lowered in agitation. "How would I know? Don't keep 'em locked up if that's what you mean. Guardswomen practice with them all the time; say it helps them shoot the regular ones." The ham hand thrust the heavy arrow back to Xena. "Anything else?" the mouse grunted.

"Not for the moment. Thanks Hep, you've been a lot of help."

The mouse grunted again, and Xena turned away just in time to hide her smile. 'Next stop,' she said to herself as she tried to keep her focus, 'the shooting ranges.'

~

Xena found nothing at the shooting range. It was deserted. So she decided to detour to the sparring fields where the trainers were teaching staff to the young girls. Some of them, Xena noticed, seemed pretty good, even at their tender ages. And then there were quite a few who just wanted to swing their poles as hard as they could just to see what happened. "Gotta be careful with kids," Xena muttered to herself, "or you'll get something stabbed at you that you really didn't expect."

The fields were full of children, three different classes spread out in various stages of practice. With mild interest, Xena walked by them, watching as the youngsters took shots at each other, laughed, concentrated, participated in the general melee that was childhood battle instruction. Every now and then several of the little Amazons would notice Xena walking slowly by and would either stop and stare, or try to show off for her. "Imitation is the highest form of flattery," Gabrielle had said to her once. "Or the beginnings of an unwieldy crush," Xena had added tersely. She cringed; Xena did not like to be emulated; she felt like no example for anyone to model – except maybe how *not* to live one's life. But then, there were those who didn't emulate her, who didn't imitate or like her; the ones who feared her, distrusted her, stared at her with equal measures of suspicion, caution, and intrepidity. Much like a pair of azure blue eyes were staring at her now. Had it not been for Gabrielle's description, Xena wouldn't have recognized Pi as she stood frozen, staff in hand, scrutinizing her as she walked by.

“She was so angry when she left, Xe. Maybe I should have let her in...” Xena hated it when Gabrielle had regrets, especially over well-intentioned decisions. The great warrior paused, redirected her step, and hailed Pi over.

Warily the girl approached her, looking a couple times over her shoulder at her instructor to make sure it was ok. When she was close enough, the little girl planted her staff, and dropped to one knee, head down. Xena let her stay there.

“You’re a friend of Kaija’s?” her deep voice asked without expression.

“Yes. Honored Consort,” the girl added after a pause.

Xena smirked. Pi was still angry, and she, in her youth, had not the tact to disguise her resentment. Xena liked her. “I heard you came to see her.”

Wispy blonde hair shifted over itself like sand as the girl looked up to squint derisively at her massive interrogator. “I tried. I’m not allowed to see her any more,” she hissed through the space where a left front tooth was still growing in. “I heard she’s better now.”

Xena frowned. “You can stand up,” she said quietly. “How do you know she’s better?”

Pi’s squint intensified. “They can’t watch me all the time,” she said proudly. “Kaija taught me lots.”

It was Xena’s turn to kneel before the defiant little girl. She asked how old she was, and got a confident “Five” back. The warrior nodded; a very impressionable age. Well, she had no intention to continue letting Kaija’s only friend go around slinking for information and offended at the rebuke of her unconditional affection. “Kaija is doing better; she’s awake. She’s asked about you,” Xena added.

The girl’s face lit up with joy and pride. “What did she say?”

Xena smiled again, knowing there is nothing like a hero’s inquiry to brighten an idolater’s day. “What would Kaija say to a child that adored her?” “She was glad you came by, but she doesn’t want you to get into trouble. She said she’ll come see you as soon as she can.”

It may as well have been a command from Artemis. Pi nodded fiercely, and said, in all the seriousness a five-year old could muster, that she would not get in trouble. “I’ll wait for her.”

“Good. And Queen Gabrielle and I wanted to thank you for being such a good friend to Kaija. I know she doesn’t have many.”

“She doesn’t,” Pi said matter-of-factly. “Just me. But that’s ok because I don’t either so we are each other’s friend.”

Xena nodded, then reached up to pat the girl's thin shoulder. "Go back to class, and uh..." Xena leaned in conspiratorially, "let's keep this our little secret." Pi nodded, and gave Xena a sly, jagged tooth grin before returning to her practice.

One by one, the classes finished for the day. Children shuffled off leaving instructors to clean up after them. Xena found Amana picking up abandoned staffs as the last class dismissed. She moved to help her.

"I've got it thanks," the lanky warrior said curtly.

Nonchalantly, Xena dropped the two small staffs she had picked up back to the ground. "Fine by me."

"What do you want now?" The younger woman angrily snatched a staff from the ground and tossed it over to the pole hole – that's what they called the bin for the staffs.

"I was looking for Ahmon. I thought you might know where I could find her."

"What for?" She snatched up another staff doing her best to pretend Xena wasn't there.

"That's between me and her," she answered easily. "But you're welcome to come along if you like."

Amana offered a snide smile in return. "Thanks but no. I've got other things to do. And I don't know where Ahmon is. She's been busy lately getting ready for the Festival. Probably out hunting."

"Know when she left or when she'll be back?"

"Sometime before dark I hope, considering she'd be arrested for breaking curfew," she grunted as she swiped another staff from the ground. With obvious sloppiness, Amana let the staff go mid-swing, half flinging it at Xena's shins.

One fine eyebrow lifted in wry amusement. "Cute." Expertly, Xena rolled the staff onto her foot then flipped it up into her hand. Hefting its weight, she twirled it absently between her fingers then sent it on its way to the pole hole – dead ringer. She cocked a dare at the younger woman then drawled, "Well, if you happen to see her, tell her I'm looking for her. I've got some warrior business to discuss with her. Hm?"

VII

Kaija was up. Kaija was more than up; she was unbearably restless. To her credit she was trying to keep herself under control, and had stopped hopping from bed to bed. She was now pacing back and forth down the length of wall where the windows were. It had been a futile battle to get her to pace elsewhere, where it was less of a risk that she was seen. She'd read all of the literature in the healing hut, but even if she hadn't, sitting still with a scroll would have no more

interested her than taking a nap. Tai'gee couldn't talk her into anything and had given up. She was relieved when Gabrielle arrived, happy to turn over guardian duties so she could go outside for a while.

Kaija had watched Tai'gee leave, sad, frustrated. "I do not like having to stay in here," she growled – and when Kaija did it, it was a real growl.

"I know," Gabrielle tried to placate her. "But as soon as the community sees you out and about, the Council will demand you leave. It's only for a little while longer, till we figure out what to do."

Kaija's eyes had flashed, the animal struggling to throw a tantrum, the woman trying to hold it down. 'She's grown so much,' Gabrielle thought.

Irritation didn't begin to cover what had grown in Kaija. She had things to do, things she had to figure out, and Gabrielle and Xena's impediment was maddening. "What about at night? Can I go out then?"

Gabrielle bit her lip. "Kaija, I don't know. It's so risky – if anyone came to check on you and you weren't here..."

So Kaija had started pacing, not looking left or right, only down, not talking. She wasn't giving Gabrielle the silent treatment because she answered when spoken to, but she didn't offer anything for conversation. When Xena finally arrived, Kaija was still pacing and Gabrielle was reading over her Council notes.

"What's the matter with her?" asked Xena quietly.

"Bored, restless. I can't blame her, she's been inside for almost four weeks."

Xena nodded. "Maybe we can go out tonight."

Gabrielle gave her a stern look. "What if she's caught? Someone might have posted a lookout."

"Look, if the Council's going to expel her anyway she's got to get back out there and build up her strength. Staying locked up in here isn't going to make things better for her."

Gabrielle nodded to the sense. The Warrior Princess patted the Queen reassuringly on the shoulder then went over to Kaija.

"If you want, we'll go out tonight so you can stretch your legs a bit," offered Xena.

Kaija didn't stop pacing, but looked with scrutiny at Xena. "You mean it?"

"Of course. You're not a priestess, no need for you to be inside all the time." Xena gave her a lopsided grin, which Kaija returned with an accepting nod.

Dismissing that conversation, Xena jumped up to sit on one of the patient beds. She motioned for Gabrielle to join them. Once she did, Xena took a breath. “Now for business.” She leveled a stern gaze onto the pacing young woman. “I’ve been back to the glen, and I think I’ve figured out some things. I need your help, Kaija, to fill in the missing pieces.”

Gabrielle bit her lip nervously at Kaija’s none overjoyed expression. She didn’t look the least bit eager to offer help of any kind, only continued pacing; but instead of looking absently at the floor, she stared intently at Xena.

‘She knows something she definitely does not want to tell,’ Xena thought. Which is what she expected, but the hostility simmering in the golden eyes was the hard part. “You don’t have to help Kaija; we can drop the whole thing. But if you don’t, you’ll be letting your attacker go free... maybe to strike again.”

“What did you find?” asked Kaija in a low rumble.

“You were stabbed at the ceremony when you came to watch Tai’gee’s induction. Instead of running after your attacker or calling for help, you watched her while she shot you, two times from the woods.”

“Kaija – why? Who?” Gabrielle pleaded.

The muscles in Kaija’s jaw bulged with every word as she clenched her teeth tighter and tighter. Her eyes were a dangerous glare. She stared at Xena with so much intensity it seemed to Gabrielle fire or lightning would shortly shoot from her eyes. The anger was palpable. When Gabrielle looked at Xena, she found the warrior holding the girl’s stare, unwavering, not backing down.

Xena continued. “You were being blackmailed by someone wanting you to leave the Amazons, someone setting you up for expulsion, and when Tai’gee was inducted your blackmailer came after you instead.”

“What have you done about it?” Kaija answered lowly through clenched teeth. Her sharp fangs were bared slightly.

Gabrielle was surprised. “We’re just trying to help Kaija. Why would you want to protect a potential murderer?”

“You ask of me more than I can give,” she growled. She spared no glance to Gabrielle, only continued to glare at Xena, threatening, warning. The last big piece clicked into place.

“She’s not protecting the murderer, Gabrielle, she’s protecting something much bigger.” Xena had pulled Gabrielle back to their hut, refusing to push Kaija farther.

“What? What could there possibly be?” demanded the young Queen.

“I’m not sure exactly. But I’ll bet my life it has something to do with why they want Kaija to leave in the first place.”

“They who?” A small, tapered hand forced its way through fine blonde hair in a frustrated gesture.

“The Council,” answered Xena succinctly. “I’m sure of it.”

Gabrielle was exasperated. Between Kaija’s hostile noncompliance and Xena’s crypticism, she was about at the end of her rope. “What?”

“Dismiss the guards.” At Gabrielle’s frozen bewilderment, Xena repeated herself, adding, “just do it.” Stepping outside Gabrielle disbanded the two Royal Guards set to watch their door. When she returned, Xena continued excitedly. “Ephiny hasn’t mentioned any trouble has she? Feuds? Strong differences of opinion?”

“Xena, you know I’m perfectly willing to go where you go, but if you don’t shed a little light for me soon I’m going to throw a tantrum.”

“Look, all this time we’ve been asking, ‘who could want Kaija to leave so badly,’ and the answer has been right in front of our faces. The Council.”

“Well, yeah, but, Xena, they’re our elected representatives. I can’t believe they would stoop to blackmail and murder.”

Xena’s face turned stony. “Come on Gabrielle. You know as well as I do that no government is above that. Cesar’s no stranger to dispensing an adversary, neither was Ming Tien or myself. Don’t put your Amazons on a pedestal.”

Gabrielle folded her arms, hugging herself, and swallowed her scolding whole. The one thing she hated most in the world was vice. She knew Amazons were as human as any other people, but she’d never felt that while she was in Amazon villages. Which was odd, because women could be vindictive and conniving in ways men would never consider. ‘Or, maybe it’s always been there and I’ve just been too naïve to know it.’ That thought did not sit well with her at all.

“Are you ok?” the melodious voice of the dark haired woman asked her tenderly. A slender hand reached out to rub Gabrielle’s arm affectionately.

“Yes. No,” Gabrielle admitted on second thoughts. “All this – I mean, this is *my* Council. I created it. And if they’re the ones responsible for this mess... It makes me sick to think it.” Impulsively Gabrielle walked into Xena, hugging her tightly. “Do you think that’s why Kaija won’t say anything? Because she doesn’t want to tell me my idea isn’t working?”

Xena returned the hug, kissed the top of her partner's fragrant blonde head. "I don't know. I don't know why Kaija's doing what she is; but it looks like she's done a lot on her own. I think it's time the cavalry joined in."

~

Dusk was fast approaching when Gabrielle caught up to Ephiny. The Regent was just leaving her hut to visit with the priestesses when Gabrielle came trotting up. "Walk with me," the taller woman offered.

"I need to talk to you, in private," said Gabrielle in low tones.

Concern etched Ephiny's face, drawing worry lines tighter. "Something wrong with Kaija?"

Gabrielle waved a hand. "No no, nothing like that. Well, yes and no. But more no."

Concern became confusion, but Ephiny let it go. "Come on. We can meet in one of the empty temple chambers."

Because the Temple of Artemis was made of stone, it was the coolest building in the city. If the priestesses could deal with the excitement, as many Amazons as could fit would ensconce themselves in the refreshing darkness – which was why the second High Priestess of Artemis had lain down limits on "parishioners' occupancy."

As Queen of the Amazons, Gabrielle had her own chamber within the temple. The Queen was expected by Artemis to pay regular tribute, and also needed to have space on holy grounds to commune with the Goddess. Gabrielle really didn't like coming into the temple – she appreciated the cool relief from the hot Grecian sun, but the darkness encouraged water to collect, which encouraged mildew, mold and mosses to grow. The air was stale, which the priestesses combated with heavy perfuming. In short, Gabrielle found being in the temple nothing less than oppressive. Which made it the perfect place to talk about private business. By going to one of the chambers off the great hall, Gabrielle and Ephiny avoided running into any of the priestesses or priestesses-to-be. If they were to go to the Queen's chamber, one of the priestesses would notice, and more than likely eavesdrop hoping to hear the voice of Artemis.

"So what's up?" Ephiny asked once they'd retreated to the corner of two solid stone walls. They were cast in a deep shadow, the light from the nearest torch didn't come close to reaching them, and they had a good view of the door. They could easily see before being seen.

"Xena broke our information to Kaija. It didn't go over well."

"I don't understand," Ephiny hissed in the darkness. "Why doesn't Kaija want us to figure this thing out? Why doesn't she just tell us what was going on?"

“We don’t know,” said Gabrielle deflatedly. “Xena thinks by not saying anything, Kaija’s protecting something bigger than her attacker. She thinks it’s the Council that’s been blackmailing her.”

“What?!”

Gabrielle motioned for Ephiny to keep her voice down. Running a hand through her hair, Gabrielle continued. “I mean, to most people Kaija’s been no champion, but she wouldn’t guard something frivolous just for the sake of it. It must really be important for her to bare her teeth at Xena.”

Ephiny was shocked. “She did that?”

The blonde nodded before realizing Ephiny probably couldn’t see it very well. “Oh yeah, she was not pleased Xena had caught on to as much as she had. So now the question is, if it is the Council instigating Kaija’s banishment, why?”

They stood together quietly, heads bent in the dark. After several moments of silence – deep, dark, temple silence – Gabrielle asked Ephiny if she knew anything at all. “Is there anything weird going on within the Nation that I don’t know about?”

“Nothing. Really. The regular anti-royalists haven’t even been acting up lately at all. And there hasn’t been any regional dissent reports in years. Everything was coming together really well for the Solstice Festival; the only problem was Kaija.”

“So you’re saying the top of the pond is still as stone.”

“From where I’m sitting. Yeah the Council has been stiffer than usual, but so has everyone considering the frustration Kaija was causing. Everyone was just so tired and annoyed, especially Saikus and Rachel; they don’t like half humans of any sort anyway.”

Quiet filled the room again while they pondered. “So what do you want to do? Should we air the laundry and just ask the Council?” asked Ephiny.

Short blonde hair shook no insistently. “We need to investigate more I think. If we start trying to draw in others we might end up throwing more sand on the treasure than we remove.”

“You have such a way with words.” The smile was evident in Ephiny’s voice. “But how do we investigate something when we have no leads?”

“We should wait to see what Xena says,” Gabrielle stated positively. “Knowing her, she’ll want to stir the pot and see what comes up.”

“You know, you should’ve been a bard,” laughed Ephiny.

“Hush you! Let’s go.”

~

Gabrielle pulled a ceramic pot from the fire. She was heating soup for their dinner because neither of them wanted to go to the dining hall. “Although, that’s probably exactly where we should be if we want to hear any gossip.”

“And how do you propose we hear any gossip when the entire place clams up because the Queen and her Consort came to dinner?” Xena asked patiently.

Gabrielle waved her off. “I’m sure all the stars and glory have worn off by now. We’ve been here for weeks.”

Xena just rolled her eyes. “Tomorrow then. Tonight we promised Kaija an outing.”

The stirring spoon paused in its rotation. “I’m not sure Kaija’s going to want to go out tonight...” said the blonde slowly.

“Oh?”

Rising, Gabrielle dusted off her hands. “Tai’gee came by while you were still out, mad as a hornet. She wanted to know what we did to Kaija.”

“Greeeeah.”

“Yeah. Apparently when she got back to the healing hut, Kaija had knocked over all the beds, turned everything out. Fortunately Tai’gee got it all cleaned up before anyone came by, but she said Kaija couldn’t stop pacing and clenching her fists. She said she hadn’t seen her that mad since she almost killed Thalkus.”

Xena smacked the wall hard. “Damn!”

“Hey! Calm down Xe!”

“If that girl doesn’t keep a lid on it she’ll blow everything – including whatever stupid secret she’s trying to hide.”

Gabrielle crossed her arms and frowned deeply. “Well how do you expect her to keep a lid on it if you don’t?”

Xena bit her tongue, willing herself to cool down. She apologized. The blonde gave a small smile then went to hug her lover. “I know you’re frustrated, Love. But we’ll get to the bottom of this.”

Long, strong arms returned the hug, and the warrior submissively lay her cheek on the top of her bard's head. After absorbing the moments of peace and support gratefully, Xena asked how things went with Ephiny.

"She thinks I should've been a bard," Gabrielle giggled into Xena's shoulder.

"What?"

"Nothing. She didn't know anything; it was all news to her."

"Well, we've still got Ahmon to question. I have a feeling she's going to be worse than her cousin."

"Blood's thicker," said Gabrielle drolly.

"Yeah, well hopefully she doesn't make me spill hers."

"My, you are crabby tonight. I think someone needs a nap."

Xena's voice dropped to low and husky. "Oh, I don't think it's a nap I need."

~

The Royal Couple ended up spending several hours into the night relieving their tensions and worries in each other's embrace. They easily dropped off to a much needed sleep. Unceremoniously, however, they were jerked awake by a rancorous pounding on their door. Xena jumped out of bed, stark naked, grabbed her sword and headed for the door. Half awake as she was in the darkness, she was well into executioner mode before she realized she was about to decapitate Tai'gee.

"What in Tartarus is going on out here?" Xena boomed.

"Kaija's gone!"

Gabrielle came up behind Xena, rubbing sleepy green eyes. She'd had the presence of mind to grab a robe, but she'd left it untied.

"What do you mean Kaija's gone?"

Tai'gee's dark eyes flicked with irritation and worry in the moonlight, shining like cold, hard pebbles. "I mean she left and hasn't come back."

Xena rolled her eyes. "And it never occurred to you that she might've just gone out for the night to get outside?" She looked up quickly at the sound of running feet – Royal Guardswomen were coming over to investigate all of the commotion. With vehemence Xena yelled at them. "Get out of here! Go march somewhere!"

“Xena!” Gabrielle scolded from behind, but it was too late; the guards had done a fair impression of scampering off. Xena turned and shouldered past Gabrielle back into the hut. “Get in here,” came the gruff, agitated order from the darkness.

Gabrielle shook her head sympathetically at Tai’gee then motioned her inside and closed the heavy door behind them.

“Of course I’d thought of that,” Tai’gee hissed at Xena before the irate warrior had a chance to yell something else. “But when she left she muttered something about ‘causing trouble’ and ‘ruining everything’ and I haven’t seen her since.”

“You were there when she left?” asked Gabrielle. Tai’gee nodded.

“And you didn’t stop her?” Xena knew she was being impatient and rude, but she didn’t care. It seemed every time she closed her eyes her problems compounded.

“And just when was I supposed to stop her, before she threw a bed at me or after she ripped the door from its frame?” Tai’gee gave Xena a dirty look.

“Sounds like she’s got all her strength back,” said Gabrielle quietly.

“No, she doesn’t,” Tai’gee countered short and terse. “She’s pissed off, and whatever pissed her off was because of what you two said to her earlier. So what was it? What’s going on?”

Gabrielle looked at Xena, then began explaining at Xena’s tired nod. Tai’gee’s eyes grew wide and, if possible, got stormier.

“And you didn’t tell me?” she bellowed once Gabrielle had finished. “Zeus’ blood, I don’t believe you two!”

“Oh look who’s so interested now,” Xena muttered.

“Xena!” yelled Gabrielle.

“Go to Tartarus,” yelled Tai’gee simultaneously.

“Been there, done that.” Grabbing her pants, tunic and sword, somehow managing to get them all on before reaching the door, Xena left. “I’m going to look for her,” she yelled over her shoulder as she stalked out into the night.

“What crawled up her shit hole?” asked Tai’gee, jerking a thumb at the door.

Gabrielle sighed, then moved to put on her own clothes. “She’s frustrated and worried. Makes her cranky.” She lit a candle.

“Cranky? You call that cranky?”

“Believe me, you’ve never seen her pissed off. *That* was cranky.”

Tai’gee crossed her arms sullenly; Gabrielle thought it was a very sexy pose of a smoldering pout. Dark lashes lowered slowly in the candlelight, and when they opened again the little pebbles had softened some. “Yeah well, if Xena finds Kaija first, she won’t find cranky. Kaija has every intention of keeping whatever secret she’s got.”

“What could possibly be so important that she’d be willing to let herself die?” Gabrielle was really more asking herself than Tai’gee, but Tai’gee answered.

The response was much calmer, more contemplative. “I don’t know. She’s sure changed a lot. I mean, she’s always understood protection, but not of abstract things – secrets.”

“She’s kept promises,” Gabrielle reminded.

“Yeah, but she’s not known it. I mean, I’ve never heard her say, ‘I promise,’ like she fully recognized the nature of a promise. But that doesn’t keep her from being trustworthy at all. Not like – me.”

Gabrielle came over and lifted Tai’gee’s down-turned face. “You are not untrustworthy,” she reassured with a smile. “You didn’t know, and you made some mistakes. You’re still a good person. And one of the best Amazon battle trainee’s Ephiny’s ever seen. And Kaija loves you.”

A smile of pride tweaked the corners of Tai’gee’s lips, and Gabrielle patted her cheek softly. “Let’s go find her.”

~

Night was not the best time to go looking for Kaija. If someone thought she could be a shade during the day, she was perfectly invisible at night. Xena’s own tracking abilities were hardly paralleled, and her senses – through a combination of intrinsic blessing and intemperate honing – were sensitive beyond almost everyone she knew. Kaija’s, however, were preternatural; she was a being of the forest, and her best in the forest. Perhaps, when the teenager was a child, sloppy and unskilled, Xena would have been able to find her – but at this point... She had no illusions – it was easy to see why Aries would want to get his hands on a creature like her; she wouldn’t need an army, Kaija could be virtually unstoppable on her own. She was fairly sure Kaija would be back – perhaps not back to the healing hut, or the plaza, but close enough to be found. She would just have to wait.

Rather than waste her time and increase her frustration by scouring the countryside, Xena meandered around the village for the rest of the night, playing in the shadows, teasing her own stealth. The night air was energizing to her, cool and clean, still enough to encourage thoughts of other-worldliness. Xena could imagine her own humanity slipping in and out of being in the surreal light of the half moon.

Considering the skills and abilities of her young friend led to thoughts of the powerful opportunities Xena had had at *her* fingertips. She could have been a god; she could have been immortal; she could have been Empress, Ruler of All That Is – Caesar could have been a general in her army and she would have laughed at his ambitions. And Kaija could have been... there's no telling. She may have been a pet. Or, if Aries was true to his usual trouble causing self, she could have been an adversary worthy of worry. Maybe she would have been a protégé, someone she groomed to take her place one day. She laughed at herself – 'just goes to show you, Xena, what a human will imagine in order to gain some inkling of power in a powerless situation.' Xena had no advantage with Kaija; she knew the girl maintained a healthy dose of guardedness with the Warrior Princess, even at this late stage in their acquaintance. She loosely defined their relationship like wolf and dog – they were similar enough to inspire a certain degree of trust, but different enough to keep a distance; and if things turned sour, it probably would not be the wolf that turned into dinner.

At the moment, she was keeping her distance, and resolved to find what Kaija would let her find. Once dawn began to break, the elite warrior stepped around a corner of the dining hall, and right into a muttering Minosha.

“What in Ta- It was you? Was it you?” The elder woman squinted dark eyes at Xena, who only lifted both eyebrows in surprise and curiosity.

“I suppose it could have been,” she answered flatly. “But I could tell you for sure if I know what it was.”

A large, gnarled hand waved to a meat shed near the entrance to the kitchens. Three deer, a big wild pig and four hares had mysteriously materialized overnight, blood let and strung up. “I don't know Xena; it took Ahmon and her girls all day yesterday to bring back just three deer. None of this was here last night, not before midnight by Zeus.”

“And you don't think anyone went out hunting last night? Night is often better for it.”

The big cook nodded. “Yeah, I know it is, but Gabrielle and her curfew y'see. Just the scouts'd be out. There weren't no hunting last night, I'm sure of it.”

Xena was impressed. ‘First night out; not bad.’ So Kaija had returned to her position of provider. Somehow she had found out the village didn't have enough food to be comfortable with for the Festival. That suggested she was planning on hanging around for quite a while, making sure Tai'gee's home was sustained. It really didn't matter what the Council decreed, there was no one that would be able to make Kaija leave if she didn't want to go. She was still there after all.

The Warrior Princess continued her search in the southern woods after her visit with the cook. The sun had risen bright and unobscured through the morning, and by mid-morning it was already very warm. Xena was very glad the Amazons had the presence of mind and good sense to design clothes that allowed for protective comfort. The lightweight fabric wasn't nearly as

restrictive, heavy or hot as her leathers; with those advantages, in that heat, she'd sacrifice the armored security every time.

She had been following a small deer trail that led meanderingly to the west. She knew in a half mark she'd reach an open, grassy meadow. There, quite a few large rats made their homes, which brought in quite a few large snakes. It was unfrequented because of that, which made it a great hiding place. Beyond the meadow another quarter mark was a small pond – like all good deer trails, its creation was meant to lead to water.

Just before the bend in the trail that would ultimately open out into the meadow, Xena pulled up short. She stopped, her senses prickling at her. Listening closely she heard nothing out of place; birds and crickets both were singing undisturbed. Then she realized it wasn't a sound her senses were picking up on, it was a smell. She knew that smell all too well; it was embedded into her mind as a child. She drew her sword and turned off the trail to follow the scent of blood and rotting flesh.

She'd forged her way into the woods about fifty feet before finding the corpse. Sheathing her sword, Xena knelt by it, swatting away flies so she could better examine the body. It was the remains of a sheep, neatly butchered of about two-thirds of its meat. The rest lay to the world to do with as it pleased. Her initial thought was that the carcass was carelessly wasted, then reminded herself that animals often left what they would not eat for others. Most of the time, what could be eaten was, the rest was left, and the fed would go off to sleep and digest. Xena found many prints in the soft lawn of the forest: booted feet, all by the same person. She looked up into the trees and started walking east, back towards the path. More than likely, her prey would be sleeping where the passing day would cast her in deeper and deeper shadow.

Sure enough, practically hanging over her head was Kaija, sprawled on a large bough, head pillowed on one arm, the other hanging limply over. Given her nightly exploits and her meal, Xena wasn't surprised the girl was sleeping so soundly. She thought better of waking her – 'she'd probably run off and I'd have to go searching all over again.' So she grabbed some nearby sticks, pulled out her breast dagger, and sat down beneath the tree to whittle while Kaija slept.

All the while she cut away at the wood she'd tried to piece together the information she had gathered so far into a sensible scenario. Before she knew it, the warm sun and abrupt arousal during the night had her dozing. She was roused just as abruptly by a sharp kick to the bottom of her boot. Tired blue eyes looked up into expressionless gold ones.

"Why is it that everywhere I go, there you are?" There was no humor in Kaija's tone, but no anger either, so Xena was left to believe it was an earnest question.

"You mean you're tired of playing tag?" Her tired voice cracked as she made her joke. Kaija seemed to consider the response for a moment, then dismissed it. Reaching down, the smaller woman offered her hand to help the warrior up.

Once on her feet, Xena dusted off her pants and cocked a smile at her companion. “Minosha appreciates the mystery meat.”

Kaija pulled her lips tight over her sharp canines, gave a curt nod. “They still do not have enough for the Festival. I will bring more tonight.”

The little huntress started to move away, but Xena reached out to stop her. “Hey, there’re some people back at the village who are pretty worried about you.”

Kaija’s head tilted to the side; she seemed curious but not the least bit apologetic. “I am doing the best I can right now Xena.”

“No, I don’t think so. The best you can do is to clue your friends in so they can help you, instead of running away from them.”

Kaija shook Xena’s hand off with a jerk. Her expressionless eyes turned stormy, the pupils dilated slightly. “I am not running away. I am doing my best.”

Trying not to lose her cool, Xena traced her mouth with thumb and forefinger, giving herself some time. “You’re doing your best... What exactly are you doing? Forgive me if I haven’t got it all figured out, but let me see what I’ve got so far.

“You get here, get dumped by Tai’gee, start creating all kinds of mischief to get yourself expelled, nearly get killed by someone, you won’t tell us who, then run off into the woods to supply the village that doesn’t want you with meat for their Festival. That about cover it?”

“You do not understand.”

“Clearly.”

The sun had begun to set and with the trees’ cover the effect was dusk. Kaija’s pupils had gotten bigger and bigger, but whether that was the darkness or the girl’s increasing agitation, Xena wasn’t sure. When the silence between them dragged out for too long, Xena waved her hands at her in dismissal.

“Look, you want to be difficult, do it. Gabrielle and I are outta here. Good luck with whatever.”

Xena turned away angrily and stomped through the underbrush. Mid-step she froze. In front of her was a very startled, very old, very angry boar. It sported one tusk, but it was long and just as dangerous as two, especially with the mouthful of razor teeth she knew it had.

The animal lowered its head and started to charge, but before Xena could get her sword drawn Kaija charged in, kicking the boar squarely in the head. It was only stunned for a moment – and then even angrier. And Kaija was the nearest retribution. Xena drew her sword in one swift motion and yelled at Kaija to move, but the girl seemed paralyzed. She’d gone to all fours, her face just inches – *maybe* a foot – from the boar’s heaving snout. Her teeth were bared, every

muscle taut, saliva dribbling down her chin, eyes divided by a narrow slit of black. A low, long growl uncurled from her throat, and she did not give an inch. But neither would the boar.

Ducking its head, the beast made to stab Kaija's throat with its one tusk, and the huntress barely missed the guaranteed fatal wound. In an instant she side stepped, dragging her clawed fingers across the boar's head, hoping to gauge an eye. The animal turned slightly, tossing its head again, just missing skewering Kaija's arm as it raked by. That was the moment Xena needed. Twirling her sword once for momentum, she drove the blade straight down. She was aiming for the spot just behind its head, but the boar was too quick. The bronze ended up driving down through the boar's back, severing the spine and pinning him to the ground. Fighting for survival, he began struggling with his front legs, pulling at his restraint and cutting himself against the blade. Front hooves scrabbled at the soft forest debris, desperate and undefeated. Kaija came over quickly, grabbed the boar's struggling head and wrenched it as hard as she could. Finally it was dead.

The younger woman knelt, smelling the kill. In one motion she pulled her knife from her boot and made a cut in the animal's abdomen to drain the blood. "We should take it to the village. They will make good use of it."

Xena nodded, wiping the back of her hand over her mouth. 'Much too close.' Looking to Kaija, she took the moment to thank her.

"Any time," the girl responded nonchalantly. With a mighty tug, she yanked Xena's sword free, handed it back to the recovering warrior, and hefted the massive animal onto her back with a fair amount of ease. Xena knew that boar probably weighed twice as much as she did.

"Since you're feeling so helpful," Xena called as they started back towards the village on the deer trail, "why don't you give back the Queen's ceremonial mask? Gabrielle is going to need it next week."

"I am looking for it," said Kaija in a soft grunt. She resettled the load across her shoulders and kept walking.

"What do you mean you're looking for it?" Xena shortened her stride to keep up with Kaija. It was a slower trip with the extra weight, and dark was quickly approaching.

"I mean exactly what I say."

"Did you lose it?"

"No."

"Then why are you looking for it?"

"Because it needs to be found," the girl answered flatly.

“Damn it Kaija!”

“Xena, I did not take the mask. I did not take any of those things.”

Cerulean eyes darted to the lumbering figure beside her. ‘Finally!’ “Then who-”

Kaija stopped in the trail, turned to Xena with a look of quickly draining patience. “You know I cannot tell you that. There is too much-” Kaija’s look grew hard. She didn’t finish, just turned to continue walking.

“Is? So the deal’s not over?”

“There was never a deal!” Kaija seemed quite ready to chuck the boar and tear Xena’s hair out. “Ephiny did not want me to leave, I needed a way out and they gave it to me.”

“But that’s not all. Why did you need a way out? Why do they want you to leave? What’s at stake here Kaija?” Xena held Kaija’s stare, but the girl wasn’t going to give an inch. Xena decided to pull her last cards. “When you were shot, you didn’t chase your shooter, but you didn’t give her away either. You were hoping your body would heal itself fast enough that you could go after her – but you didn’t realize you had to take the things out of you first before your powers took over. You were trying to interfere with something – that’s what Tai’gee meant when she said you said something about ‘falling off the land’ – you meant ‘following’... following someone off Amazon land. That’s why you want to get expelled, isn’t it?”

Kaija’s expression gentled so subtly Xena could have missed it if she hadn’t been staring at her the whole time. “Pawpaw said you are smart; that you would be trouble for me.” She waited a beat, looking as though deciding something, and Xena was sure it was how much she was going to tell her. “They have power over those who cannot protect themselves.”

“Kaija, as long as you keep it a mystery, they keep the power. You’re doing them a favor by binding your own hands.” Golden eyes gave a little more, and Xena went for broke. “Let us help you.”

~

After searching the entire day for Kaija, Gabrielle and Tai’gee were exhausted, and Gabrielle was hungry. The Queen went to take her evening meal in the dining hall while Tai’gee returned to her own hut.

In the dining hall, everything seemed normal. There was no singular topic of conversation, which would have been the case if the village had a pressing issue. Gabrielle passed tables talking about the drought, the Festival, her crummy curfew – accompanied with abashed glances once the dissenter realized who was in earshot –, and one heated arm wrestling match. Ephiny and Solari waved to get her attention and motioned her to join them by the back wall.

“Where’s Eponin tonight?” asked Gabrielle.

Her tablemates tried to hide matching grins as Gabrielle set her tray down. The amount of food would have been a lot for a growing warrior – seeing it all on the petite Gabrielle’s tray was amusing to say the least.

“I’m hungry!” she cried in her defense. Her friends just laughed.

“Ep’s overseeing patrol tonight. Where’s Xena?” asked Ephiny.

“Out delving more into the Kaija mystery.”

Two heads nodded in unison. Solari decided to fill Gabrielle in on the rest of the village gossip. “Everyone knows she ran away. Some of the Council understudies have said their mentors have been grumbling about passing a ban on her so she’ll be shot on sight.”

Gabrielle slammed her mug down before even taking a sip. The resulting crack brought instantaneous silence to every table around them – which filtered expediently to the rest of the dining hall.

“Who? I want names,” she said firmly.

“I’m not sure now is the best time,” Ephiny advised quietly as she looked around the room at the gawking tables.

“No, now. If they can bitch to the understudies, they can be held accountable for their opinions in public. Their names, now.”

Solari and Ephiny shared looks of defeat, then Ephiny took the helm. “Saikus and Rachel are the front runners,” she said barely above a whisper. “I believe Mendon was of the same opinion, but less vocal.”

Gabrielle fumed. Her appetite evaporated. “I will not tolerate this any longer,” she said in a low and steely tone. Rising, she left the hall in more silence than her initial outburst had created. It was several minutes after her departure before the hall came back to life. Ephiny and Solari looked worriedly to each other, both sighed, and took the three trays to the trash.

~

Gabrielle stalked straight to the Temple of Artemis and down its dark halls towards her chamber. The torches on the walls flickered wildly as she passed. Several young priestesses reverently pressed themselves into the wall as she stormed by, bowed deeply to avoid her angry glare, and scuttled away as soon as possible. Gabrielle had come to her chamber as a place to escape the gawking eyes of her subjects before she really blew her temper. Slamming the door closed she began stomping around her room, pounding the walls at every turn. On her third round she was pulled up short by a firm yank to the back of her tunic. Wheeling, she had every intention of

removing teeth in a fast and painful manner, until she came face to face with a glowing apparition.

“Artemis!” she exclaimed.

“Yes, Gabrielle, it is I,” the echoing voice affirmed.

“But – but what are you doing here?”

Artemis gave the surprised blonde a patronizing look. She stepped off the altar ledge to come eye to eye with her Queen. What many Amazons didn’t know about Artemis was that she was very short – nothing like the towering pillar of power of Xena; she was more a cornerstone of fortitude. She had her own brand of intimidation that did not require a fearsome and imposing stature. Artemis’ character – as much as Gabrielle knew – was defined by perseverance, loyalty, and a keen mental acuity that even Athena admired from time to time.

“Gabrielle,” she said, dropping the echo effect, “do you really think I would continue to stand by while my Queen yelled at me for allowing such a conniving Council?”

“You weren’t supposed to be listening to my thoughts,” she said sulkily.

“I didn’t have much choice, considering you were practically screaming in my ear.” The deity gave a deliberate look over the room to remind Gabrielle where exactly she had brought herself. “What’s going on? I haven’t heard from you since your prayers about Kaija, and now you curse me?”

“I didn’t!-” Artemis’ raised eyebrow stopped Gabrielle from her denial. “Ok, so I did – but I didn’t mean it. It’s only because I’m so frustrated with this Council! I feel something is going on among them – far beyond Kaija – which I do appreciate any intervention you made on her behalf by the way-”

“Thank you,” said Artemis with no small aire of pride. “It’s not easy to find a wandering soul, especially when Celesta and Charon are playing tough.”

Gabrielle was about to continue with her tirade when the meaning of the goddess’ words hit her. “The goddess of death and the guardian of the river Styx? Kaija was supposed to die?”

“No – well, yes she was; she was supposed to have died at the induction ceremony, but since she didn’t, I contended they no longer had a right to her.”

Gabrielle sat down heavily on the alter. “I didn’t know. My gosh. That close. And you – had we known that you saved her the Council wouldn’t have dared to deny her a place among the Amazons.”

Artemis floated up to sit next to Gabrielle. The blonde knew the goddess couldn't feel the cold, hard stone, which miffed her a little. "Do you even know how uncomfortable lying on this thing is?"

"I know through you – and all my Queens." She smiled. "What has always puzzled me is why you all have insisted on making yourselves so uncomfortable. Even my priestesses use pillows when they kneel for their prayers."

A snort of disbelief echoed throughout the room. "I think Xena's right – all you gods really are crazy."

Artemis continued to smile. "Perhaps, but at least our backs don't hurt in the morning. Now to the matter at hand – why are you here?"

"Artemis, how can I be Queen when my every decision is undermined by my Council? How can I protect this Nation and its people when I don't have any power? I mean-" Gabrielle ran a frustrated hand through her blonde locks and decided to go for broke, "I intended the Council to be there as advisors – why have you let it get so out of control?"

"You gave up most of your power when you decided to continue roaming the world with Xena rather than stay here and rule my Nation," answered the goddess matter-of-factly.

"You gave me that choice Artemis."

"Yes I did, because my Amazons are as I am – virgin in all aspects of life; I would not ask you to do that which is against your entire being for the sake of my pleasure. But it was you who decided a suitable alternative to a ruling Queen would be a governing Council with an enforcing Regent."

Gabrielle slapped the stone with her open hand. "It's not supposed to work like this! My idea was for the Council to be a part of making the big decisions, helping design treaties and common law – they were supposed to be representative of the people's interests. But factions are pushing their own agendas, handing out ultimatums; they don't even respect my input, let alone allow me to make a decision. I can't believe Ephiny's been dealing with this for so long."

The silence of the room made Gabrielle's ears ring. Finally Artemis spoke.

"It was an admirable idea Gabrielle – and it shows me the faith you had in your people to rule themselves. You should see the meetings on Olympus when Zeus takes it in his head to ask our opinions," she offered with a chuckle. Gabrielle wasn't amused. "My point is, the idea is borne of the purity of your faith, but even the gods can't handle the responsibility of communal consensus. My people need a leader. That is who you are supposed to be."

Gabrielle sighed heavily. She slid from the dais and took a few steps away, as though the space would give her resource enough to order her thoughts. After a few moments though she turned back to the goddess, throwing her hands to the side. "What can I do?"

“No matter what you decide, I will support you Gabrielle, as I always have.” The echo began to return to the Goddess’ voice. “You are my Queen.”

The deity disappeared in a brilliant flash of light. The torch flames didn’t so much as flicker. Gabrielle was left alone, much less angry, but all the more drained.

“I need to talk to Xena,” she said aloud, then turned on her heel and walked purposefully – albeit much more calmly – to their hut.

~

Tai’gee had met her own frustrations when she’d arrived at her hut – Amana was waiting for her.

“Hi,” Tai’gee greeted tiredly.

“‘Hi?’ After two weeks all you have to say is ‘hi?’” Amana stood in Tai’gee’s doorway, arms folded. She made no move to step aside as Tai’gee got closer.

“Well I might have had more to say, but not if you’re going to be like that.”

Tai’gee tried to get past Amana but the older warrior refused to move. Stepping back, Tai’gee folded her own arms. “Amana, I’m tired. There is plenty of time to talk, but now is not the time.”

“Oh? And when were you going to talk to me? You don’t just disappear on people, Tai’gee. And then Xena’s acting like your guardian? What’s that about?”

Tai’gee sighed. “Amana, I’m not doing this outside, and I’m not doing it now. If you want to come inside, fine. Otherwise we can talk later.”

Amana’s scowl was deep, but in the early darkness, Tai’gee couldn’t really see it. The older warrior stepped aside, allowing Tai’gee through, then followed her inside. Tai’gee immediately went to her water system, turning the nozzle to fill a large pot which she would put over a fire. She worked in silence as she grabbed the few pieces of wood she had left and stoked her hearth. She was so tired it took several tries with her flint to get the flames going, but once she did the tender was dry enough to catch right away. Then she went back to the nozzle to fill a bucket and began dumping water into the bathing basin. Amana had parked herself at the dining table, making no move to help or make conversation. She just sat and frowned.

“I don’t have any fresh food to offer you, but there’s some dried stuff I can make soup with.”

“Don’t trouble yourself on my account,” was the sulky reply.

“Fine.” Tai’gee filled two more buckets before Amana spoke again.

“How’s Kaija?”

Tai’gee mentally winced at the woman’s flat, disinterested tone, but outside she kept her face passive. “The last time I saw her she was doing much better,” she answered noncommittally.

Amana studied her fingers. “Well enough to run away it seems.”

Tai’gee’s temper snapped. Throwing the entire bucket into the basin she swung around, facing her guest angrily. “I’m not going to play games,” she said coldly, “so, out with it. You’ve never liked Kaija and you’ve never given her a chance. Why?”

The chestnut-haired warrior leaned back in her chair, raising it to its back legs. She spoke with easy derision. “You really have to ask? She’s an animal Tai’gee. She doesn’t belong among us.”

“She is not an animal, Amana! And I shouldn’t have to defend her against you!”

“What would you call her then?”

“I call her the best friend I’ve ever had, or could hope to have. She is loyal and kind and I love her.”

Amana forced out a deep-throated chuckle, mirthless and hard. “You love her?” She laughed again. “You realize you’ve just used the very description someone would use for their family dog? That’s hilarious!”

“Get out Amana,” ordered Tai’gee.

“What?”

“Get out. I want you to leave.”

Amana stood but didn’t look ready to leave yet. “What, because I tell the truth? How do you love her, Tai’gee? Hm? Like you love a sister? A pet? Like me?”

Tai’gee folded her arms across her chest, after pushing back an errant lock of her dark hair, and leveled a deep look on the woman before her. “I love her in more ways than you could ever understand. And I love her even more because she’s never judged you, even when I should have.”

An angry snap reverberated through the room after Amana’s open palm came down hard on the table. “Judge me? She’s not even capable of judging me! The animal in her evaluates us as threat or no threat and dismisses us. What does she know of attraction and love and commitment? How can you even pretend to depend on something as fickle as feline interest?”

“The same way you could if you’d ever given her the chance to show you how much she could care for you! She may not be as human as you and I are, but that doesn’t make her all animal – just like Hercules isn’t all god. She hurts and laughs and loves just like we do.”

Amana pressed her lips together tightly, taking a moment to look away from her. “Does she cry?” she asked quietly.

“What?”

“Cry,” Amana said louder. “Has she ever cried?”

“I don’t see what-”

“*Humans* cry Tai’gee,” the woman cut her off, explaining as though she was talking to one of her students. Does. She. Cry?”

Tai’gee faltered a moment, thinking. She knew Kaija couldn’t cry, not tearfully anyway. Tai’gee had never held her friend while she wept and brushed away sad tears, comforted away sniveling and sniffing and sobbing. Kaija had done it for her she didn’t know how many times, consoled and calmed her. Then an indescribable wailing pierced her memory, horrid, wretched, painful; it was Kaija’s first step in mourning the loss of her father, in acknowledging the confusing emotions coursing throughout her previously fairly unemotional consciousness. Tai’gee shuddered. “She cries, in her own way. She’ll never be just like you, no one will; you’re going to have to accept that.”

Amana snorted in dismissal. “Anyway, enough of that. What are we now? Are you done with me or what?”

Tai’gee refused to answer right away. She went to check on her pot of water. It was boiling, so she removed it and lumbered over to the bath basin, setting the entire thing into the water and using a towel to reach in and tilt the bottom. The bath water steamed with the added heat.

“I’ve learned a lot these last couple of weeks about you and me,” said Tai’gee at length. “My heart isn’t here like it was.”

“So like I said, you’re done with me?”

“Take it however you want Amana. You’re the one who likes being judgmental and spiteful. I’m just telling you where I am.”

Amana was quiet for a space, then nodded towards the big pot resting by Tai’gee’s booted feet. “I would’ve helped you with that if you’d just asked.”

“Should I have had to ask?”

After Amana left, Tai'gee bathed and cried and finally returned to the Queen's hut to wait for news from Xena. It had been full dark for several candlemarks before the dark warrior returned home. She was instantly bombarded with questions. Holding her hands up to stem the tidal wave of demands, Xena moved into the living area and sat down heavily in one of the more plentifully pillowed chairs.

"Yes I found her, and she's fine. She carried a full grown boar back to the kitchen on her shoulders." Before Tai'gee could ask the next obvious question, Xena raised her voice to keep from being talked over. "She's gone back to the forest and plans to stay there for a day or two, not very far from the village. She said you" looking at Tai'gee "have a common meeting place where you'll know where to find her if you need her."

Tai'gee instantly jumped for the door.

"Where are you going?" Xena asked wearily.

"To find her, where do you think?"

"I think you should wait." Xena was tired, exhausted, and it made her voice thick, her words slow. Gabrielle went to the hearth and made a quick cup of tea, bringing it back to the warrior with a small jar of honey. She sat down on the arm of the chair and waited for whatever else Xena had to say. Tai'gee also returned to listen. Xena spoke in between sips of her tea.

"She didn't take the mask; she's out looking for it."

"But – then – who?" asked Gabrielle haltingly.

Xena shrugged. "She still won't say. She's got some kind of deal in place that she's protecting. On the surface it looks like a deal to get her a permanent expulsion from the Amazons-"

"But she didn't want to get kicked out," Tai'gee opposed.

"She's given everyone the crystalline impression that that's exactly what she wants, Tai'gee," said Gabrielle. "If she didn't see any reason to stay, and we made Ephiny promise to keep her here..."

Tai'gee looked away evasively, shifted her stance. "Just some things she said. And not everyone thought that's what she wanted – I – I just thought she was trying to get attention..."

"What did she say? When?" Xena drilled.

"I don't know, several moons ago; last fall maybe. There was a point when a lot of people were mumbling..." She looked uncomfortably at Gabrielle and started speaking quickly. "Mumbling about the Queen's absence and neglect of her people. They wanted to vote on a new Queen, hold a big tournament or something and vote on the winners – to over – over throw you," she finished in a rush.

Deep, severe frowns etched both Gabrielle and Xena's faces. Gabrielle's voice deepened with seriousness.

"Why have you not said anything about this before?"

"Because it all went away – the mumblings and whatnot. It was like a fickle rumor that just died out."

"Rumors of overthrow never die out," said Xena pointedly. "When this talk was going on, what did Kaija say?"

"For one, she said she wanted to make sure to see the Elite Guard Exam. She told me that she heard plans being made for an attack or ambush, which I explained were probably about the testing course. And the other I'm not sure if it's something she said or that she overheard from lessons but she said fidelity to the Queen was the only thing that would protect the Nation. This was before the thefts and all; she had reasons to want to stay, and understood she was expected to stay because you wanted her here."

Gabrielle thought for a moment, absently stroking her warrior's hair as she pondered. "That definitely sounds like something Anite would say during lessons – or one of the priestesses – Wait – what do you mean she might've overheard that?"

Tai'gee shifted uncomfortably again: with both the Queen's intense green eyes and her Consort's intense blue eyes boring into her for answers, she couldn't help but fidget. "She didn't feel comfortable sitting in the classroom, and I didn't really try very hard to convince her... She hid under the window for every lesson."

Xena snorted. "That explains why you kept looking to the window for your test answers."

"I did not! I looked for opinion! My answers were my own!" Tai'gee cried with insult.

"Wait – wait – wait," Gabrielle held up her hands. "You mean to tell me that Kaija has a full Amazon education?"

Tai'gee nodded. "I think so; as much as I have anyway."

"That's all well and good," said Xena as she set her empty teacup aside. "But that doesn't get us any closer to what's going on. What I do know is that she wasn't trying to die at the glen – she was banking on her healing powers to fix her enough so she could interfere with whatever plans her stalker was originally trying to execute. Which is why I said, 'on the surface.'"

Gabrielle's forehead knitted in thought. "So Kaija did want to get kicked out?"

“Yes. She wanted to be able to go off Amazon land. That’s what she was trying to tell you, Tai’gee, before she passed out. My guess is that whoever’s blackmailing her has some bigger plan that Kaija’s fallen into and Kaija’s trying to muck it up without violating their deal.”

“But Xena, I thought we decided that Tai’gee wasn’t their leverage anymore,” said Gabrielle. “That’s why they went after Kaija directly. Wouldn’t that mean there is no more deal?”

“No, the deal is definitely still on – or at least the threat to Kaija is still in place.”

Tai’gee squinted as she tried to arrange the mental puzzle pieces. “But if the plan’s still on, and I’m not the leverage any more, and they weren’t successful killing Kaija, won’t they try something else? They have to get the upper hand back again.”

Xena nodded with a heavy head. “Which is what I explained to our good friend as she carried back a little snack for the village. She’s willing to let us try to get her back into admissions, but she’s got her jaw clamped down on what the deal is tighter than a badger with its breakfast.”

“It would make it so much easier if she would just tell us what’s going on,” moaned Gabrielle before massaging her quickly tiring eyes.

Xena raised a hand in defeat. “She seems to think the consequences of her revelation are too great to risk telling us. Which, from what I overheard that afternoon at the tavern, is exactly what her blackmailers know. I can tell you, she wasn’t the least bit eager to let me come up with even a little plan, so they must have her number nailed to a wall.”

“Do you think it’s me still?” asked Tai’gee.

“No. I think it’s something else. I just don’t know what exactly... yet.”

“Well, we’ve already established asking doesn’t work,” Gabrielle snorted.

The three of them sat in the dark quiet for several minutes. They were beyond perplexed. Finally Tai’gee took her leave, explaining she had an early patrol in the morning and bid them goodnight. After she left, Xena shook her head.

“What?” asked Gabrielle.

“Isn’t her hut the other way?”

Gabrielle smiled. “Young love. She better not get herself caught breaking my mandate. She’ll spend time in jail.”

“I doubt she’ll get caught. She’s got too much to be suspicious of not to be careful.” After a pause, Xena asked what Gabrielle had discovered over the day. The blonde recounted everything Artemis had told her earlier, the rumors about the Council, and her reservations about what to do next.

“I thought about disbanding them-”

“No, don’t do that yet. I think we need them in tact for the moment.”

Gabrielle studied her companion curiously, but when the warrior didn’t continue she added her own sentiments. “That’s fine, because if I disband them I might need to stay. Permanently. Someone will have to rule.”

“Would you be ready for that?” Xena asked slowly, trying to put herself as far away from Gabrielle’s decision as possible.

“I don’t know that it matters whether I’m ready. I’ve been the only Queen absent to the Nation. I’m not just the Queen of this region, but of all the Amazons. I’ve got five other Ephiny’s out there that have basically been un-united since my reign. If I’m not going to be the Queen the Amazons need, I need to tell Artemis that, and come up with another plan.”

Xena was very weary; trying to stay awake through her lover’s enlightenment was proving difficult. “I think,” Xena said with another big yawn. “It’s been too long a day to make dramatic, life-altering decisions.” She rubbed her face roughly to stir the energy needed just to get herself to bed. “Still,” she said as she rose from her soft, warm chair, “this will be for you as any other decisions you make. Listen to your heart, and we’ll do whatever it says.”

Gabrielle smiled at the warrior, a small, happy smile. With no words necessary, she took Xena’s offered hand and together they went to bed.

~

Tai’gee realized that after tripping over the third ‘something’ in the dark, she hadn’t been out in the woods at night in a very long time. Back in her home village she’d spent more time among the trees with Kaija than in her aunt and uncle’s house. As an apprentice warrior, she wasn’t allowed to do night patrols, no matter how good a night crawler she was. Even with all her new training, being out in the dark after months of daytime stealth had disoriented her.

“I’m not even sure I’m heading to the right place,” she muttered. “We had a bunch of common meeting spots.” She was heading north. She’d left the main trail a while ago and was trying to navigate an almost nonexistent footpath from memory. ‘Which is probably why this is the right one – this would be a piece of cake if I had Kaija’s eyes.’ Jaggedly winding was probably the best Tai’gee could do to describe this particular trail. Just enough creatures had used it just enough times to keep it clear to the point of being suspiciously trail-like. In the dark, Tai’gee would have been at a total loss had she not walked this path about a dozen times already.

She emerged into the dark, small clearing sooner than she expected, and reflexively stepped back into the shelter of the trees. She knew she had been as careful as she could, and in the past she would have known within a few minutes into the forest if she were being followed. The Amazons, however, were a much different breed than the sort of foresters she had grown up

evading. Tai'gee remembered not being able to shake Xena off her trail, or stay on the warrior's, and the average Amazon was not far beneath Xena's skill level. None of them might be able to keep up with Kaija, but Tai'gee – as much now as then – didn't want to be the one leading someone unwanted to her friend.

Tai'gee waited uncertainly amongst the shadows, idly fingering a nearby leaf. If Kaija was here, she would know Tai'gee had arrived. The sensitive senses of the younger woman would immediately begin scanning for an intruder, and she would make a circle or two of the area, seeking out tailers. Tai'gee had missed some hunters once, and after waiting tensely for several moments for Kaija to do her sweep, watched two bodies go flying from the underbrush, unconscious and no longer a threat. Tai'gee had gladly tied the big men up, smacked them to wakefulness, and made sure they'd realized the mistake they'd made. Again she waited, this time much longer than she was accustomed, and almost turned to leave thinking this wasn't the right spot after all, when a night darkened figure moved just to Tai'gee's right, out of the trees.

Kaija moved into the clearing, standing tall and motioned for her observer to join her. When Tai'gee started to speak, Kaija raised a finger to her own lips, silencing her. Reaching out to Kaija's proffered hand, Tai'gee allowed herself to be led over to a very dark edge of the clearing where they could look back at Tai'gee's trailhead. At last, after several more long moments of inspection, starlight glinted off white teeth, showing Kaija's smile, and Tai'gee relaxed, letting go a breath she hadn't realized she were holding. She fell into Kaija, allowing herself to be wrapped in strong, secure arms, and tucked her head into Kaija's neck.

"You knew I would come tonight?" she asked against Kaija's warm skin.

"I hoped you would," was the rumbling reply.

"Were there any followers?"

"A couple. I convinced them they were following a deer. They never made it here."

Tai'gee turned her head to study Kaija's profile. The younger woman seemed to still be surveying the woods for any trace of an intruder. "It's harder to be sneaky with the Amazons."

Kaija nodded. "I know. I like that. More fun."

"You would say that," the warrior laughed.

Finally, Kaija relaxed and slid down the tree trunk she had been leaning against, to sit with Tai'gee cradled in her arms.

"Are you ok?" asked Tai'gee as she nestled more firmly into Kaija's embrace. Taller as she had always been compared to her friend, this had never been an uncomfortable position for the two. They'd spent many nights warmly tucked into each other, an indecipherable ball of legs and arms.

Kaija nodded as she set her chin atop Tai'gee's head. "I am sorry I left like that. I could not stay any more."

"I understand. I was just worried." She waited a breath before continuing. "Xena told us about the Queen's mask, that you're looking for it." Tai'gee thought she might be venturing into guarded territory too soon, especially when Kaija didn't answer right away. But, after a moment, Tai'gee felt her chin nod against her head, and a tired "Yeah," followed.

"You know you don't have to tell me what's going on – or Xena or Gabrielle. But we do just want to help if we can – even just understanding what's happening would make it so much easier."

"I know." Kaija's voice was deep and sad sounding to Tai'gee; she began rubbing the arms hugging her to offer comfort. "If I could tell you, I would. It is too important that I do not."

Tai'gee shifted to look up into Kaija's eyes. The pupils were swollen to the point of taking over Kaija's irises completely. 'Windows to the soul,' one of her teachers had said, and from where she was sitting, Kaija had both windows wide open. The sincerity of her words filled the black space of her eyes. Tai'gee looked into the space she knew contained more love for her than anyone in her life had ever felt, and she felt that same loving filling her inside, trying to get out and meet its lover. Her eyes prickled as they brimmed with tears, and she realized she had reached up for Kaija while Kaija had been wiping them away. She turned, leaned back against Kaija's knee, while Kaija leaned over and so slowly – so agonizingly slow – their lips met for the first time.

Tai'gee felt a need she never had before to tell Kaija everything she felt with this kiss. She needed Kaija to know how much and how deeply she cared for her, and this was the only way to do it. Reaching up to cup the back of Kaija's head, threading her long fingers into Kaija's thick, coarse mane of hair, Tai'gee tried to deepen the kiss, opening her mouth in invitation. But Kaija froze, backed away, and Tai'gee's sensitized nerves jangled hard at the sudden retreat.

"I am sorry I-"

"No no, it's my fault-"

"No-" said Kaija with a little more force, stopping the apologies. "I just – this is something I have never done before... and..."

Tai'gee finished the hanging sentence, "and you're not sure." She hesitated, nervous. She didn't want to be more specific by asking if Kaija wasn't sure *how* to do what she wanted, or *if* she wanted to do it at all. Screwing up her courage, she decided to lay her feelings out fully – if she'd gone too far, too fast and scared Kaija off she at least wanted her friend to know how she felt.

"I love you Kaija – and I don't want to – cause you any more pain or confusion. If this isn't – if you – don't," she stumbled, choking on the ideas of which she was trying to be supportive. She

tried to stop the tears from welling in her eyes, to keep them from spilling over, but she couldn't. She felt her heart breaking in the silence stretching out between them. When Kaija tightened her hold, Tai'gee thought it was out of consoling friendship, and she felt even more shattering pieces.

Kaija's voice was low, sultry, when she spoke into Tai'gee's ear. Large strong hands reached up to brush away starlit tears and turn her face upwards. "You are exactly what I am sure of and what I want. I just realized... I have seen hundreds of couples in the woods. I have never done this myself. I did not think – I did not know it felt like this – it does not look like it would feel like this."

Tai'gee burst into laughter. Throwing up a hand to cover her mouth and stifle it, she gave up the effort and buried her head into Kaija's chest to muffle her giggles. "I can just see you sitting in a tree," she laughed, "spying on couples while they make out. Oh Kaija, that's so funny!"

Kaija shrugged. "I did not know. I mean – I did not get what it was about."

Happy laughter faded into relieved giggles. "You've probably got more dirt on more people. Just how much have you seen in the woods?"

Tai'gee felt Kaija's body twitch and then a slow, rakish grin spread across the younger woman's face. Tai'gee changed her mind – "You know what, don't even answer that."

"People always think they are safest in the woods if they want a place to hide; but they are always the most obvious and easiest to find of anything in the forest. There are no secrets here."

That, Tai'gee noticed, was a lot coming from a person who usually limited her verbal interactions to a few words and concise sentences. She considered it for a moment, idly stroking the fine hairs on Kaija's forearms. Suddenly she realized what Kaija had said, and as the comprehension blossomed, Tai'gee turned her eyes back to her friend. A small, sad smile tweaked the edges of Kaija's lips, but before Tai'gee could voice any further questions Kaija bent to kiss her. This time no flinching or hesitation interrupted them, and Tai'gee's sensibilities were quite swept away. There was a point when she managed a comprehensive thought that, for someone who had never kissed before, she was really good.

The sliver of moon overhead had traveled a great distance before Tai'gee emerged from the woods. She had just enough time to change into her guard tunic and grab some food before heading out for her patrol. Being somewhat awestruck made those simple tasks much more difficult than usual, and she stumbled onto the platform to relieve her compatriot while trying to wipe the moony look from her eyes. She wasn't successful. The guardswoman she was replacing gave her a knowing smirk as she turned to climb down the ladder.

"Sleep well?" she chided.

“Not at all,” answered Tai’gee in significantly more swooning tones than she intended. Feeling sheepish, she cleared her throat and turned to march the wall, ignoring the fading chuckles of the retiring guard. It was going to be a very long day.

VIII

The Solstice Festival was approaching much faster than Gabrielle was ready for. Due to the immensity of the event, it required her undivided attention. All of the Regents from all of the surrounding territories were going to be there: families, entourages, horses, wagons; not to mention a veritable river of pilgrim Amazons who would also be coming for the festivities. With Xena heading the security details, the Queen was left to organize the events, ceremonies and speeches. Being honest with herself, Gabrielle found all the hustle and bustle very exciting, even while it was tiring. The energy in the village was high, and growing higher as the Festival Open drew nearer.

“You know, this is really kinda fun,” she had said to Xena a few days before the Festival.

“Fun,” the warrior grunted back.

As the weeks’ time wound down to just a few days, the Royal Couple had less and less time to spend with each other. That particular exchange had happened on a rare occasion when they both happened to be hurrying in the same direction.

“I think only a true masochist could think all this is fun.”

Gabrielle tiskted at her partner. “Come on, tell me you’re not enjoying throwing some weight around – not even a little bit?”

“No, I’m not enjoying it. Your warriors weigh too much Bard; they’re making me strain,” she quipped.

“Xena!” Gabrielle batted playfully at the warrior’s stomach, but her hand was caught and held in Xena’s much larger, much stronger one. They walked in hand until they reached the temple before they had to part ways.

“Think you’ll get home in time for dinner?” Gabrielle asked.

Xena snorted. “I think I’ll be lucky to get home in time for breakfast.”

Gabrielle frowned, but didn’t protest. With only three days left, she knew they’d both get caught up in the preparations late into every night until the Festival was over.

As Xena leaned over to kiss her wife goodbye, feet pounded up to them, running. Gabrielle shifted her glance around Xena’s shoulder and saw a sprinting Tai’gee bounding across the temple yard to meet them.

“Uh oh,” Xena muttered. “Please tell me she’s found the mask.”

“Somehow, I don’t think so,” Gabrielle answered from the corner of her mouth.

Tai’gee pulled up short in front of them, shrouding them in a cloud of dust. Panting heavily she tried to explain.

“Breathe now, talk later; no passing out allowed,” Xena said.

“I – need to – talk to you.”

“Me, her or us?”

“Us – I mean – we – you both. I need to talk to both of you,” the stammering girl finally got out. “I know you’re busy – and I can’t say I know how important it could be, but I haven’t gotten to see you since the other night.”

Gabrielle pursed her lips. “It’s got to be quick – in the temple.”

They all moved into the musty darkness, down several twisting halls, and ducked into the first empty room they came to. Xena and Gabrielle both leaned against a side wall, waiting for Tai’gee to close the door.

“That thing Kaija’s guarding – it’s information. She saw or heard something in the forest.”

Xena nodded. “I figured as much. How’d you find this out?”

Tai’gee glanced away from the warrior, trying very hard not to blush. “I went to see her. She said people always think they’re safe in the woods, but they’re really obvious, and there are no secrets there. That had to be what she meant, right?” She looked imploringly at the two in front of her. “Have you heard anything else?”

Gabrielle shook her head. “We haven’t had time to investigate. Everyone’s been getting ready for the Festival.”

Tai’gee gave a resigned nod. “Well, I thought I should tell you, in case... You never know what might actually be important information, right?”

Gabrielle came closer to Tai’gee to give her a reassuring pat on the shoulder. “Thank you. And if we learn anything else we’ll let you know.”

Tai’gee nodded, feeling a little embarrassed.

“How is Kaija by the way?”

“Fine,” she answered a little too quickly. She refused to meet Gabrielle’s knowing smile. “I – um – she was fine that last time I saw her.”

Xena chuckled lightly. “And when was that?”

“Last night,” the girl mumbled. She began twisting her toe against the stone floor in discomfort. Gabrielle patted her shoulder again.

“Just don’t get caught. I don’t want to have to try to get you out of jail for consorting with an enemy of the Nation.”

Tai’gee’s eyes flashed with offense. “Kaija is not-”

“I know that, but that’s what the Council would say. Just a friendly warning to be careful.”

Tai’gee sketched a bow. “Yes my Lady Queen.”

“Stop that,” Gabrielle waved.

“When do you start your next patrol?” asked Xena. The warrior moved to the door, but didn’t open it. Tai’gee said in another candlemark she was hiking the West Wall again. Xena shook her head. “Tell Vix to find you someone to switch with – take the evening shift. You look like you haven’t slept in days.”

“But Xena-”

“No buts. You are a patrol, eyes for those of us that can’t see. You need to be awake and alert, not ready to nod off first chance you get. I’m not giving you this break again – be more responsible about your visiting hours.”

Tai’gee took the chastisement in stride. Again she bowed and left quickly, passing through the door Xena opened for her without another word. Xena waited until the young warrior turned the corner, then closed the door again.

“So Kaija saw and or overheard something she shouldn’t have out in the woods,” mused the blonde Queen. Her eyes looked at Xena, but they were introspectively rearranging the new puzzle piece.

“I gotta say, of all the things that girl got from her dad, why did she have to get the Sphinx’s propensity for riddles?” Xena muttered. Louder she added, “People who want to meet about something in the woods are usually quite desperate.”

“And if they’re really desperate, they’d want to get rid of any and all evidence to their liaison,” said Gabrielle.

Xena nodded. “Either by setting her up for expulsion, blackmailing her, or…”

“...killing her,” finished the blonde.

“So the question becomes what would that meeting have been about that would require the most unlikely – and more than likely uncomprehending – eavesdropper be dispatched?” asked Xena in idle contemplation.

“Nothing good. But Tai’gee said Kaija said people are really obvious – so maybe it was about something even Kaija understood.”

“Like...”

Gabrielle thought a moment more, trying to follow Xena’s lead. “...Like...” Her eyes widened, “making a move to take out the alpha!”

“Exactly. Those rumors off overthrow didn’t die out, they went underground. I’ll bet that ambush she heard of had nothing to do with the Elite Guard Exam, and Kaija has been working to prevent it. It looks like she got caught before she could tell anyone who would believe her.”

“And now they’re blackmailing her to make sure she doesn’t tell anyone. And you think the Council is behind it all?” Gabrielle said more than asked. She felt herself getting queasy.

“I think we should start casting some stones and see what turns up. If we want to get Kaija back into admissions, we’re going to have to get the general public to want her, not the Council.”

A mischievous grin tweaked Gabrielle’s lips. “What did you have in mind?”

~

Vix was not pleased with Xena’s order that Tai’gee switch shifts. Since warriors avoided patrol duties whenever possible, as soon as a shift was over they evaporated faster than rain in the desert. Vix ended up taking the shift herself and told Tai’gee to meet her at the North Wall Gate a candlemark before the evening meal was set. Tai’gee thanked her and left the willowy older warrior as quickly as possible. She had no interest in adding time and opportunity to increase the woman’s annoyance.

Trudging back to her hut, Tai’gee shouldered no small degree of dejection. She had hoped her new information from Kaija would have been better received – and useful in some way. She’d felt rather silly standing there with the Queen and her Champion looking at her as though waiting for the punch line. She realized they were pretty busy with the Festival, but she hadn’t considered they may have put Kaija’s dilemma on hold – or maybe even dropped it all together. That thought made her angry. But then, without new information, without something solid to work with, what more could they do? Kaija’s silence hindered all of them.

Trouncing down on her little wicker bed in her quiet, lonely hut, Tai’gee released a loud, discontented sigh. Xena was right; she was very tired, at least in body. But her mind was awake

and bustling. She wondered if Kaija was getting enough sleep, what she did during the day. Even with their newly acknowledged closeness, Kaija did not divulge much to her friend. Besides their intimacy, the most lively reaction Tai'gee effused from the half cat was a possessive and threatening growl as Tai'gee described her last encounter with Amana.

“Do you think,” Kaija had asked as the hair on the back of her neck bristled, “she is angry enough to mean you harm?”

Tai'gee had been adamant with refusal. “She wouldn't do anything like that, especially to a sister Amazon. That's just not who she is.”

“Does not mean it does not happen,” Kaija said darkly. “Nonetheless, I will keep an eye on her.”

That had made Tai'gee feel oddly very good. She liked the idea of Kaija looking out for her. Not that it was a new idea, but it was different now; comforting in a sense she hadn't felt before.

‘If all this plays down, if Kaija ever gets absolved of all this nonsense, I wonder if she would come back to the village.’ Tai'gee rubbed the empty space next to her on the bed, wondering if she would ever get the chance to share it; to have a true home and family. She supposed anything was possible – after all, no one believed Xena would be able to manage a domestic life for more than a couple weeks. She'd been in the village now for more than a moon. By taking over military command from Ahmon, it didn't appear she had any intentions of leaving soon either.

‘And they wouldn't abandon us before Kaija's position is resolved,’ she told herself. She sighed and rolled to her stomach, cradling her head on a muscled forearm.

It had been rather exciting having the Queen in the city. All through their lessons the Queen's importance and significance was drilled into them. Fealty to her was to stand next to Artemis, because the Queen was Artemis' chosen daughter – an extension of herself sent to live among the mortals so they would be assured of Her devotion to Her people. Not being a born Amazon, a tribe child, Tai'gee hadn't experienced these preachings for the number of years most of her classmates had; and as they came to age, the discussions of the absentee Queen Gabrielle got more and more heated.

“How can we be a strong people within ourselves when our Queen thinks her lover and the outside world are more important than we are?” one student complained. “If she is Artemis' presence, then her not being here shows Artemis does not support us.”

Another of her classmates had a very different opinion and her voice shook with anger as she explained. “The Queen believed us capable of fending for ourselves, to show our unity even in the real absence of Artemis. If the Goddess ever really did forsake us, would we not still be Amazons? Do we become worthless, useless, meaningless women or do we still stand for life and freedom and a woman's right to expression?”

The first speaker had sat fuming, folding her arms in aggravation and refused to look at the blonde countering her. Another girl, a mousy brunette Tai'gee now knew as Rhianon said timidly that if the Queen was present to the Nation there wouldn't be need for these discussions. "That alone shows how important she is as a leader and a symbol."

"Besides," another had added, "just by her not being here the unity between the Regions breaks down. The Queen keeps us all connected, whether or not she has Artemis' blessing."

Instructor Geesi had raised her hands then to quiet the discussion, but right as she did, a dark voice spoke lowly from the back of the room. "I think we're better off without a Queen at all. The only reason we have one in the first place is because Artemis got tired of making visits to the First Order of Amazons. She wanted a spokeswoman. I think we've gotten to the point where we can speak for ourselves."

It was Aeaxis that spoke, the Council member Saikus' daughter. She was of middling height and strength, dark skin and smoldering brown eyes. She studied her short nails nonchalantly, as though she'd made a passing comment on the weather, then looked up to the quiet room. Even Geesi stood silently, hands still up, looking in unmasked surprise at her pupil.

It was the first time Tai'gee had heard anyone speak out openly against the Queen, and from the reaction of the class, their first time as well. Her senses prickled, and she felt an instant guttural wariness for Aeaxis from that moment on. Glancing at the window, Tai'gee had gotten a glimpse of Kaija's disapproving expression before she pulled back further out of sight. It had been several very tense moments before Geesi cleared her throat and redirected the discussion back to the theology of the centaur wars.

As far as Tai'gee knew there were no repercussions for Aeaxis' commentary. As much as the Amazons were taught to respect and devote themselves to the Queen, they were also expected to be free and independent thinkers. And as far as she knew there had never been an actual revolt against the Queen, just a constant presence of grumbling dissenters. From the readings assigned to them from the old scrolls, the First Order of Amazons had sounded like a powerful and awesome force – but when Tai'gee read between the lines they also sounded lawless and directionless. Kaija had pointed out to her – it was amazing how quickly she had learned to read – in a passage that when the first Queen, Mayaz, had been chosen by Artemis, several of the women complained they were being setup to follow in the hierarchies of men. It seemed like Queen Mayaz had fought for her position everyday in the beginning.

In that regard, Aeaxis wasn't wrong and she'd had a point – but having a point was different than really thinking the sacred structure of the Nation should be overturned.

Tai'gee rolled over yet again, realizing her thoughts had started to ramble. She closed her eyes and let her mind wander over the last several days, and went to sleep with a smile on her lips as she thought of a little outcast who loved her.

“We’ve found the mask,” Queen Gabrielle announced before the evening meal was set. There was a cheer from the dinner crowd, but Xena kept a very keen eye out for those of less enthusiasm. She found them; middling the line of hungry Amazons, some even had looks of surprise and disbelief. ‘Interesting.’

Some women standing closest to Gabrielle called out, asking who found it and how. The blonde had smiled, pulling a little storyteller trick to entice more listeners, and said it really wasn’t that important. As intended, shouts of “Please!” and “Tell us!” ensued and Gabrielle relented.

“Kaija helped us find it,” she said lightly.

“You mean she told you where she hid it,” yelled a condescending voice both Queen and Consort recognized as Ahmon.

“No,” said Gabrielle firmly, loudly, and authoritatively. “I mean exactly what I said. She helped us find it. It was always supposition that she was the one who took it – no one investigated to see if it was true. In fact,” she glanced at Xena, who gave her a brief nod, “she hasn’t stolen anything since she’s been here.”

Murmurs greeted this bit of news, and Xena kept a close watch on the huddling clique as it quickly began slinking to the back of the crescenting crowd. She marked several yellow Trainer belts in the group, which worked to her advantage, providing quite a bit more information about the women than names alone would have. ‘Pretty big group in all,’ Xena noted, and she only knew a handful by name. That concerned her – if they were all anti-royals that meant they were all low key enough to stay out of the spotlight, which meant there may be two, three or ten more for every one person she was observing at the moment. Mentally she started cataloguing names and faces to go over later.

“But, then who?” asked one voice from the crowd. “If it wasn’t her, then who?”

“Yeah, and why?” shouted another.

The dark warrior lifted a brow seeing it was Saikus’ daughter who asked this question. ‘Fishing are we?’

Gabrielle quieted the crowd with a gesture, patting her hands down calmly. “Don’t worry, there will be plenty of time for the whole story – I just wanted to give us some good news to chew over with our evening meal. Now come on, let’s go inside.”

Xena was pretty satisfied with the results of that cast – she waited until the majority of diners had entered the hall before needling her way over to her bard. A few eager Amazons had clustered around her, trying to press for more information, but Gabrielle was kindly deflecting their inquiries. They quickly went about other business when the Warrior Princess added her conclusionary presence behind the Queen.

“That went well,” said Gabrielle under her breath.

Xena agreed though not verbally. She continued to watch the small group hanging back from the slowly moving line. Saikus and Rachel were diplomatically trying to look disinterested in the group, but Ahmon seemed to be fairly angry at Aeaxis. ‘Oh, and look.’ Xena noticed; Amana was also standing nearby, facing the dinner line and doing her damndest to ignore the interactions behind her.

“Interesting little pod,” said Gabrielle still speaking quietly under her breath. Though the bard knew it impossible, it seemed Ahmon and Saikus heard her and both looked up simultaneously. Xena had already turned away, as though going inside to get her food, but Gabrielle had been caught looking. Trying to cover herself, she smiled and waved at them. In return they offered stiff nods and turned back to the line, silent and with averted gazes – except for Aeaxis, who left.

Gabrielle turned casually to follow Xena, slipping her hand into her partner’s and received a reassuring squeeze. Just inside the door, a little, towheaded girl ran up to them, bowed hastily, then reached up to tug on the Queen’s free hand. Gabrielle smiled down at Pi, dismissing her mother’s embarrassed head shaking. Kneeling down to her height, the blonde bard took both the girl’s little hands into hers and felt her smile grow wider.

“Yes Pi?”

“When is Kaija coming back?”

That had been a surprise. For a five-year-old, Pi seemed eerily aware of current events. Gabrielle looked up quickly at her warrior, who was looking down at the child with amused interest.

“Oh,” Gabrielle fumbled for a moment, “well Kaija’s just out helping us for a bit and as soon as she’s done she’ll be back.”

The wide blue eyes of the youth did not seem convinced, but she didn’t press. “But she’s better, right?”

The little girl’s highly pitched voice wavered a little. Gabrielle’s supple hands gently wiped away the girl’s bulging tears, truly impressed with her genuine affection for the half cat everyone else shunned. “Yes sweetheart, she’s all better; just fine, ok?”

The girl nodded, and it was then that her mother, Cypress, stepped up, wringing her hands. Her darker hair was awry and its coarseness seemed amplified in the dim interior lighting of the hall.

“I’m so sorry. She-”

“Not at all. I don’t mind a little refreshing good will,” Gabrielle assured her. She spoke back to Pi, asking her how she knew Kaija, but it was the mother who answered.

“They would play together, a little. Before things got... Pi didn’t have many friends so she got pretty attached to the – new one.”

Gabrielle felt Xena flinch beside her, but the warrior maintained a very calm outward expression. Gabrielle pulled the girl into a brief hug and patted her cheek as she let her go. “Yes, I can tell you care a lot about her. And don’t you worry Pi – she’s just fine, and I’m sure she’ll come to see you just as soon as she can.”

Pi managed a beaming, if not a little watery, smile. Ahmon decided to join them at that point, walking up possessively behind the messy haired mother. “Everything ok here, Cypress,” she asked with a level stare at Xena.

“Yes, yes. We’re just... finishing.” With hurried roughness, Cypress hustled herself and Pi off into the jumble of Amazons, tables and chairs. Ahmon followed after a pronounced stare-off with the Warrior Princess.

“That shouldn’t have been a surprise at all,” Gabrielle said as she continued to the serving line, “but I guess with all the anti-Kaija sentiment around it gets harder to notice the ones who like her.”

“Especially when they’re only knee-high,” the warrior added at length, watching Ahmon solicitously seat Cypress and Pi at a table before seating herself. Xena catalogued that as well.

~

The evening shift, Tai’gee decided, sucked. After having slept almost the entire day she felt even more lethargic and less motivated than she had at the beginning of the day. She was also cranky over the fact that she probably wouldn’t be able to see Kaija that night. If she had to take her own shift again in the morning, she wouldn’t see Kaija until the next night – but that was the Festival Open. With a frustrated stomp, she pivoted and marched back across the wall top.

‘At least you get to walk the North Wall,’ said a small, consoling voice in her mind.

The North Wall was much more of a challenge than the West. Many of the festivarrians were already arriving, and watching the comings and goings of each person was tedious. The North Gate opened out onto the second largest road leading from the capitol city, and ultimately dispersed into narrow, winding footpaths by the time it reached the edge of Amazon land, allowing travelers to join at various places to the more public roadways.

There were five guards besides Tai’gee on the Northern Wall that night; each had their own responsibilities. Valen, the shift lead oversaw the guards, filled in when they needed a break, and kept their attentions focused. Her sister Vylan watched people entering the village proper – or rather, approaching the gate – there were another four guards at the gate who inspected everyone wishing to enter. Beckries watched people leaving the village. Tai’gee and her counterpart Mixan watched the east and west spread of the woods for any sign of trouble. Throughout the woods there were scouts on patrol who would shoot a flaming arrow, make a

warning whistle, or in some other way indicate to the Proper that there was trouble. It was Tai'gee and Mixan's job to see or hear that signal first.

Tai'gee liked Mixan. The woman was older and larger than she, and though she was in the warrior caste, she was a grunt warrior – a career patrol Mixan had said jokingly. The woman didn't seem to mind wall patrol at all; Tai'gee thought she seemed quite content with her station. She was very easy going about – well, almost everything – which was why Tai'gee liked her so much. She gave the short and simple to a story, listened patiently, and was amiable to everyone.

With a sigh, Tai'gee wondered what her woodland friend was doing at the moment. 'I hope she's not sitting there waiting for me, but I'm sure she'll figure it out if she is.' If Tai'gee had been a scout she might have been able to manage at least a cursory stop by their spot in order to explain her duty shift. But scouting was done by the off duty huntresses. The more familiar the huntresses were with the surrounding landscape, the better able they were to supply the village with food and information. At least, that was what one wise leader had reasoned centuries ago.

Tai'gee could have been a great huntress, but she wanted to be a warrior. From the moment she'd entered the village and saw the Guard uniforms and training classes drilling on sword maneuvers – which was also the first time she'd seen Amana – she had wanted to be in the Elite Guard. She reconsidered that for a moment – had it been what she'd really wanted, or more those pretty brown eyes? No – she wanted to be a warrior, wielding weapons and battle plans alike. She loved the strength and energy fighting gave her, the mental charge when she had to create a plan of attack, or figure out an opponent's plan, and be expected to reformulate at a moment's notice. It all thrilled her. Briefly she wondered if this was the drug on which Xena had gotten hooked. Tai'gee didn't think she had blood lust, but with just the anticipation of sparring she could get a sense of the demons Xena had to be battling everyday. A whole new respect for the Queen's Champion birthed in Tai'gee with that insight.

A raven cawed three times out in the distance, pulling Tai'gee from her reverie. The night was peaceful, even with the added festival traffic. The village was surrounded by mobile camps. All of the Regents were staying in the village for the festival, but their entourages had to find whatever space they could around the wall, both inside and out. The raven called again, four times this time. Tai'gee's ears pricked, and when she heard two abbreviated caws followed by two more of the same, she knew it wasn't a bird. The scouts had spotted something – or more likely, someone – of whom they were suspicious. By using the calls of various forest creatures they passed their suspicions along the informant chain strung throughout the trees. Right now there was no alert for danger, but all of the patrols tightened the grip on their bows.

Tai'gee thought it incredulous for anyone to advance on them during a festival – especially the Summer Solstice Festival, since it was the biggest. Amazons from all over the world converged on the Capitol, and they did not travel lightly. Nevermind the safety precautions the travelers would take on a basic level – there were multiple weapons demonstrations and competitions that encouraged a warrior to come laden with her best artillery. The newest advances in armor and arms would be on prominent display. How anyone could get it into his head that *now* would be a good time to make a move was beyond Tai'gee.

There were several more bursts of raven calls that Tai'gee could hear. She wished she was able to understand them, to be privy to whatever knowledge was being passed around, but there were only a few scout calls that patrols were expected and allowed to know; those being the danger alerts. On second thought, Tai'gee decided it might be a good idea to be in the dark; she might be a nervous wreck if she were a part of every investigation and suspicion the scouts followed throughout the night. She didn't think she could live with that level of paranoia.

The night dragged on with the moon rising late in the evening and still rising by the time Tai'gee's shift was over. Vix had come by to tell Valen that she needed Tai'gee to take her regular morning shift, so the shift lead had let her leave early. "Get some sleep," the woman had said firmly. "It's going to be a long day tomorrow."

As she climbed down the ladder, placing a booted foot on the hard packed earth, Tai'gee noticed the lower level guards pulling back from the gate with salutes. 'Hm – someone important's just getting here,' she thought. Pausing just long enough to see who it might be, but not long enough to get caught staring, Tai'gee slowed her turn from the ladder. There were only a few people coming in, dressed darkly, and from what she could see, very grim expressions. It was Ephiny, she realized with a jolt, followed by Solari and Eponin. All three were armed and moved quickly into the Proper, but tiredness was solidly evident in their bodies. 'What would they be doing out this late?' They definitely weren't out hunting – their bows were the short, compact version for war, not the long hunting bows. The three did not return the salutes, but continued moving quickly in the general direction of the Queen's hut.

Curiosity niggled insatiably at her, but Tai'gee refused to take the chance to eavesdrop. There were so many people around now she wasn't even sure she'd be able to if she wanted. Even though she was an Amazon now, she was just newly made so – she did not need doubts of her loyalty trailing her if someone happened to catch her poking about where she wasn't supposed to be.

She forced her attention back to her hut, making sure her feet took her there. For a moment she thought of sneaking out into the woods to find Kaija, but she admitted quickly that would not be possible. She could easily spend hours looking for her, perhaps never finding her, and then have to go right back on duty. Fortunately she wouldn't have to be on patrol for the first night of the Festival, so she might be able to slip out into the woods after her day shift.

Sharply hissed words brought her up short just at the edge of a storage hut. "They haven't found it, they're lying," someone said.

"-Then-?"

"Don't be so stupid," the first voice hissed at the second. "They're trying to flush people out."

Tai'gee finally registered the first voice – it was Aeaxis. 'And very late at night. What are they talking about?'

“You heard her,” Aeaxis continued, “she knows everything, and Xena was looking right at us the whole time. They’re going to make it look like the bitch hasn’t done anything and try to get her back into admissions. They’re trying to incriminate people.”

“But they can’t do that,” said the second voice, which Tai’gee thought sounded a lot like Amana.

There was a pronounced pause before Aeaxis continued in her impatient, snake-like whisper. “My mom thinks they’re going to try to bring the beast back into the village. She wants to call an emergency session to have her banned.”

Tai’gee stiffened. ‘It sounds like a lot has happened during my shift – and if they’re trying to bring Kaija back, some of those happenings have been good!’ She pressed against the wall and strained her ears trying not to miss a word.

“How can Saikus hope to get her banned if it’s the Queen saying she’s innocent?” asked Amana.

Aeaxis guffawed. “Come on, even you realize Gabrielle has very little power. She’s given it all to the Council. She’s just a ceremonial piece at this point. Besides, that... thing... has made enough trouble in other areas, not counting the mask. I mean, look at your relationship with Tai’gee; she’s pretty much destroyed that.”

Tai’gee felt her heart lurch, and the uncomfortable tingling and fluttering of guilt and anxiety.

“That’s our business,” Amana said sharply. “You leave Tai’gee out of this.”

“You can’t leave her out of it,” Aeaxis countered harshly, “she’s practically all over the animal – if anyone knows what’s going on with It, she will.”

“My relationship with her is off limits,” Amana reaffirmed.

“I’m just saying – anyway, we’re going to have a protest. We’re gathering supporters to rally against the beast’s re-entry to admissions. Mom says that’s what Xena and Gabrielle are trying to do – get to the public and circumvent the Council; so we’re going to beat them to it.”

“Gabrielle stood in front of everyone and said they found the mask; you saw how everyone took it – especially all the visitors. How are we going to get around that? Everyone takes Gabrielle’s word for gold.”

Aeaxis didn’t hesitate. “She’s set herself up for suspicion. Mom says Gabrielle is the worst person to have keeping a secret – when it’s the truth she likes to have her hands on it to show everybody. And everyone knows that. But where was the mask? Plus Ahmon told me, the priestesses have been given orders not to let anyone see it until Gabrielle wears it at the Festival. So why would they be hiding it, hm, I mean, if they’re so proud and happy to have it back?”

“Maybe she’s trying to make sure it’s not stolen again. That’s what I’d argue.”

“Nah, there’s too many of us that want the cat-girl out; once everyone realizes just how many it won’t matter what Gabrielle says.” The sound of feet turning to leave made Tai’gee stiffen again – the steps were going to lead the walker out of the alleyway and right into her. She had nowhere to hide.

“Aeaxis wait,” came a hiss from Amana. The steps faltered, there was a slight rustle of cloth indicating a partial turn. ‘Rustle of clothes? She’s too close – way too close!’

“I don’t want the cat to come back to the village, you’re right about that…”

Tai’gee took the opportunity to take three very large steps backwards, placing her at about the middle of the wall. She then took another couple steps out to the right, back into the path. She could no longer hear what was being said, but she figured Amana must have turned down the protest since Aeaxis said “Suit yourself” on her way out of the alley. Tai’gee began to walk back towards the alley and her timing couldn’t have been better. She ran headlong into the exiting Aeaxis.

“Hey watch it,” her former classmate barked.

“Watch yourself,” Tai’gee barked back. “I’ve done my watching for tonight.”

“What’s that supposed to mean,” the testy girl snapped.

“It means that it must be so nice for you,” Tai’gee elongated to show her irritation, “to not have night patrol so you can have plenty of time to hold up those of us who do.”

Dark eyes narrowed in the moonlight. “Well by all means, let me clear the way for you.” Aeaxis stepped aside with a snide, sweeping bow.

Tai’gee started to walk by her antagonist, forcing an aggrieved sigh, when Amana stepped out of the darkness. Tai’gee ran right into her as well, forcing a real grunt as she bounced off the solid warrior. “What is this? Talk about coming out of the gods-be-damned woodwork.” Tai’gee shook her head a little to clear it. She could feel Aeaxis still standing behind her, watching. She looked up at Amana, realizing it was the first time she’d seen her since the blow up at her hut.

“I thought it was your voice I heard,” said Amana. Tentatively she reached for Tai’gee’s hands, bringing them together between them. “We – I’d – we should talk. I need to talk to you.”

Tai’gee closed her eyes. ‘This is not happening.’ Holding onto the last bit of her acting, the younger warrior removed her hands from Amana’s grasp and put on a disinterested scowl. “Not now Amana, I’ve got the morning shift, too. I need sleep.”

Amana smiled in the darkness, her teeth catching in the faint night lights. Tai’gee had really liked that smile. She recognized the familiar stirrings within herself that Amana inspired – had become proficient in inspiring over the last year. But with one thought of Kaija, she easily shook them away, and just barely restrained the smile the little cat was proficient in encouraging in *her*.

“Doesn’t have to be tonight. We can talk tomorrow, after your shift. Or after the opening ceremonies.”

Tai’gee waved her off. “Whatever. Find me later.” Then she hurried off to her hut, not looking back.

“She’s always like that when she’s tired,” she heard Amana say to Aeaxis.

‘Now I really want to talk to Gabrielle and Xena,’ she thought. As she neared her hut she debated detouring to the royal house. She decided against it. ‘It might be better,’ she thought, ‘to wait and listen. After all, Aeaxis hasn’t done anything wrong – everyone has a right to protest.’

Aeaxis had been looking for supporters against Kaija though. Tai’gee wondered how big that crowd might be, and a guilty pang thudded against her. Throughout the year she had not been Kaija’s biggest advocate, though she should have been. She hadn’t stood up for her friend, or made a point to introduce her to the tribe. Unfamiliarity, she realized, was probably the biggest reason many people were suspicious of Kaija; it was the same story back in their old village. Once the villagers – especially the children – had seen what a good person Kaija was, they had been willing to welcome her. ‘Most of them.’ There were still a few that just couldn’t get over their prejudices, or who were more comfortable with fear and anger than acceptance and trust.

She did hope Xena and Gabrielle had found a way to welcome Kaija back to the tribe. She wanted a second chance to show her friendship as much as she wanted a second chance for Kaija. Though she’d been angry with Xena at the time, Tai’gee now admitted the warrior had been right to call Kaija more animal than human when they’d first met them back in Cresca. Not that Kaija was impulsive and reactionary, but that the higher cognition involved with recognized emotion wasn’t developed – she didn’t even know what love was. She didn’t understand ‘friend’ or ‘happiness’ or ‘sadness.’ She didn’t really understand dependence – only need and instinct. Tai’gee knew Kaija had always cared about her, but if she thought about it, there wasn’t really any indication from her about the depth or type of her feelings. Kaija’s father, Cerebrius, had wanted Kaija to be a totally self-sufficient being, never recognizing the human desires and faults inherent in the birthright from her mother. He’d even entered into a compact with Aries to have Kaija trained as a warrior, and ultimately evolve into a world conquering warlord.

‘She would have been phenomenal, and most likely unstoppable if Cerebrius and Aries had gotten what they wanted.’ And they had been so very close. ‘If it hadn’t been for Xena and Gabrielle...’ Tai’gee shuddered and tried not to think of the possibilities.

She pulled off her leathers, suddenly weary. But as she did so her mind drifted back to the memory of the four of them, Gabrielle, Xena, Kaija and herself standing on a small hill just outside of the palisade. Xena looked at a visibly intimidated Kaija and smiled. “We brought you here so you could work on those human parts of you, like your mother wanted – like you want. Tai’gee is going to help you. And we’ll be back to check up on you.”

Gabrielle had stepped up to hug the smaller girl, and patted her cheek softly. “Don’t worry – they are good people here. And you’ve already got many friends. I bet when we come back we won’t even recognize you!”

But after they’d gone, Tai’gee had pretty much abandoned Kaija – forcing her friend to rely on those more animalistic instincts. Gabrielle’s warm, hopeful smile faded into the tight, grim lips of concern, worry and disappointment. Kaija had gotten a very large dose of emotional education, but hardly any of the lessons included a trace of the positive feelings. She’d become aware of jealousy, hurt, sadness, insecurity, distrust, loneliness, and had somehow managed to get herself mired in some sinister scheme. And all of that time, Kaija hadn’t complained once – either she hadn’t learned self pity or she refused to succumb to it. At the very least, Tai’gee felt she should have recognized Kaija’s isolation, and moved to take her away from the Amazons if they could not accept her. But – ‘But.’ But now none of that really mattered because Kaija loved her anyway and the self-deprecation wouldn’t do anything positive for their budding relationship.

~

“Nothing.”

“I gotta say Xena, that girl is good, but either we’re looking in the wrong place or they’re better than we are.” Eponin shook her head glumly.

One candle lit the Queen’s hut. The guards had been dismissed. The Royal Echelon gathered together in the dim and flickering light, solemn, somber, cautious to keep their voices down so nothing so much as a whisper escaped the walls.

“But Kaija would know best where the mask is because she knows who took it,” Gabrielle insisted.

“No one’s disputing that,” said Solari. “But we have an entire Region of hiding places.”

“She’s convinced it’s somewhere around the wall though, close to the mainstay.”

“I’ve never seen someone move like that through the woods. Xena,” Ephiny said with earnest eyes, “it’s no wonder the Council wants her gone. They must be scared to death.”

“And just think, she’s been following you for moons, watching after you.” Xena’s lips turned upward with pride, though the gravity of the situation kept it weighted from an outright smile, even when Ephiny shivered. She had told them to keep Kaija with them on their search, despite Ephiny’s protests. “The wall guards are liable to start taking shots at us if she’s around! Just let us go out and look.” But Xena knew Kaija would be the best distraction they could get. Not only would she keep the wall scouts’ attentions bouncing around and off Ephiny, Solari and Eponin, but Kaija would also be able to see details in the dark the sub-Royals may miss.

“We’re running out of time,” said Solari. When she looked at Gabrielle and Xena there was something very close to defeat behind her eyes. “If she would just tell us who-”

“She has told us who,” Xena said with force. “We know it’s the Council – if not all of them, most of them.” The dark warrior was quickly becoming irritated. “We’re relying too much on her to spill everything – if Kaija feels like her disclosure would condemn something or someone then we have to respect that and find another way.”

“What are you saying?” asked Gabrielle softly. The early morning hours were wearing on them all, and Xena’s hard line was falling on overtired and sensitive ears.

“I’m saying we need to figure out what they’re threatening her with. Once we do, the time limit is off.”

Eponin, exhausted, slid down the wall she had been using as a support to tuck herself into a ball on the floor. Solari, seated at the dining table, put her head down to rest on her hands. Ephiny looked dazed. Gabrielle moved to her friend and began a gentle massage on her tense shoulders; Ephiny blinked in appreciation. Xena remained standing, taking a few steps as she ticked off what they knew.

“Kaija overheard some plans in the woods; she told Tai’gee but got blown off; the Council found out she heard about the plans and moved to get her expelled. Let’s start there. How did the Council find out what Kaija knew?”

“Maybe Amana told them,” Eponin offered with a lazy wave of her hand. “Tai’gee probably mentioned it to Amana at some point.”

“Amana and Ahmon are cousins, maybe Amana told Ahmon who we know is chummy with Rachel and Saikus,” Gabrielle suggested.

Xena nodded. “Plausible. Ok, so we can stick Saikus, Rachel and Ahmon into the anti-royalist group. Let’s add Amana too, just for laughs.”

Gabrielle frowned. “Xena, I don’t see Amana as an anti-royalist – I mean, she’s just not... she’s too...”

“Spineless,” Eponin supplied. “That girl has fewer guts than a wagon crushed toad.”

“True, but she does provide a link for the Council to Tai’gee. Amana’s constant presence with Tai’gee could be the beginning of the threats and blackmail to Kaija, whether or not Amana’s actually in on it.” The others nodded in agreement.

“But,” Gabrielle picked up, “we know that Tai’gee isn’t the target anymore – they went after Kaija directly.”

“Which I think was an accident – it doesn’t fit with everything else,” Xena took over. “Whoever shot Kaija was trying to execute some plan, and I think Kaija just happened to show up and interrupt that, making her attacker panic. Remember, Kaija’s kept her silence this whole time, so the threats hanging over her were still there and doing their job,” Xena explained. “So that still brings us back to what do they have on Kaija?” Xena tapped at her chin absently as she thought. “Ephiny, you were there when we made the mask announcement – did you recognize the women hanging around near Saikus and the others?”

Ephiny shrugged tiredly. “Most of them.”

“What about the women with the yellow sashes?”

“Trainers like Amana.”

Gabrielle released her slow massage and started to turn towards the group. A loud slap reverberated through the room like a clap of thunder. They all jumped.

“That’s it!” Xena exclaimed, slamming her hand on the table in excitement.

“What? What’s it?” Eponin, shocked from her crouch, jumped up bleary eyed and shaking.

“Trainers.”

“Yeah...” Ephiny elongated.

“Of children,” Xena extended. The others maintained their startled bewilderment. Smacking her lips impatiently, the Warrior Princess added, “That’s what they’re holding over Kaija. ‘They have control over those who cannot protect themselves.’”

Gabrielle gasped. “Xena, they wouldn’t!”

“I don’t know that they wouldn’t, and apparently Kaija doesn’t either. In her mind she’s got reason enough to think they would.”

Eponin, in a rare moment of flat seriousness, leveled a severe gaze on the Warrior Princess. “Xena, that is an extremely serious charge. To sin against a child like that...it’s unthinkable. An Amazon woman harming a child – Artemis wouldn’t stand for it.”

Xena’s glare was just as serious, her voice dropped in pitch to a scathingly hostile simplicity. “Murder, Eponin. Ambush. Blackmail. Revolt. What part of those don’t you think is serious?” Suddenly Xena was angry – a burst of fury shot through her body and she felt her vision narrow to a dangerous singularity. “Do you think Kaija’s willingness to sacrifice her life for you in all the ways that she has isn’t worth validating against your own denial of your precious Amazons betraying you? Don’t you even remember what Velasca did? Do you dare think the worst of you wouldn’t sell herself to immorality for power?” Xena watched as one by one their eyes dropped under her acute and penetrating stare; only Gabrielle’s remained up, looking calmly at

her lover. “You don’t deserve her if you do. And I’ll be glad to tell her that,” she finished. Her eyes had turned to a pale of blue that Gabrielle had always thought of as white fire. The swish of satiny fabric was loud as Xena strode across the room, which made the slamming of the door unbearable.

Eponin lifted plaintive eyes to the blonde Queen. “Gabrielle-”

“No. No Xena’s right. Either you accept this for what it is, or this plan doesn’t go a step further and we’re outta here.”

“Gabrielle, we’re not saying we don’t believe Kaija or Xena,” Solari called to halt Gabrielle’s departure. “It’s just hard to have to think in such a low manner – about our own citizens. About people we trust our children to.”

Gabrielle was still hard. “Yeah, and the longer you delay, the more they take advantage of it.” Gabrielle thought for a minute. “Do you realize what Kaija’s actions are saying? She trusts them more than she trusts us. She trusts their threats and agenda more than she trusts our action.”

“Well, we’ll just have to change that, won’t we?” Ephiny raised to her full height, spreading a determined presence that filled the room. Gabrielle smiled, happy to see the command her Regent possessed. She was even more impressed when Ephiny extended a plan to get the children away from the anti-royals during the Festival. “That should give Kaija a little breathing room.”

Gabrielle grinned in earnest, happy to relate the progress to her irate warrior. The Queen found her pacing angrily not far from the hut, wearing a short path in some shallow brush. “Good,” the dark haired woman relented begrudgingly. “I was going to get really mad if their heads were really that far up their asses.”

“Cut them some slack, Xena. It’s a very scary truth – I don’t want to believe it either.”

“Well, at least Ephiny came up with a good plan. A kid’s Festival... not bad. Gets them all together and under *our* contro- ...*Son of a bacchai!*”

Xena grabbed Gabrielle, pulling her tight into her and covering her mouth to stifle the scream she knew was coming. Xena’s large hand clamping hard over her mouth almost suffocated the smaller blonde but it was effective; Xena felt the shriek get squelched. She let go a relieved breath as a grotesquely misshapen face finished emerging from the woods, connected to Kaija’s hand, who also emerged from the darkness, her arrowhead glowing, as always, a dull red.

“Gods be damned Kaija,” Gabrielle hissed as Xena released her. Her heart slammed against her chest in painfully hard offense at the frightful shock.

The girl's golden eyes weren't visible in the darkness and shadows, but a regretful expression was identifiable. "I apologize. I was not trying to be scary. I thought it would be worse if I just stood up."

Xena's own breath was slowly returning to normal. She took several deep breaths and ran her hand down her face to help calm herself. "Kaija..." She waited a beat, opting for another calming intake. "For bloody Zeus' sake," she muttered.

"Dear gods, I think Celesta just took a couple years from me," Gabrielle panted. "Kaija, what is that?"

"The mask. I found it."

"You couldn't have just left it on the table? You had to scare the ever-loving shit out of us with it first?"

They could see a shimmering glint of light as the faint skylights shown briefly on Kaija's teeth, offering them a lopsided grin, probably much like Xena's if they could have seen her face in the daylight. "I would not have thought you were scared of monsters in the dark Xena."

"Tartarus in a tin cup, give me that!" the warrior snatched the mask from the girl's hand, but there was a sheepish smile in her voice.

Gabrielle also smiled now that she had regained her own composure. "Good job Kaija. Where was it? How did you find it?"

"Does not matter. I did switch it with the copy."

"You are brilliant," Xena complimented. Kaija's head inclined slightly, and Xena imagined she might have inspired a mild blush. "We've got more good news. You don't need to worry about the children – we've got them covered. We'll have them all together and with guards we trust."

The silence around them turned static. "Do not do that," Kaija's rumble cut through the darkness.

"But Kaija – that's it, isn't it? They're threatening the children," said Gabrielle.

"I am asking you," the girl said heavily, "to not do this."

Gabrielle was confused, as was Xena and the warrior took a step closer to the shadowed girl. "Kaija, you have to trust us. Trust us to help you. I give you my word we will not let them harm one child. We have to take away all of their advantages to get through this."

The silence drew out, and Gabrielle thought she could see the night getting darker as the quiet got quieter. She could feel Kaija's powerful presence in front of her, debating, deciding. She had a flitting moment of pure gratitude that they were on the same side – if Gabrielle had met

Kaija like this by herself and as an enemy, she was sure the girl wouldn't have had to kill her; Gabrielle would've saved her the trouble and died of fright all on her own.

They felt Kaija's deep sigh as it stirred the air around them. "I do not like it. But ok. Not one child," she punctuated.

"Kaija, I can't even tell you how proud I am of you that you have watched over this entire village by yourself as long as you have," Gabrielle praised. "Thank you for letting us help you."

The darkened girl raised her head in acknowledgement. "I am not comfortable," she admitted. "But you are determined to be in my way," she said with a slight grin, "so I will let you be there for now."

"You're too kind," Xena grinned as well. "What are you doing tonight?"

"There are many people here. I will watch them."

"You should sleep," Gabrielle directed.

"I do not wish to sleep more than I have. There is time still for sleeping."

"And you're still feeling ok?"

"Yes. Fine."

They both nodded in acquiescence and Gabrielle turned to go; after Xena said a few more words to the girl, Xena joined her. Kaija disappeared as suddenly as she had appeared and the Royal couple returned to their now empty hut. Xena closed their door with a chuckle, at which Gabrielle lifted a questioning eyebrow.

"That girl. Ephiny's right – I can just imagine any one of those pissant, pansy-assed Council members meeting up with Kaija in the dark and dropping straight to Tartarus."

"Gods she scared my good sense right out of me," Gabrielle added. "But we did get the mask back, thank Artemis. Hey, where is it?"

"I told Kaija to hide it till the Opening Ceremony tomorrow. Her returning it to you will be a perfect way to bring her back into admissions."

Gabrielle nodded, yawned, and stretched. "Great. I'm going to bed."

IX

'The Festival opens tonight,' was Gabrielle's first thought in the morning. She squeezed her eyes tight against the bright sunlight forcing its way into the room through the shuttered and curtained windows. She turned her head away so that Xena, if she was there, would be her first

sight of the day. Opening her eyes tentatively showed her that – suprisingly – her warrior lover *was* still there, sleeping peacefully.

‘How about that,’ Gabrielle grinned to herself, ‘I’m the first one awake for a change.’

“No you’re not,” the contralto voice rasped with the night’s disuse. “You’re just the first one with your eyes open.”

Gabrielle groaned as she pulled her pillow over her face. “Xena, *why* are you even awake right now? You went to bed later than I did – don’t you know sleep is important?”

“Sure,” the dark haired woman smiled, “but twenty some years of sleeping to avoid ambush doesn’t just go away you know.”

The pillow lifted a little and a green eye rolled over to examine its bedmate. “I thought you liked it when I ambushed you. You’ve never complained before.”

“Oh, and then there are your ambushes,” the warrior deadpanned, easily catching the pillow hurtling at her face.

“Speaking of ambushes, I can’t wait to put ours into affect tonight,” said Gabrielle. “Tresa’s made a pretty convincing copy of the mask. You think they’ll notice it’s different from the one they took?”

Xena pushed her body up to lean against the headboard and rubbed her face roughly to help wake herself. “Maybe. They haven’t made any obvious moves so far which makes me think if they have noticed then they’re waiting us out to see the rest of our hand.”

Gabrielle rose from the bed to start getting ready for her day. “But that won’t matter once I make my announcement. Right? Once we show the mask...”

The warrior offered a proud smile as she also turned in the bed, reaching down for her discarded trousers. “Your announcement will be great. And the timing is brilliant – I couldn’t have planned it better myself.”

“But...”

Gabrielle unexpectedly found herself wrapped up in strong, reassuring arms. “But we also want it to be devastating,” a deeply lilting voice purred into her ear. “And I think we want to build just a little more support, so that hopefully your plan will stand on its own, without us as training wheels until it takes.”

Gabrielle knew military coups were her lover’s specialty. She could not have picked a better partner. She grinned. “Talk about hostile takeover.” Turning in Xena’s arms, the smaller blonde looked up to brilliant white teeth, a gently curving nose, demurely intelligent blue eyes, all strong planes, all grace, all confidence. “I’m a little nervous,” she confessed.

Xena pulled her closer, stroking the fine blonde hair in comfort. “If I were in your position, I’d be a lot nervous.”

“You’re about as close as you can get,” said Gabrielle, with a soft kiss to the taller woman’s shoulder.

“That’s true,” her deep voice rumbled. “That’s why I know I’d be a lot nervous.”

“There’s so much at stake, Xena. There’s so much in the air right now. Gods; what if it doesn’t work? We don’t just lose Kaija and Tai’gee a home, but we lose the Amazons, Ephiny’s position... What if we ignite a civil war?”

Xena considered that – well, considered it again. When Gabrielle explained how the Council had been elected rather than appointed, she was apprehensive. When she found out Saikus and Rachel were anti-royals that apprehension was pushed to troubled concern. If those women were known to be anti-royals and still voted into office then that spoke deeply towards the feelings and leanings of a large faction of Amazons. There could have, of course, been coercion and bribery, but Ephiny hadn’t decried any foul play concerning the election. If a large segment of Amazons really didn’t want a Queen, and Gabrielle’s plan was based on making the Queenship an incontrovertible stamp, then what?

“Then we deal with it.” Xena kissed the top of the blonde head then released her hug. “We’ll be fine. No matter what, we’ll be fine.”

Gabrielle took a deep breath. “You’re right.” She nodded to herself. “I’m going to the temple before breakfast. I can’t hold food down just yet. How about you?”

“I’m going to spar a little,” answered the warrior through a morning stretch, then started dressing.

“I doubt if any of your regular sparring partners are awake this early.”

Xena gave her a lopsided grin. “Not yet they aren’t.”

Gabrielle tiskied. “My warriors are going to have a long night you know.”

“I know my Queen,” she relented with a shrug. “I was actually going to spar with Kaija. She’s waiting for me on the edge of the fields.”

Gabrielle nodded, her blonde hair wagging in tousled dishevelment. “I agree the sooner we get her back into the village common the easier it will be to get her back into admissions. Especially with all of these visiting Amazons – the rumors are going to be phenomenal. They’ll be worse if they can’t see who they’re gossiping about.”

“Yep.” The warrior scooped up her sword and gave her wife a peck on the cheek as she headed for the door. “I’ll meet you at the temple just before the high sun, ok?”

“Ok – and don’t forget you still need your robes tailored – No, don’t roll your eyes at me Warrior. You’ve put off Manillia too long; she’s all in a fuss because she’ll have to rush. She’ll be at the temple, too. The less you fidget the less time it will take.”

Sapphire eyes rolled again, but in acquiescence this time. With a small wave the warrior ducked out of the front door, her long even stride carrying her quickly across the plaza. Gabrielle watched her, and could feel a smile tugging at her lips. Xena had grown way beyond her evil warlord persona. Sometimes – for brief, precious moments – Gabrielle thought the warrior had outgrown that evil all together. She never mentioned that to her lover however. Xena held to her need for repentance as tightly as she held to her sword – both protected her, gave her a purpose and means to live. Until the warrior made her own conscious peace with her former life and former self, Gabrielle had no intention of trying to take from her what she thought she needed.

‘She loves me,’ Gabrielle thought peacefully. She felt the giddy thrill the thought gave her senses, the thrill she always got with that thought. Smiling widely, the Queen dressed and headed for the temple.

~

Tai’gee had never seen so many women. The forest was crawling with them; their camps sprawled at the edge of the palisade; they meandered in small hordes through the village. Many kiosks had been set up for vendors and traders. Competition rings were being completed, the presentation stage was being dressed, excitement and anticipation ran throughout the city like thunderbolts.

She wondered where Kaija was taking refuge from all the bustle. The last time either of them had seen this much activity among their usually quiet forests was when Thalkus had leveled a bounty on Kaija’s head. Hunters, heroes and fortune seekers from all across the land had come to try their hands at collecting the reward by killing her friend. Tai’gee had been proud of herself with the creativeness she’d demonstrated in dispatching the intruders.

She turned on the wall, walking back towards the West Gate. ‘Just a little longer,’ she encouraged herself. Then she would be free to join the fray. It was difficult having to wait to find Kaija – she wanted to talk to someone about all of the goings on around the village – even though it was probably old news at this point. The rumor mill was alive and well; from her position on the wall she could hear all kinds of conversational tidbits. It seemed the visiting Amazons had been well apprised of the mask situation, the Queen’s affection for half animals, and Tai’gee thought she heard someone mention Ahmon wanted to challenge Xena.

Tai’gee smirked. ‘I’d surely abandon my post to see that.’ In fact, she’d be surprised if anyone stayed where they were supposed to if that happened.

“Xena’s fighting!” The yell came from inside the palisade and everyone turned. “The sparring fields!”

Everyone who had been about to leave did an immediate about face; the gates instantly bottlenecked with the rush of Amazons trying to get in to see what was going on. The lower level guards tried to stem the flow, to keep everyone ordered so they could continue the check but with every passing second the tide of women became more forceful.

“Stop pushing!” one of the guards yelled. “You dogs, it’ll be over by the time you get there anyway!”

“Who? Who is she fighting?” seemed to be coming from every direction. From her perch on the West Wall Tai’gee could only see the crowd of women gathering at the sparring fields – she could almost see the semi-circle they were making, but she was really too far to see any sort of detail.

“You might as well let them through,” one of the other guards said. “We’ll just kill anyone who tries to make trouble.”

“Fine, but you’re taking responsibility for it!” answered the first guard in an angry growl.

They stepped back and Tai’gee watched the fifty or so women rush into the village heading straight for the southern end.

“Too bad we can’t go,” a short red headed guard said to Tai’gee. Her name was Emelia, and was Tai’gee’s usual guard buddy. Tai’gee liked Emelia; she was a sturdy, unobtrusive young woman, nondescript in appearance, and a better than average fighter. Tai’gee always got the impression she was as loyal a person as one could find, and wouldn’t have minded having Emelia at her back in battle. At the moment, however, Tai’gee thought she saw mischief sparkling in the mousy warrior’s eyes.

“You know we can’t Emelia, we’d be jailed for sure if Ephiny found out.”

“Come on, if they’re just letting everyone in there’s not much for us to do, is there?”

The temptation was incredible; however, being jailed over the Festival – especially when she hadn’t seen Kaija in two days – quickly took the appeal of abandonment away. Shaking her head, Tai’gee said she would stay.

“Oh fine. I hate it when we have to get good news second hand...”

Tai’gee nodded. “Me too. Did you hear they found the mask?”

“Yeah, I was in the dinner line when Gabrielle made the announcement. She didn’t say much though – everyone had questions. You know – who found it, where, who took it? She only said Kaija helped bring it back; that she wasn’t the one who took it to begin with...”

Emelia's recital wound down, and Tai'gee caught the quick glance of discomfort and uncertainty her friend cast at her.

She smiled. "It's ok Emelia. At least you were there to hear it instead of stuck on the wall. Did anyone say anything else?"

Red hair waved back and forth as Emelia shook her head no. "No one like Gabrielle or Xena or any of their circle. I overheard some of the Councilwomen grumbling about it not being possible. Actually-" here a thick finger tapped the woman's dark chin in thought, "Ahmon seemed pretty upset about the whole thing. I hate to say it, but she scares me, and she does not like your friend at all."

"Kaija can take care of herself. It seems so strange though that so many people aren't happy about the mask being returned. I mean, last night I heard Aeaxis saying she didn't think the mask was back either; that we're being lied to."

Brown eyes widened. "Really? Oh but she's always been a little troublemaker. I don't really trust what she says. Takes after her mom. Hissss..."

Tai'gee giggled at Emelia's effigy of Aeaxis' mom, Saikus. It was very common, although whispered, opinion that the Councilwoman resembled a flat nosed snake. "Well," said Tai'gee, "even still, she's enlisting people to protest giving Kaija a second chance for admissions."

"Tai'gee that's terrible." The sharp frown of disapproval was a comfort to Tai'gee, and she looked gratefully at her friend. "Every woman deserves an honest chance to be an Amazon; and if you ask me, we never really gave her that chance. Kaija's got my vote for sure."

"Thanks Emelia, that really means a lot to me."

The smaller woman waved her off. "Oh look – looks like the fight's breaking up. I wonder what it was about – and who with. Maybe Ahmon finally got tired of being tweaked."

The lower level guards shouted out questions to women who were returning from the sparring fields several minutes later. The first few said they didn't get there in time, others said they couldn't see. It wasn't until about ten minutes later that women began walking by who had seen what happened. A group of three Southern Region Amazons came by, exotically dark women who were overly excited. One with vibrantly dyed red hair took over the details.

"It was great! Xena was fighting this little bit of a girl, but full out sparring. It was that cat-girl everyone's been talking about. She even fights like a cat."

"But she used a knife – a big one like I've never seen before," one of the red-head's friends offered.

“Yeah, yeah; but Xena was right on top of every move – and she used everything: her sword, a staff, scythes. I wish she’d used her chakram; *that* would’ve been great to see.”

“Who won?” one of the lower level guards asked urgently.

“That’s just it – no one! It was like a perfect match. They finally just ended in this massive grappling entanglement. I’ve never seen such a crush of muscle,” said the red-head.

The friend smiled in awe, which delighted Tai’gee. “I tell you, I’d love to have that girl at my back; for someone to be going with Xena like that I *know* I’d be safe.”

The other woman, who had been quiet till then, pushed her friend and laughed. “You just think she’s cute!” Brilliant teeth flashed from a dark mouth, making them appear all the whiter.

Her friend leered back. “I think they’re both hot! But still, I totally wouldn’t mind fighting knowing she’s fighting with me.”

“She’s not an Amazon,” supplied the guard who had allowed the tide of women through the gate earlier.

The red-head was incredulous. “What? Has she just not been inducted yet?”

“No, she missed inductions. The Council won’t approve her because she’s a thief.”

Tai’gee felt a hot bolt of anger. “She is not a thief!” she yelled down from the wall. “There’s no proof she was involved with anything that was missing. Even the Queen said so.”

The offending guard shot Tai’gee a dirty look, but before she could follow it with a retort, the red-head continued. “Well, I don’t understand what you people are waiting for, but send her down to us if you don’t want her. We’ll take her in a heartbeat.”

“Your Council must be dumber than centaur shit not to admit her,” said the quieter of the trio. “She knew all of the sparring protocol and Xena obviously likes her – the Warrior Princess won’t spar with just anyone.”

The chatty guard shifted into defensiveness. “Hey, you don’t know the whole story, so you’ve got no right to say who’s dumb or not.”

“Maybe not,” said the red-head offhandedly, “but I know what I saw, and I saw someone who’d make a great Amazon.”

Emelia nudged Tai’gee in the ribs at that, and winked conspiratorially. Then she nodded, indicating they should get back to their posts. The timing was perfect, because Ephiny chose that moment to appear at the gate.

“What’s all this chatter about,” she demanded.

The inattentive gate guards snapped to attention, swallowing curses at being caught not only talking, but also away from their posts. They didn't bother to look up at the wall to see if their counterparts were part of the offenders – they could tell by the look on Ephiny's face that they were the only ones. Tai'gee hid a snicker throughout the ensuing lecture.

Finally her shift came to an end in the early afternoon and Tai'gee jumped off the bottom rung of the ladder with giddy relief. She thought for a moment of making a snide comment about the gate guards' new garbage detail, but decided to keep it to herself. The gate lead's comments had miffed her certainly, but the woman had gotten busted for them – maybe not for what she said, but that she was caught saying it.

As she made her way to her hut, Tai'gee re-realized she'd never seen the village so crowded. It was exciting. And she was thrilled Xena had brought Kaija back into the mainstay.

“Speaking of which,” said Tai'gee to herself, “let's go find my kitten.”

She didn't have to look far – she didn't have to look at all. Kaija had curled up to sleep on Tai'gee's bed, and Tai'gee stepped into her one room house as quietly as she could so not to wake her. She did, however, smile from ear to ear as she put her weapons away and changed into her common tunic and pants from her guard leathers. Just as she had sat down with the intent of staring at her slumbering new addition, there was a soft knock at her door. Glancing quickly to the door then back at Kaija, Tai'gee decided her friend must be exhausted. ‘Her ears didn't even twitch,’ she noticed.

Early afternoon in the summer was the hottest time of day. Most of the village found refuge somewhere for an hour or more until the intensity wore off a little before going back to hard labors. That someone was coming to visit her at this time of day was a surprise mostly because she expected most people to be at their own huts, but also because at this time of day she was normally at the wall anyway.

She tried to piece together the silhouette she could see through the slats in her door. It was Amana and she cringed remembering that she'd told her to come by once her tour of duty was over. ‘She must have been waiting for me.’ Screwing her courage into place, Tai'gee opened the door and stepped out, shutting it quickly and quietly behind her.

Amana looked apologetic, which Tai'gee found somewhat curious. “Did I wake her,” the taller warrior asked.

“No.” Tai'gee was definitely surprised. “No, she's sound asleep.”

Amana nodded. “I saw Xena bring her here and heard her say something like ‘get some sleep,’ so... Anyway. Um... can we talk?”

“Amana, I just got off the wall and I did two watches-”

“I know, I know,” she said cutting her off. The older woman reached for Tai’gee’s hands in much the same way she had the night before. Tai’gee let them stay there for a moment, then pulled her hands away. Amana continued with enfeebled eagerness.

“There’s just a lot going on, and everything is happening so fast. I just wanted to talk to you; see how you were feeling about everything. Our last conversation didn’t really go well...”

Tai’gee steeled her face. “I meant everything I said last time Amana. I would have liked it to not come out that way, but that doesn’t change the meaning.”

They had stepped around to the corner of the house, which Tai’gee leaned against, arms folded around her. Amana stood at first in front of her, then moved to squat next to her.

“I know you love her,” said the older warrior. “It’s written all over you. But I still love you, too. I don’t want to lose you.”

Tai’gee took several moments to digest this confession. It wasn’t something she wanted to hear. However, she had a responsibility, she felt, to create more closure with Amana than she had.

Finally, she chose her words, and spoke carefully. “I still care a lot for you too, Amana, just not like I did. And I don’t want you to leave my life.” She waited a moment to give Amana a chance to say something. When nothing came, Tai’gee continued. “If... you think we can be friends still... I’d really like you to stay my friend.”

“Friends,” Amana said flatly. “How do you go from ‘I love you Amana’ to ‘I like you as a friend’ as fast as you did? It’s – this isn’t right. None of this is right!”

“I don’t know what to tell you,” said Tai’gee quietly. “I didn’t know my feelings for Kaija reached as far as they did; I didn’t know hers did either. I thought – what I felt – with you and I... at the time I thought...”

“You thought we were what you wanted,” Amana finished for her. The warrior’s voice had dropped to defeat, and the pain it carried made Tai’gee hurt inside. “I don’t understand it,” she continued, “any of it – and I’m not going to pretend like I do, or that this doesn’t hurt me. But I still love you, and I don’t want you to be hurt.” She took a breath, as if still deciding to impart something. “I believe that Ka- Kaija didn’t steal the mask.”

Tai’gee started to thank Amana for her vote of confidence, but the older woman stood and held up her hand for Tai’gee to stay quiet. “The other night when we ran into each other, Aaxis asked me to join a protest against giving her a second chance to meet initiations.” Here Amana bit her tongue – a sign Tai’gee knew to mean the warrior was deciding how openly to say something. “Ordinarily – to say the least I’m a little bitter about her being here, I hope you can understand that. And I would have joined the protest...”

“But?”

“But-” the girl cut off her explanation and waited for a small group of meandering teenagers to go by before continuing. “But it’s something you care about and I’d rather not take a position like that with you – that adversarial. I don’t think you’d believe me if I said I love you and did something like that.”

Tai’gee nodded, not sure what to say. “Thank you for telling me all that. It means a lot.”

“I was tempted,” she admitted bluntly as she straightened her pristine tunic. Bone necklaces jingled as Amana shook her head. “I mostly just wanted to tell you there’s a lot of anti-Kaija sentiment out there. The protest crowd is not small. I just didn’t want it to surprise you.”

They stood quietly for a moment, and that stretched into several moments. After the intensity of the silence between them became too much, Tai’gee looked over to Amana, finding the older woman staring at her. She was startled at first, but refused to look away.

“I – I think I still see us there,” said Amana on a hopeful, shaky breath.

Tai’gee thought Amana’s head moved like she was ducking to kiss her. She stepped back. “No Amana. No. Don’t do this. I love you, yes; but I’m not in love with you anymore.”

Amana’s face twisted in frustration. “You bitch! How can you say that? How can you just shut me away like that?”

Tai’gee just shook her head, wide-eyed. She didn’t know what to say. Suddenly she felt a presence behind her and Amana’s eyes slipped past Tai’gee’s shoulder, freezing into narrow distaste.

“You must not have loved me in the first place, that’s the only way I can see,” said the older warrior looking back at Tai’gee. When she looked back at the new arrival Amana tried, ineffectually, to infuse a large degree of bravado. “I’d take note if I were you.” She turned on her heel then and disappeared down an alley.

Tai’gee sighed and turned, coming face to face with Kaija. The younger woman had the bleary, red eyes of someone who was jerked from a very sound sleep.

“Come on,” said Tai’gee as she placed a shaking hand gently on Kaija’s tensed stomach, “let’s get some sleep before the Festival starts.”

~

Ephiny and Xena walked side by side to the temple. Gabrielle had enlisted Ephiny’s help to make sure Xena made time for her fitting. The Regent had expected grousing, but not the outright tantrum she was receiving.

“Why are you giving me the silent treatment? I’m just the messenger,” Ephiny had tried to tease.

“Messengers leave after the message is delivered. You, Traitor, are escorting me to torture.”

“Tisk tisk Warrior Princess. I am following my Queen’s orders. You know I’d never dress you up when you didn’t want to be.”

That had earned Ephiny another round of grumpy silence. So Ephiny decided to fill the space with idle chatter, in part to continue the light-hearted teasing, but also to avoid making their march even more awkward.

“But you know, the pageantry is really the best part of the festivals. I mean... we spend so much time running around hunting, fighting, mourning, trying to survive that I think we forget or don’t get the opportunity to show off our civility and creativity. And culture. We need a reminder of our sophistication and connection with our fellow Amazons. Don’t you think? What’s your favorite part of a festival, Xena?”

“The end,” the warrior huffed.

Ephiny rolled her eyes. “Come on, there’s got to be something. Not the sparring competitions? The weapons demos? The blacksmith duels? Nothing?”

Xena gave her companion a dirty, patronizing look. “I like fighting for a *reason*, not to show off. All I see is a bunch of women who’ve sworn to be sisters chomping at the bit to beat the shit out of each other for a prize. Doesn’t sound very sophisticated to me.”

Ephiny conceded, not wanting to get into a real argument. Then she grinned wickedly. “Well, I know a part you’ll definitely like.”

“And what’s that Traitor-Fortune Teller?”

“Oh you’ll know it when you see it,” came the vague taunt.

“Whatever. Well, we’re here Escort; you can run along and find other dirty work now.”

Blonde curls shook. “Oh no; Gabrielle told me to take you right to the seamstress herself.”

Ephiny could hear the warrior’s teeth grinding. “What happened to trust being a building block of marriage?”

“I think Gabrielle trusts you,” said Ephiny with the utmost sincerity. Under her breath she added “to run away.”

“What was that?”

“I said ‘want me to stay?’”

Brown eyes smiled warmly into icy blues. “No. I want to get this over with so I can get on with my life!”

Obligingly, Ephiny waved the warrior to lead the way inside.

~

Gabrielle was so lost in thought she almost missed the turn to the main stage. Realizing it at the last moment, she turned sharply and nearly trampled a small figure huddled by a makeshift signpost. The sign pointed the way to the stage and main area for the festivities, and seemed quite loose, probably because of the little figure’s use of it as a backrest.

“Pi?” asked Gabrielle peeking down to see the girl more clearly. “What are you doing sitting out here?”

Soulful, puffy blue eyes looked up to the Queen. Pi’s nose and the area’s surrounding her eyes were bright red, her face glistening with all kinds of liquids. Gabrielle immediately knelt.

“Oh Pi, what’s the matter? Why are you crying?”

The girl sniffed with extreme effort, like she wanted to inhale away all proof of her distress; in the end, she started sobbing all over again.

“Pi, what’s wrong? Where’s your mother?”

“I ran away,” the girl hiccuped, wiping her nose across the back of her hand and down her arm. Gabrielle winced, but decided it was better to ignore that for the moment.

“Why’d you run away?”

“So I could find Kaija.”

Gabrielle smiled. “Oh. Well, I’m sure she’ll come find you; you don’t need to run away to find her.”

Pi lifted bloodshot, red-rimmed eyes in an accusatory glare at Gabrielle. Gabrielle was, in turn, taken aback. “What? What is it?”

“You said Kaija was alright, but then why were she and Xena fighting? I thought they were friends! Why does Xena want to hurt her?”

‘Oh...’ Gabrielle sat down next to the little girl, crossing her legs, stirring up dust. “They weren’t really fighting Pi. They were only pretending to fight. Just like in your battle classes.”

“It didn’t look like pretend,” she mumbled. “It looked real. It looked like Kaija needed my help.”

“I’m sure it did.” Gabrielle softened her tone as much as she could while maintaining control of the laugh that wanted to escape her. The thought of little Pi rushing in to save Kaija from her big, bad warrior was impossibly cute, but Pi wouldn’t appreciate the humor at the moment. “But I promise you they weren’t trying to hurt each other. It was just a demonstration, that’s all.”

Pi just shook her head and suddenly even more tears poured down her cheeks. “All those people,” she hiccuped again. “All those people – just stood there. And – and they – all – laughed when it was over. No – no – one went to see if – K – Kaija was alright.”

‘This,’ thought Gabrielle, ‘had not been part of the plan.’ Tentatively she reached out to Pi, offering a hug. At first the girl hesitated, then fell into Gabrielle’s embrace and cried for all she was worth. Gabrielle shed her, rubbed her back, told her it was ok. “It really is Pi; I wouldn’t tell you it was if it wasn’t. I can promise you with every ounce of my being that Kaija is perfectly fine. I’ll even make you a deal. Here, look at me.”

Squinting baby blues peeked up.

“I’ll make you a deal,” she continued, “that if Kaija is hurt at all, I will make you Princess for a day. How’s that?”

Pi was shocked into speechlessness. She couldn’t open her eyes any wider because all of her crying had made them swell so that it seemed her eyelashes were acting as support beams. But, had she been able to, Gabrielle was sure they’d be popping from her head. “Do we have a deal?” Pi managed a nod. “Good; now let’s go find our friend.”

‘So much for being at rehearsal on time. Screw the Council; they’ll have to get used to disappointment.’

Gabrielle knew Kaija would be in Tai’gee’s hut; Xena had planned to take her there after showing her off for the curious Amazons. She was a little concerned about what Tai’gee and Kaija might be doing when their unexpected guests arrived, but a few moments hesitation to listen at the door was encouragement that the intrusion would be safe enough.

Gabrielle knocked, holding Pi’s hand and then waited a few moments. When she didn’t hear anything, she tried the door, which opened easily. Slowly they stepped inside, Gabrielle whispering a hello. They were both sleeping; Kaija was curled protectively around Tai’gee who faced the wall. Pi looked uncertainly at her Queen.

“Go on; go see if she’s ok.”

Timidly the young girl made her way over to the bed and stood for a moment, looking at Kaija’s back. With a glance back to Gabrielle for confirmation, and the Queen’s approving nod, Pi reached up to touch Kaija – poking her solidly in the side. Gabrielle had to bite her tongue to keep from laughing.

Again and again Pi gave Kaija examining prods up and down her body. Gabrielle knew the half-cat had to be awake and was probably humoring the girl. Finally Kaija rolled over, still pretending to be asleep, so Pi could examine her other side. The little doctor bent down to look closely at Kaija's face, then pulled a lid back to make sure the woman's eyes were ok. Here Kaija yawned and stretched. Pi backed up with a worried look.

"That feels like my healer, Pi," said Kaija groggily.

"Hm?" hummed Tai'gee, not fully awake and completely unaware of what was going on.

Kaija smiled at her little guest. "Hello Pi."

Gabrielle couldn't stop the smile that took over her face at the sight of the ecstatic grin on Pi's.

"Kaija! Are you ok?" she squeaked.

Tai'gee sat bolt upright at the unexpected voice. She startled Pi, who jumped a bit, but Kaija held out a hand to the girl as she, too, sat up. Immediately the girl went to Kaija to be picked up and fit securely into Kaija's lap. "And what are you doing here," she rumbled. Tai'gee looked over Kaija's shoulder at Gabrielle who only waggled her eyebrows.

"I came to see if you're alright after your fight with Xena," said the girl.

"You have been crying." Kaija tapped the girl's nose and smoothed her wild eyebrows.

Gabrielle stepped over to them. "She was very worried when no one tried to help her friend."

"I wanted to! I was going to but Mother wouldn't let me! So I ran away to come find you."

"I see. And do I seem ok to you?" asked Kaija seriously.

Pi nodded furiously, gratefully relieved. Then she looked up a little sadly. "Only now I don't get to be a princess for a day."

Kaija raised a questioning eyebrow to Gabrielle, who shrugged.

"You will always be my princess," said Kaija. "Everyday."

Pi's smile could not have been any bigger. Even Tai'gee, sleep-fogged and confused, was infected by the child's beaming pride. 'Yeah,' she thought with her own grin, 'I know what that feels like.' She laid down again with a knowing smile all her own.

"Are you tired little Pi?" asked Kaija. The girl nodded. "I thought so. Come, sleep with us. I will take you home later."

Gabrielle came over to help the clambering girl to lie in the little bed. The blonde woman shook her head. It was a tiny bed for two people – with even a child more it was impossible. But they all three turned together on their sides, Kaija cupping Pi, and Tai'gee cupping Kaija. The Queen bit back a smile and pulled up a thin blanket. 'I know the perfect gift for them for their union,' she thought to herself as she left.

~

"Where is she?" demanded Saikus. "Does she think we just have time to waste doing nothing?"

Ephiny was profoundly irritated and she frowned at the ranting Council member. The other regents looked at Saikus with a mixture of astonishment, curiosity, and reprove. She was sure the other regents had heard of the power Gabrielle had bestowed on the Council, but this flagrant display of disrespect for the Queen was embarrassing at best.

"She will be here," said Ephiny. "Something probably came up."

"Wonder what that was, her consort or her pet," muttered Ahmon.

Ephiny wheeled on her. "You are out of line Ahmon, and you'd do well to hold your tongue and behave as a Champion should."

The warrior merely shrugged and took a few skulking steps backward.

The Amazon's highest powers had gathered for the final rehearsal of the opening ceremony. It was a ceremony designed to officially introduce new Regents and to re-state the fidelity of the regions to the High Queen and Artemis. There was a lot of pomp and plumage, and was the main source of tension this year because the Council had demanded homage next to the Queen for its role in ruling the principal region in the Queen's absence. Ephiny had been outraged at the request and repeatedly assured Gabrielle she did not approve of any such thing. In return, the smaller blonde had smiled and said she understood.

Having all of the most powerful members of the Nation together in the same place at the same time was nerve-racking. The Elite Guard had been called to be on duty in its entirety the whole time the entire government was gathered. Ahmon, currently was the head of that army and chose to show it off by parading at Ephiny's side.

Xena was also on hand, though farther in the background. The Warrior Princess chose not to engage the whispering and questions circulating the crowd, and she wasn't particularly concerned Gabrielle was late. Whether it was planned or not, it was one more step to throw off the Council's game and that was fine with her.

Finally a familiar blonde head bounced into view. Xena was pleased with herself, considering the nature of her mood and patience after visiting the seamstress, that she did not rip out the tongues of various Council members for their commentary on the Queen's arrival. Instead, she moved to meet her lover, raising a questioning eyebrow as they neared each other.

Gabrielle smiled. “Pi didn’t quite appreciate the display between you and Kaija. She needed a little consoling,” she explained quickly under her breath. “Nice touch with the knife too, by the way.”

“Yeah, at the least Kaija deserves to have it, and at the most, who ever owned it was probably watching – tweak whenever possible,” the raven-haired warrior answered slyly.

“She handled it well too – I doubt she gives that up,” Gabrielle added. To the gathered she apologized as she finished her approach.

“Is everything alright, Your Highness?” asked Sahree, the Regent of the Southern Region.

“Yes, yes, thank you. Just a little misunderstanding that needed to be resolved.”

“So can we get started now?” It was Rachel who asked with terse politeness. Gabrielle refused to be ruffled. She smiled brightly as she answered.

“I was sure you would take it on yourselves to rehearse the parts of the ceremony in which I’m not involved; there are quite a few of those segments with the addition of the Council.” She looked around cheerfully. “No? Then I take it as a flattering tribute that you waited for me to start. Thank you.”

Xena hid a prideful grin. In one neat move Gabrielle had re-established herself as the focal point and basic foundation of the Amazons. The visiting Regents felt honored, and it was made clear to everyone there that the Council was not in charge as much as it would like to say otherwise. Rehearsal began, for everyone but the dissenting Council members, on a fairly cheerful note.

~

Sundown marked the beginning of the Festival. The drums had begun about a candlemark before, which was just as well because Pi had yet to be taken home to her mother. Tai’gee could easily have slept more, but once the drumming started her excitement began to build. Feeling Kaija curled in her arms – ‘sleeping in my arms!’ – made her so happy. She could feel a giddy grin slide across her face, and almost couldn’t believe just the night before she was wondering if this would ever happen. Her arm was wrapped around Kaija’s middle, hand lightly resting on a firmly muscled stomach – ‘Gods those came back quick.’ There was an extra warmth pressed on the back of her hand which she knew to be their little guest.

Tai’gee moved her hand up the smooth muscle, lifted her head and made to sit up. Pi was awake immediately, having felt the movement in the bed, disheveled blonde hair fanning wildly. She grinned at Tai’gee, who smiled back warmly.

“Kaija’s still sleeping,” the little blonde hiss-whispered.

Tai'gee nodded as she raised a finger to her lips to tell the girl to stay quiet. As gingerly as she could, Tai'gee got herself out of bed, then lifted Pi out as well.

"The drums have started," Pi continued to whisper through the gap her growing tooth had yet to fill. "The Festival's going to start soon."

"Yeah. Which means we should hurry and get you home so your mother will know where you are."

Pi frowned at that. She looked past Tai'gee to the still, sleeping form of her friend. "Mother doesn't like Kaija. She told me."

Tai'gee was surprised at the emotionlessness of the statement. It belied a family tension most five-year-olds didn't comprehend. She remembered the same tension in her own family when the talk turned to the demon spawn hiding in the woods. Tai'gee, however, was quite a bit older when she'd first met Kaija, eight or nine years old. Tai'gee knelt in front of the little girl, feeling the need to impart some knowledge of her own experience to the little version of herself. "She's different. She doesn't look like you and me. She can do things that a lot of other people can't," she said sincerely. "Some people think she's scary because of all that."

Blue eyes became indignant. "She is not scary!"

Tai'gee snuck a quick look to Kaija, but she was completely out. "I know that," she said, placing a hand on an anger-tensed little shoulder. "And you know that. But there are a lot of people who don't. A lot of people don't know her well, so they find it hard to like Kaija."

"You didn't."

It hurt. It was hard hearing it from an innocent-eyed, little girl. Her hand slipped from the girl's shoulder and she clasped it weakly with her other as she sat back on her haunches on the floor. Her mouth worked as she tried to think of something to say.

"Why do you like her now? I saw you before," Pi pressed.

This was no five-seasons old child Tai'gee realized, and if she didn't answer – if she tried to avoid answering – it would probably hurt their chances at a relationship, maybe forever. Tai'gee took a breath. "I always liked her Pi; really I did. It's just that sometimes people get distracted. Everything here was new to me, and there was a time when I just wanted to do and see all the new things. Does that make sense?"

Pi shook her head, and continued to look at Tai'gee, waiting, disconcertingly, for a better answer.

Tai'gee fished for something a child could relate to. "Have you ever had a favorite toy?"

Big blue eyes looked at black noncommittally, but Pi nodded.

“And have you ever gotten a new toy and then you didn’t play with your old, favorite one for a while?”

“I have a doll that’s my favorite. And I got a wooden sword. Now I play with both of them.”

‘Not quite, but ok.’ “Yeah, well it was kind of like that. For a little while I just wanted to play with all the new stuff, and I didn’t play with Kaija very much. But I never stopped liking her. You still like your doll, don’t you?” At Pi’s nod, Tai’gee continued. “Yeah. It’s the same thing. And now I’ve realized that all the new stuff isn’t the same as having Kaija. She’s still my favorite and I’d rather play with her.”

That seemed to be convincing enough for the little inquisitor. The little girl looked back to Kaija and pointed out that she was still sleeping. Tai’gee explained that she hadn’t slept very much in the last few days and needed to catch up. “Do you want me to take you home?”

Pi hesitated, twisting her booted foot into the dirt floor. “Can I just go to the Festival with you? Mother will probably be there too and we can find her.”

“Now Pi, don’t you think your mother will be worried about you? You’ve been here for quite a while. Does she know you’re here?”

“No.” Blue eyes dropped to examine the twisting foot. “I told her I was running away to find Kaija; that I wanted to live with her anyway.”

‘Oops.’ Tai’gee smiled. “You can come over whenever you like Pi, but your home is still with your mother. She’s your real family. Even if she doesn’t like Kaija, I’m sure she loves you and would be very sad if you didn’t come home.”

Pi finally relented. Tai’gee dressed and took the girl home. Pi insisted on giving Kaija a kiss on the cheek before she left, which Tai’gee suspected was really a last ditch effort to wake Kaija up. But Kaija didn’t move. Tai’gee was quite concerned with that, and while Pi moved away, checked Kaija’s pulse. It was strong and even. ‘Ok... she’s just really out...’ So they left, little Pi walking along for all the world like a proud little princess.

~

“Xena, you have to do it; if you would at least try to like it that would make it so much easier. It’s not a life sentence you know. You’d think I’d condemned you to execution.”

The Warrior Princess’ foul mood had not waned in the least by the time the drums started. She’d arrived back at the hut with her newly tailored ceremonial robes balled up and thoroughly unappreciated. She’d flung the garments on the bed, refusing to come anywhere near the bedroom, as though avoidance would make them disappear. Gabrielle had emerged only half dressed from the bedroom holding out Xena’s new clothes to her.

“I don’t understand – you used to dress up like this all the time – in Rome, with Borias, you even dressed up for Autolocus when you went to steal the Israelite box-”

“I did not dress up for him! He tricked me and he paid for it.”

“Yes well, the point is this is no stranger to you, so why is it such a problem?” Gabrielle’s tone was soft as she tried to keep the teasing to a minimum. She found Xena’s tantrum utterly adorable but suspected something else was going on rather than just taking exception to fancy clothes. “What’s really bothering you?”

Xena sighed then flounced down in one of the armed chairs in front of the fireplace. “I don’t know,” she said piteously, then was quiet. Gabrielle joined her at the chair, perching on an arm and waited while Xena tried to put some words or order to her feelings.

“I’ve been having this strange antsy urge all day.”

“To do what?”

“I don’t know. It’s the feeling I would get when I was feeling a trap with my army. I feel like something isn’t right. Like I’m missing something important...” She let go a frustrated sigh.

Gabrielle thought on that for a few moments, running her hand through her blonde locks to pull the falling hair from her face. “Do you think our plan might not work?” she asked tentatively.

“No – I – that’s not it. It’s not that.” She was restless, she was annoyed, Xena explained. The Festival, the everyday politics, the village drama annoyed her; but above all of that there was a larger, overarching cloud, dark, gray, the source of which was mysteriously elusive.

Gabrielle could feel her mind working for the least offensive way to say what she was thinking. To be someone so quick to pick up on other people’s fear, it was amazing to the bard how difficult it was for Xena to recognize her own. She decided to just come out with it. “Are you afraid of something? Is it the Council?”

“Gabrielle, please. After tonight, the *only* people who will be afraid *is* the Council. But yes, I am afraid that I’m missing some detail... I feel something... just, something that’s not right.”

“We haven’t gotten any bad reports all day. Everything is going along like it should.”

“Which is exactly what makes me nervous. If Saikus and Rachel and all of their little buddies had the slightest idea that we are up to something they would be arranging something, I’m sure of it. But they’re going right along with everything like everything is even keeled and normal.”

Gabrielle bit her lip. “You’re right... But maybe they really don’t suspect anything. Maybe we’ll actually get lucky for a change.”

Xena's hunching shoulders told Gabrielle the conversation was over. Xena would retreat into herself and regurgitate all of their information, ruminate over their plans, all of the possible foils, the goals – she would wrack her brain to find the validity for her worries. The blonde sighed mentally, but let it go. She trusted in her sense that Xena would figure it out, whatever *it* was, but she wasn't going to look a gift horse in the mouth if it turned out they'd actually gotten a break.

“Kaija's bringing the mask,” Xena reminded her partner before they left their hut. “She should get there a few minutes before the ceremony actually starts and she'll give it to you directly. Then-”

“Then we go along with the ceremony after I make a gushing tribute to Kaija's instrumentality to the return of the mask and service to the Amazons, etceteras.” Gabrielle finished the last of her belts, braids and robes that she would be wearing for the next many hours. She looked up as she closed the clasp to the tight belt around her waist when Xena didn't say anything else. Pleased, she found the warrior in an openmouthed gape, staring unblinkingly at her. “Yeessss?”

“Ephiny said I'd like something in this Festival,” said the woman breathlessly.

The deep green dress draped Gabrielle's body like a serpentine skin. Her blonde hair was pulled back tightly, and the solid gold crown of hair was held in place by the Circlet of the Queen, an intricately woven silver band with the seal of Artemis embossed in a medallion that pressed firmly into the bard's forehead. Bone and ivory necklaces caressed the woman's slender neck in decoratively loving touches, with a seductive phallic bead resting just at the top of the crevice of blonde's cleavage. “You like,” Gabrielle asked with a taunting lilt.

“I do.”

“Good. If you want to see it again, you'll have to hurry up and get dressed, because I'm outta here. Got a Nation to save and all.”

Without another word, or a look of sympathy for the impetuous disregard for the warrior's obvious state of arousal, Gabrielle sauntered through the door and into the night.

~

Tai'gee hadn't wasted any time at Pi's home – Pi's mother hadn't wanted to talk, and shoved the returning girl into the house with a rather hostile glare at Tai'gee. Ahmon looked at the dark haired young warrior with decided contempt, but also said nothing as she turned to follow her girlfriend inside. Tai'gee could have sworn she saw a half smirk on the Champion's face, but it was fleeting and in the dark it could easily have been a trick of the light.

Kaija was still asleep when Tai'gee returned. Tai'gee was worried; it was distinctly out of character for Kaija to sleep so long and so hard. This time as she entered the hut she made no attempts to be quiet, closing the door as she normally would and walking over to the bed as if she were the only one there.

Even in sleep Kaija looked tired. Dark circles were under her eyes, and the sad expression of exhaustion weighed heavily on her face.

“This isn’t like you,” said Tai’gee as she stroked Kaija’s hair.

With effort, the younger woman pulled her eyes open. The golden orbs were watery with the desire to sleep. “Sleepy,” was all Kaija could manage before drifting back off.

“But you’ve been sleeping all day,” Tai’gee mused aloud. “And you’ve never been difficult to wake up. Maybe I should find Cylene.” Tai’gee frowned. She wondered if the sleeping disease Kaija had worked so hard to free herself from was something she could relapse into. “Or maybe you’ve done much more than you’re ready for. Fighting boars, hunting deer, sparring with Xena. That’s a lot for you healthy.”

Tai’gee got up from her kneel at the bedside, deciding to get dressed for the Festival. As she slid her hand along the bed, bracing to stand, her fingers brushed something feathery under the blanket. Curious, she pulled back the light cover and froze. Embedded to the shaft in Kaija’s leg was a dart – no doubt drug tipped and obviously why she was sleeping. Tai’gee could feel panic start to rise.

“Why can’t they leave you alone?” she ground in frustration. She yanked the dart free, earning a bleary eyed look of incomprehension. “Kaija, wake up,” she said forcefully, and gave the girl’s slack face several hard pats to try to bring her around. “Kaija – you need to wake up now, come on.”

Pulling her friend to a sitting position was no easy task. Who ever had darted her had given her a lot of whatever drug used, probably to overcome any reserves of strength Kaija would have rebuilt. The girl had become totally unresponsive.

Tai’gee left Kaija sitting on the bed, propped up by the wall. She ran from the hut, dart in hand, straight to the healer’s hut. ‘Please let someone be there,’ she prayed as she ran. With the Festival getting ready to start there might not be a soul around.

~

Xena hated crowds. Two armies crushing together in battle was one thing, but throngs of Amazons already in various states of inebriation, flirting, fawning, showing off and gawking at each other left the Consort feeling most annoyed and irritable. Not to mention that she looked exceptionally striking in the black and silver tailored outfit Magnillia had made for her. The satin pants draped her long legs like loving curtains and the shirt was a creative combination of styles from Chin and India, cut from the same black satin. One bold silver strand was sewn down Xena’s side, and the shirt fastened with silver toggles. Magnillia had done a magnificent job, and the lurid, appreciative stares from the wanton crowd reaffirmed it. Straightening her shoulders even more than her tension already had, Xena plunged through the crowd, hand resting on her sword, chakram patting lightly on the opposite leg.

If there hadn't been so many people, Xena would have noticed Tai'gee running to the healing hut. As it was, they just missed each other by a few feet and a few bodies. Amana noticed, and breathed a sigh of relief as she watched the two move past each other. She stepped from her sideline in front of Tai'gee and smiled brightly.

"Hey! Are you going to the Open?"

Tai'gee jumped. "Oh, Amana. No-" she made a wave back towards her hut, "it's Kaija – someone's darted her. Can you find Gabrielle? Xena, Ephiny, anyone? Tell them? I'm going to the healer's to get help. Please?"

Amana frowned in concern and reached up to stroke Tai'gee's arm affectionately. "Sure Tai'gee, I'll try. But the Festival is about to start. They're probably all busy-"

"Thank you Amana! Thank you! I have to go. She's at my hut – tell them ok?"

With that Tai'gee plunged back into the crowd in another attempt to get to the healing hut. That it was in the opposite direction of the Festival current was no help, but she pushed and shouldered as best she could until she reached the hut doorstep. As she feared, it was dark. "No one's here." She felt tears of disappointment and fear stab her eyes, but she refused to succumb to them. "Think Tai'gee. What can I do? What?"

She had no idea what Kaija had been drugged with, and even if she did, she wouldn't have known the antidote even to go in and grab it herself. She had to find someone. Turning from the healing hut, Tai'gee sprinted for the main stage.

~

By the time Xena arrived at the main stage clearing her patience was worn. There was at least another half candelmark until the opening ceremony commenced, which meant another half candelmark before she would be able to see Gabrielle again. 'I hate pageantry,' she grouched to herself, but then willed herself to focus. As the Queen's Consort and Champion she had taken full responsibility of the security for the Festival, especially where Gabrielle was concerned. She had the entire Guard on duty, Elite and Royal, dispersed throughout the clearing and positioned around the village. Ephiny had been instrumental with the defensive organization and Xena couldn't have been more thankful. The Regent's addition of a spontaneous Children's Festival at the other end of the village under watch by a handful of Guards hand picked by Xena herself, was a stroke of genius in the warrior's opinion. With adults and children separated, they could make their announcement and present Kaija without worry of retaliation. And even though Xena was arriving so close to the start of the ceremony, Ephiny, Solari and Eponin had been patrolling and preparing for hours. Xena spotted Eponin first as she arrived, and the petite guard came over to greet her.

"Everything's quiet," said Eponin.

“The mask?”

“No one’s seen Kaija yet.”

“No one will,” Xena smirked. “But I know what you mean. She’ll let us know when she’s here. And the priestesses have Gabrielle ensconced somewhere?”

It was Eponin’s turn to smirk. “Xena, this is the first Summer Solstice Festival the Queen has attended since her reign – the priestesses may never let you see her again!”

Solari joined them before Xena could reply, and the three of them moved behind the stage as the crowd began filling the square. The deep frown on the older guard’s face raised Xena’s hackles.

“Locki says she saw Tai’gee running to the healing hut,” the dark haired guard reported.

“What? When?”

“Just after sundown.”

‘Not good.’ Xena gave the stage a cursory glance. Kaija would have explained their plan to Tai’gee by now, and the healing hut played no part in it. “What could that be about?” Xena quickly ran down a list of possibilities: had either of them forgotten something during their stay there? – No – Tai’gee suddenly sick? – No – Kaija suddenly sick? A sense prickled, niggling closely to the worries she had expressed to Gabrielle earlier. Kaija had been in great form for their little sparring game that morning. They had really gone toe-to-toe, and Xena knew, unlike anyone else, Kaija was holding back. ‘That spectacle may have had a very different outcome otherwise.’ But neither of them had gotten hurt, and Xena had to practically lock Kaija into Tai’gee’s hut so the girl wouldn’t spend all her energy prowling the village and surrounding woods before the start of the Festival. “Tai’gee will be here soon,” Xena had told her. “You’ll be a great surprise.” Then Gabrielle had checked in on her later in the day, that’s why she was late to the rehearsal. ‘Had Gabrielle said anything about Kaija?’ No, just Pi; that had been all they had time for.

The opening ceremony would begin in a few minutes, leaving no time to go look for Tai’gee and Kaija. Their plan had been centered around Kaija being there to pass on the recently found mask to Gabrielle, solidifying her commitment and protection to the Amazons. They basically wanted to take away all argument as to why Kaija should not be inducted to the Amazons – without Kaija there, that would disintegrate. Xena needed to check with Gabrielle, to hold off on the presentation of the mask if something had happened that would keep Kaija from being there. Something had gone wrong, she was sure of it; with Tai’gee running to the healing hut, it seemed whatever was wrong left Kaija incapacitated. Xena snapped to attention as the drums made their final thundering announcement for Festival Commencement.

“Solari, find Gabrielle,” Xena commanded. “Tell her no mask. Now.” She turned to Eponin. “Find Kaija or Tai’gee – find out what happened. Try Tai’gee’s hut first; Kaija was there earlier today. I want both of them in my house by the time this stupid ceremony is over. Go.”

Eponin, like Solari, disappeared into the building crowd almost instantly. Because Xena was Gabrielle's Champion she had to be present to escort the Queen onto the stage. Looking up quickly, Xena saw all of the other Regents were assembled at the opposite end of the stage, robed and masked. Ephiny's thick blonde curls billowed from her mask, making her easily identifiable amongst the masquerade. Xena beckoned to her.

~

Tai'gee was stuck. The throng of Amazons was pressing on itself trying to get to the square for the opening ceremony, and the bottleneck it created was impassible. In her haste she hadn't considered taking another route. Now she was trapped and growing desperate.

~

"You're sure?"

"Yes, she ran right into me. I saw her leave the healing hut at full speed and right into the crowd. I doubt she'll be able to make it through."

"Come on, to her hut – quickly."

~

Kaija sensed she was dreaming, but she wasn't sure. Her visions were jumbled, swirling around fighting and battles, the caves of her father, Tai'gee, children laughing and screaming, Xena ordering warriors, Pi helpless and naked in the street – Kaija wasn't sure how much were memories, musings, prophecies or nightmares. She could feel her mind wanting to clear itself and come to consciousness, but it lacked the energy to slough off the fantasy weight. And then it seemed she would forget why she was trying to wake up, or why she should be concerned that she could not make any part of her body move; not even twitch a finger. Then she felt something, a tingling on the side of her face. Not knowing would could strain the strength of Hercules, Kaija had the thought that getting the half-god to open her eyes for her would present him with a great challenge.

Figures swirled in her sight, tall women, perhaps goddesses, or maybe goddess servants. Maybe it was the deity Celesta come to visit her again. 'She was nice to me.'

~

"You were nice to her?"

"Not that I know of. I mean Tartarus, I just smacked her all I'm worth. How much did you give her?"

“Are you kidding? She got up and came outside with the first one, and sat up to have a conversation after the second. She’s pretty much stayed down with this last one.” Amana shrugged. “Doesn’t matter. She’s going to die one way or another.”

“True enough. Filthy animal.”

“Why don’t we just kill her now? Get done with it.”

“No. No. She’s our only link to Xena and Gabrielle’s downfall.” Then, quieter, more to herself, “As long as we can keep her tied to us, we’ll be able to pick the Royals apart. Her every move drives in our spike deeper and deeper. You’d think the stupid beast would learn – she wasn’t supposed to say anything. Did she really think she could tell them what happened and they’d stay out of it? So now she pays...”

Aeaxis knelt by the bed and its incognizant occupant. “You wanted proof,” she said to Amana while she stared evilly at Kaija. Slowly she reached under the bed, feeling. As her hand brushed an irregular piece of wood and grassy tassels her smile broadened. “Did they not say they’d found the mask? That the priestesses have it locked in the temple until Gabrielle’s part in the ceremony? Did you know Tai’gee lives in a temple?” Pulling the mask from its hiding place, Aeaxis waited for Amana’s response.

For several moments Amana stared at the Queen’s mask. “How did you know it was here?”

Aeaxis studied the mask smugly. Hefting its weight, she scrutinized the bright paints and comically intimidating carved scowl. “Ahmon found out. After Gabrielle’s announcement Ephiny called her stooges to go with her on a ‘patrol’ – she ordered Ahmon to stay behind. They didn’t return until late in the night, but Ahmon already knew they were looking for the mask. She found a priestess in Ephiny’s hut making a copy. I told you they were lying.”

Amana stepped forward. “But why? Why lie to us?”

“Either the Queen doesn’t know they haven’t found it, and the sub-royals are trying to cover it up to save her face-”

“Or?”

“Or it’s just as I told you before and they’re trying to frame someone.”

Amana stared at the drugged figure, prostrate and useless before them. As Kaija slept she looked more human than she ever did awake. With the cat-like pupils hidden behind her eyelids and her lips limply covering the sharp canines she could look like any young Amazon. “But who? Why?”

Aeaxis rolled her eyes and shook the mask at Amana. “You’re a smart girl – think about it. Gabrielle’s given away all her power to the Council; now she wants it back. She wants to stay all of a sudden and try to be a Queen. My mother knows she’s not fit, as does Rachel and most

of the other Council members. They're fighting her for rightful control over the Amazons. What better way to get them out of her way than frame them – make them look like traitors.”

Aeaxis tossed the mask onto Tai'gee's table with disgust. “Don't you see? Everyone's so sold on the idea of a Queen, Gabrielle and Xena know all they have to do is drop a few hints to the people that the Council can't be trusted – then everyone will be clambering to have Gabrielle on the throne and my mother and Rachel banished. They'll have forgotten in the blink of an eye all of the good the Council has done for us.” Aeaxis' eyes turned pleadingly to her companion. “What wars have we had with the Council rule? What unrest? How much happier have you been knowing a decision was made among six of our leading minds rather than just one? And those six minds are of us! Having grown up as we have, knowing all of our laws and history, all of our plights, who know us! And have never abandoned us. Doesn't it just make you want to beg to know why exactly Gabrielle wants to come back *now*? Why threaten to disband our unity when we have no promise she will even stay to lead us?”

Amana absorbed this, looking again at the sleeping Kaija. “Why indeed?” She was suddenly afraid to know the answer – but she needed it. “Why do you think?”

The smirk brought no comfort to Amana. “I think Gabrielle has learned something in her travels. I think she has learned we are dying. We used to walk freely outside of our nation, be sought for council by other kingdoms and rulers. Our armies were as mighty as any man's from Greece or Sparta. Now we barely dare to go outside of our borders. We have specific clans and tribes rather than our vast regions. We've shrunk to skipping in and out of hiding to travel between our scattering villages, avoiding slavers and those who would kill us off and see the end of our great Nation. I think Gabrielle has come to realize this, and, bard that she is, wants to place her name into history as the last great Amazon Queen.”

“Surely not,” Amana scoffed. “That's much too – too-”

“Too self-centered for the doe-eyed Gabrielle?”

Amana nodded. “She is sanctioned by Artemis to protect us. Artemis has never recognized the Council.”

A stormy anger lit Aeaxis' eyes at that. “Artemis hasn't recognized her Amazons in years!” she spit furiously. “When have her priestesses last heard her voice in all of their supplements? When last has she walked among us? Is there one Amazon crone who remembers having seen the silver-eyed bear roaming our lands?”

Aeaxis shot a particularly dirty look at Kaija. “We've lived for so many centuries under the belief that we need one strong leader – and maybe at one time we did. But we have been leading ourselves for years, acting on our own judgements in the silence of Artemis' guidance. Who is Gabrielle – is Xena – is this half beast to make us feel unfit to do so?”

Amana could feel a new contempt building within her as Aeaxis spoke. With a significant glare of scorn at the unconscious creature on the bed, the Yearie watched as the faint glow of the

arrowhead brightened slightly and wondered if it was just coincidence. “This protest,” she said, “isn’t just about keeping her out, is it?”

“No protest is about the singular goal,” Aeaxis answered softly. “And that point is best seen by the size of the dissenting crowd.”

“What are we going to do?” asked Amana, a solid conviction in her voice.

“Expose them first,” answered Aeaxis clapping her new compatriot soundly on her back. “Give her the serum. Wake her up.”

~

Eponin had to skirt the edges of the village common in order to avoid the exploding crowd, and because Tai’gee’s hut was on the exact opposite side of the city it took a solid half candlemark for the petit warrior to reach it. The small domicile was dark inside, and all was quiet in the surround. She looked into a couple of the windows, but could see nothing. She expected the front door would be locked, but when she lifted the latch it swung open easily.

“Kaija? Tai’gee?” she called into the darkness. There was no response, but in the pale moonlight the warrior could see someone sitting on the bed. “Who’s there?” she called firmly, grasping her sword hilt.

“Kaija,” a small voice answered.

“Are you alright? What are you doing here? The ceremony has started.”

Eponin took several steps into the hut as she fired her questions, but she got no answer. Looking quickly to her left she found a candle to light and in a moment the one room dwell danced with soft yellow-orange light. Kaija sat on the wicker bed, hand clenched around something in her lap, head down. Eponin raised the candle to get a better look at the girl and room. Nothing seemed amiss.

“You lost your nerve,” she realized.

For several moments more Kaija just sat. Then she raised her head slightly, her gaze just offset from Eponin’s and gave a weak nod. “Yes. I did.”

~

Xena wasn’t able to return to her hut until the early hours of the morning. She was tired, to say the least, but glad the ceremony went smoothly. Gabrielle withheld her announcement and didn’t even bother with a mask, and no one noticed or cared. Saikus and Rachel didn’t even flinch when the maskless Queen took the stage, even while the gathered Amazons cheered wildly. Xena’s only thought was that they – the Council – were too smug; they must know something, or be planning something. There was nothing she could do; without Kaija’s

cooperation she really had very little to work with. Now, with red-rimmed eyes weighted with exhaustion, she entered her hut to find out why Kaija had not followed the plan.

Eponin gave Xena a disappointed look from her position of the receiving room. Arms and legs crossed, leaning against a plank table by the fireplace, the small and solid guard frowned over to a slightly obscured corner of the room across from her. The three were the only ones in the hut. Xena sighed.

“What happened Kaija?”

They waited for some moments in silence and when it was clear Kaija was not going to answer, Eponin answered for her.

“She said she lost her nerve.”

Xena closed her eyes and muttered a curse. Then, looking at the downcast cat-girl she asked if that was true. “Tai’gee was seen running to the healing hut – any idea why?” Kaija neither spoke nor blinked nor changed a breath. “Kaija, you do realize we are all putting our lives on the line for you here. And you aren’t doing a damn thing to help!” the Warrior Princess thundered. Her temper broke and like an unbridled stallion it began rampaging. “Little girl, you have tried my patience to its end,” the dark warrior seethed and taking a handful of Kaija’s tunic in her fists, Xena pulled the smaller body up to her face.

“Put her down Xena,” a voice commanded from the entryway. Gabrielle walked in with Tai’gee on her heels.

Xena ground her teeth fiercely before releasing the despondent girl and wheeled on the blonde new-comer. “Gabrielle, I’ve had it! She’s making me crazy!”

“Xena, it’s not her fault,” Tai’gee stepped in. “Someone drugged her. She’s been asleep all day.”

Gabrielle nodded in confirmation. “And whoever drugged her stole the mask... again.”

Xena ran a frustrated hand through her thick, dark tresses. “Stole the mask... that we just got back. Great. That was our ticket to get her back in!”

Gabrielle raised placating hands to her lover, while Tai’gee moved to console hers. Eponin remained leaning against the table. Ephiny and Solari were next to come in and Eponin quietly filled them in.

“Xe – I know, I know ok, but yelling isn’t going to help us here. It’s not Kaija’s fault, someone-”

“It is my fault,” said Kaija in a low, throaty voice. “And it is your fault.”

Everyone turned to the far corner of the room. Tai'gee took a half step back as she felt tension build in the strong frame next to her.

"Excuse me?" Xena placed her hands on her hips, incredulous.

Kaija raised her head slowly, her eyes lifting to a threatening glare. "All I had to do was stay quiet; to stay away from you, and you would not let me." Her voice dropped as her lip raised baring her sharp gleaming teeth, and she rose from her slump with seething grace. "You kept pushing, kept interfering. And now they have killed her."

"Killed who?" Gabrielle asked.

Kaija shot the Queen just as dangerous a glare. Reaching out her closed fist, Kaija turned it over and uncurled her fingers to reveal a blood splattered palm and a slightly curling, pale blonde lock.

"Oh gods," Gabrielle gasped, as did Tai'gee.

"Ahmon..." Tai'gee whispered in disbelief.

Kaija pulled her hand back quickly, stepping away from Tai'gee as if she were poison. "They said I could tell you now," she said with a glower to all of them. "They do not want a Queen. They do not want a Regent. They want you all to leave. There is an army surrounding us; if you refuse, they will attack. If you doubt how many Amazons are anti-royals there will be a protest tomorrow to show you. They want you to announce total rulership to the Council by the end of the Festival."

The room was silent. Xena rubbed the back of her neck. Ephiny let go her breath. Gabrielle didn't know what to say.

"So what was your role in this," asked Xena of Kaija.

"You should know by now – you figured it all out, but they thought I had told you. I heard them talking in the woods of bringing in an army, ambushing the village, killing the Regent, to show how the Council could protect us better. When Ahmon found I had heard she came to me, told me to leave. I said I could not because of Artemis' enchantment; Ephiny had to release me. So they made up tricks for me to be expelled – and show how Ephiny just follows an order without regard to the will of the people. If I told, they would kill Tai'gee.

"But then you two showed up. If I had been expelled I could have stopped Ahmon from leaving to get the army, kept her inside; she knew I could not follow her off the land, so she shot me. I tried to keep her where she was long enough that she would not be able to leave that day, but once I slept she had no more obstacle. After Tai'gee was an Amazon and you messed up my expulsion, they figured out why I did not mind being expelled. They wanted me to stay then and said they had watchers of all the children... They hoped I would die. When I did not, they came to tell me if I stood in their way again... they wanted you to leave or Pi... But all of your

interfering, wanting that mask, trying to beat them – they said it was my fault because I did not make you leave. They put me to sleep so I could not return the mask; they woke me to remind me of Pi. They said I fucked up and now Pi is... They gave me this,” she finished looking bleakly at the lock of hair in her hand.

Tai’gee tried to move closer to Kaija. “It’s just hair though – it doesn’t mean – she could still be alive Kaij.”

The mournful look in Kaija’s eyes was one none of them had ever seen from her before. They were glassy, making the gold irises sparkle. “And her heart,” she added in a choke.

Heads bowed in disgust and gasps of appall quickly disseminated around the room. “But why Pi, Kaija? Of all of the children, why did they single her out?” asked Gabrielle quietly.

On a wavering breath, Kaija feebly explained that her mother had borne a child with another man before meeting Cerebrius. The child was Kaija’s only brother. “Pi was his daughter; the woman she calls mother is an aunt by marriage.”

“She was your niece,” Ephiny finished in revelation.

“My only family. They knew that.”

“Oh Kaija,” Tai’gee whimpered. “I’m so sorry... If you’d just told us-”

Kaija looked at Xena, hard, unforgiving. “Not. One. Child.’ You promised they would *all* be safe.” The Warrior Princess could feel everyone turning to her in surprise; she could feel her world narrow around her failure. She could only look back at the angry golden eyes boring into her, naked and powerless, but refusing to back down. “I am tired of failing. I am leaving,” the youngest girl announced.

“Kaija, no-” Gabrielle tried to interject.

“Do not!” the girl cut her off, her voice loud and strong. “I do not wish to be human anymore. I will be what I was born to be.”

When she moved to cross the room, Xena stood in front of her, still refusing to move. “Kaija, I know what you’re feeling, but I can-”

Kaija refused to listen and went to shoulder past the large woman. Xena grabbed her arm as she passed and earned a granite crossover punch, violent, staggering, daunting her to momentary senselessness. Xena felt her entire head snap sideways, her neck turning to the point of breaking. Kaija sneered with full, animal fury radiating from every pore of her body. Through bared and clenching teeth Kaija’s growling threat grew to a deafening roar. “You got in my way once Xena, and now my Pi is dead. So help me, you will *pay* with your *LIFE* if you stand in my way again.” Dramatically her voice dropped to an emphatic hiss. “I will *hunt* you day and *night*, and *I – will – kill* you,” she punctuated certainly.

She turned to leave again, and everyone, voluntarily or not, backed away from her. Tai'gee, eyes wide, and truthfully fearful, was still determined to go where her lover went. When the young warrior stepped to follow her, Kaija's ears ticked back and the girl said over her shoulder calmly, "I am going alone."

"Kaija, no. Don't leave us," Tai'gee implored.

A familiar electricity simmered throughout Kaija's body. She'd had enough, she wanted out and no wall would stop her. Smoothly she made a diving leap for the nearest window; in a snarling explosion she broke through the shutters in a tight tuck and once in the darkness she was gone. Even as quickly as Tai'gee made it to the window there was no trace of the direction the girl had taken. Tai'gee could feel her heart breaking at the awful and precarious turn everything had taken. Behind her the upper echelon moved together to process their situation.

"I don't see how we have a choice," Solari whispered first, shooting nervous glances to everyone.

"I am not leaving my Amazons in the charge of a bunch of child murdering usurpers," Gabrielle replied fiercely.

"Gabrielle, we have no choice," said Ephiny. "If we stay and the army attacks it will just make a point they'll exploit, that you cared more for your position as Queen than the safety of your people. We would be putting the entire city at risk."

"I will not be exiled from my own Nation! Artemis charged me with the protection of the Amazons."

"Exile might be their only protection, Gabrielle," said Xena through her daunted haze. Everyone waited to hear the rest of her assessment. "Every Amazon within five hundred leagues is here for this Festival, and even armed to the teeth this city houses no more than one thousand warriors. Even if a small army attacks, the entire Nation – all of the Regions – will take a great hit to their remaining defensive populations. They will, in effect, be initiating the extermination of the Amazons. Without their warriors, the other Regions won't take long to collapse."

Gabrielle bit her lip at the truth of Xena's words. The others could only bow and shake their heads. Tai'gee remained at the window, letting her tears fall freely. 'It's hopeless, and my heart has just run away.' She shook her head. 'How will she get away?'

Tai'gee reeled from the window so fast she startled everyone in the room. "How are we going to get out if we are completely surrounded? That army won't just let us through."

Ephiny agreed. "And what's to say that army will just pack up and go? Who's going to walk away from an entire gathering of the best possible slaves?"

“Yes, and Saikus, Rachel and Ahmon will have counted on a double cross, so they probably got the smallest army they could find so we’d be able to defeat them in case they did attack,” said Solari.

Gabrielle picked up the thread of hopeful reasoning. “So what – what – we’re thinking small, definitely beatable army size against a thousand of us?... three hundred – two? Less?”

Xena smiled ferally, snapping from her fog. “Less,” she purred. “Much less.”

Gabrielle’s head cocked in question. “How can you be so sure?”

“Because Kaija’s got a head start on us.”

“What?” they all exclaimed.

“She as good as said so – she’s chosen to embrace the animal in her so she can go after that army; just like she did when she went after the bounty hunters in Cresca. ‘*Hunt, night, I will kill*’ is what she emphasized. I recognized that punch too – it was one of the ones she used this morning in our spar.”

“Xena, that punch looked like it could have felled an ox at half a league,” Gabrielle said frankly. “She seemed pretty serious to me.”

Xena grabbed her jaw just to check – no pain, she did feel a bruise but nothing moved oddly. In their spar she had been expecting the glancing blow and had turned her head at just the right time so that it only looked ferocious. But just then had been a surprise, catching her completely off guard, and the flat of Kaija’s knuckles had caught Xena at just the right spot on her jaw bone to daze her, but not knock her into oblivion. “If she would have meant it, that hit would’ve sent me through the wall.”

“Xena,” Solari said, “she said she’d kill you...”

“She’s a sphinx!” yelled Tai’gee. “She never says what she means when she needs to buy time.”

“Tai’gee’s right,” said Xena. “When I told Kaija I’d make sure every child was safe, she said she would *let* me be in her way – just then she said I *got* in her way; she is trying to get my attention, dotting her words with subtext. She just wanted to stall us.” Other than Tai’gee, none of them looked convinced – what they had just seen scared them, and the fear was plain on their faces. “It wasn’t real,” the warrior insisted.

“‘I’m going alone,’ Xena! That part was real,” Tai’gee said urgently. “We have to get out there,” she demanded.

Xena threw up her hands to silence the girl. “No, we can’t go yet and we can’t all go at once. I’d bet everything they’ve got someone else held at knifepoint waiting for us to make a move like that.”

“And we’re probably being watched,” added Ephiny.

“By the gods,” Gabrielle said quietly. “Kaija knew all of this. She’s been guarding this city for months, by herself.”

“All that stuff she said makes sense now,” said Eponin. “About why should she want to be an Amazon – if she saw Amazons plotting against their sisters, it really wouldn’t make much difference for her to be one. Everything we were preaching at her she was witnessing the opposite.”

“And I said she didn’t understand loyalty and commitment...” Ephiny shook her head in shame.

They all reflected on these thoughts in a moment of silence.

“And right now she’s out there fighting by herself – Xena, we have to help her.”

“We will Tai’gee,” assured the dark warrior. “We will, but we need a plan to get out of here without endangering anyone else. And we need one of you to go look for Pi.”

“Pi’s body you mean,” said Solari sadly.

“No – I mean for Pi. I think she’s still alive.”

“Xena, they gave Kaija her heart-” Eponin reminded her.

“They gave Kaija a heart – we don’t know it was Pi’s.”

Tai’gee felt a moment of hope, her dark eyes glistening, but it faded quickly. “Kaija’s one of the best hunters in the world, if not the best. She’d know a human heart from any other.”

“Has Kaija ever seen a human heart?” asked Xena plainly. Tai’gee thought for several moments, but said that she didn’t think so. “I have,” the warrior said, “and they can look a lot like a pig’s. Besides, they would never be able to maintain rule of this village if it got out they were baby killers.”

“I’ll go look for her,” said Eponin.

“No, we’re going to need you in the woods; besides, Tai’gee, you’re the only one that would know her in the dark and I doubt there’s another Amazon who can move around this village like you can.”

Gabrielle tried to hide a smile. “Especially considering what you have to do to get out of it to see Kaija while I’ve got a curfew imposed.”

Tai'gee blushed fiercely while she agreed. "I'll check her hut first – if she's missing surely her mom – uh, aunt – would have let the village know by now."

The others agreed. Once Tai'gee had stepped into the night, the rest crowded together to come up with their own strategy.

~

Kaija moved through the woods with such stealth she didn't even disturb sleeping birds, even while she knew she was passing by and under their nests. She knew she didn't have much time before Xena decoded her ruse. She needed to incapacitate as much of that army as possible before the others either tried to escape or join her. 'At least,' she thought as she lithely pulled herself into a tree, 'without this army the Council will have to rely on their own powers of persuasion with the Amazons.'

Kaija meant to kill every treacherous, invading soldier she came across. They would show no other mercy to the families sleeping less than a mile from them – at least, not to the ones they didn't want for slaves. When Aeaxis handed Kaija the bloody bundle, rags carelessly wrapped around a little heart freshly torn from its home, Kaija felt... She had no idea what she felt. She had no energy. Her legs sagged beneath her, she couldn't speak. Aeaxis and Amana had walked out of the hut as casually as if they'd come by to have dinner. Kaija knelt in numb agony and looked between her hands, from heart to hair, with only the thought 'they said they would' chasing around her mind.

When she explained to the Royals who Pi was, what had happened to her, and saw the shock in their faces she grew angry. How could they be surprised? Where was their anger, their outrage, their fury at betrayal? Just the image of little Pi's handling – rough hands grabbing her, hurting her – served to reinforce her efficiency; it would help her with her hunt. 'They will die. They will all die.'

She found a sentry first – he was so edgy his own worry deafened him to her approach. The last sound he heard was his neck crunching as the bones protested the odd angle they were being forced to accept. It felt very strange to Kaija – she saw the man twitched just like the boar she'd killed by snapping its neck. Killing people seemed no different than deer, bird or rabbit. When the sentry's companion called out to him, Kaija dispatched him the same way. She looked at the two bodies, and had a momentary urge to drag the men away, put them in a safe place for...? later? – 'What am I doing? What do I do with something I have killed but not going to eat?'

"There are two kinds of hunters: the ones that kill to eat and the ones that kill for sport." The thought came immediately to Kaija's mind in the dark, sage-like voice she now knew was the war god, Aries'. There was a little bit more to that distinction, she'd learned since then: 'The hunters that kill to eat I will never have to worry about. But the hunters that kill for sport...' She looked down at her brace of dead and wondered if this was a sport kill. *"I do not kill for sport,"* she'd answered him. And he'd answered back: *"You kill for survival."*

Survival, had felt right to her then, and it felt right to her now.

The removal of the sentries allowed her to enter the outer fringe of the army camp. One after another, meandering, sleeping, urinating, inattentive and contemplative soldiers met a quick death. As their comrades found the bodies, panic began to spread through the camp. Kaija heard some men shout something about Artemis, others screamed ambush, while others never got the time to formulate a hypothesis. Once soldiers began running in fear and confusion, Kaija had only to lay in wait at the edge of the road that brought the army to Amazon land. Like a funnel spider, Kaija picked off man after man, snapping necks, gouging eyes, ripping flesh with brilliant, razor teeth, dismembering whatever met with the blade of her new hunting knife. The frantic soldiers could see glinting eyes in the woods, some even managed to get an arrow or two off in the last direction the greenish flash was seen before they ran away.

Kaija found moments where she marveled at how similar the fleeing soldiers were to other animals she stalked: once some general alert had been sounded, the men didn't know whether to scatter or stand and fight, their eyes rolled in fear and indecision. They didn't know what to do to defend themselves. Some men were larger than others, some were able to stand off with Kaija for a little while; one man was so thin Kaija completely ripped his head off when she only meant to snap his neck. Each man spied was like another player in the game she saw the Amazon children play – they'd been called from their hiding places and now had to get home before they were caught. She liked this game she felt – it gave her a surge of enthusiasm, the excitement of stalking these creatures without the hindrance of bloodletting and butchering was intoxicating. She didn't have to pick out the best one for the day's meal; she could catch as many as she wanted; her achievement became amount not quality. This was a new instinct she'd discovered – the exhilaration she felt matched the glee she saw in the eyes of playing children – this was *fun*.

The half-human girl continued to move through the woods, circling the camp, killing whomever ran into her path. She started to find bodies with arrows in them, sword gashes, one man looked like his face had been bashed with a mace. Kaija had the fleeting realization that others had come to join her game, but she dismissed that knowledge just as quickly as yet another person ran into her view. The figure crouched, tried to gauge the safety of making another move, and while it waited, Kaija lined up her pounce. There was a split second between the figure's decision to move and Kaija's seizure of opportunity, but that instant was enough time for the figure to realize something was coming for her.

~

Xena's skin crawled as she ducked in the underbrush. She'd discovered the warlord Malvinus' body sprawled half in and half out of his command tent – she wasn't entirely surprised it was his war party camped at the edges of the Amazon village. She'd never known the man to make the best decisions when anyone dangled the slightest hint of a profit in front of him. He deserved his fate. Ruthless and stupid were rarely a combination that led to a long career in warmongering, but Xena thought Malvinus must have had an unnatural amount of good luck to actually make it as far as he had. But the satisfaction of seeing Malvinus dead did nothing to quell the uneasy turn her stomach was taking as she absorbed Kaija's destruction.

“By the gods,” Ephiny had exclaimed in hushed amazement at the string of bodies they followed to the encampment. “They never had a chance.”

Gabrielle had grabbed Xena’s arm, questioning. Xena looked back to her lover in the darkness, but was unable to offer any comfort of answer or explanation. Their group had picked up a contingent of scouts and guards on their way out of the village, whispering to them there were intruders on Amazon land. Xena took note of the guardswomen who’d doubled back to the city, more than likely to report to the Council. The others she’d led on through the woods and finally into the camp. There was very little left for them to do.

“How – how many do you think she’s – gotten so far,” Solari ventured to ask as they’d turned slow circles in the middle of the compound.

“I’d say we passed about thirty on the way in – but those were the ones I could see,” answered Xena honestly.

“Xena, we have to stop her. We can’t let her do this.”

Gabrielle was right. Aries threat to ignite Kaija’s bloodlust was still very real in her mind. Even at her peak as the Destroyer of Nations, Xena’s *armies* made this type of devastation, not just herself. Kaija had moved through this encampment like a wildfire – like a tornado. As their small contingent moved from the southern to the northern end of the base Xena could see how Kaija began to get more and more comfortable with her killer cat and mouse game. The dead men’s faces started to express less surprise and more terror, suggesting Kaija had stopped stalking and attacking quickly from behind. Some faces had the look of just being overwhelmed, perhaps having stood off with Kaija and realizing she was too much. Once she got to the first man who showed a petrified resignation, Xena’s stomach turned – this man had seen exactly what was coming for him, had time to say prayers, maybe had even asked her for his life, and Kaija hadn’t hesitated to recognize the man’s terror. Xena stopped them. “She’s already out of control.”

The others froze. Xena turned to them, pulled Gabrielle into the middle of their small circle. “Stay here. Sit down, all of you and do – not – move.”

“Xena, we’re coming with you,” Gabrielle protested.

“No!” Xena’s hand sliced through the air with finality. “Stay here. If she tries to attack you, all of you had better go for her at once; don’t you dare try to take her on one at a time. *At once.*”

With that Xena had jogged into the woods, stopping a few strides in to get her bearings and figure out what she was going to do. She’d felt... something ~ a change in the air, some faint cross breeze from a breath, sensed a thought ~ that screamed at her to move. She rolled back over her shoulder just in time to avoid Kaija who plowed down from a low branch above, snarling at the miss of her prey. Xena had this moment only to get back to the camp clearing where she had more freedom to move – to get Kaija into the light where perhaps the girl could see her target better.

The Warrior Princess backed into the camp as Kaija crawled through the underbrush in front of her. The girl's ordinarily golden eyes kept flashing a sickening green as the firelight from the abandoned pits poked through into the woods. Finally they were in the camp, drawing closer to the group of Amazon observers who had begun to rise from their defensive crouch. Xena could feel Gabrielle's terror filled gaze on her back as surely as she could feel Kaija's deadly stare. The spectacle must have been breathtakingly frightening.

Xena kept her hands in front of her, spread out like she was trying to hold back an excited dog. She moved slowly, trying to stare off Kaija's defensive line of sight, intensely trying to tell her she wasn't a threat. Kaija was not in there though – the girl's eyes were no different than those of the boar who had meant to skewer her a few days ago. She was covered in blood, rivulets of it trickled down the valleys and crevices her tensed muscles created. Bits of flesh and vein hung between her bared teeth, and Xena was acutely aware of the threatening growl simmering from deep in the girl's throat. Xena knew she may have been a match for the human Kaija, but the animal Kaija gave her no illusions; she was in trouble, and she may have to kill Kaija to save them all; *if* she could kill her.

“Kaija.” The Warrior Princess' voice cracked, and she tried again. “Kaija, you've done it; you've won. They're all gone.”

The girl's eyes narrowed and her growl deepened.

“Kaija, it's all over,” Xena continued.

A tick in the girl's eye let Xena know she was about to lunge, and when Kaija sprang at her, Xena pulled her chakram from her side and sliced at the body flying towards her. The unmistakable cry of a wounded cat let the warrior know she'd hit her mark. As she turned to assess the damage, she felt a powerful grip on her ankle and an uncompromising yank that sent her sailing flat back, knocking the wind out of her in one explosive gust. Momentarily stunned, Xena didn't have the wherewithal to be prepared for Kaija's next pounce. Like a tree crashing down, Kaija leapt onto Xena with every intent of ripping the woman's throat out with her bare teeth. At the last possible moment, Xena threw up her hands and grabbed the girl's shoulders, straining against the bestial rage that was trying to kill her. She was vaguely aware of shouts coming from all around them. Finally pulling all of her strength together for one final push, Xena threw the snarling body away from her.

Kaija scrambled in the dust and grass as she tried to right herself, then swirled back to meet her prey. Before she could get fully collected, she felt something touch her – snap by her face with fierce power. Startled, she flinched backwards, trying to get some perspective on the invisible mouth that had tried to bite her. It came again – a whirring and then a monstrous clap, and a burning stab of pain sliced into the front of her shoulder. Roaring with pain and rage, fear spurring her, Kaija zeroed in again on the woman in front of her, the only one she could get to. On all fours, she made another charge, but the whirring came again and she tried to adjust her trajectory to avoid the attacking crack that followed it. Gracelessly Kaija jumped to the side, skidding on her right hand and foot as she tried to keep her purchase. She followed the

dangerous eyes that followed her, and before she could redistribute her energy to start her charge again, something grabbed her around her neck. A fierce and rapid burning followed immediately. She jerked her head back only to find she'd been restrained. Instinctively her body recoiled against her bondage, but it was no use.

Xena's whip had a firm hold on the girl. Kaija soon realized she could not back away from the dangerous, dark-haired woman in front of her, so she decided to rush her instead. Before she could, another rope seized her, working its way over her shoulders and pinning her arms to her side. When she moved to push herself to her feet, someone threw a bola, wrapping the girl's legs together in a tangled mass and sending her toppling over. Xena released her whip as the girl fell so she wouldn't be hung. Immediately one of the other guards ran over to put a booted foot on the back of Kaija's head, holding it in place against the ground, and held an arrow cocked and ready at her temple.

Gabrielle was the first to reach the Warrior Princess. "Xena! Are you ok? By the gods – we didn't – I've never been so scared."

"Shh, shh, it's ok now. I'm fine," she assured her wife shakily, though she did massage her neck thankful her head was still attached. "Let's go see if we can talk to her."

Gabrielle hesitated, but Xena took her hand and led the way over, waving at the others to wait in the background. Eponin and Ephiny had a firm hold of their ropes and the others stood on guard, weapons drawn and ready. 'Well,' Xena sighed to herself, 'this little display will either earn you an immediate admission or an immediate banishment.'

The two approached the prostrate figure slowly. Xena called out to her like she would to Argo if the mare was ever seized by hysterics. Cautiously they made their way to her, and once they were within a couple feet of the struggling mass, Kaija froze, apparently trying to decide what she would need to do if she were getting ready to be abused in some way. Her respirations were high, shallow, her chest practically vibrating with her panicked breathing.

"Kaija," said Xena softly, "it's all over. You can calm down now. There's no one left, they're all gone." Even though the girl was as rigid as a clamped plank, the tense energy thrumming through her body could easily be felt from where Xena stood. An uncomfortable tingle ran down her spine – Kaija was still soundly in a mood where she could do quite a bit of damage if just one of those lines broke. She hoped beyond hope that Kaija's escapade hadn't landed her in the clutches of death and destruction, hadn't lit a passion in the girl to live in a world of killing. Beside her, Xena felt Gabrielle shiver as well, and suspected the same concern had probably just entered her mind.

"I wish Tai'gee was here," Gabrielle murmured.

In Kaija's highly sensitized state the mutter may well as been a shout. Her ears pricked at Tai'gee's name, and the flick of muscle was not lost on Xena.

“Yeah Kaija, you saved Tai’gee. You saved all of us. You can calm down now – we want to thank you.”

~

Kaija felt something shift inside her at the sound of “Tai’gee.” She felt her excitement and agitation melt away to be replaced by a warm familiarity. She forced herself to blink, feeling that her eyes had been large and unfocused for much too long. She became aware of the ropes biting into her, of her cheek held firmly to the ground by a booted foot, and the trampled grass blades making tiny cuts on her face. She could smell the invigorating scent of grass sap and, stronger, the iron twang of blood, of a lot of blood. Suddenly that was all she was aware of; it was as if she’d stuck her head inside a rusty cauldron and all she could smell was the metal as the ferric atoms assaulted her nose, oxidizing on the back of her tongue.

Rolling her eyes up to look as far up Xena’s nearby boot as possible, Kaija began to mew and whimper. “What have I done?”

The boot lowered, a knee knelt, and then Xena’s blue eyes lay down in the grass right in front of Kaija.

“What have I done?” she asked again, only able to whisper. Golden eyes pleaded with blue, praying that whatever it was, it wasn’t bad.

“You’ve done a lot Kaija,” Xena whispered back. “You’ve done all you needed to.”

Kaija shuddered as her adrenaline quickly washed from her system. She became aware of a stickiness covering her, and the metallic scent became stronger. She shivered, staring into blue eyes. “I am not safe anymore, am I?”

Xena reached out slowly, and then with more confidence to rest her strong hand on Kaija’s upturned cheek. “We will deal with it. Don’t worry.”

Kaija nodded as best she could, and the others released her at Xena’s nod.

~

Saikus and Rachel had gathered as many of their supporters as they could arouse. Ahmon, Aeaxis, even Amana stood shoulder to shoulder in the main plaza, waiting for Xena to return. As the victorious warriors returned to the village, the rebellious gathering brandished their weapons. Drowsy bystanders rubbed their eyes in confusion, but the night’s earlier festivities made it difficult for most of them to decide if they were awake or asleep let alone realize that something was very wrong.

Saikus stepped forward as the beleaguered party approached.

“Where have all of you been? The entire royal house out philandering in the middle of the night? Not very responsible.”

Behind Xena, Gabrielle and the others spread out, raising their own weapons.

“Your army is gone Saikus. You’ll need a new plan.”

Saikus’ pug nose lifted smugly into the air as she let out a righteous peal of laughter. “Ha ha! A new plan? I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Xena’s smile didn’t reach her eyes. “No more games Saikus. If you want to rule the Amazons you’ll have to learn real quick that they don’t like being betrayed.”

Rachel and Ahmon stepped forward. Rachel’s dark hair twisted wildly about her head, giving her a possessed look. “Betrayed!” she screamed. “How dare you speak of betrayal to us? What leader abandons her army? What shepherd her flock? What queen denies her nation? You-”

“Silence!” Gabrielle stomped forward, her irritation magnified by her exhaustion. Her normally placid and contemplative blue-green eyes flashed an angry silver in the waning moonlight. Several of the surrounding spectators stepped back in surprise – the image of a silver eyed bear, one of Artemis’ many forms, was so ingrained into their cultural heritage that resemblances were easily recognized.

“*I am Queen,*” stated Gabrielle. “This is *my* Nation, and I trusted it to your care. I am renouncing your stewardship of the Amazons, and banish you forever from these lands.”

Everyone was surprised, including Xena. The Warrior Princess knew Gabrielle had surprising stores of decisive expression, but she rarely gave those stores full rein. The response was only what could be expected – stunned silence. The cackle let loose by Aeaxis and followed by a snide chuckle from Ahmon broke that silence like a bad note.

“Banished? You can’t banish us – we are the leaders this Nation wants,” said the young dissenter. “Or would you deny the will of your people for your own desires?”

Gabrielle’s eyes narrowed to a dangerous glare. “I think you will find much less support when your followers know the rest of the story. Let’s call them out – let’s give them the whole story. Ephiny, wake everyone up.”

An alarm was raised throughout the village and in the morning twilight Amazon after Amazon stumbled from huts and climbed from tents, grabbing weapons, trying to gather themselves for whatever threat was calling them to wakefulness. Puzzled and confused the gathering warriors encircled the strange meeting in the main square, waiting for instructions. “What’s going on,” several of them asked timidly.

“We were under attack tonight,” Gabrielle announced to gasps and deepened confusion. “An invading army sat on Amazon land not one league from where you slept.”

“Impossible!”

“Why weren’t we called?”

“Where are they now?”

“They couldn’t have gotten this far onto our land without us knowing about it!”

Here Gabrielle looked deliberately at Ahmon. “Yes Ahmon – how did they get so close to us? Were you not in charge of outer defenses?”

Ahmon’s smug smirk remained firmly in place. “Not during the Festival – that charge was given over to the great Xena.”

Like they were watching a ball tossing game, the gathered crowd turned as one for Xena’s response. They were a little unnerved by her easy smile, gleaming white teeth expressing something other than joy.

“Oh yeah, about that... Tonight’s northern perimeter guards, out front. Now.”

The five scouts that had joined Xena and Gabrielle on their search for Kaija and Malvinus’ army stepped forward proudly. Xena looked over to Ahmon’s group and lifted a dark eyebrow in challenge. “Come now, don’t make me call names.”

Four more women shuffled forward from behind Rachel and Aeaxis. Unlike their five counterparts, they were not blood spattered and dirty, their eyes clearly lacking in confidence. One of them tried to defend herself before she was outwardly attacked.

“Someone had to come back to warn the others; someone had to let the village know...” She wavered as Xena’s smile grew.

“Yeeesss, and we can see how effective your alert was.” The Warrior Princess folded her arms. “Tell me – do you four make it a habit to defy a direct order and come hide in your homes?”

“We didn’t defy orders,” a pudgy guard yelled back. “Ahmon told us to return to the village if you tried anything funny.”

Ahmon’s smile twitched.

“Oh,” said Ephiny. “So you will disobey your Queen for an order from a Regent’s personal guard who had renounced authority during the Festival. Xena,” said the curly haired Regent, “I think we really need to re-evaluate our Guard requirements.”

“Now you hold on a minute,” the pudgy guard tried to protest, but Gabrielle cut her off.

“Enough. I instated this Council to help guide and lead my Nation and you have undermined every respect and faith I and this Nation placed in you.”

“Are you charging us as traitors?” asked Rachel.

Gabrielle’s chin lifted proudly. “I am discharging you from these people and announcing you as enemies of the Amazons.”

The dissenters’ faces twisted in hate and anger. Aeaxis raised a threatening fist. “You can’t do that! We have done nothing but lead and protect this tribe after you abandoned us! After Artemis abandoned us! You come back only to mock us, to demean us by bringing half-humans here for us to baby-sit. You expect us to stop the lives we must lead everyday because you come back to run things for a few days – for a holiday? And you denounce *us*?”

Gabrielle regarded the impassioned youth. She knew her only as Saikus’ daughter, and had known the sullen girl to be an anti-royalist like her mother. But listening to her argument Gabrielle felt a new seed of respect for the girl’s position.

“I do not dispute the validity of your complaint,” said Gabrielle softening slightly. “I dispute sabotage and deceit; I dispute backhanded treachery. And you should too if you really believe in the protection of your people – you wouldn’t stand to see them held hostage and hurt and blackmailed. Do you dare to defend this assault?”

No one answered Gabrielle – no defense or apology, which infuriated the young Queen. “What do you say to your sisters standing here now – those you have battle oaths with, who would fight for you at the expense of their own lives?” Gabrielle went over to one woman, wrapped in a blanket against the morning’s chill. The petite blonde pulled her from the sidelines. “What do you say to her who was sleeping while you ran from the army waiting outside her door to enslave her – because you don’t want me as Queen?” Gabrielle looked at Saikus and Rachel. “What do you say to her as you bring an enemy into her house because you are angry with Artemis?”

Saikus and Rachel remained silent, forcing their chins up in defiant pride. Gabrielle released the blanketed woman’s arm and moved back to the center of the clearing. Xena was content to let Gabrielle continue as she kept a close eye on Ahmon, whose fury was building in her eyes.

“As for Kaija,” said Gabrielle, “you all have your opinions of her.” Gabrielle reached out her hand towards her own wall of supporters. Those who had been surrounding the girl stepped aside. The bloodied and beleaguered youth moved to the blonde, her eyes down, trying to close her ears to the gasps of the audience. Her arrowhead necklace flared to life as she stepped forward, its usual demure red glow exploded to a bright and angry crimson. Gabrielle pulled her close, and the cat-girl felt her chest tighten with emotion.

“I can tell you none of you have been safer before we brought Kaija here. From the food you’ve been eating to the nights of peaceful dreams, you owe it all to her. Before the rest of us had gotten there, Kaija had destroyed half of that army tonight. She’s guarded you all for months – and she’s done it without your thanks, mostly without your knowledge, and despite your

intolerance. Those of you who plan to protest today against her – would you protest your sword? Your arrow? Would you protest your shield and dagger, your spear? Would you protest a guardian; a protector we need as we become more vulnerable?”

A red headed warrior from another region leaned over to a guard she recognized. “I told you we’d take her if you were too stupid to do it.”

The crowd shifted uncomfortably. The situation playing out before them did not lend much toward comfort or confidence. ‘What do we do now?’ all of their eyes asked as they looked to Gabrielle.

The petite blonde looked to Xena as her own intrepidity began to falter. The Warrior Princess looked back at her partner, imbuing her loving gaze with reassurance. ‘You have to do this Gabrielle. You have to be Queen now.’

“Arrest them,” said Gabrielle.

A fierce war whoop rent the air, and Ahmon drew back a huge bow and leveled her shot at Gabrielle. This was the move Xena had been expecting. Yanking her chakram from its holster, she let the deadly weapon fly. In seconds, brilliant sparks rained from Ahmon’s bow as the heavy metal arrowhead was cut from the shaft.

Ahmon dropped the now useless instrument and drew her sword.

“Ahmon, no!” screamed Amana as her cousin made a charge for the Queen.

Xena gathered herself for a spectacular somersault to intercept the enraged guard. In mid-air the raven-haired warrior drew her own sword, ready to meet Ahmon as she landed neatly in front of Gabrielle. Ephiny had grabbed her guard contingent and surrounded the other dissenters, forcing them to drop their weapons and surrender.

“I’ve been waiting for this, Xena,” sneered Ahmon. “I’ve been waiting for you for a long time.”

“Oh I know – but you should be careful what you ask for, you just might get it!”

Xena’s heavy sword clashed with Ahmon’s. The guardswoman turned, swinging her sword down and under Xena’s in an attempt to force the opposing weapon out of her hand. Instead, Xena spun on her heel and backhanded Ahmon on the back of her head as the woman stumbled in the momentum her own move created. Furious, Ahmon wheeled, swinging her sword wildly. Xena parried the blow easily, and her smile amplified her antagonizing boredom with the assault.

Ahmon was incensed. She threw blow after blow, kicking, punching, looking for any break in the Warrior Princess’ defense, but nothing gave. The acid building in her muscles made them burn painfully and tire, but her rage would not allow her to quit. Her focused and decisive strikes became desperate lunges. Finally Ahmon found the break. Xena’s glance shifted ever so slightly past Ahmon’s sword and that was all she needed. She made a surgical swipe knocking

Xena's sword from her hand. Then spinning to see what had caught Xena's attention, Ahmon raised her sword in preparation for someone who might have been trying to sneak up on her from behind.

All she saw however, at first, was Kaija, still standing where Gabrielle had left her. But beyond the smaller woman stood Tai'gee, holding Pi in her arms. Incredulous, Ahmon looked back to Xena, who offered her an affirming smirk.

"We got the mask back, too," she said lowly.

Ahmon's face contorted with rage, growing dangerously red. She hurled her sword at Xena who leaned lazily to one side and let it pass harmlessly by. Then the guardswoman turned again, shooting forward, the insane desire to strangle the child resting in Tai'gee's arms glowing in her eyes; right after she decapitated the half-animal in front of her.

"Bitch!" the now enraged woman screamed and pulled a short sword from her side as she made her homicidal charge.

Kaija was staring in disbelief at Pi and Tai'gee; the youngster, besides looking very tired, seemed otherwise unhurt. The little girl even offered a small smile once she saw Kaija had seen her. Ahmon's scream snapped Kaija from her daze.

A deadly violent roar erupted from Kaija as she reached out for the charging Ahmon and the crimson arrowhead burst in brilliance to a blinding point of white light. The smaller girl viciously swiped at the charging woman, gashing her chest and right breast in four deep and bloody streaks. Ahmon gasped, froze in shock for a moment, both hands went to her chest reflexively to hold herself together, releasing her weapon to fall harmlessly away. Kaija grabbed the larger woman by her exposed neck, lifted her with the greatest simplicity, and twisted to slam her to the ground with such force she may as well have been swinging a rag doll. Ahmon's head bounced against the hard packed earth like a ball, her hands and legs swung limply as her body followed the momentum of Kaija's swing and the large, paw-like hand brought the larger woman up to dangle in front of her again, bloody, shaken, daunted. A long, low, dangerous growl rumbled from Kaija as her eyes shrank to indeterminate slits. "You will stop."

"You filthy animal – get your hands off me," Ahmon choked through the vice clamping onto her throat.

"You would kill a child," Kaija growled, "and you call me filthy?"

"I would kill anything that I don't think belongs in this Nation."

Kaija's teeth flashed in a menacing grimace, but her great arm relaxed and she set Ahmon back to her feet, gently. The brilliant glowing point at her throat immediately darkened – it was so fast, Xena blinked to make sure she was witnessing a black arrow point where an effulgent spike had been. Ahmon was confused, but, ever the opportunist, she reached back to punch her

previous captor. She found her fist frozen in mid-air. Looking back, Ahmon's gaze met fierce, glowing, silver eyes.

Every Amazon present immediately went prostrate, except for Gabrielle, Xena, Kaija and those guarding and being guarded nearby. No one dared to speak. Ahmon's eyes flew open in surprise, but that was the only part of her body she found she could move.

"You were my daughter," said Artemis in her clear, ringing voice. "And when you were my daughter you knew my love. What do you know now?"

X

Though there were many people inside the Queen's hut, it was very still and very quiet. Xena had dropped into her favorite chair and immediately gone to sleep. Ephiny, Eponin and Solari had their heads cradled on their arms at the dining table as they too slept. Tai'gee and Pi rested on the great royal bed, slumbering in each other's arms. Only Gabrielle remained awake. She stood silently in the doorway watching her daunted Amazons mill around, pretending there was still a festival to enjoy.

She heaved a heavy sigh as she rested her head against the doorframe. Artemis had disappeared with Ahmon. Almost instantly after their two forms dissipated, Saikus, Rachel, Aeaxis and Cypress also disappeared, leaving nothing but a fine blue haze where they stood – but a soft breeze wiped even that away. Gabrielle had ordered the others imprisoned, decreeing they would be tried for their parts in the debacle. Kaija too had vanished and it was thought when Artemis took Ahmon that she'd taken the Lioness as well. That was what everyone had started calling her. Gabrielle had smiled inwardly the first time she'd heard it – no longer the cat-girl, no longer an abomination.

Now, as she stood in the frame cast by the late afternoon sun, Gabrielle wondered – if Kaija was really gone, what would become of Tai'gee and Pi? Tai'gee and Kaija had only just discovered their true love for each other, and it was easily seen how much Kaija and Pi meant to each other. The thought of those two spending the rest of their lives without the someone they both loved so much brought quick tears to the young bard's eyes.

"Why do you weep, my Queen?" a ringing, echoey voice penetrated Gabrielle's mind.

"For love," answered Gabrielle before she realized what was going on.

"Come with me."

Gabrielle felt a soft airy touch on the small of her back. She turned to look back into her hut and saw everyone was still sleeping, including Xena.

"They will sleep," the voice reassured her, and the touch pressed her softly on.

As Gabrielle stepped out of the doorway she felt herself step into another ~ place ~ was the best way she could describe it. She felt mist swirling around her, but none of its dewy dampness, and though everything around her seemed to shimmer and shift, she could still see clearly, though there was nothing to see.

“Where am I?” she asked aloud.

“Near Olympus,” Artemis answered as she stepped from behind Gabrielle. “This is one of my favorite fields,” the goddess continued, “where I come to think – to be. Even a goddess needs to renew her sense of ‘to be’ every now and then.”

Gabrielle looked around her. ‘Field’ wasn’t the word she would have chosen to describe the swirl surrounding them – and yet it did feel right. Though she could see no flowers or grasses, the air seemed scented with fresh growth, and she felt movement around her, but she wasn’t sure it was quite a breeze. It was neither hot nor cold, but she felt supported as though she were in a tepid bath and completely dry. Gabrielle closed her eyes to try to focus on one sensation and identify it. She felt Artemis’ smile move towards her.

“I rarely bring mortals here – they tend to get lost in the paradoxes and they don’t want to go back.”

Gabrielle remained still and contemplative for a few more moments before opening her eyes. Artemis continued to stand beside her, staring out into the expanse.

“What happened to Ahmon and the others?”

“I will handle them. They have committed crimes against me and I alone will be their punisher.”

The blonde studied the goddess but said nothing.

“What of my Amazons, Gabrielle?”

“What of them, Artemis? They feel you’ve abandoned them. They don’t know who to listen to or who to fight. They’re dwindling and suffering. Do you care for them anymore?”

“Of course I do!” Artemis’ nose flared indignantly, but Gabrielle felt the irritated energy subside quickly. “Though I have been neglecting them.”

“You know, there are a lot of villages in the world that don’t have men: communities, religious halls – that doesn’t make them Amazons. Our regions are becoming those villages.”

The goddess sighed into the mist but the vapor wasn’t disturbed. “What are you saying?”

“I’m saying I think the world is changing and if the Amazons are going to survive with or without you they need more control over themselves – their own leaders, their own laws. They

have to be able to adjust and adapt. Right now they are trying to hold on to you and a way of life you started and have overseen well over five hundred years ago.”

“There is much going on in the world that is not happening on Earth, that is why I have a Queen to take care of my people.”

Gabrielle stamped her foot. “I’m not enough, Artemis. And right now my place is with Xena.”

“So you wish to abdicate?” Disappointment weighed heavily on her voice.

“You’ve known that Artemis – ever since I tried to give the mask to Ephiny. Just because Velasca interrupted us doesn’t make it any less true.”

“The agreement was that she ruled in your place.”

“Don’t mince words. I am not a Queen – and this Nation needs more than me to take care of it.”

“But you and Xena could-”

“No Artemis,” Gabrielle said firmly. “That is not Xena’s place. The Greek Amazons have the leaders they need – Ephiny, Solari, Eponin. Even Tai’gee has huge potential. You have to trust them.”

Artemis took a deep breath. “And the other regions will have their own royal lines?”

“That was the announcement I was going to make during the Festival,” Gabrielle admitted. “No High Queen but many Queens, one for each region.”

“And how are they to maintain their royal lines? You are far from my original sanctified inheritance.”

Gabrielle thought for a moment, organizing what she wanted to say. “You – um – Artemis, if you aren’t going to imbue the daughters of the Queen with what they need to be leaders, there really is no point in having royal lines. It’s better to have elected Queens.”

“Humph. We shall see,” said the golden voice.

Gabrielle had been returned to her doorway. In her absence, the sky had turned a beautiful rose in the setting sun. Behind her the house still slept, and Pi had nestled herself securely into Tai’gee’s arms. The bard felt her heart swell with emotion.

‘Artemis wait,’ she called mentally. ‘What of Kaija? Where is she?’

A warm breeze tousled Gabrielle’s hair, but there was no answer in her mind. Another warm presence came up behind her and Gabrielle turned into Xena’s arms. The Warrior Princess held her bard close to her, tight and secure.

“You told Artemis our decision?” The blonde nodded into Xena’s shoulder. The warrior’s strong hand came up to stroke her soft hair. “And?”

“She accepted it. She’s going to make the changes.”

“Good. Who said all the gods are dumb?” said Xena in an attempt at levity. It didn’t take. “What?”

“Kaija,” was all Gabrielle could manage.

Xena frowned and hugged Gabrielle tighter still, before stroking the woman’s back gently. “It’ll be alright, Honey. It will.”

~

The morning dawned cold for a Grecian mid-summer. Sometime during the night Ephiny and the others had stumbled home, leaving Pi and Tai’gee to sleep over with Xena and Gabrielle. The two royals spread furs and blankets on the floor in the common room and were sleeping there soundly when Tai’gee awoke. Quietly the dark-haired young woman slipped from the house into the morning chill.

She wasn’t wearing enough to be comfortable against the unexpected temperature, but she refused to acknowledge it. Tai’gee wanted to be more numb than she was. She was sad and confused, lonely most of all. Being surrounded by her uncles and aunt, by townspeople she had grown up with while they derided her woodland friend were definitely lonely times. But this time she was surrounded by people who had come to want Kaija, had finally given her the acceptance she sought, and she was gone.

Tai’gee walked mournfully from the village into the woods, wandered aimlessly down paths she had come to know quite well. It was full morning by the time she entered the glen where her initiation was held. ‘Where Kaija was attacked,’ she added. It was empty now, pleasantly quiet. Tai’gee continued her sojourn, walking around the glen as though it were a pond. Then she ducked back into the forest moving through trees and vines with practiced inconspicuousness – in truth, before coming to the Amazons only the Elite Guards matched her in woodland stealth. She’d taught them several of Kaija’s tricks. All of the guards seemed very appreciative, even excited to have a new skill that dramatically improved their guerilla tactics. In fact, as she considered it, not until Xena had come back and started working with the warriors did their enthusiasm peak again.

Literally overnight the Amazons had come to love Kaija. After Artemis appeared and then disappeared the first question in the square had been “Where’s the Lioness?” Pi had swiveled in Tai’gee’s arms, blue eyes wide with the same question.

“Where are you?” Tai’gee asked the leafy canopy. “I love you and I want you back.” The leaves rustled slightly.

In front of her the bark on a nearby wild olive tree began to wave and twist.

“What the-”

Artemis stepped from the tree. Tai’gee was too stunned to bow at first, then quickly recovered and fell to the ground in a graceless heap.

Artemis looked at her supplicant. “You were not borne of my daughters,” she said plainly.

“No Goddess – I was initiated.”

“And you love my people.”

“There is only one I love more, Goddess.”

“Hm.” Artemis paced in front of the prostrate young woman. “I have her. She’s done me a great service. I’m not sure she belongs in this world.”

Hot tears burned Tai’gee’s eyes, but she pressed her nose into the ground to keep from sobbing.

“I think I will put her in my personal service. She would make a great deity.”

Tai’gee clenched her teeth and fists. Her hot tears turned into hot streaks of anger. “She is not a toy!” she yelled, jumping to her feet. “You don’t have the right to treat her this way!”

The goddess and the Amazon squared off for several moments.

“Have you even asked her what she wants? How she feels?”

Artemis raised a golden eyebrow. “What do you think she would have to say?”

Tai’gee’s dark eyes narrowed and she locked gazes with the goddess. “Xena said the gods like to play games. I’m not going to play with you Artemis. Kaija has learned to think, feel and speak for herself. Ask her.”

“You would let her think, feel and speak alone?”

“She can do all of that for herself, but as long as she wants me I will be there to do everything with her.” Tai’gee lifted her chin with definity.

Artemis seemed to consider this. “I could give her a good life.”

“With all due respect Goddess, no one can be given a good life; that’s something someone has to realize for herself.” Tai’gee paused before adding, “There are people here who need Kaija – people she could help more than you.”

“You?”

“Yes me – I love her, I’m in love with her, I want her in my life. Pi loves her, she wants to live with us. The Amazons need her – she saved all of us the other night – and that was just the other night-”

“Several of your sisters are in prison right now, including your former lover. Do you think you should be beside her?”

Tai’gee stopped mid-breath. She hadn’t considered that. She closed her gaping mouth, pressing her lips together in thought. Did she have any responsibility for the treason committed since her arrival?

“I told Amana what Kaija had told me, about overhearing the conference in the woods,” said the young woman.

“But you did not tell the Regent. You did not tell my Queen and her Champion when they arrived.”

“Kaija was acting so strangely... I didn’t think what she’d heard was serious.”

“Secret conversations in the woods about violently deposing the Queen? Come now...”

Tai’gee took a breath, making her decision. “I can make excuses about what I did, but I still did it. I’ll turn myself in.”

Artemis watched Tai’gee accept her own decision. As the girl began to turn towards the village, the goddess smiled. “No Tai’gee, I do not wish you to be tried. Your reasons for silence are justifiable and were not malintentioned.”

“What then Artemis? You take my love, you threaten my citizenship? What do you want from me?”

“I wanted to see and judge your character for myself. Gabrielle and Xena speak highly of you. Gabrielle thinks you would make a good Queen one day. What do you think of that?”

Tai’gee frowned. “I think I like the rulership we have.” A thin breeze tousled the trees and grasses as well as Tai’gee’s dark, fine hair. She pulled some of the loose strands back behind her ear. As she did so, she realized what Artemis was telling her. “Gabrielle and Xena aren’t going to stay, are they?”

Artemis smiled slightly. “No,” she said in a sympathetic voice. “No they have other wishes for their lives.”

“So Aeaxis is right – we’re just a holiday?”

“Is that what you think?”

“No. No I don’t think that,” the young warrior admitted. “But it’s hard to deny her case with them leaving again.”

“Gabrielle knows this, that’s why she is abdicating. She is turning rulership of the Greek Amazons over to Ephiny.”

Tai’gee threw up a hand. “Wait – what do you mean the Greek Amazons? We are more than Greece.”

Artemis held out her own hand, inviting Tai’gee to walk with her. “Yes,” she said as they meandered down Tai’gee’s original path. “My Amazons are all over the world. I’m going to divide the Regions. Each will have their own rulers and government as they see fit.”

They continued for several long steps in silence. The sun was reaching its zenith overhead, but the thick canopy kept Apollo’s heat from burning.

“Ephiny doesn’t have an heir,” Tai’gee pointed out. “At least, not a daughter.”

“No, but she will designate an heir apparent. I’ve heard great praise of you and your performance in your time here...”

Tai’gee ran a hand over her face. “I don’t know. I don’t know Goddess. Right now, I’m just trying to make it to tomorrow.”

The goddess smiled. ‘It can be tough sometimes,’ she spoke into Tai’gee’s mind. ‘It won’t always be so.’

A blue-green light appeared at Artemis’ feet, and moved up rapidly, engulfing her and then she was gone. Tai’gee looked at the spot where the Amazon patroness had stood, but it was as if she had never been there at all. The dark haired warrior had a very thick sense of disappointment. She let her head drop, sighing into her tunic, making the fabric puff. The talk with Artemis had done nothing to comfort her, and she realized her palms and underarms were clammy with nervous sweat. Knowing Artemis had Kaija did not make Tai’gee happy either. ‘Where does she have her? How does she have her? Is she happy?’ Tai’gee pulled at her hair in frustration then plunged off the path into the woods.

~

“Tai’gee’s still not back yet, huh?”

Gabrielle leaned on the window sill, allowing Xena to walk up behind her. “No,” she answered. “I’m not sure if that means she found Kaija or not.”

Xena rubbed a reassuring hand in circles on the blonde’s back, leaning over her protectively to peer out of the window over her head. After some moments of observation, Xena turned from

the window, pulling Gabrielle with her. She pulled her wife down onto her lap as she sat down on their bed.

“I’m proud of you Gabrielle. I think you’ve thought this out really well and I know telling Artemis about Ephiny ruling the Amazons was very difficult for you.”

Gabrielle cuddled into Xena’s embrace. “It’s how it needs to be. I just wish it didn’t have to be done this way.”

Xena nuzzled the soft neck under her nose with gentle affection. She added small kisses when she heard Gabrielle giggle. “I’ll be glad to have you back bard,” Xena mumbled into Gabrielle’s neck, adding a soft nip to the tender flesh.

“Queen Gabrielle?”

Gabrielle jumped, hitting Xena’s chin which clacked shut. “Damn, good thing I wasn’t using-”

“Pi, what is it sweetheart? -And I told you to call me Gabrielle, no Queen.”

“I know,” the girl acknowledged with downcast eyes. “I’m sorry.”

Gabrielle came over to lift Pi’s little chin, while Xena discretely rubbed her own.

“If they don’t come back, can I live with you and the Cons – Xena? I’ll be good I promise!”

Xena walked around the end of the bed, looking a long way down to the small girl standing in the middle of their room. When Pi lifted her watery blue eyes to Xena’s much older, experienced sapphires, the warrior felt a very strong affection build between them. “Pi, you couldn’t be bad if you wanted to,” she said warmly and gave her a big smile. “Don’t worry, Tai’gee will come back.”

“She won’t come back if she can’t find Kaija,” said the girl with uncanny certainty. “She won’t love me anymore because I made her miss Kaija – if she hadn’t come to look for me they could have been together.”

They were both surprised – a five-summers-old child should not be able to reason like that. Xena looked to Gabrielle for an explanation or answer, and Gabrielle looked back at her, seeking the same. Xena decided to take on the challenge.

“Pi, Tai’gee wanted to go look for you. She knew she was the best one to find you. She chose to come *for you*.” Xena winced inwardly – it was a slight twist. Once Xena had explained to Tai’gee that she was Pi’s best chance the young warrior went willingly, however it was not her first impulse. Hopefully the child believed it was. Pi gave Xena a discerning look. Finally, to Xena’s relief, the girl relented, either accepting the warrior’s explanation or choosing to hide her disbelief. She offered a weak smile to both of them before returning to her vigil on the front step. Gabrielle released a long held breath.

“And Artemis said nothing of her?” asked Xena. The warrior grimaced ferociously at Gabrielle’s shake, no. “By the gods, I hate the gods.”

~

Kaija did not like where she was. Nothing was determinant – the shapes, sounds, smells, even the ground – ground? – beneath her was vague and insubstantial. At first she thought Ahmon had killed her, but she was not at the River Styx, nor had Celesta come to see her like she promised she would. Then she thought perhaps she’d fallen back to the sleeping sickness, but she did not recall having this kind of lucidity during that first episode. Everything surrounding her seemed shrouded in a sparkling white-gray haze. She wasn’t sure if she needed to go somewhere or *do* something, so she sat down and waited.

That patience had long been exhausted, however, by the time Artemis returned, and the goddess found Kaija pacing irritably.

“Are you not enjoying this holy place? It’s quite sacred,” Artemis said. Her clear voice surprised Kaija at first and the girl’s sensitive ears listened as the ringing tones bounced from misty molecule to misty molecule, creating millions of tiny silver echoes.

“This is no place,” she answered but did not raise her eyes to the goddess.

“Do you remember me?”

“Of course. Bodies and mortals may forget things, but souls do not. You led my soul back to my body.”

“Yes.” The goddess nodded. “And since then you have done many great services for my Amazons and for me. I wanted to thank you.”

Kaija stopped pacing and accepted the goddess’ gratitude. “But you had to bring me here for this?”

“I wanted to talk to you without the possibility of interruption.”

Kaija shivered and looked around her. “I do not like it here.”

Artemis looked around as well, a small smile playing around her lips. “Most mortals do. I’ve had difficulty with their desires to leave,” she said quietly. “There’s nothing to fear here.” She looked back to Kaija, “no need for you to be wary.”

“I am not yet dead; there is still need for me to be wary,” the young woman countered succinctly. Artemis’ smile broadened.

Sphinxes were one of Athena's chosen beasts, and Artemis suspected the goddess known for her wisdom would appreciate another meeting with this twist of one of those great beings. The previous year Kaija had barely spoken to them at all, but now the girl had grown and gained some confidence, her natural intelligence shown like a beacon. As she was, Kaija resonated with Artemis – not only was she smart and strong, but her self-sufficient independence was built right into her soul; it was a quality she wanted in all her Amazons.

“You are an amazing creature, more than capable of self-preservation. Why should you fear for your own mortality?”

“I am no god.”

“I could make you one.”

Kaija scrutinized her detainer. “I want to see Tai'gee and Pi. You have thanked me, now release me.”

Artemis waited, then waved her hand and the world changed.

~

Tai'gee had joined a large contingent of guards who were gathering the bodies of the unfortunate soldiers slaughtered the day before. Twenty-one piles of ten bodies each and an eighth of six were arranged with wood and set alight. It was dirty work, but she couldn't deny it was fascinating seeing all of the different ways and people Kaija had killed.

“What do you think,” said Emelia to Mixan. “Think she cleared the bad Xena's yearly kill count?”

Mixan shot Tai'gee a look, silently asking if this conversation was ok. Tai'gee decided to answer.

“I thought we gave fifteen of these bastard bales to Kaija – the bad Xena would've killed more than that in a month!” she said smiling at Mixan.

“I don't know,” the larger warrior countered, “the bad Xena had armies. How many do you think she killed on her own – like the Lioness last night?”

Emelia tapped a large stick against her leg, apparently mulling over this proposition. “Well,” she said at last, “well, I suppose you have a point. But-” here a devilish grin slid across the red-head's face “-we could always go ask Xena, just to be sure.”

“Ha! *You* can go ask!” laughed Mixan. “I don't care to watch the good Xena go back to the bad Xena to answer you!”

Tai'gee smiled too, remembering Gabrielle's statement that she had yet to see Xena pissed off. "I think you'd have more to fear from her wife. She might take your head off for bringing up bad Xena."

The three of them shared a laugh, and Emelia tossed her stick into a pile of burning bodies. "Bastards," she muttered. "I almost wish an alarm was raised so I could've killed some of this scum myself."

They stared at the fire together. They wouldn't be able to stand as close as they were for much longer because of the horrendous smell of burning flesh. Ever since Tai'gee had witnessed the cauterization of a farmer's wound, she swore she'd never forget the smell of singed human flesh. But she'd never been able to understand why cooking animals didn't smell bad to her. She'd asked Kaija about it once, and her young friend said she thought it was because humans were naturally repulsed of the idea of eating other humans. She smiled as she remembered Kaija saying it was the same thing with her and vegetables. "You are also cooking the meat of other animals; not burning it. Smells bad to burn meat."

"Hey!"

The three turned as Ephiny approached; all bowed to the Regent.

"Gabrielle and Xena have called a meeting. We need you there Tai'gee."

Ephiny liked that Tai'gee hid her surprise, but the Regent could see it in her eyes. Tai'gee saluted her and followed her back to the mainstay. Mixan and Emelia shrugged their shoulders at each other and also followed at a respectable distance.

~

Ephiny didn't say anything during their trek to the meeting. Tai'gee felt awkward walking through the town at the Regent's side – given everything that had happened, and the fact that the Festival was still going, Tai'gee felt everyone was looking at them; including the people in their houses.

Tai'gee wasn't expecting they would go to the Temple. Ephiny motioned for Tai'gee to proceed her inside and they disappeared into the darkness together. The younger warrior never really liked that building. Standing inside the large, impenetrable stones felt to her like being buried alive. On the few occasions when she'd gone into Artemis' holy building she imagined this was the scenery leading to Charon and the last river before judgement.

If the priestesses noticed them, they pretended not to. The two wound their way into the recesses of the Temple, and Ephiny stopped them to look at the interior wall. She knocked three times at her eye level and two more distinct times at her waist. Instead of rock, the wall echoed like a wooden door, much to Tai'gee's surprise. Ephiny gave her a small smile, then pushed the door open. Waiting for them in the secret room was every major head of the Amazon state.

“Well... I feel underdressed,” Tai’gee murmured. Ephiny gave her another smile, but the young warrior didn’t notice.

Finding Xena in the crowd was easy; she stood an easy half head taller than the next tallest person in the room. Despite her height, her dark hair and brilliant eyes also stood out from the majority of blondes and brunettes filling the room. Next to her, obviously, was Gabrielle, tucked protectively under her Champion’s arm. Their main clique stood close by and Ephiny and Tai’gee joined them. The others in the room included four of the other regions’ regents, the Northern Amazons being the only tribe missing. They were joined by their champions, as well as the Nation’s head priestess.

The room, upon Tai’gee’s further observation, could by far be the most foreboding place in the Temple. In spite of the many candles and pots of burning oil it still seemed dark inside. Tai’gee knew there were vent holes in the ceiling, or they would be suffocating, but it was sufficiently smoky to lend the room a very close and oppressive ambiance.

“We’re all here Artemis,” Gabrielle called out unceremoniously.

A large blue-green flame appeared in the center of the room, forcing everyone back towards the wall. Amidst the flames, their patron goddess materialized, and everyone – except Xena – knelt.

“My Regents, step forward,” beckoned the goddess. Once the leaders were sufficiently encircled, the petite deity continued. “Your world is changing. You must be able to face these changes.” The Goddess paused, maybe for effect, maybe taking one last moment of reconsideration. She nodded to herself and went on. “I am dividing my Nation. Each of you will be your region’s sovereign ruler. You will be Queens in your own right, each of your regions independent queendoms,” the goddess elaborated.

Everyone looked around, curious, confused.

“But, Gabrielle...” stammered Diantries, Regent of the Western lands.

The petite blonde stepped in front of Xena, who placed comforting hands on her shoulders. “I am turning over rulership of the Capitol Region to Ephiny. My place is with Xena.”

The uncertainty filling the room was practically palpable. Everyone looked at everyone else. Finally Diantries spoke up again. “But, how can we do this? What does this mean – will we have no High Queen?” The other regents nodded agreement with her questions.

“No, there will be no High Queen,” said Artemis

“You all have been ruling as Queens for years now,” Xena pointed out. “Now it’s official.”

Artemis motioned for the High Priestess to come forward. The elderly woman approached, carrying a silver plate filled with a liquid that burned in the same blue-green flame that carried Artemis. Reflexively the Regents stepped back.

“With this I will anoint you all, and in so doing, the knowledge of your sovereignty shall be made common among your people. No tedious ceremonies and rivalries that way. The inheritance of your rulership I leave to each of your judgements – but as you decide, so shall I enforce. Judge wisely.”

So saying, Artemis dipped her hand into the plate and withdrew a handful of the burning liquid. Ephiny was first in line. Bowing her head, she allowed the goddess to drizzle the flaming liquid over her, igniting her with an eerie glow that was quickly absorbed by her body. Immediately Tai’gee felt something shift inside herself, and when Ephiny looked in her direction, the young guard offered her a solemn bow. Xena gave Gabrielle’s shoulders a slight squeeze.

One by one all of the Regents were promoted, and the five new Queens seemed to wear their new power and responsibilities like a glistening mantle.

“My daughters,” said Artemis warmly, “Rely on each other as you would rely on me. Love me, and I will not abandon you.”

As the others filed out of the room, the Capitol leaders remained. Tai’gee looked questioningly at Xena. “Why did you call me here for this? It doesn’t seem like something I should have been a part of.”

The raven-haired warrior nodded in Ephiny’s direction. The curly haired Queen came over to explain. “I want you to be my heir Tai’gee. I have no daughter.”

The young warrior was speechless. She wheeled, looking first at Xena, then Gabrielle, then back to Ephiny. The new Queen smiled. “Granted, hopefully you wouldn’t assume the throne for a long time to come, but when that time does come, I think you would make a great Queen.”

“But – but I couldn’t possibly. I am not a borne daughter of Artemis, no one would support me. Surely there is another-”

Ephiny reached out her hand, placing it lightly on the young woman’s shoulder. “You were initiated; you are as much a daughter of Artemis as I, as Gabrielle. I have already discussed this with our priestesses and your instructors; of every Amazon in this village, they, independently concluded you would be an excellent choice as a ruler for our people. Still, I would like your training and grooming to be done quietly, in a way that no one will doubt your qualifications. I am naming Solari as my second in command. If anything happens to me before we announce you heir apparent, she will continue your education until you can take the throne.”

Ephiny’s gray-blue eyes gazed at Tai’gee’s own dark pebbles with the utmost earnestness. “It is not only you I am electing as my heir, Tai’gee; I’m electing your daughters as well. Artemis has seen great promise in your line.”

Tai’gee glanced at the Goddess who had moved unassumingly to the back of the room. Tai’gee realized without the glow worn by the gods, Artemis could have been any Amazon, any woman

– she could be fragile, vulnerable, endangered. A powerful surge of protectiveness flooded through Tai’gee, which everyone noticed and revered in the moment. Ephiny saw Tai’gee’s acceptance in her eyes and smiled approvingly. Gabrielle and Xena came over to pat her back in congratulations.

Artemis also floated forward. “I have something that belongs to you I think.”

She waved her hand at a corner of the room, and a startled Kaija appeared. It only took a moment, then Tai’gee leapt forward, as did Kaija. They grabbed each other desperately and crushed each other in a hug so tight Hercules himself couldn’t have separated them. Xena smiled and Gabrielle wiped discretely at her eyes, hastily brushing joyous tears away.

Tai’gee’s relief and excitement overwhelmed her. When Kaija kissed her she thought she would explode with joy. If she hadn’t needed to breathe, she would have stayed embedded in Kaija’s arms forever. Reluctantly she pulled away, but put both hands on either side of her love’s face and knelt so their foreheads touched. Kaija covered Tai’gee’s slender fingers with her own much broader, much stronger ones.

“Hey,” Kaija purred.

“Hey yourself,” smiled Tai’gee through building tears. “You’ve been busy.”

Kaija smiled in return. “There has been much to do.”

“And there is more to do yet,” interjected Artemis. “As the Consort of a Queen, or an Heir Apparent, you are charged with the protection of my leader and her children, not to mention the Nation she calls home.”

Tai’gee turned in Kaija’s arms, happy beyond description. Kaija looked over Tai’gee’s shoulder at the goddess, pride and something akin to challenge screaming from her golden eyes.

Xena leaned forward. “I don’t think that is a charge you really need to be concerned about,” she said to Artemis. The Warrior Princess tipped Kaija a conspiratorial wink. To Xena’s surprise, Kaija casually winked back.

~

Pi sat quietly on Xena and Gabrielle’s porch step, fiddling idly with whatever rocks and twigs were close at hand. She rested her chin on a thin forearm draped across her knees. Twilight was building the darkness and lights were beginning to come on all over the city. Pi hadn’t eaten all day and even though her stomach rumbled painfully, she did not wish to break her fast. Her thin, blonde hair draped her face in disorder and teased about her eyes in a way that only a child could ignore.

The child didn’t mind being alone. Before Kaija and Tai’gee came, Pi spent a great deal of time in her own company. She was never close with the woman she now knew was her aunt – Pi

shuddered to think of her. She was glad she was gone, as well as Ahmon. When Tai'gee had brought Pi home at the beginning of the Festival, Ahmon had been there waiting for her. Reflexively the child tightened her hold on Tai'gee's hand, but there was nothing she could do to avoid being home. Her guardian had grabbed her roughly and pulled her inside.

"How dare you run off from me?"

Ahmon followed them inside. "Seems it runs in her blood – being loose and wild."

Cypress shook Pi even harder then pushed her aside. "Stop reminding me. Ugh, I'm just glad I'm not related to that beast."

Pi watched fearfully as Ahmon sauntered up to her, traced the line of her chin with one finger. "I could crush you," she spit through tight teeth as she seized Pi's jaw, squeezing it mercilessly. Pi was too terrified to cry out, but she couldn't stop her tears. She glanced at her mother but the woman stood back, arms folded, disinterested.

"You think she'd help you? She hates you, you worthless beast, just as I do. She's not even your mother, so you can stop shaming her by calling her that. She's your aunt--"

"-Technically. There's no real relation there," Cypress said.

Ahmon yanked painfully on Pi's chin to bring the girl's attention back to her. "You are that cat wench's niece, did you know that? She knows it. And she'd rather play hero than save you."

Pi was, of course, incredibly confused. Her jaw began to ache under Ahmon's pressure, and her little body trembled in intimidation.

"Oh, scared?" Ahmon taunted. "Don't worry – we'll save you. We've got a nice hideout all set for you."

The large warrior grabbed Pi by the back of her neck and carried her towards the dining table. She threw the table aside and Cypress came over to remove a woven rug which revealed a secret door. The limp-haired woman lifted the heavy door and with a cold look to her niece, motioned to Ahmon.

"Bye bye," she said in a sing-song lilt before dropping the girl into the pit. Pi hadn't even had time to look up before the door was closed and she was surrounded by darkness.

She didn't know how long she'd sat there, remaining quiet in the crumbly hole. At one point she thought someone was letting her out when the door started to swing open, but instead something was shoved in and fell down to join her. A very faint amount of light filtered through the floorboards overhead, just enough to allow Pi to make out a gruesome and frightening face staring at her from the other side of the pit. It never moved, never blinked, and even while she closed her eyes in attempt to convince herself it was only her imagination, when she opened them again the grotesque face still stared at her.

Eventually she heard mumbling then shuffling, rough scuffling, and then the trap door was yanked open. Tai'gee reached down for her and lifted her out – on the way up, Pi grabbed the Mask of the Queen, despite its heartless, unsympathetic observance of her plight. Tai'gee hugged her close but gently, stroked her dirty hair, asked her if she was ok. “I am so sorry I left you with them. I'm so sorry.” Tai'gee had apologized repeatedly. When Pi had awoken in the Queen's hut without Tai'gee by her side, Pi's guilt and fear doubled. As she sat hunched on the porch she contemplated running away, living in the woods like Kaija had before coming to the Amazons. But she remained where she was, sad and motionless.

That was how Tai'gee found her when she returned from the Temple. Pi looked up to her from her place on the step, and Tai'gee looked warmly down at her. “What'cha been doin'?” asked Tai'gee lightly.

“Sitting,” she answered with an endearingly open expression.

“Do you want to come home and have some dinner?”

Pi looked at the warrior with much too much consideration for a five-year-old. “I don't have a home any more,” she said simply. “No family.”

Tai'gee's heart skipped, and she knelt slowly in front of the forlorn child. She placed a hand softly on her cheek, then took up her little hands in her own. “You'll always have a home with me,” she said to the little blonde. “In fact, I want you to come live with me. I want you to be my family.”

Pi was surprised to say the least. “You're not mad at me?” she sputtered.

Though Tai'gee's eyes were dark, Pi could feel softness emanating from them. “How ever could I be mad at you? You are so special – I love you.”

“Really?”

“Mm-hm.”

Pi's grin consumed her little face and the girl vaulted from her seat into Tai'gee, knocking them both flat. They were a mass of giggles for a while, then Tai'gee lifted Pi in her arms and carried the girl back to her hut, while Pi hugged her neck tightly the entire way.

~

As was much more typical for a Grecian summer, the night was warm. There was a fair amount of humidity, but the skies were clear and each star sparkled brightly above the Amazon capitol. Tai'gee set Pi down just before they reached her hut. Pi reached for her hand in the darkness and Tai'gee was happy to take it.

“What should I call you?” the girl asked.

‘There’s a question,’ Tai’gee thought. “Well, when you think of me, what name comes to mind?”

The dark warrior pushed open the door allowing soft candle light to spill out onto them. The scent of roasting meat also wafted to them. Both of their stomachs growled greedily and they grinned at each other.

“Tai’gee,” Pi answered as they entered.

Tai’gee knew Kaija was in the house somewhere – she suspected by the hearth. Pi however, went straight to the bed by the inner wall. The older warrior waited by the front door for her new charge to realize who was with them. Tai’gee stepped up and winked at Kaija across the room smiling, while Pi climbed up onto the bed, oblivious, until she turned to sit in a pile of bed clothes and legs.

Frozen for a moment only, the little girl suddenly sprang from her seat and promptly toppled to the floor as her feet got tangled in the sheets. Kaija chuckled then came over to pick up the squirming bundle.

“That will not get you very far Princess. We will have to work on your methods of escape.” Kaija jerked a corner of the sheet down so Pi could see and her little nose peeked over the edge.

“Kaija!” she squeaked through the fabric muzzling her. Kaija smiled. Pi’s excitement didn’t last however. A very grave expression settled on her face. “Are you going to stay? Are you going to leave again?”

Tai’gee came to them, hugging them both while Kaija answered.

Kaija took a moment, wanting to answer the question carefully. With a calm, steady voice, Kaija explained to the little girl in all the sincerity she could. “I do not know that I will be here to sleep every night because I still have a home among the trees, but I will always be there for you; when you do see me, and when you do not.”

Pi thought over this, then offered a shy smile. “They call you Lioness now.”

“I have heard.”

“But I can call you Kaija still.”

“Mm-hm.”

“Good. I’m hungry.”

Gabrielle put the last of her belongings into her saddlebag. The Festival was over, everyone had dispersed without further incident. Gabrielle noticed Xena seemed relieved they were leaving too; even Argo seemed anxious to travel new paths – the great horse hadn't stopped whinnying since she'd been brought from the stables that morning. 'How do I feel?' the blonde asked herself. She smiled. 'Yeah, I'm ready to go, too.' Flipping the saddlebag closed, she skipped out of the house to meet Xena.

Ephiny and Solari were just saying their goodbyes to Xena when Gabrielle approached. "You know we're always happy to have you both here," said Solari with a sad smile.

"You definitely keep life lively!" Ephiny's curly hair bounced as she laughed. Xena and the new Queen took each other's forearms in firm friendship, and then Gabrielle gave her sister Amazon a warm hug.

"Good luck," said the petite woman.

Tai'gee and Pi walked with the departing pair to the edge of the village. "So Pi, you're going to be starting school again soon, huh?" Xena teased.

"Yes, but Tai'gee and Kaija like school, so I will like it too."

Xena smiled at the girl's conviction. 'We'll see how long that lasts.'

"You've got your work cut out for you," Gabrielle continued with Tai'gee. The younger woman nodded in agreement.

"Yes but at least now I feel like I'm finally on the right track. And Kaija will be there to help me."

"Speaking of which – where is she?"

"She left early this morning. I think she needed some space."

"Well tell her we said goodbye, ok?" said Xena.

Tai'gee nodded, and both of the great warriors gave Pi big hugs and then turned to leave, Argo trailing behind. The Heir Apparent and her new daughter watched them go until they disappeared around a bend, then re-entered the village hand in hand.

Gabrielle and Xena weren't long on the trail before Xena leaned over to whisper to her partner that they were being followed.

"A good followed or a bad followed?" asked Gabrielle. Xena smiled. "Xena, I hate it when you smile as an answer!"

Kaija dropped down in front of them, a light cloud of dust puffing at her booted feet. She was back in perfect health, her deep tan returned, her rippling muscles rebuilt – she was the same magnificent young woman that had overawed them when they'd first seen her not long after returning to the village.

“You’re not losing your touch are you?” Xena lifted an eyebrow at the girl, whose golden eyes twinkled in response.

“I did not want you to get nervous and throw your chakram at me,” Kaija said evenly.

Xena felt sheepish. “Look, I’m really sorry about that night. I-”

Kaija held up her hand in a way that struck both the Warrior Princess and the bard as quite regal. ‘Lioness, huh?’ Gabrielle thought.

“It is ok,” said Kaija. “I did not give you much choice. I just hope I do not have to go there again. Besides, it is healed.”

“Kaija, you have grown so much. We are so proud of you.” Gabrielle was beaming and would have said more but Kaija raised her hand again.

“Everything I have become, I have you to thank for. You gave me trust and opportunity. I could be very different without you.”

“Well, this is a life you’ve worked for, you’ve earned. Enjoy it.”

Kaija smiled, the brilliance in her eyes easily detracted from the potentially threatening canines. “I have something for both of you.”

Without missing a beat, Kaija executed the most courtly bow either of them had ever received. They both blushed.

“Wow; where’d you learn that?”

“I asked Artemis to show me. I wish you could stay for our joining ceremony, but you are invited to our anniversary next year.”

Xena reached for Kaija’s forearm. “We’ll do our best to be there.”

“In the meantime, I hope our small gift will make up for our absence,” said Gabrielle with a smile.

Kaija laughed. “Small? I would not call a house small. But thank you again. We will definitely make good use of it.”

With a final brief smile, Kaija skipped into the forest and disappeared. Gabrielle tried to trace where Kaija may have gone, but quickly gave it up and followed Xena on down the path.

“So,” she said as she caught up. “Where to now, Warrior Princess?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I was thinking we could use a vacation,” she answered offhand.

“No! No more vacations – they’re too much work! Find us a mission or the only R&R you’ll get is a royal rebellion!”

The raven-haired warrior laughed and shot a blue-eyed wink to her partner. “In that case, Eponin did mention hearing about some trouble near Sparta.”

“Trouble’s good! Let’s go!”

~