

A Queen's Tale

by Melissa Good

Warm sun, a cool piece of granite, and a spare moment to relax against the stone and look out over a stretch of rich, sown fields and the ribbon of the river rushing past.

Couldn't really ask for more, could you?

Xena thumped her bare heels idly on the rock, leaning back on one elbow as she enjoyed the breeze and the afternoon light. She had a waterskin resting by her right hand, and she inhaled, feeling the almost dry light fabric cool against her body as she lifted it up and took a sip from it.

It was a beautiful afternoon. She'd just spent candlemarks at sword practice, and now she was taking a break before she made her way back to the Amazon village where hopefully Gabrielle would be finished holding court for the day.

After another sip, Xena sat up and pulled her boots back on, tying the strings snug around her calves before she slung her waterskin over her shoulder and stood up, stretching out slightly sore muscles before she started down the rocky path.

Around her the wind rustled softly through the thick green summer leaves, bringing the scent of wood smoke to her, and she took a deep breath of it, acknowledging a sense of benign well being.

They'd been back a bit over a moon from their strange adventure and had settled back down into life in Amphipolis. The town had changed, they had changed, but slowly everyone seemed to be getting used to every day life again.

Even the Amazons had settled in, their new village finally taking shape as the weather improved. Change had come to their leadership though, as a newly pregnant Ephiny stepped aside as Amazon law required and turned the reins over to Gabrielle; giving the tribe a taste of their putative Queen they hadn't quite anticipated.

Learning process all the way around, as Gabrielle hadn't really expected it either.

Xena whistled melodically under her breath as she dropped down the steep path, coming to a more even spot and glancing ahead to where the turn off was to the Amazon village.

A lookout was there. The Amazon warrior inclined her head in respect as Xena approached, and she lifted a hand in response, giving the woman a friendly wave. "Estas."

"Welcome back." The guard said. "Did you have a good practice?"

"They're all good." Xena grinned briefly, then passed through the guard post and started down the slope to the wide open plateau that was now filled with sleeping huts, a battle practice yard, an armory, the big cookfire, gardens, and the pens for the goats, sheep and chickens the Amazons were raising.

Children were playing over near the large dining hut, and Xena paused, shading her eyes as she heard Dori's distinctive, piping voice. She spotted her daughter dodging between three or four other young Amazons, a stuffed ball tucked in her hands as she was chased.

Hands stretched and reached for her, but Dori spun and ducked, keeping out of their clutches, laughing as she escaped and galloped towards the two sticks serving as goals.

Xena smiled, and kept going, passing the cookfire, where three Amazons were stacking split wood and continuing past the healer's hut towards the shaded clearing that the gathering hall was in, it's newly barked walls and thatched roof glistening in the sun.

She turned onto the rock lined path and went to the door of the hall, ducking inside and pausing to let her eyes adjust before she picked a bench at the back of the room and slid onto it.

Silent mostly, but the low, even voice speaking at the front of the hall paused and it's tone changed as it's owner smiled, her mist green eyes lifting from the parchment in front of her to

meet Xena's at the back of the room.

Xena winked, and settled back against the wall of the hut, extending her long legs in front of her and crossing them at the ankles.

The hall was about a quarter full, with Amazons of various ages and ranks, some sitting together on benches like the one Xena was on, others standing near tables, arguing whatever point of law Gabrielle was currently reviewing.

Xena's partner herself was seated behind a large, sturdy table in a chair that was ordinary in appearance and workmanlike, yet just a touch enough larger than the rest in the room to indicate there was some authority in the person sitting in it.

Gabrielle was wearing her Amazon leathers, a woven strip of the same material tied around her head keeping her hair out of her eyes. Her summer tan had darkened her skin and made the fairness of her hair stand out and the sculpted lines of her body moved in and out of the beams of sunlight coming in the window behind her.

"So." Gabrielle put her hands on either side of the paper. "I think what's going on here is that there was a misunderstanding between the trader and you, Jefes. I think the trader thought you were going to give him both buckets you were carrying of goats milk, not only one."

"He was an idiot then." The middle aged Amazon standing near the table said. "I told him, one bucket for a sack of oats. One for one. Why would he think I would give him both?"

"Well." Gabrielle read the complaint over. "I think he thought that because you were carrying them in a brace, over your neck. Taking off one and carrying the other would have been really awkward, so he thought you would give him your whole load rather than have to carry half of it back unbalanced."

The Amazon grimaced. "That's pretty weak, your majesty."

"Not very plausible, I agree." Gabrielle nodded. "But that's his story, and he's sticking to it. Did he give you the whole sack of oats?" She watched the woman nod. "Okay. So he kept his end of the bargain, and he's looking for a bucket of milk."

"He's a scrounger." Jefes said. "He's tried this before. Just ask Solari."

Gabrielle nodded again. "I think he is too. So what we'll do is, I'm going to tell him a sack of oats are worth a bucket of milk, and if he wants another one, he's going to have to ask Xena for it."

The Amazon put her hands on her hips and grinned, half turning to look at the back of the room where the warrior was lounging. "I'm good with that."

"But Jefes, next time make sure you're really clear about what the trade is." Gabrielle said in a more serious tone. "We don't want the traders in this area to start spreading the word that our bargaining can't be trusted."

Jefes nodded. "Understood, your majesty." She ducked her head respectfully at Gabrielle. "Thanks for the judgment." She took the parchment and left, winding her way out between the seats and past where Xena was, pausing to give the Queen's consort a thumbs up.

"Well." Gabrielle looked at her cleared tabletop. "That's it for today, I guess. She stood up and stretched. "We're expecting a merchant train tomorrow, so we won't have any review. If there's anything urgent, we can pick that up the day after."

The room started to clear, the Amazons who had been seated listening turning to talk to each other, as they gathered themselves to leave. Gabrielle waited a moment to see if there were any further arguments, then she circled the table and headed up the aisle.

She dodged the milling Amazons and arrived next to her partner, dropping to one knee on the bench and leaning forward; resting one hand on Xena's shoulder as she kissed her on the lips. "Hey."

Xena reached up and hooked a finger inside her leather halter, pulling her back down and returning the kiss with lazy passion. "Hey." She replied. "Ready to go home, your majesty?"

Gabrielle glanced down at the fingers holding her in place. "I am home." She whispered. "But I'm ready to get the scamp and go back to our cabin if that's what you mean."

"That's exactly what I mean." Xena released her, letting her hand rest on the bard's knee. "It's been a damned long day."

"Well, you insisted on taking the pre dawn watch with the militia." Gabrielle reached over and gently tweaked her partner's nose. "Let's go. I'm about talked out today." She got up and extended her hand, which Xena took as she stood and joined her.

They walked out of the door back into the sunlight, holding hands as they threaded their way through the small groups of Amazons meandering outside with them.

Though everyone was aware of their presence, it excited no more notice than the chickens pecking lightly in the grass, and Xena didn't even feel slightly conspicuous holding hands with the Queen as they strolled across the open square towards the playground.

"How'd your practice go?" Gabrielle asked. "You should have heard the grumbling when you didn't want to take anyone with you."

Her partner chuckled. "I'll make it up to them after the train gets here tomorrow." She said. "I just wanted some peace and quiet to smack myself in the head in."

"Did you?"

"Not this time, no." Xena admitted. "How'd the court go?"

"About like it has been." The bard said. "Mostly minor stuff, nothing earth shattering. The most interesting case today was the two scouts fighting over the smith's apprentice down in the town. I can't believe you missed that one. You'd have hurt yourself laughing." She pitched her voice low, and gave the women they were moving past a smile.

Xena chuckled. "How's Eph?" She asked as they cleared the crowds and entered an empty space in the clearing. "Still sick?"

"Yeah." Gabrielle grimaced. "Boy, I didn't know how lucky I had it until I saw what she's going through. Poor thing. She said it wasn't nearly this bad with Xenon."

"On the flip side, this isn't a centaur." Her partner mused. "So maybe it's a tradeoff. I know the other end of her pregnancy was pure Hades."

Gabrielle thought about that time, her expression going a bit somber as they crossed the grass and neared the playground. "That was a crossroads for all of us, I think."

"Mm."

They rounded the ring of trees surrounding the childrens area and came up to where the ball game was still going on, this time a young red haired girl had the stuffed sack and was racing along the ground with it, displaying a respectable speed.

But not quite fast enough to evade the rambling, dark haired dynamo who circled the rest of the crowd and bolted across the ball carrier's path, reaching out and latching on to the sack and digging her heels in.

The runner was yanked through the air and they both went tumbling to the ground, with Dori laughing in delight as she managed to wrest the toy away. Then she stood up and tossed it to a tall, gangly girl who was just coming up. "Your turn!"

Xena whistled. Dori's head whipped around and she spotted her parents, abandoning the game at once as she turned and headed for them at a run. "Mama!" She yodeled. "Boo!"

Gabrielle fondly watched her daughter approach, lifting her hand and waving at the rest of the children, who were turning as they realized who was standing there. "Hello you all."

Dori didn't even slow down. She reached them and leaped for Xena, who caught her in mid air and pulled her into a hug. "Hey Boo! Where you been? Wanted you to come play with us!"

"I was playing too." Xena told her. "I was just someplace else."

"Mama." Dori held her hand out, and Gabrielle clasped it. "Are we going home now?"

"We are." Her mother agreed. "Is that okay with you?"

"Yes." Dori nodded her dark head positively. "I'm hungry."

Gabrielle chuckled. "So are you saying you know you'll get dinner at home, or are you saying you don't like the food here at our friends house?"

Dori grinned at her. "Mama!"

"Ah, she's learning not to incriminate herself." Xena patted her daughter's back. "Good girl."

They waved at the kids, then turned and started towards the entrance of the village. Xena lifted Dori and put her on her shoulders, where the child happily tucked her bare feet under the warrior's arms and rode along in supreme contentment. "Did you have fun today, Dor?"

"Yes." Dori said. "Mama, we made arrows today. But they showed me different than Boo does, so I told them it was wrong."

Gabrielle pinched her nose with her fingers, stifling a laugh. "You did, huh?"

"They got mad." Her daughter said. "But when I said Boo said, they got happy again."

"Of course they did." Gabrielle moved closer and put her arm around her partner. "Everybody wants to know how Boo does things, right?"

"Yes." Dori nodded.

Xena draped her arm over Gabrielle's shoulders, feeling the tension in them. "You going to survive seen and a half more moons of this?" She asked. "I'd have started drugging the morning ale here by now if I'd had to listen to what you've had to."

The bard leaned against her as they walked, returning the respectful bow of the guards at the entrance to the village as they emerged onto the path and turned to climb up the short distance to their cabin. "I think I'll live." She said, after a brief pause. "This is what Eph's been doing since Melosa died. I think I kind of owe her a break. You know?"

"No. I don't." Her partner answered honestly. "But that's why you're the Queen of the Amazons and I'm not." Xena tickled Dori's foot, feeling the child tug on her hair in response. "I'll see what I can mix up for Eph tomorrow. Maybe it'll help. It did for me."

"I'm sure she'll appreciate that, and so will Pony." Gabrielle was glad to see the outline of their cabin approaching. "I thought Pony was going to have a hard time with how Eph decided to get pregnant."

"I knew she wouldn't. It wasn't her." Xena said, in a pragmatic tone. "She told me she's so

damned relieved she's willing to try and get the tribe to adopt Mikah. She made him a knife sheath."

"She did?" Gabrielle's voice dropped in amazement.

"She did." The warrior confirmed, as they climbed up the last steep rise to the plateau their home was built on. "I also heard three more people have a crush on you."

"Xena." Gabrielle rolled her eyes. "Are you starting to listen to gossip?"

"Only when your name's mentioned." Her partner unlatched the door and nudged it open. "One of them was wondering if dying her hair black would help."

The bard started laughing, closing the door behind her and covering her eyes as she stood just inside the entrance, her body shaking. "Oh gods." She sighed and moved further inside, heading for the fireplace and the pot swinging gently over it. "This should be good and ready."

"Smells great." Xena swung Dori down and headed for the bathing room. "Ready for a bath, shortie?" She disappeared with the giggling child, leaving Gabrielle to gently stir the stew and get out of her leathers.

Which she did, in that order. She walked back over to their linen press and loosened the ties on her halter, easing it from her skin and setting it down on the press. The leathers were very comfortable in this weather, but it felt good to trade them for a soft woven shirt at the end of the day and to her, it was like exchanging her daytime role as Amazon Queen to her evening role as mother and partner and poet.

She took off her skirt and put it next to the halter, then she turned and leaned against the press, unlacing her boots and tugging them off.

In the bathing room, she could hear splashing and mayhem. She straightened and smiled, running her fingers through her pale hair and freeing the back of it from the collar of the shirt. Then she walked back across the cabin, flexing her bare toes against the fur rugs and planking and dropped into one of the low slung, comfortable chairs across from the fire.

Home. Gabrielle extended her legs and crossed her ankles. Yes, it was good to be here. "Hey Xe?"

"Yes?" Xena reappeared in the doorway to the bathing chamber, toweling herself and Dori off. "We got one bit of good news today. If you can call it that." She crossed over to the press, getting Dori into a nightgown and putting a long shirt on herself. "War's on. With Sparta."

"Ah."

"Means they'll be looking anywhere but the backend of the hinterlands here." Xena said. "Since they can't conscript from us, maybe they'll forget Amphipolis exists by the time it's all over and the treasure hunters will all follow them to Sparta looking for plunder."

"Well." The bard murmured. "Talk about a dark cloud with a silver lining." She looked up at her partner, who settled into the chair next to her. "Will they come looking for you, though?"

The erstwhile Defender of Amphipolis, once the Destroyer of Nations shrugged. "Hopefully their egos will keep them from that." She watched Dori climb up into her mother's lap. "It's time we just had some peace and quiet around here."

"Mama, will you tell a Boo story?" Dori asked.

"Sure honey." Gabrielle gazed at her daughter. "How about we do a story, then we can have some dinner. Does that sound like a plan to you?"

Dori hugged her. "Tell the aminal story. Maybe the aminal will come and listen and we can play."

“Sure.” Gabrielle patted her back. “And maybe Boo will sing for us, like she did to the animals.” Her eyes met Xena’s and they both smiled. “We’ll have lots of fun.”

“Fun.”

**

Gabrielle finished buckling the leather belt around her waist and reached for her staff, curling her fingers around the worn, battle hardened surface before she looked behind her to see if her family was ready to go.

Xena was seated near the fire with Dori in her arms, both of them dressed in blue cotton tunics and looking very festive with their matching leather boots.

It made Gabrielle smile. “Let’s go, kids.” She knocked her staff on the floor a few times. “We don’t want to miss the market, right?”

Xena looked up, a finely arched dark brow lifting in a mute, yet perfect expression of wry skepticism. Nevertheless, she got up and set Dori on her feet, and they both joined the bard at the door. “I have to admit, rebuilding the area across the river as a big market square wasn’t the worst idea I’ve seen.” The warrior allowed.

“But not letting people live over there.” Gabrielle closed the door behind them and led the way down off the porch. “I don’t really think anyone wanted to anyway, but it gets cleaned up a lot more.” She watched Dori as the child pattered ahead of them, chasing a big butterfly.

“Not as crowded.” Xena agreed. “Still don’t want to live down there though.”

Gabrielle had to admit she felt the same way. Though the village had settled down and reformed after the floods, and she and Xena had worked their way back into a more normal life over the last two moons there was still a bit of rawness there and she suspected in some sense things would never be the same for them here.

Life had become, she’d come to realize, just a cycle of changes and slowly she and the warrior had reconciled themselves to it and just learned to adjust.

It was, what it was.

A quarter candlemark later, they were emerging onto the path that lead through the back of Amphipolis; their appearance generating calls of greeting from the townsfolk who were also out and heading towards the river.

The smell of freshly cut wood permeated the village square, and on either side of the path there were newly built log cabins where there had once been only broken down remnants, as settlers took over the small plots of land and they became homesteads.

Some had been living in the lower town. Gabrielle exchanged a wave with a baker who had escaped the floods, and was now living not that far from Cyrene’s inn. Most of the merchants had moved on though, and only a few had stayed to make their home in the upper town.

Less profit, less bustle, less growth. There were many who were unhappy about that. Gabrielle edged a step close to Xena as they started into the square, since it was becoming busier by the minute. “Looks like everyone’s in a pretty good mood today.”

“Looks like it.” Her partner agreed. “Want to stop in at mother’s?”

“Sure.” Gabrielle altered her steps as they neared the inn, which was busy even at this relatively early hour. Since the inn in the lower town had been completely destroyed, Cyrene’s place was once again the center of life in the village, and so far she’d seen no move by anyone to change that.

They walked up onto the porch and Xena opened the door, letting Gabrielle and Dori enter ahead of her into the very familiar place.

“Ah, there you are.” Cyrene spotted them. “Now isn’t that cute? Look at the two twins there in the same color.”

Gabrielle smiled at her partner’s somewhat embarrassed expression as everyone turned and saw her and Dori’s matching outfits. “Can’t even blame me for that.” She said. “Xena picked them out.”

“Xena had them made.” The warrior interjected. “Since the weaver was complaining there wasn’t enough left after making mine to make another one from the same bolt.” She picked up Dori and they went to the front of the inn to the table nearest the big fireplace, where Cyrene and several others were sitting.

“It’s adorable.” Cyrene said. “Sit down. Last I heard, the merchant train was still coming down the road.”

“Be interesting to see what they’ve got for sale.” One of the men at the table remarked. He was an elder, and he gave Gabrielle a nod of respect as she took a seat opposite him. “Being it’s the first one since the flood.”

“The scouts said it was pretty big.” Gabrielle said. “I think Xena’s idea of sending a few people out to say there was still a market here was a good one.”

The man nodded. “People heard things, surely.”

“Surely.” Cyrene returned to the table with a tray full of mugs. “Here.” She put it down. “With all the bastards running from here I’m sure they heard earsful. But a few good markets will put it right.”

“People might come this way any route.” Xena said. “We’re one of the furthest areas from the possible fighting.”

The man nodded solemnly. “Figure they’ll be around to recruit soon enough.”

“And we’ve got an exemption from them conscripting anyone.” Gabrielle said, picking up a mug and taking a sip of the ale. It was cold and crisp against her tongue, and tasted wonderful. “Did you open a new keg, mom?”

“Yes, in deed I did.” Cyrene appeared pleased that she’d noticed. “With any luck, it’ll be a busy night.” She lifted a mug and took a sip. “Not bad, if I do say so.”

Xena leaned back against the wall and relaxed, noting the good number of patrons in the room and the air of cautious optimism in the faces around her. She picked up a mug and took a drink, watching Dori turn her head to watch what was going on. “Got any cider before the terror starts grabbing for one?”

“I’ll get it.” Gabrielle chuckled, getting up and leaning her staff against the wall next to Xena. She circled the table and went into the kitchen, where two cooks were busy at the various fires. “Hello, Eustace.”

The nearer cook turned. “Oh, hello there.” She greeted the bard. “Can I get you something, ma’am?”

“I got it.” The bard went over to the casks near the back of the room and picked up a pitcher, then she unstopped the cider cask and partially filled it. “Looking forward to the market?”

“Oh yes, ma’am. Absolutely. Right, Alais?”

“Good to see some new stuff.” The other cook agreed. “We’re near out of spices. Terrible.”

“Well I’m looking forward to it too.” Gabrielle picked up a cup and headed for the door. “See you all out there.” She reentered the big room and walked back over to the table, in time to see Xena nearly losing her mug to their precocious offspring. “Dori!”

Dori turned from where she was standing on Xena’s lap with one hand stretched up to grab the ale and the other clutched in her partner’s hair. “Mama! I’m thirsty!”

“Well, that’s not the way to get a drink is it? Get your bottom back down on the bench, madame.” Gabrielle told her sternly. “Stop mauling Xena.”

Dori poked her lower lip out. “Mama.” She protested, but stopped her climbing and sat down in Xena’s lap instead. “Sowwy Boo.”

Caught between laughter and not wanting to undermine her partner’s scolding, Xena merely bit the inside of her lip and worked to keep her expression serious. “Thanks for rescuing me, Mama.” She told the bard gravely.

Gabrielle poured some cider into the cup she’d brought and then set the pitcher down. “Good girl. Here you go.” She passed the cider over to her daughter. “So anyway, where were we?”

“Talking about the crops.” Cyrene said. “The floods caused a late start, and most of the fields are just under seed now. If we get an early frost, we could have a lot of problems this winter.”

“Well.” Gabrielle leaned forward, resting her forearms on the table. “I talked to the tribe. They’re willing to teach people here to forest gather, if anyone’s interested. Most of the time, the Amazons can’t put fields under plow, but they do mostly all have little gardens and they know how to make the most of the wild around them.”

The elders sitting at the table were briefly silent. “Well.” The old man said. “Never hurts to try something new, eh?”

Cyrene looked at him. “Now you say that.” She said. “The gods know all I heard before the floods was how we need to stick to the old ways.”

The elder half shrugged.

“Let’s try to get as much in storage as we can then.” Xena spoke up. “Before it all starts going to Athens.”

“They’ll expect us to donate to the war effort, won’t they?” One of the other men said. “Someone from over Thebes way passed through last night and said word was out, everyone was being taxed for it.”

“We’re exempt.” Cyrene said. “If they respect that piece of parchment, that is.”

“I’ll make them respect it.” Xena said, after a long silence. Then she bounced Dori up and down on her knee a little, as the child laughed. “But the truth is, we’re too small for them to really come after. To wage war on that scale, you need hundreds of legions and more grain than we produce in ten seasons from every city in the land.”

Cyrene nodded. “Maybe in the long view of things, the floods might have done us a favor.” She glanced at the elder. “Ector, I know a lot was lost, but who knows? It might have been lost anyway.”

“Might have.” Ector agreed sadly. “We will never know. But if it comes to be that we are overlooked or thought destroyed and bypassed of this war, I welcome it.”

“Aye.” The other two elders at the table nodded. “That’s for sure.”

The door to the inn opened, and two of the scouts entered. They came over to the back table at once, pulling riding gloves off their hands. “Trains coming in. Just down the road.” The nearer one

addressed Xena respectfully. "Ten wagons at least, and lots of pack animals. Looks like it's a good one."

Everyone in the inn was listening, and now most rose and started for the door. "Bout time." One man said. "Let's see what they got."

"Some Amazons are with them to, ma'am." The scout said to Gabrielle. "Five or six, we think, riding alongside."

"Really?" Gabrielle frowned. "Not from our tribe, we don't have any hunting parties out down that way." She looked over at Xena. "Maybe they heard the tribe moved up here."

"Could be." The warrior agreed. "Maybe some friends from the last war." She bounced Dori again. "You done with your cider, shortie? Want to go see what's going on?"

"Done." Dori set the cup down with both hands and an exaggerated seriousness. "Boo, that was good."

Everyone chuckled. "Don't tell me, tell your grandma." Xena prompted her. "She made it for ya."

Cyrene stood up. "Glad you enjoyed it, scamp." She ruffled Dori's dark hair. "All right people, let's go see what we got." She joined the elders as they headed for the door, leaving Gabrielle and Xena with Dori at the table.

"Amazons." Gabrielle leaned back and cupped her ale mug in both hands. "Good or bad thing, what do you think?"

"Fifty fifty chance either way." Xena put her mug down and stood up, setting Dori onto her feet. "Let's go find out."

Gabrielle drained her mug, then she got up and joined her family as they left the inn last, closing the door behind them as they emerged into the morning sunlight. Most of the village was already heading down to the river, some crossing the newly rebuilt bridge over to the other side.

Across the river, all that remained of the lower town was a stone wall marking what once had been the perimeter, and a tall, heavy structure at the far end that had been the just finished theatre when the disaster hit.

Now they used it for storage, and it would be shelter for the merchants who were heading their way as they set up their wagons to sell what they'd brought in a temporary marketplace around the cleared wood planked space that once had been a dancing square.

Gabrielle felt a little sad, as she always did, when she saw it. There had been so many dreams invested in the settlement, not the least of which was a budding troop of actors, who had hoped to inhabit the theatre and bring a little of the culture found in the bigger capital cities here to Amphipolis.

So close. Now most of them had dispersed to other places, as the town reined back its dreams and feeding and housing everyone took precedence over entertainment. Gabrielle had hoped to see one or two of her own tales acted out in the space but now she knew it would be a long time if ever before expansion got to that point again.

For now, they would just rebuild what they could, and do their best to get back to where they had been before everything had started to spiral out of control.

Gabrielle paused before she stepped onto the bridge, memories of the flood surfacing as she remembered its predecessor breaking loose and bearing down on her with murderous speed. Only luck and Xena's strength had saved her.

"Something wrong?" Xena bumped her lightly from behind.

“Just remembering.” Gabrielle continued across the bridge, the now relatively placid river flowing under it with gentle burbles. “You know I still think it was romantic of you to save me in your underwear.”

Xena chuckled.

Dori skipped ahead of them, bouncing up and down on the bridge planks that gave a little under her weight. “Boo boo boo.. too slow!”

“Gods.” Gabrielle watched the child bolt across onto the other side and bounce up the slope. “She makes me feel twice my age sometimes with all that energy.”

“Me too.” Xena commiserated.

Gabrielle gave her a look.

The warrior pretended she didn't see it, focusing her pale eyes on the oncoming merchant train. As the scouts had promised, it was a big one, the wagons not the usual small traveling vehicles common in the area but instead big, long range ones with storage and living areas being pulled behind teams of horses and oxen.

Good sign. Xena knew she had no responsibility for the flood that had damaged so much of the town and killed so many people, but she also knew she and the Amazons had destroyed the sudden hope of plundering the riches of the mountain they lived on and there were still very hard feelings about that.

Many felt they had a right to mine the place. Xena had proven her own right of possession with her sword, and after a few killings, and half a dozen with hands cut off their wrists, the bounty hunters had fled and the town reconciled itself to making a living the way it always had.

And in reality, though Dori had her collection, and there had been a nugget or two in the streams, Xena knew there was no vast fortune under the paths she trod on a daily basis. Just enough to make everyone think there was, and that would bring unrelenting destruction to a place she'd come to love.

Tough choice. Xena put her hand on Gabrielle's back as they entered the cleared ground that once had been the lower town. But then, her life had been full of tough choices.

The crowd cleared them a path, and they emerged in the center of the space, just as the lead wagon pulled up outside the square and the drover jumped down off his seat.

“Good morning to you!” The man said. “And a long road it's been for us.”

“Welcome.” Gabrielle stepped forward. “We're glad to see you.” She settled her staff into the crook of her arm and extended her other hand, clasping the drover's. “I'm Gabrielle. Welcome to Amphipolis.”

The man paused in mid motion. “Gabrielle?” He asked, a note of hesitation in his voice.

“Yes.” The bard smiled kindly at him. “Yes, I'm that one. No, I don't bite. Yes, that's Xena behind me. Yes, you're perfectly safe here.” She released his hand. “You're welcome to set up here in this area, we've got a storage building over there if you want to get anything under cover.”

“Ah.” The man said. “Thanks.” He cleared his throat. “This looks like a good spot. I was told we'd have good customers here... true?”

“True.” Cyrene stepped forward. “You've got it? We'd like to buy it. We had some bad luck in the spring thaw, and we're just rebuilding. Once you set up, my inn's up at the top of that slope there, everyone's welcome.”

Several of the other drivers had gathered, and their faces looked pleased at the welcome. “Looks

like we heard right.” One of them said. “Good spot here. We’ll bring the horses up.”

“There’s a rough pasture past the building there, with a bit of fence. “ Johan had come up behind them. “We sent word down the river too, for them who has needs.”

The drover’s smile grew wider. “Good to hear.” He motioned all the wagons forward. “We’ll get to working then.”

“Looks good.” Cyrene said in an undertone. “Hope they’ve got cooking pots. My best one’s shot.”

Gabrielle stepped back and joined Xena, resting her hand on her partner’s hip. “So far so good.” She kept an eye on Dori, who had run predictably up to the horses attached to the first wagon and was patting their noses.

“Mm. Look what’s coming.” Xena indicated a direction with a small jerk of her chin. Approaching them were a group of Amazons on horseback, that of itself unusual enough. “That’s trouble or I’m a goat.”

“Baaah.” Gabrielle uttered. “Hope you are.” She put a game smile of welcome on her face as the lead Amazon spotted her staff, and changed direction to come right at them. “I really hope you are.”

**

“Okay.” Gabrielle rested her folded hands on the table. “Let me make sure I have this straight.” She studied the five Amazons seated around her, and then looked past them at her partner who was at the other end. “Someone who said they were representing the Athenian council came to you.”

“To our leaders.” The oldest of the Amazons, Chlea, clarified, briefly holding her hand up. “We are but the messengers.”

“Don’t worry.” Xena remarked. “We won’t shoot you.”

The Amazons glanced at her with puzzled expressions then back at Gabrielle.

“So.” Gabrielle started again. “Some people who said they were representing the Athenian council came to your leaders, and offered your leaders a lot of gold if they would join the war against Sparta.”

“Yes, your majesty.” The woman nodded. “They came and said, if we could gather up all the Amazons in Greece, and enter the war, that they would pay us all enough to keep our tribes for generations, and besides, grant us lands.”

Gabrielle nodded slowly. “I see.”

“So our leaders sent out messengers to all the parts of the land, so that we might take this offer to all the Amazons we could find so that we might all benefit by it.”

“I see.” The bard murmured again. “So. Do I take it your leaders are going to accept this offer?” She asked. “They want to go to war?”

“Yes, of course.” Chlea said. “How many seasons have we scraped for a living? This is a chance to finally build our tribes into a good situation, and live a good life.”

Gabrielle looked over at Xena.

“If any of you survive.” The warrior said. “War with Sparta’s no joke.”

“The whole of the Athenian army will be fighting them.” The Amazon said. “If we join into the cause, when we win the war, we share in the riches. “

"I've fought Spartans." Xena's voice remained mild. "There's no guarantee you'll win." She said. "Especially if the same idiots are in charge the last time I was in the capital."

"Besides that." Gabrielle drew the conversation back. "Who is to say they're not lying to you, and really just want you for cannon fodder?"

The Amazon turned back to her. "You sound like you are against this plan, your majesty. May I know why? My leader, especially, felt that you would be the first to join in."

"Me?" Gabrielle's brows lifted. "I think you've got the wrong Amazon queen if that's the case. I'm against it because I don't think Athens is making a fair offer, I don't agree with the war, and I won't send my sisters into battle for someone else's bad decisions."

Xena nodded her head. "What she said" She concluded.

"So you would deny your people this opportunity?" Chlea didn't sound angry, just puzzled. "Deny them the riches, and the lands?"

"Yes." Gabrielle didn't bat an eyelash. "I value their lives over gold and dirt. We have lands here, and their needs are fulfilled in a way that leaves none of them hungry. I won't send them to war, especially a war that will spill blood across the land like water."

"But your majesty, we are warriors." Another of the Amazons said. "Is this not what we live for?"

Gabrielle studied her. "Have you ever been in a war?"

"We have been in battles, of course." The older Amazon said.

The bard stood up. "That's not what I mean. I don't mean battles, or skirmishes with other tribes, or a fight with the Centaurs. I mean a war; one with battle engines and thousands of troops, and burning fire, and catapults that can take out a whole line of cavalry at one shot." She said. "Ever been in one of those? Seen a battlefield covered in bodies? Smelled a hundred dead around you?"

The visiting Amazons stared at her.

"I have." Gabrielle said, in a quiet voice. "I've been drenched head to foot in blood, and seen my friends and sisters die in front of my eyes." She looked at each one of them in turn. "No offer from Athens would tempt me to go through that again, and it shouldn't tempt you either."

The Amazons hesitated, then they looked back at Xena. "Say you the same? " The oldest one asked. "We know your reputation, Xena of Amphipolis. Do you too, shy from this war?"

Xena steepled her fingers and tapped the tips of them against her lips. "Athens wanted me to lead their army in this war." She said. "I nearly set the place on fire running away from the offer. There's no good from it. Sparta's armies are better than ours, and if they route them, they'll be here breathing down our throats in no time. Their promises are worth nothing."

Chlea leaned forward. "To be truthful, you are the first who feel in this way." She said. "We have met with four small tribes on our journey here, and all seemed willing to join in this cause. They are sending representatives to the conclave our leaders have called."

"Well, Xena and I have had more experience in this particular area than most." Gabrielle said. "I know there are a few other tribes around here that will probably give you the same answer. They fought in the last war with us."

"Fair enough." Chlea said. "May we take shelter with you over night? It's been a long road, and we'd like to get some rest before we continue on."

"Of course." Gabrielle said. "You can stable your horses in the town barn, and we'll walk you up to the village. The path's too steep for them to climb it."

“Very well.” Chlea nodded. “Thank you for the hospitality at the least.” She got up. “Come, my sisters. Let’s settle our beasts, and then we can rest for the evening.” She led the Amazons out of the inn, past the few tablefuls of villagers waiting for the market to open and out the door, allowing in a blast of summer sunlight before it closed behind them.

Gabrielle and Xena regarded each other across the table. Then the bard got up and went over to where the warrior was seated, plunking herself down on the bench knee to knee with her. “Oh boy.”

Xena rocked forward and rested her head on her hand. “Are they really all that stupid?”

“Xena.”

“Gabrielle.” Xena intoned. “Even before you went to war, and before you and I had all the experiences we had, would you have really thought the deal they’re being offered is legit?”

“Hm.” The bard mimicked her posture, resting her chin on her fist. “Hon, when I met you if you’d told me I’d get a nutcake every time I cleaned your saddle I’d have bought into it. I’m not really a good example.”

Xena smiled.

Gabrielle’s expression sobered. “They just want bodies.” She said. “Maybe they figure the novelty of women warriors will throw the Spartans. You think?”

“Maybe.” Xena sighed. “They’re going to need all the help they can get. “

“But you think the promises are bogus, right?” The bard asked. “The land, and the gold?”

Xena snorted. “If I were the Amazons, I’d make them give up the land AND the gold first, if they’re going to throw their bodies into this. They won’t remember a damn thing if they win, and if they lose, we’ll all be running from the Spartans anyway.”

“You won’t be running from Spartans.” Gabrielle gazed at her partner with knowing, quiet affection. “Maybe we’ll end up being the last stand if it all goes bad.” She shook her head. “But for the sake of the Gods, Xena. They can’t really think this is a good idea, can they? We had trouble enough convincing two tribes to fight with us when the threat was breathing down their necks.”

“We weren’t offering gold and land.” Her partner pragmatically reminded her. “Only the privilege of dying alongside you and I.”

“Mm.”

Xena shifted in her chair. “If you bring them to the village, they’ll talk.” She said. “If I were you, I’d call a meeting and forstall them.”

Gabrielle eyed her.

“There are people up there who might think it’s a good enough incentive.” Xena said. “And if you’re making the decision for the tribe, you’d probably better explain it to them first.”

“Would you explain a decision of yours?”

“I’m not the queen of the Amazons.” Xena’s eyes twinkled gravely. “Army generals don’t have to explain anything.”

“Mm.” Gabrielle reached over and folded her hands over Xena’s wrist, feeling the warm skin under her touch with a sense of decadent pleasure. “So can I beg my consort to occupy these folks for a little while so I can go up to the village and make my peace?”

“Maybe.” Xena arched a brow. “What’s in it for me?”

“My undying devotion.”

“Already got that. What else?” The blue eyes widened a little.

“My heart, my soul.. oh wait, you’ve got that too.” Gabrielle sighed. “How about those dumplings you love so much?”

“Now we’re getting somewhere.” Xena lifted her hand, bringing Gabrielle’s with it up to her lips. She gently kissed the bard’s knuckles. “I will keep your Amazons occupied, my bard. But do me a favor and take Dori with you, because watching her and keeping track of them is going to be too much for me to handle.”

“Sure.” Gabrielle rested her cheek against their still joined hands. “Why does it always have to be war, Xena? Don’t they get it that war never solves anything?”

Her partner gazed at her with wry understanding. “It’s not meant to solve anything. It’s just what people do. Its like the bucks, sparring at mating time, Gabrielle. All animals fight. For territory, for food, for mating rights... we’re no different.”

“Are you saying we’re no better than warthogs?” Gabrielle reached over with her free hand and brushed the dark locks from her partner’s eyes. “I understand what you’re saying, Xe, but we’re not deer. We have thoughts, and dreams and a lot of things animals don’t have. We think. We make decisions. I make stories. We should be able to look at what we’re doing and say, that’s not right. We shouldn’t do that.”

“We should.” The warrior agreed. “But until you’ve gone through what we’ve gone through, it’s hard to deny that animal part.”

“Ah.” Gabrielle got up and circled her partner’s chair. She gave her a kiss on the head, and hugged her from behind. “Well, a lot of people up in that village did go through what we went through the last time, so I shouldn’t have too hard a time explaining, right?”

“Right.” Xena agreed. “And if they give you a hard time, tell them I said they’ll have to go through me to get to Athens.”

Gabrielle leaned against her, exhaling as she let the deep affection she felt for her soulmate well up and spill out of her. “Even if I didn’t think this was a scam, and even if I couldn’t convince the Amazons it wasn’t right, I’d still take you, and run off into the hills because it’s not worth it to me to risk a single hair on your head no matter what someone elses cause is.”

“Right back at you.” Xena leaned back and reached behind her to give the bard as much of a hug as she could in return. “So go charm your Amazons. I’ll meet you back up there in a while.”

Gabrielle twisted her body around and gave Xena a kiss on the lips, ignoring, or completely oblivious to the people in the inn. She took her time, then she backed off a little, allowing their eyes to meet.

They both smiled. Then Gabrielle reluctantly released her hold, and picked up her staff, easing around the table and heading for the door to the inn.

Xena remained seated for a minute after watching her leave, resting her head on her fist and taking that moment to savor the sweetness of this chance gift in her life.

Just a moment. Then she got up and dusted her hands off, pushing the chair back into place, half turning as her name was called.

“Ah, Xena there you are.” Cyrene pushed through the kitchen door and came over to her. “I need some help, you got a minute?”

“Just a minute?” Her daughter said. “Something stuck on a top shelf again? Cow on the roof?”

Her mother gave her a wry look. "You've been in a very good mood lately, I noticed."

Had she? Xena pondered that briefly. "Things have been pretty good for a while." She shrugged the thought off. "Can't be a sour puss all the time."

"I'm not complaining, honey." Cyrene patted her arm. "It's wonderful to see you happy. To see Gabrielle happy. You've earned it." She moved closer. "Anyway, all I need is to have you look at something one of the traders is trying to push – tell me if it's the real thing or not."

That sounded innocent enough. Xena followed her mother out of the inn onto the porch, and they both pulled up short as a group of villagers blocked the way, all surrounding a wagon that had obviously come up from across the river.

"Thought they were all staying down there?" Xena asked Cyrene in a low voice.

"He'll go back. Wanted to bring the stuff up here, since they're not quite set up there yet. Guess he's anxious." Her mother muttered back.

Xena used her height advantage and stepped to the edge of the porch, peering over the heads of the villagers at the contents of the wagon. A ripple of color met her eyes and she blinked a little, surprised to see bolts of fabric exposed under the rough leather tarp.

"Good stuff, as I said, citizens." The wagon owner was saying. "From far off. I got a lucky shot at it, and you're the first to see em."

"How far off?" Xena asked, from her perch.

The drover looked up, spotting the tall, beautiful woman in blue watching him. He beamed at her, reminding Xena a bit of her old friend Salmoneus.

Which made the wagon's contents immediately suspect.

"From far off, good lady. Far shores in the East, according to the merchant I found with them. Just off some ship that got wrecked on the coast, he said."

Interesting. Xena started down the steps, and the crowd parted respectfully to let her through. She went over to the wagon, passing the merchant and reaching over to touch the bolts, her fingertips confirming her first guess. "Silk."

"Is it, then?" Johan came over. "Is it as he says, Xena?"

The merchant froze, and his eyes went wide. "By the gods. Are you Xena?"

The warrior merely looked at him. Then she went back to examining the fabric. "It's from a place damn far from here, that's for sure." She pushed the fabric aside and glanced at the rest of the contents.

Ivory, that she recognized. And the rich black lacquer shaping fans and boxes, all finely made, and exotic to even her eyes. "You said a boat came ashore with this?"

"Yes, yes." The merchant said, in an anxious tone. "A shipwreck, they told me. The salvagers drew up chests of these things up on the shore. I took a few, thought maybe I could sell them. Unusual, aren't they?"

Xena rested her wrists on the wood of the wagon. The townsfolk stood quietly around, obviously waiting for her to answer. That had changed, a little, after she'd staked her claim to the mountain, and made it clear she was willing to keep it with her sword.

This was still her home. They were still her neighbors. But there was a renewed awareness of who she was, and Xena actually found that something she liked. The guilt had faded somehow, and a certain edge had come back.

“They are unusual.” The warrior agreed quietly. “Were there any survivors of the wreck?”

The man shook his head. “They said no. It was a bad storm, so I hear. Sent the ship up onto the rocks, and cracked it in half. Man I got this off said stuff was scattered up and down the shore.”

“Better to try and sell this in Athens.” Xena mused, picking up a finely crafted music box.

“So the salvagers said.” The merchant nodded. “Said they had no use for frivolous things and to take this up to the high and mighty in the capital, but they weren’t looking for it either. Just for weapons, and gold.”

“For the war?”

“Aye.” The merchant relaxed a little, since Xena didn’t seem likely to gut him immediately. “That’s what they said. I bumped into the man who was organizing the trading caravan coming here, and he said, well, you never know.”

“You never know.” Xena agreed. She turned and looked at the crowd. “It’s real.” She told her mother. “You won’t see this stuff often.” She put the music box back down and stepped back. “It comes from Chin. It’s a land across the ocean, very far away from here.”

“You been there, Xena?” One of the crowd asked.

“I’ve been there.” The warrior answered shortly. Then she climbed the steps back up onto the porch as the townsfolk clustered around the wagon with a good deal more enthusiasm.

“Did you take a fancy to this?” The merchant held up the box. “Please, take it as a gift from me.”

Xena put her hands on the rail of the porch. “Thanks, but no thanks.” She told the man. “Sell it to someone and make some good coin out of it.” She turned and started back for the door to the inn, pausing when her peripheral vision caught sight of the Amazons coming back from the stable.

War. Amazons. Unexpected ships from Chin. It really wasn’t starting out to be a very good day.

**

Gabrielle was glad of the climb up to the village, because despite having to keep an eye on Dori’s scampering she had the time to think about what she was going to say to her tribe.

Her tribe. The bard shook her head a little, inwardly a little bemused at the coaching she’d gotten from her partner on dealing with a group of people they both had such mixed histories with. Xena was right, of course, she’d known that as soon as the words had come out of the warrior’s mouth, but she was also a big embarrassed to have to have been reminded of that.

Of course, Xena did have an insight into the warrior minds that made up so much of the Amazons that Gabrielle still didn’t quite have a handle on. Though she had certainly gone to war, and been in more battles than the people she was leading, she still didn’t really get the whole love of fighting thing that pushed them beyond sense sometimes.

Xena knew. Xena understood it at a gut level. Gabrielle understood Xena at a gut level, but when it came to the question of why innate fighters fought, she was removed a step.

Or, at least, she liked to tell her self that. “Dori, careful.” Gabrielle balanced her staff across her shoulders as she climbed up the path. “You don’t want to get hurt and have Boo get her needles out, right?”

“No, no mama.” Dori jumped off the rock she’d been balancing on and joined her mother. “No pokes.”

Gabrielle chuckled and put her hand on Dori’s shoulder. “Honey, I know what you mean. Do you know how many times your Boo has had to fix mama?”

“Boo always fixes mama.” Dori responded.

“Boo always does.” The bard smiled quietly. “You know what, Dori? Some bad people want us to go fight with them again. Do you remember what that was like, when all those mean people were here, and we had to run away?”

Dori frowned.

“But we’re not going to do that.” Her mother reassured her. “Even if all our friends want to go and fight, we’re not going to do that, Dori. What do you think about that?”

“Mama and Boo stay here?” Dori looked up at her, with wide, innocent green eyes. “We can go get fishes, and play.”

“You got it.” Gabrielle steered her towards the entrance to the Amazon village, instead of continuing up towards their cabin. “So you can help me tell everyone about that. Okay?”

“Okay.”

Gabrielle nodded a greeting at the guards, who saluted her as she passed, then focused their attention again back at the path. The one thing the tribe loved, really loved, was that they had limited access into where the village was now.

Not like when it was in the middle of the forest. Now, the guard post blocked the pass that led to the pleasant plateau they’d built on, and the rest of the area was surrounded by the peaks of the mountain and the stream that provided the tribe with clean, fresh water.

The plateau sat above some rugged slopes that led down to lower open spaces, rich with soil and perfect for the small crops the tribe planted when they had the land to. They’d gotten seed in after the floods receded, the dirt all the more enriched for its long soaking.

It would hopefully make for a good harvest.

Gabrielle came up over the little rise that led into the village and strolled across the grass, already hearing the cries of children at play and the soft thunk of arrows being sunk into targets. “Hopefully, on opposite sides of the square, right Dor?”

“Mama?” Dori looked up at her in puzzlement. “C’n I go play?” She pointed at the crowd of children.

“Sure, honey.” The bard stroked her head. “Be careful, and be good, okay? Be nice to your friends.”

“Okay.” Dori nodded readily, and then she turned and raced off towards the playground. Her mother watched her until she reached the edge of it and was welcomed by the crowd, then she continued on towards the path that led to Ephiny’s quarters, and just to the right of them, her own.

She used them during the day to relax, and sometimes have private meetings in. However, she never stayed overnight, and grudgingly the tribe had come to understand that it really wasn’t that she didn’t like being here, it was just that she’d grown old enough to put herself first when it came to dividing up her time.

She veered towards Ephiny’s quarters and knocked her staff end against the door post in a familiar pattern.

“C’mon in, Gabrielle.” Her friend and regent’s voice floated out.

Thus invited, the bard separated the heavy bead curtain that formed the door and stepped inside. “Good morning.”

“Hey.” Ephiny was sprawled in a chair behind her work desk. “Remind me again why I did this?” She had her head resting against one hand, and her other hand over her stomach.

“Well.” The bard took a seat across from her. “Same reason I did. You wanted a baby.”

“Did you ever regret it?” Ephiny’s pale curls were almost overgrown into her eyes. “Having to deal with all the side effects?”

Gabrielle cleared her throat, and glanced out the window.

“Tell me you didn’t have side effects.”

The bard gave her an appealingly sheepish look. “It’s complicated.” She said. “It’s sort of involved with that whole thing Xena and I have. It’s not that stuff like being sick didn’t happen, it just didn’t always happen to me.”

Ephiny blinked at her.

“We sort of shared.” Gabrielle explained. “Stuff.”

“Xena got sick?”

The bard nodded. “She took it pretty well though. You know Xena. She’s tough.”

Ephiny laughed gently. “Well, anyway. So I thought you were down at the town today with the merchant train? Pony said most of the tribe was heading down there too shortly.”

“I was.” Gabrielle rested her staff across her lap. “And the train’s in. Unfortunately, it came with a bunch of Amazons. Strangers. Didn’t know us.”

Ephiny straightened up, reacting to the warning note in her friend’s voice. “Yeah?” She said. “Just visiting?”

“I wish.”

“Uh oh.” The regent rested her elbows on her knees. “Why do I have a bad feeling about this?”

**

“Well done stables.” The Amazon commented to Xena, as they walked along the path. “Beautiful animals in there.”

“Thanks.” Xena said. “Mare and stallion in there are mine. Mother and son.” She commented. “I’m not used to seeing Amazons on horseback, what’s the story there?”

“Ah.” The woman said. “And I’m Thrasia, by the way.” She held a hand out, which Xena clasped. “Our tribe, mine, and Chlea’s there, live on the plains just outside Athens. We’ve been horse riders for generations, best way to get across the land there.”

This was new to Xena. “Do you fight on horseback?”

“We do.” Chlea said. “We use battleaxes, and bows. “ She eased up so she was on Xena’s other side. “You are also well known as a horsewoman. One of my sisters saw you fight mounted once, and still tells the story.”

The warrior nodded, her steps taking her down the path to circle the back of the village, the long way to the path that led up the mountain. Behind her, the merchant train was busy setting up shop across the river, and most of the town had meandered down there leaving the paths quiet and empty.

“That’s why we were confused, when your Queen rejected the thought of joining us in the fight.” Thrasia said. “Everyone in the land, practically, has heard of you, Xena. They know of your

fighting skills. Do you truly wish to turn your back on this?"

Xena pondered the question, looking inside herself and finding no yearning at all, which rather surprised her. "I guess when you've spent as much time as I have at war, it loses its excitement." She said. "I don't see the worth in the cause, either. Athens isn't going to pay you out in land. They'll be lucky if they don't end up with Spartan overlords to pay taxes to."

"The Athenian army is large, and well armed. They are our neighbors." Chlea protested. "We know much of them. We would not otherwise consider joining with them in a fight, but we think they have a good chance of winning. But you do not?"

"I know the Spartans." Xena said. "Athens doesn't have the stomach for them. The army's good enough, but the leadership's just not there." She raised a hand and returned the wave of one of her militia, quietly standing a post on the far side of the river.

"The town posts a guard?" Thrasia had caught the motion.

"My troops." Xena replied. "They stand watch and handle any problems from outsiders."

The Amazons looked at her in silence for a moment.

Xena understood the look. They passed into the trees and the sounds of the town faded a little. She stretched her legs out a little as she started up the slope. "How many warriors are you going to send to the war?"

"That hasn't been decided yet." Chlea said. "They spoke with my Queen, and her council. We weren't given the details." She added. "It was thought that... well, I know my Queen at least was certainly looking forward to speaking with Queen Gabrielle."

"Why?" Xena asked.

"Well, you would need to ask her that." Chlea said. "It is just what she told me."

Thrasia came up even with the warrior again. "You say that Athens won't keep their promises.. how do you know that, Xena? We have lived near the capital for all the history of our tribe, and I will say that we have always had good relations with them. They have traded with us, and I have never seen them to cheat, or try to take advantage of my sisters."

"That could be true." Xena acknowledged. "But my experience with them has been different. So has Gabrielle's."

"We heard she was in the city for the last Games." Chlea commented. "Our tribe, and Thrasia's were in the far west hunting. We were sorry to have missed all the festivities."

Festivities. "We didn't really enjoy it." Xena said. "Up this way." She took the angled path into the pass, and almost smiled as the two Amazons on guard slipped forward and blocked the way, hands on swords and chobos. "Friends." She intoned, in as serious a tone as she could muster.

The guards studied them, then drew back, giving Xena little half bows.

Xena proceeded past with her little mob, catching the eye of the nearer of the two guards and winking at her. They cleared the pass and began the short climb up to the plateau, as the sun trickled through the leaves and dusted them in yellow.

"Secure approach." Chlea said. "You could hold that with a dozen fighters."

They achieved the slope and the village spread out in front of them, the big open space surrounded by its stately crown of trees where the living huts were nestled. Several Amazons were crossing to the cooking pit, a deer suspended between two staffs resting on their shoulders.

That boded well for dinner. Xena returned the greetings as she crossed over to where the

meeting hall was, her innate sense telling her that was where her partner was.

“Well favored location.” Thrasia said. “Your tribe seems prosperous, Xena.”

My tribe? Xena took a breath, then reconsidered, and inclined her head graciously. “We’ve been through a lot of hard times. It was due.” She paused to listen before the hall entrance, then she pushed the door open, hearing the soft voice calling her name just at the edges of her ability to detect it.

Meaning none of the others would have heard.

Inside, Gabrielle was seated at the council table, with Ephiny and Eponin on either side of her, and several of the other senior Amazons along with a few of the elders scattered around. Behind the table, two guards stood in somber silence, though one of them caught Xena’s eye and briefly grinned.

The warrior lifted a hand in a faint greeting to Cait, and proceeded down the middle aisle, circling the table and patting her partner on the shoulder as she took up a position just near the back window, to one side of the guards, on a sturdy, high bench set up specifically for her.

“Thanks, Xe.” Gabrielle greeted her warmly. “They almost set up down there?”

“Almost.” Xena replied.

The bard turned her attention to their visitors. “You are welcome here in our village.” She said. “Please, take a seat. Quarters are being prepared for you.”

Chlea looked around, then sat on one of the well made benches at the front of the hall. “Thank you, Queen Gabrielle. We are very happy to find ourselves here in such a nice place among our sisters after spending so many days on the road with strangers. We really appreciate the hospitality.”

Gabrielle smiled. “Anytime.” She inclined her head. “This is my regent, Ephiny, and her partner and our weapons master, Eponin.” She introduced her tablemates. “They were interested to hear of your experiences, and had some questions.”

Xena leaned back against the wall, content to let the Amazons deal with the other Amazons, and suspecting that’s exactly what her partner was doing as well. Gabrielle was undoubtedly a fine negotiator, and a skilled communicator, but when it came to the inner workings of Amazon society and traditions she was the first to step back and let the experts have a go.

“So, excuse me a moment, I’ll let you get on with it.” Gabrielle stood up. “I think we’re all going to go down to see what the market holds for us, but we’d love to host you for dinner here this evening.” She glanced over at Renas, one of the elders. “Want to come up here? I know you had some questions too.”

The elder stepped up with out hesitation and Gabrielle dropped back, giving up her place and scooting over to where Xena was perched, confirming the warrior’s suspicions. “Hey.”

“Hey.” Xena smiled as the bard eased between her knees and leaned against the bench. “Some interesting things showed up in the train.” She said, without preamble. “Flotsam off a wreck from Chin, apparently.”

She felt Gabrielle’s reaction before the bard’s expression even changed. The body touching her stiffened and the muscles on either side of Gabrielle’s mouth twitched. “So that was the jolt I felt from you earlier.”

The warrior inclined her head. “Didn’t expect to see that stuff showing up here.” She admitted. “But it’s trade goods. Silk. Some carved ivory.”

“Ah.” Gabrielle relaxed. “A shipwreck?”

“That’s what they said.” Xena glanced past her, as the chatter covered their conversation. “No survivors.”

Gabrielle was silent for a long moment, her eyes searching Xena’s face. Shadows of their joined past flickered between them, but after a breath, the bard leaned forward against Xena’s body, wordlessly seeking comfort.

Xena circled her with both arms and gave her a hug. “Guy was going to give me a carved box as a gift. I turned it down.”

Gabrielle gently kissed her on the cheek. Then she straightened a little, glancing over her shoulder at the small crowd with a mildly abashed expression. “I really didn’t need to head back up here.” She uttered softly. “Though I think everyone was kinda flattered that I did. The minute I said fight, and Athens they were all over it saying no way.”

“I figured.” Xena said. “But it pays to be sure. Aside from being idiots, they’re not a bad bunch.”

“Xena.” Gabrielle chuckled softly.

“I meant the ones from Athens.” Her partner clarified. “They still don’t get why we don’t want any part of their fight.”

“They shouldn’t want any part of their fight.” The bard retorted. “They just don’t know what they’re getting into.” She half turned in the circle of Xena’s arms and watched the group around the table. Ephiny had stood up and was leaning on both hands, shaking her head.

Eponin was scowling. Renas merely had her arms folded, and a skeptical look on her face.

“Wanna go swimming?”

Gabrielle immediately felt strongly attracted to the idea. “And abandon all the stuff we have to do today?” She reminded her partner, who merely looked back at her with those twinkling baby blues. “Xena. You just don’t want to go shopping with me.”

Xena chuckled softly under her breath. “We should be careful.” She said, her expression shifting to something more serious. “We don’t want word getting back to Athens we’re here sitting on resources or building our own army again.”

Gabrielle studied her face. “You think they’d come here after us?”

“They might.”

“You think they’ll come here after you.” The bard restated. “They wanted you badly, Xe.”

Her partner nodded slowly. “Put that with the stories that might have gotten out about us sitting on piles of gems or gold.. I don’t mind fighting off a pack of scroungy raiders but I don’t want the Athenian army showing up on our doorstep.”

“Definitely not.” Gabrielle agreed. “So what do we do? These women already have a loyalty to Athens.”

“They do.” Xena murmured, watching the Amazons with hooded eyes.

“Can we stand by here, and let this happen?” Gabrielle watched the sharp angles of her partner’s face shift, as the intent gaze move from the Amazons to her.

“We both almost died trying to stop this once already, Gabrielle. You really think we owe them another round?”

The bard held her eyes steadily. “Not for their sake. For ours.”

The warrior's brows arched a bit. She looked at the Amazons, then gave her head a half shake. "No matter which way this goes, there's going to be trouble." She gave Gabrielle a little scratch on the back. "That's about the only thing I'm sure of right now."

**

Continued in Part 2

A Queen's Tale

Part 2

Gabrielle gazed into the heart of the cookfire, a mug cradled in her hands and a pensive look on her face. Around her the Amazons were gathered in groups enjoying dinner, served outside near the pit to avoid the summer heat inside the gathering hall.

She was tired. It had been a long, full day; the market had turned out to be a general success, and she'd gotten a few luxuries she was looking forward to sharing with her soulmate once they got back to the cabin later on.

Ephiny had already retired, the early stages of her pregnancy knocking her out. Gabrielle tried to remember if she'd been affected that way, but it was hard because they'd been involved with that war, and the city, and one of Xena's old soldiers.

She sort of remembered being more tired than usual, but they were on the road traveling so it could have gone either way. In any case, she didn't grudge the rest to her friend, and was happy enough to spend the evening under the stars with bellyful of relatively tasty venison stew and some of the market's fresh cheese with sweet bread to chase it down with.

Her senses caught Xena's presence, and she turned her head to watch her partner approach, the warrior's distinctive, sexy walk drawing more eyes than hers as she approached the slightly raised platform Gabrielle was seated on.

Xena had changed into her leathers, the dark blue hide hugging her lithe frame and the well made boots altering her pace just enough to be noticeable. She'd left her armor in the cabin, but tied her hair back and added the charming touch of an armband that had Gabrielle's token dangling from it.

Even after everything, that made her heart skip a beat, and the bard smiled as her partner joined her on the platform, dropping into the next chair and handing over a plate. "Whatcha got there?"

"They're trying a new kind of honeycake, and they were too chicken to ask you to pass judgement on it." Xena informed her.

"So they asked you?" Gabrielle asked, her voice rising in astonishment.

"No." Xena folded her hands over her stomach. "I just went in and took some because it smelled good and figured I'd bring you back a plate too."

"Pirate." Gabrielle broke off a corner of the cake and tasted it. "Mm. Not bad." She went back for more. "And they were scared to bring this over? What's up with that?"

"Your cooking skills intimidate them."

Gabrielle paused in mid chew, and gave her partner a dire look.

Xena lifted both hands, turning them upright, then putting them back down on her belly. Then she turned her head as Pony came up on the other side of her chair, and leaned on it. "How's Eph?"

"I think that stuff you gave her helped." Pony looked as relieved as her partner probably felt. "So

what do you think about those guys?" She indicated the visiting Amazons, who were near the fire, with a group of their own tribe. "They're all hot to go to war."

Xena turned her head. "What do you think about them?" She returned the question.

Pony went down on one knee and rested her elbow on the chair arm. "I was talking to them, you know? I thought maybe they were just nuts, because Xena, I've been to war. The real kind."

"I know." The warrior glanced sideways at her. "I led you into it."

Pony nodded. "But we went, because we trusted you and her Maj." She looked past Xena at Gabrielle's quiet profile. "We knew there was bad stuff going on, and that it would be hard, and people would get hurt, and die, but we also knew we were there for the right reason."

"Not this time." Xena shook her head. "This time, it's just war for the sake of war." She lifted her hands and interlaced her fingers. "But those other Amazons we got to fight with us, they though the same thing we're thinking about these guys, didn't they?"

Pony considered that, then she shook her head. "Not the same." She disagreed. "They just thought we were crazy, and you were going to go out in a blaze of glory with everyone dying around you."

Xena looked over at her, both eyebrows hiking.

"We knew it wasn't. Because we know you and her Maj." Pony continued, unruffled. "But I guess I see what they are saying because they think they know those guys in Athens, like they're neighbors and all that."

Xena looked thoughtful. "We were in Athens."

"Yeah, right?" Pony nodded again. "So we sorta know more about what that's all about than they do, but you can't just go say that, you know? Like, oh, well, we know it's all a scam because we know the God of War is behind it all and stuff like that. People look at you funny when you say stuff like that."

Xena chuckled wryly. "Ya got a point, Pony." She agreed. "They do."

"They've got a lot of people sucked into that." Pony said. "I was talking to that Chlea and it's ten tribes. I didn't know there were that many down there."

"Lot of things down that way have changed. We saw that when we were traveling back from Athens here." Xena said. "We thought we saw signs of Amazons, but we didn't want to call attention to ourselves so we ducked around them." She was aware that Gabrielle was now listening, the bard's ear visibly twitching in the next chair.

"Kinda sucks if they all get pulled in." Pony said. "But on the other hand, maybe if they don't get into the stuff with Athens, they'll come after us up here. You get too many warriors in one area, sure as Hades they're gonna start sparring with each other."

Delightfully pragmatic. "Good point." Xena leaned her elbow on the chair arm. "Maybe they've got the same itch Athens does."

"So you think it's okay for them to just go marching off to get killed?" Gabrielle spoke up, resting her mug on the chair arm and regarding her platform neighbors.

Pony shrugged a little. "It's their game."

The bard exhaled. "That's true." She admitted. "But I'm not sure I can sit here and not try to stop them."

Neither Xena nor Pony looked particularly surprised at the statement. Gabrielle herself wasn't

particularly surprised to hear it coming out of her mouth. Most of the entire last decade of her life had been spent sticking her nose into everyone else's business and she figured at this stage she probably wasn't expected to change much by her friends and family around her.

But did she really want to go down to Athens and try to convince people not to do what they passionately wanted to do? There was, she'd discovered, such a thing as lost causes, and she remembered how hard they'd tried to subvert Ares' plans the last time only to end up almost walking right into a trap.

Gabrielle studied Xena's profile. No, be truthful, Gabrielle. You did walk into it. He played us both to perfection. He got exactly what he wanted. She watched the pale eyes, amber tinged in the firelight turn and meet hers with an emotional impact that almost made her breath stop.

I got exactly what I wanted too, though, didn't I? Gabrielle reached over and clasped the warrior's arm, feeling her skin warm under her touch. "We should get everyone together tomorrow and talk about it."

Xena cocked her head to one side, and one eyebrow edged upward in a skeptical expression.

"Queen Gabrielle."

The bard turned her attention from its current fascination to the young Amazon in front of her. "Yes, Aalene?" She smiled at the woman, remembering the long hot night she'd given birth, a crossroad on their journey with the Amazons as the baby was born into Xena's skilled hands.

"We were just telling our guests about the last war, but I can't do it justice. Would you?" Aalene asked. "It's always so much more real when you tell it."

Hm. "Sure." Gabrielle set her mug down and stood up, running her hands through her hair as she walked down from the platform over to where there was a cleared spot just to one side of the firepit. Her presence was immediately recognized, and bodies shifted, coming around from the other side of the fire and gathering where they could see her.

Amazons loved stories. Gabrielle hadn't quite realized how much until she'd gotten to spend a lot more time with them now that they lived just down the slope. It was a rare night when she wasn't asked to display her storytelling skills and she'd learned she could polish her gorier stories on them where she couldn't do so in the town below.

Different audience. She liked that. As she waited for the crowd to settle down she stretched out her body and shook off the after dinner sleepiness as she sorted through the number of stories she had about the war, deciding what to tell.

It was warm out, and she half wished she was in her old traveling gear, or her Amazon leathers instead of the staid tunic she'd worn to the market and then not bothered to change out of when she came back up the mountain for dinner.

She was sweating, a little. Her mind drifted a little, to the thought of the deep spring in the back of their cabin where she and Xena would slip out to and cool off by starlight sometimes. Maybe they would tonight. She glanced over at her partner, seeing the faint knowing smile on her face and she plucked at her tunic, sticking her tongue out a little.

Xena made tiny swimming motions with her hands, then she lifted her index finger and made a whirling gesture with it.

"Okay." Gabrielle flexed her hands, as the conversation stilled. "We'll make this a short story, since we've had a busy day. So I'll tell you about how a great army walked into a trap, and how by working together we won a war that ended right down in the town of Amphipolis."

Xena settled back to listen, extending her long legs out and crossing her ankles. Pony settled down cross legged on the platform, and they both accepted fresh mugs from a tray being passed

around.

“That was pretty cool.” Pony said. “Coming up behind those guys and nailing them.”

“Plan worked.” Xena agreed, taking a sip of the cool ale, from barrels they’d stored in a cool cave just down the slope. The outer wall was part of the bed of the same cold stream that started in the spring up by their cabin and it provided an escape from the heat during the day.

“Know what Eph liked the most about that whole thing?” Pony said.

“Not having to mess with the horses?” Xena smiled.

“Yeah, that.” The weapons master agreed. “But no, she really liked being one of the only people who knew the whole deal.”

Gabrielle started her story, the bard’s rich voice filling the glade as the crowd all leaned forward to listen. Xena watched their visitors, who seemed a little surprised. “You and Eph were the only ones we could tell. Everyone else was just a doublecross waiting to happen.”

They listened to Gabrielle, the bard’s voice becoming warmer and more animated as she described what her mind’s eye was seeing, her hands reaching and shaping forms as they helped her express her feelings.

Standing there in front of the fire, the warm golden light outlining her body, she had transformed completely from her role of Queen into what Xena had come to understand was her native persona as a storyteller, this facet of her most closely expressing the truth of who Gabrielle was.

Xena regarded the crowd, catching the visiting Amazons leaning together and whispering. She studied their faces, then relaxed as she detected mostly intrigue there.

No one in the tribe was interested in joining in on the war. Xena’s sharp ears had picked that up without any effort during dinner, though the Amazons had been polite to their guests, the general consensus was that they were nuts.

Xena didn’t think they were nuts, she thought their tribes were restless, maybe a little cramped in their plains home if there were that many tribes around, and probably had a bunch of younger warriors just itching to make their feathers.

Personally, she was of a mind to let them go do what they wanted, and let what was going to happen, happen. She had no attachment to the greater Amazon nation, just to this specific portion of it, and if tribes who might at some point decide to come after them got wiped out?

Well, they did. It happened. Xena took a sip of her ale, acknowledging how cold, but how true to her own nature that was.

Gabrielle, on the other hand, her still idealistic, great hearted soulmate probably had other ideas.

“And then, just as all seemed lost, a signal was given, and between the rocks of the pass there came a thunder, a sound so loud it drowned out even the hammering heartbeats and the screams of battle.”

Xena suspected she’d find out what those ideas were sooner, rather than later.

**

“This feels wonderful.” Gabrielle floated peacefully in the spring, the cool water soaking the day’s frustrations from her bones. The moonlight lit the water’s surface with silver, and all around her she could hear the faint sounds of nature going about it’s nocturnal business.

A faint ripple rocked her, and she turned her head to see Xena joining her in the spring, the

warrior's bare body rippled in moonlight and shadow. Gabrielle waited for her to swim over, then she reached out and curled her hand around Xena's neck, pulling her closer and rolling half over in the water to kiss her.

Xena bowed her head willingly, one arm slipping over Gabrielle's hip while her body curled up around the bard, displacing the cool water with body heat.

It felt very good. Gabrielle wrapped her arms around Xena's neck as they turned slowly in the water, savoring the teasing touch of Xena's hand making its way up her body. The combination of the sensual tweaking and the feeling of near weightlessness sent a flush across her skin. "Mm."

Xena chuckled softly, deep in her throat. "Glad this day's over."

Gabrielle kissed her again, moving closer and running her hand slowly down Xena's belly. She felt the muscles contract under her fingertips, sensitive to the touch and smiled as a reciprocal warmth made her own guts clench.

Their bed would certainly have been a more comfortable spot for this. Gabrielle nibbled down Xena's collarbone as she felt her partner's hand gently cup her breast and tease it. But there was something about being out in the wild surrounded by the quiet sounds of nature that really turned her on.

Xena's hand cupped the inside of her thigh and she relaxed her tensed muscles, letting her knees part and welcoming the warmth as Xena's leg slid between hers.

Cold and warm. She released a soft, guttural sound as Xena half turned, taking hold with one hand to something to keep them in place and bringing them belly to belly as their lips met again and the gentle stroking began to get a little more insistent.

Gabrielle could feel the welcome tension begin to build in her as Xena's touch became intimate, and she heard the taller woman growl as she kept pace, working to keep them in synch as a hot flush of passion made the cool water simply vanish.

Now it was just them, just the heat, and the knowing touches and the desire that flooded both of them as they clamped hold of each other, riding a rolling, shuddering wave that sent ripples to the very edge of the spring.

Gabrielle was breathing hard as she felt her body slow its convulsions, as Xena relaxed, and their stroking gentled and eased. She exhaled into a faint chuckle, then she wrapped her arms around her partner as Xena rolled onto her back.

It felt wonderful, just to relax together in sated contentment, catching their breaths. Gabrielle inhaled deeply, feeling her body press against her partner's as Xena curled her arm around her waist and hugged her closer.

She closed her eyes, resting her head against Xena's collarbone. "We're nuts."

"Yup."

"Do you care?"

"Nope."

"Me either." Gabrielle tried to call up all the things she wanted to talk to Xena about from the day and utterly failed. With a shrug, she concentrated on the rich mineral scent of the water, and the intoxicating warmth of her partner's skin instead, reasoning that whatever the issues were, there would always be tomorrow to resolve them.

Hades with it.

**

Xena quietly watched the outline of the window very slowly become visible in the faint gray of pre dawn. In truth, this was her favorite time of day, before anything was stirring when she could lay in bed, with Gabrielle curled up against her and just be happy.

Not that her life during the rest of the day was bad. It had settled down into an acceptable mix of activity tucked into periods of lazy summer peace. But those minutes before dawn didn't require her to be anywhere, or do anything other than in bed and be in love and she liked it.

Life had come around to being all right again.

Must be pissing the Fates off. Xena shifted a little so she could look down at her sleeping soulmate, limp as a dishrag next to her.

In her sleep, Gabrielle stirred, one hand reaching out suddenly, stopping when it hit Xena's hip, then draping over it. Her body relaxed again and a faint smile appeared on her face.

Xena smiled back. She gently rubbed a bit of Gabrielle's pale hair between her fingertips, idly wondering what her partner was dreaming about, the faint motion of her eyes under their lids betraying her.

A happy, peaceful dream, the norm now for her.

For both of them. Xena recalled the one she'd recently woken from, a zany and colorful romp that had involved a donkey in a hat, and her mother chasing them around the kitchen with her rolling pin. It had made no sense at all, but she remembered laughing so long and hard in it her stomach had hurt.

She was beginning to be able to see her life from a different perspective. Watching Dori the other day, realizing how big her daughter was getting brought home to her the fact that she was, in fact building a successful family relationship with Gabrielle; something that at one time she regarded as impossible.

So many long nights they had both suffered through, so sharp the fracture, so vivid the anger, so painful the heartbreak.

She was beginning to believe they were past that now. She was older, the years separating her from that always angry past. Gabrielle had grown up and grown into a more mature set of ideals and gotten a handle on her sometimes impulsive temper.

What they'd gone through would never be forgotten by either of them, and that was a good thing. Xena knew those memories tempered everything they said and did with each other, their current happiness all the more intense for them knowing the opposite.

So. Xena breathed in a lungful of the sweet summer air, catching a hint of rain on the breeze, and the far off smell of bruised vegetation. What would this war bring them? She wasn't silly enough to believe it would pass them by and in fact, she was a little surprised Gabrielle hadn't brought the subject up the night before.

She thought about that, then smiled. Okay, maybe she wasn't that surprised.

A soft piping sounded outside. The soft light was growing a little stronger, making the inside of the cabin somberly visible.

They had finished it, since they'd come home. The furniture was finished, and the walls decorated with woven mats and a colorful throw rug. The fireplace had its stone mantel, and it was fitted out with iron cooking pots and Gabrielle's various knives and tools and spoons.

The big bearskin rug was there, and a matching one graced the floor in Dori's room, and the windows had light hemp covers they could draw down that let the breeze in but kept any wandering eyes out.

It was a little wild. There was a big curved sword, captured from one of the mercenaries in the last war up on the wall, and staves and armor were scattered all over, blatant advertisement that the occupants of the place weren't quite domesticated.

Xena liked it. She felt comfortable here in a way she never had before, even down in Amphipolis in the first cabin they'd lived in. There were furs draped over the furniture, and an Amazon mask on the wall, and most of the time a wolf was curled up near the fire, completing the exotic picture.

She felt Gabrielle start to stir, and she looked down, to find her partner's eyes half open, gazing up at her with a sleepily contented look. "Good morning."

"The best morning." The bard corrected her. "I love waking up with you in bed."

Xena's eyes twinkled a little. "You're very good for my ego." She gently pushed Gabrielle's hair back.

"You think I'm kidding?" Her partner asked.

"No." Xena laid her palm against Gabrielle's cheek, and watched her eyes close as she leaned into the touch. "What were you dreaming about?"

Gabrielle's lashes fluttered open. "Fishing."

"Fishing?"

The bard nodded. "You and me and Dori were out somewhere in some pond in some forest chasing and catching fish." She pillowed her head on Xena's stomach and exhaled. "Maybe I'm getting that itch again."

Xena chuckled softly.

"I think I want to go and try to talk those crazy Amazons out of going to war, Xe." The bard said. "I don't think I can sit here and not at least attempt it."

Xena watched her face, seeing a frown forming there. "But?"

"I can't just walk away from the Amazons here." Gabrielle said. "I promised Ephiny, and the only person I could really ask to take my place – since she can't – is you."

Xena searched the ceiling intently. "Gabrielle, you are not suggesting that you want me to run the Amazons. Are you?"

Gabrielle exhaled again. "I didn't say that. I said you were the only one I could ask." She ran the edge of her thumb along one of Xena's ribs. "I know you wouldn't want to and for that matter, I don't want to go without you." She paused. "I just don't know what to do."

Xena let her hand rest on Gabrielle's hip. "Sweetheart." She said, in as gentle a voice as she could manage with the thought of running the Amazons rattling around in her head. "There is no way in Hades I would let you go to Athens by yourself."

Gabrielle's lips quirked.

"And even if I was demented enough to, the minute you got into trouble I'd toss the Amazons ass over feathers anyway."

"I know." Gabrielle didn't even feel a twinge of resentment. Xena was only telling her the truth, and they both knew it. It didn't pay for her to get pissed off, or to complain that Xena was treating her like a child.

She wasn't. She was treating Gabrielle like she was her beloved soulmate. How was she supposed to be upset about that? She would do the same thing, and it was silly to pretend otherwise.

But that didn't really fix her problem. Gabrielle watched Xena's ribs rise and fall. Maybe she should just let it be. Stay out of it for a change. "It's a silly rule, anyway." She said. "I stayed Queen of the Amazons when I was pregnant. I even rescued the damned Amazons when I was pregnant."

"I remember." Xena mused. "But we were both pretty damned emotional, Gabrielle. I can see the Amazon's point."

"What's wrong with being emotional?" The bard asked, reasonably. "It didn't stop me from making some hard decisions."

"True." Xena nodded. "But you're an emotional person. "

Gabrielle's face crinkled into a wry expression. "Well, that's true too." She exhaled. "Let me talk to Eph about it. See what we can come up with." She reached out and grasped Xena's hand. "I'm sure we can work something out." She kissed the warrior's palm.

Probably they could. Xena glanced up to where the dawn was breaking in earnest, the pinkish gray light flooding the inside of the cabin. "Better get the water on." She said. "Our child will be rambling in here any minute wanting her breakfast."

Gabrielle smiled. "I'm going to teach her to cook." She informed her partner. "I am not going to be the only one in this family who knows how to do that."

"Lucky me." Xena smiled charmingly.

"Wench." Gabrielle chuckled and rolled out of the bed, stretching her body out with a grunt and grabbing one of her shifts draped over the end of it. She tugged it on over her head and headed for the cookfire.

Xena relaxed for a moment more, then she followed suit, standing up and reaching for one of the roof supports, catching with her fingers and letting her weight hang just long enough to pop her shoulders into place. "Ow."

She went to the press and removed a shift of her own, putting it on just as her sharp ears heard the first rustlings of motion in Dori's room. "Look out."

"I hear her." Gabrielle poured water from the pitcher she'd set by the previous evening into a pot and set it on the iron grate over the fire, kneeling to stir some life into the coals and add a hunk of wood to feed it. "Want some eggs for breakfast?"

"Sure." Xena looked up from washing her face. "We have some?"

"Mmhm." Gabrielle opened the top of a basket and peered inside. "Eggs, which I'll poach, and some bread and cheese. Sound good?"

"Mama!" Dori pattered out, her dark hair sticking out in all directions. "I saw a owl outside!"

"Did you, honey?" Gabrielle was setting a pot on the fire. "A big one? Did it ask you who you were?"

"Yes!" Dori "He said Hoo! Hoo!"

Xena circled the chairs and picked her daughter up, carrying her into the bathing room. "How about we make you not look like a porcupine. You up for that?" She set Dori in the big tub and stuck her hand in the pitchers of water, glad to find them luke warm. "Ready to be a fishie?"

Dori looked up at her and grinned widely. "Boo, will you take me to catch fishies today?"

Xena removed the child's shift and set it aside. "I have to see what your mama's going to be up to, but we could go catch fishes, Dor a little later."

Dori frowned. "Now!"

"Aren't you a demanding little thing." Xena washed Dori's head, as the child giggled and closed her eyes against the stream of water. She put the pitcher down and picked up one of the rough linen towels, drying Dori off. "Let's get some breakfast, then we'll see about fishies."

Dori threw her arms around Xena and hugged her. "I love you Boo."

"I love you too, munchkin." Xena ruffled her hair dry. "C'mon." She put Dori's shirt back on then picked her up out of the tub and set her on the ground. She followed her back into the main part of the cabin, where Gabrielle was busy with a knife and some wooden plates.

She joined the bard near the fireplace and stole a piece of cheese from the cutting board, breaking it in half and handing a portion down to Dori before she could take a breath to squeal for it. "If Athens starts conscripting the merchant trains, we need a backup plan to prepare for winter."

"You think they will?"

"If it were me, and I was in charge, I would." Xena said. "They'll need all the supplies they can get. The only thing we're gonna see is a lot of what was in that merchant train down there."

Gabrielle stirred the slowly boiling eggs. "So." She said. "If we stock up, and have a good harvest, what's to keep them from coming here and conscripting that? The only thing we're exempt from is people."

"I'll keep them from conscripting that." Xena stole another piece of cheese. "Last thing they need is to get any part of their forces tied up with some crazy has been warlord down in Thrace." She picked up the plate of cheese and bread Gabrielle had finished cutting and turned to put it on the table. "Not worth the grain."

She lifted Dori up into the high chair furthest from the fire, and took a seat next to her. "Ready for breakfast, Dor?"

"Yes." Dori drummed her hands on the table. "Boo, ever'body's going to go catch fishes and in the woods. I can go too."

"Yeah? Who's everybody? All your friends in the town with Grandma?" Xena sorted out Dori's portion and handed it over, along with her little cup full of cider.

Dori shook her head as she manhandled her bread. "Feather peoples."

"Ahh." Gabrielle brought the finished eggs over and sat down. "Hold on, Dori. Let me give you your egg, okay?" She quickly peeled the shell off and, using her knife, cut the medium boiled object in to slices. "They're going to take the kids and do a forest class tomorrow."

"Ah."

"Not too far, just in the back section." Gabrielle handed over two eggs to her partner, and accepted a cup of cider in return. "I think it's safe for her to go."

"I think it's safe for her to go, but probably not safe for the egos of the people teaching the class." Xena added a slice of egg to her cheese and munched her impromptu sandwich. "When she starts correcting them and throws my name in a few times, you're gonna hear about it."

Gabrielle chuckled. "Yeah. I know. But that's all right. I'll survive." She watched her daughter try to emulate her, balancing a slice of cheese on her bread. "Good girl, Dori."

Dori looked up at her, and grinned widely. Then she took a bite of her breakfast, spraying crumbs on the floor. "

“You can go with your friends, honey.” Gabrielle continued. “Just be careful, and be good. Okay?”

“Okay.” Dori agreed. “Mama, can I take Guff? I hear him outside.” She scrambled off the chair without waiting for an answer, rambling over to the door and tugging it open. “Guff?”

“Is it really him?” Gabrielle murmured. “I didn’t hear a damn thing.”

“Uh huh.” Xena took a swallow of cider.

There was a patter of toenails and Ares trotted in, his tongue lolling out. He went immediately over to Xena, who greeted him with a scratch of his hears. “Hey boy. “

Dori came after her friend, throwing her arms around him and hugging him. “Guff! You get to come wif me to have fun today!”

Ares set to work cleaning up all the crumbs under Dori’s chair and the child climbed back up into it to resume her breakfast.

Gabrielle watched her indulgently, enjoying the normality of the morning. Dori was always entertainment for them, and it provided a nice way to start the day together. From the corner of her eye she saw Xena drop a piece of egg on the floor for the wolf, and she prodded her partner’s hand. “Xeeena.”

“Ggaaabbbrielle.” Xena grinned engagingly, knowing she’d been caught. “C’mon, he’s part of the family too, and he’s hungry.”

Familiar argument. Gabrielle mock exasperatedly shook a finger at her, then she went back to finish her food before anyone got the idea to send it the wolf’s way too. After a moment, she looked up, catching Xena watching their daughter with a look of gentle, bemused affection.

It tugged at her heart, as it always did. It felt a little strange, to feel this normal, to have day after day of them just living their lives, going through the various trials and tribulations.

Laughing. Sometimes a little exasperated. “Xe?”

“Mm?” Her partner turned her head and looked over at her. “I’m going to send some scouts out along the way towards Athens. See if they see anything, or hear anything going on.”

“Have you talked to the merchant train leader?”

“Not yet.” The warrior finished her plate, then got up and took it over to the washing basin. “Wanted to let them settle down. I’ll visit them afterwards. You going to go do your Amazon Queen thing?”

“Yep.” Gabrielle got her plate, and Doris and brought them over to where Xena was washing up. “I’m going to get those visiting Amazons into my quarters up there and have a private talk with them. Maybe I can give them something to take back with them that could get their leaders to at least ask some questions.”

Xena snorted.

“Honey, I gotta do something.” Gabrielle gave her a kiss on the shoulder. “Come on back up when you’re done down in the town? We had a council meeting scheduled for today to talk about winter. I’d like your. um...”

“Intimidating influence?” Xena bumped her with her hip. “Sure. G’wan and take the terror with you. See you up there later.”

Gabrielle put her arms around Xena and hugged her hard. Then she released her, and collected Dori. “C’mon Doriboo. Let’s you and I get dressed and go find your friends. You can help mama pick out what color to wear today, okay?”

Xena chuckled as they retreated to the garment press. She whistled softly under her breath, enjoying the simple tasks and pondering her approach to the merchants. Friendly militia leader? “Nah.” She shook her head. “Time to put the armor on and shake em up a little.”

**

Gabrielle strolled across the big center square, Dori’s hand clasped firmly in hers. The morning sun had just cleared the trees and it felt good on the back of her shoulders as she amiably glanced around the village.

There were women clustered over near the cooking area, and two patrols getting ready to go out. Other than that, it seemed quiet. “Now remember, Dori. You have to be good and listen to the nice people taking you out in to the forest, Okay?”

“Okay.” Dori agreed.

“You’re not going to run away and make them scared, are you?”

Dori eyed her. “No, mama.”

“Okay.” Gabrielle steered them both over to the teaching hut, where she could see activity as the group was gathering. “Morning, Solari.”

The dark haired Amazon glanced up from where she was kneeling next to her pack. “Oh, hey. Good morning.” She waved at them. “Dori ready for her first class in hunting?”

“Mama! My friends in there!” Dori pointed at the hut. “C’n I go?”

The bard released her. “Go ahead, and be good.” She watched her daughter trot inside, then turned her attention to Solari. “Are you all ready for your first lesson from her?” She asked, wryly. “She’s been going out with Xena for a while.”

Solari wrinkled her nose. “Yeah, I kinda figured. But we’ll try to teach her a few tricks anyhow.” She admitted. “I’m looking forward to it. Be good to get out of the crowd for a while.”

Gabrielle swiveled around, then looked back at her. “This is crowded?”

“I’m staying in the big hut.” Solari said. “It gets really noisy in there.”

“Ah.” Gabrielle put her hands on her hips. “Solari, you’re a senior warrior. Why are you in the group hut? You should have your own digs.”

Solari stood up slowly, wrapping a snare into a small ball. “Well.” She glanced around. “It’s always been sort of like, you stay in the big hut until you partner out, then you get a single.” She said. “Pony lived in the dorm until she and Eph hooked up.”

Gabrielle considered that. “I’m not sure that makes sense to me.” She finally said. “We have plenty of space here. I think I’ll change that tradition and give people an option.”

Solari grinned suddenly. “Really?”

“Sure.” The bard turned around and gestured. The village really was tucked into one corner of the big plateau, the other three sides wide and open as they faded off into the forested distance. It was roughly five or six times the size of their previous location. “Look at this place. You could give every single person their own place and still have plenty of room.”

Solari took a step closer. “You know, we were talking about that the other day.” She said. “About how we got so much land here. But I think everyone’s still sorta adjusting.”

Gabrielle nodded. “I know. It’s a new world for all of us.” She exhaled. “Take care of my terror. Give me a yell if she starts giving you too much grief and I’ll send Xena over to give you a hand.”

“No problem.” Solari said.

The bard waved, and then she headed back towards the gathering hall, where she could see a knot of familiar faces in front of the door.

She watched their body posture, and her bard trained senses pricked immediately, picking up definite tension in the group. Her years of gauging audiences came into good service, and she angled into the sunlight, catching their attention and waiting for the reaction.

Uh oh. Even from where she was, Gabrielle could see the widening eyes and mouthed curses. “Now what.” She picked up her pace and closed in on the group, keeping her eye on them and daring them to run. “Good morning.”

“Ah. Good morning, your majesty.” Renas mumbled.

“Your Majesty.” Selene murmured.

“Good morning.” Aalene put her hands behind her back and fell silent.

Gabrielle looked from one to the other, then she let one eyebrow hike up.

The three Amazons gazed apprehensively back at her.

“Okay.” The bard said. “What’s going on?”

“What makes you think something’s going on?” Renas, as the eldest and a elder answered.

“I have a child.” Gabrielle responded. “And you all are acting just like her when she’s snitched my nutbread.”

The two younger Amazons edged back, leaving Renas facing Gabrielle.

“Chickens.” Renas muttered. Then she exhaled. “Um. Seems like our guests left early. Real early. As in, before it got light early.”

Gabrielle indicated the opening to the gathering hall. “Okay.” She followed Renas inside. “Well, I would have liked to talk with them, but I guess they wanted to get on their way since they didn’t get what they wanted here.”

Renas grunted.

“And?” Gabrielle fished.

Renas kept facing away from her as they walked slowly up the aisle towards the head of the room.

“Renas?”

The elder paused, and turned. “Ephiny and Eponin went with them.”

Gabrielle felt her body chill with shock, then flush as she started breathing again. “What?”

Renas perched on the bench before the raised table. She braced her hands on the surface and looked up at the queen. “They left with em.” She repeated. “I guess.. well, Eph said she figured if she didn’t go you would, and maybe she could talk those fools out of fighting.”

The bard felt like she was a little short of breath, so profoundly was she stunned by the news. She slowly walked around the table and sat down in the chair behind it, resting her elbows on the arms and steepling her fingers. “Okay.”

“That’s why Eph went. Pony went because she said she was damned if she was the one who was gonna have to face you when you found out.”

Gabrielle managed a brief smile. "I'm so glad I inspire so much terror." She remarked dryly. "Did I grow horns somewhere no one's mentioned to me yet?"

"Well." Renas cocked her head a little. "You do have a temper."

She did. Gabrielle pressed her fingertips against her lips, falling silent so she could gather her wits. She felt betrayed, in addition to surprised, that Ephiny would choose to up and leave without a word to her about it.

She thought about that for a while. Did Ephiny owe her explanations? Her eyes flicked to Renas face, as the elder sat quietly watching her. Had she ever consulted her regent before she'd done whatever it was she wanted to do?

Would she have let Ephiny go?

Did she have the right to stop her?

"She figured you'd tie her to a tree." Renas said, finally. "Crazy idea, I thought."

"That' I'd tie her to a tree?" The bard asked.

"Going." The elder shook her head. "Fools' errand. Those women don't have the sense Artemis gave a grasshopper. Mind's only on one thing, gold." Her face wrinkled. "Get as old as I am, you realize a cellar full in winter's worth a hell of a lot more than yellow dirt."

"Hm."

Renas studied her face. "You mad?"

"Disappointed, I think." Gabrielle responded honestly. "That Eph didn't think she could trust me." She looked up as the beads rustled, and Solari entered. The dark haired Amazon was breathing a little hard, and she came right down the aisle towards where the bard was sitting. "Trouble?"

"Just heard about Eph and Pony. You want me to go after them?" Solari asked without hesitation. "They musta lost their feather plucking minds. I knew preggers made you crazy, but I didn't think it made you that crazy."

It was a funny feeling. Gabrielle wondered if she'd somehow crossed some line somewhere and gone from being a respected, if somewhat marginal outsider in the tribe to assuming this regal role and having it accepted.

Solari was, in fact, treating her as the queen. Not as Gabrielle. "Let's call a council and discuss it." She said. "They're both grown women, and I want Xena here to get her take on it."

Solari nodded after a brief pause. "Okay, I'm going to get back to the kids. Yell if you need anything." She turned and made her way out of the hall, nodding at the group of Amazons entering.

They were whispering, and Gabrielle figured the word was passing quickly. That was all right, she figured, since it saved her the time of having to tell everyone. "I'm going to go to my quarters for a minute." She got up. "Tell everyone we'll meet back here in a candlemark. We've got a lot of talk about."

Renas studied her. "Will do, your Maj." She agreed. "Give everyone time to get a cup of tea into them and find their wits, at any rate." She waited for Gabrielle to head for the door, then she got up and followed her. "Long live the Queen."

"What was that?" Gabrielle half turned, peering curiously back at her.

"Nothing. Just talking to myself." Renas waved her on. "Old women do."

**

Xena seated her sword in its sheath and shook herself to settle her armor into place around her. She adjusted a bracer, and then she left the cabin and headed off down towards the town. It was early enough that the summer heat hadn't risen yet, and she rambled down the steep mountain path in a tolerable good humor.

She passed the turn off to the village and briefly waved at the sentries, continuing past them into the deeply forested lower part of the path. It was closer here, and now she could hear the sounds of the town filtering up on a smoke tainted breeze coming up at her.

Her armor was soundless, unlike the chain her soldiers wore and she passed through the trees and onto the path like a silent shadow moving among the faint spears of early sunlight.

The town was just stirring. Xena nodded in greeting as she passed the smith, a brace of buckets over his shoulder heading back to his workshop.

"Morning, Xena." The man smiled amiably at her.

"Morning Arens." The warrior responded. "Got some work for you later. "

The smith perked up. "Anytime."

Xena continued down the path that led through the center of town. In the front of the small cabins and huts men and women were emerging, sweeping the front of their homes out, and feeding the chickens.

A hen scurried across in front of the warrior, avidly pecking the ground, oblivious of the boots that paused just long enough for her to pass before moving on.

"Morning. Genr'l." Bennu emerged from a small cabin, closing the door with evident pride of ownership. "Pretty morning, eh?"

"Nice." Xena agreed. "You and the boys get some down time in the market yesterday?"

"Aye." Her militia chief nodded, as he joined her on the path. "Heard about the war, eh? Good thing tis far off from us."

"For now." Xena eyed him. "I'm not ruling trouble out."

Bennu smiled. "Genr'l with you, never." He said. "Boys are just now settling themselves back down after that whole mess w'the flood and all. Still sorry we took of after ye when them townies told us off."

Xena patted his shoulder. "You came back. That's what mattered." She paused at the crossroads. "We need to send scouts out." She kept her voice even, but it went completely serious. "We need to know what's moving from here, to the big pass."

"Aye." He watched her face intently. "I'll take care of it. Genr'l."

"Send a few men past the Thrace border." The warrior continued. "Tell them to listen hard to anything they hear about conscripts, war confiscations, all that."

"Aye."

"Keep it quiet." Xena concluded. "But I want to know what Athens is up to."

"Will do." Bennu nodded, and ambled off down the path, with a deceptively easy speed.

"Bennu." Xena called after him, waiting for him to turn. "Send word down to the outpost near Potadeia."

He lifted his hand and saluted, then disappeared between the trees.

Xena glanced down towards the river, then she swerved, and climbed up onto the porch of her mother's inn instead of continuing down towards the market. She could smell bread baking, and as the door opened, a gust of warm, rich air hit her.

"Morning, Xena." Johan looked up from a hinge he was working on. He was seated at one of the tables, amongst a dozen or so others taking an early breakfast. "You're early on."

"Morning." Xena glanced around at the crowd casually, before she took a seat next to her step father. "Looks like we'll have good weather today."

"Aye." Johan nodded. "Think we can fancy some dancing down by the river tonight? Good and warm for it."

Cyrene emerged from the kitchen. "Ah, thought I heard your voice." She came over and sat down. "Why the formality?" She tapped Xena's shoulder armor with her spoon.

Why. Good question. "I need to go talk to the merchant leader." Xena said. "Didn't want him to mistake me for a milkmaid."

Johan chuckled softly under his breath and shook his head.

Cyrene rolled her eyes. "They were up here last night having a grand old time with their earnings." She said. "So I'd guess you won't be getting much out of him this early." She glanced past Xena. "Glad they had a good market though. We need that to get around."

"If there's any other trains on the road." Johan muttered. "I was talking to that lot that came with the fancy stuff, said trading's sparse this side of Athens."

"Everyone's heading there to get their coin." Cyrene exhaled. "Athens, damned it, always causing us a headache. Wish we could move the town out of their reach." She sounded frustrated. "Can't we just catch a break?"

"That's what I want to talk to the merchant captain about." Xena lowered her voice. "Try and get a feel for what they've seen out there and what we can expect."

Both Cyrene and Johan nodded. "So no break for us." Cyrene sighed.

Xena half shrugged. "Life." She acknowledged. "You never know. It could pass us by, mother. They may not have time to worry about us here in the hinterlands. They've got bigger issues."

"And yet, they could." Johan spoke up. "If they hear there's riches to be had. Men that left here, could have gotten that far, Xena."

"I know it." The warrior stood up. "I'm banking on them not having the time or the guts to send an expedition up here." She considered. "I'll give the barracks a visit to give those bastards time to wake up, then go down there."

She moved past the tables and stiffarmed the door, letting it swing shut behind her.

"Crazy times again." Johan went back to working on his hinge.

Cyrene sighed. "I think we're on the right side of this, Jo. I'm hoping Xena's right, and they focus all their attention on their blasted war. Maybe by the time it's over, if they end up leaving for Sparta, we'll have a time of peace to collect ourselves in."

Johan glanced up, peering at the door, and then back at his wife. "For their sake, I hope they keep their distance. Hate to think we'd have to kill countrymen over some damn fool thing like money. Xena won't let em through here."

"No. She won't." Cyrene agreed quietly. "Even if the whole blasted army of Athens shows up on

my doorstep.” She tapped her spoon on her hand. “But they better have a care of they do. She might end up stealing that army right out from under them. Almost did the last time.”

Johan scratched his nose. “Lot of mouths to feed.”

Cyrene snorted.

**

Gabrielle was glad enough to escape into the dim confines of her quarters, aware of the bulk of the village now out and about and all abuzz with the news. She paused as she got to the center of the space and looked around, struck suddenly at how impersonal it was.

It was comfortable – like the one she’d had in the previous village, it was square, and divided into two areas, a sleeping area in the back separated by a dense, bead curtain and a working area in front that had a desk, a weapons rack, and two chairs.

Comfortable, but impersonal. She had nothing of her own here, save a few practice staffs tucked into the weapons rack. There were a few curls of parchment on the desk, but they were notes of hers about things she’d adjudicated, or history scrolls of the nation.

Guest quarters. Gabrielle’s face twitched, as she mentally acknowledged that. Even now, with the village so close, she still wasn’t a part of it. In this case, she knew the decision to put that distance between herself and her nation was hers, though, not theirs, and not Xenas.

The warrior had even offered – a sacrifice that Gabrielle fully appreciated – to split time and spend nights in the village with her if that was what Gabrielle wanted, since she’d started taking a day to day role in the Amazon’s lives.

But no, Gabrielle hadn’t wanted that. She wanted to go home at night, away from the village, and away from the town she also worked in council for and back to a focused involvement with her family.

Turn off the Amazon queen stuff. Turn off the town reeve stuff. Back to just them.

With a sigh, Gabrielle went to her desk and sat down, hitching one booted foot up onto a rung of the chair and leaning her elbow against her knee. Her eyes got caught by a piece of parchment, folded, underneath her ink jar and she studied it for a moment, then reached over and tugged it free.

Unfolded, it revealed Ephiny’s untidy scrawl and Gabrielle took the time to lean back in her chair before she read it.

Gabrielle –

By now I guess you’re good and pissed at me, so I took the chicken’s way out and left you a note where I figured you’d find it.

First of all – don’t blame Pony. This was all my idea.

Gabrielle had to smile at that, a rueful chuckle emerging from her lips.

I knew you were worried about the war, and all those Amazons going headlong into it, and I figured you were thinking of heading out to try and fix the problem yourself.

I figured it was my turn. I’ve watched you do the greater good thing for how many years now, and just this once I thought I’d take my hand at it. I might be able to talk to those Amazon leaders and they may listen to me in a way they’d hesitate before listening to you – I thought it was worth a try anyway.

I also figured you could use some down time at home. So kill me when you see me, but that’s

my story and I'm sticking to it.

I know you want to know why I didn't talk to you about it first. It's pretty simple. If I had, you'd have talked me out of it. So I didn't.

We should be back in a month or so – take a vacation, and take it easy.

E.

Gabrielle reread the note a few times, then she set it down on the desk. "Well." She sighed. "She's right on all counts. I wanted to go, I wanted to stay home, and I'd have talked her out of it if she'd asked."

She got up and went over to the small, square table that held a few of her things inside. There was a small carafe on the top of it, and two wooden cups. She poured a bit of water into one of the cups and brought it back over to the desk, sitting back down in her chair and swirling the liquid thoughtfully.

Was she mad at Ephiny? Gabrielle studied the inside of the small hut. Or was she just jealous, since her first instinct had been to do the same thing?

Except she couldn't. She'd committed to Ephiny that she'd run the Amazons until she had her child, and running off to Athens would have ruptured that commitment, regardless of how much she'd wanted to, and the fact that she'd started trying to find some kind of justification for doing it.

Well, Hades. She took a sip of the water. There wasn't much she could do now, except deal with it. Maybe Ephiny was right, after all. Maybe a lifelong Amazon, a regent and a seasoned warrior like her just might carry more weight with the heads of those unknown Nations than Gabrielle would.

So.

Now in the meantime, with Ephiny and Eponin gone, she had to face the fact that for the first time since she'd been given Terries right of caste, she was here and solely in charge of these Amazons. She'd been the queen for some time, of course, but she'd always had Ephiny there, and she always was mindful of her regent's authority and took pains not to undermine her.

Now, she was it.

"Ugh." Gabrielle felt more than a little depressed. Then her head lifted up and she looked over at the opening to her quarters, just as a hand parted the beads and Xena's tall figure ducked inside. "Am I ever glad to see you."

Xena let the beads fall behind her and crossed the interior space over to where she was sitting. The warrior dragged one of the chairs in front of the desk around to the side and sat down in it, extending her armored legs out across the floor. "Did I hear right?"

Gabrielle handed the note over without commenting.

Xena took it and read it, then she flicked her eyes up to her partner's face. "Huh."

"Mm."

"Wasn't expecting this." The warrior admitted. "I wasn't expecting those women to take off out of here, and I certainly wasn't expecting Ephiny to chase after them."

"Me either."

Xena turned the parchment over in her fingers. "So I guess that blows our reputation for knowing everything huh?"

“We had a reputation for that?”

Xena smiled. “Want me to go after them and bring them back?” She asked. “They’re not going to get anything out of this other than trouble.”

Gabrielle studied her partner. Sitting there, completely relaxed in her well made armor, Xena seemed almost as out of place inside her little Amazon hut as she did. “I thought about that. Solari offered.” She said, after a quiet moment. “But you know, Xena, they’re both adults. Maybe Eph’s right. She’s done this a long time and she knows Amazons.”

“So have I.” Xena replied. “I think they’ll just chase them back down the road.”

“Then they’ll be back here and we won’t have to do anything.” The bard said. “But I think if that’s what they really want to try, we shouldn’t go after them like they’re little kids and drag them back here.”

“Okay.” The warrior nodded. “At any rate, we’ll have enough on our plates here. I talked to the merchant train captain. In private.”

“Yeah?”

“He said he had a Hades of a time getting enough wagons to come up here. Said it’s likely there won’t be more than this one.” Xena said. “So we’ve got to figure out what we’re doing to do for the winter, and if trouble comes this way.”

“You think it will.”

“I think it will.” The warrior confirmed. “I think word is out about riches to be had here, and I think Athens remembers what I did there. They’ll come.”

Their eyes met, and Gabrielle gave herself a long moment to study that familiar, angular face, half cast in shadows. She didn’t feel any sense of panic. They’d both gone through so much in their lives together that it was hard for her to say what at this stage would freak her out. “Okay.” She half shrugged. “So lets just do what we can do.”

“Got a plan?”

“No. You?”

Xena chuckled. “Not yet.” She admitted. “I sent some people out. Gave the merchants some lies to spread around. To be honest, I’m not really sure where to start in all this.”

Gabrielle got up and walked around the back of Xena’s chair, circling her neck with both arms and kissing her on the back of her head. “We brought this right down on top of ourselves.”

“We did.” Xena agreed.

“Well, we’ll figure something out.” It made Gabrielle feel better just to be in contact. “You know, I think I never knew how lucky we were when we were common road vagrants, hon.”

Xena chuckled wryly.

“Then at least when we screwed up, we’d only get ourselves in trouble.”

“Well.” Xena tipped her head back. “Not always.”

“Mm.” Gabrielle closed her eyes and drew in a breath filled with Xena’s scent. “I feel so confused, Xe. Part of me wants to just take you and Dori and just run away somewhere, but I know we can’t.”

“We could.”

“Xena.”

The warrior shrugged. “I’ve been a selfish jackass before, Gabrielle. If that’s what you want to do, I’d be happy to throw you over my shoulder, put Dori in the saddle bag and take off.”

“Would you really?”

Xena nodded. “Being guilty gets me nothing. I finally figured that out.”

Gabrielle came around and knelt down next to the chair. She rested her forearms on her partner’s thighs, and gazed up at her. “I don’t want to do that.” She said. “I think I’ve grown up enough to know running from your problems never solves them.”

Xena’s face creased into a smile, lighting up her eyes. “No. But it’s more fun.” She lifted her hand and cupped Gabrielle’s cheek, watching the look focused on her soften and intensify. “I’m sure Eph and Pony will be fine. Those were a tough bunch of women they were with, and they’re both fine warriors.”

Gabrielle nodded.

“And if all else fails, we can take the militia, and the Amazons, and go conquer Athens. I loved those nice big bathtubs they had.”

Gabrielle put her head down on Xena’s lap, feeling the cool pressure of her leg armor against the side of her face. “You’re so funny sometimes.”

“Think I’m joking?”

“No.”

The bard got up, giving Xena’s knee pat. “C’mon, consort. Help me go wrangle some Amazons. They’re going to pitch a fit when I tell them we have to cooperate with the town. There’s still some hard feelings there.”

“Still some hard feelings in this group from Zeus’s creation of that damn mountain outside.” Xena got up and joined her. “They hold a grudge longer than I do.”

“Xe, be nice.”

**

The whole village had gathered, there in the hall. The only ones missing, Gabrielle realized, were Solari and the small group that had taken the children out for their classes. On one side of the hall were the elders and the senior warriors, in the middle were the young adults and the far side was full of the recently feathered warriors, the just out of adolescents who had never known any leadership other than hers.

Gabrielle paused when that thought ran through her head, and winced.

Cait and Paladia were there, standing against the wall together in all their mismatched glory. Despite Cait’s age, she already wore the double feathers and weapons of a regular warrior and though Paladia had never become the village social butterfly, she had achieved acceptance from most.

Perched on her shelf nearby, Xena had her arms crossed over her chest and her legs extended a little, crossed at the ankles. The position had been deliberately chosen, a spot enough out of the way not to distract from Gabrielle, but enough in view that the assembled crowd couldn’t forget about her presence.

Intimidating? Gabrielle studied her partner. Yes. There had been a time in her life when the thought of using Xena as a symbol of her authority had galled her to the quick but now she’d

grown enough as a person and as a leader to welcome it.

Xena caught her eye, and unobtrusively crooked a finger at her.

Gabrielle moved away from the small table in the corner where she'd been standing and crossed the raised platform over to her partner. "You want me?"

Xena's pale eyes took on a decidedly mischievous twinkle.

Gabrielle sighed. "Someday, maybe, I'll stop walking right into stuff like that." She acknowledged. "We're almost ready to start. I'm just waiting for two of the elders who are on the way over."

Xena uncrossed her arms and let one hand come to rest on Gabrielle's hip. "How are you going to play Eph's leaving?" She asked, in a low tone.

"Straightforward." The bard half turned her back to the crowd. "I'm just going to say she decided to see what she could do about persuading the other Amazons not to go to war." She watched Xena's face, seeing the muscles shift as her expression altered into one she knew meant the warrior was thinking hard. "No?"

Xena's eyes shifted to the room, then back at her. "Can you imply there was more planning behind it without outright lying?"

Gabrielle put her fingertip on Xena's exquisitely shaped nose. "Are you asking me that for a strategic reason, or just because you know I don't like lying?"

"Yes." The blue eyes twinkled again.

Gabrielle gazed steadily at her for a minute. Then she nodded. "I can do that." She said with confidence. "You'll tell me why later, right?" She asked, seeing the last two stragglers come in, and the room start to quiet and look up at the platform.

"I will." Xena gave her hip an affectionate pat. She watched Gabrielle move forward to address her sisters, crossing in front of her desk and leaning against it, not very far from the posture Xena herself had taken.

That presented the warrior with a nice view of her partner's back, its bare expanse lit by the flickers of sunlight coming in from the window behind them.

Another reason she'd picked the spot she was in.

"Good morning everyone." Gabrielle said, her voice deepening a little into her storytelling mode. "As I'm sure you have all heard, we have a lot of things to talk about today so I think I'll just go ahead and get started."

Get started. Xena resumed her crossed arm posture. She felt like she should be getting started too, but she was damnably unsure of where that start place was, or really what they should do about the situation they were rapidly finding themselves in.

She had so little real information. Aside from the merchants news, and the abrupt arrival of the Amazons she really didn't know what Athens plans were, and if she even played the tiniest part in them despite what she'd said earlier.

Was it ego, that insisted that Athens would come after her? Come here, to Amphipolis in the hind end of nowhere to dig out a now truly retired warlord to lead their attack? Was she unrealistically flattering herself?

Xena wondered about that. What would happen if they just did nothing? Just prepared for a hard winter, and got their affairs in order, and pretended they were just some little town and some mountain Amazon village out in the sticks no body really cared about?

It might be true.

Did she want it to be true?

“And so, Ephiny and Eponin decided they would go with these Amazons, to feel out what the situation really was, and see if they could talk to their leaders.” Gabrielle’s calm tone made her look up. “I think it really benefits us to have two such experienced sisters working to determine what our options are.”

Nice. The confidence in the bard’s voice made it seem like the whole thing was well planned, and as the warrior scanned the room, she saw a lot of nodding heads.

“In the meantime, we need to prepare.”

“Prepare for what, Queen Gabrielle?” Aalene spoke up. “For war?”

“Not if I can help it.” Gabrielle smiled easily. “We’re in a safe place up here, with the mountain at our backs, limited approaches, and good friends to stand with us.”

“You mean the town?” Renas looked a touch skeptical.

“I mean Xena, and her militia.” Gabrielle responded. “Who are part of the town.”

There was a faint stir, but then the Amazons settled down again. Gabrielle waited to see if there was any further comment before she continued. “So you might ask, what do we prepare for, if not for war.” She stood up and started to pace slowly. “We have to prepare for being cut off. With no trade, and no access to things we don’t either grow, or have here ourselves.”

Renas nodded. “Like the old days.” She said. “There were times in the war, we only had ourselves.”

“Exactly.” Gabrielle said. “Like how I lived with Xena, on the road for all those years. Depending on each other.”

Xena produced the expected smile at that, as the crowd looked over at her. Well, in the short term, what Gabrielle was telling them made sense. They could gather and prepare, and get ready, and if nothing worse happened than a tough season, they’d come out all right.

And if the worst happened, they’d at least have something prepared.

“So the bottom line is, we don’t know what will happen. But we do know how to take care of ourselves, and we will do that.” Gabrielle concluded.

“Queen Gabrielle.” Aalene spoke up. “Will Athens send people here, like the did the last time, that we heard about? Here to the town I mean?”

Gabrielle half turned in Xena’s direction. “Xe?”

Thus called on, the warrior stood and came forward to stand next to Gabrielle. “The town was exempted.” She said briefly. “Whether they’ll honor that, remains to be seen. But it’s possible we’re just too small for them to really bother with.”

“Now.” Renas said.

Xena inclined her head in agreement. “It could be they have heard about the flood.” She allowed. “It could be they’re depending on the bigger towns and cities around Athens. But if the war doesn’t go their way, or it’s a stalemate, that could change.”

“Xena.” Renas rested her hands on her wrinkled knees. “Why in Hades don’t you just go lead the damn army and get the war over with? Save us all a pack of a lot of trouble.” She asked. “Get this gone and done for Artemis’ sake.”

Xena felt her nostrils flare a little, as she swept her eyes over the assembled Amazons and saw nods and mild agreement in their faces. She looked over at Gabrielle, who prudently looked away and scratched one ear. “That really wouldn’t be my first choice.” She finally muttered. “But thanks for asking.”

“Pity. Woulda been fun to watch.” Renas grumbled.

“All right. Let’s conclude this for now.” Gabrielle took control back. “Senior warriors, and elders, please stay behind so we can start drawing up some plans.”

The room started to bustle with movement, and low muttered voices. Gabrielle turned and looked at her partner, giving her a pat on the side. “Want some cider?”

“Got anything stronger? I think I’m gonna need it.”

**

Continued in Part 3

A Queen’s Tale

Part 3

Gabrielle evaded two groups of chattering women and slid into a seat at the high table next to Xena. “You know what I just thought of?”

Her soulmate was plowing stolidly through a plate of the Amazon’s miscellaneous stew lunch. She put her knife down and picked up her cup, taking a sip and swallowing whatever it was she had in her mouth with some effort. “Gabrielle.”

“What?”

Xena turned and laced her fingers together. “Couldja please teach these damn Amazons to at least cut the pieces of wood in the food into bit size chunks so I don’t get a sore throat swallowing it?”

“Oh, c’mon, Xena. It’s not that bad.” Gabrielle poked around in her partner’s plate and paused, as she felt something hard and square. She removed it and brought it closer to her eyes for inspection, her brows creasing. “What is this?”

Xena pushed her plate over, and retired to her cup instead. “Here. All yours.”

Tentatively, Gabrielle bit into the square, then she removed it from her mouth and examined it again. Then she stood up and picked up the plate. “Excuse me a minute.”

“Go baby go.” Xena braced her elbows on the table and watched in contentment as Gabrielle disappeared into the cooking area, fairly sure she’d return with something at least marginally more edible.

There had been a time in her life, and in fact, a time in her life with Gabrielle when she’d pretty much not cared what food tasted like. She ate whatever was available, to keep herself going and keep her strength up for fighting the unnumbered series of battles that stretched on day after day.

Then she met Gabrielle, almost the first person she’d spent any length of time with outside her mother who could cook. Now she’d found that she’d gotten a lot pickier about what was on the table and far more used to things that were cooked right and tasted good than otherwise.

The Amazons unfortunately stuck to her former philosophy and while they appreciated good food when it was available they consumed whatever the cook hall put before them with very little complaint.

Xena wasn’t above complaining.

She glanced around the room. It was mostly full with Amazons all clustered around the trestle tables, hunkered over bowls or tearing hunks of bread up to dunk in the liquid at the bottom of them. Xena shook her head a little and set her mug down.

Everone seemed to have settled down. The conversation was casual, though some of the women looked up as Gabrielle passed, their eyes following her with various levels of interest, ranging from curiosity to outright lust.

Xena's eyes narrowed a little, seeing the latter.

"So, Xena." Renas came over, seeing her unoccupied.

"Yes?" The warrior eyed her, not really wanting to continue their conversation about her leading Athen's army.

"I was talking to those women last night." Renas said. "After Gabrielle finished telling her story. You know what one of em said to me?" She didn't wait for Xena to respond. "She told me Gabrielle must just be exaggerating because she could see for sure none of us had the guts for war."

Xena rolled her eyes.

"Cait poked her in the ass." Renas said. "I mean, Artemis sake."

"Wait until they get in the middle of it. Then they'll find out who has guts." Xena said. "Everyone thinks it a big old party until they take the first arrow in the chest."

"Have you?" Renas asked. "Taken an arrow in the chest?"

The warrior chuckled softly under her breath. "I've taken arrows pretty much everywhere." She admitted. "Gabrielle's had to do plenty of sewing on my hide in the last few years."

"She's taken a few herself."

"She has." Xena agreed. "That's why both of us agree going to war is no fun.. We have a lot of scars to show for it."

Renas grinned. "That's what Cait told them crazy Amazons. She got her skirt all in a dither about it. Kid's got spunk. Likes you a lot."

The warrior nodded. "We have a lot of history together."

"She from here?"

Xena caught sight of Gabrielle heading back in her direction, carrying a pot. "She's from just down the river. Parents were killed in a raid, and she went feral. My mother started tossing her scraps, and she hung around the inn for a while."

"Hm."

Gabrielle arrived back at the table, and set the pot down. She stirred what was in it, then scooped two big ladles full into a plate and put it down in front of her partner. "See if that's any better."

Xena speared a chunk and popped it into her mouth, already recognizing the familiar spices. Then she reached over and took Gabrielle's free hand, bringing it over and kissing it. "Almost as tasty as mpfh."

The bard had clapped her hand hastily over her soulmate's mouth. "Xena."

Renas chortled. "Your secret is out, your Majesty." She said. "Xena, I never figured you for such a romantic."

“Oh, she is.” Gabrielle released her hold, watching the blue eyes twinkled wickedly at her. “She most certainly is.” Before she could continue, though, they all heard the sharp whistle of the watch, stilling conversation around them as everyone turned towards the door. “Ah.” She removed her hand from Xena’s mouth as she felt the warrior’s body start to move, guessing her intent and stepping out of the way.

“Be right back.” Xena stood and slipped around her, moving swiftly through the dining hall and ducking out the door before the sound had faded.

Gabrielle debated following, then she took her seat instead, ladling out some stew for herself. Xena certainly could take care of herself and everyone else in the general area, and besides, she was hungry.

The stew hadn’t taken that much to fix. She’d just had to have the well meaning, but unused to the local ingredients cooks fish out the chunks of root they’d thought would soften and then follow her lead in correcting the spices so the stew tasted like something other than dishwater.

Poor Xena. Gabrielle chuckled and shook her head. “I’ve got you good and spoiled, that’s for sure.” She muttered under her breath.

“Queen Gabrielle?” Renas spoke up after a moment’s silence. “Anyone ever tell you you’re not supposed to be serving other Amazons?”

Gabrielle looked up at her, a droll expression on her face.

“I know.” The elder held her hand up. “But if you want to maintain your authority, you have to think of things like that.”

The bard chewed her mouthful and swallowed. “So does that mean I have to treat my family differently when I’m here? If it does, I’m leaving.” She took a sip of cider, and then another spoonful of stew. “So long.”

Renas blinked at her. “Well, that wasn’t really what I ...”

“That’s nor another Amazon.” Gabrielle said. “That’s my partner.”

“Sure, I know that.”

“Do you really think I care what anyone thinks when it comes to me and my partner?” Gabrielle asked, looking up over her bowl. “Especially when I have to subject her to this tasteless pulp you all eat here?”

“Hey, it’s not that bad.” Renas dropped the subject. “Sure have had worse. They have to get some practice somehow right?”

“We teach our sisters to make arrows, and craft armor.” Gabrielle said. “Why don’t we teach them to cook?” She looked over at Renas. “Why don’t we teach things like that?”

Renas blinked at her in silence.

“Is it because we’re all supposed to be tough?” Gabrielle wondered. “Or what?”

The elder scratched her head. “Y’know, I never thought about it.” She admitted. “I guess everyone figures if you’re a woman, you know how to do that stuff, so why bother teaching it?” She shrugged. “Anyway, in the village it’s always someone who has the interest who gets into that. Most of us, the warriors, we don’t.”

Gabrielle rested her chin on her hand. “That’s silly.” She remarked. “I think we need to change that. It doesn’t work to wait for someone to take an interest – look where we are now? Our one cook is out of commission in the sick hall and we have to eat tree bark.”

“Well...”

“Xe’s right. I’m going to lay off the staff and start teaching other stuff.” Gabrielle shook her head and went back to her bowl. “Plenty of people here know how to beat the stuffing out of each other. Not many know how to grill a fish.”

“Ah.”

“Want to be in the first class?” The bard asked.

Renas got up. “Actually, I have a.. trap I have to go check. Yeah. Ah, see you later, your Majesty.” She sidled away and headed for the entrance to the hall, leaving Gabrielle to finish her lunch in peace.

“I’m not sure what that was all about.” Gabrielle mused. “But those classes are definitely going to happen.”

**

Xena met the guard as they came across the central grassy area, their eyes showing relief as they spotted her and angled their steps to intercept hers. “Whats up?”

“Word from the town.” The nearest guard said. “Said they’re looking for you.”

“Thanks.” Xena ducked past them and started for the entrance to the village, breaking into a loping run as she hit the slope down to the path. The summer air puffed lightly against her body, and she was aware of the warm sun on her shoulders until she cleared the edge of the village and passed beneath the trees.

Then she was in the shade of the rocky, steep path and moving faster, rambling down the rocks with easy grace. She was glad the relative peace since their return had let her recover from their harrowing ordeal in the valley. It made the travel up and down to the cabin a lot easier, and she and Gabrielle had resumed sparring again after taking a long break from it.

The town was coming up fast, and Xena allowed her speed to increase as she came to the end of the slope and headed through the town.

She was spotted immediately by two militiamen, who started in her direction. “Gen’rl!”

Xena pulled up as she met them. “What’s going on?”

“Gen’rl, got a r’port from the pass. Armed troops coming in.”

Son of a Bacchae. Xena cursed silently. She hadn’t expected anything this quickly. “Okay.” She said. “Get me six mounted, at the gates. I’ll meet them.” She didn’t wait for an answer, turning and heading towards the stables at a run.

Then she stopped, and half turned. “Leos!”

One of the running militia hauled to a stop. “Aye?”

“Send someone up to the village. Let Gabrielle know.”

“Aye!” He pointed at the barracks and waved the other man on, turning himself and running towards the sloping path Xena had so recently come down.

Satisfied, Xena turned and headed for the stables. She passed the inn, catching a glimpse of a familiar figure on the porch as she started past.

“Xena!” Cyrene called out. “Wait! What’s going on?”

“Later, mother.” She gave her mother a wave, as she jumped over the paddock fence and dodged

a couple of goats on her way to the barn door. She let out a whistle, and pulled the door open just as Argo pushed her stall door open and came towards her, snorting. "Hey girl."

She wrapped her fingers in the mare's mane and vaulted onto her back, glad she already had her armor on and her sword on her back. She tightened her knees and urged the mare out of the barn, ducking gracefully as they cleared the door.

A saddle and stirrups would have been nice, but she'd ridden many times without them, and she relaxed into Argos pace as the mare broke into a canter. She could hear hoofbeats approaching and as she reached the crossroads, six men on horseback clattered towards from the direction of the barracks.

"Let's go." Xena urged Argo towards the bridge. "Let's see what's going on here."

"Right behind ye, Genr'l." Bennu answered.

They rode across the bridge and up the slope to the far side, threading their way through the wagons among the slowly stirring merchants.

"Hey, what's going on?" One asked. "What's all the rush? Sara's got some fresh pastries out, good ones!"

"Later." Xena guided Argo around him. "We've got something to take care of."

"Something going on?" The man called after them.

"Soon's we'll all know." Bennu said as they rode past.

Xena waited until they cleared the merchants, then she tightened her grip and Argo responded, surging into a gallop.

It felt great. She'd always loved riding horseback, and knowing she was doing that, into possible battle, raised the hair on the back of her neck and put a grin on her face. "Any idea who they are?" She yelled to Bennu, over the rumble.

"Nah." Bennu shook his head. "Didn't have colors on." He said. "Looked like mercs, scout said."

Mercenaries. Xena settled herself a little more forward on Argo's back, putting her hand on the mare's shoulder as she galloped. That could go either way. Maybe just some opportunists, who hadn't figured out where they were, or maybe agents of Athens.

She wasn't really sure which she'd prefer. Opportunists would merely provide her with some entertainment. Agents of Athens, on the other hand, would at least confirm her suspicions and let them get enough information to form a plan.

They would know soon enough.

**

Gabrielle spotted the forestry class coming back and changed her direction, heading back across the grass towards the children's area instead of going to her quarters.

Now that the first meetings were over, and the shock had faded, wheels were starting to turn in her head as she realized this was an opportunity to think about changes she could make in the long inured traditions of the tribe.

She respected tradition. She understood that the Amazons took pride in their heritage, and stood firm in wanting to keep to their old ways and not really try to fit in with changing times. But Gabrielle also knew more than most how people needed to adapt to the world and maybe this time she'd have a chance to gently push the Amazons towards some new horizons.

She'd start with the small, common sense things first, like the single quarters now that they had

space, and cooking lessons. Who knew where that might lead?

Already, she could hear the children's excited voices, and selected Dori's out of the crowd with out effort. Her daughter was rambling on about fishes, and Gabrielle briefly wondered if she'd displayed her nascent talent for catching them in her bare hands to her friends.

She was fairly sure that would startle the Hades out of them, since it certainly had knocked her and Xena for a loop the first time they saw her do it.

As she neared the group, Solari spotted her and waved. Then Dori saw her and came running over, her face alight with happiness. "Mama!"

That never failed to perk her up. She opened her arms and knelt as Dori reached her, giving her a big hug as her daughter flung her arms around her enthusiastically. "Hey, Doriboo. Did you have fun?"

"Mama I did!" Dori said. "I saw fishes, and we got bugs, and Mama! Mama I saw a turtle and I show him to e'vrybody!"

Ah. "You did, huh?" Gabrielle ruffled her hair. "I see you got wet too, huh? Did you go hunting for fishies?" She stood and took Dori's hand, walking with her back over to the group. "Everyone have a good time?"

"Well." Solari looked a little worse for wear, her leathers scuffed and a few bruises dark against her tanned skin. "I think we sorta just kept up with your kid there, finding stuff for us to look at." She gave Dori a look of respect. "She sure can track."

"Is that true, honey? Did you show your friends all kinds of nice things?" Gabrielle asked her daughter.

"She sure did." Solari grinned.

"Yes, mama! Look!" Dori was digging in the little pouch at her waist. "See?" She held up something. "I found a toof!"

Gabrielle accepted this item and inspected it gravely. "What kind is it, Dor?"

"Piggy."

The bard glanced at Solari, who grinned. "That's right, it's a wild boar, huh? Do you remember when that piggy chased your mama?"

Dori giggled.

"I don't remember hearing that story." Solari mentioned hopefully.

"Hm. No." Gabrielle handed Dori back her prize. "Didn't wind up so well for me or the boar, but Xena ended up with porkchops for dinner so she thought it all worked out fine in the end." She said. "I've got a history of stumbling into wild boar's dens. That's where I got this." She indicated a long thin scar on her thigh.

"Wow." Solari glanced at it respectfully. "That musta hurt."

"It did." The bard agreed. "She wasn't too crazy, was she?"

"Nah." The dark haired Amazon shook her head. "She's just knows so much about stuff out there. She sees everything."

"Like Xena." Gabrielle smiled.

"Like big X." Solari nodded. "It's wild."

Gabrielle gazed fondly down at her child, who was examining a butterfly fluttering around a few grass stalks nearby. "Xena's been teaching her for the last year or so." She said. "I think she gets a kick out of passing on that knowledge."

"She mind giving us some lessons?"

The bard chuckled. "Ask her." She whistled softly. "C'mon, Dor. Let's go back to our house here, and you can show me all your stuff and tell me stories about it."

Dori jumped up and ran over. "Good! Mama, can we have some cookies too? Hungry!"

"Sure honey, I'll get you some lunch." Gabrielle promised. "Then maybe your Boo will come back, and we can have some fun with her. How about that?"

Dori's eyes lit up. "Boo! We can go flying!"

Solari chuckled. "See ya later." She said. "Everyone stop freaking out about Eph?"

Gabrielle took Dori's hand and clasped it. "They're working on it." She said. "You know, I've heard people say more than once it would be nice if their Queen stuck around for a while."

Solari grimaced.

"They might want to be careful what they ask for." The bard winked at her, then she started off across the grass, with Dori rambling happily alongside her.

"What did she mean by that?" One of the other children's caretakers came up next to Solari.

"Pasi, your guess is as good as mine." Solari said. "But there are a lot of people around here that are gonna have their opinions adjusted if you know what I mean."

"Hmph." Pasi sat down on a rock at the entrance to the kids area. "You think she made Eph leave?"

Solari turned around and stared at her. "Are you nuts?"

Pasi shrugged. "Just something I heard in the dining hall."

"No way." The dark haired woman shook her head emphatically. "And whoever's saying that should keep their trap shut, because if Gabrielle hears that crap she's not gonna like it."

"I don't think so either." Pasi said, a touch defensively. "It was just real strange for her to up and take off like that, you know?"

Was it? Solari gazed at the retreating figures. "Well." She said, after a moment. "Eph's done that before. You remember when she took off with those kids, and when she took off again for Amphipolis, said she was itchy?"

Pasi nodded slowly after a pause. "Oh yeah. I do remember that." She said. "Got her ass in trouble both times."

"Got her ass saved by Gabrielle and big X both times." Solari confirmed. "So you know, the last thing I think her Maj would do is to send her outta here, cause probably she'd just have to haul her butt out after her and go rescue her again. She's got crap luck that way."

"That's true." The childcare worker agreed. "And when she had Xenon, too."

"Yup."

"Yeah, you're right. So what did she mean by saying people should be careful for what they ask for?" Pasi said. "Sounds like she doesn't think Ephs coming back."

Solari stood up and dusted her hands off. "Maybe it means she's going to take that mask

seriously.” She said. “If she does, won’t matter if Eph comes back or not. Gabrielle’s the queen.”

“Huh.”

“Huh.” Solari echoed.

**

Xena pulled Argo up as they approached the last bend in the road before it turned and straightened and went through the pass that came down through the mountains and opened up onto the plains where Amphipolis was located.

The message had been relayed from her watch station just this side of the pass, sent via signals past the watch at Potadeia, past the bend of the river, and up through the rise to the town. After a two candlemark ride, they were almost in position to see what was coming at them firsthand, and Xena took a moment to catch her breath, and think about what she wanted to do.

No point, really, in doing that beforehand. “Okay.” She patted Argo’s shoulder, feeling the sweat under her touch as the mare also caught her breath.

“Think there’ll be fighten?” Bennu came up next to her.

“Maybe.” Xena felt her own pulse pick up a little at the words. She’d had no real fights since they came back, though she’d conscientiously drilled for them and she was feeling a touch on the rusty side because of it.

Crazy. “Let’s let the horses cool down, then we ride around the bend towards the pass casual.” She ordered. “Just make it look like we’re heading to Dartour. We’re not expecting any trouble.”

“Aye.” Bennu nodded, patting his big bay horse’s shoulder. “Sounds good Genr’l. What your thinking they want?”

Xena cocked her head to one side. “Well, it’s either just some opportunists, if it’s mercenaries, or they’re running from Athens because they realize the war’s a bust, or it someone coming to Amphipolis for a reason.” She sorted Argo’s mane.

It was hot, and she could feel the sweat under her armor. She raked her fingers through her hair and settled her legs, then she nudged Argo forward again. “Let’s go find out.”

They kept at a walk, as the men filed in behind her in a rough formation, talking to each other as they moved along. Xena stayed in the lead, vaguely wishing she’d stopped to saddle Argo since the one odd thing about them was the fact that here she was, in full armor, riding a horse with not so much as a bridle on.

Ah well. She hitched forward a little, and tightened her knees, moving her body weight forward over her center of balance in case she needed to draw her sword. She took a deep breath, feeling the leathers under her armor grow snug, then released it, glancing casually around as they started into the bend.

Argo snorted and shook her head.

“Yeah I know, we’re crazy.” Xena correctly interpreted the horse’s commentary. “Sorry girl. Next time I’ll take your son when I want to go riding all over the place in the heat, okay?” She stroked the horse’s neck. “I think you’re getting a little too old for this crap.”

Argo snorted again.

“Maybe I am too.” Xena muttered under her breath, more than normally aware of the discomfort of the weather.

The mare rolled her eyes.

“Did you say something, Genr’l?” Bennu asked, moving up next to her.

“Nah.” The warrior sighed. “Did Deran tell me the other day you had ten new recruits?”

“Aye.” Bennu seemed happy at the acknowledgement. “Y’know we all feel like we let you down, Xena, letting the town run us off that way.”

Xena half shrugged. “You did what you had to, Bennu. If you’re supposed to be guarding the town, and the town tells you to get out, what choice did you have?”

“Coulda stayed.” Bennu said, glancing off past her. “But the truth is, we’re not here for the town. They know it, we know it. Ain’t no purpose for us staying there w’out you being there.”

Xena exhaled. “I know.” She said. “Sometimes I wonder if that’s where I really want to be too. I think I was happier out on the road with Gabrielle.”

Bennu chuckled. “I figgred that.” He said. “Even when we were at the city, that time, you didn’t have a mind to stay.”

“No.” Xena remembered that time, and smiled. “But then, I’d just found out we were going to have a kid. Hard to say where the Hades my head was then. If Gabrielle had wanted to stick around for a while, I woulda.”

“Ahh.”

“And after that, once we finally got home, I knew we had to stay there.” Xena went on. “We had some peace and quiet.”

“Till the war.”

“Till the war.” The warrior acknowledged. “Now we take it one day at a time.” She lifted her head, as a puff of wind brought her the faint sound of hoofbeats coming towards them. “Here we go.”

Bennu fell silent and they all shifted, men checking their weapons as their pace picked up a bit, the horses sensing their rider’s tension and reacting to it.

Xena felt her heartbeat pulse more strongly, bringing a flush of blood to her already warm skin. A tingle of anticipation ran up her spine and she took a few deep breaths, as they rounded the midpoint of the bend and could see ahead of them again.

At the edge of the curve, on the other side, a group of mounted, armed men were clustered, all looking their way having heard the approaching horses.

“Keep going, act normal.” Xena uttered. She let her hands rest on Argo’s neck and whistled softly under her breath, as the rest of the militia laughed at something Bennu was telling them behind her. She watched the soldiers they were approaching with her peripheral vision, affecting a relaxed lack of concern to their watching eyes.

A dozen of them. Mounted and well armed, on well kept horses. They didn’t wear tabards, though, nothing to identify them with Athens, or anything else.

Her curiosity was peaked. Could another warlord like Andreas be rearing his head? Xena turned her eyes towards the men now, casually meeting the glance of the one in the lead, then looking past him as though he were of no interest to her.

He was about her age. Bearded, and with short cropped hair, with a serious expression but nothing that indicated immediate threat.

Xena kept her hands on Argo’s mane as they drew even with the group, her fingers sorting the rough hairs out to either side of the horses neck. She gave the man in front a brief nod as they

started past, the rest of her men ignoring the others completely.

“Excuse me.” The man said. “Could you possibly tell me where Amphipolis is?”

Xena signaled Argo to stop, and the mare did willingly. She half turned and regarded the man. “Who wants to know?” She kept her voice mild, though, giving the man a brief grin to take the sting out of her words.

The militia came to a halt behind her, leaning on their saddlebows and regarding the strangers with benign interest. Though outnumbered, the confidence in their body language was unmistakable, and mostly based on the fact that they had unshakable faith in the woman leading them.

A dozen men? They’d seen Xena battle hundreds and defeat them, without any help at all. What were a dozen men to her? Or them?

“My name is Ranalf.” The soldier said, in a polite tone. “I bear a message to be tendered in Amphipolis, and am just wondering if we’re on the right road. We have been traveling four sevendays and were hoping our journey was near to it’s end. It’s hot, and we’re tired.”

Xena swung her leg over Argo’s head and sat sideways on the mare’s back, crossing her legs casually and leaning on both hands. “You’re on the right road.” She replied with equal courtesy. “Follow this around to the river ford, across that is Amphipolis proper.”

The men looked relieved. Up close, they appeared well ordered, mostly younger men but neatly shaved with their armor in well cared for condition. Their leathers were stained with sweat though, and they were dusty from long travel. “A river ahead? That’s good news.” Ranalf said. “And journey’s end, for now. I thank you.”

“My pleasure.” Xena said. “Is your message for anyone in particular? We’re from Amphipolis.”

Ranalf glanced at them curiously, taking in their armored bodies and well used weapons, and the hawkshhead patches sewn into their leather shirts. Then his eyes turned to Xena, who was still comfortably seated sideways on her horse, with no such identifying mark on her. “Are you? Well, our business is somewhat private....”

“I can think of two people that message might be for.” Xena gently interrupted him. “I’m one of them and I’m married to the other. My name’s Xena.”

Ranalf’s body posture stiffened perceptibly and his fingers inside leather gloves clenched on his horse’s reins. “Then you are indeed who we are looking for.” He said, unsurprisingly. “If I may beg a pardon though, as I say we’ve been traveling a long way. Could the delivery of this message wait until we have a table bench under us, and some ale before?”

Xena studied him for a long moment, her eyes narrowing slightly. She let him wait just long enough for everyone to start twitching, then she nodded. “Sure.” She resettled herself in a more conventional posture on Argo’s back, and lifted her hand to indicate the path back towards home. “After you.”

Ranalf started his horse forward, and she pulled Argo along side him, letting her men string out in rough formation around the strangers.

They rode in silence for a moment, then Ranalf looked over at her. “So you’re Xena.”

The warrior nodded. “I’m Xena.” She agreed.

“You and your men were heading somewhere. I hope we’re not interrupting you.” Ranalf said.

“We were finding out why a dozen strange soldiers were heading this way.” Xena informed him. “We had word you were coming through the pass earlier.”

The soldier nodded slowly. "I see." He said. "Were you expecting some trouble?"

Xena chuckled. "We were bored and looking for entertainment." She turned her head and looked at him. "But we're glad you turned out to be friendly, polite strange soldiers instead of the usual kind. It's always nice to be pleasantly surprised."

"Some shoot first in these parts, we've discovered." Ranalf said. "We started out eighteen."

Xena glanced behind her. "I'm old enough to know better than to do that." Her ears pricked, though, hearing it. "But there's a lot of unknowns right now. With the war."

"With the war." The man agreed. "That's very true."

Silence fell again, and they walked along, kicking up dust from the road as the sun baked down on them. Xena had the feeling the shadows they would soon start casting before them were a sign that once again, she was bringing trouble home.

Again.

**

"What?" Gabrielle looked up from changing Dori's jumper.

"Said he was from the town, from the militia." The scout said. "Wanted to talk to you."

"Bring him over." Gabrielle tied the strings on Dori's shirt hastily. "He's probably got a message from Xena."

The scout regarded her. "We didn't let him in. He's a man."

Gabrielle paused in midmotion, then she turned and looked up at the scout.

"It's the law." The scout said. "Your majesty."

"Oh for the sake of the Gods." Gabrielle got up. "Dori, stay here. Mama will be right back." She ducked past the scout and emerged onto the lined path that led to her quarters, breaking into a run towards the tribe's entrance.

She startled a group of women standing nearby, her powerful, short strides taking her up to her full speed quickly as she crossed the open space drawing the attention of everyone in the general vicinity.

There was no sense of urgency from Xena. No trickle of anger, or fear, or the seductive excitement of fighting coming from her partner, so Gabrielle herself wasn't really sure why she was scaring the Hades out of everyone except that running felt good, and she was in the mood to do it, so she did.

She whipped past the dining hall, and spotted heads turning and hands reaching for weapons, but she kept going, ignoring the calls and the quickly reacting guards who started running towards her.

She outpaced them, her boots kicking up dust as she slipped between them, taking the slope in stride and muffling as smile as she heard them cursing.

A moment later she passed under the leaves of the trees that lined the outbound path and had to haul up quickly to avoid crashing into the man in Xena's colors standing patiently outside. "Edgar."

"Ma'am. Ah. Gabrielle." The soldier looked very glad to see her. "Didn't want to stir up nothing here, but Xena asked to get a message up to you."

"No problem." Gabrielle clasped his shoulder, pleased to feel her breathing remain even, and her heartbeat steady despite her sudden effort. "What's wrong?"

“Watch station at the far pass sent word. Soldiers on their way in.” Edgar said. “Xena took a couple of the boys to go check it out.”

“Soldiers... as in an army?” The bard asked.

“Didn’t sound like.” The militiaman shook his head. “Else she’da taken more, yah?”

“Not necessarily.” Gabrielle responded dryly. “But thanks, Edgar. I guess we’ll find out soon enough, right?”

“Yah.”

Gabrielle patted his arm. “Okay, let me get my daughter and we’ll head down to town. Thanks for coming up to tell me.” She watched him salute, then turn and leave, heading down the slope back towards Amphipolis.

She waited, then she turned, to find the guards, and the two on duty watch there staring at her. “Okay.” She said. “Gabrielle’s rule change number one. If someone from the town wants to talk to me, you let them in.”

“He was a man.”

“I don’t care if he was a three legged minotaur.” The queen said. “These are not some unknown strangers wandering down the road. If they show up here, and ask for me, find me. Bring them in and don’t waste their time.”

“Mama.” Dori pattered into view, two Amazons sprawling nearly into the leaves after her. “Mama, where you going?”

“C’mere, Dor.” Gabrielle held her hand out. “So are we clear on that?” She returned her attention to the guard. “I understand what our laws are. But I also have learned, sometimes painfully, that common sense has to come before laws sometimes, and this is one of those times.”

“Yes, your majesty.” The nearer of the guards said. “We’re clear on that.”

“Besides, if they’re sending a warning up the hill, chances are we need to hear it.” Gabrielle concluded. “Now, me and Dori are going to go down there and find out what’s really going on. There are soldiers headed this way.” She started for the path herself. “I’ll be back shortly to fill everyone in.”

“Yes, your majesty.”

Gabrielle took Dori by the hand and dropped out of their view as she ducked past the village entrance and headed for the lower gate to the town. “Like chickens sometimes, I swear.”

“Mama, we going to find Boo?” Dori asked, as they climbed down the path. “I want to show Boo my toof.”

“Yes, honey.” Gabrielle murmured. “We’re going to find Boo. I’m not sure where we’re going to find her, but we’ll find her. Don’t you worry about that.”

“Okay.” Dori agreed. “Mama those people were mad.”

“Who, the people up in the village?” Gabrielle watched her daughter.

“Yes.” Her daughter nodded. “They were chasing and making loud noise.” She added. “Mad peoples.”

Gabrielle raked her hair back out of her eyes. “I know that, sweetie. But sometimes you have to do the right thing, even if it makes people mad. You know that, right? Sometimes me and Boo tell you to do things you don’t want to do?”

“Yes.”

“Well, that’s because your Boo and I know that it’s the right thing to do, even if it doesn’t seem like fun to you.”

“No fun.” Dori pouted.

“I know, honey.” Gabrielle felt her annoyance ease, charmed by her daughter as usual. She was a little concerned about her partner, but after all Xena was more than capable of taking care of herself and she’d taken militia with her.

She’d be fine.

Not that the thought kept her from moving a little faster, or her heart beating a little more strongly, or her senses starting to reach out to find that sometimes elusive thread that bound them together. There was what she told herself logically, and then there was that feeling in her gut that sometimes overrode sense.

There were things about her and Xena that defied logic and often also sense, but she was okay with that.

They reached the back gates and Gabrielle stiffarmed them open, striding down the path past the new cabins and the recently rebuilt wooden fencing towards the inn – where she could already see a crowd gathering.

The inn, which had become again the centerpoint of town life and the place all Amphipolis went to find out what was going on. Gabrielle exchanged smiles and a wave of greeting as she edged her way up the steps and found Cyrene waiting at the top of them. “Hi mom.”

“Ah, there you are.” Cyrene spotted her and came over. “Do you know what’s going on?”

“Just what everyone else probably does.” Gabrielle admitted. “That they spotted some soldiers heading this way, and my one and only’s out there checking it out.”

“Gramma!” Dori wormed her way forward. “Want to see my toof?”

“Hey you little darling.” Cyrene stroked Dori’s head. “I’ll look at it in just a minute.” She turned back to Gabrielle. “Hope this isn’t the start of something bigger.”

“You and me both.” Gabrielle put her hand on her mother in law’s arm. “Maybe we’ll get lucky and it’s just someone lost heading for Athens.”

Cyrene gave her a skeptical look. “Well, why don’t you two come inside and get some lunch while we’re waiting? Unless you’re going to sneak off to the stable and ride after her.” She watched Gabrielle’s face shift and saw the chagrin there. “By the gods, Gabrielle. Some things about you never change.”

Gabrielle had to smile, and lift her hands in self acknowledgement. “No, I’ll be good this time.” She guided Dori into the inn. “C’mon, Dori. Let’s see if Gramma has some cookies.”

Cyrene followed them inside, leaving the buzzing crowd behind them.

**

Xena led the way across the bridge, glad they were almost back to town so they could escape the heat and the thick muggy air. She was sweating freely, as were the rest of the men behind her, and she was grateful for the relatively scant covering of her leathers that at least gave her a little relief.

“Hades, it’s roasting.” Ranalf said. “Glad to see the town there. That’s it?”

“That’s it.” Xena agreed. “Stables to the left. Inn’s to the right.”

“Phew.” One of the men behind him sighed. “Thank the gods.”

They started up the slope from the bridge up to the town. Xena glanced up at the inn’s porch, where she could just make out a figure standing on it, elbows resting on the railing watching them approach.

Gabrielle, of course. The warrior smiled as she recognized her partner, reading impatient curiosity in the bard’s posture. A straggle of others were moving towards the inn, seeing them approach and Xena herself was very glad to pass at last under the trees that lined the approach up to the newly rebuilt town gates.

The bard straightened up and put her hands on the railing, the sunlight trickling through the leaves outlining her body. Unlike the townsfolk around her, most of her skin was showing in her Amazon leathers, burnished to golden from the summer sun.

“Is that an Amazon there?” Ranalf said. “By the inn?”

Simple question, with a very complicated answer. “C’mon and I’ll introduce you.” Xena angled Argo’s steps towards the inn and shook the sweat dampened hair from her eyes. “Bennu, call someone up to grab their horses.”

“Aye, Genr’l.” Bennu swung off his horse as they arrived at the inn. He put his scarred fingers between his teeth and let out a short and long whistle, grunting as two of Xena’s men popped out from nearby and headed their way.

Xena swung her leg over Argo’s neck and slid down, giving the mare a slap on the shoulder and bumping her on her way back towards the paddock. “G’wan, girl. I promise you some apples later.”

Argo eyed her rider skeptically, but snorted and trotted off, pausing to shove her nose into the horse trough next to the inn’s yard and drink some water.

“General?” Ranalf asked.

“You pick up a lot of titles when you do what I’ve done.” Xena walked towards the steps, her eyes meeting Gabrielle’s and a smile appearing on her face at the grave twinkle she saw there. “Lead men in battle, you get called a lot of things.”

“Ah.” Ranalf hurried to keep up with her as one of the militia took the reins of his horse. “I see.”

Xena climbed up the steps, reaching out to take Gabrielle’s extended hand and clasping it, drawing it up with casual grace and kissing her knuckles before turning back towards the soldier behind her. “Ranalf, this is Gabrielle.” She said. “She’s... what are you today anyway?”

Gabrielle chuckled, and met Ranalf’s eyes. “A little of everything .” She said. “I’m Xena’s partner.” She clasped his hesitantly offered arm. “Welcome to Amphipolis.”

The rest of the townsfolk were hanging back a little, waiting to see what was going to happen.

“Thank you.” Ranalf said. “But you are... you are an Amazon?”

“Sometimes.” Gabrielle said. “When I’m not acting as a judge here in town, or telling stories somewhere.” She indicated the door. “Looks like everyone could use a cold drink.” She hooked her fingers through one of Xena’s armor straps. “Especially you.”

Ranalf looked confused, but wasn’t about to turn down the offer. “It is very welcome, thank you.”

They entered the inn. A few of the tables were occupied, but most weren’t, leaving plenty of room for the visitors to settle in. Cyrene was behind her counter, watching the action with a critical eye, but she kept her silence as the strange soldiers took seats around the biggest of the tables.

Xena took her usual seat at this, her family's table. It was the one closest to the window, where a chance of a breeze might blow in. Gabrielle took the seat next to her, and they faced the soldiers. "Pitcher of ale?"

"We'd be grateful for it." Ranalf said. "We have good coin to pay." He hastily added. "We're not asking for charity."

Cyrene grunted, and signaled the serving girl, who had been standing by in the shadows waiting. The girl picked up a pitcher and a tray of wooden mugs and glided over to the table.

"Where are you from?" Gabrielle asked, appropriating one of the mugs and pouring it full. She put it down in front of her partner and leaned on the table, studying the soldiers.

Ranalf glanced up from pouring his own mug. "Begging your pardon, ma'am, we'll keep our business quiet a bit longer, until there's a touch less dust in the throat and I can speak of it."

"Sure." Gabrielle said. "I know the feeling."

Xena took a slow swallow of ale, glad to be in the shade after the day's ride up and back to the pass. She was content to wait until the soldiers had a mind to talk, since hearing whatever trouble this was bringing her wouldn't make her happy.

It seemed a bit strange to her to have the soldier keep pushing it off like this though, and she could see the minute shift in Gabrielle's expression that told her the bard was thinking more or less the same thing.

Could they read each other's minds? Xena felt a tiny smile appear as her partner casually looked around, and met her eyes, one brow hiking slightly. No. She couldn't reach inside the bard's mind and examine her thoughts. But living with her in close quarters for so many years had allowed Xena to read her body language; more expressive than any words could be.

"Is our daughter back from the wilds?" Xena leaned back and tapped her thumbs together, seeing the tilt of her partner's head as she acknowledged the response and the subject change.

"Yes." Gabrielle took a sip of Xena's ale, then put the mug down. "She ended up teaching the class, as you suspected. She found a boar's tooth as long as my hand in the process."

"Have to carve something out of that for her." The warrior remarked. "Did they at least catch the boar and bring it back? You could show them that pit cooking you do with those things."

"Just the tooth." The bard patted her hand. "But I told them I was going to start cooking classes so you didn't have to suffer so much there."

The server returned with a platter, which had a loaf of fresh bread on it, and a mound of cut meat slices. The soldiers made very agreeable noises as it arrived, and dove in without hesitation. "Not many towns out this way." Ranalf said.

"Not many, no." Gabrielle answered, since Xena had her nose stuck in her mug. "A few small ones, down the river, and there's a few holdings up in the mountains, but it's pretty quiet around here. Amphipolis is the largest town for about a sevenday."

"So we noted." Ranalf nodded. "Get trade here, though, we saw on the way in."

"Sure." The bard said. "We produce enough to trade." She added. "Farms around, and there are some good craftsmen here."

"Good hunting around." Xena commented briefly.

The man nodded. "And now we come to it." He opened a pouch at his waist and withdrew a rolled parchment. "Forgive me for waiting. It's a cruel thing, but my men are important to me, and I wanted to make sure they got at least a bite and some drink before I tendered this, least you take

exception to it and send us back on the road.”

“We would never do that.” Gabrielle told him, in a kind tone. “We’d have just had Cyrene poison the meat.”

Everyone stopped chewing, and stared at her.

“Just kidding.” The bard smiled.

Xena extended her hand out for the parchment, holding it steady until Ranalf gave it to her. Then she settled her elbows on the arms of her chair and untied the silk ribbon holding it closed.

Silk ribbon. Bad sign. “Did you come from Athens?” She asked, glancing up over the still closed parchment resting in her hands.

“No, we did not.” Ranalf answered. “But I believe that message will explain our purpose.”

Gabrielle regarded them, then turned her head and looked at her partner. “Why do I get the feeling we should have stayed in bed today?”

Xena sighed, and unrolled the scroll, tilting her head a little to read it.

**

Gabrielle sat down on the grass next to where Xena was fully reclined, her long legs extended and crossed at the ankle in the shade of a tree. “Well.”

“Definitely wasn’t expecting that.” The warrior said.

“No.” The bard said. “Me either.” She unrolled the parchment and read it for the nth time. “Most noble warlord Xena.” She intoned, lowering her voice. “We approach you on a matter that might be of benefit to us all and ask your indulgence on a discussion of it.”

Xena covered her eyes with her forearm. “I’m no supporter of Athen’s war, but did the Spartans really think I’d cross the lines and lead their army?”

“Apparently so.” Gabrielle confirmed. “Ten thousand dinars, and ten leagues of land if you agree, and twenty thousand more dinars plus a palace if you lead them to victory.”

“That’s a lot of loot.”

Gabrielle glanced at her. “Interested?”

“Sure.” Xena left her arm where it was. “We could use all that to buy a thousand silver horseshoes for Argo and a gold ale tap for my mother.” She exhaled. “No I’m not interested, but it was damn bold of them.”

“I like it.” Her partner surprisingly replied. “Very straightforward. None of this appealing to loyalty or honor stuff. Just ‘hey, we hear you’re a kickass fighter, and we’d like to pay you a lot of money to do it for us.’ It’s sort of refreshing.”

Xena chuckled.

“Well, hon, it is.” Gabrielle let the parchment roll up, and then she reclined next to the warrior, resting on one elbow. “Do you think they heard about you defeating that guy?”

Xena let her arm down, then curled it around Gabrielle’s back. “Maybe.” She said. “But I think I’ve told you I bumped up against the Spartans before. Fought a legion of them to a standstill back in the border hills years back.”

“You and your army?” Gabrielle leaned closer and gently blew in Xena’s ear. “Or you alone?” She watched the skin on her face tense as a smile appeared, and she could see the twinkle in those

very blue eyes.

“Me and about a dozen guys.” Xena turned her head and kissed Gabrielle on the lips. “It’s possible they remembered that.”

“It’s possible they remembered you.” Gabrielle touched foreheads with her. “You’re pretty unforgettable.”

The warrior purred softly under her breath. Then she sighed. “Well, I’m not up for leading Sparta against the Athenian army, so I guess we can send back a note with these guys and that’ll be the end of it.”

“Not even a little tempted?”

“Honestly, no.” Xena replied easily. “For one thing, I don’t think they need my help and for another their fighting style is not anything I can work with. That’s what let me beat them the first time, they do battle by numbers.”

“Ah.”

“Besides.” Xena nibbled on her partner’s earlobe. “I’m enjoying being retired.”

Gabrielle studied her soulmate’s face. It was relaxed and open, and she realized the words were heartfelt. Xena really didn’t feel any urge to accept the offer, and that made the bard wholeheartedly smile. “You couldn’t anyway, sweetheart.” She informed her. “Because I’d have to go with you, and that means our whole Amazon nation would have to go too.”

Xena covered her eyes again, her belly shaking with laughter.

“There’s not enough parchment in the world for me to write down all the stuff that would happen if we did that.” Gabrielle eased down next to her, letting her cheek rest against Xena’s upper arm. “I’d still be writing when Dori’s kids were around watching me thinking their grandmother was more than a little nutty.”

“Gods.” Xena wiped the tears from her eyes. “That’s the truth.”

They lay there together quietly for a few minutes, listening to the leaves rustle over head. Here in their little private glade, the sounds of the town were muted and they could absorb a little of the peace they’d retreated here to find.

Back at the inn, the soldiers waited, along with the elders of the town who knew what was going on. Dori was playing with her cousins, and Gabrielle had sent word up to the Amazon village that she’d be down the hill for a while dealing with some unexpected visitors.

That left them free to consider the options together, without interruption or the pressure of all those watching eyes and listening ears.

It suited Gabrielle. She draped her arm over her partner’s waist and let her fingers stroke the soft leather covering it. Underneath, she could feel the steady breathing, glad she was finally not able to count every rib.

They had both been nothing but skin and bone when they got back from the valley and all the running up and down the mountain since then hadn’t helped much. But the slower pace of the dog days of summer had finally caught up with them and they’d gotten a chance to relax a little more and recover completely.

She felt Xena’s fingers glide through her hair, and she exhaled happily as she felt the gentle massage at her temples. “Mm.”

Xena let her eyes drift open, and regarded the leaves over her head. It was hard to say really how she felt about the parchment. On one hand, it was flattering that a major city state was

offering her truly princely sums of money to do something she generally did for free, but the offer did put her on the map and if it got out, could draw Athen's notice and not in a good way.

She really didn't have any desire to actually accept the offer. Her statement to Gabrielle had been the honest truth, and even now, reviewing the idea, she didn't even feel the faintest twinge of interest.

Which in itself, was a little interesting. Xena felt Gabrielle nestle a little closer, her warm breath tickling the side of her neck. "What would you do with all those dinars?"

"What would I do." Gabrielle unbuckled a strap on Xena's armor. "Well, since no amount of money could possibly buy me anything more precious than I already have, I guess I'd have to spend it on toys for Dori and new clothes for you."

"That's a lot of clothes." Xena observed.

"You wear them out fast. I figure that many dinars should keep you for... maybe a year." Gabrielle looked up at her with warm affection. "Why in Hades would we need all that?"

"We wouldn't." Xena shook her head. "But I'd like you to write a nice, polite note to them turning them down, so we don't stir up any more trouble than we have to."

Gabrielle considered that, one hand making idle tracings on the leathers covering her partner. "They'll never believe it's from you."

"Especially after you sign your name to it." Xena pulled the leather knots loose holding Gabrielle's top on. "Tell em you won't let me go."

Gabrielle started laughing.

"You're the queen of the Amazons, aren'tcha?" Xena felt her armor drop free, and the laces on the back of her leathers loosen. "Don't I have to listen to you?"

Gabrielle laughed harder.

"Yeah, okay." Xena finally chuckled along with her. She rolled onto her side and stifled the bard's guffaws with a kiss, that eased quickly past teasing into passion as Gabrielle slid the straps on her leathers down. "You'll think of something."

"Yes I will." Gabrielle nipped her collarbone. "But not right now."

"No, not right now."

**

They walked back up onto the inn's steps hand in hand, the late afternoon light casting their shadow ahead of them.

Xena pushed the door open and they entered, to find the room mostly empty, with the foreign soldiers still at the table, looking a little awkward and uncomfortable. Cyrene was behind her work counter, and only a half dozen militia were there, keeping watch on the guests.

They all looked profoundly relieved to see Xena and Gabrielle.

Xena pulled out a chair at the table next to the soldiers and sat down, as Gabrielle went over to where Cyrene was standing, and whispered to her. "Gentlemen." The warrior said.

The soldiers turned and looked at her, with slightly wary expressions that made the warrior wonder if her militia hadn't been telling tall tales while she was gone. She extended her legs out and crossed them at the ankles, and rested her elbows on the chair arms.

Ranalf turned to face her. "Have you had enough time to consider the note we brought you?" He

asked. "I do thank you for the hospitality shown to us, I realize our mission might not be popular."

Xena shrugged. "We're a pretty tolerant town." She remarked. "Most of us are fighters, or retired fighters, or people who've lived through knowing what side you're on is sometimes a very gray proposition."

"I see."

"And Athens last took notice of us wanting taxes and conscripts with nothing in return." Xena went on. "Wasn't a popular demand."

Now Ranalf nodded assuredly. "We have heard much the same on the way here." He said. "In our land, coin for the army and bodies to fight in it are never begrudged but also care is taken in return."

"So I've heard." Xena inclined her head graciously. "Spartans are a proud people."

The soldiers stirred a little, and exchanged glances, relaxing in their chairs perceptibly.

Gabrielle came over and sat down, a parchment and quill in her hands. She set an ink pot down on the table and dipped the end of the quill in it, pausing to bite the end of the instrument as she considered the blank sheet in front of her.

"We have heard." Ranalf said. "Your officers here have been entertaining us while you were gone."

Ah. Xena gave her men a look, and they grinned back at her. "So you don't have anything to worry about in regards to that here." She said. "My mother'll take your coin even if you are Spartans. Right Mother?"

"Right." Cyrene agreed.

Ranalf glanced over at her. "We appreciate that."

"You came here in good faith, and delivered a message." Xena said. "I didn't take offense to that. Nice of Sparta to think of asking, but that's not my line of work anymore."

Ranalf studied her closely. "Really?"

"Really." Xena confirmed. "I'm out of the warlord business. Have been for a while."

The soldiers looked around at the militia, then back at Xena, plainly skeptical. "I know those who sent me will be disappointed." Ranalf said. "They had hoped you would be honored by the offer."

Bennu shifted, his eyes narrowing a little. Xena lifted a hand slightly in his direction, and he settled back down. "Honored is a hoary term. I appreciate the offer, and I respect whoever it was who sent the message. I'm just not interested."

Ranalf exhaled. "I am truly sorry to hear that." He said. "As I have been listening to these various tales of your men here, and was looking forward to seeing the reality of that for myself." He glanced at his companions. "We all were."

Xena spread her hands out, then laced her fingers together in front of her. "That's not my problem." She said. "Gabrielle will give you a note to take back to whoever sent you."

Ranalf glanced at the bard, who was busy scribing next to Xena. Gabrielle wrote for a moment more, then sensed the quiet and looked up in question. When no one said anything, she put her head back down on her left hand and continued scribbling, pausing only to briefly glance at her partner and bite the end of the quill, before she went on.

"Well." Ranalf said after a long pause. "We will be content with that, then. You are the master of

your own mind, of that I am sure. “ He inclined his head respectfully in Xena’s direction. “Then with your leave, we will stay the night and take horse tomorrow. I would like to get clear of this border region and back into more familiar lands quickly.”

“You took a risk coming here.” Xena remarked.

“We did.” Ranalf agreed. “Though we do not wear my master’s badge, still, we would be recognized by some and though battle has not yet been joined, all know it’s coming.” He regarded her. “Perhaps you are the wiser to stay here and out of it.”

“Mostly because we’ve been in it a lot more than a lot of people.” Gabrielle spoke up. She signed the bottom of the parchment and gently blew on it to dry the ink. “Why are you fighting this war?” She looked over at Ranalf. “I know why Athens is.”

The soldier settled back and rested his elbow on the table. “Fair question.” He said. “We welcome the war. It’s what we live for, and we love fighting. I love fighting, even though you get hurt, and many die doing it.”

Gabrielle rolled the now dry parchment up and tied a ribbon around it. She took a bit of old candle end out of her belt pouch and held it near the lit candle on the table, until it softened and dripped on the ribbon’s knot. “Well.” She set it down, then she removed the ring from her finger and reversed it, gently pressing the face of it into the cooling wax. “At least you’re honest about it.”

Xena chuckled softly.

“Do not your Amazons feel the same?” He asked. “I had heard that they do.”

“Some do.” Gabrielle handed him the rolled parchment. “Here you go. My Amazons, matter of fact, don’t want any part of this war. They know what war is. We lost sisters, friends, and mothers to the last insane man’s fight that came this way.”

Ranalf took the parchment and looked at it, then he carefully put it in his saddle bag resting near his feet. “Tis our belief war has no place in it for women.” He said, as he closed up the bag “So that is for the best.”

Xena tilted her head and looked at him, then looked down at herself, then looked over at Gabrielle with hiked brows, before she returned her attention to the soldier.

“Don’t worry honey.” Gabrielle patted her arm. “I know you’re all woman.”

Ranalf looked up at her, then at the warrior. “Of course, you are an exception. “ He recovered gracefully. “I am sure my master has the greatest respect for your skills, if he asked you to fight for us.” He added. “And I meant no offense, it is just what I believe.”

Gabrielle leaned on elbows. “None taken.” She said. “Matter of fact, there’s been more than one time in my life when I’d wished the guy trying to kill me felt that way.”

The soldier smiled at that. “Had it been me or one of mine, it would have been so. “ He said. “If we cannot persuade your noble friend here to take up arms with us, at least I am glad that we will not be facing you or your – did you call them sisters? Across the line of battle.”

Gabrielle smiled back. “Likewise. I have heard so much about the fighting skills of the Spartans. I know you’d be a very formidable enemy.”

All the soldiers straightened a little, and preened. “We are of the First legion.” Ranalf said, proudly. “We have carried our master’s flag into battle twenty seasons and never failed him. So indeed I am glad we will not be enemies. I have heard – rumors cross the water – that even Athens will mock us by throwing others of the Amazons before us in hopes of drawing our weapons and giving us pause, but I will tell you that though we do not think women should be on the

battlefield, none of us will hesitate to take their lives.”

Xena and Gabrielle went still. Then they slowly turned and looked at each other, staring silently into each other’s eyes for a long moment.

“They will tell them we are afraid of women.” One of the other soldiers said, oblivious of the wordless communication going on. “And so they will lead the vanguard and think themselves secure. We will kill them.”

Ranalf nodded. “So it is good, then, you and yours stay here behind.” He said to Gabrielle. “As you are gracious, and seem a kindly woman.”

Gabrielle slowly exhaled. “Thanks.” She murmured. “Will you excuse us for a moment? We.. um..”

“Need to go pick up our daughter.” Xena rose out of her seat, her body tense. “We’ll see you later on.” She put her hand on Gabrielle’s back as the bard stood up. “Bennu, make sure they get settled.”

“Aye, Genr’l.” Bennu also stood. “We’ll take care of em for ya.”

Instead of heading for the front door, by common, silent consent they both eased past the tables and went into the kitchen through the back entrance, waiting for the swinging door to shut before they looked at each other.

“We need to talk.” Gabrielle said. “I need to think about what they just told us.”

Xena slowly nodded.

“Do you think they were telling the truth, or was that just battlefield bs?” The bard asked, turning and taking Xena’s hands in hers. “Wishful thinking on their part? Just ego talking?”

Xena’s face went still, only her eyes moving as she considered. “I don’t know.” She said, after a long pause. “But we need to find out. “

“Damn.” Gabrielle muttered. “You going to take one of them out behind the barn?”

“No.” Xena released her, and gave her a pat on the cheek. “Relax. Let’s find out the truth of this before we even talk about it. They could just be shooting pointless arrows. “ She glanced at the entrance to the kitchen cellar. “Let’s let mom’s ale work on them and see what we can dig out of them tonight.”

“I know they’re not my tribes, and not my business.” Gabrielle said. “But they’re talking about just letting them walk into a slaughter. I don’t know if I can ignore that, Xena.”

The warrior’s hand came to rest on her partner’s shoulder. “Me either. But let’s find out the truth first.”

Gabrielle put her hands on her hips and exhaled, her head down. Then she stepped closer and put her arms around Xena, seeking comfort. “Trouble really does seek us out, doesn’t it?”

Xena hugged her. “Think of a good story to tell tonight. And let’s get some of your Amazons down here for dinner.”

“Ugh.”

“They could use a break from the food up there anyway.”

“Xena.”

**

Continued in Part 4

A Queen's Tale

Part 4

Gabrielle settled back down into her chair, the last of the claps and whistles fading around her as she returned the accolades with a smile and a wave. She picked up her mug, freshly filled, and took a sip to ease her throat as their guests turned their chairs and faced her.

"What a fine storyteller you are." Ranalf said straightforwardly. "Wonderful."

The bard smiled at him. "Thanks." She lifted her mug in his direction. "It's very nice to have a new audience. Glad you enjoyed it."

The inn was chock full, between the merchants visiting, the soldiers, the townsfolk, and a dozen Amazons scattered around inside. It was more than a little warm, and Xena had her chair pushed back against the wall, with the window open behind her shoulders.

"Do the Amazons traditionally perform so?" Ranalf asked. "I hadn't heard they did."

"They don't." Gabrielle said. "Amazons have a strong tradition of passing down their beliefs and history in tribal scrolls, and there's many a night when someone will bring one of those scrolls out and read to everyone a bit of the history."

"But that is not what you have just done." The soldier next to Ranalf spoke up.

"No." The bard agreed. "That part of me is not Amazon. I'm a bard. I tell stories just because that's what I do, and that's what I love." She glanced to one side. "Well, that's one of the things that I love." She amended, as she watched Dori swinging her booted feet where she was sitting on Xena's lap.

Xena was content to sit in her corner, with the cool breeze hitting the back of her neck as she watched their guests, and listened to Gabrielle's skillfully casual questioning of them. Solari came over and offered her queen a pitcher, and the bard waved her to put it on the table, inviting everyone to take part in the most natural way.

The soldiers, of course, were happy to. They'd had a big dinner, and many jugs of ale, and despite being big men and experienced fighters, it was starting to get to them. Xena kept to her large mug, filled with cider and pretended to concentrate on Dori's cheerful babbling, one ear fully cocked and listening to the men's conversation.

"Boo, I heard somethin."

"Yeah?" The warrior bounced her little charge a bit on her knee. "What'd you hear, shortie? In here all I can hear is your mama telling stories and someone beating up a pot back in the kitchen."

"I heard a foxes outside."

Xena turned her head and looked out the window, seeing little but shadows. "Yeah?"

"Pardon, Xena?" Ranalf said. "What did you say your daughter's name was?"

Xena wrested her attention from the bushes and focused on the soldier. "Her name is Doriana." She said. "Dori for short."

Dori put her hands on the table and patted it. "Hi." She greeted Ranalf amiably, grinning at him. "You gots pretty shirts." She pointed at the mail on the man's chest. "Shiny."

One of the other soldiers chuckled. "Tis only a babe could think this pretty." He touched his armor. "Wish they could never grow up to find differently."

“Dori’s already known war.” Gabrielle spoke up from her end of the table. She smiled at Dori as she looked over at her. “Mama’s got a shirt like that too, right honey?”

“Yes.” Dori agreed. “Mama, you tell the cow story? It’s funny!”

“Not right now, Dor.” Gabrielle had caught the grimace on her partner’s face. “I’ll tell it to you later, when you go to bed, okay?”

Dori scowled engagingly at her.

Ranalf was studying Dori, then looking at Gabrielle, then turning his head to look over at Xena.

Xena merely smiled benignly back at him. “We held off an army of around four thousand with about six hundred here, Gabrielle’s Amazons, my militia, and some friends of ours all told.” She remarked. “Dori helped.”

The soldier’s curious look turned to a stare.

“We know war.” Gabrielle said. “That’s why we don’t want to rush off into another one, no matter whose side it is.” She held her hand out. “C’mere, honey.”

Dori scrambled off Xena’s knee and darted under the table, startling all the men before she popped out next to Gabrielle and climbed up into her lap. “Mama!”

Gabrielle put her arms around Dori. “I can understand Athens recruiting Amazons.” She said, casually. “They’ll be lucky to get them.”

Xena nodded. “I took every one I could get in the war.” She said. “Those were some tough battles, right Solari?”

“You got that right, champ.” Solari was seated at the next table with Cait, Paladia, and Aalene. “We got them good in that ambush, though.” She said. “Nailed those suckers.”

The younger man next to Ranalf leaned forward and let his weight rest on his elbows. “Well, as we hear it.” He said, looking around and then facing forward again. “They don’t care if you can fight.” He was visibly a little more drunk than his comrades.

“Well.” Solari leaned forward. “I hope they don’t think they can use Amazons for something other than fighting if you catch my drift.”

Cait chuckled. Paladia rolled her eyes. Aalene merely looked amused.

“We can fight.” Solari went on seriously. “C’mon, you wanna arm wrestle?”

The younger soldier goggled at her. “Who.. me?”

“Yeah you.” Solari stood up and put her hands on her hips. “I’d rather arm wrestle you than either of those two.” She indicated Xena and Gabrielle. “I can beat you.” She looked back at the man. “I’ll just get my ass kicked by them.”

Gabrielle bit the inside of her lip to keep from laughing, and almost lost it anyway when she looked across the table and saw the faint smirk on Xena’s face and the tip of her tongue poking out between her teeth.

She pinched the bridge of her nose. “Solari.” She said. “These are our guests.”

“Aw.” Solari returned to her seat and dropped down into it. “Sorry your Maj.”

Ranalf looked bemused. His younger companion scowled. “Naw.” He said. “They didn’t want em for bedding, we heard. Some deal. Some thing, some god favor.. dunno.” He reached for his mug and drained it. “You aren’t gonna be there, so it’s okay.”

It stopped being funny. Gabrielle looked right across the table at her partner and saw the narrowed eyes and the slightly flaring nostrils. Without moving a muscle Xena had suddenly altered from laid back and slightly bored to bristling irritation and Gabrielle suspected the same thoughts were running through both their heads.

“Yeah, you’re right.” Xena drawled. “We’re not going to be there. “

Ranalf cleared his throat a touch uncomfortably. “And glad we are of it. All that talk is probably nonsense at any rate.” He turned to Gabrielle. “Where did you learn your storytelling, Gabrielle?”

With an effort, Gabrielle wrested her attention away from the thought of gods, and favors. “Living with Xena.” She told Ranalf. “Though I’ve told stories since I was little, really. I started having lots of things to tell though when I began traveling and seeing the world.”

“And getting into trouble.” Xena relaxed a fraction, still without actually moving. “I got a lot more experience figuring out how to get us both out of situations after that.”

“Makes for good stories, though.” Gabrielle blithely asserted. “So that’s where I got my start, and when you live the life I do, you’re never lacking for new material.” She looked down. “Right Dori?”

“Mama.” Dori squiggled back and leaned against her mother. “Mama tells good stories!”

Xena let her partner draw the attention while she studied the soldiers at the table. She was aware of the alertness of the Amazons nearby, and knew they hadn’t missed the offhand comment any more than she had.

Gods again. She knew better than most that it was not a far stretch to think that was possible, though Ranalf’s original story that they were going to be used as spear fodder was also reasonable given the current minds in charge in Athens.

Maybe the truth was twofold. Maybe there was a god’s involvement, and maybe that was Athen’s way of filling their end of the bargain. Or maybe it was all nonsense. The warrior conceded it could well be.

The facts were, the Amazons were being solicited. The Spartans were also soliciting, but it seemed they were being far more selective. Were they both just looking for every advantage? Xena didn’t lie to herself. She was flattered by the offer, and deep down, there was a very animal part of her that would enjoy leading Sparta to war.

But the animal part now was fully owned and directed by a mature reasoning that had different priorities and so, though both flattered and understanding the pleasure being held out, there was truly no temptation for her to agree to it.

She wondered if Ares was involved. It would be like him to play so frivolously with the mortals at his disposal. Xena had thought, though, that the adventure they’d just shared might have made him take a step back, and think about things for a change.

Then she thought about that, and had to laugh wryly at herself. “Who do I think I’m kidding?” She muttered under her breath.

“What was that, champ?” Solari looked over from the other table.

“Nothing.” Xena straightened up and leaned forward. “Ranalf, has Sparta tried to treaty with Athens over this? I know the war really has no urgent reason, but I’m sure they’ve said what their attacking for. what the goal is, haven’t they?”

Ranalf shrugged. “I am but a soldier.” He said. “I know not the plans of my masters. We were not told the whys, just to gather our weapons and assemble. That is the Spartan way.”

“No clashes on the border lately?” The warrior pressed.

“The usual.” One of the other soldiers sitting closest to Xena said. “Squabbles. A man stole a cow, a legion responds to retrieve it. “

“Then the other side sends two legions to ask why.” Gabrielle said. “Is that it?”

Ranalf nodded. “We both want war.” He said, in a mild tone. “I want it. I’m bored at home, I want to fight. Does there need to be a reason?”

Athens had also wanted war, Xena recalled. If she cast her mind back, she could remember herself wanting it, wanting the excitement of leading soldiers into battle and the incomparable rush when your life was on the line and it was only your skill and the luck of the battlefield that let you walk the line and survive and win.

And win. Xena folded her arms over her chest with a thoughtful expression. “What’s at stake?” She asked bluntly. “Land?”

Ranalf cleared his throat. “I don’t know any details.” He said, leaning forward in a conspiring way. “But the word is, this will be no border skirmish. How do you keep from having to guard your borders? Remove them.”

The younger soldier nodded in excitement. “Once and for all! End the petty stuff. We want to take it all. Maybe you’ll end up under Spartan rule in any case?” He smiled at Xena, not very pleasantly. “We could end neighbors.”

“Think Athens wants the same?” The warrior picked up her mug casually and drank from it.

“Of course.” The man shrugged. “But they won’t get it, if they must beg women to fight for them.” He added. “And no offense to those here, who have proven themselves in war apparently.” He gave Solari a look. “I will kill women, but I do not fight against them. It isn’t honorable.”

“Well.” Xena steepled her fingers in front of her, gazing at the man past them. “I’ve never let honor stand in the way of a good fight.” She commented. “But as my partner mentioned, you’re a guest so I won’t rip your man’s parts off and shove them in your mouth for that.”

The soldier took a breath to answer, then met the ice blue eyes staring at him and paused.

“Ah, the boy meant nothing.” Ranalf said, giving the man a push back against the back of his chair. “It’s the ale talking. Apologies to all. We talk freely here, as perhaps we shouldn’t.” He gave the rest of the soldiers a warning look, then turned determinedly back towards Gabrielle. “Your little child is charming and well favored. How many seasons has she?”

Gabrielle accepted the change of subject, realizing by the expressions on the other soldiers faces they would likely get no further information from them. “She’s almost four.” She combed her fingers through Dori’s dark hair. “And very precocious. “

Dori looked up and grinned at her, making her mother grin back at the familiarity of the expression. “Are you ready to go to bed, Dori?”

Her daughter scowled. Everyone around the table laughed, the tension easing.

“I think that means no, your Maj.” Solari chuckled. “Does she ever sleep? “

“Very lightly.” Gabrielle ruefully agreed. “Just like her other mother.” She looked over at her partner. “Thank goodness it’s quiet up by the cabin or they’d both be basket cases.” Her eyes shifted focus and caught the look on Ranalf’s face and only just kept herself from reacting.

She forgot now, sometimes, that not everyone would find the idea of Dori’s origins natural. They hadn’t dissembled about it for years, and everyone in Amphipolis, and in the village, took it as a matter of course.

However, explaining usually got her nowhere, so she pushed right on past the consternation. "So despite the fact my little fishie here doesn't want to, it's time for her to go to bed, so I'll leave you all to trade gory stories." She stood up with Dori in her arms. "C'mon, punkie."

"Mama!" Dori protested. "Want to stay with Boo!" She poked her lower lip out. "Pweese?"

"G'wan, shortie." Xena told her. "I'll be there soon. "

"Promise?" Dori asked.

"Promise." Her parent said gravely.

"Okay?" Gabrielle gave Dori a little bounce. "We should see if we can find Ares, too. I thought I heard him outside."

"Find Guff." Dori agreed. "Bye!" She waved at the remaining tables as Gabrielle eased between them on the way to the door. "Bye Cat!"

"Bye!" Cait waved back.

Cyrene came over with another pitcher of ale and set it down, then took the seat Gabrielle had vacated. "We had a weaver who came here, couple of seasons back, who was from Sparta." She said. "She tells us tales..."

"Ah the tales of women.." Ranalf chuckled. "Is she still here? I sorely lack a good woven blanket in our style. Mine was lost in the journey here." He seemed more comfortable with Cyrene. "We have some I have known from Amphipolis as well. We too have heard tales."

"Well, we can trade then." Cyrene poured ale in his cup. "And yes, she's still here, and I'm sure she'd love to sell you whatever you like. I've seen her blankets. Gorgeous."

Ranalf beamed. "Our weavers are without match." He said. "The colors they use are like none other."

Bennu came over and sat down. "Tis true you don't take mercenaries?"

"Very true." One of the other soldiers, previously silent replied. "And to be a citizen, you must be Spartan. We allow no others the privilege."

"And I've seen smithwork.. hold on a minute." Cyrene glanced down the table at her daughter. "Don't you have a promise to keep?"

Xena looked up from her mug, both eyebrows hiking. Then she lifted the mug in her mother's direction and stood up. "I do." She glanced casually at Solari, who nodded almost imperceptibly. "Gentlemen, I'm sure we'll meet again tomorrow before you leave. Enjoy my mother's hospitality."

"And a good evening to you, Xena." Ranalf said courteously. "Till the morrow."

Rather than dodge through the room, Xena merely stood and put her hands on the windowsill, vaulting out of it and into the night air as she left the soft rattle of crockery and the low voices behind her.

A moment later she was crossing through the back gates, aware she had more than a promise to Dori awaiting her up the mountain. Given her knowledge of Gabrielle, it was probably going to be a very long night.

**

Xena took a detour, as she got to the ridge where she'd built their home. Instead of heading for the porch step she took the path to the right of the cabin, into the deep and fragrant woods that bordered the homestead.

It was quiet up here. She could hear small night animals moving around, and the soft sound of crickets, and far off on the edge of her hearing the faint sounds from inside the cabin and the whisper of Gabrielle's voice on the breeze.

Taking her time, she eased between the bushes, following her nose until she reached a thickly leaved shrub, covered in white and yellow flowers. She carefully gathered a handful of them, appreciating the sweet, delicate scent.

Once she had them arranged to her satisfaction, Xena circled back around the rear of the cabin, glancing up to see the flicker of candlelight through the glazed windows. It shone out a little, just enough for her to cast a shadow as she came around the other side and passed by the deep sunk well with its carefully hammered trough that brought water into the cabin.

Surprisingly decadent for a cabin in the wild. Xena appreciated it though and she gave the wall a pat as she headed up to the door, pushing it gently open and walking inside.

The main room was empty, though the fire was stoked. She could hear Gabrielle's voice inside Dori's room, the bard's warm tones rising and falling as she told Dori her favorite story. Xena went to the mantel and took a down an earthenware jug, carefully arranging her flowers in it and setting it back down to let the fragrance drift around the cabin.

Satisfied, she sat down and removed her boots, tucking them under the chair before she got up and went to the door to Dori's bedroom, where the child was curled up in her bed listening.

Gabrielle was seated in the low, padded chair next to the bed with her legs extended, and she turned her head as she sensed Xena's presence, her voice altering as she smiled. "And then, grandma said, look! Look who's here."

Dori turned around, and her eyes lit up. "Boo!" She yodeled. "Mama's going to tell about you and the cow!!"

"Yeah, I'd never want to miss that part." Xena came over and settled on the bearskin rug, resting her elbow on Dori's bed. "Told ja I'd be up here. "She tweaked Dori's foot.

"That's right, Boo promised." Gabrielle prodded her leg with a toe. "And Boo always keeps her promises, right?"

"I try." Xena exhaled, meeting her partner's eyes through the warm candlelight.

"Mom take over the game?" The bard asked.

"Like a champ." Xena confirmed. "I just hope they don't end up in a free for all down there." She watched Dori grab her hand and squirm over to be next to her. "Those Spartans were getting pretty soused."

"Mm." Gabrielle returned her attention to their daughter. "Okay, let's finish our story."

Xena resigned herself to it, extending her arm across the bed as Dori curled up on her side and used it as a pillow. "G'wan, mama." She regarded her soulmate with a wry smile. "Let's get to me taking a header into the turd pile."

"But you did it so gracefully." Gabrielle said. "And you didn't go headfirst."

"No I went butt first."

Gabrielle cleared her throat. "Okay, here we go. Grandma said. Oh look, look who's here! Xena's here. She'll get the cow down!"

"Moo!"

**

Gabrielle noticed the fragrance as they left Dori sleeping and entered the main room of the cabin. She detoured to the mantel and stopped at the jar, taking a deep breath of the scent. "Mm."

Xena patted her on the side as she eased past, unstopping the half full wineskin and pouring some of it into a warming pot that she set by the fire to heat.

Neither of them spoke. Gabrielle went over to the chair nearest the fire and sat down, extending her legs out and crossing them at the ankles as she gazed into the flames.

Xena set two mugs on the mantel, waiting until she could smell the heating wine before she took it off the fire and poured it in equal measures. Then she picked up the mugs and joined Gabrielle, handing the bard hers as she sat down in the second chair.

"Thanks." Gabrielle finally broke the silence, taking a sip of her wine. "Long day."

"Uh huh." Xena swirled her wine around idly.

Gabrielle waited, watching her soulmate from the corner of her eye. When nothing else was forthcoming, she took another sip of the sweet, warm wine and let it burn its way down into her belly. "What do you think?" She finally asked.

Xena let her head rest against the back of the chair, turning her face so she was looking right at Gabrielle. "What do I think." She repeated. "That's a damn good question, Gabrielle."

The bard half turned so she was facing Xena. "I can't decide what I want to believe." She said. "Do I want to believe Athens is going to throw Amazons in front of the army as bait? Do I want to believe this is all some scam from Olympus? Do I want to believe these soldiers are just passing us bad information for whatever reason? What do you believe?"

Xena studied the quiet, serious face opposite her. "I believe I want to take you to bed."

That got her the expected reluctant smile. "Xena." Gabrielle sighed. "I don't know what to do with this."

"I know." The warrior said. "So let me get my side of this out before you start since you talk more than I do, and I really do want to take you to bed." She took a sip of her wine. "First of all, I could give a damn if those other Amazons want to ride Athens coattails to Hades."

Gabrielle sighed again. "Yeah, I know."

"I really don't care." The warrior said, bluntly. "They're idiots for doing it."

The bard watched her, eyes intent.

Xena was briefly silent. "I do care about Eph and Pony." She continued, in a quieter voice. "I think she's on a fools errand, but if either of those things they told us are true, they could be getting themselves into trouble."

Gabrielle put her cup down. She got up and went over to Xena's chair, laying her fingertips on her partner's chin and lifting her face a little so she could kiss her on the lips. Then she let her forehead rest against Xena's. "I'm worried about her too."

Xena put her own cup down and got up, bumping Gabrielle over to the low slung couch where they settled together in a comfortable squish. "So."

"So." Gabrielle took Xena's hand in hers. "So my problem is, I can't just leave it alone, Xe. I know they aren't part of our tribe, and they really want to do this but I can't let them just walk into what might be a trap without trying to warn them."

Xena nodded, and grunted a little under her breath.

"I have this obligation to Ephiny." Gabrielle continued. "This rule, this..." She exhaled. "I started

changing the rules there today Xe.”

“Uh huh.”

The bard was silent for a long moment. “I can’t change the rules for myself though.” She finally said. “I can’t just say, because I want to go someplace, I’ll just change this rule that says I can’t.”

Xena thought about that. “You and me are different in that way.” She remarked.

“I know.” Gabrielle acknowledged softly.

“I’d say to Hades with the rules. I’ll do what I want.”

“I know.” The bard repeated, with a touch of very wry amusement in her tone. “But I can’t do that, Xe. I can’t just leave them here.”

“Uh huh.”

There was another little silence, filled with soft breathing, and the snap of the fire in the fireplace. “Xe.” Gabrielle said, at last. “Will you go out there and find them and warn them? Bring Eph and Pony back here?” She asked. “For me?”

Xena tilted her head and studied her partner’s face in the shadows, watching as the candlelight picked up the glints off her eyes as she watched Xena in return. “Do you honestly expect me to say anything but yes to that?”

“No.” Gabrielle smiled briefly. “I knew you’d say yes, even though you think they’re idiots and deserve what they get.”

“I’ll do it because you want me to.” Xena said. “But also because I want to make sure I understand what’s going on with this war. I don’t like surprises. “

Gabrielle nodded. “I think that’s a good idea too.”

The warrior lifted her hand and gently stroked the side of Gabrielle’s face. “I’ll miss having you with me.”

“I’ll miss having you here.” The bard replied in a mournful tone. “And .. um. “ She paused and took a breath. “I’m going to be looking at the rule books. Figuring out how I can pass this right of caste on to someone else.”

In the shadows, Xena’s eyes popped wide open. “Buh.” A tiny, startled noise escaped her.

“By the gods, did I actually surprise you?” Gabrielle said “Xena, this isn’t who I am. I don’t want to be the queen. I don’t like it, and I don’t think I’m very good at it.”

Xena was surprised. Really surprised, since she’d thought Gabrielle was enjoying her time with the Amazons. “You really don’t like it?”

“I don’t like it.” The bard confirmed. “I don’t like being in charge of all those people, especially since I’m starting to disagree with a lot of things about the Amazons. “ She rested her head against Xena’s shoulder.

“Ah.” Xena recovered and circled Gabrielle with her arms, giving her a hug. “When we get back, Eph and you can work something out.”

“She’s going to be pissed at me.”

“I’m pissed at her for taking off like that.” Xena retorted. “She didn’t spring that you’d have to run the Amazons until after she gave birth until it was a done deal .”

“Well, if I’d paid more attention to the rules... “ Gabrielle sighed. “Anyway.” She lifted Xena’s

hand and kissed the knuckles. "Thank you for taking care of this for me."

"No problem, hon."

Gabrielle soaked in the indulgent affection in that tone, glad of this quiet moment in the dark, when she could speak her heart and know it went to safe ears. Long past were the days when she stressed over every word, wondering how Xena would take them, hoping she didn't sound crazy, or childish, or...

Whatever.

She was angry, a little, that she had to send Xena alone to salve her own conscience. Angry that she had to stay behind and deal with the Amazons, who she was beginning to realize didn't have much in common with her.

They loved her stories, for example, but had no understanding of her need to tell them. They lived by laws that sometimes made little sense to her and had prejudices she really didn't understand.

On the other hand though, with Xena gone, she'd decided she'd take Dori and move down into the village, so at least when Eph came back, and she told her she was giving up the right, she'd have some solid experience behind her to back up the decision.

And probably an Amazon tribe in the middle of a full scale revolt.

"Besides." Xena spoke out of the darkness suddenly. "This'll give me a chance to spread the word we're still open for business here. Maybe drive some trade this way, merchants trying to get away from the war."

"Bring Dori back a present." Gabrielle said. "She's going to be mad at you for taking off."

"Least she'll have you here."

Gabrielle at last surrendered to a yawn. "Honey, I know she loves me, but I'm not her Boo and we both know it." She squeezed her partner's hand. "She'll miss you as much as I will."

Xena patted her on the knee. "Let's go to bed, Mama." She stood up, taking Gabrielle up to her feet with her. "I'll meet with the Spartans tomorrow and let them leave out of here. Then I'll start out after them."

"You don't want to travel with them?"

"Oh no." The warrior smiled grimly. "Last thing I want to have happen is someone spot me traveling with Spartans. We still don't know what Athens is up to in these parts."

Fair enough. Gabrielle unbuckled the belt holding her tunic closed and went over to the garment press, glad to rid herself of the leather. Xena stood nearby, taking off her armor and hanging it up.

Gabrielle sat down on the press and unlaced her boots, pulling them off and setting them aside. She then stood and unlaced the ties at her neck and pulled the tunic off over her head, feeling the slightest of chills as the night air came in through the window, fluttering the candle flames as it went.

It brought to her the scent of the flowers, and she turned to look at them. She walked over to the mantel as Xena started stripping out of her leathers and stood next to the hearth, the warmth of the fire tickling her skin as she touched the soft petals. "Thanks for bringing these in."

"I like the smell." Xena joined her, resting her elbow on Gabrielle's shoulder as she leaned in to sniff them. "There's a couple of big bushes out in the back. I noticed them when I was out with Dori the other day."

Gabrielle turned and slipped her arms around Xena's bare body, the warmth of the fire replaced by the heat of their skin as they came into contact. "You know, it's been a long time since we were apart for any length of time."

"Before Dori was born." Xena said, in a very quiet tone.

Gabrielle fell silent.

"Okay, probably not a good thing to think about before bed." Xena gave her a hug. "C'mon." She steered Gabrielle over to the big bed near the windows, which were propped wide open to let in the night air.

Very different from down in the town. There, the townsfolk kept shutters tight, against creatures of the night and prying eyes. But to people who were used to sleeping under the stars, the night sounds were welcome and the cool air doubly so.

Gabrielle stretched out on the cool linen, laying her head on her pillow as Xena slid into bed next to her. Feeling the comfort and the peace of their home was already giving her second thoughts about moving down into the village, and as she felt Xena's fingers tangle with hers, she decided put that choice on hold for a day or two.

See what happened, first. Maybe Dori would rather sleep here too.

Out of the shadows, Xena's voice suddenly rose, singing a gentle song that put a smile on Gabrielle's face. She turned on her side and reached over to lay a hand on her partner's belly, feeling the motion as she drew in breath to continue her singing.

It was sweet and beautiful. And yet, Gabrielle felt tears coming to her eyes when she thought about not having this cornerstone of her life at her side for an unknown period of time. It was strange and she felt a sense of confusion, a torment of conscience that felt like she was being torn in two.

Chill out, Gabrielle. Her better sense chastised her. You just asked Xena to go out there and do you a favor so stop freaking out because that's what she's doing. She'll be fine. You'll be fine.

Xena's hand covered hers and rubbed her knuckles in comfort.

It did comfort her. It was as though Xena understood what was going through her mind, and just wanted to say it would be all right. Just like the song, just like the flowers.

Gabrielle thought about the flowers, as the last of the song faded. "Did you know I was going to ask you to find Eph?"

Xena cleared her throat a little. "I thought you might."

The bard smiled, and snuggled up next to her soulmate, satisfied to let tomorrow wait. Now it was time to just savor the moment, soak in the love, bolster herself against the separation to come so that in those long dark nights, she'd be able to fill her mind's eye with just this moment.

They'd be all right. Then when Ephiny came back, there would be changes.

It would all work out.

**

The next morning was overcast. Xena stood by the window, debating whether to just get wet or endure the sweaty discomfort of her cloak on her way down to the town. On the one hand, it would be more comfortable at first to merely get wet, but on the other hand if she wore her leathers it would end up being a lot more uncomfortable.

Choices. Choices.

“Uck.” Gabrielle joined her at the window, already dressed in her Amazon leathers. “Figures if you have to travel the weather’s going to suck.”

Xena chuckled wryly.

“Maybe it’ll clear up later on.” Gabrielle mused. “You’re going to stay wet for candlemarks though.”

“Yeah.” The warrior agreed. “I think I’m going to just throw a tunic on to go down the hill with. I can change into leathers and armor later.” She turned and headed over to the press. “You coming down?”

“No. I’m going to head on to the village with Dori.” Gabrielle said. “I think it’s best we don’t let them think anything they said caught our attention.”

“Okay.” Xena finished tying the belt on one of her older tunics. “I’ll see them off, then stop by there and have lunch with you before I head off. Take me a candlemark or two to get packed up anyway.” She sat down and tied on a pair of sandals. “Then can get out of this wet stuff and at least start out the trip half dry.”

Gabrielle turned to watch her. In the simple peasant garb of the town, Xena almost seemed ordinary, except for her height and those eyes. Almost, until she moved and displayed that animal grace. “You look cute.”

Xena stopped and looked at her.

“Honey, you do.” Gabrielle protested mildly, crossing over and fluffing her partner’s dark bangs. “Do you want me to braid your hair?” She sorted through the wild locks. “You need a trim.”

Xena lifted her hand and gave her partner’s bare navel a tickle. “Want to do it quick now? With that sun, a trim would do me some good.”

Gabrielle glanced over her shoulder at the door to Dori’s room, where the child was busy playing with her toys. It was just dawn, and she reckoned they had time for the task. “Sure.” She agreed. “Let me get my trimmers.”

Xena got up and went over to a stool near the fire her partner often sat on when she cooked and perched herself on it, letting her elbows rest on her knees as Gabrielle came over and started combing out her hair.

The familiar touch felt good. Xena exhaled in pleasure and relaxed, turning her mind towards the tasks she had yet to complete before she left, and the path she intended on taking. “I’m going to take Io instead of Argo.” She commented. “Get him some exercise. He’s too full of himself after the last breeding season.”

Gabrielle chuckled. “I can hear Argo snickering from here about that.” She said. “You said she was pissed of at you for riding her in the heat yesterday.”

“She was.” Xena extended her legs out. “Besides, she may be in foal. I don’t want to stress her.”

“Mmhm.” Gabrielle carefully trimmed the dark hair, cutting it just to shoulder length. “If you put this back when you’re riding, you should be fine.”

“Feels better already.” Xena closed her eyes in reflex as the sharp trimmers came close to them. “Want me to do yours? You’re kinda shaggy.”

“Sure.” Gabrielle agreed. “I like the way you cut mine.”

“Me too.” Xena bumped her with an elbow. “Hey, you think I should just ride like this? Bring the armor with me?”

“You’d be more comfortable riding.” Gabrielle carefully trimmed the thick hair around her partner’s sensitive ears. “I’d say you’d draw less attention but we both know that’s just not true.”

Xena smiled.

“I’d even say you might attract less trouble, but we both know that’s nonsense too. “ The bard mock sighed. “But what the heck, Xe. See how long you can get away with it. At least you’ll be a little cooler for a while.”

“Yeah, I think I will.” The warrior agreed. “At least until I’m out of the area and nearer to the roads leading to Athens.” She added. “You done?”

“Yep.” Gabrielle finished the last snip, then she riffled her fingers through the silky dark strands and gave Xena a kiss on the top fo her head. “My turn.”

They changed places, and Xena went to work with the comb, untangling the pale strands before she started. “You want it short like last time?”

“Yeah.”

Xena straightened a little, and her hands went still.

“What?”

“Sh.”

Gabrielle felt the motion start again, and she fell silent, straining her ears to try and pick up whatever it was that had alerted her partner. She knew it was probably a lost cause, but she sorted through the sounds around their cabin in hope anyway.

The birds had stopped singing, she realized. She could still hear the trees outside rustling in the morning breeze, but the piping birdsong that she’d become so used to hearing was now startling by it’s absence.

Xena’s hands remained steady though, her fingers sorting through Gabrielle’s hair and gently tugging on it with the trimmers to cut it. The warrior started whistling softly under her breath, the quiet melody floating out on the breeze into the too silent forest outside.

Very casual. And yet, through the contact of her shoulders with Xena’s thighs, Gabrielle could felt the tension in the body behind her. She focused her hearing now on Dori’s bedroom, catching the soft burbling of her daughter at play.

“Hey Dori.” Xena suddenly called out. “C’mere.”

Gabrielle slowly pulled her boots up under her and shifted her center of balance, a quick glance around locating her staff in its place near the door. Whatever the danger was, it was enough for Xena to worry about where their child was, and the bard felt her heart start to beat more strongly, flushing her skin with blood and warming it.

“Boo?” Dori appeared in the doorway, clutching Flameball.

“Hey shortie.” Xena said casually. “C’mere and show mama that trick I taught you yesterday.”

Dori amiably ambled into the room and came over to where Gabrielle was sitting. “Boo show me dis, mama...”

“Hold this.” Xena handed Gabrielle the trimmers, then she stepped silently back and drew her sword from it’s sheath hanging on the wall.

“C’mere, Dor.” Gabrielle took hold of their daughter and circled her with both arms. “Hang on for a minute then you can show me, okay?”

Dori had seen Xena move, and she huddled against Gabrielle, eyes wide, knowing what the baring of that glittering steel meant. She had seen Xena fight often enough. “Boo gots mad.” She whispered.

“I know, honey.” Gabrielle whispered back as she turned to keep her partner in her peripheral vision. “But Boo won’t be mad for long, right?” She watched as Xena went to the window, silent, as she shifted her sword from her left hand to her right, then paused, motionless.

Sitting in the center of their cabin, Gabrielle felt completely safe even though she herself had a clear shot at the window. Watching Xena hunt, though, made her realize that her initial plan of moving down to the Amazon village while her partner was gone wasn’t the worst idea she’d ever had.

She could defend herself. She could defend Dori. There was no question in her mind, or in Xena’s of that. But Xena was what she was, and Gabrielle knew she could never hope match her partner’s skills or senses.

A flicker of motion, a sudden surge of tanned skin and the solid thump of Xena hitting the side of the cabin wall preceded a struggle outside, as the warrior hauled herself backwards, along with whatever she’d grabbed outside and dragged it through the window.

Gabrielle stifled a giggle. “Boy, I feel safe.”

Xena sighed and released the dog she’d hauled in by the scruff. “Damned puppies.”

“Guff!” Dori looked absolutely delighted. “Thank you Boo!” She rambled over to the animal, a half dog, half wolf crossbreed who was cowering with a tremulously wagging tail at Xena’s feet. “Buppit!” She hugged the creature. “Good boy!”

Xena sheathed her sword with a faint curse, and went back over to where Gabrielle was sitting. “Damn things are running around all over the place up here. Can’t they stay in the town?”

Gabrielle handed her back the trimmers. “They love you.” She relaxed, and straightened back up, as Xena resumed her task. “Besides I’d rather Ares teach them to hunt then have them have to rely on handouts in the town.”

She felt a draft, and a tickle as Xena cut her hair short in the back, the edge of the trimmer sending tiny chills down her spine as it traveled across the skin of her neck. “Look at that, Dori! Boo brought you a present, wasn’t that nice of her?”

“Love Boo!” Dori was on her back, her legs tangled with the dogs as they played.

“Okay.” Xena finished up the other side of Gabrielle’s skull and ran her fingers through the front part of her hair to see if it was even. “That should do you.”

Gabrielle stood up and glanced in the mirror, pleased with the results. She turned and gave her partner a hug. “Thanks, Looks great.”

“Mine too.” Xena returned the hug, then reached over to put the trimmers in their box, with its locking clasp on top of the mantel. “Sure you don’t want to come down to town with me?”

Gabrielle exhaled, and put her hands on Xena’s stomach. “I’m sure.” She said. “For one thing, if Dori sees you leave, she’ll freak out. “ She glanced at their child, busy with her animal pal. “And for another, if I see you leave, I’ll just follow you. Let’s save both of us the heartache.”

“Okay.” Xena cupped both Gabrielle’s cheeks in her hands and tilted her face up, kissing her with simple, frank passion. “I’d rather say goodbye in private anyway.”

The bard felt another flush warm her skin, for a completely different reason. “You got that right.” She drew an unsteady breath then backed off a bit as Xena released her. “See you around

lunchtime.”

Xena winked at her, and then she turned and lifted her cloak up, swinging it over her shoulders and clasping it in place. “See you in a little while, Dori.” She waved at the child, then escaped out the door before she could be chased and hauled down.

“Boo!” Dori let out an outraged squawk.

“Take it easy munchkin.” Gabrielle walked over and ruffled her hair. “Boo will come and have lunch with us. We’re going to go and see your friends in the village, okay?”

“Okay.” Dori appeared mollified. “Mama can I take the buppit? “ She still had a headlock on the animal. “He wants to play too.”

“Sure.” Gabrielle said. She hoisted up her carrybag and slid it onto her shoulders, then held her hand out. “Let’s go and we’ll surprise everyone. We’ll teach them how to make breakfast. How’s that?”

Dori looked dubious, but got up and took hold of her mother’s hand anyway. “Fun?”

“Well, for us it will be.” Gabrielle fastened Dori’s cloak on her. “Keep that on, honey... it’s raining outside.”

“Buppit gonna be wet.”

Gabrielle swung her own cloak over her shoulders, covering in the carriesack. “That’s okay, honey. We’ll take him inside the big place to dry off. I’m sure everyone will like that.” She opened the door and waited until Dori and the dog went through it, then she followed, stopping briefly to pick up her staff.. “Dori, we have to give your friend a name.”

“Buppit.” Dori pointed at the animal, who was now snuffling in the wet leaves.

“Arent’ all of them buppits?” Gabrielle started down the path, careful of her steps in the slippery weather. “We should give him a special name.”

“Boo.”

“Honey, I don’t think Xena would like it if we called a buppit after her.” Gabrielle stifled a laugh. “Especially not a little boy buppit.” She clarified. “How about Patches? He’s got those gray and brown patches on his back.”

Dori bounced down the path. “Boo.”

“Honey, you can’t call him Boo.”

“Boo boo boo boo boo.” Dori bounded ahead of her. “Mama, we kin call him buppit.”

“Okay.” The bard gave it up. “Let’s call him Buppit.” She caught up with Dori just as they reached the fork in the path and they took the one leading into the village. As they reached the guard outpost, the two guards stepped out into the open, and saluted her respectfully. “Morning.”

“Good morning, your Majesty.” The one on the left said. “It’s an early start today for everyone? We saw Xena go down to the town a bit back.”

“Yes, it is.” Gabrielle agreed. “I have a lot of news to tell everyone, and Xena wanted to see our guests off properly.”

Both Amazons smiled at that. “We heard about them.” The same woman said. “We heard Solari had a mix up with them too, she got back here real late last night.”

Oh. Sheep. “Ah.” Gabrielle herded Dori and her buppit past. “Well, I’m sure it turned out fine.” She said. “But I can’t wait to hear all about it.” She could tell by the expressions on the watches

faces that whatever had happened, hadn't been bad for the Amazons.

That meant it probably hadn't been great for the Spartans. Gabrielle wondered idly if they'd gotten soused enough to delay their departure. The thought made her wryly smile, and she ducked her head a little as the rain drove more insistently against her, and they had to navigate around puddles on their way across the big open space in the center of the village.

Well, first things first. She angled her steps towards the cooking hall. Time to start the day with a little lesson.

**

Xena entered the back door of the inn, not surprised to find the place quiet and almost empty. The only other occupant was her mother, who was in the kitchen, putting up loaves of morning bread. "Morning."

Cyrene looked up. "Oh, morning, Xena." She said. "Did you two have a good night's sleep?"

"Sure." Xena went to the cupboard and removed a mug, then poured herself a cup of cider. "How'd it go here last night?"

"Sit." Cyrene scooped two plates of stew from a pot in the back of the stove and set them down on the table, removing a newly baked loaf of bread from the tray nearby and setting it down as well. "Where's Gabrielle?"

"Village." Xena was content to let her mother talk at her own pace, and started in on the stew, something left over from the day before and rich tasting that worked quickly to quiet her grumbling stomach. She hoped Gabrielle was getting as lucky.

"We got them talking." Cyrene said. "But nothing more than they already said while you were here." She ripped the bread loaf in half and tossed one portion onto Xena's plate. "They don't know anything about battle plans, nothing about what Sparta wants to get out of the war, nothing about what you'd have been doing. "

"Hmph."

"Then your Amazons challenged them to a shooting match outside."

Xena stopped eating, and looked up.

"Well, it was better than letting them wrestle inside the inn, and they were all pretty overheated." Cyrene told her in a wry tone. "I'd say it ended up a draw, but that was enough to embarrass the Hades out of those men."

"I bet."

"That's why they snuck out of town last night." Cyrene added. "One of your boys followed them down through the ford and I suppose to the pass."

Xena worked hard not to react. "Saves me the trouble of pointless conversation with them this morning I guess." She took a sip of her cider. "Good."

"You going to just let them go?"

Xena rested her elbows on the table. "Gabrielle asked me to go find our missing Amazon regent, and warn the other Amazons about what these guys said."

Cyrene's eyebrows hiked. "She asked you to go? She doesn't want to? Is she sick? "

Xena gave her a wry smile. "With Ephiny gone, she can't just leave." She explained. "There's no one to leave in charge. Pony's gone, and her logical choice, her consort..."

“Is you.”

“Is me, and she can’t leave me in charge of the Amazons either, because I’d never let her go by herself.” Xena concluded. “So I’m going. But I’ll check out what’s going on, and make sure those Spartans get back across the border while I’m at it.”

Cyrene nodded in agreement. “That’s going to be tough on her.”

Xena nodded back.

“You going by yourself, or taking some of your men with you?” Her mother asked. “It could be a little dangerous out there.”

“Myself.” Xena said firmly. “I want everyone else here to deal with anything that crops up. Last thing I need is to be parading around the countryside with armed troops.”

Cyrene grunted.

“I’ll be fine.”

Cyrene grunted again.

Xena finished her cider. “Thanks for the breakfast. I’m going to go pack my kit.” She got up. “Talk to you later.”

Cyrene watched her daughter leave. “I’ve got a bad feeling about this.” She said, to the empty room. “But then, I always have a bad feeling about everything.”

**

Gabrielle entered the gathering hall, glad the rain had finally stopped, and a pallid sunlight had begun to filter through the trees. She walked to the front of the hall and removed her cloak, hanging it on a hook fastened to one of the support poles.

Inside, the hall was a little stuffy, and she went to the windows and opened them to admit the breeze. She’d called a general assembly, after a surprisingly well received cooking lesson that had resulted in a reasonably tasty breakfast for the tribe.

Everyone had seemed a little bemused. The two cooks who had been struggling were now glued to her every word, though as yet no one else seemed to be interested in learning anything likely to help them.

The old cook had caught the coughing sickness, and was very ill and likely to be a long time recovering. Since Gabrielle herself was susceptible, she sympathized but was disturbed that the older woman hadn’t even tried to coach any of the younger ones in what to do.

She’d jealously guarded every recipe, such as they were, and Gabrielle had a sense that there was more to it than just an older woman’s peculiarities.

Oh well. She’d find out eventually. She turned as she heard footsteps and found Solari entering the hall. “Morning.”

“Morning, your maj.” Solari looked more than usually pleased with herself. “You hear what the deal was last night?”

“I’m about to.” Gabrielle took a seat on her table and let her legs swing. “Xena went down to the town, guess she’s probably hearing now.”

Solari came down to the front and sat on the first bench. “Those guys, they were crazy.” She said. “After they had a couple more cups, they were all talking crap about how great fighters they were and all that stuff, and then someone said they were just talking like that because Big X was gone.”

Gabrielle considered that. "Spartans are good fighters. Xena's come up against them before, and the guy she had to beat in Athens was from Sparta. They deserve their reputation from what she's told me."

"Yeah, okay." Solari said. "But they ain't better than she is, and we got the feeling they thought they were."

"Ah."

"So we told em we'd take em outside and beat up on em." Solari said. "They freaked! They were all like, 'we're not fighting women.' And all that but we got them outside and then one of them picked on Paladia."

"Oh no." Gabrielle covered her eyes. "Did he survive Cait?"

Solari laughed. "She tore into that guy like a wild dog. I thought he was going to lose his mind." She said. "She's so fast you can't even see her moving, almost as fast as Xena."

"Almost." The bard agreed. "So then what happened?"

"We all scrapped." Solari replied. "It was a mess. Those guys knew their stuff, for sure, but I think we freaked them out so bad they just picked up and started running and didn't stop."

"Running?"

"Got on their horses, and picked up their stuff and took off." The Amazon affirmed. "Got across the river and headed out down the road. One of big X's guys went after them."

Gabrielle's jaw dropped a little. "They ran away?"

"Uh huh."

The bard covered her mouth and stifled a laugh. "By the gods, Xena's going to lose her mind when she hears about that."

"I thought it was pretty cool." Solari seemed quite satisfied with herself. "Those guys were bugging me."

The hall behind them was starting to fill with Amazons. Several came forward and took a seat next to Solari, some stayed in the back, most found seats somewhere between the two. The elders filed in, and took their customary seats on one side and Gabrielle could tell from the looks and the whispers that everyone knew something was up.

Gabrielle waited until everyone sat down, then she stood up. "I'm glad we've all assembled here." She said. "There's been a lot going on the last few days and I wanted to fill you all in on it." A faint reaction caught her attention and she took a moment to identify it.

Surprise? A little. "As you know, there were some soldiers spotted coming through the pass. It turns out they're Spartans."

There was a stir, but Gabrielle correctly guessed this was not news to anyone unless they'd been out hunting all day and night yesterday. "The Spartans were here to tender an offer to Xena, for her to come lead their army."

"Spartans are smarter than they look then." Renas commented from her corner.

A faint chuckle went over the crowd. Gabrielle inclined her head in acknowledgement. "I certainly don't blame them. If I had an army going to war I'd want her to lead it too." She said. "Xena turned them down. She doesn't want any part of this coming war."

"What were they offering?" Renas asked. "Just curious." She amended, when Gabrielle gave her a raised eyebrow look.

“You can ask Xena.” Gabrielle heard the edge in her voice, and produced a smile to soften it. “If she wants to tell you, that’s up to her.”

“Those Spartans seemed really high on themselves.” One of the guards said. “Solari said they were dissing women, and Amazons too.”

Gabrielle nodded “They were. It seems they’d heard that Athens was recruiting Amazons, and they had definite opinions about that.”

“Said they were going to be spear fodder.” Renas said. “I heard em.”

There was a stir again, and Gabrielle was aware of an intensifying attention on her. “Yes, that’s true.” She held up a hand. “They seem to think Athens is going to put the Amazons in front as a distraction, because they have the idea that Spartans won’t attack women. That’s not true.”

“For sure.” Solari agreed. “I don’t think it worked out for them last night though.”

Everyone chuckled.

“The Spartans told us it’s not true, because though they won’t go to war against women, they have no problem just killing them.” Gabrielle said. “So obviously, that’s a concern because many other nations are considering joining in with them in this war.”

One of the senior warriors, Sesta, stood up. “Queen Gabrielle.” She said. “Even though we turned down the offer to join them, we can’t let those Amazons go to war and not know that.”

“Yeah.” “Agreed.” “We have to tell them.”

Gabrielle waited for the chatter to die down a little. She lifted her hand. “Yes, we have to warn our sister Nations.” She said. “I’ve asked Xena to go find them, and tell them.” She said, into a sudden silence. “And also to bring our regent and weapons master home safely to us.”

Another ripple of reaction, this one very complex even for Gabrielle to sort out. It was hard to tell where all the emotions were coming from, she could see relief, and consternation in equal measure, along with a touch of suspicion and from the corner of her perception, envy.

A full handful. “So.” Gabrielle leaned back against the table. “With any luck, we can stop our sisters from getting into a situation that brings no value to them. If it’s true that Athens wants to use them like that, then many of them will die, and for no purpose.”

Renas nodded slowly. “No coin’s worth that.”

“No.” The queen agreed.

“Is Xena going by herself, your majesty?” Sesta asked. “It could be dangerous.”

That produced a very wry smile from Gabrielle. “She is.” She said. “And over the years, we’ve sometimes realized that the fewer people who get involved in our situations, the safer it ends up being. Xena feels that she can attract a lot less attention if she goes alone.”

“Anyway, she’ll have Eph and Pony on the way back.” Solari mentioned. “I just hope those tribes listen to her, cause it would really suck if they ended up just getting offed.”

A mutter of agreement traveled over the crowd. Gabrielle got the sense that her actions were generally approved, though she got the feeling some had their reservations. Was it still that mistrust of Xena?

She knew there was long memories here, and her soulmate had at best a mixed history with many. That couldn’t be helped. “I hope she has a quick and successful journey. I don’t think I need to tell anyone here how personally invested I am in that it be a safe journey as well.”

That seemed to alter the reaction, just a little. Solari gave her a quietly sympathetic look, and

she remembered the dark haired Amazon as one of the ones who had stood by her in the purging hut, in that dire time of her soul.

Brave and loyal, and a good friend of Ephiny's. Gabrielle returned the look with a smile, then she straightened to address the assembly again. 'Now that we have that discussed, I have a few other items I want to bring to the table, since we're all here.'

Everyone sat up a little and watched her alertly.

"Let's talk about traditions. "

**

Xena had her pack laid out in the stables, and she was carefully stowing everything she'd need in it piece by piece. At her back, the stalls were empty since the horses were out enjoying the newly burgeoning sunshine after the stuffiness of the barn.

To one side, she had her saddle and tack slung over a stall divider, the leather warmly rich with polishing. On the bench before her she had her bedroll tied neatly, the furs tucked into the ends of it, and the rudimentary kit she could use to cook with when the need arose.

Flint and tinder. Several different daggers of various sizes and uses. The farrier tools she'd need to care for Io's hooves on the road. Tools to fix her armor. The sharpening stone for her sword.

Her gear was always more compact and lighter than Gabrielle's. But it had been a while since she'd had to pack for a relatively long journey alone, and she kept having the feeling she was forgetting something only to realize that no, she wasn't, it was just that her partner wasn't going so whatever it was wasn't needed.

She didn't need the double set of furs, for example. Or the case of parchment and quills, nor the carry bag that usually held Gabrielle's diary and her personal gear.

It felt weird not to have it. Xena sighed and shook her head, tucking away a supply of dried venison for the ride and a pair of extra boots.

One bag, she slung over her shoulder. That would be for her leathers and armor, still up at the cabin. She decided she'd go up and get all the things she needed from there, then stop at the village on the way back and spend some time with her family before she came back down, saddled Io, and left.

She wasn't looking forward to their parting. Xena could feel the turmoil in her partner and the powerful desire in her to join Xena on the journey. She knew it would take the lightest of excuses and for a split second wondered if it wouldn't be better if she just got her stuff and rode out without stressing that any further.

Only for a split second. She regretted even the thought as soon as she had it.

She rolled up the pack and set it to one side, then dusted her hands off and started for the door, pulling up short when it opened, and Cait slipped inside. "Hey."

"There you are." Cait said. "I was terribly afraid I'd miss you."

Xena perched on the edge of a feed bin. "Almost." She acknowledged. "What's on your mind?" She asked. "Bennu just told me you roughed up the Spartans last night."

Cait looked pleased with the acknowledgement. "They were complete jerks." She said. "It was a good job thrashing them. But I just heard, is it true you're going to find Ephiny?"

Xena considered the question. "Gabrielle asked me to go warn the Amazons about what we heard, and to find Eph and Pony, yeah. " She allowed. "I'm not sure how much of what they were spouting was the truth, but they should know about it anyway. Maybe it'll change some minds."

Cait nodded. "Would you like some of us to go with you? I know Gabrielle can't, because of the rules."

Anyone else, and Xena would have just brushed off the offer. However, she respected Cait and understood the request, so she gave it its due somber regard. "All the people I'd like to take with me." She said. "Including you, I really need to stay here and make sure Gabrielle's all right."

Cait frowned. "She's right in the middle of a whole pack of those Amazons." She said. "I don't..."

"Exactly." Xena very gently cut her off, making eye contact with her. "She's right in the middle of all those Amazons."

Cait fell thoughtfully silent.

"She needs all the friends she has there, Cait." Xena said. "I don't want to take any of them with me. I'd rather you be there for her."

"All right." Cait said. "But please do be careful, Xena. It would be awful if something happened."

"I will be." The warrior smiled. "Thanks for the offer, Cait. I do appreciate it."

Cait blushed slightly, and nodded. "Well then I'm off." She said. "Pally said Gabrielle threw everyone head over this morning teaching cooking. I can't imagine how scary that's going to get."

The warrior chuckled. "C'mon. I've got to go up to the cabin." She got up and shepherded the young Amazon to the door. They exited into the sunlight, and as it baked down on them Xena was glad of her decision to ride light starting out.

"It's awful hot, isn't it?" Cait seemed to read her mind. "It wasn't this hot last summer."

"No, it wasn't." Xena agreed. "Summers only half over too." She added. "Damned if I'd want to run an army in full kit in this weather. Half of em'll probably keel over."

"I'm glad we're up on the hillside. It's cooler." Her companion said. "Will Gabrielle be coming to stay in the village while you're gone?"

"She might." Xena allowed. "Depends how crazy she's being driven."

"That doesn't sound good."

No, it didn't. Xena thought maybe her partner would want to be in the village, just to give Dori some company, but that might pose difficulties of another kind. She knew there were those who would use Xena's absence as an excuse to approach the bard and they might find out more about their Queen than they'd bargained for.

Oh well. Gabrielle would decide one way or the other, and there was nothing stopping her from moving if things didn't work out.

Right?

She dropped Cait off at the path to the village and continued climbing up, into cooler air that dried the sweat on her skin before she reached the cabin. She opened the door and stepped inside, closing it behind her and pausing a moment to look around.

It was very quiet, as their home almost never was. She walked over to where she'd left her armor and started packing it, folding the metal plates and fitting them inside the carrybag. On top of that, she slid in two sets of leathers, and the heavy boots she usually wore with the gear.

Her cloak was already packed down in the stables. Now she looked around the cabin for anything she might be missing. She spotted Gabrielle's diary, and after a moment, she went over and sat down at her partner's desk, picking up a recently used quill and opening the top on the ink jar.

She flipped the pages to a fresh one, and started writing on it, spending some time and covering three quarters of the page with her bold script. When she finished, she tapped the quill against her chin and reread it, then sanded it dry and closed the book, setting the quill down next to it.

The desk was a little too low for her to be really comfortable at it, but she rested her forearms on the wood for a long moment, absorbing the warm energy she could feel in this space her soulmate spent so much time in.

Screw the Amazons. Maybe she should just go get Gabrielle and Dori, and take them with her.

Xena traced a pattern on the wood desktop, wrestling with her own conscience before deciding on circumventing her partner's. Then she sighed and straightened, shaking her head at her internal conflict.

She got up and roamed around the inside of the room, letting her fingers lightly touch the items scattered around. Gabrielle's sparring shirt, which she'd made to match the one she used for sword work, with padding along the ribcage and shoulders was laying across the back of her workchair. Xena straightened it a little and paused to examine a buckle before she moved on.

She picked up her worn travel bag and dropped a comb and a chunk of soap into it, and a handful of leather ties for her hair, closing it and tucking it into her armor bag

With one last look around, she swung the bag back onto her shoulders and shifted the weight so it was balanced. Then she went her armory chest and opened it, removing a leather bag the size of her fist from it and opening it.

Inside was a double handful of coins, a brassy and solid weight in her grip. Xena swung the pack down one last tie and stowed the bag, then she resumed it and headed for the door, her conscience salved by the opportunity of doing some surprise shopping while she was out in the world.

Io's stud fees. Xena closed the door behind her and started down the path towards the Amazon village, whistling a soft melody as she passed through the trees.

**

Continued in Part 5

A Queen's Tale

Part 5

Gabrielle found herself just sitting in her quarters as it came close to lunchtime, unable to concentrate on anything as she waited for Xena to appear.

There were any number of things she could have been doing, but rather than doing them she had her arms folded on her work desk and her chin resting on her wrist, listening to the sounds of the village drifting in the window along with the sweet summer air.

Dori was with the children's group, playing. She could hear their laughter from where she was, and knowing her daughter was having a good time in the village made her feel better about them spending even more time here.

She was trying to work herself into a positive mind set about the whole thing. She really didn't want to project a horrible attitude to the Amazons, because they were savvy enough to pick it up, and they didn't really deserve that from her. It wasn't their fault Gabrielle was stuck here, and they were her responsibility.

They deserved better from her.

Gabrielle glanced around the inside of the simple space, pondering how much she could, or should personalize it in the coming days. She didn't really want to bring the things on the wall in

her cabin down.

They didn't really fit in, and besides, half of them were Xena's, and she didn't want to...

"Psst."

The bard jumped, and looked over at the window, feeling mixed emotions as she recognized the tall figure outside leaning on her sill. "Hey."

"Hey." Xena stepped over the sill and entered the room, walking over and taking a seat next to Gabrielle on one of the sturdy guest stools. "What are you up to?"

"Trying to talk myself into not being bummed out."

Xena gave her a sympathetic look. "Want me to not go?"

"No." Gabrielle sighed.

"Want to go with me?"

The bard sighed again. "Don't be mean to me, Xe." She said. "This is hard enough."

Xena reached over and stroked her cheek. "Sorry." She said. "I don't like it when you're bummed out, and I don't have your scruples when it comes to reversing that."

Gabrielle straightened up and half turned, so she was facing her partner. "You all ready?"

"Yeah."

"How long do you think you'll be gone?" Gabrielle tone was even, but Xena could see the faint tremor in her hands. "Just an estimate."

The warrior unslung her armor bag and set it on the ground. Then she stood and held her hands out, waiting for Gabrielle to take them before she pulled the bard up and led her from the work area back into the sleeping chamber, separated by the traditional curtain of carved beads.

This room had two windows, but they were shaded fully by trees close outside and it leant the room a cool calm that Xena found appealing. There was nothing on the walls, and only woven mats on the floor, but there was a bed that was big enough for both of them and that's what she was looking for.

She bumped Gabrielle down onto it and then joined her, stretching out on her side as the bard did the same. "Now." She reached over and tickled her partner's navel. "Now that we're alone and in bed. Talk."

"Sorry." Gabrielle said. "I'm not really sure why I'm acting like such a baby. I'm not even close to cycling."

"It's okay." Xena studied the expressive face opposite her. "If I had nine months of being stuck here in my mind, I'd be acting a lot worse." She smiled. "C'mon, Gab. If you weren't ticked off about not coming with me I'd be pissed."

"I know." Gabrielle admitted. "I do want to go with you. I don't even care about the other Amazons." She made a face. "I mean, I do, but I care about being with you a lot more." She glanced up and met Xena's eyes. "Don't take too long, okay?"

Xena smiled, and ruffled her hair. "I won't." She said. "I'm going to track those Spartans, then head up the main trade route – same one we took when we went to Athens. I figure the Amazons went that way."

"Not the long way along the coast like we did coming home."

“Right.” The warrior nodded. “Once I catch up with them, I’ll talk to the Amazons, make sure they know what they’re getting into, and bring Eph and Pony back with me the same way.”

It all sounded so simple and straightforward. Gabrielle could imagine the route herself, having ridden it not that long ago. Her mind drifted to that trip to Athens and she smiled, remembering how many moments of joy there had been amongst all the crazy danger and terror.

Xena reached over and tweaked Gabrielle’s nose. “Short trip.” She said. “Then after I get back, we need to plan a longer one.” Her eyes twinkled gravely. “I’m kinda tired of hanging around here. What about you?”

“Eurgh. “ Gabrielle felt a surge of happiness, and she saw Xena’s expression brighten as she reacted in return. “Know where I want to go?”

“Where?”

“Someplace I haven’t been to before.” Gabrielle squirmed closer and settled down against Xena’s warm body. “Can we go where you saw that animal?? The lion?”

“Africa?” Xena pondered that. “Yeah, why not? Maybe Morocco. You’d have a blast there.”

“Really?”

Xena’s eyes twinkled. “Oh yeah. I’d never get you out of the souk.” She watched the bard’s face light up, and her gloomy attitude faded. “So start thinking about what we can take on a trip and we’ll get moving on that soon as I get back. You me and Dori, just out there.”

Gabrielle gazed affectionately at her. “You’re trying to cheer me up.”

“Working?”

“Yes.”

Xena kissed her. “Good.” She gently nibbled her partner’s throat. “It would make this trip miserable for me to think you were miserable here. “ She felt Gabrielle press against her, the bard’s hand coming to rest on her hip and slowly moving over it.

And slowly, Gabrielle felt the tension in her ease. She returned the kiss as her shoulders relaxed and she focused on the tan skin in front of her. ‘I’ll try not to be.” She said. “I don’t want you to be miserable, Xe.”

Xena lightly rubbed her back, and felt Gabrielle press her body against hers. “Yeah, bad enough I have to suffer my own cooking out there.” She said mournfully. “And only have Io to talk to.”

Gabrielle smiled, and gently untied the belt holding her partner’s tunic closed. “Well.” She eased the fabric back. “Let’s not talk right now and get you started off right.”

Xena’s low, musical chuckle tickled her ears.

*

Lunch was light, and cool. Gabrielle managed to relax in her chair up at the front, satisfied with the plate of crisp vegetables and cold fish but suspecting her partner would stop in the merchants stalls on her way out of town and pick up some of every horrible thing she could find to take the place of hers.

She didn’t look unhappy though. The warrior’s face was also relaxed, and she was resting her chin on her fist as she worked her way through a big wooden mug of cider. Dori was seated next to her, helpfully cleaning her plate for her.

The dining hall was full of light, for a change. They had rolled up the windows shades and opened the shutters, and there was actually even a breeze coming through. Gabrielle picked up a

pea pod and offered it to her companion. "C'mon, hon. You have to eat something."

"I just did." Xena gave her a mock innocent look. "Didn't I?"

Caught offguard, Gabrielle felt a blush heat her face and she closed her eyes and put her head against her hand as the people nearest them started chuckling.

Xena crunched a piece of carrot. "See?" She said. "What are you all laughing at? What's so funny?"

Gabrielle shot her a sideways look. The mischief was so evident, she just as quickly looked away. "Are you trying to make me glad you're leaving?"

The warrior chuckled. "No." She turned abruptly serious. "But it is time for me to go. I want to get through the pass before nightfall."

Gabrielle nodded. "Okay." She sighed. "Dori, hon. C'mere."

Dori looked up alertly, her eyes moving from Gabrielle to Xena. "Mama?"

Xena stood up and picked her daughter up from the chair and hugged her. "Shortie, I got to go out for a while." She saw Dori's eyes start to get big. "Not too long. I'm going to go get your Aunt Ephiny and Pony, and come right back."

"Boo go?" Dori looked crestfallen. "Boo, I miss you when you go!"

"I know you do." Xena leaned forward and rubbed noses with her. "But I'm leaving you your Mama this time, so you have someone to tell you stories and have fun with."

Dori looked over at Gabrielle, then looked back at Xena. "Oh."

Gabrielle stood up and pressed her side against Xena's, putting her arms around the warrior. "That's right, Dor. You and I are going to have a great time. And if you're really good, Xena's going to bring you back some presents, right?"

"Xena's bringing back presents for everyone in this family." The warrior asserted. "But you gotta be good for your mama, okay?"

Dori still seemed amazed. "Mama's staying here?"

Gabrielle had to laugh. "Oh gods." She hid her face against Xena's shoulder. "She's as weirded out by that as I am."

Xena gave her a kiss on the head. "Both of you behave and stay out of trouble." She shifted Dori to her mother's arms. "I'll be back soon as I can." She leaned over and gave Gabrielle a kiss on the lips, not particularly caring that they were in front of the entire nation.

Hadn't cared the first time either.

"We'll try." Gabrielle took a deep breath as her eyes and Xena's met. "Promise me you'll be back in one piece."

"Promise." Xena's lips tensed, and her eyes softened. "Love you."

"Gush!" Dori waved her hands.

"Love you too." Gabrielle leaned up and kissed her back.

"Gush!!!"

"Love you even if you think we're strange." Xena told her daughter. "Be good." She ruffled Dori's hair, and gave Gabrielle's arm a squeeze, then she ducked out from behind the table and headed for the door, returning the few casual waves from the crowd.

Gabrielle waited until she disappeared, then she sat down and put Dori in her lap, as much for comfort as to prevent her from just bolting after her partner. “Okay, sweetie. Can you imagine all the nice things Boo’s going to bring us?”

She wasn’t nearly as happy as she sounded, and as she looked at Dori watching her, she figured her sensitive child probably knew that. Sure enough, she saw the beginning of a pout. “I’ll miss Boo too, honey.”

“C’n we go with Boo?” Dori turned and looked after the departed warrior.

The bard exhaled. “Not this time, Dori.” She bounced her a little. “This time, we need to stay here with our friends, and have fun, and Boo has to go help your Auntie Ephiny. But when they come back, we’ll have a big party, and a good time, right?”

“Party.” Dori looked mildly intrigued. Then she tugged on her mother’s leathers. “Mama, we should go with Boo.”

As if she needed to hear that. “Well, we can’t.” She returned her attention to the table. “So we’ll just have to muddle along, Dor. Want some more fish?”

“Your majesty?”

For once, glad of the distraction, Gabrielle looked up to find Aalene there. “Hi there. Sit down.” She indicated the chair at the end of the table. “What can I do for you?”

Glancing past Aalene, Gabrielle could see the quickly averted eyes and the mixture of expressions and she slowly let out her breath, digesting that. There was some sympathy there, she could see those friendly faces and quick smiles. There was also disapproval, from the older ones in the room, and embarrassed excitement from the very younger.

So. She’d chosen to make her parting from Xena public. She knew some were wondering why, and she knew others knew why and felt bad for her. She didn’t really care either way though, because the truth of the matter was if she’d done it in private she’d never have done it, and she and Dori would have been on their way down the hill right now with their gear packed and rules broken behind them.

She wasn’t even really sure why she was so tied up in obeying this particular rule, except that she’d promised Ephiny. Promised her she’d take care of her Amazons while she went through this very trying and private time in her life.

“I was just wondering, I heard you were giving some lessons this morning.” Aalene said, distracting her. “Are you going to do that again? I missed it.”

“Sure.” Gabrielle offered Dori a bit of her fish. She looked up as Solari scooted into the seat on the other side of her. “It doesn’t have to be very formal, I was just giving some tips. “

“Hey, Your maj?” Solari said. “Any chance of staff class this afternoon?”

Gabrielle smiled at her, feeling a little bit better. “Sure you’re up to it?” She teased Solari. “That last class didn’t end up so good.”

“I’ve been practicing.” Solari said, as the women nearest them laughed. “Besides, I hear the scouts were practicing a new dance they wanted to show you, so I thought I’d better get a bid in before every body’s laughing too hard to pick up a staff.”

“Sure.” Gabrielle gave Dori another piece of fish, and then she picked up Xena’s mug and took a sip from it. “We can do that, right Dor? You want to help me teach staff?”

Dori picked up one of the peapods and studied it, then she took a cautious bite of it, drawing it back out of her mouth and sticking her tongue out. “Yuk!”

Aalene and Solari chuckled, and slowly the rest of the crowd in the room started drifting forward, gathering around in casual groups.

“Oh, you rotten child.” Gabrielle relaxed, forcing herself to accept the fact that she was here, and Xena had left. “You’re just like your Boo, you know that? I bet she’s having a dough cake right now down by your grand ma’s.”

“She’s really Xena’s image.” Aalene said. “So cute.”

Gabrielle’s brow cocked. “Which one of them?”

Solari laughed, and two more of the Amazons sat down. Cait wandered over and sat down on a stool behind Gabrielle’s table, and someone brought over another pitcher of stream cooled cider, and poured her cup full.

They were her sisters. Gabrielle started feeling just a little better. She might even actually have a little chance to learn more while her partner was gone, and not scaring everyone half to death. Maybe she’d talk to more people. “Hey Solari?”

“Yazzam?”

Gabrielle took and released a breath. “Mind giving me a hand? I’m going to move my stuff down here while Xe’s on the road.. It takes both sets of our eyes and ears to keep Dori from getting into trouble up there anyway.”

She felt the reaction, heard the slightly louder buzz just under her audible hearing.

“Sure.” Solari didn’t bat an eye. “I bet Cait’ll help too. Right Cait?”

“Absolutly.” Cait agreed instantly. “Should we go now?”

“Hey, we can help too.” Dosi and Elen came over. “I’m sure Dori’s got a lot of toys to carry huh?”

“Sure.” Gabrielle stood up. “Now’s as good a time as any. Anyone who wants to help. C’mon.” She started to round the table, as the small groups broke up and quite a number of people started to follow her.

She knew most of them just wanted to see her place.

Their place.

But hey, at least it would keep her mind occupied.

**

Xena led Io out of the barn, his saddle and her gear already strapped to his back. She paused near the fence and jumped onboard, settling her knees against the well broken in leather and gathering the reins in one hand. “Ready boy?”

Iolaus tossed his head and mouthed his bit, but started forward agreeably enough. They passed the inn but didn’t stop, since Xena had already been in to bid her mother farewell. Only a few townfolk were around in the late day heat, but she spotted Bennu jogging towards her as she rode through the gates.

She pulled Iolaus to a halt and waited for him.

“Gen’rl.” Bennu stopped next to her. “Sure you want to head out by yerself?”

“Yep.” Xena confirmed. “I need all of you here in case anything happens while I’m gone. I’ve got a feeling there’s more going on here than we know.”

Her captain nodded. “Agree, gen’rl, but it wears hard seeing you go out with no one at your

back.”

Xena shifted in her saddle. “I appreciate the concern.” She said. “But I’ll be fine, and it’ll make me feel a lot better to know you’re here.”

“All right.” Bennu patted Io’s shoulder. “Take good care then, Genr’l. If you need anything, send word.”

“I will.” Xena caught his hand and gave it a squeeze, then she urged Iolaus down towards the river and the road that would lead her out of Amphipolis.

She definitely had some mixed feelings. She was looking forward to some action, tracking the Spartans, and seeking out the Amazons, but she felt uncomfortably alone without Gabrielle’s familiar presence and she knew she was in for some long, dark nights during her trip.

At least she’d get a chance to sit and think, though. About what she wanted for her future, and her families. It was hard to do that surrounded by them.

They crossed the bridge and meandered through the market, noting the satisfied looks on the merchant’s faces. “Afternoon.” She greeted one of them.

“Afternoon, lady.” The man responded. “Heading out somewhere? Need supplies? We tried to get some coin from those soldiers what came through late but they were spooked and run through us.”

Xena pulled Io to a halt and dismounted. “Maybe” She strolled among the stalls with Io trailing amiably behind her. The merchants caught sight of a prospective customer and scurried to their wares, glancing hopefully at her as she browsed.

She mostly had what she needed. “What’s in that?” She pointed at stuffed waybread, on heavy wooden trays.

“Lamb, ma’am.” The man working the spit said. “Fresh cooked this morning.”

“Gimme two.” Xena ordered.

The man dropped his knife and complied. “Was going to put some greens in, but m’daughter’s not back yet with em. If you wait a bit...”

“Glad I missed her.” Xena sniffed the sandwiches, pleased to detect a significant amount of spices. She tossed the man a coin and turned to stow them in her saddlebag, spotting a wineseller at the next wagon eyeing her hopefully.

A bag of sweet white would be good. Xena walked Io on and surveyed the casks, their stoppers stained and fragrant. She bought a skin, then continued down the row of stalls, set up in front of their wagons along the road.

A saddle pad, travel cup and a few more snacks later and she was mounting Io again and heading out along the road. As the wagons faded into the distance behind her, Xena settled into her saddle and relaxed, taking in a deep breath of warm air tinged with the smell of the river.

She rode through the fields under crop on the far side, the stands of wheat and barley rich and golden in the sunlight. It smelled of the earth, and Xena felt her body settling into the ride as she looked around her.

A sheep’s soft baa echoed gently. Her ears pricked, and she became more aware of her surroundings, a nameless alertness she had little need of when she was living in the town, even up alone in the cabin as they were.

The sun warmed her skin, it’s slant pronounced in the now cloudless sky and she was very glad she’d decided to hold off putting on her armor. It felt nice to just be riding, the thin fabric of her

tunic comfortable in the heat.

A rabbit raced across the road ahead of them. Io snorted. Xena watched it disappear into the wheat, but continued on, resisting the urge to start hunting so soon into her trip. There would be time enough for that later.

Tonight she planned to stop at a small town just the other side of the pass. She'd briefly considered stopping in Potadeia, but her partner's hometown was just a short ride from Amphipolis and Xena wanted to get a little further before she stopped traveling for the day.

A soft whistle came to her ears, and she looked up to see a sentry part the stalks and climb up to the road to meet her. She slowed Iolaus. "Destin."

"Hullo, Xena." Destin was an older man, who had a family and a small holding in the town and had chosen to join the militia after the war. "Heading out?"

"Heading out." The warrior agreed. "Quiet?"

"Very." Destin nodded. "Didn't expect you. Saw those Spartans riding out before dawn. You after them?"

The warrior shook her head. "Going to bring back those Amazons from here that went down the river on a fool's errand." She leaned on her saddlebow. "Favor for my partner."

"Ah." Destin smiled. "Anything for the pretty one, eh?"

Xena smiled back. "Something like that." She gathered her reins. "Have a good watch. " She started Io forward again, and in a little while she cleared the fields and entered the scrublands that led eventually to the pass.

Here, with the town far behind, the road paralleled the river and wound between trees and shrubs. On the other side of the river lay the hills that held Potadeia and to her left, the mountains that Gabrielle's Amazons had once lived in.

She remembered riding down those mountains, heading for that river after rescuing Ephiny from a frozen stream, and seeing Gabrielle riding to meet her, the bard's anxiety palpable.

It made her smile to think of it. No matter how far they'd gone in their travels, and no matter how terrible the situations they'd found themselves in, the ride down this road, and along this river had always meant home for them both and now that she was out here, in all the quiet, she wished Gabrielle were riding along with her.

Traveling with Gabrielle gave her something to keep her mind occupied with. If the bard wasn't talking to her, she was doing something with her horse, or picking something up on the ground – it gave her something to watch and usually something to listen to.

Especially when Gabrielle would practice her storytelling. There were many long roads they'd spent many long days traveling where the bard would entertain them both by figuring out how to tell any number of their stories, or those about others to make the time pass.

It was different being out here alone. Xena let her eyes track along the river's edge, watching the shadows start to slide across the ground.

Sort of boring, really.

Xena settled back into her seat and turned her thoughts to something more productive. She considered how her path might fork once she traveled through the pass, and tried to reason out which way the Spartans would have gone.

Would they keep riding, and head to the nearest port town, just down the river from Amphipolis? There they could board a trading boat and cross the Aegean to Sparta, but it meant

risking suspicion unless they could find a merchant who didn't care whom he carried.

Therma was the closest large port town, but Xena recalled the men saying they'd travelled far – and they were on horseback. The horses hadn't been local, and the tack was just altered enough not to have been either.

So. Then maybe they'd come overland, crossing over at the mouth of the Gulf of Corinth, and then traveling through the mountains and through the wilder areas, passing as few large cities as possible. Xena nodded a little. Would they go back the same way?

Or would they take the quick route, ditch their mounts and take to the water to make their way home that much faster?

What would she do?

Xena took a sip of water from her waterskin and turned her head to watch a duck glide by on the river's edge, trying to recall how the soldiers had treated their mounts. Transport? Or comrades. She herself would not simply ditch Iolaus much less his mother Argo to save herself the trouble, but she hadn't gotten the feeling that the Spartans were wedded to their beasts quite that way.

Tentatively, she decided on a route to Therma. It was on the route to Athens, and it was possible the Amazons had stopped there as well. She could find out if they'd seen the Spartans, or their horses and as it was a trading city, she could also pass on word of Amphipolis' market.

"All right." She said aloud. "So, Io. Know any good stories?"

The stallion craned his head around and eyed her, yanking on the bit a little.

"No huh?"

**

Gabrielle set down an armful of scrolls on her worktable, turning to find Cait right behind her with the small chest that held her quills. "Thanks Cait. " She took the chest and set it down. "I think that's everything."

Cait surveyed the inside of the Queen's quarters. "It's a bit smaller in here." She commented.

"It is." Gabrielle agreed. "But not too bad."

It really wasn't. Though not as large nor as comfortable as her cabin home up the mountain, the hut had enough space for her to bring down clothes for her and Dori, her cooking gear, and toys to keep her active child busy at least for a few minutes.

She had a worktable to write on, and she'd put Dori's little bed, its collapsible frame and clever strapping now stowed into the sleeping area with its covering of sheepskin and linen all neatly tucked in.

"It's near dinner." Cait said. "If you're quite done, I'm going to get a bit of a wash then."

"Sure." Gabrielle smiled. "Thanks, Cait, I appreciate the help."

"Had lots of that." The young Amazon smiled back. "Though I think a lot of that bunch just wanted to see the inside of your place."

The bard chuckled. "I think so too, but that's okay. I like my home." She said. "I think Xena's knife collection fascinated everyone."

"Too right." Cait said at once. "Lovely." She gave Gabrielle a little wave. "See you later."

"Later."

Gabrielle watched the beads swing after Cait, and then she looked around again. She went over and opened the wooden cabinet near the wall, peering inside to see her Queen's mask laid carefully inside along with her ceremonial leathers.

The other side of the cabinet was empty though, and she set to work putting her clothes and Dori's inside it.

Most of the Amazons wore leathers pretty much all year round, with thick hide leggings and cloaks in the cold weather. She, on the other hand, had shirts and dresses and boots and cloth leggings, and clean linen shifts to wear after she retired at night.

Some were workaday clothes, mostly in rich colors she tended to like, but some were also silk and other rich fabrics she sometimes wore down to the inn, or to tell stories, or just because she felt like putting something pretty on.

Xena had a beautiful silk robe she sometimes wore after her bath, and she enjoyed dressing up sometimes too, trading her leathers for velvet and her boots for pretty laced sandals.

Gabrielle had left most of her nice stuff up at the cabin, but she'd brought down some of the short, belted tunics she liked to wear, sleeveless and light, just enough coverage for the town's sensibilities and yet comfortable enough for the heat.

Sometimes coming into the inn, acting on town business, just worked better if she wasn't in her Amazon leathers. She wasn't sure Amphipolis bought into the Amazons all the way yet.

She finished putting away the clothes and turned, as she heard Dori's voice approaching. "Now." She said. "Let's see how my child deals with this."

Dori came pattering inside, then pulled up and looked around. She spotted Gabrielle and came over to her, reaching for her hand. "Mama"

Gabrielle sat down on the cabinet and picked her up, setting her on her lap. "Hey, munchkin. Did you have fun with your friends?"

"Mama yes." Dori nodded enthusiastically. "We had fun! We played ball."

"Good girl." Gabrielle gave her a hug. "You know what I did? I went and got our stuff, so we can stay here by our friends while Boo is gone."

Dori frowned.

"Wont that be more fun?" Gabrielle ran her fingers through the child's dark hair. "Since we won't have Boo here to play with for a little while, we can play with our friends the Amazons."

Dori considered this. "How long Boo go?"

"Not long, honey." Gabrielle bounced her a little. "Just a little while. So we'll stay here and watch all the funny things our friends here do, and be with them. I brought your toys here, they're in the other room there."

"Okay." Dori said. "We c'n have fun."

"Besides, it's easier for the buppits to get here." Gabrielle tossed her ace card in gently. "it's hard for them to climb up where we live, but I saw one of them here just a few minutes ago looking for you."

Her daughter's eyes lit up. "Buppits? Where?"

"We can go look for them in a little while." Gabrielle promised. "And look, Dor. We have pretty beads for a doorway, isn't the sun pretty on them?" She pointed at the door, where the sun was slanting through the colorful stone beads.

“Pretty.” Dori kicked her feet a little, seemingly satisfied. “C’n we still go get fishes, mama? “

“Sure.” Her mother said. “We’ll go get fishes, maybe tomorrow morning, before everyone gets up. Would you like that?”

“Yes!”

“Okay.” Gabrielle mentally pictured the Amazons reaction to finding their Queen and her heir up to their backsides in the creek in the morning, and grinned. “We’ll do that. Right now, we’re going to get cleaned up and go get some dinner. Is that okay with you?”

Dori grinned.

“I thought so.” Gabrielle ruffled her hair again. “Lets go over to the bathing room. They’ve got big pools there, Dor. You can swim in them, I bet.” She got up and picked up two pieces of linen, draping them over her shoulder. “Wanna go make trouble?”

Dori giggle. “Boo makes trouble.”

“Boo does.” Gabrielle led her out of the hut into the rich russet of the coming sunset. “But you know, I can make trouble too.”

“Mama?”

“Yep, mama.”

It felt a little strange, to be walking across the grass, joining a small straggle of Amazons also heading towards the big communal bathing hall. Past the hall, she could see the big cooking pit busy with people, and the scent of woodsmoke drifted past her.

She was noticed, crossing the grass. More eyes gathered to her as she neared the hall, and she felt more than a little conspicuous as she entered the hall aware she was the center of a lot of veiled attention.

“Mama!” Dori provided a welcome distraction. “Fishies!”

The laughter eased the tension in her guts, and Gabrielle forced herself to chill out. “Yes, little miss fishie.” She returned the smiles of the women nearest to her. “Let’s show everyone how you can swim.”

“Like Boo!”

“Just like Boo.”

**

It was full dark by the time Xena reached the small town on the other side of the pass she’d intended on spending the night at. The road had been almost empty, she’d only passed one man with a ragged herd of sheep and two travelers heading the same direction she was on foot.

Now, as she rode Io down the last slope leading into the dusty town, she kept her eyes and ears open. There were a few people out, they gave her a cursory look as she rode past but kept on their paths, leaving her to find her way to the small inn at the center of town.

She dismounted Io in front of it, and let his reins drop. “Stay.” She gave his shoulder a pat and eased past him, passing the lit torch in front of the inn and pushing the door open.

There were a handful of people inside. Mostly travelers like her, hunched over bowls at the trencher tables. Xena moved past them over to a man perched on a stool in the front, his arms resting on a higher table and a mug of ale before him. “Evening.”

The man gave her the once over, then he leaned closer, stirring the candle to bring the light up.

His eyes widened and he stood up, giving her a respectful duck of his head. "Bigods. Here's a surprise now."

Xena smiled. "Hello, Bins." She leaned on the counter. "Been a while."

"It has." The innkeeper said. "Good to see you then, Xena." He returned the greeting. "Sorry to hear the floods were so hard on you down in the valley."

"It was rough." The warrior agreed. "But it's getting back. Got a bed?"

"For you, surely." The man nodded. "By yourself?" He looked around hopefully. "Gabrielle's not with you is she?"

"Unfortunately no." Xena demurred. "I'll tell her you asked for her though." She handed over a coin. "Got a horse to be stabled. Take dinner and a handful for the road tomorrow."

Bins nodded, but handed the coin back. "Take none of your coin here." He said, in a blunt tone. "I'll send my boy out to take care of your friend. Room's out round the back. The rest of these here are in the big hall."

Xena gave him a slap on the shoulder and made her way back to the door, this time collecting quite a few interested stares. She ignored them. Once outside, she removed her saddlebags from Iolaus's back, and turned him over to the slim young man who'd come running over.

The town was darker at night than Amphipolis was. There, they took pains to keep torches burning on the crossroads, and main lanes of the town but here only the torch in front of the inn and one further down just barely seen through the trees was lit.

That didn't impede Xena. She could see fine in the gloom, and she followed the long walked path around the side of the inn to a single stepped porch that held a door. She pushed it open and entered, her nose catching the smell of sun washed linens and candlewax.

She set her bags down on the small bed and went to the windows, opening them wide to let some air and light in, enough for her to take out her striker and light the candle on the bedside table.

That let her light a second, and the room brightened to a golden glow, revealing a humble space with just enough room for her and her things in it.

That was fine by Xena, since she only had her and her things this time. Gabrielle, she was pretty sure, would have nosed around and tried to find something bigger, but it had a bed, and was acceptably clean.

Xena went over to the basin on the table and dipped her hands into it, bringing them up to her nose and sniffing the water, before she washed her face with it. She ran her wet fingers through her hair and turned to regard her saddlebags thoughtfully.

"Hmph." She removed the bag of coins and tied it to her belt, then she left the bags in the corner. The open windows were now letting in enough breeze to promise minimal comfort later, so Xena made her way back out into the dark night and closed the door behind her.

When she entered the inn, she noted the number of people inside had increased. No one stared directly at her, but she was aware of the attention as she selected an empty table and sat down behind it.

A young girl she recognized as Bin's daughter came over immediately with a wooden serving tray. She had russet red hair and eyed her new customer with unabashed awe. "C'n I get you a drink?"

"Ale." Xena drawled.

“Okay.” The girl nodded. “We’ve got rabbit stew inside. Not much.”

“That’s fine.” The warrior replied. “With some bread if you have it.”

The girl disappeared and Xena folded her arms onto the table and looked around the room, watching everyone furtively look somewhere else. She started chuckling a little, unused to the wary reaction now since she was taken for granted so much at home.

She wasn’t ignored, of course. Everyone did tend to be aware of her presence and she knew she was the center of attention if she showed up to have a meal at the inn, or stopped to pass the time of day at the stables with the stockmen.

But there, the interest was just interest. Amphipolis knew her and frankly just enjoyed looking at her; they were not worried about her intentions.

If Gabrielle had been with her, the interest here would not have even made an impact. She’d have been focused on whatever it was the bard was talking about, distracted enough to ignore her surroundings.

Now there was nothing to distract her. So she studied the inhabitants in return, no doubt making them a lot more uncomfortable than she was. She didn’t hold out much hope for the dinner – if they were serving rabbit stew it meant they were scrounging the countryside for the pot and that didn’t say much for the town’s prosperity at the moment.

“Well, Xena.” Bins came over and took a seat across from her. “Give you what we got, not a lot you can see.”

“I see.” Xena said. “Summer hasn’t been bad by us. What’s the word here?”

The girl brought her ale back, and a wooden bowl full of a light brown stew. “Here you go.” She set it down with a half loaf of bread. “Da, ma says we’re near out.”

“Allright. Just tell her we’ll start up again tomorrow.” Bins said. “G’wan.”

His daughter escaped, and disappeared around a corner into what probably was the kitchen. Bins watched her go, and shook his head. “Least we made the pot tonight.” He looked around. “Thanks to you, Xena.”

Xena chuckled briefly.

Bins lowered his voice. “You heard about the war?”

“Yeah.” Xena nodded. “They come taking for that?”

Surprisingly, Bins shook his head. “Wish it was.” He said. “Be easy to be mad about that, yeah? Nah. They offered top coin for all the stock, and them that had took it down to the gathering point for it. Left us with a few chicks, a sheep or two, and whatever we could cull from the forest.”

Well. Xena ripped off a piece of the bread and dunked it in the stew, taking a bite and finding it acceptably edible. “Hard to argue with that.”

“Aye.” Bins nodded. “Hard to be mad, but yet, winter’s comin Xena.”

“True.” Xena drew her belt knife and fished out a chunk of rabbit. “We didn’t hear anything about that at home. “

Bins looked around. “No.” He said. “We heard they said they weren’t going past the pass. Said you all were out of the conscripting, so you shouldn’t share in the buy out.”

The warrior started laughing. “Give me a break.”

Bins shrugged. "Guess they figured they screwed up last time." He muttered. "Now they's buying everyone and everything up with good coin stead of demanding it for free. We lost most of our boys, they went down to join up for the offer, top coin for that too."

Ah. Xena considered that as she ate. "Fits." She finally said, taking a sip of ale. "We heard they've made that offer to some others, closer in."

"Not so lucky for you down there." The innkeeper said.

"Mm." Xena knifed up another chunk of rabbit. "Anyone come back here yet with all that coin?"

Bins remained silent for a few minutes. "Well, no... haven't been gone that long though." He said. "And the boys, I guess they're gone till the war's done." He picked at the wood surface uneasily. "Makes you say that, Xena?"

The warrior took a long swallow of ale. "I've had enough to do with Athens to wonder." She said. "Maybe it'll all be good. Guess we'll find out when winter hits."

Bins looked troubled.

"At any rate." Xena was aware of his discomfort. "We're just as glad to stay out of it. We've had enough fighting on our doorstep these last seasons."

"True enough." Her host seemed glad of the subject change. "And at the least we're glad ourselves that we're at the back end of the fighting and I'm sure you are as well."

Xena nodded. "We haven't seen much really down our way." She ventured in a little different direction. "Merchant train just came through."

"Aye." Bins relaxed. "Saw them heading down the road – they didn't take the time to stop here, and I don't blame em, neither. Did they have a good market by you?"

"Very good. Stopped on the way out in fact and picked up a few things."

The innkeeper lowered his voice again. "Heard a story from one of the poor lot passing by though. Begged me a piece of bread, and said he saw some fighten going on this side the pass. Big mix up, some foreign types a horseback, ended up leaving some bodies at the side of the road."

"Yeah?" Xena raised an eyebrow. "Foreign?"

Bins shrugged. "So he said." He replied. "Never saw the like here, so couldn't say. Some from here went out to see if they could see aught, but came back empty."

Went to see if they could scavenge, Xena reckoned. But the Spartans would have taken everything of any value and she remembered seeing extra bags lashed to their horses saddles. "No one came through here today, did they?"

Bins shook his head immediately. "None but you."

So. "Good. I'm not looking for trouble." Xena drained her mug and set it down. "Thanks for the stew. Hope everything works out for ya." She stood up and patted Bins on the shoulder. "Don't be a stranger."

She walked back out through the room slowly, taking her time and turning her head from side to side as she examined the inhabitants. They all seemed local, most looking back at her shyly. Only one seemed out of place, a man in half armor near the back, keeping his eyes firmly on his plate, and his hand firmly on his mug.

Xena scanned his profile, but it didn't ring any bells good or bad, so she continued on and emerged back into the darkness with relative satisfaction. She'd gotten a decent meal, some interesting information, and had planted a bug of her own in the process.

Not bad for under a candlemark. The warrior turned the corner of the inn and paused, tilting her head and listening in silence. She could hear voices murmuring inside the inn, and the creak of the wood tables, but the door remained closed behind her and after a moment, she continued on back to her little room.

Once inside, she stood still and swept her eyes over the interior, comparing what she saw now with how she'd left the space before dinner. Satisfied, she went over to her saddlebags and lifted them up, unfastening the flap and removing a rolled light fur which she tossed on the bed.

Then she removed her sword and put it down on the right side of the mattress within easy reach of her hand. So far, the town had been completely mild, and there was no reason for her to expect that to change.

However. She hadn't survived to be the age she was by not taking precautions and you could never tell when the Fates were going to throw you a rotten egg from around a blind corner. Not in her life experience anyway.

Xena sat down and removed her sandals, then stretched out on the bed, leaning back against her bedroll and opening the small bound volume she'd taken from her bag. The light of the candle was sufficient for her to read it, and she tilted the rough cut pages, absorbing the words in silent pleasure.

**

Gabrielle sat down at last, at the end of a long and stressful day and faced her closed diary, its leather cover a warm and rich golden in the candlelight.

Dori was asleep in her bed in the other room, and the sounds of the village had faded at last outside as the Amazons drifted back from the firepit and the practice yards to their quarters.

Somewhere, off to the left, Gabrielle could hear laughter. It was a little strange, to be able to hear so many people around at night, she was used to hearing at most an owl or Ares hunting after dark.

She could hear the soft sounds of chores being finished near the dining hall and was aware of the sound of booted feet crossing the ground on the path that led past the turn her quarters were built into.

Her's and Ephiny's, tucked into the back corner of the village compound, away from the rest, secluded on a slight rise and surrounded by a thicket of trees and bushes that gave them privacy.

Gabrielle appreciated that. She found herself just a bit rubbed raw by all the attention and she was glad to have some peace and quiet to sit and reflect and write her diary entry in.

With a sigh, she got up and went to the table near the window, picking up a pitcher of cider and pouring herself a mug full. She brought it back and sat down, taking a sip and listening again to the sounds outside.

It was too quiet in the space around her, she decided. Xena was never that noisy, but she was always aware of the warrior's presence, even if she was slouched by the fire working on something, her motions precise and deliberate.

Her absence, now that Gabrielle was alone here became starkly evident. With a sigh, the bard shook her head and pulled the diary over. "Get over it, Gabrielle." She told herself. "Don't make her crazy." She opened the diary and flipped to a fresh page, and then she paused, spotting writing that wasn't her own.

She flipped the last page back and found an entire sheet of her partner's distinctive, slanted writing, and she felt a smile tug on her face muscles as she settled down to read it.

Hey.

I sat down and wrote this the day I was taking off because I figured you'd be reading it at night, after being pissed off all day.

Gabrielle chuckled wryly.

I wrote this knowing I'd be missing you already when you read it, and you'd probably be missing me too.

The bard swallowed, and felt the faint sting of tears in her eyes. "You're right there, partner."

Look at it this way. I know you're ticked off at the Amazons. But without me around for a little while, you can get to know them and then at least when you tell them to get lost, it'll be an informed decision.

The bard laughed in pure reflex.

I told you once you'd never be an Amazon, and I think now you're getting an idea of what I meant. It has nothing to do with you being able to fight.

Gabrielle looked thoughtfully at the page, her fingertips touching those words.

It's the same reason that, though I'm your consort and I play the game, I could never be an Amazon either no matter what my history with them is. To be an Amazon, you have to play by the Amazon's rules and live by their laws and neither of us is made for that.

Gabrielle straightened, and reread that part again. "Good grief, Xe. You make me sound like an outlaw."

I'd like to blame that on me, because I've never been willing to live by anyone else's idea of what's right or wrong, but I don't think you have an obedient bone in your body either. Maybe that's why we clicked, way back when.

The bard sat back, a trifle bemused. But after a moment's thinking, she chuckled again and nodded, a wry expression on her face. "Yeah, maybe."

So do me a favor and try to get some fun out of letting the stuffed feathers see who you really are. They think they do. I know they don't. They see you as a mirror of Eph or of me – just about everything about you is not what they expect.

Gabrielle pondered that. She really had no desire to be miserable the entire time Xena was gone and what the warrior was telling her made a lot of sense. She knew if she was upset, her partner would feel it no matter what distance, and it would make her upset, and they'd start to get each other crazy.

She didn't want to do that. "Hon, I'll try." She said. "I will sure give it a try, because I don't want to be nuts until you get back."

Anyway. I'll try to make it quick. Just remember I love you.

As if she could forget that.

Give Dori a hug for me. Hope she's not too mad at me for leaving. I'll bring her some presents as a bribe.

X

Gabrielle felt a certain tension in her relax. She took a long swallow of her cider and rested her chin on her fist, rereading the note a few times and allowing the gentle affection in every word wash over her.

She and Xena had come such a long way.

With a smile, she turned the page and picked up her quill, dipping it into the ink. She started to write, the soft scratching of the quill point now the loudest thing in the room.

**

Xena was on the road by dawn, still in her light tunic in deference to the muggy heat that had descended during the night and promised further rain later on that day. She planned her route in her head, hoping to find another stopping point by dusk but recognizing that it was very possible she'd spend then night out in the wild.

As she rode on and the sun rose, she caught up with and passed a few other travelers, all heading in the same direction she was. Most were younger men, with bags strapped to their shoulders who gave the tall woman on horseback only casual glances as they met.

That suited Xena. She tied her hair back in a tail and steadily drained her waterskin, feeling a faint trace of tightness across her shoulders that made her glad she'd packed the aloe.

About midmorning, she passed from fairly open ground into a patch of forest, glad to escape the sun for a while. The trees came close to the road, and as the wind passed between them it brought the sound of voices ahead to her.

She shifted forward in Io's saddle as they rounded a bend in the road, unsurprised to see it blocked ahead with a fairly large group of men, some mounted. They were clustered together, apparently deeply into an argument.

Xena glanced up through the trees, judging the position of the sun. "Hasn't even been a day." She sighed, as she closed in the group, who now were raising their voices in anger. Since there was no way for her to guide Iolaus around the men and the trees were too close for the stallion to fit between them, she reined him in and came to a halt just short of the group.

The mounted men were clearly soldiers. Xena could see a sigil on their armor, but she was too far away to identify it. The men on the ground were dressed more or less the same way, but their armor was of a lesser quality, and more haphazard.

"I don't care what those bastards told you. Go back there and find someone who's seen them! We know they came this way!" One of the mounted soldiers said, thrusting his hand in a gesture Xena's direction. "They're lying!"

"Sir, we asked." The man on foot closest to him said. "We asked everyone we saw."

Xena had no reason to believe their conversation had anything to do with her, but she was willing to lay ten dinars down that it did. Her life just went that way. With a sigh, she knelt Iolaus forward slowly. "Excuse me, gentlemen."

The guard captain turned his head and spotted her. "Here, you! Hold it."

Xena pondered the fact that so many guard captains she'd met had turned out to be jackasses. Was it the armor? Too tight around the neck? Casually she reached down and untied the flap on the hide cover over her sword hilt. "Why?"

The man swung his mount to block the road. "We're the regional guard. I need to question you."

Xena closed in on him, keeping Io to a slow walk right up until they all started twitching, hands reaching for weapons nervously. Then she signaled the stallion to halt and sat there, hands resting on her saddlebow. "About what?"

The soldiers watched her uncertainly. The guard captain put his hand on his sword hilt and assumed an air of bravado. "We are in search of a group of Spartan soldiers." He said. "Where do

you come from? What road have you been on?"

"Amphipolis." Xena saw the reaction to the name and just kept from smiling. "Been on the river road up from there, through the pass." She said. "I haven't seen any Spartans since I left home."

"Would you know even what you were looking at?" One of the other riders said, in a derisive tone.

Xena turned her head slowly and looked at him. "Would you?"

"Quiet, Zoser." The captain lifted his hand in the direction of his subordinate. "It just occurred to me who we're speaking to, and I've got no intention of losing my command this short into it."

Xena smiled at him, her blue eyes twinkling. "What's the story with Spartans on the road? Spies?"

The man shook his head. "We don't know." He said. "We just had word from an old, retired Athenian soldier who lives east of here that he'd seen Spartans, fighting with some local band nearby. You didn't see anything?"

"I didn't see any fighting." Xena replied honestly. "No."

The captain nodded. "Eh. Maybe he was knocked on the head one too many times. No one round here has seen anything either."

Xena pondered pointing them to her friend Bins, then figured he didn't deserve it from her. "Well, good luck hunting." She said politely. "Wanna move out of my way now?"

The captain drew his horse aside. "Headed to Athens?"

The warrior shook her head. "Just out for a ride." She guided Iolaus around the soldiers. "Athens isn't in my plans this season."

"Have a good ride then." The captain said. "Fair travels, Xena."

Xena lifted a hand and rode on by, aware of the now wide eyed stares from the younger soldiers. She kept her casual pose until she got around the next bend, then she reined her stallion in and turned in a tight, silent circle, gazing back along the path through the thick leaves.

Her ears cocked. She could hear the soldiers back there. The voice were no longer raised, and after a moment, she heard the soft sounds of hoofbeats slowly heading in her direction. With a sigh, she turned again and started off, her eyes flicking casually to either side of the path looking for a way off of it.

"It's getting complicated already, boy, and Gabrielle's not even here." She told her horse. "Is that fair? I've only been out here for a day, and I've already got a dozen soldiers on my ass. "

Io snorted.

Xena listened, and heard the sounds of pursuit behind her, though slowly and stealthily enough to make her believe they weren't trying to overtake her, just follow.

Well, she had no intention of being followed. She spotted a creek just off the path and after she rode around the next curve, she guided Io off the road and down the sloping bank, the stallion obeying her without question as his feet left dry land and he splashed into the water.

Downstream for a moment, then she found a spot on the opposite side and kned him in that direction, leaning forward as he climbed up the bank and they passed through the trees and were hidden from the road.

Xena didn't stop to see if they were going to follow. She pushed on through the thick foliage, letting Io pick his course as she pictured the road in her minds eye and worked to move away from

it.

The ground was a little soggy from the previous day's rain, and that muffled Io's hoofbeats as she ducked under a fallen tree and got a lungful of richly mossy air. She glanced to one side, and saw a rocky path and with a quick shift of her knees guided Io onto it.

His hooves made more noise here, but left no mark, and she kept him on the stones until the path tilted to one side, then spread out into the leaf litter again. This deep inside the forest, she could hear leaves blowing around her, and animals moving, but no sound of pursuit.

Good. Xena pulled Io to a halt and dismounted, then took hold of his bridle and led him behind a huge fallen trunk, stopping and letting her hand rest on the crumbling bark of it.

He nudged her and nibbled her sleeve. Xena reached over and scratched his forehead, her ears perked for any sounds other than the natural ones.

Would the soldiers follow her? Xena wasn't sure if their curiosity had any meaning, or if it was just coincidence, but she wasn't in the mood to find out. She waited in silence for a quarter candlemark, her breathing quiet and measured as the birds twittered overhead and a squirrel raced up the trunk only to find her there, halting in startled amazement.

Xena made a small chittering noise at the animal, watching as it lifted, then put down its front foot, its nose twitching furiously. The warrior fished in her saddlebag for a bit of waybread, and held it out invitingly.

The squirrel stepped cautiously forward foot by foot until it was within Xena's reach. The warrior didn't move though, she merely held the bit steady, until the animal snatched it with one foot, bringing it back as it backed up a few steps.

Xena let her hand fall, and watched as the squirrel nibbled her offering, giving her quick, nervous looks as it ate.

With a smile, the warrior gathered up Io's reins and slowly moved off, threading her way through the trees and stepping carefully over the logs and branches that liberally littered the ground. Here in the closeness of the trees it was hot and muggy and before long, she was sweating freely under her tunic.

She kept going though, squeezing herself and the horse between close growing trees she knew would block any followers and picking her way carefully over a series of wet rivulets winding through the leaves.

A motion caught her eye, and she went still. "Hst."

Io stopped still next to her.

The leaf litter stirred again and morphed into a thick body sliding along. Xena took a firm grasp on Io's bridle and willed him to remain in place, her eyes glued on the snake as it moved in their direction, her senses ratcheting up to hair trigger level.

The snake paused, its tongue flicking out as though tasting their essence, then it continued on through the wet leaves leaving them disinterestedly behind.

Xena let out a breath. She recognized the big puffy headed snake as poisonous and getting bitten or worse, getting Io bitten would have truly, truly ruined her day.

She waited for the snake to get a good distance off, then she continued, a touch slower this time as she searched the ground intently for any of the snake's relatives.

It was starting out to be one of those days.

**

It was just dawn when Gabrielle waded into the creek, with Dori scampering at her side, all excited at their very early morning escapade. They had tiptoed out of their hut and snuck past the standing guard near the firepit on their way down to the water and now that the sun was just peeking through the trees, they were ready to catches fishes.

“Mama.” Dori whispered. “We’re sneaky!”

“Yes, we are.” Gabrielle whispered back. She had a woven bag slung over her shoulder and now she paused in the creek, then moved forward until she was up to her thighs in water.

It felt good. It was cold, and the smell was rich and clean. “You ready, Dor?”

Dori was crouched in the shallower water, staring intently at the surface. “Mama you hear them? Fishies!!!”

Gabrielle didn’t, really, but she felt them, and after a long moment, she plunged both hands in the water and grabbed hold of whatever it was that was tickling her calf. “Ah hah!”

Dori nearly pitched forward into the water with her own attempt, letting out a squeal as she pulled her hands out full of a sardine size fish. “Mama!”

“Shh.” Gabrielle put her own catch, a respectably sized perch, into her bag. “Give that to me, Dor. I’ll put it here with mine, and we can have fish stew later. You like that right??”

“Yum.”

Gabrielle waded in a few steps deeper, until her hips were covered and she was standing in the full force of the water, not terribly strong this close to the source, but enough to provide a shelter for the fish trying to hold their place and search for food.

It was a trap of sorts, just standing there and tricking the fish into trusting her, but Gabrielle felt no remorse about it as she might have for furrer, cuter creatures.

Not fair. The bard wiggled her fingers and listened, hearing the clink of the river stones near her bare feet. Not fair, but it was what it was. She paused, and went still, as she felt something against her knee. “Ooo... I think I got one, Dori.”

Dori looked over, a wet river rock in her hand. “Mama?”

Gabrielle made a grab for it, and felt scales under her fingers as she struggled to get her fingers into the gills. “Cmon you...”

Dori got up and rambled towards her, splashing into the deeper water and throwing herself headlong into the creek, eagerly grabbing at whatever it was her mother was fighting with.

“Dori!” Gabrielle let go with one hand and grabbed for her daughter, but the child latched on to the fish and squealed in delight.

“Mama! Gots!” She tugged the fish up in both hands, kicking with her feet to keep afloat. “Mama!”

“Yes, I see.” Gabrielle was laughing, as she held the fish in place, getting her fingertips into the back of Dori’s little Amazon skirt. “You hang on tight, okay?”

“Gots!” Dori hauled the fish up and the weight of it nearly took her under the water, only Gabrielle’s hold on her prevented it. “Mama! Look!”

“Look what you caught, Dor!” Gabrielle got a good grip and lifted the fish out of the water, the rising sun catching a rainbow of colors across it’s scaly body. “Oh, look. How pretty!”

“Pitty!” Dori now had hold of Gabrielle’s leg, to keep herself from being taken downstream. “Mama, you make that with the yellow stuff inside?”

“Yes, I will.” Gabrielle glanced to the side, realizing they had an audience. Five or six Amazons were there, two obviously the guard. “Good morning.”

“Your majesty.” The nearest guard said. “We heard sounds.”

“Bet you did.” The bard got the big fish into her bag. “Dori, you done fishing? Can you get me one more small one?” She picked up her daughter and walked her into the shallow water. “One more, so we have four. “

“Okay.” Dori crouched in the water. “Mama watch!”

“I am honey.” Gabrielle concentrated on her daughter, blocking out the watching Amazons. “Go on.”

Dori went very still, and her eyes narrowed. Then she grunted and stuck her hands in the water, grabbing something and removing it. “Gots!”

“Very good, honey.” Gabrielle held her bag open. “Put it in here.” She waited for Dori to do so, then she looked up at the watching group. “We felt like fish for breakfast.”

The Amazons were watching her with expressions of mild disbelief.

“Here, hang on to this.” Gabrielle offered up the bag, waiting for one of the to take it. “Thanks.” She turned and plunged into the creek headfirst, exulting in the rush of the cold water over her body – a sensation that was long familiar to her from her travels.

It felt wild and wonderful, and the part of her that was part of Xena laughed inside. She squinted into the water, feeling the sting against her eyes as she saw a blur of motion around her, a brief glimpse of a fishes wild eye, and the rounded hump of a turtle.

She let the current take her, ducking under the surface and turning, stretching out her body and then grabbing hold of a passing branch to stop herself. She pulled herself back to the shallows, then she stood up and let the water sheet off her, shaking her head and sending droplets everywhere. “Ahh.”

“Mama! Wet!” Dori shook herself too, wiggling her entire body in imitation.

Her mother chuckled and ruffled her hair. “That was fun, huh?”

“Fun.” Dori had hold of the back of her skirt and she climbed up the bank after Gabrielle as they joined the small group on the bank. Gabrielle took her bag of fish back, and they all started walking up towards the central square.

As they reached it, the other women drifted off, leaving Gabrielle with the two guards, who seemed to be providing something of an escort to their wayward Queen.

The sun now felt good on her wet skin, and Gabrielle ran her fingers through her hair as she walked. “Didn’t meant to scare anyone.”

“Oh, you didn’t , your Majesty.” The guard hurriedly assured her. “We were just surprised, right Rana?”

“Right.” The other guard agreed. She was a younger woman , with dark red hair and a spare, athletic body. “We just couldn’t imagine what kind of animal was caught in the creek.”

Gabrielle chuckled. “When we’re out on the road, we do that a lot.” She said. “When you sleep rough, it’s nice to start the day with a bath.”

She was aware of the eyes on her. She was wearing only the top and brief skirt of her Amazon leathers, but the sun on her bare skin felt good, and knew both she and Dori would dry soon enough – and the faint shock value was making her smile.

“Your majesty, can I ask a question?” Rana said.

“Sure.” Gabrielle nodded.

“Is it true, I heard that you said you were going to let people make houses, like down in the town, around in here. Just for one person.”

The bard watched her from her peripheral vision. “Well, I was talking to Solari.” She said. “And it just seemed crazy to me that she has to live in the communal dorm just because she’d not partnered with anyone.” She said. “We have a lot of space, why shouldn’t she be able to make her own place if she wants to?”

“Its not tradition.” The other guard objected. She was an older Amazon, with a sprinkling of gray hairs and a prominent scar on her shoulder. “Living in the dorms teaches you how to get along with your sisters.”

Rana snorted under her breath. “Elseh, please.”

“Well, I’m not very traditional.” Gabrielle replied mildly. “And I guess I value my privacy because there wasn’t much in my family growing up.”

“Mama.” Dori came trotting back over. “Look! Izzard!”

Gabrielle knew better than to hold her hand out. “Let me see.” She peered at Dori’s catch. “Oh, isn’t he pretty? You should let him go, Dori. So he can run around and have fun with his friends.”

Dori eyed her, then reluctantly let the lizard loose. The animal sprang from her hand to the ground and scampered off, its crest rising and falling rapidly.

“But your Majesty.” Elseh said. “We let women who partner out make their own space. If you let everyone do that, what incentive is there to partner?”

“That’s not why people partner.” Rana broke in. “You’re such a prude. Maybe more of us would get to know and keep a partner if we weren’t stuck in a room with everyone making comments all the time.”

Gabrielle figured she’d found at least one ally. “Well, I can only speak for myself.” She cleared her throat. “And given who I’m partnered with, I can say making our own hut somewhere never came into the decision for me at all.”

Rana chuckled.

“No one has to do it.” The bard went on. “But since we have the space now, I think we should give people the choice. “

“Its not tradition.” The older Amazon turned and started off in a different direction. “I’m going back on post. You can stay and suck up, Rana.”

“Hey.” Rana frowned.

“Hey.” Gabrielle put her hand on the woman’s arm. “Don’t let that get to you. I know there are a lot of traditions here, and it’s not my intention on rocking the boat.”

“Why not?” Rana said, looking her right in the eye. “Maybe some of us would like that.” She gave the queen a smile, then she saluted. “Time for me to get back to guard duty as well. Have a good day, your majesty.”

Gabrielle watched her go, one eyebrow arched. “Ah heh.” She mused. “Interesting.” She turned back to Dori. “C’mon, Dori. Let’s go make some fish. You want to help me teach how?”

“Fun?”

“Well.” Her mother smiled wryly. “Maybe. Let’s go see.”

“Uh oh.”

**

Continued in Part 6

A Queen’s Tale

Part 6

Xena stood just inside the treeline, the setting sun brushing her shoulders as she watched the approach to the tiny town ahead of her on the road.

The place looked fairly sleepy. There were two chickens pecking the grass near the first small hut and a woman was standing outside, beating linen in a wooden bucket.

“What do you think, Io?” Xena asked her equine companion. “Those guys ride through here? Or did they go up the main fork to Thalos?”

Io rested his chin on Xena’s shoulder and blew out his lips, spattering horse spit all over his rider’s face.

“Thanks.” The warrior wiped her cheek of against her tunic sleeve. After a long day’s hike in the deep woods, the garment was much the worse for wear and Xena was looking forward to getting out of it.

Question was, where?

The town looked too small to even have an inn. Just a collection of cottages and a communal paddock that had two cows, a horse and a donkey inside it. Xena exhaled with some regret and turned, heading back into the trees.

The leaves brushed against her as they had been all day, and she wound her way through the overgrown trees until she found a small footpath, which headed up on a slight incline. She took it, leading Io up the slope.

As she walked, the breeze got a little stronger, and she kept climbing, as the sun slanted further on the horizon and painted the path with lurid orange light.

The path got a bit steeper, and as she looked to her left, she could see a wisp of smoke from a town chimney as she climbed above the little valley fold the town was settled in. The path took her then to the right, around a moss covered stone outcropping.

Behind her, Io ambled along with out protest, his golden head swinging from side to side as he examined his surroundings. His rider had been leading him on foot most of the day, and so far he’d gotten to see lots of interesting things and animals, a far more intriguing time than he’d have spent in the field in Amphipolis.

Now there seemed to be cool water and hill grass in his future, as Xena made a satisfied grunting noise and they climbed up a last, steep grade up to a flat area between two hilltops. The water he’d smelled turned out to be a deep spring that overflowed it’s bank on one side and ran down the crease in the hills as a respectable creek.

The surface of the ground was covered in thick, green grass and if Iolaus could have smiled, he would have. Instead, he flicked his tail and nudged his rider in the shoulder.

“Yeah, didn’t expect to find anything this nice up here.” Xena sighed in satisfaction. “Better than the stuffy back of a barn, huh boy?”

She turned and started taking off Iolaus’ saddle, loosening the girth and swinging the heavy

leather construct off his back and setting it down on a narrow boulder near the creek. She then slipped his bridle off, and gave him a slap on the shoulder. "G'wan. I'll rub you down later, after you finish rolling."

Iolaus trotted off towards the water. Xena watched him with an indulgent grin, and then she unstrapped her bedroll and saddle bag and started examining her surroundings for a decent place to make camp.

She didn't have far to look. There was a curve of the hill with two trees in front of it, and a clear space between them. Xena took her gear over and set it down, pulling out her wood cutting ax and heading into the nearby scrub for some firewood.

There would be no fish in the spring, she figured, so as she went, she kept her ears cocked for anything she could catch for dinner.

The summer heat had dried out the trees, so she had little trouble chopping herself a double armful of wood, tucking the ax into her belt as she carried it back to the camp, dropping to one knee near the curve of the hill and arranging the limbs into a neat pile.

A handful of dried grass, and her flint and striker, and she was blowing gently into a quickly catching tinder. The fire came to life t her hands and she carefully tended it, using one of the spare pieces of firewood to scrape away anything that might burn from the edges of the newly born flames.

Once she had it burning the way she liked, she took out the small traveling pot they used for water and went over to the creek, leaning over and bringing a handful of the water up to her nose for a cautious sniff before she took a sip of it.

Clean, cold and sweet. Xena filled the pot and brought it back with her to the fire, setting it down at the edge to warm. Then she leaned against the stone and unlaced her sandals, letting them drop to the ground as she viewed their sadly battered state.

Comfortable? Yes. But not nearly as rugged as her boots. Xena loosened the belt on her tunic and stripped it off, draping it over the top of her saddlebag as she felt the early evening breeze cool her skin.

She walked over to the spring and splashed her way into it, waiting until she was up to her thighs before she dove the rest of the way in. The cold water felt wonderful; she'd been sweating most of the day and it was a relief to wash the dust and grime off her and she held her breath as she scrubbed her newly trimmed hair and let the water cool her scalp.

Then she surfaced into the oncoming twilight, flipping over onto her back and swimming lazily across the spring as she watched Iolaus rolling in the grass, all four legs waving in the air.

He was a beautiful horse. He had his mother's coloration and spunky disposition, and his father's size and build. He bred well, and was a pleasure to ride having a nice smooth gait, more pleasant in fact than Argo's though Xena would not have mentioned that in her favorite's presence.

Looking at him, she felt a quiet pang as she thought about his lost brother, the dark maned and tailed Hercules who had died defending her in the war. She still missed him. It still made her angry when she thought about the gutless animals who had killed him and she hoped they'd been some of the men she'd slaughtered in the fight that followed.

Bastards.

Xena brooded a moment longer, then set the memories aside and swam across the spring again, reaching the end and turning to go back the other way. The water felt good and it let her stretch her body out, after all the tramping she'd done through the forest that day.

Io finished his fun and came over to the spring, lowering his head to get a drink as he kept and

equine eye on his mistress.

Xena leaned back against the moss covered stone ringing one side of the water, stretching both arms out to either side as she watched the sun disappear from the sky. The color stretched across the horizon, in gentle colors that tinged the leaves and the grass and she was content to simply watch it, having learned from Gabrielle to appreciate a nice end to the day.

It was nice. She had a decent place to camp, good water, and she'd managed to make relatively good time while avoiding the soldiers from Athens. All in all, not a bad day.

She waited for the last of the sun to fade, then she swam to the shallow area of the spring and stood up, now appreciating the warmth of the air against her water chilled skin. She made her way back up to her camping spot and removed a piece of linen from her pack to dry herself off with.

Iolaus wandered over to a patch of thick green grass nearby and started ripping up mouthfuls of it, his flaxen tail whisking slowly back and forth.

Xena rummaged in her pack and removed a clean shirt, slipping it over her head. Then she rolled out her bedroll near the fire and sat down on it, removing her travel cup and packets of herbs and setting them down.

She sorted out the herbs she had and crumbled some into the bottom of the cup, reaching over to pick up the water pot and pouring the steaming liquid over the leaves. She set them aside to steep and considered her options for dinner.

Fishing was out. She could hunt for something, of course. Xena regarded the rapidly darkening forest around her, her fire spreading only a modest ring of light across the space. Or she could make do with the leftovers she had in her saddlebag, and get something better in the morning.

Xena stretched out on the fur and pulled her bag over, removing one of the pocket sandwiches she'd gotten in Amphipolis out of it, along with a handful of nuts. She sipped her tea and munched her sandwich, idly listening to the soft cracking and popping of the fire nearby.

Iolaus edged over, still cropping the grass but staying within the warm light of the fire. It reflected off his golden coat and he shook his head, nickering a little at her.

Xena toasted him with her tea. "Could be worse, huh boy? Could be some dusty lean to with weeks old hay."

Io snorted.

The warrior chuckled. The ground was hard, but it was nice to stretch out and just listen to the forest around her. She would go back to the road tomorrow, she decided. Hopefully the soldiers would have found something more interesting to occupy their attention, but if not, and she met them on the road, then she'd just deal with that.

She finished up her sandwich and nuts, and then she sat up and pulled her gear bag over, removing her sword and setting it to one side along with her sharpening stone. She set the bag aside, patting it with one hand. "Tomorrow."

She'd gotten her two days of relief. In the morning she'd put on her armor and trade the discomfort for the safety of the well broken in leather and hammered metal that in reality defined who she was. With a satisfied grunt, she started running the sharpening stone down her blade, the harsh whisper echoing through the glade and into the darkness.

**

Gabrielle settled her staff down across her thighs and waited, while the Amazons across from her sorted themselves out and decided who was next. They were halfway through a morning sparring

session, and she'd just joined them when their attentions had turned to quarterstaff.

Bows and spears – she was useless with and everyone knew it. She picked up a bow, and every Amazon in the vicinity ran for cover, and even her beloved soulmate went on unobtrusive alert, her hands flexing just in case they were needed for errant arrows.

Some of the Amazons preferred chobos, the short, hard war clubs used in both hands. Gabrielle had only recently started to learn them, as Xena determined her two handed coordination had improved enough for her to try without hitting herself in the head all the time.

Embarrassing. But she'd started to get the hang of them and she loved watching Xena use hers, since the warrior was so graceful and balanced with them.

So for most of the sparring sessions she just watched, content to observe the Amazons, knowing enough from her life with Xena to know who were the good fighters and who weren't and having a very good eye for skills that she didn't herself possess.

But this one weapon, the one she had both hands wrapped around, and was idly spinning as she waited, that she could and did participate in and often taught her sisters when she was in the mood to.

“Your majesty?”

Gabrielle turned to find Renas the elder at her back, along with two of her cohorts. “Hi.” She greeted them. “What’s up?” She could see the faint twitches in their faces, and she stifled a smile.

“May we speak with you?” Renas said.

“Sure.” The queen said. “But not right now. I’m in the middle of this.” She indicated the sparring session. “We can do lunch if you want, over at my place.”

The elders looked conflicted between being pissed about being put off, and being charmed about being invited to the queen’s private quarters and they fortunately decided on the latter. “We’d be glad to do that.” Renas said. “Just after noon?”

Gabrielle tipped her head back and regarded the sun’s position. “That’ll work.” She said. “Now you’ll have to excuse me.” She pointed at the tall Amazon who had trotted out to oppose her. “See you later.”

The elders retreated a bit awkwardly, as Gabrielle turned and went to meet her sparring partner. “Hi.”

The Amazon managed a grin. “Your majesty.” She handled her staff a little nervously, clearly intimidated by facing her queen.

“You know.” Gabrielle twitched her hands, and took the Amazon’s staff out of hers. “Xena taught me one thing that really sticks out in my mind.” She waited for the woman to retrieve her weapon. “You can’t worry about who you’re fighting against.”

The Amazon gripped her staff and managed a brief grin. “All due respect, that’s easy for you to say, your majesty.”

Gabrielle laughed. “So how intimidating an opponent do you figure Xena is?” She moved her staff up to a defensive position across her body. “C’mon.”

The Amazon took a deep breath and came closer, hesitating as she waited to see what Gabrielle was going to do. “I’m not really good with this.” She apologized. “I’m better with a sword.”

“So’s Xena.” Gabrielle agreed. “But there are advantages to using a staff, like this. “ She extended the staff in one hand, its end tapping the woman on the shoulder. “If you had a sword,

I could get at you, and you can't get to me."

"Okay." The Amazon shifted her grip. "But we practice staff against staff. How does that help you know how to use this against a sword?"

Good question. "Well, you should practice against both." Gabrielle answered, as she moved her hands and took the Amazons' staff out of hers again with the unexpectedly quick motion. "But first, you need to learn to use this thing before you try that."

"Could you kill someone with it?" The Amazon asked, out of the blue.

The murmuring voices of the group watching stilled, and everyone looked over at Gabrielle.

The bard set the end of her staff on the ground and leaned on it. "Yes." She answered. "And I have."

The silence stretched on a moment after that, then Solari pushed through the crowd and gestured at Gabrielle's opponent. "C'mon, Kellas. Get a move on. Gabrielle ain't got all day here. You can ask her stuff at dinner."

"Okay, sorry." Kellas turned and put her staff up in position. "Your majesty?"

Gabrielle resumed her weapon position and came forward, reasoning she'd never so much as get to lunch if she didn't start the sparring session off. She tapped one end of her staff against Kellas, and waited for her to react, then moved forward again to engage her.

She kept her motions relatively slow and relaxed, making the strike and counterstrike more of a dance than a fight, using the gentle warm up motions that she and Xena used when starting their own sessions.

Xena had told her, well, that's fine for training sessions. It suited them both to slowly work up to the rapid fire exchanges that got her heart racing and forced her reactions past thought, to the instinct that had become over the years bone deep in her just as it was in her partner.

In real life, though, she knew opponents didn't let you warm up.

Kellas took heart from the lesson though, and slowly her reactions became more sure, and faster. "It's..ah. It's hard to get an angle on you." She blurted out, as she got knocked back for the fifth or sixth time.

"One time being short gives me an advantage." Gabrielle acknowledged easily, ducking under a swing and bringing her staff back faster, as her body started reacting without her thinking about it. She kept her grip on the staff shoulder width and used the strength of her torso to add punch behind the strokes.

Kellas was strong, and she was fast. She wasn't that skilled with a staff, as she'd told Gabrielle, but she wasn't that bad, and after a few minutes she seemed to be enjoying the experience.

That made Gabrielle relax, and she started enjoying it too. "Okay, try not to hold your staff even like that." She said. "Hold it .. right. Angled, so you can use your weight to counter."

Kellas nodded. "Oh. Yeah, I see."

"Right so.. " Gabrielle suddenly felt a prickle across the nape of her neck, and she didn't stop to think when her instincts warned her of a presence at her back, and danger. She planted both feet and jumped backwards, then swung her staff around so fast it was just a blur to the watching eyes.

A body, a moving weapon. Gabrielle felt the hard, familiar crack as her staff caught the object heading towards her and sent it flying, following through and catching her attacker in the head as her body reversed itself and the opposite end of her staff took the feet out from the figure holding it and dumped them on the ground.

Kellas stood with her staff in her hands, gaping.

Gabrielle took a deep breath and slowly let her body relax, recognizing the figure on the ground now holding their head. "Sorry about that, Aalene."

"Ow." The Amazon croaked. "Great Athena."

The bard grounded her staff again, and eyed the watching Amazons. "It's probably not a good idea to come up behind me like that anymore." She said, quietly. "I've had too many people try to kill me that way."

In the silence that followed, she could hear a hawk in the distance. It almost made her smile.

**

"No, no, it was my fault." Aalene held the water soaked cloth to her head. "I should know better than to run up on anyone on the field like that." She gave her queen a rueful look. "But boy, do you hit."

Now inside the healer's hut, Gabrielle produced a mildly abashed expression. "When I first started learning to fight." She said. "I had to think about everything, and believe me I kept getting knocked on my ass all over the place. Xena got me past that."

"Here, drink this." Salas came over and offered her a cup. "There's no herbs in it, but it'll make you relax." She glanced at Gabrielle. "And by the way, your majesty. I'm not Menelda. Your consort is welcome here to teach us anything she likes whenever she likes."

That produced a genuine, full smile from the queen. "Thanks Salas. I'll let her know when she gets back. I'm glad you stepped up here, I've heard everyone say good things about your care."

The older woman looked faintly surprised. She smiled back at Gabrielle. "Thanks." She said. "To get a nod from most of these women, you'd need to to pay em."

"I'm glad Menelda decided to go back with her daughter rather than move here." Aalene spoke up. "She was so bitter."

"No way she'd have moved here." Salas said. "Not with how much she hates Xena. Hope she's happy where she moved to. She never was with us." She removed the cold cloth from Aalene's head, then rinsed it, and replaced it, putting Aalene's fingers back on it. "You'll be okay. Just stay away from the business end of her Maj's stick."

"That'd be either end." Aalene said. "I think I got hit by both."

"You did." Gabrielle agreed, glad to see the injury was relatively minor. She felt bad that she'd hurt Aalene, whom she liked, but not that she'd reacted as she had. Xena had gotten her past that, too. "Now that I know you're okay, I'm going to go get lunch and see what the elders want from me."

"Oooohh.." Aalene rolled her eyes.

Salas snorted. "Stuck in the past." She shook her head. "They want to go back to the old days, when you had to kiss every nipple in the nation to get accepted." She patted Aalene on the shoulder and gave Gabrielle a nod of respect, then disappeared back into the depths of the healer's hut.

"Well, they won't get much luck with me on that score." Gabrielle said. "Sorry again, Aalene. Hope the headache goes away soon."

"No problem." The younger Amazon waved at her. "Have a nice lunch."

Eh. Gabrielle left the healer's hut and angled her steps towards the dining hall, using her staff in

it's more usual role as she walked. As she approached the kitchens she could hear the normal clatter of those working inside and she slipped past the curtains and into the firepit area after leaving her staff leaning outside.

There were six women hard at work inside, and they looked up as Gabrielle entered with a mixture of anticipation and wariness. "Ah, your majesty." A brown haired Amazon of medium height greeted her. "Welcome back."

The bard went over to a washbasin and scrubbed her hands in it. "Thanks" She said. "I'm just going to grab that stew I left on this morning. My kid's expecting it for lunch."

The cooks chuckled. "Doriana has a good appetite." One of them mentioned. "And a good heart too. She saved a little lizard from under my foot earlier."

Gabrielle went over to where she'd left her pot of fish stew and uncovered it. "She loves all kinds of animals. I don't really have the heart to tell her we regularly serve some of her favorites to her as dinner." She sniffed at the concoction approvingly, then put the cover back on and hefted it off the warming fire.

The cooking area was finished, finally, and starting to look like she remembered the one in the mountains had. They had built a stone cooking pit at the back of the dining hall, the inside being a fireplace for the cool weather, and the outside a series of spits and hooks to hang pots on, where several fires could be lit at once.

Stone workspaces were across from the fires, the mountain above Gabrielle's cabin giving a rich source of building materials to the clever stone masons in the tribe. The whole work area was covered with a sturdy roof and thick thatch, the firepit itself sending its smoke off a well built chimney that had seen Xena's hand in the making.

Amazon meals were mostly communal. There was always a big pot on, and the hunters that went out every day would bring back whatever they found, to be added to it to serve the village, along with the herbs and vegetables from the gardens, and whatever forest scrounge the gatherers brought in.

"Your majesty, can you show me again what herbs you used in that?" One of the cooks came over, a thin girl with hair roughly the same color as Gabrielle's. "It smells so good."

"Sure." Gabrielle set the pot back down. "Let's see, this one has sage in it, those are the leaves I showed you all this morning, but what you probably smell is the crushed fennel seed I put in. " She opened the pot and sniffed it. "And the wild onions."

"Mm." The woman agreed. "Thanks. You know, we really do appreciate you sharing that with us." She looked around and the other cooks came closer to her. "We're sorry that Esta's in the sickroom, but she never wanted to tell us how to do anything."

"Why?" Gabrielle leaned against the hearthstone, feeling the warmth of it penetrate her shoulder muscles with a sense of relief. "Everyone who wants to learn should know how to do this stuff."

"Not everyone?" One of the other cooks asked shyly.

"Some people just have no interest." The bard smiled at her. "I live with someone like that. I wouldn't force her to learn something she didn't care about."

"But you would show her if she asked you, right?"

"Of course." Gabrielle replied. "So, let me get this straight. You asked Esta how to cook, how to put things together, and she said no?"

The thin woman nodded. "Said she worked hard to know what to do, and she wasn't going to give it up to just anyone."

“Jeun, that’s crazy.” Gabrielle said, after a moment’s pause. “We’re all sisters. We have no written history. How would anything get passed down from generation to generation unless we taught each other what we know?”

The woman shrugged. “Just what she said.” She turned. “Right?”

The rest of the cooks nodded. “You’re the first person who told me to cook porridge with anything but water.” Jeun admitted. “We just figured people would pour honey or whatever onto it”

“And they do.” Gabrielle said. “But if you make it taste like something to start with, they have to work less at doing that.” She picked up her fish stew again, and reached over to pick up a loaf of newly baked bread. “Don’t worry. We’ve got plenty of time to learn.”

The cooks went back to their tasks, and she left the kitchen, stopping to pick up her staff before she made her way back over to her quarters with a very thoughtful expression on her face.

**

Xena woke in the dark of pre dawn, blinking a little to shed the dew from her eyelashes as she lifted her head off her bedroll and looked around the campsite.

Her fire was still popping gently, mostly banked but giving off a little heat she could feel on the bottom of her bare feet. The glade was quiet and dark otherwise, and she could see Iolaus’ outline just down the slope near the spring.

Without Dori to care for, or Gabrielle to roust, the warrior put her head back down and let her body relax back onto the furs, content to wait until dawn lit the surroundings. She stifled a yawn and let her eyes half close, glad she’d gotten a decent night’s sleep despite being out here in the wild.

Or maybe because of it.

She let her mind lapse into an idle daydream, until she felt the light on her eyelids, and then she opened her eyes again this time to the gray twilight of morning. She rolled over then and stretched, arching her back and pushing herself up right.

Iolaus was already cropping grass, and Xena watched him enviously for a moment, as she heard her own guts rumbling. With a sigh, she rummaged in her pack and removed some leftover nuts, munching on them as she got up and went to the spring to fill her water pot again.

She paused to drink her fill from the spring and wash up before she dunked the pot in and wiped her lips dry as the sun started to peek slightly through the trees to the east. There was a haze in the sky that promised rain, and she got her water heating as she traded her shift for her pair of neatly folded leathers.

She folded the shift and put it away, then sat down on her furs to pull her socks and boots on and lace them.

Halfway through the second boot, her ears caught a sound out of place and she quickly looked up and around, seeing Iolaus’ head come up and his ears cock at the same time. She finished her lacing and got to her feet, drawing her sword from its sheath in a smooth motion.

Flexing her toes, she circled the trees she’d been camping behind and came around the rocks to where Iolaus was standing, his head turned towards the south. Xena came up next to him and put her arm over his back, looking in the same direction.

There was nothing obviously there, but both she and the horse could hear the sounds approaching, bare footfalls and labored breathing. Xena judged this as not an immediate threat, so she remained where she was, until the noise resolved into motion just at the treeline.

“Trouble for breakfast, Io.” The warrior mused. “Just like old times.”

Moments later, the motion turned into a young man racing up the slope, looking behind him as though he was being chased by wolves and throwing himself heedlessly forward with jerky, awkward strides.

He was halfway to where she was standing when he swung his head around and spotted her, his eyes growing huge and round as he hauled himself to a stop, stumbling forward and nearly pitching headfirst into the ground.

Xena lifted her free hand and motioned the boy forward. “C’mere. I won’t hurt you.”

Chest heaving, the boy stared at her for a long moment, then he lurched forward, stumbling up to her. “You..’ He turned and pointed behind him. “They’re comin. Gonna get me.”

“Who’s coming?” Xena asked, then stopped, as the answer became evident. Four men on horseback thundered through the trees, dressed in common workman’s clothes. They spotted her, and their quarry and pulled up.

“Hey! You there! Leave that boy be.” The man in the lead yelled out. “He’s ours!”

Xena stepped out from behind Iolaus so her casually carried sword could be seen. “That true?” She asked the boy. “You a slave?”

The boy shook his head like a frantic puppet. “No. no no no.”

There was something familiar about the boy, but Xena turned back to the men. “What do you want with him?” She asked. “He says he’s not a slave.”

The men looked at each other. They were unarmed, but had ropes in their hands, and whips.

“You running from the officials?” Xena asked, not taking her eyes off them. “You do something?”

“Nnnno.”

“Well?” Xena twirled her sword in her hand. The sun eased up over the treeline and sent sparkles off the blade. She started towards the men and stepped into the sunlight herself. She saw the men react a little. “What do you want with this kid?”

“This is our business!” The man in the lead protested. “You shouldn’t get involved!”

“Story of my life the last few years.” Xena smiled and twirled her blade again. “C’mon. I could use a little exercise before breakfast. Spill it or I’ll beat it out of ya.” She was glad, now, that she’d decided to put the armor on no matter the heat, because silly threats like that definitely carried more weight when you were wearing leathers than when you were wearing a nightgown.

They just did.

“No matter. We will find him later.” The man in the lead buckled, and pulled his horses head around. “Let’s go. We can tell the town guard there’s an outlaw in the area!” He tossed the threat back at Xena as they cantered off. “They’ll take care of you!”

Xena laughed, the light ringing sound chasing the men out of the clearing and back down the hill. Then she shook her head and turned around, finding the boy still standing next to Iolaus, hesitantly patting the stallions shoulder.

She had the time she took walking back to try and figure out where she’d seen him before, and just as she came within reach of him she did. “I know you.”

The boy watched her face, and slowly nodded “I remember you too.” He said. “You were there the night I came back to ma’s. You helped me. “

“Evon.” Xena remembered the name, and it brought back a memory of a downtrodden inn, and a desperate mother, and fear. “You escaped from Andreas’ army.”

“Aye.” He nodded. “And you’re Xena. Mama tells everyone how you came and helped me and made those soldiers go away.”

They walked back over to where Xena’s campsite was. The warrior banked the fire and tucked the water pot in her gear, after emptying it. Then she started to don her armor. “So, why are you being chased this time?” She asked, settling her chest armor over her head. “Don’t tell me you’re running from an army again.”

Evon sat down on a rock and sighed. He had grown in the past two years into a tall, gangly young man with a headful of curly blond hair. “Sorta.”

Xena sat down on another rock as she fastened her knee guards on. “Sorta?”

“Wasn’t easy after the war.” Evon said. “They took so much, mama had a tough time wi it.”

“Hm.” Xena grunted. Though Amphipolis had prospered after the war, many places, some already marginal like the tiny town she’d bypassed the night before, hadn’t. “So let me guess. You were given for work to someone?”

“Aye.” Evon nodded. “Went to help farm, I did. After I healed, anyway. Hard work.” He flexed his hands. “Did the best I could but m’back’s always bothered me since.”

“Given what they did to you? I bet it did.” Xena stood up and started lacing her bracers. “And?”

“Well, them folks from the city came through, said they had good money for them who wanted to be soldiers, so them folks my ma gave me to figured I’d be worth more to them for the coin, than for the work.”

Xena stopped lacing. “They were going to sell you to go fight for Athens?”

Evon nodded. “Didn’t want to.” He said succinctly. “Had me enough with that other one.”

The warrior finished getting her armor settled then she clipped her sword sheath to her back and settled her sword inside it. “C’mon.” She knelt to roll up her bedfurs. “I’ll take you home and see what we can work out.”

Evon watched her curiously. “Why should ya?” He said. “Just gonna be more trouble. Them’ll end up dragging me off some where anyhow, they gots the rights to.”

Xena stood up and whistled for Iolaus. The stallion trotted over, his muzzle covered in water droplets which he delighted in scattering over his rider’s face. She lifted his saddle up and settled it onto his back, reaching for the girth strap under his body. “Why should I.” She mused, tightening the strap. “Just because.”

“Oh.”

Xena slid the horses bridle on and fastened it. It was tempting to think that this was just a change that had happened to her, something Gabrielle had nurtured and triggered but the truth was, well, how had she met Gabrielle in the first place?

Meddling in crap she had no business caring about.

“Ma’ ll be glad to see you in any case.” Evon seemed reconciled to the idea. “Talks about you all the time. Think some folks there don’t like that, though.”

“Considering we had to talk them out of turning us over to Andreas because they were cowards? I bet.” Xena took hold of Iolaus’ bridle. “C’mon. Let’s go this way.” She started forward. “There’s a way through the hills back down to the road. “

Evon joined her, and they walked together through the grass to the narrow footpath on the other side. “You won that war, that last one.”

“Yes, I did.” Xena agreed.

“Nobody thought you would, from where I was from.” Evon seemed apologetic. “They figured you were crazy.”

“I’ve been called that before.” The warrior admitted. “They were lousy odds, but sometimes you get lucky. I did.”

Evon digested this. “Mama said she put a offering to Ares for you, every night.” He said. “Did you do that too?”

“Ahh...” Xena chuckled wryly. “That’s complicated question.”

“Oh.”

**

Gabrielle sighed and sucked on the end of her quill, studying the parchment in front of her . She was sprawled on the bed in her quarters, writing by candlelight as Dori snoozed on her bed nearby.

It was night, and it was dark out and here she was again, feeling that darkness outside pressing in on her.

“Cut it out.” She spoke softly aloud. “I mean it.” She went back to writing with a determined expression.

So today was my second day staying here. It went okay, I guess. The cooks are sort of warming up to me, the elders are pissed of at me, and I scared the heck out of people with my staff during practice.

Boy, I wish Xena was here.

Boy, I wish Xena was here.

Just thought I would put that down twice just to make sure anyone reading this gets where my head was when I was writing it. She’s only been gone two days – okay – really one whole day – and I feel so depressed I want to hit something.

I don’t like that. I feel like most of the people here think I’m just this crazy person who they’re stuck with while Ephiny’s gone and pregnant, and I don’t much think they like me.

Well, some of them do. Cait does, and Solari. I think some of the younger ones think I’m less hidebound than Eph, which is sort of funny because I never thought of her as really traditional at all – but when I look back, and remember her challenging me when I first got Terrais’ right, well, maybe she is.

I guess the question is – when is change good, and when is it just something different?

The children’s minders said today that tomorrow they were going to teach the kids how to make bows and arrows. I really don’t know how I feel about that.

Or, really – I don’t know what Xena’s going to think about that. I don’t think she wants Dori around weapons, at least until she’s much older when she can talk to her about them first. She’s really hung up on Dori not following in her footsteps.

How do I feel about that?

Gabrielle let her head rest back against the wall. “How do I feel about that?” She studied the

ceiling, glad that the noise around the village had dampened down to its late night level. "I don't know. Would I want someone to deliberately steer me away from where my heart tells me to go? Isn't that what my family did for all those years?"

She glanced over at Dori, deep asleep in her bed. The child was on her stomach, her arms and legs sprawled in abandon and her dark hair in disarray. "What if you like bows and arrows, Dor? Should we stop you and say no, that's wrong? How can we do that, if you live here?"

She dunked her quill point in the ink.

I think it's probably unfair to Dori to tell her it's wrong to touch weapons, when she lives with us, and sees us fighting all the time. It's too confusing. I think we have to either go live on a farm and raise sheep and tell her not to touch a sword, or we need to prepare her to live in our world with us.

She reread the paragraph, and grunted a little.

So if she wants to, I'm going to let her go to the bow class tomorrow and see what she says about it. Maybe she'll end up thinking it's silly. After all, we don't use bows much. I sure don't anyway.

So the elders came to see me today. I wasted a nice pot of fish stew on them. They're really scared that I'm going to be changing things right and left and they don't like it. But I'm not sure if it's that they're stuck with tradition, or they're just embarrassed they didn't think of changing things before.

Guess we'll find out.

Gabrielle blew the entry dry, and then she got up and put her diary on the worktable in the main section of the hut, pausing to get a cup full of water and drain it before she went back into the bedroom.

She blew out the candle and got into bed, holding her breath a little as the vision of the other half of the bed empty brought back a startlingly powerful emotional pang. She felt a chill run over her skin, and had to spend a few minutes just slowly relaxing as her rational mind worked to overcome her emotional heart.

"Wow." She finally said. "That wasn't funny. You gotta cut that out, Gabrielle. She's out there." Gabrielle licked her suddenly dry lips and felt her heart slow. "Stop freaking out."

The sounds of the village drifted in, just strange enough to move her mind out of that dark place it had been sliding into and making her grateful that she'd decided to move down from the cabin after all.

Being alone in that big bed would have been too much.

The sound of toenails suddenly echoed loudly in the hut, and she turned her head to see Ares trot inside, with one of his puppies at his heels. The wolf leaped up onto the bed next to Gabrielle and turned a few times, settling down and gazing at her, ears pricked.

The puppy settled down next to Dori's bed with a grunt.

Gabrielle stared at him in fascination. "Ares... how did you know to come in here?" She whispered, reaching out to scratch his ears. "Did Xena send you?"

Her partner was nowhere nearby. The wolf hadn't followed her. And yet, right at this moment, when she was thinking these dark, lonely thoughts he had appeared and plopped himself down in Xena's spot just as though her partner had snapped her fingers somewhere and sent him.

Ares tongue lolled out and he panted happily at her.

Gabrielle put her head back down on her pillow, wondering if it was just her admittedly

overactive imagination playing tricks on her. Sometimes the downside of being a storyteller was that everything around you could turn into a story if you weren't careful.

Regardless, having Ares there made her feel better. The wolf lived on the mountain – often he was away hunting, or being with his family, the puppies and the scruffy barn dog bitch that was their mother but he often stopped by the cabin, or joined Xena on her hunts.

Gabrielle was always glad to see him, because Ares had become a part of her life just as her life had changed beyond recognition along with her relationship with Xena. He'd seen the best and the worst of them, and through it all just wagged his brushy tail, and offered a wet kiss without judgement.

So few people in her life were like that. She rolled over onto her side and gave him a kiss on the nose. "Thanks."

Ares licked her face, then he settled his head down on the bed and exhaled.

Gabrielle did the same, feeling both her body and her mind relax and she was able to turn her thoughts towards the morning.

Tomorrow she'd end the speculation running in the village and start making some changes.

See where that took her.

**

Xena felt her boots skid a little as they descended a somewhat steep slope leading down to the road. She leaned back and got her balance, watching from her peripheral vision as Iolaus did the same. "Easy boy."

Evon was behind her, one hand on the horses saddlepad to keep himself steady, having run out of things to say quite some time back.

Wasn't much of a talker. Xena didn't mind that, really. She glanced both ways as they reached the road, then crossed into the center of it, judging the time it would take to continue around the bend and eventually end up back in Evon's hometown. "How long were they chasing you?"

"Two days." Evon moved up next to her, now that they weren't on the slope. "Figured I'd get far from mama just in case. Didn't want em taking out on her, or her getting in with them."

"She tried to shoot me." The warrior recalled.

Evon looked at her. "My mama?"

Xena nodded. "Figured I was there to make trouble the last time, after all the destruction Andreas spread around. Can't blame her." She kicked a small rock. "Ran out of arrows then started throwing pots and pans. Woulda been funny if I hadn't had cast iron heading at me."

"Wow."

"That was just before you got there."

Evon exhaled. "I don't like thinking about that." He said, honestly. "It hurt a lot." He reached back and touched his shoulder. "Still does. All stiff and all. Makes it hard to work."

The scar tissue would. Xena glanced at him. All the skin on his back had been flayed off, and every movement must have been agony for the kid for months. "Yeah, I'm sure it does." She said. "That was a lot of damage."

"You told me, I'd wanna die. I did." Evon said, in a placid tone. "I did, but I couldn't leave mama, all by herself. Not till it was over, and things got sorta okay."

They walked past a herd of sheep off the road, with their shepherd under a tree wiping his brow and taking a swig from a waterskin. The animals looked a bit bedraggled, and Xena's knowledgeable eye caught the lack of lambs in the huddled herd. "Morning."

The shepherd looked up, gazing at them a moment before he lifted a hand in greeting. "Morn."

"Heading to market?" The warrior asked.

The man shook his head. "Just moven em to better pasture." He studied the herd. "Wolf got a half score. Bastard animal. Shoulda set poison."

"Took the lambs?"

"Aye."

Xena felt a bit ambiguous. She sympathized with the man, and understood his anger at losing part of his flock, but she also counted a wolf as part of her family and she knew if Ares had the chance, he'd have taken one of the animals too.

Just part of nature. She knew Ares hunted mostly wild mostly up by the cabin, but she also knew she'd seen him with chicken feathers on his muzzle and the only chickens around town belonged to someone.

She could remember being a wolf in human form, and exulting in finding a flock out in the field when she was hungry. How could she fault her four legged friend the same?

"Where you folks headed?" The shepherd asked, unexpectedly. "You going to join up with the army?"

Xena bit back a retort. After all, she was in armor, carrying weapons, with a battle horse. Wasn't really outlandish. "No." She said. "Just heading for the coast."

"Yah." The man nudged his flock into motion. "Least one person I met today's got sense." He shook his head. "Buncha idiot kids going to get thesselves kilt." He muttered. "Told them fancy high types came through here same thing, just got laughed at."

Xena's ears pricked. "Soldiers?" She slowed to let him catch up. The sheep flowed around Iolaus, who ignored them being long used to the wooly beasts. "Coming through here?"

The shepherd shrugged as he walked along. "Had stuff on like you do." He said. "All horseback, and whatnot, half score of em. " He glanced behind them. "Lot of people riding through lately. Least they don't come through wrecking all."

Ah. Xena was pleased. She recognized the Spartans in the man's description and felt a sense of vindicated relief that she was heading in the right direction. "When did the soldiers come through?"

"Sun highest yesterday." The shepherd said. "They friends of yours?"

"No." Xena said. "Just don't want to bump into them. Not looking for trouble."

"Smart." The shepherd grunted. "More should mind their business." He herded the sheep along the left hand side fork in the road, a half cleared path leading slightly downward. "Good day to you."

"And you." Xena replied courteously, looking up quickly when she heard approaching hoofbeats along the right hand side fork they were continuing to travel down.

Evon edged closer to Iolaus, taking hold of one of the stallion's stirrups and getting behind Xena as though he was hiding.

Xena sighed and shifted her shoulders, twitching her sword into place. "Maybe your friends are

coming back for you.”

“Hope not.”

Six riders clattered around the bend heading right for them. Not Evon’s friends, Xena noted, but well dressed men with the air of merchants about them. The men stared at them carefully, but continued past without comment.

“Didn’t look too friendly.” Evon commented.

“Neither do I.” Xena reached into one of her saddlebags and retrieved an apple. Then she paused, and pulled out a second. “Want one?”

Evon lifted a hand. “Thanks. I don’t like them.” He said. “Got a pit stuck in my throat when I was little.”

Without comment, the warrior put the second fruit away and bit into the first, tearing off a chunk and offering it to Iolaus.

The stallion nibbled it from her palm and crunched it contentedly, as Xena patted his cheek. “Good boy.” She strolled along side the horse. “This much traffic on the road lately?”

“Seems like.” Evon said. “Ever since them folks from Athens came through.”

“Uh huh.”

“Maybe they’re looking for stray stuff to sell.”

Xena figured they were more likely looking for people like that shepherd, either to co-opt or get his animals at a bargain price to sell them but she merely grunted and shrugged.

The continued down the road for another quarter candlemark when they heard more horses approaching. “Busy day.” The warrior mused. “Seems like a lot of people are heading in the opposite direction from us, uh?”

“Uh huh.” Evon agreed.

Xena was beginning to get the feeling that things weren’t really adding up. There was something going on that she just didn’t quite grasp yet.

The sounds got louder, and now they heard voices, raised and full of coarse laughter.

This time, it was trouble. Xena felt her hackles lift as soon as the newcomers came into view, rough armored men driving their animals hard, who let out a roar as they spotted them. “Fresh meat!” The man in the lead said. “Git em!”

“Stay here.” Xena swung up onto Iolaus’ back and sent the stallion bolting down the road as she drew her sword. She wrapped the reins around her saddle horn and released them, clamping down with her knees as the men neared.

It occurred to her that she could have tried talking to them first.

Only fleetingly though, as she was engaged in battle in the next moment, her sword smashing the leading raider’s out of position as Iolaus barreled into his mount and knocked him over.

Without hesitating she turned the stallion in a circle and kicked out with one boot, sending a second man half out of his saddle as she whipped her sword down and smacked the man in the side of the head with the flat of it.

That sent him tumbling out of his saddle as she ducked instinctively, sensing a mace passing over her shoulder. She straightened and backhanded her attacker, the backs of her knuckles wrapped around her sword hilt catching him in the face and sending blood flying everywhere.

A flash of steel and she kned Iolaus, feeling the stallion whirl under her and kick out with both hind legs as she flipped her sword from one hand to the other and caught the blade heading her way, twisting her wrist and deflecting it then sending her elbow into the face of the man wielding it as his horse buckled under Io's attack.

"H.. get out! Get back!" One of the men screamed horsely. "Get outta here!"

Ah, music to Xena's ears. She whirled Io in a circle, pleased to see her erstwhile adversaries running for their lives down the road, dripping blood and having left weapons, bags and for some reason a boot behind. "Losers!"

The men didn't stop to argue. They disappeared around the bend, and Evon emerged from behind the rock he'd hidden behind as Xena wiped her blade down. "Wow."

"Yeah." Xena sheathed her weapon. "Wow. As in, wow, what did those idiots think they were doing?" She shook her head. "Attacking people on the road in broad daylight? Is that common around here?" She asked the boy.

Evon shrugged. "Maybe they got the same idea as them guys from my town." He suggested. "Sell us to the army, or something." He eyed Xena. "You really know that stuff, huh?"

Xena looked around, then at herself. Her eyebrows hiked. Then she shook her head and extended her hand down. "Here, grab hold and I'll pull you up." She said. "We need to move."

A moment later they were cantering down the road, leaving the brigands far behind as they headed through a fold in the hills and into the valley beyond, winding through sunlit brush that held an air of wildness and neglect.

**

Gabrielle was startled out of sleep and a deep formless dream by an impudent tug on her hair. She jerked and came up onto her elbows, then relaxed as she heard Dori's giggle. "Dori."

"Mama." Dori mimicked her tone.

Gabrielle put her cheek down on the bed and peered at her child. "That's bad, Dori."

Dori came over and put her fingers on the covers, getting almost nose to nose with her mother. "Hungry." She complained. "I played with Oogy but I'm tired now!"

Ah. There was definitely a good side to her partner's early rising ways. The bard pushed herself upright again and swung her feet over the edge of the bed. "Okay, you little bandit. I'm getting up."

"Yay!" Dori scampered off into the other room, leaving her mother to climb out of bed and follow her. It wasn't quite dawn, but Gabrielle stifled a yawn as she crossed the floor and figured at least it would give her a little time to get ready for the day.

Xena was Doris' morning buddy. The warrior never minded waking up early, in fact she usually woke up before their daughter did and she would gather up a cold breakfast and go into Dori's room, to entertain her and let Gabrielle wake whenever she had a mind to.

The bard had started out resenting that a little. She'd felt Dori was usurping her own morning time with her partner, but after she'd thought about that for a while she'd just slapped herself and grown up and learned to enjoy it instead.

"Dori Dori." Gabrielle came into the main part of her quarters, and glanced around, spotting the child over near the fireplace. "Careful, honey."

"Mama, I cook." Dori had one of her pots on the floor, and she was pounding a mud patty with a serious expression. "Look!"

Gabrielle finished washing her face in the water basin, and then she came over, wiping her skin dry with a linen towel as she gazed at Dori's new project. "What is that supposed to be, honey?"

"Pacakes." Dori looked up at her. "Like mama do."

The bard sat down on the chair next to the fire, and rested her elbows on her knees. "Well." She said. "They look very pretty, but I don't think you want to eat them, right? That's dirt from outside, isn't it?"

"Yes." Dori picked up a few pebbles and pressed them in some haphazard pattern into the mud. "Go outside with Guff, and got good dirt." She explained. "Then we got rocks and make all pitty."

"Ah huh." Gabrielle mused. "Well, how about if mama goes and gets some stuff to make you some of the kind of pancakes we can eat. Would you like that?"

"Yum."

"I thought so." The bard went to the chest and pulled out a shirt, exchanging her sleep shift for it. She tied the rough linen belt around her and ran her fingers through her hair. "We can have some pancakes, and some fruit. That okay? You want some pears?"

"Yum!!!"

"That's what Boo gives you all the time, right? Nice pears?"

Dori got up and joined her. "Yes." She agreed seriously. "Apple and cupcakes."

"Cupcakes." Gabrielle took Dori's hand and they walked together out of the hut. "Honey, if you were anyone else's kid, I would think you were just trying to con your mama."

"Yum!"

Gabrielle chuckled under her breath. The sun was just coming up, and there were only a few Amazons out and about, scouts heading out towards the fringes of their territory and some early risers heading towards the dining hall as she was.

It looked like it was going to be a nice day.

"your Majesty?"

Gabrielle glanced up to see Solari trotting towards her. She waved. "Morning."

"Morning." Solari slowed to a halt. "We just heard from the upmountain watch. They finally managed to clear that rockfall last night and they found a new little valley."

"Great." Gabrielle said. "I think we agreed anything the tribe clears on this side of the mountain belongs to us."

Solari nodded. "Yeah, they said you should come check it out."

The bard considered that as they walked along. "They did, huh?"

"Yeah." The dark haired Amazon agreed. "I think they found something but didn't want to say. You know?"

"Mm." Gabrielle nodded. "Okay, sure." She said. "Dori's going to be in the class all day, so I can run up there and see what's going on. The idea of exploring something new appealed to her. "You want to round up a few people to head up there after breakfast?"

"Sure." Solari smiled. "You're going to let Dori do the bows and arrows class? "

The bard nodded. "Yeah." She said. "I don't want her shooting bows at anyone, but if she's going to be a part of the tribe, and live here for a while, I can't keep her from taking part in stuff like that." She said. "Besides, she wants to. Right Dor?"

Dori had been examining a bug on the ground. "Mama?"

"You want to make bows and arrows with your friends today?" Gabrielle asked her daughter, as they reached the dining hall and ducked inside the kitchen. "Remember what they asked yesterday?"

Dori nodded emphatically. "Want to make arrows with the pretty fethers." She agreed. "Pretty like mama's!"

Solari regarded her. "I don't think she gets it."

"That's why I don't mind her being in the class." Gabrielle smiled briefly. "I know how Xena feels about that." She roamed around the kitchen, picking up a wooden bowl and putting a few ducks eggs in it, then dipping into the common barrel of flour.

"What are you doing?" Solari asked, after a moment's watching.

"Getting stuff for breakfast." Gabrielle added a pitcher of milk from the stone crock and tossed a handful of berries into the bowl for good measure. "Want to come over to my place for pancakes? Dori woke up wanting them."

"Uh. Sure." Solari came over. "Want me to carry that for you? I heard the grumps yapping yesterday about you acting like a queen and all that."

Gabrielle gave her a look, then she handed over the bowl. "Thanks." She went and captured her roaming offspring. "But only because I need to keep hold of little miss wild thing not because of what the elders think."

They escaped as the morning workers were arriving to the kitchen and headed back across the square. In the few minutes they'd been inside, the area had gotten busier, and Gabrielle returned the greetings of at least a dozen people as she walked. "I don't really understand what the elder's problem is." She commented.

"With you?" Solari asked.

The bard nodded. "It's not like I just started acting weird yesterday. I don't get it. Are you telling me that Eph really has everyone cater to her like that?"

Solari was quiet for a few minutes. "Well." She said, as they reached Gabrielle's quarters and went inside. "I mean, yeah. Um... but, it's not catering." She glanced around and then put the bowl down on the worktable. "It's just what she's due, you know?"

Gabrielle set Dori loose. "Go see what Oogy's up to, Dor. I'm going to make you some pancakes, okay?"

"Yum!" Dori galloped around in a circle. "Mama! Mama! Yay!"

The bard chuckled, and shook her head as Dori went bolting off into the sleeping area. Then she went and got the bowl. "You know, I don't think I do know." She answered Solari. "I know Eph's my regent, and she's due all the respect in the world for that, but I don't get what that has to do with her carrying her own stuff back to her hut."

Solari scratched her nose. "Well when you put it like that..." She moved around so she could watch Gabrielle work. "I think she's... I mean she does get her own stuff and all that, but it's sort of an honor for someone to go and get stuff for her, or do stuff."

Mist green eyes flicked to her face, then went back to the bowl.

“Like.. I don’t know.” The Amazon said. “Like a perk.”

“Ah.” Gabrielle nodded. “I see.” She mixed the ingredients with an expert hand, her skillet already warming near the fire. “But I thought the whole concept of the Amazons was equality.”

Solari sat down. “Gabrielle.” She said. “I think you kinda know better than that. Sure, we’re all sisters and that stuff but we wouldn’t compete like cocks if those rank feathers didn’t mean squat.”

“Mm.”

“So with the elders, it’s like if you act like your rank doesn’t mean squat, then all theirs and I guess all ours don’t either.”

Gabrielle stopped mixing, and studied her, a thoughtful expression on her face. “Now that, I understand.” She said. “I don’t want to diss anyone. I just don’t want to pretend I’m someone I’m not when I’m here.”

Solari grunted.

“ I mean.. “ Gabrielle carefully ladled a portion of the batter she’d just finished mixing into her skillet. “This is my life. This is who I am. I wake up every morning, and I need to be a mom, and get breakfast together, and try to keep Dori from eating frogs, and all that stuff. I can’t not do that.”

“Most of us eat over at the hall, together.” Solari said. “It’s sort of tradition. People who stay in their own places we look like as being stuck up.”

Gabrielle removed her spatula from her kit. “Solari, you can’t have it both ways.” She flipped a pancake. “Either I’m stuck up and the queen, or I’m common as the gardeners and I’m not. I can’t just eat in the hall because the food there stinks, and my family can’t stand it. Xe was chewing on wood bits the other day before she left for the god’s sake.”

Solari regarded her. “Oh. I guess we’re just used to it.”

The bard put three of the pancakes on a plate, and drizzled some honey over them. She handed the plate to Solari. “I know.” She started another three cakes cooking. “But we’re not.”

Dori rambled back in, holding one of her dolls. “Mama.” She came over to where Gabrielle was busy with her cakes. “C’n the buppit have some too?”

“Is the buppit here, honey?” Gabrielle flipped the cakes.

“No.”

“Well, then sorry about that, he missed out.” The bard put the cakes onto a plate and applied honey, then set it down on the table. “Here you go. See if that’s better than the mud.”

Dori scrambled up onto the chair across from Solari, kneeling rather than sitting and reaching for her plate. “Yum.” She poked one of the cakes with her finger, then blew on it. “Mama, it’s hot!”

“That’s right.” Her mother agreed. “Let it cool down for a minute.”

Solari had rolled up one of the cakes and bitten into it. “Mm.” She mumbled after a moment. “That really does taste good.” She admitted. “But anyway you’re teaching those guys how to do this right? So it should get better?”

“Right.” Gabrielle sat down with her own plate. “But that doesn’t mean I’ll stop cooking for Dori and Xe. I like doing it. “

“Ahuh.” Solari nodded.

“So, what do they think they found up at that new valley?” The bard changed the subject. “Is it

the one up at the high pass? I thought I heard something about some work going on there.”

“Dunno.” Solari was busy with her pancakes. “They were acting like it was some big thing, you know?”

Gabrielle eyed her. “No, but I bet I’m going to.”

“Mmph.”

**

Xena slowed Iolaus as they approached the worn looking gates to the village Evon lived in. It appeared deserted, and she glanced behind her as they approached. “Pretty quiet.”

Evon peered past her shoulder. “Some people left for the war.” He acknowledged. “But most will be in the fields trying to get what we can in.”

Ah. Xena nodded. “Farmers?”

“Mostly.”

“They lose a lot of field help to the army?”

“Yeah.”

They dropped to a walk as they entered the village, one or two scraggly looking chickens scattering before Iolaus’s hooves as they passed between two rows of almost unkempt appearing huts, and a second row a little further back that were burnt and destroyed.

“That from the last war?” Xena indicated the abandoned property.

“No.” Evon shook his head. “Someone set fire in the winter, burned out a dozen families. They left.”

All around her Xena sensed an air of indifference, and the few inhabitants she saw on the way to the old inn merely gave her a brief glance, then turned away. “I figured your mother would want to move out of here after what those bastards let them do to you.”

“Not so easy to move.” Evon said. “Ma’s got ties here.”

Xena pulled Iolaus up next to the inn and waited for Evon to slide off. Then she dismounted and looped her reins around a broken post. She led the way up the steps and pushed the door open, revealing a dark, dank interior she half remembered.

She and Gabrielle had been on their way back to Amphipolis after discovering the danger Andreas posed and they’d stop to stay the night here after a long day’s travel. The fear then had been palpable, and the innkeeper had viewed them with suspicion after being attacked by Andreas roaming bands on more than one occasion.

She hadn’t held that against them. It had been a tough time. But looking around, she’d gotten the feeling that this particular little village hadn’t needed Andreas to ruin their luck.

“Let me go get ma.” Evon eased past her and headed for the back of the inn.

Xena decided to remain where she was, and she turned slowly in a circle regarding the inside of the place. It was completely empty – as her mother’s almost never was. The fireplace was stale and cold, and most of the tables were uneven.

She and Gabrielle had never spent time in this room, she recalled. They had gotten their vegetable soup and retreated to their tiny room, with only a fight with Andreas men and an

impromptu attack by the innkeeper to break the quiet.

“I told you, Evon, you can’t come back like this I..”

Xena turned as the innkeeper entered, with Evon following her. The woman stopped in her tracks on seeing the warrior, her eyes widening. “Hello, Rose.”

“You.” The innkeeper gasped. “He wasn’t lying!”

The warrior cocked her head. “Why would he?” She asked bluntly. “Seems like I’m destined to get in the middle of him being dragged off to some damn army.”

Rose came over and sighed, perching on the edge of an uneven table. “Different this time.” She said, a touch defensively. “This was legit, those men from Athens came here and made their offer.”

Xena glanced past her to where Evon was standing. “That’s an offer. Not a requirement.”

“He’s prentice to them men.” Rose said. “They’re entitled to their keep of him.” She didn’t even look at her son.

Xena felt herself to be a bit shocked, and she wasn’t sure the woman was saying what she thought she was saying. “So you think it’s all right for them to sell him to Athens?”

“He went into prentice of his own mind.” The woman said. “It’s their right.”

Technically, that was true. Xena looked over at Evon, watching his face, seeing the betrayal in his eyes as he watched his mother. “C’mere.” She ordered him, waiting for him to edge warily past Rose and approach her. She extended her fist towards him and dropped a handful of coins into his hand when he reached instinctively towards it.

The sound of the metal was very loud in the room.

“Go buy yourself free of the bastards.” Xena said, then she grabbed the front of his shirt unexpectedly. “Then get out of here. There should be enough left over for you to go somewhere else. Head down to Amphipolis if you want.”

Evon stared at her in shock.

“Don’t come back here.” The warrior said. “There’s no future here. Move it.” She gave him a hard shove towards the door, and waited until he caught his balance and stumbled over to it, looking between her and Rose before he finally pushed his way outside and the door closed behind him.

Slowly Xena turned and regarded the innkeeper.

Rose hesitated, then finally met her eye. “You get tired of fighting.” She said. “He gave himself over to them. Them people from Athens made a good offer.”

Xena felt a mixture of emotions. Part of her could see the woman’s perspective, but another part of her felt a profound disappointment. “Those people from Athens are nothing but murderers.” She said, bluntly. “All they want kids like him for is to throw in front of the Spartans while they shoot over their bodies at them.”

Rose studied her. “That what you’d do?” She asked, but before Xena could answer the door burst open and a crowd of men with weapons drawn filed in, stopping when they spotted the warrior standing there. “Here now.. wait!”

The men didn’t. “There she is! Get her!” The one in the lead roared, launching himself forward. “Get her now! To Hades with that damn boy! Here’s our meal ticket!”

Xena grabbed Rose and threw her bodily towards the kitchen, turning and drawing her sword as the crowd descended on her, the close quarters hemming her in and cramping her ability to

respond.

The day was running rapidly downhill.

**

Continued in Part 7

A Queen's Tale

Part 7

Gabrielle placed her staff carefully on the rocky path and climbed up over a stack of rocks, watching her balance carefully. The path was narrow and they were high up on the slope and she had no intention of taking a header into the trees below.

Cait, Paladia and Solari were behind her. She felt reasonably satisfied with the escort, and as they climbed, found herself getting interested in what they'd find at the end of the trail. Maybe it would be really cool, and something she could look forward to telling Xena about.

The idea of achieving something in her partner's absence was appealing. "Careful of that rock there, guys. It's loose."

"Thanks, your Maj." Solari called back. "Y'know, since I'm the guard here, shouldn't I be going first?"

Gabrielle paused and looked over her shoulder. "Leaders lead." She replied simply. "Otherwise what's the point?"

Solari didn't buy it. "Does big X let you go in front when there's dangerous stuff going on?"

The bard's eyes twinkled. "Depends on how hard I argue with her." Gabrielle turned and continued up ward, seeing evidence of their exploratory team's progress in the scraped ground and scattered stones.

The back side of the mountain, the range past where the village was nestled, and across the ridge where her own home was had been mostly a mystery to them. Xena hadn't ever investigated it, the townsfolk had no interest in the high reaches and it had presented itself as an uninhabited space ripe for exploration.

It was wilderness, much like the top of their own slope was, and Gabrielle thought that Xena's idea of ceding it to the Amazons was a good one, if only because the tribe would likely never turn it into an overpopulated town, instead keeping it as hunting lands or retreat areas.

Gabrielle edged past a thick pile of stone and put her hand against a gnarled tree half growing into the wall. She could see the rough path turning to the right ahead of her, and looking through the trees she could view flickers of motion.

Solari did as well, apparently, since she sent up a long whistle that echoed off the granite.

The flickers solidified into Amazons, who appeared from around the bend in response to Solari's call. They spotted who was leading the party and their faces brightened, one of them letting out a loud call directed further into the valley.

Gabrielle curled her fingers around her staff and climbed up the last slope, glad when the breeze picked up as they cleared the trees and cooled off her skin. They'd left the village and even her cabin far below, and she could feel the air a bit thinner in her lungs as she crossed the rocky ground towards the rough Amazon encampment ahead.

"Your Majesty." A very bright eyed Amazon trotted towards her. "It's great you're here!"

The rest of the group gathered around the newcomers, with grins all around. "Hey Sol." One of

them called over to Gabrielle's escort. "Finally got off garbage detail, huh?"

Solari scowled at her. "Shut up, Belli. "

"Garbage detail?" Gabrielle eyed her.

"Long story." The senior warrior muttered.

"Well." The bard turned her head towards the group. "You all sent word down we should come see what you found. SO here we are."

"You won't regret it, your Majesty. " Belli said immediately. "Wait till you see."

"Lead on." Gabrielle gestured towards her. She followed as the group turned and headed towards the newly uncovered path between the rocks.

It was obvious how hard they'd been working. Most of them were covered in rock dust, and there were plenty of scrapes and bruises visible on the lithe Amazon bodies. They had cleared most of the rock debris away from the opening, but the shifting poles and wheelbarrows were still scattered near it obviously in use.

Gabrielle looked around as she walked. "It's pretty up here." She commented. "What a nice view." She could see mountaintops in the distance, only a little hazy from the heat. The Amazons had made camp in the trees just off the path, and there was enough even land for their shelters and the neatly marked off cookfire.

"It's a lot nicer in the valley." Belli told her. "This way."

Gabrielle eased between the stones into the narrow pass, glad of her shorter stature as Belli thumped herself in the head and cursed. "Careful there."

"We're trying to get ore of these rocks out of here." Belli apologized. "But we just got through and we wanted to send word down." She slid sideways between two sharp edge rocks and ducked under a third. "Kinda need to crouch up here."

"Maybe you do." Gabrielle was able to get under the rock in question by merely ducking. She felt a moment's unease, but the rocks started to widen out then and a moment later she was emerging on the other side of the pass with the valley beyond spreading before her.

It wasn't big. She straightened and stepped to one side so the rest of the Amazons could enter. It had gently sloping sides and a forest of thick trees, and at least two waterfalls tumbled down the sides of the walls into the woods below. "Wow, it's pretty."

"It certainly is." Cait came up next to her. "Gosh, look at those waterfalls." She half turned. "Pally, you can draw them up, can't you?"

Paladia edged past her and peered at the scene. "Huh."

"Right. So." Belli seemed to be the spokesperson. "We went down to find a good water source, cause there isn't any out there, right?" She pointed down to where the nearer waterfall crashed down into a pile of rocks below. "So we went down there – we put a path in."

"Okay." Gabrielle agreed. "So far I can see this place is beautiful, and it's got a good water source." She scanned the horizon. "Looks like there's good hunting, and I bet there's herbs and mushrooms here. Good find, guys."

"Yeah, that's what we thought too." Belli said. "Then we found it."

Gabrielle looked over at her. "It?"

Belli nodded, and motioned her to follow. "You gotta see this to believe it." She paused, looking back over her shoulder. "You said this was ours, right?"

Strange question. “Xena ceded this area to the tribe, yes.” Gabrielle agreed, as she started to follow Belli down the carefully laid path. “It’s ours. Why?”

“You’ll see.” Belli said. “Watch your step here, it’s slippery.”

Her curiosity now ratcheted up to high, Gabrielle kept right on Belli’s heels as they came down the path and arrived at a pretty glade with a very nice view of the falls. She could see a campfire there, amongst the rocks, and was surprised when Belli went right over to it and crouched down.

What was so great about a campfire? The bard circled the rocks and came over to her, peering over Belli’s shoulder into the heart of the banked fire. “So what’s the b...” She stopped speaking, as her eyes fell on a warmly reflecting solid pool of metal. “What on earth?”

“It’s.. um.. silver.” Belli said, briefly. “We made a campfire here, and I guess the rocks are full of it because when we banked the fire the next morning and brushed the cinders aside there it was.”

“And we found this.” One of the other Amazons shyly approached, holding her hand out. In the palm a big silver nugget rested, winking in the sun. “There’s some copper too.”

“And lead.”

“And iron ore.” Belli added. “I came to the nation late. My family were smiths. I know the stuff.”

Gabrielle felt her jaw drop, a little. “Wow.” She finally said. “This sure is a find.”

“And it’s ours, right?” Belli looked up at her from where she was kneeling next to the firepit.

The bard leaned on her staff, wrapping both hands around it. The implications were stunning, not the least for the tribe. “It’s ours.” She confirmed in a quiet tone. “Boy we’ve got a lot to learn about it though.”

“Wow.” Paladia had arrived next to them and was peering down at the metal. “Check that out.” Even the usually taciturn ex renegade seemed honestly impressed.

“Did you say copper and iron too?” Cait asked. “Goodness. We can smith our own weapons! Lovely!”

“No more buying arrowheads.” One of the others agreed. “But the queen’s right. We gotta find people who can work it.”

Solari circled around next to Gabrielle. “Artemis’ sword.” She breathed. “That’s it. That’s the swag Melosa and all them were always talking about around the fire. What we’d have to get to set the tribe up for life.”

For life. Gabrielle took a breath. Yes. “This certainly does open up a lot of possibilities for us.” She said. “Aside from the obvious. Solari, doesn’t Renas and her friend Das make jewelery?”

Solari nodded. “Real nice stuff.”

Belli grinned, and the other Amazons followed suit, everyone relaxing a little. “We were pretty excited.” She admitted. “I mean, it’s a really nice place anyway, but then to find this...” She looked up at Gabrielle. “Our lucks’ finally turned.”

Gabrielle released one hand off her staff and put it in her hip, her face shifting into a smile. “It’s going to be a lot of work.” She said. “But wow. There’s so much we can do with this.”

So much. She looked around at the group, for once absent of the usual Amazon attitude. Solari had knelt next to Belli and was touching the metal at the bottom of the pit, picking up a bit of stone and studying it’s surface.

The tribe had always been self sufficient. This represented a chance to be more than that. Gabrielle grinned a little more broadly. She certainly would have things to show Xena when

she got home.

**

“Stupid idiots.” Xena ducked and turned, taking the impact of the chair on her shoulders as she nailed the man swinging it with her elbow to his face. She felt the crunch of breaking bone, but didn’t stop to savor it.

She had her sword out, but was trying not to gut anyone with it, since the men attacking her were more desperate than dangerous. She deflected a club, then her senses warned her and she dove to one side, bowling over one man as something big and heavy slammed into where she’d been.

A loud crack sounded and the scent of ale suddenly rushed through her senses as a wave of liquid went everywhere and she heard Rose scream a curse.

Hands grabbed at her. Xena shook her now drenched hair out of her eyes and caught a glimpse of steel moving fast dangerously close to her body. She let her reflexes react and her sword arm came around with it’s deadly cargo.

Metal sheared against metal and she shoved backwards against the man’s hold, drawing her sword back as she tried to put distance between them.

He thwarted her by grabbing her arm and swinging his body hard, trying to knock her off balance, slamming his hip against a table and rebounding back into her too fast for Xena to move her blade out of the way in time.

The warrior cursed and got a boot up against his side, kicking him off the sword and hauling it out of his body as blood spurted everywhere to mix with the ale. The stench reached her nose and she twitched, her hands flexing on the weapon as the rest of the men came at her in a group and her instincts switched from defense to attack.

She cut a man’s arm off with a vicious downswipe, then drove forward and backhanded the sword and sliced into another one’s neck, coming a whisker from beheading him as he rapidly backpedaled. A low growl rumbled in Xena’s chest as she stalked the next man, and after a second’s bluster he broke and stumbled back away from her.

“Get out of here!” Rose yelled suddenly. “You stupid bastards! Take your gods be damned insane money hunger and get out! Get out! Before you wreck me more!”

Xena turned in a circle as the men broke off and got her back to the fireplace, fingertips still twitching on her hilt.

One man was out cold. Another was slumped by the door where her sword had left him. A third was on the ground, hand desperately covering a bleeding stump. Tables were broken all over the inn, and it stank to Hades of ale, blood, and unwashed skin almost making her retch. “Morons.”

The two remaining men grabbed the man with the stump and pulled him out the door. “You’ll pay for this.” The only uninjured one said. “Promise you that.”

The door slammed behind them. Xena waited a moment, then she straightened up and let her body relax from its quivering tension. She walked over to the man out cold on the floor and rolled him over with a foot, studying the bloody mess of his face. “What in Hades is wrong with these people?” She looked sharply up at Rose.

The innkeeper stared at her. “Same thing’s wrong with me.” She said. “We’re just tired to death of wanting.” She kicked one of the table legs. “Tired of never having.”

Xena wiped her sword blade on the unconscious man’s shirt, then she stood and sheathed it. “Tired enough to die for it?” She turned and looked at the woman. “What’s a man’s life

worth? How many dinars is he bringing to his family now?" She pointed at the dead man in the corner.

"Ye don't understand." Rose said, after a pause. She sat down on one of the chairs.

Xena's considered that. "You're right, I don't." She said. "Anyone in charge here? I'd like to let them know what happened before people think I'm on a rampage again."

Rose snorted. "Last one out was him." She said. "No reasoning with the lot of them." She gazed around at the destruction and just shook her head. Then she looked up at Xena. "Thanks for what ye did for the boy. Hope he listens to ye."

Xena walked over to her. "Go with him." She said. "if it's so bad here, get out." She urged. "Or at least take cover somewhere until the war's on. Then it won't matter."

"Won't matter?" Rose looked up sharply at her. "What's that mean?"

The warrior gazed evenly back. "They'll have their battle fodder already. Once they waste all of them, they have to fight for real and they'll be too busy to bother anyone this far out."

"Battle fodder?"

"All those kids?" Xena said. "The one's they're paying all that good coin for?"

Rose stared at her.

"Then they'll come back and tax the coin back to keep fighting." The warrior said. "Let me get out of here before that fool comes back and tries something else stupid." She righted a table and headed for the door.

Iolaus was already restive outside, his ears pricked and turned back towards the road. Xena heard the distant thunder of hoofbeats a moment later, and she wasted no time in untying the stallion and getting up into the saddle. "Teach me to do good deeds, Io."

The horse snorted, as he threaded along the path around the side of the inn. Xena judged the direction of the oncoming horses and spotted a track on the other side of the town heading in the opposite direction. She guided Io towards it. "That could be anyone coming, boy. I'm not sticking around to find out."

She heard a yell in the distance and hesitated, then she shook her head and tapped Io on the shoulder, as he broke into a canter and they rapidly crossed the town and entered the forest, the path rapidly twisting and moving downward.

Xena hoped it ended up back on the road. She licked her lips, tasting ale on them, and grimaced at the sticky dampness of her armor.

But not before finding someplace to wash.

**

The sun was tiling towards the western horizon by the time she found a spot that was remote enough for her to stop at. Xena left Iolaus in a small glade, then shouldered her bags and climbed down a rocky escarpment to a half hidden spring she'd glimpsed below.

Cursing under her breath, she dropped the last few bodylengths to the ground and spent a minute exploring the spring, satisfied when she didn't find any sign of intrusion.

With a sigh, she sat down on a convenient rock next to the water and set the bags next to her, letting her left wrist rest on her knee as she unlaced her leather bracer.

It was quiet in the overgrown space, trees and thick brush surrounding the water and muffling it's travel down further through the rocks past where she was sitting. There were some soft bird

tweets off to her left, but aside from the faint ruffle of wind in the leaves, all she could hear was her own breathing.

She unlatched the catch on her chest armor and lifted it over her head, setting it down next to her before she started on the plates that covered her knees. One had a big dent in it, and she ran a thumb over it with another muttered curse.

Shed of her armor, she stood and walked over to the spring with the small net bag she kept her soap in clutched in one hand. Without hesitation, she stepped over the rocks that lined the spring and sloshed into it boots and all.

The spring was cold, but that felt good against her sun heated skin and she kept going forward until she was up to her shoulders in it. Then she set the bag with the soap down on a nearby rock and loosened the straps on her leathers to slip out of them.

That felt even better. She took a step to one side and leaned her elbow on the rock, picking up the soap and starting to work it into the surface of the leather. "Stupid idiots."

Her voice sounded loud to her, and she glanced around, cocking her ears to listen for any echo before she returned to her task. The sound of the birds and the soft ripping noise of Iolaus cropping grass reassured her until she realized what she wasn't hearing was what was bothering her.

She wasn't hearing Gabrielle.

Xena frowned, and worked on her task, scrubbing the leather with the soap and rinsing it. So far her plan wasn't going along very smoothly, and she found she missed being able to just talk about what her frustrations were with someone she trusted.

So strange, to have taken so long to come so far. She wanted to talk to Gabrielle about Evon's village, and get the bard's perceptive feedback on the people there. Hear what she had to say about the soldiers, and whether or not she should ride openly on the road and risk announcing her presence to roaming Athenians who might, just might, be on the lookout for her.

A risk she hadn't really talked to her partner about before she left. Gabrielle had been focused on the need to warn the Amazons, and to protect Ephiny and there really hadn't been time for her to fully go through some of the things that had been in the back of her mind.

Sure, they'd talked about the possibility of Athens coming to Amphipolis after her. Xena rinsed her leathers out and lifted them clear of the water, giving them a shake, then twisting them in her strong hands to drain them. But not that she might get caught on the road by them, and run into complications.

Well. Xena waded over and spread the leathers out on another rock in the sun for them to dry, then she leaned against the rock and reached down to unlace her boots and pull them off. She shook them clear of water and set them out to dry as well, then she moved off into the deeper water to wash her hair off.

She needed to stop getting involved in other people's issues. Xena finished rinsing her head and relaxed in the water, gazing up at the sun. Just go and do what she had promised, and get the Hades back home. "No risks, Xena." She murmured. "Try to keep it simple."

She floated there for a moment more, then she ducked under one last time and surfaced, walking towards the edge of the pool and emerging from the cool of the water into the sun's warmth. She raked her fingers through her hair and squeezed it dry, stepping carefully over the rocks back to where she'd left her armor and bags.

Once there, she pulled a set of tattered furs from the saddlebag and spread it out, then she sat down on it and started cleaning her armor with the linen cloth from her soap bag that was now

nice and wet.

There was a fair size town, she remembered, about five candlemarks ride from where she was now. If she left soon, she could make it there just after night fall and that might put her back on track. Xena rubbed a spot of blood off the metal in her hands and nodded to herself. "That'll work."

She heard a rustle and went still, then she put the rag down and closed her hand on her sword hilt as she listened.

Another rustle. Her nostrils flared, and she shifted her grip, from the sword to her dagger resting next to it. Her fingers worked the knife out of its sheath and she waited, focusing her attention on the brush to her left.

For a minute, everything was still. Then the leaves shivered, and parted, and a brown haired rabbit hopped out into the sun, nibbling the grass, unaware of her presence.

With a flick of her wrist, too fast for the eye to follow, Xena sent the dagger at the rabbit hard and took it right behind the head. It scabbled in the grass briefly, then went still. "Sorry about that bunny." The warrior set her armor aside and got up. "But there ain't no fish in that spring and I'm hungry."

She collected her prey and took it down to the water to skin it, glad at least she'd get something in her belly before heading back out onto the road. She made quick work of the butchering, tying the unwanted parts into the skin and then pitching it as far as she could back into the foliage.

Then she took the meat back and pulled her small pan out, setting them aside as she collected some firewood. It took her only a minute to make a neat fire, then she pulled her bag over and rooted around inside it.

She pulled a packet out, checked the lettering on one side, and then added the meat to the pan, sprinkling the contents of the packet on the parts and rolling them around so they all were acceptably covered. Then she set the pan on the fire and went back to cleaning her armor, keeping an eye on the rabbit as she worked.

With any luck, she'd finally figure out how not to burn it.

**

Gabrielle rested her chin on her fist, her quill twirling slowly in her fingers as she reread the parchment in front of her on her desk. Next to the inkwell, six rocks were resting, and she paused to glance at them again before she continued writing.

Here's a rare update in the middle of the day. I wanted to get this down though, because it's fresh in my mind and I've got some quiet here before Dori gets back from her class.

The Amazons.. no. Wait. I have to stop doing that. It's not 'the amazons.' It's us. We found a new valley today. A group of the younger women went up the mountain and worked to open the pass with the rockfall.

It's been there forever. At least as long as I've been around these parts, and no one's ever been interested in before because no one wanted to move all those rocks. I guess they figured, hey, one more valley. No big deal.

Except it is a big deal, because those women found all kinds of really valuable stuff in there. Herbs and hunting, sure, but minerals and ores that I know Xena's going to freak out about when she sees them. She's always said we were at the mercy of the weather, and the fates because nothing around here really produced hard coin, but now..

This changes everything. Dori's rocks, those couple of gems and the rest of the pretty things

really wouldn't do it, because, Xena told me, the gems are only valuable if there aren't many of them. So – maybe one could be sold every once in a while but to do more, or to let people root around for them really doesn't do anything for anyone.

But metal's different. Xena knows how to smelt copper and make steel, and not only does it mean making our own weapons and armor, we can make the silver into coins. It means real wealth.

I wonder what Eph's going to say when she gets back? I know Xena's going to be happy. I think she worries about the Amazons sometimes, with all that stuff that happened way back when. If the tribe really makes out because she granted them that valley...

Well, it's awesome. I checked to make sure the land grant papers were here, and properly recorded, and they were. Not that Xena'd do anything about it, but it's hard to say how the town's going to react.

After all, they're so close. But they could have explored up here for years and years and they didn't.

I feel good about this. I want the Amazons to... here I go again. I want us to be happy, and prosperous. I know it's been a rough couple of years but now, with this...

Wow.

Wow.

I guess I never really thought about that. I know this sounds corny, but it's really true that as long as I have my family, as long as I'm with Xena, and Dori, I don't want for anything. But it would be nice to see all of my sisters not wanting either.

I've called a meeting tonight after dinner to talk about it, and show the rocks we found. I hope everyone else is as excited as I am.

Gabrielle looked up again, as she heard a familiar patter of feet. She smiled as the beaded curtain exploded inward, and Dori bounded inside, with Ares right behind her. "Well, hey there honey!"

"Mama!" Dori was in very high spirits. She was covered in various shades of the stain the Amazons used on their arrows, and she had lurid stripes painted across her cheeks, but seemed oblivious to it all. "Mama, I made petty arrows, and Cat said I was just like Boo!"

Gabrielle got up and circled her desk, dropping to the ground cross legged and opening her arms. "She did? That's so nice! C'mere and give mama a hug and tell me all about it."

Dori thumped down into her lap and gave her a kiss on the cheek. "I had fun!"

"And you got all covered in paint too, huh?" Gabrielle tried to wipe the stain off her face. "Oh my gosh, you look so funny."

"I made the arrows, mama. All straight like Boo" Dori thumped her booted feet on the ground. "I wanted to put a rock on it, but they don't let me."

"No honey, that won't make the arrow go right in the air." Gabrielle smoothed the thick, dark hair back. "How about you take me over there, and show me your arrows, okay? Then we can go swimming."

"Go to fishes!" Dori jumped up. "Let's go mama!"

Gabrielle got to her feet and shepherded both child and wolf out the door, back out into the bright sunlight and a busy central square.

There was a definite air of excitement. Gabrielle could sense it, as she crossed the yard and saw groups of Amazons talking to each other. Two of the elders spotted her and moved to intercept them, meeting her halfway across the grass.

“Your majesty.” The first one said. “We heard the news.”

Gabrielle slowed, but didn’t stop. “Walk with me, Ala.” She offered. “I promised Dori I’d go see her handiwork.”

The elders fell in at her side. “Is it true?” Ala asked. She was one of the eldest of the elders. “What they found?”

“It’s true.” Gabrielle told her. “It looks like we’ve got some very exciting times ahead of us, and a lot of hard work. But I think it’ll be worth it.” She lifted a hand and returned the wave of a group of Amazons near the children’s area.

“Incredible.” Ala said. “I wish Melosa were here to see it.”

Gabrielle privately reflected that if Melosa were there, likely they wouldn’t be seeing anything because she’d be off somewhere with Xena and long out of the Amazon’s lives. “Mm.” She made a noncommittal sound.

“She would have been overjoyed.” Ala went on, apparently oblivious. “She was always saying if we could just get us a treasury, we’d be something.”

“Aren’t we something anyway?” Gabrielle asked.

“Ah, you know what I mean, your majesty.” Ala said. “We do all right. We’ve always done all right. But this now, this is different.”

Yes, it was. “Okay, Dor, show me your stuff.” Gabrielle perched on the railing that surrounded the children’s area as Dori bolted ahead and went over to a table they’d obviously all been working on.

Obviously, because it’s wooden surface was now stained with more color than any summer sunset and covered with rows of more or less straight wooden arrows.

Dori scrambled up onto the bench and walked along it, peering down at the arrows until she found the ones she’d made. She picked them up and ran back along the seat, jumping off at the end and landing with the tiniest of hops.

“She’s such a strong child.” Ala observed. “Really active.”

“She sure is.” The bard agreed. “She’s growing up so fast. I think she gets taller every time I look at her. At this rate she’s going to end up taller than Xe.” A smile creased her face at the thought. “Look at those legs.”

Ala leaned on the fence. “She’s growing up to be a beautiful Amazon princess.” She agreed. “What a warrior she’ll be.”

The bard stiffened and turned, taking a breath to protest. She stopped when she saw the mild benevolence in the woman’s face, and fought down the urge to bite her head off.

With an effort, she relaxed. “Well.” She said. “That remains to be seen. She could take after me, y’know.”

The elder chuckled, and pushed away from the fence. “As you say, your Majesty.” She lifted a hand. “Till later, then. Enjoy your little princess.”

“Thanks.” Gabrielle held out her hands and waited until Dori put the arrows in them. “Oh my gosh, Dori! These are so pretty!”

“See mama?” Dori climbed up on the rail so she could see better. “I gots the fefers from where

Boo showed me, with the big duckies near the tree.”

The feathers were deep glossy blacks and greens, and Gabrielle recognized them. “How did you get them? Did you find them on the ground?”

“No.” Dori grinned like a pirate. “Guff helped. He ran and made them come and I caught one.” She jumped off the fence. “Go get some more.” She ducked around the edge of the hut, with Ares behind her.

“Be careful, Dor.”

Aalene appeared, from the kindergarden hut. “Oh, hello there, your Majesty.” She came over. “Is Dori showing you her masterpieces?”

“She is.” Gabrielle studied the shaft. It was straight and even, and the feathers were set into place neatly. “She did a nice job, huh?”

Aalene peered at the arrow. “She surprised me to be honest. She’s so ..uh... “

“When people are being nice to me, they say ‘active’. Gabrielle remarked. “But I know what you mean.”

“Well, yes, she’s always going full on.” Aalene said, as Dori came rambling around the corner, her hands full of colorful feathers. “But when we were doing the arrows, she sat there and just focused on it, everyone was really impressed.”

Gabrielle held up the arrow. “Yeah, I know someone else like that.” She grinned briefly, studying the colorful pattern striped on the shaft.

“Mama, mama look!”

“Whatcha got there, honey.” Gabrielle watched as Dori came over and offered up her double handful. “Oh, how pretty. Where did you get them?”

“From the birdies.” Dori said. “Just like Boo showed me.”

The bard took the feathers and straightened them out. “Do you want me to write a story for you with one of them? Would you like that?”

“Yes!”

Gabrielle chuckled.

“You do know where she gets those, right?” Aalene had been watching her. “The feathers?”

“Probably from a nesting area.” The bard glanced at her. “Why? No?”

The young Amazon was shaking her head. “She pulls them off the actual living birds.” She informed Dori’s mother. “She catches them.”

“Bam!” Dori smacked her hands together. “Just like Boo!”

“She says that a lot.” Aalene reported. “It used to freak everyone out, you know? Her saying that because it sort of like... “ She paused awkwardly. “It was just weird getting used to.”

“Ah.” Gabrielle nodded. “Yeah, you know I forget sometimes. Actually, I forget most of the time that it’s unusual for Dori to have both of us as parents.” She watched Aalene’s visible discomfort from the corner of her eye. “Does that bother you?”

“Only because.. “ Aalene lifted one hand and let it drop. “I just don’t understand.”

Gabrielle looked at the feathers, then at Aalene. “If it’s any consolation to you, we don’t really understand it either.” She said. “She’s just a part of us, and we’re glad.”

Aalene nodded. "Sure." She said. "So I guess we're celebrating tonight, huh?"

"Yep." Gabrielle accepted the change of subject gracefully. She tucked the feathers away and offered her hand to Dori. "You ready to go get wet, miss fishie? Let's go get the colors off your face."

"Okay." Dori fit her hand into her mother's. "Bye!" She waggled her fingers at Aalene.

"Bye, Dori." The young Amazon waved back. "See you later."

As they walked over to the bathing hut, they heard the first sounds of drums tuning up, a faint, insistent rhythm that echoed softly across the village, and mixed with the woodsmoke from the newly stoked cookfire.

"We have fun, mama?" Dori asked suddenly. "Wish Boo were here."

And here she was, right back where she started. "I wish she was too, honey." Gabrielle said. "But she'll be back soon, and I bet she has presents for us."

"Cookies?"

"Maybe that too."

**

Xena surveyed the town, it's outline dim in the night but outlined with numerous torches. There was a lot of activity, and her nose told her there were plenty of people and horses ahead of her.

She shifted in her saddle, and patted Iolaus on the neck, pondering what her next best course was. If there were lots of people in the town chances are some were from Athens, and she could be in for some trouble.

On the other hand, she couldn't avoid contact with emissaries from the capital without having to backtrack through the wilds, and taking three times the length of time to get where she was going.

On the third hand, it was late, and she wasn't in the mood to travel far out of her way to find a safe place to camp for the night, especially since the town was at the edge of the plains without much good cover.

"Let's go, boy. You deserve a dry spot to sleep in tonight too." She started down the small slope that brought her to the road leading into town, and they trotted through the moonlight approaching the gates.

Sturdy gates, Xena noted, with men guarding them. She drew closer, and the men in the torchlight put down their mugs and moved to the center of the road to block her path. They were carrying spears, and had steel helmets on.

"Easy boy." She pulled Io gently up as she neared the men, half turning him sideways and lifting her right hand in the air in greeting. "Evening."

The closer guard took a step forward. "Who comes?"

Ah, the eternal dilemma. Admit who she was? Or not? Xena let her hand rest on her thigh, and straightened a little. "Just a traveler." She said. "I'm looking for a room for the night for me and the horse."

The man lifted his torch up out of its cradle and held it up to see her better. "Where do you come from?"

"Amphipolis." Xena replied briefly.

The man stepped closer and peered at her, then he nodded. "Open the gate, Rog."

Xena wasn't really sure how to take that. It was unclear whether the man just took her statement at face value, or if he recognized her, or if he just didn't give a damn. "Thanks." She guided Io past the man and through the now open gates, hearing them close behind her with a heavy clank after she passed.

Guarded gates. Xena wondered about that as she made her way up the town's main road, seeing a lot of torches, and people out walking. Ahead of her, she could see a square, and hear music coming from it, and the smell of cooking meat wafted through the air.

The buildings she was passing looked well built, and there was an air of prosperity she could sense even in the darkness. It reminded her a little of Amphipolis, which had regained that after the flood even though they'd lost that lower town.

Very different from Evon's village. The warrior frowned a little, then she angled Io towards a corral she could see on her right, where three or four animals were tied out and grazing on a hay net.

There were two young men leaning against the fence, and one turned hearing her approach. He straightened and dusted his hands off, sizing her up as she pulled Io to a halt and dismounted. "Good evening, traveler."

"Evening." Xena responded. "Got any space for this guy?" She patted Io's cheek, and the stallion nibbled the skin on her arm.

"Two dinars." The stableman said. "If'n you want him inside. One to stay outside w'hay."

"He's worth two." Xena's ears caught the rumble of thunder, and was glad she'd decided to head into town. "Show me where to put him. He's not friendly with handlers all the time."

The stockman eyed her shrewdly, then he shrugged and gestured towards the barn. "That way." He led the way over to the big double doors, the top halves of which were thrown wide open to get the breeze.

Xena followed him, as he opened the lower part of the door and they entered the large, well made barn together. The warrior glanced around approvingly, noting the clean floor, and the fresh looking hay. She led Io into the stall the stockman held open, and turned him around. "Thanks. Nice place."

The stockman studied her. "Where you from?"

Xena set her saddlebags down in the corner and loosened the girth strap on Io's saddle. "Amphipolis." She pulled the saddle off and set it on the divider. "Busy around here huh?"

The man nodded. "Lot of folks in from around. Market's going down the lane, got some dancers and storytellers there if you've a mind for that." He said. "Inn's across the market square. Maybe they got a bed. Not sure."

Xena grunted. "Guess I'll go ask and take my chances." She rubbed down Iolaus' shining coat. "Worse comes to worse I'll sleep with him."

The man chuckled. "If you've got coin, they've probably got a room." He pushed off the wall. "Nice horse." He walked away and slipped out the door, leaving Xena to her task.

"Well, well, Io." The warrior mused. "What do you think something going on here?"

Iolaus bumped her with his nose.

"Yeah yeah. Shut up and feed me." Xena pulled down some hay into the roughly knotted net, then she slipped outside with the bucket and went over to the water trough against the back wall. Three other stalls were occupied, and she glanced into them as she passed.

One was a sorrel gelding, who gazed placidly back at her. The second had a pony in it, a shaggy beast with a dappled coat who was laying down, his hooves tucked under him. The third made her pause, as she studied the beautiful white mare inside, with delicate, thin nostrils and an exotic, dished face.

Wow. "Aren't you pretty?" Xena asked, extending her hand inside the stall. The mare sniffed at it suspiciously, then she exhaled as the warrior tickled the soft part of her nose. "Pretty, pretty girl." She moved on to the water trough and filled the bucket, returning to put it inside Io's stall for him.

When she turned, the white mare had her head sticking out of her stall, watching her. The animal's exquisite ears were pricked up and pointed in her direction. "Ah, so you like flattery huh? Typical girl."

Io whickered at her, his own ears swiveling in the mare's direction. "Don't you get any ideas." Xena advised him. "That pretty girl probably belongs to some patrician who wouldn't appreciate her fooling around with the likes of you."

She finished her task and hoisted her saddlebag to her shoulder. "I may end up right back here, boy. Keep the straw warm for me." She patted Io on his shoulder and slipped out of the stall, heading for the door.

The two stockman were gone. She returned to the road and headed towards the noise, coming up alongside a large open space that was full of people, a big bonfire, musicians, and the scent of cooking. Xena debated stopping, then she continued on towards the inn at the far side of the square, wanting to get her bags settled before she looked for her amusement.

The inn was large, and appeared clean. It was bigger than her mothers, in fact, and Xena pushed the door open with a sense of bemused relief at the lack of the squalor she'd seen in the countryside so far.

The main room was packed. There were men and women clustered at every table, and some tables were set up near the fireplace on an elevated platform that were hosting a few parties in the elegant clothing of the capital area.

Xena kept her focus forward and eased between the chairs. The windows were all wide open, and the sound of the musicians floated in, and the patrons inside seemed to be enjoying themselves.

At the front of the common room she found a corridor, and she went down it, hearing voices in what would have been the rear of the building. She turned a corner and found a tall, gaunt woman standing next to a doorway, facing two men in good linen tunics and expensive looking leather boots.

"I am very sorry, sirs. You have the best rooms in this inn. We are not such a big city." The woman said, in a polite tone. "Maybe you could approach our noble mayor, and he could accommodate you?"

"He's got his place full." The man on the left said. "The noise is too much! My lady wife cannot sleep. What would you have me do?"

"Come on, Ranald. We'll get no assistance here. Let's find the law in this place, and see if we can get some quiet." His companion cuffed him on the arm. "I saw a town guardsman near that Gods be damned fire. "

They left, muttering to each other out a side door to the inn. Xena waited for them to exit, then she stepped forward and caught the attention of the innkeeper. "Evening."

The woman looked her up and down. "Evening. What can I do for you?"

"Just looking for a room." Xena said. "For tonight."

The innkeeper eyed her shrewdly. "Pretty full tonight, warrior. Lot of people here with good coin looking for a bed."

Xena removed a handful of coins from her belt pouch and offered them on her palm. "Mine good enough?"

The innkeeper took one and leaned close to the lamp nailed to the wall. Then she lifted the lamp off its hook and brought it closer to Xena, the warm light bringing out the warrior's distinctively planed features. "Ah, I thought it might be you." She put the lamp back. "It's been a long while, but you and your friend stayed here a few nights, seasons back."

"Yes, we did." Xena agreed. "During the spring festival."

The woman closed Xena's hand over her remaining coins, and handed her back the one she'd given her. "Come, Xena. My eldest son's alive because of you. It's been a long time coming, my paying you back that debt."

Xena put the coins away, and didn't argue. She remembered the incident well, not really because of the boy who'd sent his ax into his own thigh, more for the few days break it had afforded them after two solid moons of nothing but fighting brigands that had infested the area.

"Busy we have been." The innkeeper said. "Many traveling to Athens, and those from Athens bringing the word of the coming war to us."

"Mm. I've seen them."

"Do you go to Athens yourself, Xena? We thought the city would be asking for you." The woman said, as she led the way down a hall, and stopped in front of the last door on the end. "They seem to be looking for all those with strength of arms."

Xena waited for her to open the door, then she ducked inside. "Not this time." She said. "I'm just looking for some friends out on the road."

"We didn't open the kitchen." The woman said, apparently accepting the answer. "But there's plenty to be had outside. Some good harpists out there too."

"So I hear." Xena said. "Thanks."

"Your friend isn't with you? I remember she told tales." The innkeeper asked. "Adorable little thing."

It had been here, Xena recalled, that Gabrielle had experienced her first true success with her storytelling, and had been quite a hit with the travelers passing through. "No, Gabrielle's busy back in Amphipolis right now." She answered. "But I'm sure she wishes she were here. She enjoyed entertaining everyone."

The innkeeper smiled and backed away. "Good evening to you then, Xena. Take care." She turned and disappeared back into the shadows of the hall, leaving the warrior to get herself settled.

Xena looked around the room. It was a fair size, and the windows on both walls were flung wide open to let the night air in. They faced away from the square, and there was even a wooden tub in the corner for bathing, a rare addition.

The warrior suspected the patricians had not quite gotten the best room in the inn. She went over and picked up the bedside candle, bringing it over to the lamp hanging against the wall and lighting it. Then she went over to the bathing tub, finding a wooden trough and stopper next to it. She drew the stopper, and water started flowing, barely giving her a chance to grab the washbowl and catch it before it tumbled into the tub.

It smelled of wood and minerals, but a cautious taste proved it drinkable enough and Xena stoppered the trough and used the water to wash off with. She scrubbed the road dust off her face, and ran her fingers through her hair to order it, then pondered what she should wear back out into the square.

Or more precisely, what she shouldn't wear. She dried her face off with a bit of linen from her bag, then decided to stay as she was and set the bags down on the floor before heading for the door back into the hall.

She used the side door, avoiding the common room. Once outside, she strolled around the corner of the inn and past the ring of torches that were lighting the big open space around the fire.

There was a platform set up there, and that's where the musicians were. Xena found herself enjoying the tune, and she relaxed a little as she altered her path towards the outdoor tavern. The open front half shelter was full of patrons, and she had to edge her way through them to approach the service area.

She got some looks, but she was used to that. She got to the back and caught the server's attention, lifting her hand and indicating the ale barrel. The man behind the counter picked up a wooden mug and drew it full of ale, putting it down in front of her and giving her an expectant look.

Xena glanced at the wooden board behind the counter, then removed the proper coin and put it on the counter before she reached for the ale. "Thanks."

"Welcome." He answered, his voice low and guttural. "You want to put a tab down, it's three dinars. We give you back what's left if any at the end of the night."

"No thanks." Xena lifted the mug and eased back away from the bar. "I'll take it one at a time." She turned and edged through the crowd, finding a small space near the edge of the shelter, behind a big party of well dressed travelers.

There was a half shelf there, and she perched on it, taking sips of the cold and more than acceptable ale. On the platform, the harpist had finished, and given way to a team of jugglers, who were alternating balls with lit torches in a display that immediately caught the warrior's attention.

She remembered seeing Gabrielle on that same platform, though it had been far smaller back then, and the big town just barely past a village. Gabrielle had thrown her heart into the stories and even Xena, who had found a place near the back to stay out of sight had emerged into the crowd to listen.

They'd been given a spot in the common room to sleep in, since Xena was treating the innkeeper's son, but after Gabrielle's performance the dinars had flown hot and heavy, and they'd ended up a nice big private room with a big soft bed that the bard had insisted on paying for with the money she'd earned.

She remembered how proud Gabrielle had been of that. She also remembered feeling a little strange, to let herself be taken care of by the bard's largesse, a little unsure of how that would change the already frenetic relationship they had.

In the end, though, the lure of the soft bed, and the privacy had overcome her ego, and they'd spent three days in unusual comfort together while Gabrielle practiced her newly honed skills and collected coin from the appreciative crowd.

More dinars than Gabrielle had ever had in her life before, and she'd had a wonderful time shopping, coming back with both things they needed, and crazy little gifts for Xena. A cup, a thick woolen shift, and a pretty silver pin that had confused and embarrassed both of them just a little.

Just a little. The warrior smiled, remembering that odd, awkward moment, when their eyes had met, and Gabrielle had blushed and she'd surprised herself by feeling more shy than annoyed at the whole thing.

Xena sighed and wished the bard was up on that platform right now. She took a sip of her ale, and glanced around the open air tavern, spotting the patricians who had been complaining earlier. They were seated at a table with four other men, all in the leather and steel of soldiers.

They didn't appear to be the law the men had been looking for, and it also didn't appear they'd had much luck in shutting down the entertainment. As she watched them from the corner of her eye, she saw a bag pass from the men to the soldiers, and then the soldiers drained their mugs and got up, wiping their mouths on the backs of the hands.

They hitched their trousers up and looked around, and then they slipped out of the tavern and started to wander over to the performers.

Xena studied them. She turned her head and watched the two patricians, who had satisfied looks on their faces, and she reasoned that the money changing hands was probably destined to cause a disruption in everyone's fun.

She pondered whether or not it was her responsibility to prevent that. After all, the town probably had their own constable with enough men to keep the place safe, right?

There really was no need for her to get involved with a couple of pissy aristocrats who obviously cared more about their own comforts than the crowd of people having a good time.

Was there?

Xena exhaled and drained her own mug, setting it down on the counter before she hopped off the tavern steps and strode after the soldiers.

Sure there was.

**

Gabrielle put her back to the cookfire, and leaned against the high table facing the assembled Amazons. There was some definite excitement in the air, and the dinner they'd just finished had held something of a party atmosphere.

Even the elders were in a good mood. The bard lifted a hand and slowly the chattering faded off, and everyone focused on her. "My sisters. We've got a lot to talk about tonight."

The silence was now almost a physical thing, thrumming against her in a familiar beat as the fire snapped loudly to the rear. "I know the past moons have been one long series of changes for us." Gabrielle let her hands rest on her thighs. "We've moved our village, and been through some bad weather, that made our lives tough for a while."

The bard scanned the faces watching her. If anyone felt her inclusion of herself in the tribe's recent history wasn't really accurate, their faces weren't showing it. "Now that we've had a chance to settle down, there's a number of things I'd like to talk about, some changes I'd like to make, and one really big opportunity that has just come to our notice earlier today."

She pushed off from the table and paced a few steps. "I know there's a lot going on right now. Ephiny's gone to try and help our sister tribes, and we've got a war far on the horizon between Athens and Sparta. Hopefully." She paced the other way. "Hopefully that won't touch us once Xena finds our friends and lets them know what's going on."

One of the elders stood up. "Your majesty." Renas said. "Will Xena stop the other Amazons from joining in the war?"

Gabrielle allowed herself to be sidetracked. “You mean, by force?” She asked, in a quizzical tone. “As in, tie them up and keep them from going to Athens?”

Renas half shrugged. “Not.. well, Hades, she might.” She said, as the rest of the tribe chuckled a little. “But we know.. least, I think we know those women might go to their deaths if they join up.”

Gabrielle went back to the table and leaned against it, folding her arms over her chest. “I think my partner will do her best to convince them that going to war would be a bad decision.” She said. “But I think when it comes right down to it, it’s their choice.”

Renas nodded, and sat back down. “No offense.” She said. “But we’d rather get the three of them back here than have them get tangled up with those crazy women.”

The bard smiled at her. “Me too.” She freely admitted. “Anyway.” She gathered her thoughts. “A couple of things first, before we start talking about the new valley. I know there’s been some rumors about some changes I intend on making.”

There was a rustle of movement, and silence fell again.

“Nothing too dramatic.” Gabrielle said, after a minute. “You’ve seen some of it already. I just want to give people the chance to do some things differently if they want to. So that means, if someone wants to learn to cook, I’ll teach them.”

There were some nodding heads.

“And, if someone wants to build their own space, and live in it – now that we’ve got the room, that’s okay too.” Gabrielle watched the faces opposite her carefully. “I know there were some people who really didn’t like that idea.”

Everyone looked over at Renas, who reluctantly stood up. “Your majesty, there’s reasons for our traditions. “

“I know.” The bard agreed. “I respect that. “ She got up off the table again. “But I think you also need to respect the fact that I didn’t grow up in the tribe, and I see things with different eyes.” She addressed Renas directly. “And that I’ve had a chance to know people in many different places and in many different ways. I want to bring that experience here, to the tribe.”

Renas looked thoughtful.

“After all.. “ Gabrielle addressed the crowd. “What else can I bring? I’m a shepherd’s kid, who grew up tagging along after a reformed warlord and learned to tell stories along the way. What in the world am I doing being a Queen of the Amazons?”

The crowd rustled again, this time with a slight but perceptible unease.

“I was just in a place at a time when something I did touched someone who was in mortal need, and here I am.” Gabrielle lifted her hands and let them drop. “So. No one’ forcing anyone to change. If you’ve lived in the dorm your whole life and love it, that’s not going to change.” She glanced over at Solari, who was smiling. “But If you’ve proven yourself a warrior of the tribe, or a senior in the ranks, then if you want to put up a home, and live in it, you can.”

“But your majesty.” Renas held up a hand. “The tradition encourages those of us inclined to find ourselves a partner, in order to do that. What incentive will there be then, if that’s taken away?”

Gabrielle cocked her head to one side and folded her arms. “Are you expecting me to agree with the idea that the only reason you should join with someone is to get a house? Me?” She unfolded one arm and pointed at her own chest.

Renas took a breath to answer, then she closed her mouth, and reached up to scratch her jaw.

“That’s what I thought.” The bard smiled. “So let’s just see how this works out. “ She turned her attention back to the crowd. “So let’s get on with the really exciting news. Today, up in the new valley our sisters were digging out, a really interesting discovery was made.”

The crowd settled back down, though there were still some whispers in the corners. Gabrielle suspected it wasn’t the last she’d heard about the protests, but it seemed the opposition was content to wait until another day.

She picked up two big pieces of ore, and held them up to the light of the fire. “Our tribe has always been rich in experience, in battle skills, and in traditions. “ She said. “Now, with what was found today, we have the chance to be rich in the material sense as well.”

Definite interest. “Silver was it?”

“That was one of the things.” Gabrielle agreed. “Silver, lead, iron ore... our sisters found a place rich in resources we can mine. We have a lot of work to do to get it of course...”

“We don’t really know how to mine stuff.” Renas said.

“Exactly.” The bard said. “So we need to learn a lot, and gain the skills necessary to take advantage of the find. There are some people we can ask for help... Tyldus, for example.”

A low mutter.

“Some of the smiths down in Amphipolis. They know how to work these kinds of things.” Gabrielle went on, hearing the unspoken protests. “And of course, Xena knows how to work metal.”

Silence.

Gabrielle surveyed the crowd. It was hard to tell what the mood was, not unusual when it came to her partner. As Xena had said, there were long memories here. “So one way or the other, we’ll get the knowledge we need to put this to good use for the tribe.”

One of the senior warriors stood up. Gabrielle recognized her, remembering her as one of her adversaries in the staff competition, all those years ago. “Yes?”

“Everyone gets a share?” The woman asked.

“Of course.” Gabrielle replied. “Just like everyone shares in the hunt, and everyone shares in the gathering, everyone will share in this new resource. “ She said. “And some of what we get from it will go to the tribe itself, so we can make things better for everyone who lives here.”

“Get a nice timber roof on the dining hut?” Renas suggested.

“A little herd of sheep maybe..” Aalene mused.

The Amazon who had addressed Gabrielle sat down slowly, her head faintly nodding. “Maybe we get our own at last.” She said, in a somewhat wondering tone. “By the gods, it’s been long enough.”

Gabrielle leaned against the table again. “It has been a long time.” She admitted. “And I know there were people who doubted moving up here. We had a tough start.”

“But now it was worth it.” Solari said, standing up. “Cause not only did they find all that stuff, but we’re in a spot we can defend it in.”

True. Gabrielle nodded. “Hopefully we don’t have to do that for a while.” She demurred. “It’s going to take us some time to get started with all this.”

“Solari’s right.” Renas said. “You going to tell the people down the hill about this?”

The bard's face twitched, and she frowned as the murmurs rose around her. "You mean the people in Amphipolis?" She asked. "As in, my family?"

Silence again.

"They were ready to burn the place down over those rocks of your kid's." Renas said.

True. Gabrielle lifted a hand, then let it fall. "People do strange and crazy things over money." She admitted. "I will probably tell my mother in law, but not everyone else."

"Cyrene?" Aalene spoke up. "She tried to stop them, when they were going to attack. She was chasing people with her wood ax."

"She's tough." Solari nodded. "She's all right though. She told that crazy guy off who was wanting to come up here and dig for diamonds or whatever."

"Well, she is Xena's mother." The bard managed a faint smile.

More of the Amazons were coming up to the front now, clustering around her. Gabrielle braced her hands on the table, and quickly reviewed the faces nearest her, relaxing a little when it was obvious the mood had lightened.

She wasn't afraid. She was just very sensitive to how she was being viewed by this cluster of women she casually called sisters, but whom she really didn't share much in common. She knew there were people around her who had doubts about her.

She knew there were people around her who had doubts about her consort, and the fact that circumstance had put them in charge of a tribe one half of them were often at odds with.

She remembered the reception Xena had gotten, after the bad times.

She remembered the hidden truths that had come from Pony's and Granella's consciences when they'd all been stuck together in a place she still had nightmares about.

But right here and now, the attitudes were good, and the faces at the least grudgingly approving. She'd take it. "So do we have some ale we can pour to celebrate?" She asked. "Because I think we're entitled to it."

Solari and another Amazon led the way to the newly tapped cask, and before long pitchers of ale were being passed back from row to row, as Amazons untied their mugs from their belts and held them out to be filled.

Outside near the fire, drums started up, drawing them out from under the shelter into the clear night, where stars twinkled softly overhead. Gabrielle got her mug filled and wandered out with the rest, climbing up onto the multilayer platforms and settling herself on a couple of pillows.

Gabrielle stretched her legs out and explored the novel experience of being alone up on the wooden planks, without Xena's familiar length lounging behind her. It felt strange, and she kept fighting the urge to look around, expecting to see her partner somewhere nearby.

Usually she was. Not always right next to her, but somewhere within eyesight if Gabrielle looked around carefully enough when they were both in the village. She'd asked her just the other sevenday why that was, surprised when Xena told her she just wasn't going to let her loose in a crowd of randy women who wanted to bed her.

Now that was a spit your drink out your nose moment. Gabrielle had laughed until her stomach hurt so much she had to stop, leaving her partner with a bemused expression on her face.

Anyway. Gabrielle took a sip of her ale and sighed.

She expected to miss Xena at night, when she was alone in the hut or in the morning, when Dori

woke her, but it was moments like this when her body unexpectedly craved her partner's presence that she felt her absence the most strongly.

She wanted Xena's touch. Not the intimate one of their bedroom, but the simple, casual warmth of her arm draped over the bard's shoulder; the knowing bump of her knee against Gabrielle's thigh, the gentle ruffle of her hair from Xena's long fingers.

Even in the heat of the summer, she felt cold without her partner's presence.

With another sigh, she pulled her boots up under her and took a sip of her ale, focusing her thoughts on the drumming, and the various groups of Amazons around her, lifting their mugs in her direction, for once in a collective good mood.

Cait came into her field of vision and she waved the young Amazon forward, glad for someone to talk to she felt no ambivalence about. "Hey Cait."

"Hello." Cait joined her on the platform and settle down cross legged next to her. "That was exciting news today, wasn't it?"

"It sure was." Gabrielle agreed. "I'm glad you guys were there to see it. I wasn't expecting anything like that – I thought maybe there was just really good hunting there, or they found a hot spring or something."

"Too right, me too." Cait agreed. She rested her elbows on her knees. "Or something a bit silly, like a secret cave to make into that purging thing they were talking about."

Gabrielle blinked, and glanced around, belatedly realizing the one thing that they hadn't built in the new village was a purging hut. "Oh. Huh."

"Did you think that too?"

The bard shook her head faintly. "No. I.. actually I didn't even think about it. I just figured out they didn't put one here yet." She paused thoughtfully. "Wasn't my favorite place. Don't think I missed it."

"Oh." Cait murmured. "Yes, I'm sorry. That's true isn't it."

"Yeah." Gabrielle sipped from her cup. "I understand the theory behind it, and I guess... I guess I was willing to try anything at that point in my life."

Had she been? Or had it just been easier to just do what Ephiny was urging her to do because she just really didn't care? Gabrielle carefully let herself think back to that time, and could just vaguely remember the sweat, and the sting of the branches.

She hadn't cared. None of it had mattered, no pain could touch the black ball of grief eating her from the inside out.

"I didn't mean to bring that up." Cait said, awkwardly. "I only thought of it because I heard some of them talking before, you know, about that being one of the traditions they thought were being left behind."

"It's okay, Cait." Gabrielle patted her on the knee. "I didn't want to stop that. If it helps people, and it makes them feel better then we by all means should do it. Maybe we can find a cave for that. I think you need someplace set apart."

Cait glanced around. "I thought the idea was a bit on the silly side myself." She confided. "When you're feeling awful, why would being made to feel even more awful make it better?"

"Well." Gabrielle watched as a group of the Amazons got up, and the beat of the drums changed, to a more seductive rhythm. "I think it's a different kind of pain." She said. "I guess the theory is you trade one pain for the other, and it helps."

Cait looked extremely skeptical.

“It didn’t work for me.” Gabrielle smiled briefly. “But there were elders who swore by it.”

“Sorry.”

The bard smiled more broadly. “Don’t be, Cait.” She watched the dancing start up. “When I look back at that time, it’s just as a contrast to now.” She glanced over at Cait. “We survived.”

Cait smiled back. Then she looked over at the dancers, now filling the open space in front of the fire as the drums got louder. “They do keep asking if I want to do that.” She indicated the bodies outlined in the firelight.

Seductive, certainly. The Amazons were in a collective good mood and it showed. “Do you want to?” Gabrielle asked. “I think a lot of people enjoy it.”

Cait studied the dancers, then she turned her head and regarded the queen. “Do you?”

Ah. Gabrielle wrapped her hands around her mug and pondered the question. “I do, but not with just everyone in a big group.” She said, slowly. “It gets too busy.”

“I don’t rather like it.” Cait said, frankly. “I don’t like so many people all round, you know? And they start grabbing at you.”

“Mm.” Gabrielle looked up as a shadow fell over her, to find an Amazon with a tray full of mugs standing nearby. “Oh. Thanks.” She exchanged her empty mug for a full one. “Cait?”

“Yes, please.” Cait accepted a mug and sipped it. “That’s quite nice.”

“So where’s Paladia?” Gabrielle asked.

“Feeling a bit under the weather.” Cait said. “Cycles, you know.”

“Uh huh. I know.” The bard commiserated. “Don’t you want to go keep her company? I’m sure some mulled wine would probably help. It does for Xena.”

“Well.” Cait cleared her throat a little. “I would, but you see, I did promise Xena I’d make sure you’d have someone to chat to.” She told the queen. “Especially up here on this flat bit all by yourself.”

Gabrielle put her cup down. “Xena made you promise that?”

“Not exactly.” The young Amazon said. “I wanted to go with her, you see. And she said that would be lovely, but she didn’t want to take anyone away who was quite on your side.”

“Ah.”

“And that you would need all the friends you had here, while she was gone.” Cait concluded. “So I thought it was important to her that you not be left up here all by yourself with nothing to talk to but that tree.”

Aw. Gabrielle had to smile, as the revelation suddenly made it seem like Xena was, in fact, around her, the warmth of the concern for her wellbeing giving her a pleasant jolt of surprise. “Thanks Cait.” She clasped the younger woman’s shoulder. “But you want to know a secret?”

“If you want me to.” Cait replied.

“I’d rather if you’d gone with her, since I couldn’t.” Gabrielle said. “Does that make us both crazy?”

“I don’t think so, no.” Cait grinned. “But next time, I definitely shall ask you first.”

They both laughed, as the drums increased their pace, and the Nation threw their energy into the dance. The sound echoed off into the distance, bouncing off the mountain's walls and out into the starry sky overhead.

Gabrielle lifted her mug, and toasted the stars in the shape of the Warrior, imagining she saw the eye peeking out of its field of inky black. "Be safe, my love." She whispered. "Hope you're tucked in bed, halfway home already."

Wishful thinking, and she knew it.

**

Continued in Part 8

A Queen's Tale

Part 8

Xena caught the back of the two armed men's leather armor and hauled backwards, nearly pulling them both off their feet and back onto their asses. "Hold on there boys."

They turned, reaching for their weapons and she swung them both together, smacking them against each other as the crowd around them edged away. "I said, hold on there."

"Let me go you.." The one on the left caught his balance and turned fully to face her.

Xena spun other one around then she grabbed the both by the front of their half armor and walked backwards, ducking behind the nearest stall before they could pull themselves free.

She shoved them away from her and stepped back, standing relaxed in the light from the torches. "Wanna talk? Or fight. Your choice." The rate her luck was going, she figured they'd fight and resigned herself to the inevitability of it all.

The two looked at each other, then they both held out their hands to show how empty they were. "Not looking for trouble. Xena." The one on the left said. "What's your piece in this?"

"Same here." The other man said. "Aint' seen you since the war, but I sure remember you fighten."

Ah. Pleasant surprise. "Those sandal wearers pay you to make trouble?" The warrior asked bluntly. "I heard them giving the innkeeper a hard time."

The nearer of the two glanced behind them, and lowered his hands. "Just making a few coins." He said. "Didn't seem a big thing, Xena. He just wanted to get the noise to stop. Asked us to fake a fight near the stage."

"Stupid bastards." Xena said.

The man looked abashed. "Didn't seem much harm." He muttered. "Just some buskers."

The warrior put one hand on her hip. "These people are just minding their own business enjoying themselves. Leave em alone." She said. "And don't diss performers. I'm married to one."

The man blinked. "Ah. Sorry." He said. "What are we going to tell those travelers? They paid us good dinars to break this thing up. Something with their women."

"Take off." Xena said. "I'll handle them."

The two men left without further argument, disappearing into the darkness in the direction of

the inn. Xena waited a moment, then she wandered back around into the square again, glancing up as the musicians gave way to a lone storyteller.

A young woman, tall, with chestnut hair. She reminded Xena a little of Gabrielle's sister Lila, and she paused to lean against a post to listen, the faintly awkward posture ringing familiar bells with her.

She wished Gabrielle were with her, and standing up on the stage right now ready to charm the audience with one of her stories, her eyes twinkling in the torchlight, poised and confident.

It always gave her a kick, to be there in the audience. Even when the story wasn't one of hers, she loved seeing the reaction of those around her and knowing that she'd had a hand in making the person Gabrielle had become.

Though there had been good and bad in their lives, the part that had included Gabrielle learning to be a good storyteller had very few of the bad memories and the majority of the good ones. Xena still smiled every time she thought about their trip to Athens, when the simple power of the bard's words had overshadowed so much pomp and circumstance.

Back in the back of the auditorium there, with her drum, she'd been so proud of Gabrielle, and so incredibly happy she'd been the one who brought the word of her winning the competition to her.

Now she stood in the shadows, watching a young girl take the same first steps on the road they'd traveled, and she was very glad she'd taken the time to get involved and given the kid a chance to do her thing unimpeded.

She was obviously new to the craft, and it was a simple story. Xena kept an eye on the two patricians as she listened, watching them grow more and more agitated as they obviously craned their necks looking for something.

There was a flicker of motion nearby, and Xena moved her head a little, so she could see what the motion was. The two men had half stood up, to greet a young woman joining them. She was dressed in good style, and had blond hair so pale it almost appeared white.

The men seemed upset she was there. The woman signaled the servers to bring over a tray, and one of the men stood all the way up and reached for the woman's arm.

The new bard wound up her story, and Xena pulled her attention away from the minor drama at the bard to start the clapping for her, which was picked up by those nearby and caused a blush to color the girl's face.

She stepped down off the platform and smiled at the crowd, her path taking her right past where Xena was standing. She glanced to the side as she sensed the warrior's tall presence, halting to stare as their eyes met. "Oh!"

Xena put her finger up to her lips and made a small hushing noise.

The girl came closer. "You're Xena, aren't you?" She whispered. "By the gods!"

"I am." Xena admitted. "But I'd rather not draw a crowd."

The girl looked around. "I saw you grab those guys before I went up there." She said. "I thought it was you, but it was so fast I didn't have time to see." She added. "Were they Spartan agents or something? What did you do with them?"

Echoes of her soulmate rang like the bells of the Hestian Virgins in her head. "Nothing that exciting. Just a couple of guys." Xena said. "Nice story."

The girl's eyes positively lit up. "Did you like it? I mean, of course, I'm just starting and you must

be used to the best.”

“Everyone has to start somewhere.” Xena said. “Good luck.” She lifted her hand and waved a trifle, and then she slipped away from the platform and headed purposefully back towards the bar. One of the two men were gone, and the other was seated next to the pale haired young woman, who had a mug in her hand and seemed to know what to do with it.

She was noticed as she climbed the two steps up to the bar level. Both the man and the young woman turned their heads as she passed, but Xena saw no reason to acknowledge them as she wound her way back to her selected spot.

The server drifted over immediately. ‘Ready for another mug?’ She asked. “On the house?”

Xena leaned against the counter, regarding her. On the stage, a harpist was starting to play, the beautiful sounds lifting up into the sky. “On the house?” She inquired. “My mother’s an innkeeper. She doesn’t give away her ale to every scruffy looking stranger in the place.”

The server smiled. She was roughly Xena’s age, with dark brown hair and a startling scattering of freckles across her face. She leaned a bit closer. “Even if the old woman hadn’t sent word down, and even if I hadn’t recognized you, my brother saw what you did down by the stage and so yes, on the house.”

It was pleasant, Xena had to admit, being recognized this way, rather than how she had been in the past. She inclined her head in graceful acceptance, and took the proffered mug. “Thanks.”

“Watch out for those two.” The server made a motion with her thumb pointed behind her. “They’re trouble.”

Having already decided that on her own, Xena merely nodded. The woman moved on, heading back to the bar and leaving Xena to ponder her choices for dinner. Nearby to one side of the stage, she spotted a cookpit roasting what looked like a whole pig and she marked it for attention.

Once that was decided, she slowly let her gaze roam around the open air tavern, finally allowing herself to meet the gaze of the young woman at the front table. The knowing expression and faint smile made her understand she was recognized, but rather than prolong the contact, the warrior merely moved her attention on.

She caught sight of the other man coming back, his face stormy as he shoved his way past the crowd and back to the table. She sipped her ale as she watched the action in her peripheral vision, the newcomer leaning in to the table and gesturing with his hands to his companions.

The woman listened, then she turned her head away, watching the harpist.

Xena picked up her mug and dropped off the wooden floor of the tavern to the ground. She made her way over to the cookpit, now aware of the looks she was getting from the crowd as she went through it.

She heard her name, whispered, finally in a tone more reverent than feared. Xena smiled as she arrived at the cookpit, studying what they had to offer.

They had wooden platters. She pointed at one, then at the grill. “Gimme one of whatever you got.”

“Yes, ma’am.” The man behind the grill quickly complied. “Here you go.”

Xena took the plate and gave him a coin, staring him down when he started to refuse. She then took her platter and went back to the tavern, climbing up back to her spot to find she’d gained herself some company.

The young woman was there, waiting.

Xena put her platter down and resumed her perch, giving the woman a chance to talk first. She had fine, even features and a beautiful face that went with the body just visible in the artfully arranged draping of fabric around it.

“You’re Xena.” The woman said. “From Amphipolis.”

The warrior picked up a rib and glanced at her. “Good guess.” She took a bite and chewed, pleasantly surprised at the spicy tang.

“My name is Milena.” The woman said. “Would you join us at our table? I have a offer for you.”

Xena looked past her to where the two men were sitting, visibly upset and glaring in her direction. “No thanks.” She said. “I’m not looking for any offers.”

“All right, then I’ll join you.” Milena sat down on the edge of the wood and took a sip from her mug. “Sorry to be so forward, but this isn’t Athens and I don’t think you appreciate the social necessities anyway.”

That surprised Xena. The woman apparently had a mind, and was older than she perhaps looked. “That your horse in the barn?” She asked, casually drawing her dagger and stabbing a likely looking piece of meat before bringing it to her lips.

Milena paused in mid sip. “Horse?”

“White mare?”

The woman blinked. “W... oh. Yes.” She said. “What does that have to do with anything, and how did you know that?”

“Just asking.” Xena settled back on her makeshift seat and nibbled on her selection, the dagger catching the torchlight. “What do you want?”

Gabrielle would be so exasperated at her. Xena waited for the woman to answer. But then there was a reason most everyone preferred to deal with her soulmate. She was curious, though, as to what the woman had in mind.

“My brothers and I are headed for the port city.” Milena collected herself. “We hear from the provost here that the road’s alive with brigands. If you’re headed in that direction, we want to hire you for protection.”

Xena started laughing, a light sound that echoed through the tavern. Then she let the laugh wind down into chuckles, as she took a swallow of her ale. “I’m not for hire.” She said. “Most dangerous thing I saw on the road here were packs of idiots kidnapping people to sell to the Athens army. You’re probably safe.”

Milena studied her. “You act like my offer is an insult.”

“If you really know who I am, then you know it is.” The warrior responded mildly. “I’m no mercenary.” She speared another chunk of barbeque and tore a bite out of it, watching Milena’s face past it.

It was a face unused to rejection, she decided. This was a beautiful, willful person who probably was the apple of her father’s eye, and very used to having every wish granted to her.

Gabrielle, certainly, would have been having a ball once she got past her innate dislike of anyone trying to horn in on her partner.

“Everyone has a price.” Milena finally said. “But I meant no insult. We had heard Amphipolis was on hard times, and thought you would welcome a chance to earn some dinars.”

Xena extended her booted legs and crossed them at the ankles. “You heard wrong.”

“Then you don’t deny you have a price.” Milena smiled. “But come, Xena. We all travel the same road. Why not travel with us, in that case?” She rested her elbow on the wooden perch Xena had her plate on.

One of the men came over. “Milena, we’ve gotten lodgings on the other side of town. Come. We can get some quiet there.” He refused to look at Xena.

“Rog, go if you want.” The woman said. “Take Gerras and go to bed. I can take care of myself.”

Xena continued consuming her dinner, mildly entertained by the patricians. She was finding Milena intriguing, with a touch of the piratical that peaked her interest. Her brothers were common Athenian types however, and she was hoping they’d take the hint and leave.

“Sister, please.” Rog leaned closer and lowered his voice. He glanced at Xena, then focused on the other woman. “We have an early start tomorrow, and the crowd here is getting rough.”

Xena found his eyes on her again. She licked the edge of her dagger and waggled an eyebrow at him then she picked up a rib and bit into it.

His lip curled in distaste.

“Go on.” Milena gave him a little push on his shoulder. “I’ll come join you shortly. Where are the new rooms?”

“Someone’s guiding us.” Rog said, in a stubborn tone. “You will have to come with us to find it.”

Milena’s eyes narrowed. “Then I’ll sleep where I please.” Her glance drifted over to Xena, then back to her brother. “Leave.”

“Milena, you cannot.” He hissed.

“I can.” She pushed him again. “Go, before I find the guard and tell them you’re misusing me.”

Reluctantly, the man straightened, and backed off, shaking his head before he turned and rejoined the other man at the table, bending close to him and talking with short, sharp motions of his hands.

Milena watched them for a moment, then she returned her attention to Xena. “They mean well. But they like to think they’re in charge.”

Xena drained her mug. “Thanks for the offer.” She said. “You and your brothers heading for Athens?”

“Of course.” Milena signaled the server, who came over with her tray. “Two.” She tossed a coin onto the tray and put one of the two the server set in front of her over in front of Xena. “Isn’t everyone? There’s a sloop waiting for us in port.”

Xena finished her rib and debated briefly, then accepted the mug and took a drink from it. “What’s your interest in Athens? Supporting the troops?”

“What’s yours?” Milena countered. “Joining the troops?”

“No.” Xena said. “I’m not heading to Athens.”

“Really?”

“Really.” The warrior said. “I’m just looking for some friends, then heading back home.”

Milena studied her with focused interest. Her eyes were a muddled color in the torchlight, but they were pale, and almost as piercing as Xena’s own and this close, the warrior could see the sharp intelligence in them.

"I find it hard to believe you have no interest in this war." Milena said, slowly. "My father was in Athens during the games, and that's all they were talking about, you being part of the army. Why lie about it?"

"I'm not." Xena said. "It's not my war."

The woman took a swallow of her ale. "I don't believe that."

"I don't really care." The warrior shrugged. "I didn't ask for your opinion."

The woman straightened a little. Then she lifted one hand and let it fall. "That's true, you didn't. I intruded myself on your table, didn't I?" She said. "So you won't travel with us then, I take it."

Xena shook her head. She stood up, casually shrugging her weapons into place and seating her dagger. "Have a good trip."

Milena rose as well. "Staying at the inn?" She asked. "I'm sure you are, if your horse is in the barn with mine. I'll walk you to your room."

Xena shrugged again and led the way out of the tavern, briefly glad her beloved partner wasn't there at her side, if only because if she had been, the night would have ended with them riding from the town in the dark after the bard clocked this young, saucy rich kid.

Who was definitely intent on getting what she wanted.

**

Gabrielle cradled Dori in her arms as she walked back to her quarters, the last echoes of the drums fading off into the distance. A sense of quiet was settling on the village, after the long night of songs, and dance and feasting.

"Mama." Dori burbled sleepily. "Mama I love you."

Gabrielle smiled. "I love you too, honey." She told her daughter. "Did you have fun with your friends tonight?"

"Missed Boo."

The bard hugged her a little closer. "Yeah, me too. But I had fun tonight anyway. Cait stayed with me and told me funny stories." She said. "We're going to go see Grandma tomorrow."

"Gramma!" Dori kicked her feet. "Good. I can play there."

"That's right. You can play with your cousins, right?" Gabrielle ducked through the curtained entry to her quarters and continued through to the sleeping area, setting Dori down onto her bed. "And your other friends who live by Grandma."

Three village children, and Granella and Toris' twin boys. Dori adored them. "Mama, we can see horsies! I can ride Gogo?"

Hm. "Well, I think we can ask Argo if she wants to give you a ride." Gabrielle said. "But remember you have to be very nice to her, right? She's Boo's favorite horsie."

"Bring happles."

Gabrielle chuckled, as she removed Dori's jumper and replaced it with a little cotton shirt. "You learn fast, honey. Okay, we'll bring Argo some apples, and see if she'll give you a ride."

Dori snuggled down in her bed and pulled Flameball over to her, tucking her arm around the stuffed toy and hugging it. "Good."

"Goodnight, Dor." Gabrielle ruffled her hair. Then she stood up and went back into the other

room, dropping down into the chair behind her worktable and loosening the laces on her boots. She pulled them off and wiggled her toes.

Long day. She got up and went to the garment press, exchanging her leathers for a shift. The party had gone on later than she'd expected, and she'd had one too many cups of ale near the end of it, using that to excuse herself from the dancing.

She knew how, but she was more than a little self conscious about it, and surprised at the number of her sisters who had asked knowing what her answer had been the last time.

Maybe they'd forgotten.

She went over and rummaged in the kit Xena had left, removing a packet and studying the script on the back.

With a nod, she went over to the table under the window, adding the contents of the packet to a cup and pouring some apple cider over it. She stirred it with a finger then downed it resolutely, the crisp sweetness of the cider almost overcoming the sharpness of the herbs.

Then she filled the cup with water, and drained it.

That made her head feel better. "Ugh." Gabrielle filled the cup again and took it back to her worktable, setting it down as she slid into the chair and opened her diary.

Today's been a really eventful day.

I don't want to say it's been a great day, or an amazing day, though some amazing things happened, but it's been a very important day in terms of the tribe.

I wish Xena were here.

That had nothing to do with what I wrote first. I just wish Xena were here because I miss her. I really felt it tonight at the celebration when everyone was having fun and being together and that platform up there felt so empty to me.

It was nice of Cait to come up and keep me company. It figures Xena told her to keep an eye out for me.

I wonder why she did that? It would have been good for her to have Cait go along, even if all she did was keep watch one night or two so the poor thing could get some sleep.

Cait said Xena said I needed all my friends around me. Why?

What did she know? Or was it just one of those things that she just understands and can't really explain? She was the one going out there, she was the one who really could use some friends with her. I was just staying here and babysitting.

Did she know we'd find something? Probably not. She probably just didn't want anyone to be responsible for out there if it wasn't me.

Or Dori.

I wonder where she is and what she's doing.

I wish I was with her.

Anyway. The search party who was digging out the pass up mountain found a valley that has a lot of ore and silver in it. It's also a really pretty valley and I think there's probably a lot more to find there but really it's the silver and the lead and everything that has everyone so excited.

Am I excited? I guess I am for the tribe. They've worked so hard for so long, and they've got so little to show for it except for this village, and their identity. They hunt and sell the skins and that

stuff but really, if they were hard up they'd have a tough time surviving.

So now, it's different. With what they found today, so much is possible. We just have to handle it, and figure out how to take advantage of it in a smart way.

We definitely need Xena's advice on this. I know she'll know how to do it and not mess it up.

Gabrielle reread her last sentence, then she set her quill down and leaned back, folding her arms across her chest, and stifling a yawn. "I need to finish this tomorrow when I'm less gloomy." She got up and went over to the pitcher, pouring herself another cup of water, going over to the window to look out as she drank it.

Jasmine was blooming. She could smell its sweet fragrance on the air. The moonlight was trickling through the leaves and painting a faint silver pattern on her, and now that the sounds outside had faded, an owl's soft hoot echoed nearby.

She finished her water and then she doused the candle and went into the sleeping chamber. Dori was sound asleep, and she crawled into the sturdy bed and lay on her back, looking up at the ceiling.

She was tired. It had been a long day, and the climb up and down the mountain hadn't been the easiest. Gabrielle could feel an ache in her knees and a little stiffness in her back, and suspected she'd be wishing for a trip up to the cave of the hot springs by the time she woke up tomorrow.

Maybe it all had made her too tired to dream.

**

Xena felt a distinct twinge of annoyance as she walked through the hall of the inn, very aware of the shadow at her heels. She'd worked to lose her unwanted visitor by stopping at several vendors to pick up supplies for the road, but Milena had stuck with her.

Now she was at the door to her room. She turned and leaned against it, feeling the outline of her sword through the leather over her shoulder blades as she faced the young woman. "Night."

"Aren't you going to invite me in?" Milena asked. "You're known to like women, Xena."

It had been a long time since she'd been so boldly propositioned. Xena wasn't sure if she should be flattered, insulted, or just amused. "No thanks." She said. "I'm married."

"So?" Milena leaned against the wall. "What does that mean, for a woman in these times? Someone's ready to pay for your headstone?" She inquired. "My father is busy marrying me off. You think I care?"

Xena cocked her head a little to one side. "I don't give a damn. I said I wasn't interested."

"Really?"

Xena merely turned and opened her door, then she walked in side and closed it firmly behind her. "Pity the bastard who's got to marry her." She sighed, walking over to her saddlebags and kneeling next to them to stow her provisions.

When she heard the latch working, she felt her temper unexpectedly snap and by the time the door was cracking open she was across the floor and yanking it towards her with one hand, the other reaching back and drawing her sword.

The blade whirled around in the shadows and smacked Milena across the cheekbone, sending her flying backwards into the hallway and against the far hall wall.

Xena followed it up, flowing into the hallway and pouncing on the woman, grabbing her by the front of her gown and pulling her up only to slam her against the wall. She leaned forward and

put her blade Milena's throat. "Sorry I was too subtle for you." She growled. "Beat it."

"Wait I... wait, Xena, please."

The warrior's eyes narrowed, but she held herself still.

"I just wanted to talk to you." Milena said. "You're gorgeous, and strong and sexy and I really like that. You fascinate me. It's not a crime."

Xena studied the pretty face across from her. She could see the flutter of her pulse at her throat, but the expression was carefully controlled and without visible fear.

Interesting. "It's not a crime." She said. "But I'm not interested in talking." Xena let her go, and gave her a shove down the hall. "We clear now?"

Milena caught her balance, and straightened her clothing, retaining an admirable dignity. "Maybe you'll be more in the mood tomorrow." She said. "See you in the morning." She turned and walked back down the hall and into the darkness, turning the corner and disappearing back into the main part of the inn.

The warrior waited for a minute to see if she was coming back, then she retreated back into her room and shut the door, sheathing her sword with a vexed scrape of metal on leather. "How in the Hades do I get into stuff like this?"

She dropped to one knee next to her bags, then changed her mind and sat down on the floor, extending her legs out and pulling the leather sacks over. "Stupid wench is lucky Gabrielle wasn't here or she'd be pulling three cubits of wood out of her backside by now."

The woman's wanton approach had surprised her. She was no stranger to sensuality, but she knew her reputation was built more on ass kicking than ass kissing and so the aggressive stalking wasn't something she was used to.

Or something like that.

She sorted through the packages she'd purchased and found space for them. Things she hadn't really thought of bringing, trail snacks and herbs she was accustomed to Gabrielle carrying in their mutual baggage.

She'd forgotten that it was her partner who thought about what they'd eat on the road, keeping her eye out for berries and roots as they walked, and casting her mind ahead to where they would stop to make sure they had enough to keep themselves going with.

Ergo, why she ended up having pine nuts for breakfast twice now.

Xena leaned back against the bed and unstrapped her knee armor, setting it down and starting on the laces holding on her boots. She decided to get out of town before the sun rose, figuring the last thing she needed was a daylight encounter that might attract the law in the bargain.

She pulled her legs up crossed under her and unlatched her chest armor, pulling it off over her head and setting it down on the pile, followed by her bracers. Then she raked her fingers through her hair and went back to ordering her bags.

A skin of cider and a honeycake would do for breakfast. She tucked those in her front saddlebag, then she paused as her fingers encountered something unexpected.

She pulled it out, a smile grudgingly appearing on her face as she studied the parchment wrapped bit of rock now resting in the palm of her hand.

Was it something new Gabrielle had put in there? Or something left over from one of their many trips, just now being found?

Milena faded from her thoughts as she patiently unfolded the parchment from the rock, studying the stone for clues of its origin.

Ah. It appeared to be a river stone from near their cabin, so the chances are this was something new. Xena set the rock down and turned the parchment over, lifting it towards the candlelight so she could read the words written on it.

Gabrielle's hand, unmistakably.

Hey love of my life.

Xena smiled in reflex. If the note wasn't new, it was recent, from the salutation. It held the warm confidence they'd developed between them over the last little while and she had no trouble hearing Gabrielle's voice saying it.

I know when you're reading this I'll be missing you like crazy.

Ah. Definitely something new.

Letting you go on your own was one of the hardest things I've ever had to do. It's not that I don't trust you to do what needs to be done – I just don't trust the Fates. They've been really cruddy to us.

Xena exhaled. "They have, haven't they." She sighed. "Wish you'd just chucked your conscience and come too, Gab. I miss you."

So I hope you're just laying low and staying out of trouble. I want Eph and Pony back safely, but really, Xe... that's mostly because I want to break my word to her, and get out of this. I think you know that.

She did. "Right there with ya, hon."

Please go as fast as you can, and bring them back. If you want to pass on convincing the other Amazons, that's okay by me. You mean more to me than they do.

Xena stopped and reread that line a few times, dark lashes fluttering over her eyes in startlement. She hadn't expected that raw of an admission from her partner, though she'd known in her heart that was how the bard felt.

They'd moved past the greater good, in some ways. Paid their dues to the concept in ways few other people ever had.

Anyway I don't want to bring you down. I'm sure you'll have a good trip, and maybe even have some fun out there by yourself.

"Oh yeah. It's been a blast." Xena remarked dryly.

And I want you to know I'm going to be spending most of the time you're gone figuring out what to do to you first when you get back.

Xena's eyes widened. "Gggabrrrielle." She drawled. "Boy have you ever grown up."

Listen to me. Would you believe I blushed when I wrote that?

The warrior started laughing. "Yes!" She chortled. "I sure as Hades can."

Be safe, my love. See you soon. G.

Xena read the note over, then she folded it in half, touching it to her lips before she dug out her little book and slipped the note inside for safekeeping. Her agitation over Milena's advances had faded, replaced by a warm contentment.

She wondered if Gabrielle had found any of her own little surprises yet, tucked away in the Amazon queen's quarters before she left. Not notes, no – writing wasn't her forte.

But other things. Her own way of reaching out over the miles and touching her soulmate whose melancholy was evident through the link between them.

She closed her eyes and thought about how much she loved Gabrielle, and how happy that love made her.

It was the best she could do. She didn't know if it would make Gabrielle feel any better, but it sure worked on her, and she got to her feet, going to change out of her leathers in a much more pleasant frame of mind.

Tomorrow she'd start out early, before the sun rose. It would get her to her goal faster, and with any luck at all she'd leave her randy admirer behind.

Far behind.

**

Gabrielle watched Dori join in the play of her cousins, an indulgent smile on her face. Then she turned and headed down the path, angling her steps towards the inn on one side of the central square of Amphipolis.

It felt good to be in the town, and she waved back at the blacksmith and the weaver, who were crossing in the other direction. It was early, and the sun hadn't become unbearable yet and she enjoyed the splash of warmth on her skin as she trotted up the steps onto Cyrene's porch.

Her mother in law was seated just to one side of the door, a cup in her hands. "Ah. Good morning, cutie."

"Hey mom." Gabrielle dropped into the seat next to her. "Glad I found you out here."

"Uh oh." The innkeeper eyed her.

The bard grinned wryly. "It's not bad, really." She said. "We finally unblocked that high pass up the ridge from the Amazon village."

"Did you? Xena said someone was working on that." Cyrene replied. "A big rockslide closed off so much of that way back when... Gods, ten summers back? Some of the hunters came back and said it was all blocked so we just forgot about it."

Gabrielle nodded. "Xena said." She agreed. "So we moved all the rocks, and a couple of the Amazons went down into it and explored it a little. It's a nice valley."

"Good." Cyrene nodded. "Glad it worked out. I thought Xena was being a little snitty, honestly, when she signed it over."

"Me too." The bard admitted. "But she's going to be pretty surprised when she gets back. We found a lot of ore, lead and silver in there." She lowered her voice. "Enough to really mean something."

Cyrene whistled under her breath. "How about that?" She said. "You know, after some of the things we've seen around here, it doesn't really surprise me." Her face grew thoughtful. "You might not want to advertise it round here, though."

"Yeah." Gabrielle agreed. "I know the land was granted, but like we found out with Dori's rocks, sometimes people just get so crazy they don't think."

Her mother in law nodded. "You said it."

"There's so much I want to do for the tribe. This changes a lot for us." Gabrielle leaned back,

letting her elbows rest on the chair arms. “We had a big meeting about it last night.”

Cyrene turned her head. “How do the Amazons survive?” She asked. “They don’t farm, and I never see them herding or anything. Do they just scavenge in the forest?”

Reasonable question.

“Wait.” Cyrene said. “Let’s go in side and get you some tea. It’s going to start to get busy out here in a minute anyway.” She got up, and led the way into the inn.

Gabrielle followed willingly, and they crossed the big, empty front room in silence and entered the kitchen together.

This room always made her smile. There was a small table in one corner, big enough for a couple of people to sit down at and she’d had many a breakfast there with Xena when they’d lived just behind the inn.

There was always something going on in Cyrene’s kitchen. Something on the fire, something being cut up,, or prepared, or even just a pot bubbling slowly on the back hook full of odds and ends. “I dropped Dori over at Toris’s place.” Gabrielle said. “She was glad to see her cousins.”

Cyrene poured her a cup of tea, and they sat down at the table. This early, her helpers weren’t in yet and they were alone in the inn, with just the soft simmering of the aforementioned back pot. “They miss her.” She said. “Soli was in here asking me just yesterday where she was. He thought she went to Athens again.”

Gabrielle took a sip of her tea. “Almost.”

Her mother in law chuckled wryly. “I know you didn’t want her to go alone.”

The bard smiled. “I didn’t. I told her before she left when she got back and Eph got back I was going to see what I had to do to turn over my title. “

Cyrene sat up a little. “Didn’t you just say you had all these plans for the Amazons?”

“I do.” Gabrielle admitted. “I just don’t want to be part of them.”

Her mother in law gazed at her in interest. “Really?”

“Really.” The bard said. “I think I’ve finally figured out who I am, and it’s not the queen of the Amazons.” She took a sip of her tea. “Anyway, so we found a ton of valuable stuff in that valley, and I’m going to have to figure out a way to take advantage of it without making us a target for every greedy mercenary in the area.”

Cyrene digested this. She watched her daughter in law’s expressive face, the mist green eyes flicking up to hers with that open steadfastness so peculiar to her. “What did Xena have to say about that?”

The eyes warmed. “I think she was for it.” She said. “She tolerates the Amazons because of me.”

“Isn’t she an Amazon?”

“On parchment.” Gabrielle said. “Though, that parchment also means she gets a piece of whatever we found in that valley so I don’t know.”

“I’m not sure that matters to her much.” Cyrene got up and went to the pot, ladeling two bowlsful of the contents of it and bringing them back to the table. She slid one in front of Gabrielle and handed her a spoon. “I can hear you growling from here.”

Gabrielle didn’t deny it. “Dori and I shared some cereal this morning.” She said. “So, mom, who do you think I can talk to about this here? We’re going to need help extracting the ore, and smelting it. I know Xena knows how, but I’m not sure when she’s going to get back.”

Cyrene stirred her stew thoughtfully. "That's a tough question. I know there's some good craftsmen here, but they're neighbors. Not sure they can keep quiet about it."

"Mmhm." Gabrielle was busy chewing.

"So maybe we can...." Cyrene stopped as they both heard the sounds of running footsteps outside. "Hm."

"Hm." The bard repeated.

They heard the outer door open, and the sound of a number of people entering. "Cyrene!" A voice called.

"Cow fall in the creek again?" Cyrene got up and pushed the kitchen door open "Here." She said. "What's all the noise?"

"Is Gabrielle there with you? The smith said he saw her come this way."

Cyrene turned, but Gabrielle was already at her side and they both made it through the doorway and into the big room. "What's going on?" Gabrielle asked, as she recognized two of Xena's militia. "Peder, what's happening?"

The militiaman looked relieved on seeing her. "We heard from the watch, upcountry. Lot of people moving through. Heading this way."

"Upcountry?" Gabrielle's brows lifted. That meant the wilds of Thrace, sparsely populated and on the edge of the sea. "Who are they?"

"Watch didn't say." Peder reported. "Armed, though. Said to let you know, cause they weren't sure what their intent was."

"Armed?"

"Aye."

Gabrielle took a breath, sparing herself a moment to think about the situation. What would Xena do? Without question, Xena would go find out. "Okay." She said. "How far?"

"Three, four nights. it was the far watch." Peder said. "Out beyond Xena's valley, by the sea road."

He looked at her expectantly, waiting for her to respond.

Yikes. She would need to see who they were. "Let me get some of the Amazons, and we'll take a couple of the guys and go see what's up." The bard decided. "It could be nothing. Maybe Athens raising troops out in the far reaches, and they just gathered together to march to the capital."

"Could be." Peder admitted. "Pass us by, more than likely. If they take the sea road."

"We need to be sure." Gabrielle said. "Tell Bennu to pick two guys who can ride, and I'll meet him down here after noon. "

"Aye, will do." Peder took his companion and they left, rattling the door shut behind them.

"Well." Cyrene said. "Never a dull moment around here, I guess."

"Probably nothing." Gabrielle couldn't keep the anticipation from tensing her guts though. "After all, Athens is raising troops. Stands to reason they'd be heading there."

"True." The innkeeper agreed. "But I can tell you there's not much sympathy for Athens in those parts. They must be spreading coin like rain to get any number responding."

"That they are." Gabrielle sighed. "Well, let me finish your great stew and then go head up to get

an honor guard. “

“Rules of the Amazons?” Cyrene smiled.

“Rules of my partner.” The bard admitted. “But hey, it’ll give me something to make a story with for the feast at the full moon.” She headed back to the kitchen, turning her mind to who she’d take with her on this unexpected journey.

It wasn’t until she’d sat down and finished half the bowl before she realized that with Xena gone, she really, truly was apparently in charge.

Of everything.

**

Xena was glad of her isolated room when she dressed in the light of a single candle, in the dark hour just before dawn. It was quiet outside, and she washed quickly and put her leathers on, then donned her armor as she listened for anyone stirring outside.

She lifted her saddlebags to her shoulder and went to the door, pausing and cocking her head. There were soft, muffled sounds on the other side, and she wasn’t sure she could identify exactly where they were coming from.

With a shrug, she went to the window and sat down on the sill, swinging her legs over and hopping down to the ground soundlessly. The air was still cool with the night’s moisture, and she took a deep breath of it as she walked along the path heading for the barn.

Most of the torches had burned to guttering. Xena crossed in front of the inn and stayed near the edge of the big square, which had more than one figure curled up near the firepit in a cloak to keep the dew off.

She’d slept the same way, many times. So many mornings waking up before the dawn, rolling over and watching Gabrielle sleep beside her, tucked into her furs with just that mop of hair poking out.

Xena smiled as she turned at the end of the square and opened the gate to the barn’s yard, closing it carefully as she headed for the door through the idly grazing horses left to pasture outside.

One big cart horse eyed her, and she gave him a pat on the shoulder as she opened the barn door and walked inside.

It was dark. No lamps were lit, and she nodded in approval at that as the animals inside became aware of her presence. Io stuck his head over the door to his stall and extended his nose towards her, his pale coat visible in the shadows.

“Hey boy.” Xena greeted him, scratching his cheek and giving him a kiss on the nose. “Ready to get out of here?”

The stallion nudged her, and got an ear rub for his pains. Then Xena stepped inside the stall and set her saddlebags down, reaching over to lift Io’s saddle and swing it up and over his back. She looked across the barn as she settled the tack, spotting the white mare watching her.

She made a small noise and the mare shook her head, pricking her ears forward.

Xena finished saddling Io, then she left his stall and crossed to the mare’s, holding her hand out to the animal’s muzzle as she came close. The delicate nostrils sniffed her skin, then nibbled it, and she stroked the horse’s nose. “What a pretty girl.”

The mare took a step forward, pressing against the stall door. Xena ran her hand down the animal’s neck, admiring the arch of it, and the smooth lay of her coat. “You are too good for a

raunchy wench like that, you know that, pretty girl?"

The horse had big, liquid dark eyes, and they were watching Xena intently.

Xena peered into the stall, sorry she didn't see any sign of mis use that might excuse her from taking the mare along with her. "Sorry about that, girl." She gave the horse a final pat. "Gotta go." She retreated back to Io's stall, where her stallion was alertly watching, clearly as interested in the mare as his rider was.

"C'mon, Io." Xena fastened her saddlebags to his saddle and led him from the stall, waving at the mare as she headed for the door. They emerged into the paddock, and as Xena crossed with him over to the gate, she heard the start of a commotion coming from the direction of the inn.

Could have been anything.

She wasn't taking a chance. In a smooth motion she leaped into Io's saddle and got her knees settled, then turned his head for the far paddock fence and clucked her tongue. The stallion responded, moving from a walk to a canter as they moved away from the inn.

Gathering himself Io sped up and jumped the fence head on, landing in the grass beyond it as Xena guided him out past the rows of houses towards the road.

Xena could hear the commotion growing behind her, but she kept her head forward, and in a moment she and Io were in the trees and out of sight. She kept up the pace until they reach the road, then she slowed to a canter as they left the big town behind them.

As dawn lightened the sky, she was approaching the river ford and as they reached it, so did two wagons heading the opposite direction. Io splashed into the ford and they moved to one side as the first of the wagons did the same, the big oxen pulling them lowing in anxiety as the cold rush of water hit their hides.

The drover whistled and cracked his whip, and the oxen kept pulling. He paused and gave Xena a nod as she passed, and she lifted her hand and waved at him.

"Morning." The man said. "Fair road ahead?"

"Fair." Xena replied. "Big town half candlemark down the way."

The man nodded. "Where I'm bound." He indicated the wagon. "Picking up rations for the war. Hope they're in a giving mood."

"Luck to you." Xena was glad she was heading in the other direction. She guided Io to the far bank and they climbed up out of the river, passing the second wagon and continuing on the road.

Another half candlemark later, and she started to relax, letting the tension out of her hands and turning her thoughts to the plan ahead. Two days riding, and she'd be near the port town. Once there, she could find out if the Amazons had shown up, and maybe even if she was lucky find Ephiny and Eponin.

If they were there, she'd try to convince them to just turn around and come back. If the other Amazons were there, waiting to catch a boat to Athens, she'd talk to them but as Gabrielle herself had said, they were not her priority.

Xena uncapped her waterskin and took a drink from it. And if Ephiny and Eponin weren't in the port town? The warrior put the skin back on her saddlebow. Then it would get tougher. If the Amazons had taken the overland route, the one she and Gabrielle had taken on their way to Athens, then she had a long trek ahead of her.

She hoped they'd want to take the easy way. Xena hadn't been in a hurry either coming or going to Athens, and so she'd elected to take the long route, giving them more time to wander out alone

– something that strongly appealed to both of them.

Besides, Gabrielle got seasick, and they'd both had horses. Ephiny and Pony hadn't taken any, and the Amazons could sell theirs and pick up others on the far side of the journey so the port city made more sense.

Or at least, that's what she told herself.

The sound of approaching hoofbeats jerked her out of her thoughts, and she half stood in her stirrups, gazing down the road. A small party of horsemen were heading in her direction, and after a split second's indecision, the warrior stayed on the road and resumed her seat.

She had a right to be on the road, after all.

Xena relaxed her posture as she drew even with the riders, men in the unmistakable livery of Athens. Not army soldiers, but administrative types. She gave them a civil nod.

"Hold up, would you?" The man in the lead said.

Obligingly, the warrior pulled Io up. "Yes?"

"Beg your pardon." The man said. "We're looking for two men and a woman. They may be traveling calling themselves brothers, perhaps. The woman is young, and of good looks. Have you seen any such as these?"

Xena leaned her weight on her saddlebow. "Why are you looking for them?" She asked. "I'm not in the mood to play into some father's nightmare."

The Athenian raised his hand, seeming in good humor. "Never fear. These three aren't any runaways. They're reported to have been involved with the stealing of some of the tax rolls from these parts."

"Oh really." Xena perked up. "Thieves?"

"So called." The man admitted. "There's no proof yet, but they're wanted for questioning. We've been sent to find them and bring them to the provost in the port city."

Xena turned and pointed. "Town, about a candlemark or more that way. Three that match what you're looking for."

The man smiled. "Much obliged to you, citizen." He courteously held a hand out, and Xena reached over to grasp his forearm. "Areneus is my name. And yours?"

"Xena." The warrior smiled back, as she saw the reaction to her name. "And for the record, they had a damn ratty attitude." She released the man. "So go get em."

The man half saluted, and waved his party on. "Come on. We've pinned our quarry. Let's go quickly and we might yet catch them in bed." He led his group on, and once they passed Xena, they broke into a canter.

Xena watched them go with a satisfied grin. Then she turned and gathered her reins, urging Io on. "Feels good to be a nice upstanding citizen, huh Io?"

The stallion snorted and bobbed his head.

"Gabrielle'd be proud."

**

Gabrielle dodged a cart as she made her way between the fence posts and headed for the barn and its outside pasture. She ducked inside the barn first, and went to the heavy wooden chest in the corner, which held her and Xena's travelling gear.

She opened the top and ran her eye over the contents, seeing what was missing and apparently gone with her partner. She took a mental inventory, then she turned and slipped back outside, heading around the corner of the barn to the open space just to one side of it.

“Oh boy.” Gabrielle reviewed her choices. “Argo, it looks like it’s you and me, girl.”

The golden mare had been cropping some grass under the shade of a tree in the paddock, and now she looked up when she heard her name called and regarded Gabrielle thoughtfully.

Still, even after all this time, Gabrielle felt funny about riding Xena’s favorite. She knew Argo was moderately fond of her and she often brought the mare apples and other treats, but there was just something about her memories of their early years together that made her feel just a bit awkward.

Maybe because Argo had given her that first glimpse into Xena’s softer side, back in the days when she dreamed of being smiled at with half the affection the mare got.

She’d never gotten to know horses in Potadeia. There were sheep there in plenty, and goats, and cattle, but her only equine experience had been with the shaggy old pony Tympani. Horses were owned by the families who had the most money – hers hadn’t had, and Argo was the first horse she’d actually spent any amount of time around.

She suspected it had been a learning experience for them both, since Xena was the only person Argo had been around for a really long time.

“Mama!” Dori had come out of the town school and spotted her, and was now running her way. “Lets Gogo!” She yodeled.

Argo saw Dori approaching. She lifted her head and she moved away from the tree and came over to the paddock fence as Dori reached it, standing still as the child swarmed up the posts and climbed on her back with a gleeful laugh. “Gogo!!!”

The bard smiled at the sight. Dori, on the other hand, treated Argo like she treated Xena herself, as a playmate and living toy to be clambered over with impunity. Gabrielle came over and patted Argo’s neck. “Be careful honey, make sure you hold on.”

Dori hitched herself up closer to Argo’s neck and took hold of her mane, giving it a tug. “Gogo!”

Argo craned her head around and gave Gabrielle a look.

“Hey. Don’t look at me, madame. She didn’t get that riding seat from this shepherd’s kid.” Gabrielle pointed at her own chest. “Go talk to your buddy Xena.”

“Boo!” Dori agreed. “Mama, let’s go!”

Realizing she wasn’t getting off without a ride, Gabrielle got up on the fence herself and settled into place behind her daughter, squeezing her knees tight as Argo amiably ambled off with them on her back.

The three Amazons she’d selected as an escort were getting ready, packing up their gear and heading down the mountain. Bennu and his men were also preparing, and that left Gabrielle alone to decide which horses to take, and what she was going to tell her daughter.

She’d promised to stay with Dori, after all. Just like she’d promised to stay with the Amazons. Gabrielle found herself willing to break the latter promise, but not so much the former one.

Cyrene had agreed to take care of her, but now Gabrielle found herself undecided, not sure if she should go on and leave Dori here, or send someone else in her place to see what was going on.

No question what Xena would have done, and in fact, if she was very honest with herself she’d

have gone with Xena in an instant.

On the other hand, this really wasn't a dangerous trip. They were just going to scout things out. Gabrielle studied her daughter. "Hey Dori?"

"Mama?" Dori was bouncing in place, hoping for a faster ride. "Make Gogo go!"

"Okay." Gabrielle tightened her grip and Argo broke into a gentle canter, much to Dori's delight. The other horses in the paddock got out of the way, and they made a circuit of the grassy space in short order. "Dori, Mama has to go on a ride with Argo for a few days. Do you want to come with me?"

Dori nearly lost her grip as she turned around. "Go with Mama? Yes!"

Should she? Gabrielle watched Dori's face light up, and she smiled. "You have to be really good for mama, okay? Can you do that? Like when you were with Boo and me out in the forest?"

"We go get Boo?"

Gabrielle sighed. "I wish, honey. No, we're going to go see some people that might be coming here. We're going to ride on horsies, and I need you to help me steer Argo. Okay?"

Argo slowed to a halt under her tree and turned her head around to peer at Gabrielle, giving as close to a copy of Xena's skeptical expression as was possible on an equine face.

"Yeah, I know." Gabrielle patted the mare's neck. She thought about not going, wondering if her decision to ride out with the scouting party broke the letter of the law Ephiny had mentioned to her. Did a short trip count?

She thought about that. Ephiny had left on her own more than once for longer than that, in fact, she'd left and ended up in Amphipolis for a moon at a time at least twice. So her going with some Amazons to check something out should be fine.

After all, it was in their benefit, since whoever the large group of troops were, they were also headed in the direction of the village.

Right?

"Mama, we go?" Dori asked. "C'n I bring Guff?"

Was she a little crazy? "Just a minute, honey." Gabrielle got down off Argo's tall back. "Okay, let's go get our things together so we can take our friends and see new things."

Dori gladly scrambled off Argo's neck and into her mother's arms. Gabrielle then set her down on the grass, and followed her as she ran towards the gate. It would be short ride, she reasoned, probably only a day, or a day and a half because they'd be coming towards them.

No big deal.

Probably just troops moving to Athens. They'd see them, turn around, and come right back. One night camping, and that was it. No problem. They could tell the town there was nothing to worry about, and she could reassure the village they were being left in peace to explore their new discoveries.

Piece of cake.

Gabrielle scratched her nose and hoped she wasn't making a really bad mistake. "Dori, let's stop by Grandmas."

"Gramma!" Dori changed her direction and bolted off towards the inn. "Get cookies!!"

"Yeah, let's hope Grandma doesn't bake me into a cookie." Gabrielle started sorting out her

arguments for her mother in law. “She’s going to freak out.”

“Mama?”

“Nothing, honey.” The bard broke into jog to keep up with her daughter. “Let’s go find Grandma.”

**

Xena perched herself on a rock in the shade, draining her waterskin as she watched Io take a break under the trees. The heat of the day had stained the stallion’s coat to almost brown with sweat, and Xena could feel the tightness of the exposed skin on her body as the sun baked her as well.

It was just after noon, and the worst of the day’s heat was making the road shimmer, the sky overhead without a single cloud to break up the sunshine.

On the edges of her hearing, she caught the sound of the river, winding it’s way through the forest on it’s way to the port city and into the sea. They were far enough downstream that she wasn’t intending on either drinking from or swimming in the water, but the trees around it might provide both her and Io a more comfortable route out of the sun.

Her plan decided, Xena stretched her legs out and crossed her ankles, regarding the slope of scrub that separated her from the road.

It was surprisingly empty. She hadn’t seen more than a handful of people since midmorning, and as she peered down the road to the horizon, it remained bleak and silent. That seemed a little strange to her.

And so, of course, as soon as she thought that, she heard the sounds of wagon wheels approaching, and the solid thunk of oxen hooves.

She looked the other direction, and sure enough, a trail of figures appeared from the same way she’d come, dust rising around them as they took up the width of the road.

It appeared to be a merchant train. Xena could hear the slow crack of whips, and the yells of the drovers, and she could see men walking alongside with staves, though whether they were leading or guarding was anyone’s guess.

A few men on horses were riding up and down the train, and that made Xena stay in her spot, waiting for them to pass by so she could see exactly what they were up to. The riders had armor, and were carrying whips and that combination usually ended up being trouble.

Of course, she was often riding, in armor, and occasionally had a whip and sure enough, she usually ended up being trouble so personal experience in this case was definitely weighing in.

The wagon train drew closer. The lead wagon was a big covered conveyance, with tall wooden walls and a heavy hide draped and tied down over the bed. The drover had the six sets of reins from the six oxen clasped in one hand, and he slouched in his seat, reaching out with the whip every so often.

The oxen were big animals, their solid, well fleshed bodies at least indicating they were reasonably well cared for. They plodded along the road, kicking up dust as they pulled their burden along. Their backs and sides were covered in sweat though, and the drover had his arm shading his face from the sun when he wasn’t using it for his crop.

One of the riders cantered up to the front and spoke to the man, who shrugged, but Xena couldn’t hear what he said over all the clatter of the wagon train. Behind the first wagon she saw a group of men walking, most dressed in common tunics and boots, and carrying rough hide bags.

They were young, and seemed in reasonable spirits. The rider gave them a brief glance as he passed, then moved on.

Volunteers? Xena guessed. The second wagon appeared much like the first, and there were three after that which rolled by her, sending a gust of air filled with the smell of animals and dust, and the sharp scent of human sweat.

After the last wagon went by, she saw another group of men, and though these were also young, they were dressed in brown linen shirts, and were tied by their ankles together. Most had their heads down, and none were carrying anything more than a little bag at their belts.

Most were barefoot. They shuffled along, and there were far more of them than the ones near the front. Xena counted over a hundred, and the riders seemed to circle around them most often, whips at the ready.

Conscripts. The warrior's face twitched, and she flexed her hands. Or worse.

The wagon train slowed and stopped a short distance past where Xena was sitting, and the crowd of volunteers and drovers moved off the road and headed to the fringe of trees not far from where the warrior was resting.

The conscripts sat down where they were, their backs to the sun as two of the riders stayed nearby to watch them. One of the drovers jumped down off his wagon, and picked up a big waterskin, coming back to offer the seated men a drink.

One the rides waved him off. The drover shrugged and retreated, putting the skin back. Xena's eyes narrowed, but she stayed where she was, listening to Io crop the grass under the trees.

If Gabrielle had been with her, Xena had no doubt that she'd be riding into battle at the moment, driving off the riders and setting the conscripts free. It went against the grain of her soulmate to let someone be dragged into anything as horrible as a war without their consent, and regardless of the trouble it would have caused them, she knew they'd have done it.

Xena didn't have time to take care of a hundred lost, penniless conscripts who were who knew how far from home. She felt bad for them, and didn't agree with the practice, but she was pragmatic enough to know that it was both legal and expected in times of war and cutting the men loose would likely only get them recaptured, and put a price on her head.

Really no point to it. She took another sip of water, glancing to one side as she heard hoofbeats approaching and saw one of the riders headed her way, having spotted her.

She retained her relaxed pose as he rode up. He was dressed in well cared for armor and carried himself with a definite air of authority, but she didn't see any identifiable crests or markings on his gear.

"Hello there." The man said. "Traveling on the road to Therma?"

Xena nodded.

"So are we. Care to join us? Safer traveling together, and we could use another sword."

Xena wondered just what it was about her this trip that made people think she was looking for a job. Was it the worn boots? She studied hers thoughtfully. Had she forgotten to fully polish her armor? Did she look like she was going hungry?

With a sigh, she glanced up at the man. "Thanks for asking, but I'd rather go at my own pace." She said. "You heading for Athens?"

The man nodded. "We are." He said, looking behind him. "Got men and supplies for the war. You heading there yourself?"

The warrior shook her head. "Just to Therma."

"Really? You're not joining the army?"

"No." Xena said. "I'm retired."

The man studied her closely. "Well then, good travels to you." He turned his horse's head away and started back towards the wagons, leaving her sitting on her rock in peace.

His attention had drawn others, though, and Xena realized she was now the focus of the conscripts seated on the floor, their eyes fastened on her in unmistakable recognition.

So.

What were they expecting? Xena mused. If they really knew who she was, they would expect... now.. that she'd intervene on their behalf, wouldn't they?

They would.

But she already had decided not to get involved. She didn't have time. She promised she'd hurry back. There were things to do, and people to find and a partner to get back to.

She watched them nudge each other, and point at her.

Damn Gabrielle and her stories. Xena smiled, though, and stood up, stretching her body out before she turned and whistled for Io. The stallion trotted over to her and she patted him, then she took hold of his reins and started back in the direction of the wagon train.

After all, they were going in the right direction, right?

The man who'd approached her saw her coming and turned, then headed back in her direction. He slowed to a halt a few paces from her, his head cocking in question. "Change your mind?"

Xena shrugged. "We're going in the same direction." She said. "And it's too hot to rush."

The man nodded and extended his hand. "Paradon." He said.

"Xena." She surrendered to the inevitable as she saw his face react. "Relax. I really am retired." She got up on Io's back and followed him back to the wagon train, turning her head casually to look at the conscripts as she came even with them.

Kids. Staring at her with those big eyes, full of stifled hope. Xena winked at them, then she rode up alongside the wagons as the volunteers rejoined the train and they started off again.

She picked a spot about midway, and got upwind of the oxen and in the shadow of the wagons, settling down in her saddle as two of the riders cautiously approached her, obviously intent on talking to her.

Maybe she could get some useful information before she threw her life ass over teakettle and ended up being chased by the law.

"You're Xena, right?" One of the men said. "It's an honor! "

"Yeah." His companion agreed. "I've never met a real live hero before."

Xena smiled at them, as charmingly as she could.

Maybe she'd even have a little fun.

**

Continued in Part 9

A Queen's Tale

Part 9

"Mama, look." Dori pointed ahead of them, between Argo's golden ears. "Birdie!"

Gabrielle shaded her eyes and peered ahead of them, spotting the circling creature in the distance. "That's right honey, that's a bird. Do you know what kind it is?"

"Big." Dori pronounced with emphatic satisfaction.

Her mother chuckled. "It's a big bird. Its an eagle." She said. "Remember when Boo found that eagle's nest? With the little baby eagle in it?"

"Boo Boo Boo." Dori bounced a little.

They were a half days into their journey, nearing the time when the sun would start to disappear. Gabrielle and her little band had kept up a steady pace, heading up the river through sparsely populated wilds where cottages were few and the road was merely a partly overgrown path cut through the dry grass.

Solari was riding a pace or two to her left, with Nala, an older Amazon who had ridden as one of Xena's horse soldiers in the war. She was tall and no nonsense, and bore a scar across her arm that looked like an arrow had gone through it.

Cait and Paladia were riding behind them with a greater and lesser sense of satisfaction accordingly.

Bennu was on the other side, with three of his men.

Gabrielle was pretty sure they were all convinced she was nuts to have Dori with her. However, the child's delight with being along overshadowed her knowledge of that, and she was content to enjoy the ride along with her daughter.

"What do you think these guys are, your Maj?" Solari asked. "Really soldiers heading to the war?"

Gabrielle shrugged. "That many people, it would really be hard to say it was anything else." She said. "I just didn't think there were that many places in Thrace that were beholden to Athens enough to send that many troops."

"That's the truth." Bennu spoke up. "When we was in the vally there, wasn't nothing that far around that gave a whip for them people. Must be giving gold like water to pull em in."

"But they didn't come to Amphipolis." Bennu's lieutenant spoke up. "I wonder why?"

"Someone didn't want big X to ram their offer scroll up their butt?" Solari said. "Cause I'm pretty sure she woulda."

Gabrielle was pretty sure she would have too. "Well, apparently everyone else felt the need to come ask." She demurred. "Amazons, the Spartans... everyone but Athens. But you're right, it's a little strange they combed the whole area around and didn't bother stopping here."

"Maybe they didn't want the Genr'l to tell em what for." Bennu mused. "Men doing crazy things don't like bein called on it."

And that was also true. "She would have." The bard agreed. She looked ahead of them, and saw the river bending to the left, just past what was obviously a ford. "Guess we need to cross."

"Water'll feel great." Solari said. "Hades, it's hot."

They headed down the slope towards the water, alone in the vast expanse of scrubland that extended out to the horizon.

All around them the sound of crickets buzzing stirred the air. Nala and Solari eased ahead of her along with Bennu, and Gabrielle muffled a smile and stifled her instinct to protest, wrapping one arm around Dori instead.

“Mama, dere’s a bug.” Dori reached out to make a grab at one of the crickets, who had unwisely jumped to a stalk nearby.

“No, honey.” Gabrielle captured her hand. “Don’t do that, the grass will make you owie.” She stopped Argo long enough to carefully break off a piece of the grass. “Here, mama will show you.”

She took hold of Dori’s hand, and touched the edge of the grass against it. “Feel that?”

Dori drew her finger back. “Stuck!”

“Like a thorn, right. It’s sharp, and if you grabbed that bug, you would have cut your hand.” Gabrielle said. “It’s sneaky grass!”

“Ew.” Dori put her hands behind her back. “Tank you, mama.”

Satisfied her teaching would be remembered, Gabrielle rid herself of the bit of offending foliage and looked around as they approached the river, it’s surge a little more apparent here closer to it’s source.

It was also a little shallow here, too. They picked their way down the slop, which bore scars from the water that had coursed down it in the floods, and had carved it’s way through rock to leave broken slates and rocks scoured and tossed along it’s temporary bed.

Now the water was back safely inside it’s bed, and in fact looked a little on the low side. Gabrielle was a little glad of that since it meant less of her and Dori would get wet on the way across.

They approached the edge of the river, going single file down to the ford. A channel had been roughly cut in the bank and lined with posts, the ground beaten smooth from years of use. Solari guided her horse, a stolid brown gelding into the water, and the animal splashed through without hesitation.

Nala went through next, and then Bennu, before Gabrielle gently urged Argo forward, glad her partner’s horse didn’t really seem to mind them riding her. “C’mon girl.”

“Mama, fishes.” Dori observed.

“I know, honey, but we can’t stop right now to catch them.” Gabrielle wrinkled her nose as the water came up on Argo’s sides and covered her boots, soaking through them as they crossed. She could see the pressure of the water against the mare’s legs and the sound of the rushing made her briefly think of the day of the flood.

Horrible, terrifying day. Gabrielle took a closer hold on Dori, who was leaning over to peer into the water. She’d come so close to dying, in that moment when the bridge was bearing down on her and she was stuck in the mud of the bottom, unable to escape.

“Mama, Boo would catch dat fishie.” Dori pointed. “Look!”

Gabrielle peered down and spotted the big perch. “You’re right Dor. Boo would catch that, and then we would eat it for dinner, wouldn’t we?”

“Yes!”

The fish swam between Argos legs and continued on downstream. Dori picked her feet up and put them on Argo’s neck as they reached the middle of the river, giggling as she looked up past

Gabrielle to watch some birds flying by.

“Hey Dor.” Gabrielle tickled one of her feet. “Are you glad you came with me?”

Half upside down, the child’s pale green eyes goggled at her.

“Yeah, pretty stupid question, huh?” The bard chuckled, taking a tighter hold as Argo started to climb up the bank to the other side of the river. “Of course you’re glad. I’m glad too.” She took her boots out of the stirrups and shook them, startling Argo a little.

“Gabrielle.” Bennu dropped back next to her. “I’m thinking there’s a set o caves just on that side of the ridge.” He pointed. “We stop there yeah? Bout two candlemarks yet.”

“That’s fine.” The bard drew Argo to one side, and they waited for the rest of the group to emerged from the ford and gather around. “Then we can get an early start tomorrow and probably be through the upper pass in time to see them mid afternoon.”

“If they’s moving fast as we are.” Bennu said. “Yeah.”

“And then, your majesty?” Nala asked.

And then? Gabrielle resisted the urge to come up with an immediate excuse to prolong the adventure. “Well, we need to see who they are.” She temporized. “Let’s wait to determine what to do next until we do that. “

“Could be harmless.” Nala agreed. “Could be men heading to Athens, but most I’ve seen would stop and take what they could if they found it.”

“Tis true.” Bennu nodded. “Gen’l knew. She said to keep an eye out.”

Gabrielle looked over at him. First Cait, now Bennu? Had Xena really known something, or was it just her typical overprotectiveness showing? “Xena always knows.” She remarked. “I used to think she carried a crystal ball in her saddlebags.”

Bennu chuckled.

“Boo!” Dori thumped her bare heels against Argo’s neck. “Mama let’s go!”

“Your majesty, would you rather we look for an inn?” Nala asked. “For the little princess, I mean.”

Gabrielle looked fondly down at her daughter. “No, she’ll be fine. She knows how to sleep rough. Right Dori? You like camping with us?”

“Yes!” Dori grinned.

“She traveled back from Athens with us after the Games.” Gabrielle said. “She got a lot of experience sleeping out under the stars. Xena made her a little folding cradle and everything.”

“Boo!”

Solari studied the happy child. “She’s in a good mood.”

“She’s with me, not back in town.” Gabrielle replied, in a wry tone. “I didn’t really want to subject Cyrene to that and she can’t really keep up with her anyway.”

“Too right.” Cait said. “It’s great we all got to go.”

“Speaking of going....Let’s. ” Gabrielle picked up her reins, and they moved off. The overgrown path moved away from the river and towards the far hills, cutting a swath in the thick patch of river grass waving on either side of them.

The warm air made Gabrielle glad she was in her Amazon leathers. She’d packed her old traveling clothes in her saddlebag, and a tunic, but the nature of the trip seemed to dictate some

what martial trappings, so accordingly she had her staff strapped against Argo's side and was wearing Xena's dagger at her hip, its hawkshead pommel resting against bare skin.

The other Amazons had far more weapons, of course. Cait alone probably had ten blades on her, and Solari had a longsword strapped across her back not too different from Xena's.

Gabrielle bore her single piece of steel with a sense of pride, though. It seemed to fit her, longer than an average dagger and holding a dark patina, it was different from the simple blades the Amazons were wearing.

Older. More potent, having been borne by Xena during her warlord days and stained with unknown quantities of blood. Gabrielle had last carried it during the war, and by her own hand had refreshed that stain finally making the knife hers in a way.

In a way. She remembered cleaning it that night, after Xena was asleep and taken care of. A piece of cloth in her hand, and some water, and a candlemark of scrubbing while she went over every moment she could remember of that frantic plunge.

It had been such a strange feeling, holding this thing in her hands that she'd used to fulfill one of the oldest of her unspoken daydreams.

In that moment, she'd gotten the smallest glimmer of understanding into the unspoken emotional attachment Xena had for her sword, and the chakram. It became more than a tool and more than some half foreign thing hanging at her waist.

She could now see a piece of her own soul reflected in that dark metal.

"Mama, dere's a deer!"

Gabrielle shook her head a little and jerked alert, peering around her. She spotted the brown figure moving through the grass on the other side of the little plateau they were on.

She raised a hand and caught the rest of the groups attention. "Anyone want to chase down dinner?" She pointed at the motion.

Nala pulled her crossbow out and slipped off her horse. "I'm on it. Meet you on the other side of the grass."

Solari grabbed the reins from her horse and they moved on, while Nala slipped into the high cover and disappeared.

"Good catch, your Maj." Solari said.

"Not me." The bard pointed at Dori. "She figured out pretty fast if she pointed stuff out to me eventually it meant something good to eat for her."

Bennu chuckled.

"Your Majesty." Cait took the opportunity to ride up next to Gabrielle as the path opened up a bit. "Can I ask you a question?"

Gabrielle eyed her. "Since when do you call me that?"

Cait blinked. "Well, you are that now, aren't you?" She asked, slightly puzzled. "I mean, with Ephiny gone and all that."

The bard looked at her, one brow raised.

"Okay, well, anyhow." Cait cleared her throat. "You know I thought there was something a bit odd about those other Amazons, and I just now got into my head what it was."

"Uh huh." Gabrielle kept one ear on Cait, and the other focused on Dori, who was rambling

something to herself involving buppits and rocks.

“Well it was just that..”

A loud whistle went up, alerting them. Gabrielle stood in her stirrups and peered in the direction of the alarm, seeing waving grass where she'd seen the deer disappear. “Okay, let's go.” She sat down and released her staff from it's bindings. “Bennu!”

The men wheeled their horses, and in a moment they were galloping through the grass, and Gabrielle was remembering all over again why sometimes Amazon leathers weren't the greatest idea in the world when you were riding a horse. “Ow..ow...ow...”

“Mama owie?”

“Mama's an idiot sometimes.” Gabrielle muttered, shaking her head to move the hair from her eyes. “Nala! Hang on!”

“Yah!” They heard Nala let out a yell, and then the clash of steel, and the men drew their weapons along with Solari as they let out a yell of their own, to let the Amazon know they were coming.

Gabrielle tightened her hold on her staff. “Dori, hang on to Argo, okay? Mama's got to go boom.”

“Go boom?” Dori had both hands clutching the mare's mane. “Mama go boom? Gogo! Go faster!”

“Just hold on, sweetheart.. hold on tight.” The bard could see violent motion in the grass and she licked her lips, tying the reins to her saddlebow and letting go, relying on her powerful legs alone to hold her on Argo's back as she swung her staff over the horses head and grabbed it in both hands.

Dori ducked, and clutched Argo's neck, her eyes wide, her lower lip caught between her teeth as she recognized the danger around her. “Mama go boom. Go get Boo.”

**

Xena stretched her spine out as she walked along the road, it's fringes steadily going wider and wider as she approached the port city ahead.

Iolaus ambled along behind her, slightly favoring his front left hoof that had shed it's shoe some candlemark or so before. The stallion seemed to be enjoying his riderless stroll, and he was swinging his head from right to left, watching the scenery go by.

Xena wasn't minding walking either. It reminded her of the days she and Gabrielle had spent together on the road, after their friendship had grown to the point where the warrior felt uncomfortable riding while her companion walked.

Argo, naturally, had gotten the best of that deal. Xena was pretty convinced her horse had started warming up to the bard after that happened, accepting her shyly offered treats with a cheerful horse smirk.

Xena chuckled under her breath, looking up to check the angle of the sun. Another couple of candlemarks and she'd be entering the gates of the city, the area she and Io were traveling through already sprinkled with cots and crossroads where the road branched out to settled areas.

She was looking forward to getting there. She'd only seen a few people heading out in the opposite direction, and she was anticipating the bustle and buzz of the place and the possibility of finding her friends.

Might even be a little fun to walk the docksides, and see if she could find a little trouble, not too much, but enough to brush the dust off the memories of what it was like in the bad old

days. Have a couple mugs of the hard stuff, and get in a bar fight maybe.

Xena thought about that and started laughing, surprising Iolaus, who snorted. The warrior dropped back and walked alongside him, putting her hand on his shoulder. "I think I'm definitely too old for that crap, Io."

Instead of that, maybe she'd see if she could find something fun for Dori, and unusual for Gabrielle. Port cities were good for that sort of thing, and if she was lucky she might even find some socks.

Maybe a stirring spoon for her mother.

Io sidled over and bumped her. "How about a new bridle for you, boy?" Xena patted his shoulder. "Get all my friends a little something? That sound better than getting drunk and getting throw in jail for being an ass?"

Io shook his head, blowing his lips out and sending small spatters of saliva ahead of him.

"Thanks." Xena put her arm over his neck. "Did I ever tell you how I met Gabrielle?" She asked the stallion. "There I was, Io, just walking down the road heading for Amphipolis. Felt like crap. Got thrown out of my army, got my ass kicked, fell in lust with a demi god.. my life was going right to Hades."

The stallion flicked his ears backwards towards her voice.

"Damn, I was tired." Xena paused a moment, remembering. "Tired of myself mostly."

She remembered the sultry heat of the day, and how she'd heard the screams for help, noise that bothered an already aching head.

She remembered being pissed off. Seeing Draco. Wanting to hurt someone, lash out more than she really wanted to help the bedraggled looking village kids she paid only a brief, cursory attention to.

There had been a momentary pleasure, momentary satisfaction at the end of the fight but then a sudden motion had caught her eye and she'd turned her head and her gaze had been caught by one of the victims, staring at her in awe.

Just a kid. Just a barely out of adolescence girl, with long blond hair in shaggy disarray dressed in typical peasant garb.

Smudge of dirt on her cheek.

Those soulful eyes that captured her whole and never let her go.

Xena remembered feeling her chest heave as her body belatedly remembered to breathe and then everything going dark as she got cold cocked from behind.

"Nearly got my ass killed, Io. What do you think of that?" Xena smiled, feeling a benign goodwill at the golden sunlight bathing her. "I had no idea what the Hades I was getting into, that's for sure."

Now she knew. Now she could look back along that long crooked path and wonder how she could have been so blind for so long.

"I should have known right then, Io." The warrior sighed. "I should have known even before that damn kid showed up in Amphipolis and got between me and those rocks."

Abruptly she stopped walking, sensing something she couldn't identify for a minute, then realized it was a wave of emotion coming from Gabrielle, the mixture of apprehension and energy she recognized as her partner in a fight.

“What in the Hades?” She looked at Io, who had stopped when she did, and was now peering back at her curiously. “Who is she fighting with in the damn village?” A prickle of unease went up her spine. “Hope to Hades none of those old timers got any ideas about challenging her.”

Gabrielle could certainly defend herself, and Xena knew she was likely capable of answering her own challenges, but she also knew her own role as Queen’s champion and took it very seriously – which meant everyone else did too.

No Amazon even joked about that in her presence.

So. Just a training session? Xena chewed on her lower lip, knowing her partner did also take those seriously and might be just getting into it with her staff. She didn’t sense any real fear there, but then, she hadn’t sensed that from Gabrielle while fighting in quite a while.

Tension, yes. Ferocity, always. But with that staff in her hands, being as good with it as she was, the bard was no longer afraid to face off against whatever she had to.

She would never know the joy in battle Xena did. That just wasn’t in her. But she’d come to accept a sense of personal satisfaction in her hard won skills that made her teacher proud and caused the bard to exude a raw confidence when she fought.

Sensing nothing other than that, Xena relaxed a little, and continued walking, but she realized her breathing was a little fast, and she felt her hands twitching as her body responded to the far off agitation of her soulmate.

Sparring session? Or was it something more serious?

As she kept walking, and the sensation didn’t diminish, she felt her heart rate start to speed up, faint chills working their way down her spine. It wasn’t a pleasant sensation. Xena felt an urge to turn around, and start back that she only just stifled as being pointless.

No matter what Gabrielle was into, she was days from home. What would rushing back there do, after the fact?

She stopped, and half turned, her body tensing as she poised in indecision, about to release Io’s bridle and grab her saddlebag before starting to run.

Then the energy eased back, and almost as if she could see and hear Gabrielle grounding her staff and catching her breath, her own heart started to settle.

Okay, so probably a training match. Xena exhaled in relief, and shook her head. Probably her partner was working a few kinks out giving a class to some of her Amazon sisters, working up an appetite before ending the day.

That was their usual schedule, after all. They set aside time before dinner for sparring, up in the small open glade near the cabin as the sun started to paint the forest around them in shades of copper and gold.

A candlemark, usually, going full out with each other with no pausing in a perfect synergy of intimate knowledge and confidence that raised a good sweat and worked off the stress of their lives.

Then a jump in the spring, and they’d join Dori for leisurely meal and relax after a usually long and active day.

As she felt the emotion ease further, she allowed herself to be relieved and made a mental note to tease Gabrielle about her battle lust when she got back. She knew the bard could feel hers, and she suspected they were two very different sensations.

It would be fun to tell Gabrielle she had one of her own. She could imagine the widening green

eyes and it put a smile back on her face. "C'mon boy." She picked up the pace a little, wanting the long dusty day to end. "Let's go see a man about a shoe."

**

Gabrielle dove off Argo's back as they cleared the last row of river grass and spotted Nala in a group of armored men, fighting furiously. "Dori, stay!" She yelled, as she bolted towards the group and picked a target aware of the troops arriving at her back.

She didn't wait for them, seeing the swords in fists raised above her Amazon sister. She swung her staff at the nearest soldier and caught him in the head, the noise of the blow ringing out over the fight as it knocked his helmet right off and sent it rolling down the slight slope.

Bennu came past her and took on another soldier with his mace, as the man turned and faced this new attack.

There were six men fighting Nala. Gabrielle had time to see the Amazon rolling out of their grip on the ground as they all realized they were being assaulted and then she had to focus on her own survival as one of them came at her with a drawn longsword.

About Xena's height. His face was hidden behind his helmet but he struck at her in a way that she recognized as a skilled swordsman – down and past her staff, then sideways as Xena sometimes did.

But she knew how to counter that. She reversed the staff's position and went in the opposite direction instead of intercepting the blade, whacking him on the hand with the middle of her weapon with a short, hard push downward.

The tip of his blade smacked the ground and she jumped backwards as he tried to grab her with his other hand, swinging the end of her staff around and into his fingers instead. He let out a yell and jerked his hand back, and Gabrielle stepped forward again, bringing the other end around to hit his sword arm again with all the strength she had and sent the weapon flying.

She could hear her heartbeat hammering in her ears as she focused on the battle, sliding her hands apart as the man gathered his wits and drew a mace from his belt, coming at her with grim intent. He made no effort to go after his sword, using the weapon he had at hand and that, too, was what Xena would have done.

So these were not common raiders. Gabrielle watched her opponent carefully, looking for an opening. She waited for him to come at her and commit himself, the mace heading for her ribs in a sideways swipe that took a great deal of strength.

Hard to block. So she didn't. She got out of the way and let him come past her, turning as he did and watching his body language as he flipped the mace to his other hand and backswiped the weapon at her head.

She could see the muscles standing out against his skin, and the dark eyes watching her with no compassion as he moved toward her with sudden speed, taking away the advantage of her staff's reach.

She ducked, and the mace went over her head, then she dropped the staff and grabbed his arm, catching him by surprise as she wrenched his hand behind him with her forward motion and pulled him out of balance.

His mace hand whipped around and tried to hit her, but she was well behind him now, and he was bending over from the pressure she was putting on his arm.

She slammed into him and they both went to the ground as he tried to yank his hand from her grip, and she used all her strength to twist it up and forward, shoving his face into the dirt as she let out a yell, ducking her own head as the battle swarmed over her.

He made a gargling noise into the dirt and twisted under her, as she got her knee up under the back of the arm she had a grip on, leaning forward until she felt his back arch in pain, fending off a struggling form with a shove of her shoulder.

“Here, little hawk.” Bennu slammed his battle ax against the back of the man’s head, and shattered it, sending bone and blood across the ground. “Good grip on ya.” He yelled. “Get free!”

Gabrielle released the arm and rolled clear, ducking past a sword and under a chobo and spotting her staff nearby. She grabbed it and came up onto her feet, quickly looking around to see what the battle status was, and where Dori had ended up.

She saw Argo nearby with the rest of the horses, and Dori’s dark hair against the mare’s pale mane, and four of the six soldiers were on the ground, with the two remaining being overwhelmed by Bennu’s men and a visibly delighted Cait.

“Crap.” Paladia was shaking one hand.

“You all right, Gabrielle?” Solari bounded over.

“I’m fine.” The bard said, as the final soldier went down under Bennu’s sword. “What on earth are these guys though? Setting ambushes?”

“Not really, your majesty.” Nala limped over, cradling one hand. “I think they were after the same as I was, I shot the deer and surprised them.”

Gabrielle set her staff end down and exhaled. “So they decided to attack you? For a deer?”

“Mama!” Dori yelled. “Come now?”

Gabrielle looked over and made the tongue clicking noise Xena had taught her, that brought Argo towards her at an amble.

“Didn’t make sense to me.” Nala said. “But then .. I didn’t waste much time asking questions. They were out for my hide and no amateurs.”

Bennu came over, wiping his sword. “True enough.” He said. “These were reglars.” He had a deep cut across his arm, and the links in his armored shirt were half pierced through. “Not the lot usually around here looking for trouble.”

“That was absolutely wonderful fun.” Cait was seating the last of her daggers back into their sheaths. “And here I thought we’d have nothing but a bit of hunting to do. Lovely.”

“Freak.” Paladia rolled her eyes.

“I saw you kicking that red haired one.” Cait said. “Wasn’t expecting that, was he?”

“In the nuts? Nope, guess not.” Paladia smirked. “Moron had his legs spread like a donkey. He deserved it.”

Gabrielle took a quick stock of herself, then she reached up for Argo’s bridle as the mare arrived next to her, with Dori clutching her neck. “Good girl.” She patted Argo’s nose. “And you’re a good girl too, Dori. Thank you for listening to mama.”

“Mama go boom!” Dori informed her seriously. “Big boom!”

The bard patted her leg. “Yeah, mama didn’t do too bad.” She said. “But you did great, honey. You kept Argo safe, and you know how important that is, right? Keeping Argo safe for Boo?”

“Yes!”

Argo looked at her, then snorted and shook her head.

Gabrielle surveyed the battlefield. To one side lay the shot deer, and what she could see was a scattering of camping equipment she figured belonged to the soldiers. "Okay, let's see what we can find out about them." She ordered. "I don't see any obvious markings, but they have to belong to someone."

"Yeap." Bennu and the other men started searching, rolling the bodies over with nonchalant unconcern. Solari joined them and Cait was already investigating their gear, cautiously opening a bag with the edge of her dagger.

"That was a nice move, your majesty." Nala said. "Taking that big guy down like that. Never seen it before."

Gabrielle could feel her heartbeat settling, and she leaned one arm against Argo, her other hand wrapped around her staff. "Xena's big on the unexpected." She said. "Guys that big don't expect someone my size to try and wrestle with them."

"No. I wouldn't have." Nala said frankly. "What I like most about Xena is that she fights smart, not just hard. People could learn a lot from her."

That got her a big smile from her queen. "I've been telling people that for years."

"Well, a lot of us had our heads up our asses." Nala said. "Some still do, but I figured out during the war just how much she had to offer and decided to toss my ego long enough to learn it." She examined the swelling in her hand. "Wish I'd learned not to punch some guy in the helmet. Ow."

"Go on back over to the river and put your hand in there while we clean up." Gabrielle advised. "The cold will help." She patted Nala on the shoulder. "Good job." She walked past the Amazon and joined the rest of the group around the fallen soldiers.

"All dead." Solari commented. "Too bad, maybe we could have gotten some info from them."

Gabrielle knelt next to the man she'd taken down. "Well, if Xe'd been here, maybe." She said. "But these kind of guys – they usually don't talk." She studied the armor on the man's body, well made mail and hardened leather with metal studs that was cared for and in good condition.

Definitely soldiers. There were no insignias stamped on the leather though, and even the helmets were generic in shape, not like the distinctive ones she remembered from the war. She picked the man's up from where it's fallen, the beaten metal heavy in her hands.

Simple crosspiece over the eyes, and no flares at the neck to deflect a sword. Gabrielle set the helmet down and studied the body sprawled face down and motionless. His hair was cropped very short, and amidst the gore she could see pale skin exposed.

She pulled the mail shirt back a little, some still, silent part of her shivering over touching this dead man she'd so recently been fighting with. "Bennu, look."

The soldier knelt next to her and without hesitation moved the cracked skull forward to see better. "Ah." He ran a finger along the line in the skin. There was a distinct mark where the helmet had blocked the sun, but under it, about a fingerspan lower, was a second, almost faded line that contrasted with the pale skin under the armor. "Good catch, little hawk."

Gabrielle wasn't really that fond of her nickname amongst the militia but she knew it for the honest compliment it was. "So he wore a different helmet, and not that long ago." She mused. "Well, that's not really unusual, is it?"

Bennu grunted. "Maybe got rekkited when he joined up with whatever's paying him now."

"Nothing on them, Gabrielle." Solari came over. "Just blank. No stamped coin, no script, no nothing."

“Interesting.” The bard rested her weight on her knee. “Almost like they didn’t want anyone to know who they were fighting for.”

“They had this.” Cait brought over a blanket. “But that’s it. Isn’t this an awful like the ones they were selling in town?”

Gabrielle reached up and took hold of the fabric, turning one edge over and looking at it. It was more familiar to her than she’d expected, the colors and pattern striking an unexpected chord. “Not quite.” She said, after a long pause. “It’s a shepherd’s blanket. From Potadeia.”

“Huh.” Bennu said. “These aint’ the ones who came through the other day. Not the same ones, but the same kit.”

“Yeah.” Gabrielle stood up and dusted her hands off. “Not the same as the Spartans. But they definitely have been in the area. The question is, why?”

“Maybe they’re a part of that force heading through?”

“Why no markings though?” Solari asked. “Those Athenians, they like everyone to know it.”

Gabrielle rubbed her thumb against the edge of her staff, and exhaled. “I should have guessed this wasn’t going to be as simple as it seemed.” She said. “Somewhere out there, Xena’s laughing at me.”

**

Somewhere out there, Xena was standing next to a blacksmith’s shop, waiting for the smith to finish hammering out a new shoe for the patiently waiting Iolaus.

“Nice horse.”

“Thanks.” Xena used the time to study the part of the city around her, which was filled with shops and the small cots of workmen. It was busy, and the paths were full of people and wagons moving back and forth reminding her of what Amphipolis had been like before the flood.

There had been isolated moments when she hadn’t really minded that. They had been few and far between, but there was something in her that could appreciate the bustle of a big city, if only for a short time.

“Heading over the water?” The smith asked, as he dipped the shoe into a bucket, letting off a hiss of steam. “Lots are.”

“Looking for someone.” Xena replied. “If they’re here, then no. If not, maybe.”

The smith nodded. He came over and turned his back to her, picking up Iolaus’ foot and setting it between his knees. “Ships in tomorrow, we think. Places is full of those wanting to take them. If you’re looking for a bed, might need to spend a bit of coin for it.”

A tiny twinkle entered Xena’s eyes. “So the decent priced rooms are gone?”

“Aye.” The smith agreed. “Fancy inn’s all that’s left I hear. Up top of the hill, looks out over the water.” He put four twisted iron nails in his mouth, and set to work fitting the shoe.

Having spent her share of time in the slums, Xena wasn’t overly disappointed to hear that. She waited for the smith to finish, then she led Iolaus back out into the busy roadway, heading up the long slope of the road that rose up to the gates of the city.

Along the road there were rows and rows of cottages that spread out to either side around the curve of the walls that surrounded the hill the city sat on. Xena glanced around her as they started upward, feeling the slight strain against her thighs as they climbed.

The sun was down, and twilight was advancing. The air around her was relatively still and the smells of the city were somewhat overwhelming. As she climbed upward though, there was a hint of a breeze and that became more than a hint as she reached the gates and the scent of the sea hit her.

Ah. Xena gave the guards a brief nod as she passed through the gates and entered the city proper, the change from wood and mud construction to stone making an immediate visual difference. It wasn't the pristine white of Athens, but the buildings she now walked among had the look of permanence.

It was lit with oil lanterns already, the golden light reflecting off the walls and there was sound all around her of people and living, music and booted heels, the creak of wagons and the rhythmic pocking of horses at a stately walk.

Thera was the biggest trading city in the area, in truth, what Amphipolis had aspired to be, with its dredged barge landings and its ambitions. But this city sat on the edge of the Aegean, and the ships that docked at its long piers were from places her home town had never heard of.

She had. Xena led Io past the busy taverns, the full stable yards confirming the smith's statement to her. The outdoor eating places were packed, filled with young men bearing packs, some not much different than the men in the wagon train she'd briefly traveled with.

That hadn't worked out. Two of the wagons had broken down not a candlemark after they started towards the city, and she'd rode on with out them, somewhat reluctantly leaving behind the conscripts they were herding.

Even the fact she'd ended up walking the last half of the day hadn't let them catch her up, and she regretfully decided she'd find her business here and get on with it before she had a chance to get herself in trouble.

Ah well. Xena watched the wagons around her peel off, and she went on into a set of steeper streets, with wider curbs and larger buildings. The crowd was thinning out and the smell of salt was stronger here, and she glanced up at the street signs, spotting a directional one pointing her towards the Owl's Goblet, at the top of the hill.

Two men walked past her, dressed in the typical white togas of Athens, and she knew she caught their attention as they stopped speaking until she passed. She kept going though, climbing at last up onto the wide, curved street at the top, lined with classic stone buildings facing the sea.

She paused, for a minute, holding Io's reins as she faced the water, letting the breeze coming off it whip her hair back and rinse away the stink of the lower city. The thunder of the waves made her smile, and she glanced down at the piers, seeing them dark and empty.

So.

"C'mon Io." She turned and started leading the stallion towards a set of stout barn doors set back into the street. "Let's go get comfortable. Those ships not being here either means I've been lucky, or I'm in deep horse crap."

Iolaus ambled along behind her, his golden coat glistening in the lamplight. He stopped and waited as Xena paused before the doors, taking her dagger out and rapping on them with loud, sharp bangs.

It was silent inside, then she heard running feet. She took a step back and waited, hearing the rasp and scrape of metal against wood, then the door to the barn slowly opened, pushed by a young man with mud brown hair and a slight stature.

He stared at Xena for a moment, then he stepped back. "You want something?"

Xena leaned one arm against the door. "Place for my horse." She drawled. "That's what you do

here, right?"

The boy studied her. "This place's for them that's staying there." He pointed at the inn.

The warrior nodded. "That's where I'm staying."

"You are?"

Xena chuckled. "Kid, take the horse before I knock you senseless and do it myself."

Still looking doubtful, the boy stepped back and extended his hand. "Bring im in I guess." He backed away as Xena moved forward, leading Iolaus into the inside of the barn.

It was big, and very well kept. Xena ignored the skeptical stable boy and looked approvingly around at the neatly made stalls, and the swept floor. The smell inside was mostly of hay and horses, and very little of manure and she was content to turn the reins over as they approached one of the empty spaces.

"You pays them in the inn." The boy told her. "Tack cleanin's extra."

"Clean it." Xena gave Io a pat on the rump. "Have fun, boy. Enjoy it." She spotted a set of steps. "That go inside?"

"Courtyard, yeah." The stable boy nodded, then dismissed her, as he started to work on removing Iolaus' saddle.

Xena unlatched her bags and put them over her shoulder, then she climbed up the steps and pushed the door open to find a small hallway and another set of steps leading up.

Those stopped at another door, and when she pushed that open she found a small inner courtyard with a alabaster fountain in it, surrounded by patrons in white robes, sipping from goblets. They looked at her when she emerged, the looks turning into stares as she knocked the dust off her boots before she strolled casually through them.

The chatter dropped off, and the sound of her footsteps rang suddenly loud in the courtyard. Xena ignored it all, and went up yet another set of steps on the far side of the open space, nearly colliding with a hurrying figure heading in the opposite direction.

"Oh, ah.oh." The man hastily stopped and stepped back. "Oh."

Xena looked at him. "You own this place?" She asked.

The man looked around, then back up at her. "Why do you want to know?" He countered. "We don't want any trouble here. If you're looking for someone, I don't record any names of those people staying here."

Xena waited for him to stop talking. "I want a room."

The innkeeper blinked. "You do?" He asked. "Are you sure? There's some lovely places down the hill from here, much more your type."

That earned him a smile for his honesty. "I'm sure." Xena told him. "Relax. I can pay."

"To be sure." The man said. "I can see by your weapons you surely are no common soldier, but why would you want to? The rest of thee patrons here are all patricians. Do you wish to be stared at?"

"Sometimes." Xena allowed herself to be charmed by the man. "Suppose you give me a room, and let me worry about providing entertainment."

The man shrugged and gestured behind him. "Come then. I was just going to see what raised the alarm in my stables. I suspect I have found it."

“You have.”

Xena followed him further into the building, finding herself in a maze of meandering passages with odd turns and doorways leading off into the shadows. There were oil lamps in iron brackets on the walls, and the floors she was walking over were well fitted stone tiles.

It smelled of roasting lamb inside, and spiced wine, and she was reminded of times she'd spent with her army in the coastal capital cities a little further down the coast. “Busy, huh?”

“Very.” The innkeeper led her to a door, and opened it with a set of keys jingling on his belt. “I’ll be glad when the ships come in. There’s not enough for some to do here, if you catch my drift.”

Xena did.

“Does this suit you?” The man indicated the room. “The cooks will be serving dinner shortly. I could have them bring it here if you want.” He rubbed his hands together, cocking his somewhat birdlike head at her.

Xena stepped inside and glanced around. The room was large, and well aired, a large window in one wall thrown open that faced the sea. There was a bath in one corner and a bed that looked soft, and was canopied, and the whole place smelled like fresh linen and oiled wood. “That’ll be fine.” She said. “I’ll find the dining room.”

“Your choice.” The innkeeper said. “But I’ll just warn you, there are some there already half drunk, and they’re not shy about making rude comments.”

Xena leaned against the doorframe. “I’m not shy about cutting people’s tongues out.” She said. “Might want to pass the word around.”

“Perhaps you will pay me now then?” The man shot right back. “In case you leave in haste.”

The warrior started laughing., the sound echoing off the stone walls.

“So rare.” The man leaned back, folding his hands over his stomach. “To find someone with a sense of humor in these hard and frightening times.”

Xena tossed her bag inside and then opened her belt pouch, removing some coins and extending her hand out to him. “There.” She said. “I’ll try not to break anything on my way out the window.”

He took the coins without hesitation. “Pleasure doing business with you.” He said. “The dining chamber’s down the hall, and last door on the left. Some of the rest, as you have seen, are in the solar having some wine. You’re free to join them.”

“Thanks.”

“Good day.” The man turned and disappeared down the hall, without further comment or question.

Xena chuckled and shook her head, and then she went in her room and shut the door behind her. She crossed to the window and rested her hands on the sill, enjoying the brisk sea breeze and the rush of the waves that penetrated the room.

It was a nice view, and it reminded her a little of the old days, when she was roaming the coast, before she took a hand picked crew of her men to sea and became a pirate for a while. Xena smiled at the memory, and then pictured a more recent one, when she and Gabrielle had traveled along the sea on the way home from Athens.

That had been nice. Dori had love the ocean, and they’d all enjoyed the long days of bright sun and fresh air. After a moment, Xena sighed. “We gotta get out of Amphipolis.” She mused. “Get back out in the world.”

She turned and went over to her bags, picking them up and tossing them on the bed. She went to the tub and opened the stopper, watching the water rush out and into the carved stone, a quick dip of her hand confirming that it was pleasantly warm to the touch.

Ah. Xena shed her armor and leathers and grabbed the soap from her pack, then she lowered herself into the tub with a heartfelt sigh of pleasure.

The basin was long enough for her to stretch her legs out and she did, letting her arms rest on the edge as the water filled up and covered her body. The warmth felt good, despite the heat of the day, and she leaned her head back, taking in a breath of the salt tinged air.

Tomorrow she'd scour the city looking for Amazons, she decided. Now that she knew the ships weren't in, she also knew she had time to search and where the most likely places to look were. With any luck at all, she'd find them by lunch time, and the following morning she could start off back home.

She took out the soap and started washing the trail dust off, humming a little under her breath as she worked. A quick wash of her hair, and she was rising out of the tub, the breeze coming in the window getting a start on drying her skin.

It felt good, and refreshing after the long day in the sun. She stretched, feeling a tightness in her skin and a tingle that meant she'd gotten a little toasted on the journey and she made a mental note to shop for some aloe before she left the city.

The sound of the waves brushed against her ears, and she shook her head to get some of the water out of her hair, running her fingers through the dark locks to sort out the tangles and rake them into some order.

At least she'd gotten Gabrielle to give her a trim.

Xena took a piece of linen out and completed the process, then opened the flap on her bags and considered her options. She riffled her fingers through the contents, and then she pulled out a neatly folded packet she'd shoved in there last minute, with some idea she might have to blend in somewhere.

Simple, Athenian style robes, last worn in the capitol and saved in jest by Gabrielle before their hasty leaving. Xena shook them out and slipped into them, fastening the golden link belt and then glancing at the mirror to judge the result.

Not bad. She brushed her hair out, and then she added the silver ear cuffs Gabrielle had gotten her a lifetime ago and sat down to put on her sandals. Aside from finding the Amazons and bringing Eph home, her natural curiosity was urging her to find out if any of the bored patricians in the courtyard knew what was going on in the capital.

She didn't want any part of the war, but she wanted to know who did, in case it ended up causing her problems. Xena stood up and adjusted the crystal necklace she was wearing and twitched the robes a little more to her liking.

Then she gave her reflection a wink and went to the door, slipping through it and pausing, then ducking back inside to take the key from the ring on the wall. She went outside and closed the door, locking the lock and slipping the key into her belt pouch along with her dinars.

She studied the hall for a moment, then she headed down to the door the man had indicated, hearing the soft sound of voices, and a harp inside. She paused outside and took a breath, then she worked the latch on the door and pushed it open, entering the dining chamber.

Unlike the reaction in the courtyard, there was more interest than outrage as she sauntered across the big chamber and claimed a seat on a couch against the far wall. She extended her long legs and crossed them at the ankles, as two servers hurried over, bearing laden trays.

The rest of the room was filled with men and women in fine silk robes, seated on low lounges as she was, most holding goblets and plucking fruit off platters. Most of them were roughly the same age as Xena was, though a few of the men were older.

One of them had four women around him, and he was watching her with definite interest. He had a faintly familiar to her face, and a lean, soldier's body, and the ladies were solicitously plying him with food and drink as though they were body servants.

Maybe they were. Xena spared him a glance, then moved her attention elsewhere, exchanging glances with two women seated together across from her and a young man with the air of a noble. Did any of them know her?

Probably not. The warrior smiled inwardly. At least, none of them might until they heard her name. It had been a long time since she'd been to Thera, but she suspected her reputation might still be whispered about back in the alleyways and along the docks.

There were some here that might remember the Destroyer of Nations, along with those who more likely knew her later incarnations.

Xena let the inner smile appear. She accepted a goblet from the server, and took a handful of grapes then settled back to wait and see who was going to nibble at her bait first.

**

It was almost dark by the time they reached the caverns. The sun had already disappeared behind the mountain and the rich purple twilight had turned their surroundings into muted shades of gray. Gabrielle had one arm tucked around Dori, glad her daughter was being quiet for a change.

They hadn't seen a single other person since their altercation a few candlemarks before. The track had been empty, and they'd made pretty good time across the wide plains until they started up the slope that led to the cavern entrance.

Gabrielle could see the openings from where she was, relieved that they seemed as bereft and empty as the track had been. "Solari..."

"I'll go check it out." Solari correctly interpreted the start of the request. "C'mon Ben."

Bennu chuckled and followed her as she rode towards the caverns and the rest of the group slowed to a halt.

"How's the hand, Nala?" Gabrielle asked.

"Better." The grizzled Amazon relaxed in her saddle. "Looks deserted around here."

"It does." The bard agreed. "But you never can tell. I can remember my share of strolling into what I thought were deserted caves only to find a bear inside them."

"Really?" Cait asked. "Don't they smell awfully?"

"They do." Gabrielle agreed. "But if the wind's blowing into the cave, and it's raining, you miss that sometimes. Xena ended up in boxing match with one the last time we were out."

"She win?" Nala asked.

"That's where the rug in my quarters came from." The bard answered, with grin. Then she glanced around, "We should pick up some dry wood for the fire. Probably isn't much up near those rocks."

Two of Bennu's men and both Cait and Paladia got down off their horses, and moved into the trees, breaking off dry limbs as they walked. Gabrielle stayed where she was, content to at least

act the queen for the moment.

“Mama, hungry.” Dori announced, tipping her head back and looking up at her mother. “You got cookies?”

Gabrielle dug in her saddlebag. “I have some of Boo’s cookies.” She pulled out one of their trail bars and broke it in half. “Want to share it with me?” She gave half to Dori, who clutched it with both hands and started chewing it industriously. “Guess that’s a yes.”

She stretched her legs out and then let her body relax, wishing she was well off Argo’s back and knowing she’d pay for the long day’s riding. Already she could feel the knots forming in her lower back, and Xena wasn’t around to fix them.

Solari and Bennu emerged from the caves, and the Amazon let out whistle, waving them over. With a sigh of relief, Gabrielle patted Argo on the shoulder and tightened her knees. “Let’s go Argo. You’re almost rid of us for the day.

They rode over to the edge of the rocks and dismounted. Gabrielle eased her legs straight and lifted Dori down, then she studied the steep climb ahead of her.

“Gabrielle.” One of Bennu’s men came over to her. “May I take care of your horse for you? I know you have your hands full with the little one.”

Gabrielle hesitated, aware of the Amazon eyes on her. She untied her staff from its hangers, using that to give her a minute to think about what to answer.

“We’re putting up a lean to.” The man pointed. “And posting guard there, figured we’d leave the tack and not have to haul it up. We’ll take yours too.” He looked over at the rest of the Amazons.

“Oh gosh, that’s lovely of you.” Cait said.

“I’ll help.” Nala said. “That’s a good idea.”

The soldier turned and looked at Gabrielle, lifting his brow a little in question.

“Sure.” The bard gave in and handed over Argo’s reins. “Thanks, I appreciate it.” She unclasped her saddlebags and tossed them over her shoulder, then ducked past Argo’s neck, giving the mare an affectionate pat as she passed. “C’mon Dor.”

Dori fit her hand in Gabrielle’s as she joined Cait and Paladia and they started up the rocks towards the cavern, where Solari and Bennu were waiting. Solari had a pack on her back that had the venison in it, and the bard sorted out her mind whether or not she’d brought the right kind of spices for it.

“Mama, dere’s an owl.” Dori pointed. “Hoo! Hoo!”

“I see him, honey.” Gabrielle watched the bird turn its head to follow them. “He’s pretty, isn’t he?”

“Hoo!”

They made it up onto the ledge. “All clear?” Gabrielle asked.

“Dry as dust and empty.” Solari said. “We’ll have to haul water up, but it’s safe up here.”

“Okay, lets get some torches lit first.” Gabrielle said. “Then get a fire on so we can get ourselves some dinner.”

“Yum.” Dori released her mother’s hand and went over to the edge of the cavern, peering inside. “Mama it’s dark in there.”

There was the sharp sound of a flint and striker, and a moment later the twilight faded back as

Solari lit the torch she'd been carrying. It shed the scent of wood and pitch and she ducked inside the cavern as Gabrielle followed her.

It was a large cave, with smudges of soot along the walls and ceiling that showed it had been used for shelter by many others before them. Against one wall was a circle of stone, with blackened remnants of a previous fire.

The Amazons brought in the firewood, and laid it down to make a fire, and as it was lit, Gabrielle slowly examined the interior of their shelter.

She'd been in worse. She could remember nights spent in scant overhangs, when only her cloak and Xena's warm body had stood between the cold and rain and her. This was better than that, a large, wide mouthed cave that let in light from the stars outside and the rising moon, overlooking the trail heading to the river plateau below.

If it was her and Xena, she would have laid their dual bedrolls just to the left of the fire, with their backs to the wall, and Xena would have taken the spot closer to the entrance. No argument there. But now, Xena wasn't there and she had Dori to think of.

"Mama, look." Dori had climbed up onto a small rock shelf and was patting the wall. "Shiny."

Gabrielle went over and held the torch up, seeing the faint crystals in the rock walls. "Sure is," She wet her finger, touched the rock then touched her tongue. "Oh my gosh, you know what this is, Dor? This is salt."

"Really?" Solari came over and scratched a bit of the crystal, then put her finger into her mouth. "Hey it is."

"Good." Gabrielle set her bags down on the little shelf. "I picked up some stuff during our stops today so let's get everything out and we'll see what we can have for dinner." She sat down on the shelf and opened the bags, rummaging inside.

"We're going to fill the waterskins." Cait came over. "Do you want me to fill yours?"

Gabrielle felt the urge to do it herself, and she had to exhaled and stifle that, surprised when it took more effort than she'd expected.

Close to cycling maybe? "Sure, thanks Cait." She gave the young Amazon a smile, as she picked up the worn skin and slipped out the entrance to the cave with it. "Dori you can look around, but don't go far away, okay?"

"Okay." Dori got up from where she'd been kicking her heels and ambled off to explore the inside of the cave. "Boo Boo Boo..."

"Boy, if she finds that in here I'm throwing a party." Gabrielle muttered under her breath. She glanced up as she heard the crackle of the fire, and then she looked around, picking spot just to the side of the shelf, in a curve of the wall to spread out her bedroll.

Wouldn't be comfortable. Gabrielle now wished in retrospect she'd brought Dori's little folding bed with her, since her daughter hadn't quite learned to turn off the discomfort of sleeping on the ground with any sort of success.

When she'd first started traveling with Xena, she'd just been too exhausted at the end of the day to really care where she was sleeping. Even the hardest ground, and pinecones under her wouldn't have kept her from collapsing but as she grew up, and grew more used to traveling, she also became aware of how damned uncomfortable it all was.

She remember sleeping in a bed with Xena for the first time, and how blissfully comfortable and gut churningly uncomfortable at the same time that had been. The memory made her smile.

“Gabrielle?”

With a jerk, she glanced up, abashed to realize she'd drifted right off into a daydream. “Sorry.” She cleared her throat, giving Solari an apologetic look.

“No problem.” Solari opened her pack, releasing the scent of raw meat into the cavern. “So, like, what do we do with this? I'll be the first to tell ya, I ain't one of those people who wants to learn to cook from you.”

Gabrielle removed her frying pan from her gear and stood up. “C”mon.” She pointed to the fire. “Let's get this party started.” She followed Solari over and the crowd around the fire made room for her, as she slid her frying pan into a comfortable position over two of the stones, and set her spice bag down.

In her peripheral vision, she saw Nala and the two soldiers come in, talking in undertones and chuckling. “Horses settle down?”

“Yeah, they're fine.” Nala said. “Guard's staying down there, but they're all pretty hardy beasts.”

“True.” Gabrielle drew her cleaning knife out of her pack. “But Argo's pretty special to me since she's Xena's horse. “

“Boo!” Dori came galloping over. “Mama can I go sleep with Gogo?”

“No honey, I'm afraid you're stuck with me.” Gabrielle cut the venison into slices and dusted it with herbs from her kit. She cut off a bit of the fat and dropped it into the pan, throwing in a handful of berries along with it and waiting for the fat to melt and start to sizzle before she laid the steaks on the hot metal.

The scent of the spices and the meat filled the cavern, and Gabrielle studied her handiwork for a moment, before she settled back to watch the steaks cook.. She put her arm around Dori and exhaled.

“That smells great.” Nala said.

“Sure does.” Bennu agreed.

“Once we finish this off, we can smoke some of the rest of that meat for the ride tomorrow.” Gabrielle said. “We probably won't get as lucky as we did today.”

Slowly, the Amazons and soldiers settled down in a circle around the fire, as the last of the light faded outside.

“Wish we knew who them fellers were.” Bennu said. “Bothering me.”

“Seemed pretty weird, them being there without any scrip or anything on them.” Solari agreed. “You think they were spies? Maybe from the Spartans like those other guys?”

“Coulda been.” Nala said.

“No.” Gabrielle turned the steaks. “I don't think they were Spartans.” She was aware of her voice echoing in the silence as everyone looked at her. “They had the wrong shaped heads. Spartan heads are really blocky, kind of square. And these guys weren't that great at fighting. Spartans are.”

The rest of the group digested this for a few minutes.

“You've seen other Spartans, your majesty?” Nala asked, after a somewhat awkward silence.

“I have.” Gabrielle was unruffled. “And Xena has. She told me about them. But the man she defeated in the Games, in the pit was a Spartan. “

“Their champion.” Solari said. “The big guy Pony told us about. She said he was good.”

“He was.” Gabrielle turned the steaks again.

“Not good enough to win though.” Bennu said. “Not against Xena.”

No. Gabrielle started parceling out the venison to the waiting wooden travel plates. Not good enough to win against Xena, even though his winning would have squashed the war they were now so worried about.

Ares trap, which they’d walked right into. Which Xena could have circumvented, and possibly, probably saved many lives not the least of which was the Spartan slave who’d been promised his freedom if he’d beaten her.

That day when the greater good had lost. “He really didn’t have a chance.” Gabrielle managed a smile, as she cut up a portion for Dori, who was impatiently wiggling on the ground next to her. “But he was a real Spartan, not like those guys today.”

She handed Dori her plate, and put a handful of berries on it next to the meat along with a few nuts. Then she offered her scrounging to the rest of the group and settled back with her own serving. She had her waterskin back, the surface damp and chill with the fresh water inside.

The low hum of conversation rose around her, and she nibbled her steak absently, her thoughts drifting almost irresistibly to her partner; wondering what she was doing, and whether her trip was going well.

Missing her.

Maybe because they’d spent so many evenings just like this. Around a fire, after a long day traveling, a little sore, they’d have a leisurely dinner together then relax under the stars simply enjoying each other’s company.

“Mama?”

Gabrielle looked up from her plate and over at her daughter. “Mm?”

“You make this for Boo? Boo likes this.”

Yes, Boo did. “Sure, when Boo comes back, I’ll absolutely make this for her.” Gabrielle said. “Go on and finish, Dori, before it gets cold.”

Dori went back to her plate, and Gabrielle leaned back against the wall, releasing some of the stress from between her shoulder blades. She thought about the men they’d fought earlier, who certainly had spent their own nights around the same kind of campfire.

Where had they been going? Were they spies? For Sparta, or Athens or someone else? Maybe they were even roaming the area, having heard about the supposed riches in Amphipolis.

So strange, not to have any thing on them that identified them. Even their weapons had been painfully common.

What would Xena think about it? Gabrielle wished she could ask her soulmate. She was sure if Xena had been there, seen what they had seen, she would have known exactly what the men were up to, and what to do about it.

That was just how Xena was. Her mind took all the details everyone else saw and fit them neatly together like one of her puzzles and that was something the warrior hadn’t ever quite taught Gabrielle to do.

Gabrielle exhaled silently. She wished Xena were here. She knew everyone was looking to her to know what to do, and as they got deeper and deeper into the mysteries of the situation she

wasn't at all sure she was up to that.

"Gabrielle?"

However, she suspected someone was going to ask her for something she was up for. "Yes?"

Bennu licked the edge of his knife. "Woudlja tell us one of Xena's tales?"

"Mama, cow!" Dori said instantly, drawing Gabrielle's mind right off her absent partner. "Pweeze?"

"Honey, let's save that for when we get home." Gabrielle took a sip of water. "You know Boo likes us to tell that when we're together, right?"

Dori scowled.

"How about if I tell the one where me and Xena found the Lost Mariner. You like that one, don't you?"

"Fishes!"

The group chuckled a little. "I like that one too." Gabrielle said, pausing to swallow a mouthful of venison, as she composed herself to start the story, ordering the parts of it in her mind, shifting some, discarding a few.

Savoring all over again that moment when Xena had jumped on board, and the sweetness of that hug. "I'd heard about the legend of Cecrops the Lost Mariner since I was a little girl." The bard began. "About how he was cursed, and how he had to travel the seas forever and ever, never going home again."

"Stories, I thought." Nala said.

"Me too." Gabrielle agreed. "Until one day I was in a shipwreck, and ended up being pulled onboard his boat and into his legend one dark night."

"Oh wow." The older Amazon said. "Didn't see that coming."

"Neither did I." Gabrielle finished her dinner and settled back, putting her arm around Dori. "So it was dark, and it was stormy, and the ship Xena and I were on broke apart on the rocks in the storm and we were tossed into the ocean and lost each other."

"Boo gets mama, all the time" Dori wiggled her booted feet. "Go Boo!"

"Hey, who's telling the story here, you or me?"

**

Continued in Part 10

A Queen's Tale

Part 10

"They tell me your name is Xena." The gray haired patrician took a seat across from her, swirling the wine in his goblet. "Is that true?"

"Who's they?" Xena watched him as she worked a grape off the bunch she had in one hand and popped it into her mouth. She rolled it around with her tongue, the bit into it and enjoyed the burst of cool sweetness. "And who's asking?"

The man smiled briefly. "My name is Denius." He said. "I'm a member of the Athenian council." He continued. "And they, are my lovely retinue over there, who seem to know of you."

Xena glanced past him at the three young women, who were watching them with tiny smiles and half lowered lashes. "I'm Xena." She admitted. "What are you doing here, instead of in Athens?"

"I could ask you the same." Denius said. "Though I fancy you'll be taking ship for the capital in the next day or so when the transports get here."

Xena studied his face. He was handsome, and had steady gray eyes and seemed just vaguely familiar to her. From her last visit to the capital, maybe?

"May we join you for dinner?" Denius said. "We're taking ship tomorrow or the next day ourselves."

"Sure." The warrior made her decision. "I hate eating alone."

Denius smiled, and lifted his hand, making a gesture with his fingers. The three women responded immediately, rising and coming over to join him, settling themselves in the seats to either side. "Thank you."

Xena picked up her goblet of chilled white wine and sipped it., pondering how to proceed with her seeking of information. "You from around here?" She hazarded a guess. "Home seeing what you can send to the war?"

The man inclined his head gracefully. "My lands are about a day's ride to the south." He said. "Now that arrangements were made, it's time to head back to Athens, and rejoin the rest of the council as we prepare for war. And you?"

And her? Xena considered her options. "I've heard Athens is soliciting Amazons for the fight." She decided on truth, something in her resisting the easier route of pretending to follow the path he'd already preassigned her.

She wasn't really sure why.

His brows twitched. "That may be so." He allowed. "Does that concern you?"

"Why?" Xena asked. "Why ask them?"

Denius shrugged. "I have heard they are sought, but not the reasons behind it. That is up to the generals, they asked that messengers go out and collect the best warriors of the land. Why not the Amazons? Are they not fierce?" He turned the question around on her.

"They are." The warrior accepted an exquisitely carved wooden platter with delicacies placed on it and gave the server a smile in return.

The young man winked at her, then turned to serve Denius and his retinue.

Xena wondered idly if she got treated well by inn workers because they knew who she was, or if they sensed she was one of them in a way. She set the platter down on the low table next to her seat and examined it's contents.

"They are?" Denius prodded her. "And so?"

Xena selected a morsel and put it in her mouth. She gave the excuse of chewing and swallowing to give her time to answer. "They aren't soldiers."

"The better to deter the Spartans with, then. They expect soldiers. They expect a traditional battle. That's not what this war is about." Denius smiled. "Come, Xena, surely that's why you are going to Athens, isn't it? I know a handsome sized delegation came to ask you to come."

Xena kept her breathing even, and she shrugged slightly. "I said no the last time." She commented, catching sight of a few people entering the dining hall, tall, broad shouldered men with the unmistakable air of soldiers.

She felt a prickle between her shoulder blades.

“Yes, but it’s different now.” Denius shook his head, oblivious to the newcomers. “That was a command, what was sent to you was an offer. By the fact that you are here, you have accepted, it is clear. I am glad.”

“Denius.” One of the soldiers came over. “Good to find you here.”

“Ah, Aleron.” The patrician smiled. “See who is also waiting to take ship?” He gestured at Xena. “This will be a glorious war.”

The soldier ducked his head respectfully in Xena’s direction. “We heard on the way up here that the honorable general was also staying. It is an honor to meet you.”

What. Xena managed a smile. Have I gotten my leather covered ass into.

“Please join us.” Denius gestured to an empty chair. “Xena, Aleron is the cavalry master. He has been very anxious to meet you.”

“Gladly.” The soldier sat down and accepted a goblet. “But it is a shame we just missed the last ship. Many of my comrades were on it, and would have loved to have used the voyage to discuss our horse strategy with such a master.” He held up his goblet in Xena’s direction. “But ten big wagons, and some of those Amazons will be welcomed by the cause on the other side.”

Damn it.

“Ah, and we were just talking about Amazons.” Denius said. “Xena here seemed interested in them. A large number?”

“Score, perhaps.” Aleron said. “Noisy bunch of women, no offense.” He glanced at Xena.

“None taken.” The warrior picked up a bit of chicken and ate it. “When did they leave?”

“Evening before last.” The soldier plowed into the plate of food the server handed to him without apology. “City was glad to be rid of them, I think. Someone said there was some fighting involved or somesuch.”

Double damn it. Xena ripped apart another piece of chicken, not even tasting whatever spices were on it. What were the chances the Amazons were any other than the ones she was looking for? And she’d missed them by a day and a half, since she’d been hanging around lollygagging and getting involved with every hard luck story she’d come upon.

Damn it, damn it, damn it.

“Xena, of course you’re welcome on our ship.” Denius spoke up. “We have a large sailed transport picking us up, and naturally it has all the comforts.”

Xena eyed him. “Fast?”

Aleron smiled. “The fastest. My uncle’s the captain.” He said, proudly. “She’ll be the flagship once the war begins. Hes breaking in new sailors as he picks up supplies and soldiers from here.”

“Sounds like she’s a pleasure to sail on.” Xena sighed inwardly. “I love a good warship.”

Both Aleron and Denius looked like she’d just tossed them one of Gabrielle’s freshly baked cookies.

“Are you a mariner, Xena?” Denius said. “All the stories I’ve heard of you don’t mention the sea.”

“That’s because most of those stories are told by my partner Gabrielle, and she gets seasick.” Xena resignedly accepted a plate of fruit and cheese from the server along with what looked like rabbit legs.

“Ah, yes.” Denius nodded. “The lovely young woman who won the bard competition.” He said. “I remember that well.” He turned to one of his companions for the first time. “Leena, you were there also. You remember that?”

The woman nodded. “Of course.” She smiled at Xena. “And was in the games as well.”

“Ah.” Denius sat back. “Of course, that’s why you were interested in the Amazons. Isn’t your partner one? I had forgotten, she was carried to the stage by several of them.”

Xena took a swallow of wine. “Gabrielle’s an Amazon queen.” She said. “But that’s not why I was asking about them. She’s already turned down Athens’s request to go to war.” She glanced up when she sensed the silence, to see them watching her.

What were they thinking? That she agreed with Gabrielle? Disagreed? “She made the right choice.” Xena took any ambiguity out of it. “The tribe she’s the leader of took the brunt of the last war in our parts.”

Aleron nodded. “There were many who thought that overblown, but my people live just this side of Thrace, and they know better. They toast you at every meal, Xena.” He raised his goblet. “I think Athens should too, from what they’ve told me of that fight. It could easily have come our way.”

“Would have.” Xena said, briefly. “I drew it the other way.”

“That’s what they said.”

“And that’s why Athens asked for you.” Denius cut in smoothly. “And I’m sure it comforts you to know your friend is safe and sound back in... Amphipolis, yes? While you pursue this with us.”

Xena remained silent, sipping her wine as the rest of them started chatting, bypassing her for the moment. The room was now very full, but it was obvious to her that they were the center of attention, the other diners watching them from the corner of their eyes, or over their cups.

She sensed she was well in the middle of something, and something she hadn’t really intended on putting herself into. Speaking out against the war at this moment would likely get her nothing but suspicion, or into a fight.

Now, she really wouldn’t mind getting into a fight. The dinner was stretching on, and she was getting a little restless, and a knock down drag out in the middle of the room would give her both entertainment and exercise.

But now that it looked like the Amazons had left ahead of her, she didn’t want to alienate her new friends who had a fast ship. The trip across the Aegean would take a week, and with any luck at all she might overtake her quarry and they could turn it right back around in the port of Athens.

So she didn’t disagree with Denius, she merely smiled at him and returned his mimed toast, resigning herself to having to spend more time searching, more time traveling, and more time away from home, and away from her family.

“Sure have become a grumpy old homebody, huh?” She muttered.

“Xena, did you say something?” Denius leaned forward. “I can’t tell you how glad I am you’ll be traveling with us. My brother Aescenian is the senior member of the Athenian council, and he’s very anxious to talk to you.”

Xena felt her lips twitch, as she remembered her brief encounter with the council, and the memory she had with the man in question. “I’m sure he is.” She smiled graciously. “I’m looking forward to the trip. I haven’t been to sea in a while.”

“Have you traveled much?” The woman next to Denius asked, speaking up for the first time. “This is my first voyage.”

“I have.” The warrior said. “I’ve been as far as Chin by sea. But that was a long time ago.” As she said it, she realized she was thinking not of her first voyage, but her latest one, which was now beginning to fade into the mists of her past.

It had been years, she pondered with an internal start. It had been all the years of Dori’s life and more, though thinking of it still hit some faint raw spots in her, and certainly in Gabrielle – though she felt that too, at last was fading.

“Chin! That’s so far.” Aleron said. “We heard there was a shipwreck off the coast earlier on this season, from there. Some things were salvaged.”

Xena nodded. “Saw a merchant train with some of it.” She said. “Guess they’re reaching out to trade again. They weren’t for a long time.”

Denius eyed her sharply. “Think they are?”

Xena leaned back and tried to relax, as the servers came over and refreshed her plate and her glass. She was glad enough to turn the talk to something other than the war, and she reckoned her experiences in Chin were far enough in the past to raise little comment. “What I saw was trade goods.” She said. “Ivory, combs, music boxes.”

“That’s what they said.” Aleron nodded. “My cousin saw them coming ashore. Great packing boxes full.”

“Some were saying it was just a screen, to excuse their presence in our waters.” Denius said.

Xena thought about that. It wasn’t something she hadn’t considered herself, hearing the news. “Anything’s possible” She conceded. “They could have been testing..” She paused for a second. “Us, or they could have been seeing what the merchanting possibilities are. I’d bet on the latter.”

“Why?” Denius said. “We’re searching out war, why not them?”

“If they were looking for war, we’d be fighting right now.” Xena said. “One ship, trade goods... yeah, it could have been a fishing expedition but chances are they’ve had a warlord change there and finally got tired of eating their own for a while.”

“They recovered two barrels of spices. Those went right to Athens for the war effort.” Aleron said. “Gorgeous stuff. I got a smell of it on the way through.”

“If they brought spices, definitely it was trade.” Xena said. “I’m surprised they didn’t have opium with them.”

“If they did, we didn’t see any.” Aleron shook his head. “Though I’ve heard of it, from some of the old soldiers who traveled in those parts.”

The spices would be enough, Xena reasoned. Exotic and strange, tickling the tongue and often the senses with the pungent tastes and smells. She’d gotten her taste for spices in Chin, and though she was well satisfied with her diet these days, she did remember the fire and richness of them.

Maybe she’d be ashore long enough to find some in the market. Xena’s interest perked. She could bring it back home, and see what Gabrielle could do with them.

Would the bard enjoy the challenge? Or resent the memories the spices would raise, of a time neither of them remembered with any pleasure?

It was a tough question. On one hand, the bard enjoyed practicing her cooking skills on her

family, but on the other, Xena was very sensitive to the fact that Chin had been a dark period in Gabrielle's life for more than one reason.

Heartbreaking. For both of them.

Xena regretfully decided to leave her past in the past, and maybe just take the time to grab her soulmate a stack of parchment, or a nice new quill if she had the chance.

Much safer choice.

She got caught up in a moment of daydreaming, imagining what Gabrielle was doing, feeling a sense of vague discontent she thought might be coming from that direction.

Was it egotistical to assume it was because Gabrielle was missing her? Xena smiled faintly, acknowledging that since she was missing the bard, it probably wasn't.

She wished Gabrielle was with her. She cursed her moment of weakness in not persuading her to break her promise and come, wanting the comfort of her presence and missing the simple companionship she'd come to depend so much on.

Maybe she should just turn around and go home. Tell Gabrielle they'd already left for Athens, and ..

And she missed her too much to stay apart from her? Xena smiled again. Well, Gabrielle wouldn't put much of an argument up against that, now would she?

She could imagine the grin, no matter the failure of her mission. Maybe she could just send a message with Denius.

Maybe tomorrow would be more interesting than any of them thought.

**

Gabrielle woke to the sound of thunder, and the clatter of rain hitting the rocks outside their little sheltered cavern. She lifted her head and peered past the fire, to see pitch blackness outside, violently jerked into silver as lightning struck.

Great. She exhaled. Just what they needed.

"Loud, mama." Dori had apparently been waiting for her to stir. "Too loud."

"Yeah, I know honey." Gabrielle pulled her a little closer, now glad of the furs she thought might have been too warm the night before. "Shh."

"Okay." Dori put her head back down on her little pillow. "Mama I was seeing Boo when I was leeping."

Gabrielle glanced around, seeing the rest of the group rolled up in their beds asleep save the one Amazon on watch, who was just inside the edge of the cavern. "Were you?" She curled her arm under her head and lay back down. "What was Boo doing?"

"Going to fishes."

Of course. "She was catching fish for you?"

"Yes."

"Well." Gabrielle lowered her voice. "I was seeing Boo in my sleep too. How about that? We both were seeing Boo, I guess that means Boo must have been thinking really hard about us, huh?"

Dori giggled.

At least her dream had been a good one. Gabrielle let her eyes drift shut, and wondered if she

could get back into it. It had been her and Xena, taking a walk through the forest near the cabin, chasing woodchucks.

Why?

Who knew? It had seemed important at the time, and certainly her partner had been throwing her usual intense effort into finding the little creatures, but that had been interspersed with a lot of laughing and picking of flowers.

Silly. A little surreal.

But they'd been happy, and if the worst dreams she had centered around them chasing wild animals in circles while collecting daisies she'd take them in a heartbeat. It was such a damned relief not to fear falling asleep anymore.

Her life had gotten so much better.

"Mama is raining."

Gabrielle winced a little as the thunder boomed again. "It sure is, Dor." She agreed. "Remember the last time it rained so hard, when we were in our house?"

"Boo made fun!"

"Yeah, Xena played all day with you. Wasn't that nice of her?" Gabrielle said, thinking of the long candlemarks spent together, watching the rain quietly as Dori took her afternoon nap and they lay curled up in bed together.

"Love Boo."

"I love Boo too." Gabrielle found herself smiling. "I wish Boo were here right now, so we could hug her."

"Boo Boo Boo." Dori warbled softly. "Mama Boo showed me a bug it had red dots on it!"

"She did?" The bard waited as a flash of lightning lit the cavern, then a rolling blast of thunder followed it. "Was it little and shiny black?"

"Yes!"

"Well, let me tell you a story about that kind of bug, okay?" Gabrielle kept her voice low. "One day, Boo and I were going into a town, where they were having a big, big party."

"Fun?"

"Boo and I wanted to have fun, because we'd been walking for a long time, and it was very nice for us to find this town and see how much fun everyone was having at the party." The bard said. "We were really really glad because we were thirsty, and we wanted to have fun too."

"Boo has fun with mama." Dori clarified the point.

"Well, now she does, honey, but that's a story for another time." Her mother said. "Anyway, we were looking for someplace to get a drink and all of a sudden, everyone started to make a lot of noise."

"You go get water?"

Cold ale, actually. "We were thirsty." Gabrielle evaded the question. "But all the people started to make noise, so Xena and I had to go see what was going on." She squirmed a little closer. "So we got to where all the people were and what do you think we saw?"

"Fishes!"

"Nope." Gabrielle said. "We saw a bunch of bad men trying to hurt people. So what do you think we did?"

"Go boom!"

"You got it. Me and Xena went over and we stopped those bad men from hurting people and they all ran away. "

"Boo fixed it!" Dori made a burbling sound. "Boo fixd e'vrything."

"Isn't Boo wonderful?" The bard smiled. "The people there were so happy that we chased away the bad men they gave us presents, and one of the pretty things we got was a pin that looks just like that bug, with the red dots."

"Oh." Dori lifted her head and looked at her mother. "Boo has dat!"

"That's right. There was a very nice man there and he gave me that pin, and I put it on your Boo because I thought it was as pretty as she is." Gabrielle said. "She was wearing it at the party before we left, you remember that?"

"Boo likes."

Gabrielle remembered that years ago moment, looking at the beautiful piece of jewelry and then turning to slide her fingers inside the strap of Xena's leathers to fix it there, looking up to find those gorgeous eyes watching her in a sudden silence.

She'd done it without thought or warning, forgetting why there should have been either.

And the fact that she had, after all they'd been through on the dark road back to each other had put the sudden glint of tears in her partner's eyes and stilled her own tongue in a moment of aching, terrible joy that caught them both completely by surprise..

Gorgeous. "Boo does like it a lot, so that's probably why she showed you that bug because seeing that kind of bug makes her happy and it makes me happy too."

"Pretty!"

"Yep, they're very pretty." The bard said. "You should always be very nice to those bugs, Dor. They make the flowers come out and smell so pretty too. They're good bugs."

"Good bugs." Dori murmured. "Mama go sleep now?"

Gabrielle silently started to laugh, her body shaking in the storm lit gloom. "Am I boring you, honey?" She asked, when the giggles had worn down. "You're my toughest audience, you know that?"

"Want Boo."

"Aw." Gabrielle put her arms around Dori and hugged her. "Okay I'll stop talking about her, because that makes me want her to be here too."

"Okay."

Gabrielle closed her eyes and tried to relax, hoping the storm would be finished by the time they had to leave the next morning. She didn't want either of them getting sick on what was turning out to be a slightly more ominous trip than she'd anticipated.

Or was it?

Gabrielle sighed, hoping she wasn't coming down with a case of her partner's precognition.

**

Xena left her dining companions long before they were done with their cups. She made her way back to her room and shut the door behind her, locking it and hanging the key back on its hook. She went to the window and leaned on the sill with both hands, staring out at the sea with a grim expression.

The air was full of moisture, thick and salty from the sea, but also heavy with impending rain. Xena could feel the taste of it on the back of her tongue, and she half turned and perched on the sill, leaning back against the window edge and folding her arms across her chest.

The air was cool, and felt good blowing against her skin after the long evening of verbal fencing and rich foods that had resulted in her having to swallow some very unpalatable facts to go along with the heavy red wine.

“Damn it.” She sighed. “Why couldn’t this have been easy? I’m going to kick Ephiny’s ass when I catch up with her.”

She had a sense that the whole situation was getting away from her. There was definitely a little voice inside her that was telling her going to Athens was a bad idea and she very badly wanted to listen to that voice.

Well.

Xena sighed. She decided to search the city anyway tomorrow, to maybe find someone who had seen the Amazons and could tell her for sure they were on their way across the water. After all, everyone said they saw Amazons – didn’t mean it was her Amazons, did it?

Maybe it was some other Amazons, and she could still find Ephiny and Eponin waiting here with the rest of the idiots or going to take ship to follow them. It could be. Her luck didn’t always have to be bad, did it?

The sound of the ocean almost masked the soft knocking at the door, and Xena almost pretended it did for a long moment, her nerves rubbed raw from the night and the news. “I guess it does.” Then she exhaled and got up off the sill, trudging across the wooden floor and bracing her hands to either side of the doorway. “What?” She asked, in a loud enough growl to be a warning.

“Xena.” A voice echoed softly through the wood. “It’s a friend.”

Not enough of one to immediately trigger the warrior’s memory, but she reluctantly removed the key from the hook and unlocked the door, swinging it partly open enough to poke her head out.

Then she straightened and stepped back, blinking a little in surprise. “Iolaus.”

“Shh.” The short blond man hurried inside and shut the door. “I’m not exactly as welcome as you apparently are here.” He pressed his back against the wood and went still, his leather woven vest warmly reflecting the candlelight.

It was as though a pink rabbit had appeared in her room. Xena wasn’t quite sure how to react, it had been so long since she’d seen him. “Hello.” She ventured.

Iolaus ran his hands through his curly hair and exhaled, then looked up at her. “Hi.” He stepped forward and hesitantly offered a hug, audibly surprised when Xena took him up on it. “Uh.”

“Where in Hades have you been?” Xena asked, releasing him. “Where’s Herc?”

“Long story.” Iolaus said. “Wait, I know, when isn’t it?” He added. “Where do I start...” He looked around then sat down on a chair next to the dresser as Xena took a seat on the bed. “He’s all wrapped up in the challenge between Athena and Artemis and it’s a mess.”

Xena’s eyebrow lifted.

“You don’t know about that?” Iolaus exhaled again. “Figures. I guess you don’t know about the

bet, either.”

“The bet.” Xena covered her eyes with one hand. “I thought I heard something about a bet but I was hoping the guys I heard it from were drunk off their asses.”

“No. Well, they might have been I don’t know, but the bet’s real enough.” Iolaus said. “Not sure what started it but the two of them got in a squabble about who was the better battle inspiration and apparently Zeus said neither of them were.”

Xena got up and went to the sideboard. “Want a drink?”

“Do you have to ask?”

She poured him a mug of wine and passed it over. “Don’t they have anything better to do than get into pissing matches?”

“Do you have to ask that?” Iolaus cupped the goblet in both hands and took a deep draft of it. “Athena naturally roused Athens into the fight, and Artemis went to inspire the Spartans. “

Xena brought her cup over and sat down in the chair across from Iolaus. He really didn’t look much different, she realized, save he’d gotten a haircut and gained a few more lines on his face. “What’s the bet?”

“Zeus bet them both they couldn’t inspire either side to win. “ Iolaus said. “If the war doesn’t happen he said he’d make them both mortal.”

Xena groaned. “Just what we don’t need.”

“Tell me about it.” Iolaus said.

“So what else?” The warrior asked. “Lets get all the bad news out at once.”

“Then they wagered with each other – whoever wins gets to sentence the other to something bad.” Iolaus concluded. “Just a mess. Herc went over to the other side to try and reason with them.”

The warrior leaned on one arm of the chair and swirled her wine in the cup. “So two cities will go to war and a lot of people will die for a damn pissing match.” She shook her head. “Athena behind the recruiting of the Amazons?”

Iolaus cocked his head. “Huh.” He said. “I saw a whole bunch of them on the road. I was wondering what that was about.. they’re being recruited?”

Xena nodded. “That’s what I’m doing here. A couple of Gabrielle’s Amazons, Ephiny and Eponin, chased after them to try and change their minds.”

“Names sound familiar.”

“Blue paint.”

Iolaus covered his eyes with one hand. “Ah.”

“Anyway, they took off after them and I’m doing Gabrielle a favor trying to get them back and warn the rest of them they’re in a bad deal.”

The blond man sipped his wine thoughtfully. “Thought you didn’t know about the bet?”

“I didn’t.” Xena took a swallow of the sweet red wine. “But I had a visit from some Spartans who wanted to recruit me and they told me they knew the Amazons were going to be battle fodder.”

“Spartans.. came to you?”

“Mm.” The warrior nodded. “So we figured the Amazons were just a ruse and were going to end

up being sacrificed on the Spartan front lines.”

“That’ll ... Artemis is pretty damn fond of them.” The blond man said. “What a mess.”

Xena nodded again. “Damned gods and their damned bets.”

Iolaus grimaced, and glanced around. “Listen, I know you’re more immune than most but I’d rather not be zapped tonight, y’know? It’s been a long day.”

They studied each other in silence for a moment. “It’s good to see you , Iolaus.” Xena finally said. “Been a long time.”

“Sure has.” Iolaus smiled wistfully. “You look good. How’s Gabrielle?”

Xena returned the smile. “She’s fine.” She said. “She’s home in Amphipolis.”

“We heard you two settled down there.” Iolaus leaned his head back. “Or as settled as you’re likely to get.” He added.

“More or less.” Xena agreed. “Not sure you heard. We have a daughter.” She watched his reaction and smiled. “Her name’s Doriana.”

Iolaus looked up over his cup at her, studying her face for a moment. Then he chuckled softly. “Yes, we did hear that.” He admitted. “I’ve been trying to get Herc to take a moon off to go visit you since we got back from overseas. It’s just been so crazy.”

Xena nodded. “You should. I’m sure we’ve got a ton of stories to swap.”

The blond man’s lips quirked. “We do.” He admitted. Then his eyes lifted back to her face. “But right now I’m trying to get to Athens. You got a ride?”

The warrior nodded again. “You’re more than welcome to join me. Better than the bunch of uptight sandle brains I had dinner with. Ships coming in tomorrow.”

Iolaus sighed. “Xena, you’ve changed.”

The warrior smiled easily. “Yes, I have.” She agreed. “Like I said, its been a long time.”

He lifted his cup in her direction. “Then can I ask another favor for old time’s sake? I sure could use a room and the bastard who runs this place had me kicked out twice for asking.”

Xena wasn’t sure if he was asking to stay in her room, or asking her to get the innkeeper to put him in his own, but given her room only had one bed, and it had been a long time since they’d seen each other she opted for the safe route, and got up to open the door. “Sure. “

Iolaus got up hastily. “Ah, actually it’s sort of late maybe I could..”

She stepped out in the hallway and lifted her fingers to her lips, putting them between her teeth and letting out a long, very loud, very shrill whistle.

“And then again, some things never change.” Iolaus leaned against the door way and chuckled. “I can’t wait for Herc to get back from Olympus. It has been too long.”

Xena let out another whistle, then listened as feet started running in their direction. “It has.” She said. “It definitely has.”

**

Gabrielle carried her staff outside, the early dawn light spreading over a waterlogged countryside. Raindrops were still perched and glistening on the leaves, but the sky was clearing and the storm had brought a bit of cooler weather on.

It felt great. The bard drew in a breath of the clean air, and laid the staff over her shoulders,

twisting her body to loosen up her muscles.

Inside, her little gang was stirring and getting together a trail breakfast, with Cait entertaining Dori long enough for her mother to take a break to work the kinks out after sleeping the night on hard stone.

She was used to that, of course, but being used to something and liking it were two different things. Gabrielle reasoned that she'd paid her dues a long time ago in the roughing it category and she'd even opened up a dialog with her partner about bringing hammocks with them the next time they traveled.

Xena had laughed, but Gabrielle knew her soulmate felt the ground more than she herself did and she knew that would only get worse as time went on. The warrior no longer dissembled about it to her, matter of factly admitting to the aches and pains and expecting her to do the same.

Now she did. Now she could, without feeling afraid of Xena's opinions of her. So if she took the blame for being a softie, that was okay with the bard since they both knew the truth and there had been more than one day in the past cold winter where Xena had unapologetically stayed inside by the fire to ease the ache in her battered joints from the weather.

Not having sore ends justified the means. She twisted her body the other way, then pulled the staff down and started her warmup routing, glad to get the blood moving as her muscles relaxed and lost their stiffness. Her lower back was aching from the ride the day before though, and she leaned to one side, grimacing at the tight pain.

"Ow." Gabrielle straightened up and looked around, finding a scrubby bristlecone pine growing into the side of the mountain not far away. She went over to it and judged the height of the branches, setting her staff down with a grunt of satisfaction.

"Short and spunky." Gabrielle grabbed an upper branch and lifted herself up off the ground, relaxing her back and then crossing her ankles and extending her legs out.

It helped, but not quite enough. With a sigh, the bard pulled her feet up and put her legs over a lower branch, loosing her hold and then allowing herself to drop upside down. "Ah." She felt the knots start to loosen as the weight came off her spine. "That's better."

The roughness of the bark wasn't exactly comfortable against the backs of her knees, but the relief from the pain was worth it. Gabrielle folded her hands over her stomach and rocked her head back and forth, one eye watching the entrance of the cave.

Xena had taught her this particular trick. She'd seen the warrior do it on any number of occasions, locking her ankles under another branch and pulling her body up and letting it drop for a considerable length of time.

It kept her body strong, she'd told Gabrielle, but also made her back feel better and the first time Gabrielle had tried it, once she'd gotten over the vertigo of being upside down and the odd feeling of blood rushing to her head, she realized it felt really good for her also.

As the sun started to peek through the clouds, she finished her swing and pulled herself upright, freeing her legs and letting herself back down to the ground.

Now when she picked her staff up her body felt more ready for it, and she quickly ran through three or four drills with it that woke her up completely and got her heart pumping hard in the cool morning air.

That done, she went to the edge of the path and looked out over the hills, spotting the fold in them that they'd need to head for. She marked the road down, deciding they'd be better off walking the horses at least until they got into flatter spaces.

Of course, her own dislike of riding had nothing to do with that.

Of course.

“Mama.” Dori came pattering out of the cave. “Where you go?”

“Right here honey.” Gabrielle turned and walked towards her. “I was just looking out at the pretty day. Aren’t those trees nice?”

Dori stooped to pick up a rock, then she stood and held it out. “Pretty!”

“It sure is. Are they ready for breakfast in there?” Gabrielle cautiously steered her daughter away from the edge of the path, which tumbled down dangerously.

“Your majesty?”

Gabrielle turned to find a group of Amazons emerging. “Good morning.” She greeted them. “I know that wasn’t the most luxurious cave I’ve slept in, but it wasn’t too bad, was it?”

Nala was fastening her dagger. “I’ve definitely slept worse.” She said. “Especially given that storm last night. That would have been nasty to suffer through.”

“Too right.” Cait agreed. “I think we’re about ready to have our whatnots and start along.” She said. “We should be mostly there quite soon.”

“Mostly.” Gabrielle guided everyone back towards the cave entrance. “So let’s get ourselves fed and get moving. Maybe we can sort out who these people are by today, and then be on our way back.”

The fire was in the process of being banked, and everyone had their things packed up. They sat around in a rough circle and ate the leftover venison, along with some nuts and berries Gabrielle had produced from her carry sack.

It wasn’t great, but it wasn’t horrible either. Gabrielle chewed her semi warmed deer flesh and reflected she’d certainly had worse breakfasts, when she and Xena had just had one of those days on the road and ended up the following morning with little more than stale water and a withered apple between them.

Tough times, sometimes. She’d learned to keep a bag of groats tucked away for emergency breakfast and that was mostly why she’d lost her taste for the stuff.

Venison on the other hand, had a nice smokey flavor, and she’d put enough herbs on it the night before to give it an acceptable taste even for breakfast. “You like that, Dor?”

Dori nodded, both hands wrapped around a piece of the stuff as she chewed it.

Sunlight started to peek inside the cavern, and Gabrielle relaxed, suspecting it might even end up to be a fairly nice day. “We ready to go?” She asked, after a few more minutes, as everyone got up and they started to move out.

The horses were more or less where they’d left them, in a sheltered space between some trees. Branches had been knocked down around them, but the animals were grazing placidly the long summer grass, while one of Bennu’s men stood casual guard nearby.

They saddled up and got moving, leading the animals along the path that narrowed to single file, as it pitched downward towards the pass leading into the valley plains beyond.

Gabrielle had maneuvered herself and Argo, with Dori on her back, into the lead. She walked alongside the horse and watched the footing, damp from the rain the night before. The last thing she wanted was for Argo to slip and get hurt – explaining that to Xena would take more out of her than she was willing to give.

“Mama, you gots a story?”

Gabrielle smiled. "Of course I do." She said. "What kind of story do you want to hear? "

"Boo!"

"Of course." The bard chuckled. "How about I tell you about how Boo and I taught a whole school of kids like you to count sheep?"

Dori considered this. "Don't know that one."

"That's because I just made it up." Her mother informed her. "Want to hear it?"

"Okay."

"Can you just do that?" Solari asked, as she walked along as close to Argo's rear as she could without risking the battle mare's temper and getting kicked. "Just make it up as you go along?"

"Now, sure." Gabrielle said, confidently. "Especially with my little wild child. Most of the stories I tell her are short and funny." She glanced ahead of them and started down a slope. "Easy Argo."

Argo snuffled a little.

"That's cool." Solari said. "I can remember a lot of long nights around the campfire when we could'a used someone who could do that."

Gabrielle smiled, and was about to start her story, when something caught her attention and she got in front of Argo and swept the forest, trying to find out what it was.

The path seemed clear before her, as far as she could see. The trees off to the right were fairly thick, and down the steep slope and she studied the edges of them, her eyes flicking over the branches waving softly in the morning breeze.

"Gabrielle?" Solari called uncertainly.

The bard held her hand up, clenched around her staff. She kept moving, but slid around in front of Argo so that she was between the trees and both horse and tiny rider.

Something. Something had made her senses prickly, and she felt her heartbeat get faster as she intently searched the area to find out what it was.

Bird? She swept her head back and forth, and didn't see any. "Solari, keep your eyes open." She said. "Pass it back."

"Will do."

"Mama?"

"Just hang tight, Dor." Gabrielle. "Mama thinks someone is playing hide and go seek. You remember we play that with Boo?"

"Yes!"

"Okay, so mama's seeking. Maybe we'll find someone nice, but you need to be quiet now so I can look, okay?"

"Okay." Dori pulled her legs up and crossed them under her, balancing on the saddle with utter unconcern. She had her hands gripping the saddlebow and she watched in silence as the ground went past them.

Gabrielle felt the breeze against her skin and she cupped her ears and took a deep breath as she'd seen Xena do times without number. Her senses were nowhere near her partners but in growing up out in the wild, she gained some little bit of the woodcraft skills her partner was now teaching Dori.

The wind brought mostly silence, which was a warning in its own right. She could smell the forest, and the rich smell of the mud they were walking through and a brief hint of bruised leaves from the evening's storm.

But that was it.

She drew in another breath. Or was it? "Hey Dor?" She called softly back to her daughter. "Tell me what you smell? Something funny? Like the buppets when they're wet?"

Dori frowned. "Smell Gogo." She said, after a moment.

"Why are you asking her that?" Solari whispered.

"She's Xena's daughter." Gabrielle uttered back.

"Smell izzards." Dori commented. "Big oinks."

Gabrielle nodded. "Yeah, I thought I smelled those too." She said. "But I don't think they're piggies, Dor. It's too high here for them." She took a firmer grip on the staff. "But sometimes men wear pigskin, don't they?"

"Armor?"

"Watch the trees." Gabrielle ordered. "That's where the smells' coming from."

Solari gave her a respectful look. "You got it." She turned and made a sign behind her. "You want me to take point?"

"No room." Gabrielle started moving faster. "We need to get down lower and clear of this path. They can get at us one by one here. C'mon." She urged Argo on, watching the treeline as she felt her way down the slippery rocks.

"Little hawk, we've got the line covered." Bennu called. "Take yer time."

And then, there were good points to having people with you with weapons who knew how to use them. Gabrielle took a breath and continued down. Usually out in the wild it was just her, and Xena.

"Mama, look!"

And Dori, of course. "What at honey?" Gabrielle glanced behind her, to see a small hand pointing down and to the right. She followed the fingers and saw a flicker of motion, color that didn't belong in the greens and browns of the forest. "You see that Dor? Someone's playing hide and go seek, huh?"

"Yes." Dori agreed. "Go hide now."

"I saw it." Solari said. "She's got sharp eyes."

Gabrielle spotted a widening of the path below, and a turn, where the way went around a large standing boulder. "Solari." She pointed at the spot with her staff. "We can't see the other side of that rock."

"Hold up, and we'll come past you." Solari said. "I got Ben and his boys and Cait behind me."

The bard hesitated, driven by the urge to lead the charge herself. She knew absolutely it was what Xena would have done.

She took a breath. But she wasn't Xena. "Okay, when I get to that next little knob, I'll pull Argo up and you can go around." She moved to a slightly wider area and stopped, patting Argo's cheek as the Amazons and Bennu and his men slipped casually past her, leaving their horses with the two men and Paladia.

Gabrielle started moving as soon as they passed, using her staff to steady her steps as she followed her troops towards what she suspected was an ambush.

“Who in the Hades is making trouble out here?” Paladia asked. “It’s nothing but scrub and feral goats.”

Good question. “I don’t know.” The bard answered, watching the path anxiously as Solari and Bennu approached the wide bend and the boulder, now shoulder to shoulder and apparently lost in casual conversation with each other.

They were good people. Gabrielle knew a moment of deep anxiety, wondering if she should be the one risking the ambush again. Then, her skin tingled as she felt a surge of instinctive alarm, her body reacting far faster than her thoughts as she whipped her staff around and slashed through the air, feeling the solid thunk as an arrow was caught in mid flight and deflected. “Get down!”

In an instant, she pulled Argo against the rock wall and hauled Dori off her back, setting her daughter down on the ground. “Hold on to Argo, Dor. “

Dori clutched the mares front leg with both hands as Gabrielle got in front of her with her staff stretched out in front of her, and Paladia slammed into the wall next to her, with Bennu’s men diving down in the front of the path to lay on their bellies, their crossbows extended on the ground.

“We’re sitting ducks up here.” Paladia said.

“No kidding.” Gabrielle watched her troops further down the slope also drop, and she flexed her hands as two more arrows suddenly appeared, and she knocked them both down with a double motion. “Keep your head down.”

“Keeping my head behind your stick.” Paladia said, edging over. “Jerks.”

Solari yelled from further down the slope and a cascade of crossbow bolts fired from the path, arching down into the trees and ripping through the leaves with an audible rush. There was a grunt just audible and a shiver of the leaves, and then a body fell out of one of the canopies breaking branches as it tumbled down in a lifeless sprawl and hit the ground.

The two soldiers in front of Gabrielle fired. Another body fell from the trees, then a volley of return fire headed their way, but aimed at the group on the lower path.

“Cover me!” Solari bolted down the path, with Cait and Nala behind her, dropping down the rocky way with impressive speed.

Bennu and his men shot into the trees, loading and shooting again as they drew the enemy’s attention from the rushing Amazons, ducking as a return set of shafts nearly caught them where they were standing.

“Let’s get on down there!” Bennu pointed at the boulder. “Kill or cover.” He slid down the path with his men behind him, as the two men left above started firing to cover them too.

Gabrielle chafed at being the rear guard, but she knew this kind of fight wasn’t one she could help much in so she held her ground and watched as Solari and the other two Amazons dove off the path into the forest, disappearing into the brush as two of the enemy soldiers broke cover and bolted for the location they’d dropped into.

“Mama.” Dori had wormed her way between Argo’s front legs and was now peering past Gabrielle’s knees. “Bad mens?”

“Bad mens, honey.” Gabrielle sighed. “Story of our life, huh? We’re always running into bad mens.”

Cait's battle yell suddenly rang over the trees, high and distinctive, and Gabrielle heard the ring of steel against steel as Bennu's men reached the boulder and engaged the group of men she'd figured might be behind it.

"Okay, time to go fight." Gabrielle picked Dori up and put her on Argo's back. "C'mon, guys. Paladia, just bring those horses behind me, okay?"

"Sure." Paladia sorted the reins out and followed. "Nothing's gonna be left by the time we get down there though. The crazy nutcase is about to cycle so if I were you, I'd hide the kids eyes."

"Ah."

"Bet you wish your squeeze was here."

"Bet your ass I do." Gabrielle started down the path, having tied one of Argo's reins off to her belt to free her hands for her staff. "More and more every damn minute."

**

Xena woke to sunshine outside, but as she stepped to the window and looked out over the sea, she could also feel weather approaching and a glance at the crimson sunrise confirmed it. She could see dark clouds right on the horizon, and the surface of the sea was dark and had a glaze to its surface.

Storm coming in over the water. She wondered if it would delay the ships, then realized some were already in port. Three of the slips below her window had wooden bulks in them, and the roads that ran right along the piers were busy with traffic.

She sat down on the window sill and stretched her joints out, wincing as the coming storm made itself doubly known in their aching stiffness. The breeze came in and ruffled her hair and she leaned back against the wall edge as she idly watched the city wake beneath her.

She could hear the yells of the workers, rough curses floating up on the wind as another ship came edging into the harbor with its sails half furled.

This one was massive. Xena studied it with some wry admiration, the wooden vessel shifting in the wind and sending heavy creaks up to her ears. The ship had two belled sails in a richly striped motif and a high forecastle with a big curving prow, and she could see and hear the oars to either side slowly moving her along.

On either side of the ship hung shields, and she could see soldiers gathered on the bow watching the approaching town. On the rear raised section there stood a clump of crew and what was likely the captain, one of the men standing stalwart with his hand on the tiller as they steered slowly in.

It occurred to her that getting some breakfast before the incoming horde hit the beach was probably a good idea. Accordingly, she got up from her perch and walked back over to the dressing table, where a bowl of water rested.

She washed her face and dried it with a piece of the clean linen left there for her, then she dressed in her light tunic and sandals and slipped out of the door.

The hall was empty. She gave the room the innkeeper had given Iolaus a brief glance, then decided to let her old friend sleep in, since he'd seemed exhausted when he'd escaped into its darkness the night before.

Iolaus, Herc, gods, bets.... It was all starting to sound a little too tiresomely familiar to her and Xena bit off a few curses under her breath as she climbed up the steps into the small central courtyard.

"Ah, good morning, good warrior." The innkeeper was just coming out of a smaller door to the

rear, apparently the one to his own personal quarters. "Did you have a good evening?"

"I did." Xena confirmed. "I see the ships are coming in."

"Oh yes." The man said. "The Silver Sand Dollar is just coming in, and we'll be overrun shortly with randy sailors and men from Athens who've spent the trip at sea and tire of hard tack and salt cod quite quickly.

"I figured." Xena said. "Thought I'd grab something then be out of your hair. With any luck, I can find what I'm looking for here and not have to get on that damn ship."

The innkeeper cocked his head at her. "It was said you'd be going to Athens, though. To fight in the war."

"Not if I can help it." Xena said.

"I see." The innkeeper mused. "Well, you are the master of your own mind, to be sure. There's a breakfast laid on inside the hall. We thought to have it out here, but the weather's not so promising." He gave her a brief nod then continued on past her and disappeared through the door she'd entered through.

Xena continued on and entered the hall, glad to find a ready sideboard of cider waiting, along with fresh bread and sweet, mild cheese. She captured a portion and added a handful of figs to it, then took her plate over to a table near the window and sat down.

A moment later, the door swung open, and her dinner companion from the night before entered. He was dressed in a good quality but toughly made leather overtunic, close enough to armor to catch Xena's eye.

"Good morning." He greeted her. "Mind if I join you? My ladies are all still abed." He didn't wait for her to answer, he just took the seat across from her and started to pick at his plate of nuts and olives. "I would have thought you the same."

Xena merely look at him, as she chewed her bread and cheese.

"After all, we heard you had a late visitor." Denius concluded, glancing up at her. "Busy woman, I'm sure."

Xena put the piece of bread down she was holding and without any warning half stood and slammed the man across the face with enough force to knock him right out of his chair and send him flying across the room into the next set of tables.

Then she sat down and picked her bread up again, continuing her breakfast without a word.

Denius sat where he landed, utterly stunned, for several heartbeats. Then he took a gasp of air and lifted a hand to his face. "Why did you do that?" He spluttered. "For a compliment I get this?"

The warrior glanced up. "Sorry." She said. "I don't consider it a compliment." She added. "I'm an old fashioned kinda gal."

Denius stood up. "If I had my sword..."

"If you had your sword I'd shove it up your ass." Xena interrupted him. "I've killed ten thousand men dumb enough to try that. Don't be stupid." She wiped her plate with the last of the bread and drained her cup, standing up when she finished and dusting her hands off.

The inner door opened and Iolaus appeared, grinning when he spotted her. "There you are." He continued, oblivious to the red faced Denius. "Hey thanks for arranging the bed last night. I really appreciated it."

Xena pointed at the sideboard. "Food's that way." She said. "Glad you got some sleep."

“Ah, yes.” Iolaus started to turn, then apparently remembered his manners and held a hand out to Denius. “Sorry, we haven’t met. I’m Iolaus.”

Stiffly, the patrician clasped his arm, then released it. “Ah, would that be…”

“Yes. It would.” Iolaus agreed cheerfully. He turned and went to the buffet and loaded up a plate then came back over and sat down at Xena’s table. “Boy this looks good.”

Xena resumed her seat, and leaned back, resting her elbows on the chair arms.

Denius slowly lowered his hand, and then raised it to rub his jaw, already bruising. “Then I in truth apologize, Xena.” He said. “I meant no disrespect.”

Xena inclined her head graciously and indicated the chair Denius had so unceremoniously abandoned. The man eased back down in the chair and picked up his mug, as the warrior steepled her fingers and rested her lips against them.

Iolaus paused and looked from one of his table companions to the other. “Do I want to know what’s going on?”

Xena hiked an eyebrow at him.

“That’s what I thought.” Iolaus went back to his bread and cheese. “Harbor’s filling up. Hope they’re going to do a fast turnaround.”

“Me too.” Xena agreed. “You want to give me a hand looking around for my friends today?”

“Sure.”

Behind them the room was slowly filling up, most of the guests coming in in groups of two or three and sitting quietly with their food. The mood seemed reserved, and far off, a soft rumble of thunder could be heard.

“Weather’s coming in.” Iolaus said. “On the tails of those boats, I bet.”

Denius had recovered his composure, but there was now a bruise darkening his skin all across one side of his face. He blinked a few times, and kept glancing over at Xena, as though wondering if she was going to haul off and hit him again.

Having made her point, Xena didn’t. Her head lifted though and she caught her breath, as she felt that indefinable sense of energy from Gabrielle fighting.

The room faded out a little. It was a very odd sensation and after a moment of it going on Xena decided she really didn’t like it. She imagined she could hear Gabrielle’s breathing speeding up, and her own heart fluttered a little.

It did. She felt it.

Her fingertips twitched and she felt the muscles in her thighs tense.

“Xena?”

She looked across the table at Iolaus, who was watching her in some concern. “Yeah?”

“Everything okay?”

Xena remembered being with Iolaus, way back when, and knowing she had to get back home but this was different.

Very different. This wasn’t Gabrielle wanting or needing her, this was just Gabrielle living and being into something that Xena probably needed to be into also. “Yeah.” She finally answered. “Weather’s giving me a headache.”

“Ah.” Iolaus looked relieved. “Gives me earaches.” He drained his cup. “Glad it’ll come through today and give us clear sailing.”

Denius spoke up finally. “Do you also travel for Athens?” He asked. “I had offered Xena passage on our ship, we would be honored if you joined us as well.”

Iolaus displayed his charming smile. “That’s very nice of you to offer. Thanks!” He said. “Which ship is yours? Is it here yet?” They both turned and looked out the window and Xena was left to her own devices.

The feeling of anxiety grew. She knew almost at once this wasn’t a sparring match, and as it went on longer and longer, the buzz of conversation moving past her unheeded, she tried to sort through what she was feeling and figure out what to do about it.

The noise became too much. “Excuse me.” Xena stood up. “See you in a while.” She ducked around the table and got over to the door, getting through it and across the small courtyard as quickly as she could.

She brushed past two men on the steps, barely hearing the exclamations of anger and escaped into her room before anything else could happen.

Then she sat down on the bed and leaned forward, resting her elbows on her knees and her head against her hands, her heart racing.

It was one of the most uncomfortable things she’d ever felt. She sat there for a least a quarter candlemark, until it started to fade, and the anxious tension relaxed. She lifted her head and exhaled. That had been a real fight for sure.

Hadn’t it? The warrior got up and went to the credenza, splashing her face with the water in the basin and scrubbing fiercely. Or had it just been another sparring match, an early morning bout after breakfast as the Amazons tended to do?

Xena went over to the window, feeling uncomfortable and restless. What if she abandoned her task and went back home and found out that’s all it was? What would Gabrielle think?

Gabrielle would understand. Xena leaned her weight on the window sill. She often teased Xena about being overprotective, but she also knew her life had been saved more than once when her partner had responded to her distress, so always, always, the teasing only went so far.

“Damn it.” She scowled out over the water, watching the clouds start to roll in. Now that the feeling had faded completely she was a little embarrassed, and with that she decided to get her ass in armor and get to work.

She changed out of her tunic and pulled on her leathers, pausing when she spotted a rip in the surface and exhaled. “It’s gonna be that kind of day, isn’t it?” She stepped back out of the garment and sat down on the bed, pulling over her saddlebag and removing her kit from it.

She spent a minute threading some gut through one of her sturdier needles and half turned as she started sewing so the light from the window aided her effort.

The tear was along where her ribcage would be and she wondered briefly when she’d gotten it. The tough hide didn’t rend easily, and she glanced at her own side, pausing her sewing to run her fingertips over her ribs searching for a cut or bruise from it.

Nothing. “Huh.” Xena frowned and finished the mend, tying off the gut and biting it clear with a quick pressure of her teeth. She put her sewing kit away and stepped into the armor again, sliding it up and slipping the straps over her shoulders as she tugged it into place.

“Ah.” She said, as she caught sight of her reflection in the mirror. “That damn inn. I remember now.” Satisfied, she donned the rest of her armor and strapped her saddlebags shut. The scuffle

in the dining room, and a quick glimpse of a knife coming at her as she boxed with her opponents.

It hadn't touched her, but it had apparently come close, and she put the event out of her mind as she ran her comb through her hair.

Feeling the sticky breeze from the window, she took a moment to get a hair clasp from her bag and tie her hair back, then she made sure her sword was seated, and left the room.

Outside, the corridor was now quite busy. Men and women were filing through and she could hear yelling from further up, near where she'd originally come in the inn.

"Xena!" Iolaus caught up to her. "Hey, you okay? You looked like you ate something bad in there."

"Yeah, fine." Xena said. "I just went back and got some herbs for my headache." She indicated the corridor. "I'm heading down into the city looking for Amazons. Wanna come?"

"Sure." Iolaus nodded. "I talked to that guy we were sitting with. His ship's the big one out there. I think we got lucky."

Xena led the way up the hall towards the entrance. "If I find those Amazons I'll have gotten luckier." She said. "I don't really have any desire to go any closer to Athens, thanks."

Iolaus gave her a sympathetic look. "All those guys think you are."

"I know."

They exited into the street, now full with people and wagons, the damp air making the smells around them more than usually pungent. Everyone seemed excited, and children ran through the crowd, dodging the carts and they ran pell mell down towards the pier.

Xena and Iolaus walked along at a much more sedate pace, easing past the crowds as they casually scanned them. "Lot of people." The short, blond man said. "Lot of excitement too."

"War does that." Xena took a fork in the road that would lead down into the more moderate areas of town, where the Amazons might have taken rooms. It wasn't that Ephiny didn't have coin with her, she knew the woman well enough to know better than that, but a crowd of Amazons wouldn't have been to the liking of the innkeeper up the hill.

Just as a lone, scruffy looking fighter hadn't been. Just as she herself might not have been if her personality had been different.

They crossed a street and entered a market square, the stalls around them looking scantily filled as those waiting to travel stocked away things for the voyage and vendors just as obviously held back waiting for those fresh off the ships.

Xena slowed. "Let's take a walk around here. See if anyone saw those guys." She started a counter clockwise ramble through the stalls, searching out the kind of thing Ephiny or Eponin might have been shopping for.

Ah. She stopped at a leather stall, thick hides draped over a wooden tree and a couple of dour looking craftsmen behind the counter who perked up immediately when they spotted her and Iolaus.

"Ah, now what can we do for you two?" The older of the two came forward, rubbing his hands. "Fine way to start the morning, with people who know what they're looking at." He pulled one of the hides off the stack and laid it over the counter. "See that? Best of the season."

Iolaus stroked it with his fingers. "Nice job." He agreed. "And I need a good bit of leather for a new vest, don't you think?" He touched his sadly worn one. "I think that's most of the reason

they wouldn't let me in the place last night."

"Go a head and bargain." Xena edged over and found a spot to lean against, giving the second man a sociable nod as she half turned to watch.

"Anything for you?" The younger man stepped over to her. "We've got some nice dark ones there. Like what you've got."

Xena looked where he was pointing, seeing in fact a darkly tanned hide whose smooth surface looked more than agreeable. If she was heading back she'd have grabbed it without question – the craftsmen back in Amphipolis had her measure and she was due a new set of leathers but there was no easy way for her to carry it if she was heading out.

Too bad. "Nice stuff." She complimented the man. "I like that color."

Thus encouraged, the young tanner brought over the hide. "Thank you. It was my work." He said, proudly. "I take my time, and try to do it right."

Xena touched the hide and flipped over one end of it, rubbing the edge of her thumb against its soft surface. The tanning had been done right and it was soft as silk, and she was reminded of just how many patches were in the current set wrapped around her body.

Leathers wore well, but she was tough on them. "How much?"

Down the counter, Iolaus was in a spirited bargaining session, reminding Xena a little of her partner. She smiled, then looked over at the younger tanner. "Well?"

"Ten dinars." The tanner said.

Xena studied him. "This your first sale?"

He blushed a little, and shrugged.

The warrior fished a ten dinar piece from her belt and tossed it onto the hid. "Roll it up for me kid." She said. "You drive a hard bargain."

The man looked confused, his eyes going to his boss, who was in fierce debate with Xena's companion. "Aren't you going to argue with me?" He asked,

"No." Xena said. "I know what these damn things cost. I go through a half dozen a year. Roll it up." She watched the tanner take the hide and start to carefully fold it. "Find some place to store the damn thing I guess."

"Did you say something, ma'am?"

Xena turned her head to watch him. "I'm looking for some friends of mine." She said. "They'd have liked your wares too."

"Yes?" He looked at her with interest. "Such like yourself?"

Xena waggled her hand. "Amazons." She said. "Seen any?" She was watching his face, and saw not even the slightest twitch of reaction. "Two maybe, maybe more. One with curly blond hair a little like his?"

The man considered, then regretfully shook his head. "Sorry, I've seen none such." He set Xena's package on the counter. "I've heard of Amazons, I would have remembered seeing one. My master also - he has spoken to me of them and so I know he would surely have said."

"All right sir, you drive a hard one." The older tanner said, as coins changed hands between him and Iolaus. "Here you go, and good service to you."

"Thanks anyway." Xena said. "C'mon Iolaus. Let's keep shopping."

“Right you are, Xena.” Iolaus shouldered his hide and joined her. “Nothing like a bit of good bargaining to start the morning off right.” He glanced behind them, to see both men staring at them with jaws dropped. He chuckled a little. “Ah, just like old times.”

Xena smiled briefly and shook her head.

They wandered away from the stall, and stared along one side, distracted when they heard the sounds of a loud altercation coming from the downslope road on the other side of the market.

Men and women started running up the road away from it.

The sound of steel suddenly rang out, and a woman screamed.

“I think the morning just got a lot more exciting.” Iolaus sighed.

“Depends on who’s doing the screaming. C’mon.” Xena broke into a run and they headed downhill, against the flow now heading just as rapidly the other direction.

“Story of my life.”

“Yeah? Mine too.”

**

Continued in Part 11

A Queen’s Tale

Part 11

“Dori stay down!” Gabrielle put a hand on her daughter’s back as she peered between two rocks at the fight in process. They were pinned down behind a set of rocks, and their attackers were sheltered in the forest, and right now, no one was going much of anywhere.

“We should rush them.” Nala was busy fixing an arrowpoint on one of her crossbow bolts.

“We could do.” Bennu agreed.

Solari came over and crouched next to them. “I think we can get down the trail there.” She pointed. “If we get some cover, we can hit them from that side.”

“Sounds good.” Nala said.

“Aye.” Bennu agreed. “Send my boys down the right side there, quick like. Surprise em.”

“No.” Gabrielle was watching the pattern of the arrows. “I think that’s what they want. “ She sensed the silence around her, but didn’t look at her companions. “So we’re not going to do that.”

The silence went on a few minutes more, then Solari cleared her throat. “What clued you to that, your maj?”

Gabrielle almost smiled at the political correctness of it. “Well.” She eased up and rested her elbows on the stone. “If they just wanted to attack us, they’d just have waited at the foot of the path, and when we went through that area there, they’d surround and hit us.” She pointed to a small clear spot near the bottom of the path.

“Maybe we surprised them.”

“No, because Dori saw them creeping around waiting for us.” Gabrielle reminded them. “So they knew we were coming.”

“Huh.” Solari grunted. “So why are they just pinning us down here? “

Now that was a good question. She hadn't really gotten that far yet.

"Why would they want us to attack them?" Nala asked. "You said doing that would play into their hands, but why would they want that anyway? You think they have a trap laid down there?"

"Could be they want to draw us in, yeah." Gabrielle was more than happy for the handout. "Maybe they've got a pit dug there, and they want to catch us instead of fight us."

"Ahh." Bennu made a low muttering sound.

"Why capture us?" Nala said. "We're just a bunch of .."

"You aren't." Gabrielle turned to regard her. "But I'm really not, and neither's Dori." She said. "Wouldn't be the first time someone tried to grab me to try and get leverage on my better half, and there's a lot of people out there who want a piece of her for this damn war."

"Oh." Nala exhaled. "Well, Artemis' left tit, I never thought of that."

"Me either." Solari murmured. "Boy that would have really sucked."

Gabrielle glanced around, taking in the now respectful looks aimed in her direction and knowing a moment of that black self humor so common to her partner. "Anyway." She said. "So now we are pinned down here and we've got to figure out what to do about it. We're wasting time."

"Maybe they know we're going to look at those armed troops and they don't want us to." Paladiaspoke up.

"Why not just shoot us then?" Nala asked. "Her maj is right. If they wanted to stop us, they would have."

"Well, maybe they wanted to delay us then." Solari said. "Sort of hold us off so we... aw crap. That doesn't make sense. Nala's got it they 'd just have shot us."

They looked at Gabrielle.

"Unless they're afraid to shoot us." The bard responded.

"Afraid?" Nala looked confused. "Of what?"

"Xena, dumbass." Solari rolled her eyes. "You think you've seen some bad tempers? You just wait to see what she's like if someone lays a finger on either Gabrielle or Dori."

Actually, though she thought the notion was valid and that there was a good reason to fear Xena's vengeance; Gabrielle knew in the depths of her heart that if anything were to happen to either of them her partner would be far too rolled up in grief to much care.

It was a horribly uncomfortable thought. Gabrielle shifted away from it quickly. "So."

"So, what do we do now?" Solari asked. "Cause there's no way in Hades we're going to risk them grabbing you, your maj. I'm not gonna be the one to go back and say I let that happen."

It really didn't do any good to wonder what Xena would do. Gabrielle picked up a rock and looked thoughtfully at it. Xena would just go wipe the floor with all of them and they could continue on their merry way.

So if she couldn't wonder what Xena would do, she had to figure out what she would do, and the truth was she wasn't often in situations like this alone.

So what should she do? Gabrielle had to admit privately she really didn't have a clue.

She got up on her knees again and peered between the rocks, the offset just enough to hide her from the forest yet give her a glimpse of it. The trees were tall, and thick with leaves all the way

up to their crowns, the summer rains having given the region a richness of growth everyone hoped would translate to the crops.

Her eyes traced the shape of the branches, the glittering of moisture from the rains putting the kibosh on a nascent idea of setting them on fire.

Not really her style anyway. She paused seeing some thick lumps in the branches, wondering if they were lookouts.

Too small, she decided after a moment. Too small, but were they some disease causing the odd shapes or...

Or.

“Solari, who’s the best marksman we’ve got with us?”

“Cait.” Solari answered without hesitation. “She’s just waiting her chance down the slope there, though. “

“Tell her to come here.” Gabrielle leaned her elbow on the rock. “Dori, stay where you are honey. Don’t go past that green stick, okay?”

“Okay.” Dori scrambled over to her and sat down. “Mama, c’n we go down wit the trees? Hot here..”

“I know honey.” Gabrielle murmured. “Thank you for being so good for mama. We’ll go down there and see some pretty flowers soon.”

“Here I am.” Cait came over to her, crouching low behind the rocks. She settled on her knees at Gabrielle’s side. “Something lovely for me to shoot at?”

“Yeah.” Gabrielle moved aside and cleared the way for her. “Look right through that slot there, at that tree with the bent top.”

Cait studied the area. “All right.”

“Just to the left there, see those lumps?” Gabrielle said. “Sort of looks like the trunk bends out?”

For a moment, the young Amazon didn’t answer, then she leaned forward just a bit. “You mean that bit there?” She pointed. “Where it angles?”

“Yeah.” Gabrielle leaned on the rock. “There’s a narrow bit there, where it’s touching the branch? You can just see the light behind it?”

“Yes, I do see it, how odd.” Cait frowned. “Is the tree deformed or something?”

“No.” The bard said. “It’s a wasps nest. Can you knock it off the branch?” She peered through the gap. “I think it’ll drop right on top of those guys.”

Cait grinned. “Rather.” She very gently nudged Gabrielle out of the way. “Let me get on with it.”

Solari squinted. “Holy Artemis. You can tell what that is?” She blurted. “I can hardly see it!”

The bard got back away from the rock. “Okay folks, listen up. Cait’s going to drop a surprise into their laps, and we’re going to wait up here and see what happens. If those are what I think they are, our friends down there are going to come flying out of those trees. Let’s be ready if they fly this way.”

The men and Nala got their weapons ready, grins on their faces. “Good catch, little hawk.” Bennu said. “That’ll stir em.”

“That’s sweet.” Nala agreed, drawing her sword. “This should be good.”

Gabrielle took Dori’s hand and moved with her to the other side of the rocks. “Okay, Dor. Let’s see if we can find some pretty rocks for you here.” She glanced over her shoulder. “Whenever you’re ready, Cait.”

Cait rested the barrel of her crossbow into the slot and waited, her body settling into stillness as she carefully sighted down the shaft tucked into the mechanism.

She licked her lips and stuck her tongue out, almost making Gabrielle laugh until she realized why she was doing it. She watched the Amazon take a breath, then release it, then take another one, and then slowly exhale, triggering the crossbow as she did.

They heard the hiss of the arrow, then the sound of leaves tearing, and a thunk that sounded oddly hollow.

Gabrielle smiled. “She hit it.” She said.

“Sure did.” Bennu had been watching. “Nice shot.”

“Got it.” Cait confirmed. “It’s coming off quite nicely now.”

There was a ripping, tearing sound then they could hear something large hitting branches, and tumbling through leaves.

A yell of surprise.

Then a louder yell of alarm.

“Loud.” Dori said, looking up from sorting her pebbles out. “We go get fower now?”

“Soon, sweetie.” Gabrielle said. “Maybe mama can even work out a new story when we do that, hmm? A story about how the pretty flowers grow?”

“Mama makes good stories.” Dori contentedly arranged her pebbles in a circle.

Chaos erupted down below. Gabrielle could hear thrashing and then running feet, and screaming. “Thank you sweetie, I do my best.”

“Wow, listen to them.” Solari came over to her. “Bennu, they taking off?”

“Wrecking the bushes right now.” Bennu said. “Got a dozen of em I can see.”

There was another hiss.

“Less than a dozen. Good shot young Cait.” Bennu said. “C’mon boys, let’s pick em off.” He steadied his own crossbow and Nala joined him, as they sighted over the stones towards the forest where their enemies had been hiding.

Paladia was watching from the next rock over. She turned and looked at Gabrielle. “They’re getting bit like crazy.”

“Yellow jackets.” The bard said. “They really hurt.” She moved some of the rocks over. “Let’s see if we can make a picture, Dor. Then we can go see the flowers.” She ran her fingers over the pebbles as Dori placed them into a pattern.

“Really hurts huh?” Paladia asked as screams of pain suddenly rang out. “You know that like personally?”

“Oooohh yah..” Gabrielle exhaled, chuckling wryly. “That’s how I knew what to look for. I learned the hard way.” A brief memory flashed into her mind’s eye of a long day spent soaking in a cold pool, trying so hard not to scream as Xena patiently treated sting after sting.

For once, Xena hadn't scolded her. Had felt truly, honestly sorry for her and it had showed in the gentle fingers and the quiet, serious voice.

She remembered cups of bitter tasting herbs, and falling asleep in Xena's arms, and the ungrudging comfort her companion had provided her.

She remembered opening her eyes, and looking up to find Xena's gentle, loving expression gazing back, raw and unexpected and all the more precious to her for it. All the more so when the look refused to alter, even after Xena caught her awake.

Priceless.

"Whatever." Paladia said. "Pretty cool though. We're not going to have to go get in another freaking fight now at least." She leaned forward. "Those things are kicking those guy's asses."

Nala let out a whoop, and Solari joined her. "Look at them go! Hey, your maj, they're clearing out! They're running!" Solari said. "Wow!"

"Bad mens go?" Dori inquired.

"Bad mens go." Gabrielle confirmed. "Mama made them run away, Dori. So we could go and see the flowers and the pretty butterflies and go where it's cool. That okay with you?"

Dori grinned. "Go mama!"

"Go mama." Gabrielle got up slowly, keeping behind the rocks as she peered warily over them, seeing the wild thrashing and hearing the voices slowly fading into the distance. The plan had worked stupendously well.

Not bad. The bard suspected her partner would have been delighted with her. "Let's get moving people. Just be careful."

A quarter candlemark later, and they were walking down the path, into an area now quiet and still. Gabrielle led Argo carefully, third in line behind Nala and Bennu who absolutely insisted on going in front.

Mindful of her own suspicion that she might be a target, Gabrielle had given in. But as they reached the bottom it was obvious that their attackers had well and truly fled. There were broken branches and ripped leaves everywhere, the ground churned up by boots and hooves.

There were discarded items in the grass, and they paused to investigate, wary of the still buzzing insects in the area. The Amazons and Bennu's men fanned out and searched carefully, then moved back in Gabrielle's direction.

"Just some bags and what not." Cait displayed her finds. "And we got a handful of them." She indicated the trees. "Quite dead."

"One of them I think from the critters." Bennu said. "No touch on im but that."

Gabrielle nodded. "They can kill you if enough of them sting you" She commented mildly. "Unless you've got someone who knows how to take care of that." Her expression was thoughtful. "I'm glad I did." She turned and took Argo's reins. "Let's go."

"Gabrielle, you mean you got bit by those bees?" Nala said.

"Wasps." The bard corrected her. "Yeah, I backed into a nest in a swamp way east of here a couple years ago." She started leading Argo on, with Dori perched happily on her back. "One of the longest days of my life."

"I bet." Solari caught up with her. "Found this." She handed Gabrielle a pouch. "Most of the stuff was empty, or just stuff they had food in. They must have been camping around here."

Gabrielle opened the pouch and examined it. Standard leather, and very common. Could have come from anywhere. No stamp identifying where it was made, and inside, a comb and blade, and a tiny hunk of soap.

She removed the soap and sniffed it. It had a slightly rancid smell that wasn't pleasant, and none of the herbs common to the markets around Amphipolis. The blade had remnants of short, thick hairs on it, and she reasoned it probably had been used to shave a man's face with.

Hence the soap. She considered that. What soldiers in the wild would bother with shaving? "Hm. We find anything else? Coins? Sharpening stones, anything?"

Cait came up and held out both hands. "They were camping back there, absolutely. Killing rabbits." She displayed the bones. "And this." She displayed a boar's tusk. "Quite some days, it looks like."

"Aye, they'd been there a bit." Bennu agreed. "Had a middens to the back. Near the water."

So. A group of soldiers, camping for a number of days, who shaved, and apparently were determined to stop or delay ... them? Or any travelers that way?

It wasn't really adding up. "Let's keep our eyes open." Gabrielle said. "I'm sure they're out there, and they'll probably be back. We should ride on faster once we clear the ridge."

"Yes. Ma'am." Nala said. "Whatever you say."

"Got that right." Bennu said. "Woudla spent half the day getting shot at weren't for the little hawk."

"Does he have to call you that?" Solari whispered to Gabrielle.

"It's a compliment." Gabrielle whispered back. "Long story."

"Huh."

Gabrielle started moving a little faster, anxious to get clear of the narrows. She was inwardly pleased with the success of her idea, but she'd learned in long, hard lessons from life with Xena that one moment's victory usually meant a day of disaster to follow.

She wasn't looking forward to it.

**

Xena hauled up just past the curve in the path, when she saw the commotion ahead of them. There was a huge group of people in a mass, and she realized the wagons looked familiar to her. "Ah."

"Ah?" Iolaus barely kept from crashing into her. "What's going on?"

Good question. Xena's eyes flicked over the crowd. The riders were trying to get through a mass of bodies and there was a flurry of motion in the center of the group, hands and arms moving in hitting motions.

A whip cracked.

"I think they're bringing conscripts in." Xena finally said. "I saw them on the road."

"Well. Ah." Iolaus stood on his tiptoes to see better, resting his hand on Xena's shoulder for balance. "Who's doing the fighting?"

Xena shook her head. "I don't know. Probably the conscripts fighting to get away from those guys. They didn't look happy when I saw them on the road, but..."

“It’s legal.” Iolaus concluded. “It reeks, but it’s legal. Herc and I were arguing about that just last moon.” He exhaled. “We could bust them loose.”

“We could.” Xena agreed. “But then what? They all run off and get recaptured in a day and we’re in lockdown watching them march on the ships anyway.”

Iolaus sighed. “I hate logical thinking.” He muttered. “That’s exactly what Herc said.”

Xena smiled briefly. “Let’s get out of here before we get ourselves in trouble.” She headed down a side street, and Iolaus reluctantly followed her. It was the second time she’d turned her back on the same group and she was starting to wonder if it wasn’t the Fates who kept throwing them in to her path.

She spotted an inn, a one level, somewhat rough looking building, and steered towards it. “Let’s ask in there.”

“Looks scroungy.” The blond man said. “What are you saying about the Amazons, huh Xena?” He followed her through a broken gate towards the door. “They don’t like frills?”

“They don’t like frills.” Xena repeated. She pushed the door open and scanned the interior, then she entered and blinked as her eyes adjusted to the gloom inside. “On the other hand, they don’t like stink either.”

“Ugh.”

It smelled like spoiled beer inside, and long expired food. Xena doubted Ephiny’d so much as stepped inside, but she continued forward anyway figuring it didn’t hurt to ask if they’d been seen. She spotted a small man in a stained apron near the back, and headed his way.

He had a cleaver in his hand, and his fingers flexed on the hilt as they approached, but he stood his ground and gave them both a truculent stare. “What yer want.”

“Some friends of ours passed through the city the last couple of days.” Xena said. “We were just wondering if maybe you saw them.”

Iolaus merely folded his hands in front of him, and politely smiled.

“Aint’ seen nobody.” The man spat at them. “Get outta here.” He waved the hand with the cleaver at them and then had it taken from him.

Xena threw the cleaver into the wall where it stuck with a ringing sound. She then grabbed the innkeeper and lifted him up by his shirt, pinning him to the wall with a solid bang. “Okay. Let me rephrase the question, jackass.”

The smile on Iolaus’ face went a little wry.

The innkeeper’s eyes bulged. “Ddddint’ meant it.” He stammered.

“My friends are two Amazons.” Xena said.

“Ccccourse they are.”

“Have you seen them?” The warrior enunciated slowly. “One had blond curly hair, the other long dark hair. They might have been alone.”

The man swallowed, then shook his head. “Didn’t see em. For real.”

Xena studied his face, then she let him drop to the ground and stepped back. “That’s a damn relief. If they’d had to come in here they’d have been in real trouble.” She looked around and shook her head. “Next.”

Iolaus gave the innkeeper a bright smile. “Hasn’t had her morning ale yet.” He said, as he

followed Xena to the door. "She's a laugh riot most of the time. Honest."

They emerged into the sunlit day. "A laugh riot?" Xena eyed him as they moved along the road towards the next square. "What was that all about?"

The blond man chuckled. "It's just good to see parts of you haven't changed, Xena." He said, surprisingly. "You were being so nice I was starting to wonder who it was I was walking around with."

"Gabrielle rubbed off on me." Xena ducked under an awning, and moved into the open space beyond where a big well sat in the middle well attended by citizens with buckets and waterbags. There were several wagons passing through, and at least half of the people in the crowd were in half or full armor.

She and Iolaus fit in. Xena strolled casually over to the well and waited her turn, pulling up the bucket and setting it on the well to dip her hands in and take a drink, her ears cocked to listen to the talk around her.

"See them ships in? Lotta dinars going out."

"Got some fellows want to buy everything we got I say we wait and up the dinars.."

"Tell em you fought in the war, idiot. They'll pay ya."

"Those kids, they'll end up with that bunch of women that went the last time. All dead, I'm telling ya."

Xena slowly lifted her head and looked around to identify the last voice. It was older and male, and she had little trouble finding the grizzled soldier who was filing his waterskin nearby. He was one of the ones in full armor, and his beard was liberally flecked with gray.

An old timer. She had some in her own militia. He could even have been someone who'd fought with her... fought for her once upon a time.

His eyes shifted and met hers. He blinked, then straightened, his expression altering to astonishment.

Xena deduced she'd once again been recognized. She lifted a hand and crooked a finger at him. After a brief hesitation, the man capped his waterskin and edged through the crowd, coming around to her side of the well as she leaned against a spare bit of the wall.

"Xena." He said, as he arrived at her side. "Been a while."

"Yes it has, Daniel." She agreed. "Heading to Athens?"

He nodded. "That's where the pay is." He said. "You?"

"Not if I can help it." Xena watched the crowd clear a little, leaving them some talking space. Daniel had been, she recalled, a minor member of her army back in the bad old days. A farmer's son who didn't have a taste for planting, reasonably good with a sword, with a natural inclination to keep his mouth shut. "Still selling your sword?"

"I am." He glanced at Iolaus, then back at her. "I heard you're not."

"No." The warrior agreed. "I'm here looking for some Amazons. You seen any lately? Last couple of days?"

He was already nodding before she finished talking. "Sure as Hades did. Big bunch of bitches." He responded readily. "Got in a big dustup down near the pier, broke up the inn down there and some of them got locked up."

Xena's ears pricked. "Yeah?"

“Started up with a bunch of kids signed on for the war, thought women had no part in it.” Daniel said. “Most of the oldtimers like me stayed clear. But couple of the kids ended up dead, and one or two went to the healer’s. City was some upset at those Amazons.”

“I bet.” Xena said. “Then what?”

“Most of em went shipboard that day.” Daniel said. “Except the ones in lockup. Still there, maybe. Haven’t seen em around the last day.” He added, studying her for a moment. “People said you retired.”

“I did.” Xena confirmed.

“So what’ya sitting here under arms in a muster town for, Xena?” Daniel’s eyes twinkled, just a little bit. “Didn’t know better, I thought you maybe were shopping your talents out.”

Xena sighed. “You’re not the only one who’s thought that.” She acknowledged. “But believe it or not, I’m just doing a favor for someone.” She pushed off the wall. “Now it looks like I’m going to have to go visit the jail. Thanks Daniel. Good luck to you.”

“And to you, Xena.” Daniel held a hand out. “Course, if you do end up in the war, might be like old times, eh?”

Xena clasped his arm and released it. “I doubt it would be like the old times, Daniel.” She waved as they turned to leave. “But do yourself a favor.” She paused. “Think about where in the lines you want to end up being.”

Their eyes met, and his lips quirked just slightly. Then he turned and melded back into the crowd, just another armored form in a stream of them.

“Old acquaintance?” Iolaus asked, after a moment of silence.

“He was in my army, way back when.” Xena started down the alley, feeling the draft of salt scented air hit her face. “Now what are the chances the Amazons I’m looking for are in the slammer? Do I get that lucky?”

“If I remember Ephiny right, probably not.” Iolaus said, with a rueful smile. “She didn’t seem that much of a firebrand to me.”

“No, she’s pretty sharp.” Xena agreed, as they sidestepped a laboring pony trying to draw a laden wagon upward past them. “And she’s pregnant. Hopefully that’ll make her not want to take chances.”

“Ahh. Her first?” Iolaus asked. “But wait, no - I thought she had a ...”

“She’s got a centaur son.”

“Ah. Heh.” The blond man murmured. “Scratch that about firebrand and chance taking.”

Xena had to smile about that. She briefly let her mind drift back to Xenon’s birth, and the chaos and heartbreak surrounding it.

Ephiny’s heartbreak, in losing her partner. Xena’s own heartbreak in nearly losing Gabrielle.

Nearly. She swallowed the lump in her throat. “She took a chance on Phantes. Damn shame what happened to him. I delivered the kid.”

“Hm. Yeah, I remember her saying.” Iolaus mused. “So she really is an old friend.”

Xena thought about what was then, and what was now, and what had come between in her history with the Amazon regent. Then she smiled briefly. “She is. “

They reached the dockside and now they were in the middle of a crazed chaos of people and

animals, wagons rumbling back and fourth and large crowds around each ship. It was hard to tell if they were coming or going.

The dockside shops were packed though, and Xena led Iolaus slowly along the fringe of them, keeping her eyes peeled for Amazons. They would have stuck out, definitely, in the throngs of merchants in sturdy cottons and the ships crew in linen and leather.

“I think that’s the dock jail.” Iolaus pointed at a walled building at the end of the pier. There were a half dozen city soldiers in front of it, and the windows had stout iron bars in them. “Did you want to check for your friends there?”

They crossed in front of a dockside bar, already packed and busy despite the still early hour. The crews had gotten off the ships, apparently, and headed right for the ale barrels and there were raised voices slurring out in bawdy songs.

“Ah, the good old days.” Iolaus chuckled. “I remember bars like that when I was a kid.”

“Me too.” Xena admitted. “Learned some of my best fighting moves in places like that.”

Her companion laughed. “Oh yeah.” He paused. “Want to go get a cup?”

“No.” Xena steered him past. “We’ll end up in a brawl.” She glanced ahead at the jail. “Despite how much fun that would be, I got stuff to do.” She dodged four men arguing so furiously they were unaware of anyone in their path, and caught sight of a group of armored mercenaries watching her and Iolaus.

Evil intent or just curious? She had a bare few seconds to figure it out before they were moving past the group, all her senses tingling and her body already flexing to move into a fighting position.

Maybe they sensed that. The group shifted their attention abruptly to something else and Xena relaxed a little.

Until she spotted what they were looking at.

A wagon was rolling down the slope from the upper town, with soldiers in it, and several prisoners apparently bound for the jail. Most were men, but one was a woman, and she was struggling in her chains like a wildcat.

Young, and beautiful, and dressed in the remnants of a silk gown, she was fighting so hard the soldiers holding her were sorely pressed to keep her in one place, two of them braced on either side holding the chains in both hands.

“That one of them?” Iolaus hazarded, seeing Xena’s expression.

“No.” Xena shook her head. “That’s trouble.”

Iolaus paused and looked up at Xena, both his eyebrows hiking up into his hairline. “You ever heard the term pot calling the kettle black?”

“What?” The warrior frowned. “C’mon. Let’s go around the back of that damn thing I don’t want to get involved with them.” She ducked around a pole and merged with a stream of shoppers, working to blend in as they moved around the wagon and past the jail.

“Wow. Look at that woman” Iolaus said. “What a beauty!”

The woman was gagged. Her appearance was gaining a rapt audience though, and Xena had to start to push her way through the stalled crowd to get around the wagon. “Looks aren’t everything.”

“Oh c’mon, Xena.” Iolaus started walking backwards to keep the woman in view. “I know you’re a

married woman now but you're not blind. She's gorgeous. Wonder what the deal is with her?"

"Let's not find out." She and Iolaus had gotten most of the way around, and almost in the clear when a man on horseback moved to block her way.

"Ah, our friend from the road." The man raised his hand. "Just wanted to say thanks, citizen!" He pointed at the wagon. "Your tip lead us right to them."

Iolaus stared at Xena. "Citizen?"

Heads swung around to see who he was talking to, and Xena had to pause as she reached the horses' side. "No problem." She said. "Anytime. Excuse me."

"No rush!" The soldier said. "Come with us to the inn, Xena. We owe you a drink." He gestured to the soldiers around him. "We got high marks for capturing that bitch and her two friends!"

Xena glanced at the wagon, to find a pair of absolutely venomous eyes glaring at her. "Maybe later." She said, then paused. "You got any friends in the jail? Want to do me a favor back?"

The soldier hopped down from his horse and dusted his hands off. "My brother's in charge." He said. "Sure I'd be glad to help if I could. Men, take this prize into the lock down. Don't let her loose for a minute!"

The men started hauling their captive down as she lunged in Xena's direction, but was unable to break the hold they had on her.

The soldiers laughed and one went over and circled her with his arm, lifting her up despite her kicking and struggling. He walked to the edge of the wagon and tossed the woman to three of his comrades. "Be still you bitch! Or we'll put you in the jail with some as not been with women for a year!"

"Xena." Iolaus looked uncomfortable. "What's going on here?" He asked. "What did she do?"

"Now, what can I do for you?" The soldier asked Xena. "Aside from stating again my offer of hospitality."

"Later." Xena muttered to Iolaus. To the soldier she pointed at the jail. "Someone I may be looking for might be in there. Just need to find out."

"Ah!" The soldier gestured with his arm. "Nothing easier. Come!" He glanced at Iolaus. "And your friend here as well... do I know you sir?"

"Ah, no." The blond man muttered. "Iolaus." He held a hand out and exchanged clasps with the man. "What did that woman do?"

"What didn't she?" The soldier started to guide them towards the jail. "A lot of people in Athens want a piece of her, I can tell you that. My senior officer and the city council among them."

"Really." Iolaus muttered, watching the woman be dragged off ahead of them. "She seems so young." He glanced at Xena. "Sure there wasn't some mistake?"

There was a yell ahead of them, and as they watched, the woman twisted in the grip of the two soldiers, lashing out and kicking a third right in the groin. The man went to his knees, and she kicked him in the face, then she yanked her escort around and glared back at Xena, raw fury in her eyes.

"Okay. Maybe not." Iolaus remarked.

"Don't think she much likes you." The soldier agreed. "Charming enemy you made there Xena, though it was for our benefit."

Xena's fingers twitched, and she wondered if maybe she should have let her instincts get the

better of her back in the town. Death was often unfair, but it sure kept people from sneaking up and stabbing you in the back.

She sighed. "Let's go and get this over with." She nudged the man forward. "The sooner the better."

**

"It's too quiet." Solari glanced around, taking a sip from her waterskin as they stood in the shade for a short break. "Too damn quiet."

They'd stopped for a brief rest, to get some water and get out of the sun for a few minutes. The horses were sweating, and seemed glad to be clustered under the thick leaves of the tree they'd found as they caught their breaths and cropped the lush grass.

Gabrielle was watching Dori run around nearby, the queen walking around in a circle and stretching her body out as she relieved the cramping even from the short ride as it tensed up the muscles in her back.

The sun had risen high overhead, and was baking down on them now that they were off the mountain path and into the lowlands that led to the pass to the lower plateau, the hills surrounding them blocking the wind and making it a muggy, breathless heat.

Solari sighed, and resisted the urge to dump the contents of her waterskin over her head. At least in their new village, higher up the mountain, the heat was less and the mountain walls channeled a breeze pretty much all the time. "I had to volunteer for this, huh?"

"Sorry, did you say something?" Nala asked, as she leaned back against the tree's trunk, arms spread out along the lower branches.

"Nah." Solari let her gaze wander again.

It was mostly scrubby brush they were moving through now, with only a few trees, and little cover. That made it easier to watch for any followers, but also exposed them to the merciless sun.

Life and its tradeoffs. Solari dismissed the discomfort, idly watching Gabrielle flex her hands, the warm light dappling over the bard's tanned, muscular body. It occurred to her again that her queen was completely ignorant of her own sex appeal and consequently equally ignorant of all the attention it got her.

She just really didn't clue into it. She really was just sort of puzzled when everyone wanted to dance with her, or end up in the bathing room at the same time as she did, or carry her stuff back to her quarters for her.

No clue. Solari watched Gabrielle hitch up her tooled leather belt, then hook her thumbs in it as she watched her kid chase butterflies.

No clue at all.

She really didn't look like the rest of the tribe. Most of the Amazons were taller, for one thing, generations of being their own defense breeding them tough, with heavy bones and lithe, fighter's bodies.

Gabrielle wasn't. In comparison with them, or even with her consort, she seemed almost slight and when she had her town clothes on you would never take her for an Amazon at all. But dressed as she was now, it was different.

Short and lithe, her light frame was nevertheless wrapped in visible muscle that shifted under her skin as she moved, giving an impression of confident power somewhat at odds with her gentle and humorous nature.

Very sexy. Solari produced a wry grin. Very attractive, and completely unavailable and therefore frustrating in the extreme to a nation more used to casual promiscuity. It wasn't even that people were too scared of Xena to approach her – the truth was Gabrielle just absolutely had no interest in anyone but her partner.

Village morals? Solari watched Dori crawl under the bush, down on her belly with her nose near the dirt in search of some creature or other. Could be. Or it could be what the queen had blurted out one late night in a dance, that Xena was just that good so why look elsewhere?

Or maybe that was just Gabrielle.

Cait emerged from the underbrush and walked back over to where Paladia was holding both of their horses reins. “No sign of anything.” She reported. “I went quite back to that ravine there, under where they'd gotten cross of us, and it's all quiet.”

The queen leaned against a nearby rock, one eye on her daughter and the other on their scout. “That's good news..” Gabrielle said. “But it doesn't really make sense. I know we gave them a beating, but they were here for a reason.” She frowned. “Hard to believe they scared off that easily.”

“Aye.” Bennu agreed. “Don't like the quiet.”

“Hmph.” Paladia scratched her nose. “Can't make anyone happy around here.”

“Sh.” Cait told her. “This is quite dangerous.”

“No shit.” Her erstwhile partner rolled her eyes. “I ain't worried. If those jerks come back we can just throw that kid at them. If they thought hornets were bad they ain't seen nothing.”

“Pally.” Cait poked her. “Do be serious.”

“I am serious!!!”

“All right. Let's get going.” The bard went over and patted Argo on the cheek. “C”mon, Dori. Ready Argo?”

The mare snorted, spraying her with grass bits and saliva and making her jump back with a yelp.

Dori giggled and danced around the horse's legs. “Gogo you made mama all funny.” She scampered under Argo's belly and bounced next to her mother. “Mama, go up?”

“Hang on there a minute.” Gabrielle boosted Dori up into the saddle, then she removed a piece of linen from her saddlebag and removed Argo's gift from her bare stomach. “Cait, why don't you hang back a little after we move on.” She tucked the linen away. “Just in case someone's following us.”

“Right.” Cait went over and took her horse's reins. “No surprises.”

“No surprises.” The bard agreed, hauling herself up behind Dori. “Let's hope what the watch saw was just a herd of sheep. There's enough odd stuff going on around here.”

“Got that right.” Paladia muttered, climbing up onto her horse.

“Hope it is, cause I don't like the idea of camping out here with those guys coming after us.” Solari remarked. “Cave was one thing.”

Bennu grunted assent.

Gabrielle took Argo's reins in her hand and settled herself. “Well, sooner we go. Sooner we'll get there.” She started the mare forward, only to have to pull her up a little as Bennu and Solaribattled for point ahead of her.

She bit her tongue and looked down at Dori instead, while they sorted themselves out. “Weren’t those pretty butterflies, Dor?”

“Pretty.” Dori nodded. “Mama it’s hot.”

“I know, honey.” Gabrielle nudged Argo forward as they moved out of the meager shade and back into the glare of the sun, making their way out of the foothills and into the grassy plains approaching the pass. “But maybe we can find a pond, and go swimming later. Would you like that?”

“Yes. Catch fishes.” Dori thumped Argo’s shoulder with her boots and rocked back and forth. “Gogogogogogog.”

Gabrielle caught one boot. “Honey, stop thumping Argo. I’m sure she doesn’t like it.”

She’d begun to feel that this trek wasn’t a good idea. A foreboding was twisting her guts and she wasn’t sure entirely if it was what she herself felt or something Xena was going through since it was accompanied by a sense of impatient restlessness alien to her nature.

But not to her partner’s. She let her thoughts slip for a moment, turning her attention inwards to the always fragile and sometimes unreliable link they shared.

Lately, she’d come to realize, it was also hard to tell if what she was feeling was her or Xena, because they’d started to grow towards each other so much. When she was down in town, and someone was bitching at her for something, she found her eyes narrowing and her temper shortening, and if she looked over at Xena, she saw exactly what she was feeling reflected in her partner’s expressive face.

Synergy. They’d come around to the same viewpoint on a lot of things.

“Mama, wanna hoball?”

Jerked out of her meandering, Gabrielle looked down at her daughter. “Honey balls? I don’t think we have them with us.”

“Good.” Dori held up a small sack. “See?”

Gabrielle’s heart lurched as she reached for the sack. “Did you find this in the forest, Dori?” She anxiously examined it, relaxing as she saw the sigil stamped on one side. “Or.. where did you get it?”

“Here.” Dori tugged at one of the saddlebags. “Boo put it.”

Honeyballs. Gabrielle opened the sack and took one out, putting it in her mouth and smiling around the familiar taste. “She did huh? I guess she wanted to surprise us.” She peeked inside the bag, hoping for a note, but seeing a flash of metal instead. “Hm.”

“Good. Boo Boo Boo.” Dori burred happily. “Gogo, go faster!”

The bard fished inside the bag and drew out the metal item, which turned out to be a pretty gold ear cuff, with three bits of jade in twisted wire hanging from it. “Oh”

“Pretty.” Dori had turned around to see what she was doing. “Oh, mama! Bitty rocks!”

“Yeah.” Gabrielle felt her throat close a little. She reached up and fastened the cuff to her ear, feeling the cool metal warm to her skin quickly. “See how much Boo loves us, Dori? She gives us such nice presents.”

“Love Boo.”

“Me too.” It was unexpectedly intimate, and gorgeous and she fairly ached with the hug she couldn’t give her partner for it. She gave Dori a hug instead, and they both rode along, sucking

their honey balls.

“Shouldn’t be long now. “ Bennu said, having regained the point lead from Solari as they avoided some boulders. “Then we’ll be after it.”

“Hey, is that someone watching us?” Solari pointed, and Bennu reined aside to look. “Scuseme.” The Amazon neatly moved her horse around his, and continued on in front. “My mistake.”

Bennu snorted, and shook his head. “Saucy woman.”

“You both are just lucky I’m letting you get away with it.” Gabrielle warned him, a faint twinkle in her eyes. ‘Enjoy it while you can.’

“Genr’ls orders.” Bennu said, in a virtuous tone.

“Genr’ls not here.” Gabrielle countered, shaking her finger at him. “And she left me in charge.”

As it happened, it was Gabrielle who was in the lead when they got to the bottom of the trail and turned to head through the pass. She was riding easily, one arm tucked around Dori and her eyes scanning the horizon.

After a candlemark of working their way across the plains they hadn’t seen any of their attackers, nor seen any sign of them either. The rest of the Amazons and Bennu and his men had fanned out, giving Gabrielle the point but creating a circle of protection just in case.

So Gabrielle had let her nerves settle, once Cait had rejoined them and now she was telling Dori a short tale as she craned her neck to see what the pass had to offer to them.

There was just an outcropping of granite blocking the view, and she kneed Argo into a gentle canter as she angled to one side of it. “Let’s get this over with.”

“Gogo!” Dori was delighted with the pace. “Go faster!”

Dori the speed demon. Gabrielle chuckled under her breath. The gods help them when she started riding on her own – she could see years of being a nervous wreck in her future.

She rounded the granite and they cantered forward into the pass, a wide grassy opening between the hills that was pleasant and open right to the point where Gabrielle saw what was on the other side of it. Then she stopped Argo with a quick tightening of her knees. “Whoa.”

“Mama?” Dori looked up at her.

“What’s going on , your Maj?” Solari came up next to her. “You see some...oh.” She stopped. “Oh.” She repeated. “That can’t be good.”

Bennu trotted up, shading his eyes. “Bigods, that’s a...”

“Damned army.” Gabrielle concluded, with a sigh. “A damned big army.”

“A Spartan army.” Bennu’s lieutenant said. “I seen them banners. I knows em.”

Gabrielle licked her lips, and looked carefully around them. “I guess that explains the welcoming party.” She said. “And the other guys. They must be advance scouts.” She drew Argo back until they were just inside the pass entrance again, and out of sight.

Now what? Gabrielle eased Argo up a little so she could look out at the invaders, under no illusion that they were anything but.

The army had just started to enter the pass on the other end, and apparently had stopped for some reason. There were at least a thousand men there, all armored, with siege engines and all the panoply of war tediously familiar to Gabrielle’s eyes. “I should have saw this coming.”

“Your maj?” Solari was peeking from behind her right shoulder. “Were you, like, expecting this?”

Gabrielle sighed. “Not exactly.” She said. “But the fact of the matter is, my life is just never simple or easy. If there’s a catastrophic way to do anything, I’ll find it. Hades, look at who I’m married to.”

Solari muffled a snort.

“So, what are we going to do?” Nala asked. “You think they’re part of the war? I thought it hadn’t started yet.” She frowned. “That’s what those women said. They were just preparing.”

“Well, Xena said the Spartans were no dummies. Looks like they decided to get a head start.” Gabrielle watched the front of the lines, seeing a lot of horses and men riding back and forth in very well kept armor.

Nothing good there. They were equipped to march, and march they would across this sparsely populated area, crossing the hills and ending up attacking Athens by the rear.

She knew the route by heart now, having traced it out on the map in her quarters a dozen times, trying to figure out how far her partner had gotten. The question was, would they speed across the land and leave it’s small towns and villages intact, or rape and pillage them as they went to leave Athens nothing to tax behind?

One course was bad for Athens, the other for her and their neighbors. And really, it just absolutely sucked.

Gabrielle sat back in her saddle and considered. “It’s possible they’ll go right past us.” She said. “Right past Amphipolis, I mean.”

Bennu shifted a little. “Just let em by then?” He said. “Let em head past?”

The Amazons watched her in silence. Gabrielle felt an unpleasant sensation in her guts again, and wished, vainly, that Xena was here to do what it is that she did best. “Guys, I love all of you in the Militia and all my sisters in the tribe. I’m not sending a couple hundred of us up against a Spartan army.”

“Genr’l...”

“In fact, Xena probably wouldn’t either.” Gabrielle said. “But what we need to do is head back home as fast as we can, so we can get ready in case they decide not to pass us by.” She started to turn Argo around. “Let’s go, people. We came to see what was going on, and boy did we.”

She could sense the reluctance around her as she nudged them around and headed back up the path the way they’d come. The story she’d been telling Dori was driven right out of her head, and she started thinking about everything that would now need to be done in fairly short order.

“Mama?” Dori half turned to look up at her. “We go?”

“We’re going back home honey.” Gabrielle hugged her. “Did you see all the people out there? They were shiney huh?”

“Bad mens?” Dori frowned.

Were they? Gabrielle felt ambivalent about that. She’d been around and in wars long enough to know that usually there was no real right and wrong, good and bad about the participants themselves. They were just two sides of a coin. “Well, Dor, they could be bad men.” She said. “It depends. But we have to go tell all our friends about them, so we can all be ready in case they come to see us.”

“Bad mens.” Dori concluded. “Go get Boo.”

Gabrielle suspected their daughter had inherited in full measure her partner's cut to the chase attitude and had to smile, despite everything. "Yeah, I wish I could, Dori. I wish I could."

"Your majesty." Cait had come up alongside her. "Do you suppose they really will just go by us?"

The bard exhaled. "Depends." She said. "Depends what their goals are. If their goal is to get across the land quickly and ambush Athens, then maybe." She glanced around them, feeling a sense of urgency to be out and away from the army. "But if it's not, if they're invading, then they'll destroy and take what they can along the way."

"Oh. Dear." Cait frowned. "That's awful."

"War is awful, Cait." Gabrielle said. "If this war comes to us..." She paused, and shook her head. "We don't have time to get ready for it."

Cait moved her horse closer, and lowered her voice. "Gabrielle." She said. "Shall I go get Xena?"

"We're going to check to make sure them fellers didn't come back to ambush us." Bennu rode up. "Don't need no slowdowns."

"Okay, thanks Bennu." Gabrielle eyed the path, knowing they'd need to get off and walk the horses shortly. "Let's make time while we can." She watched him and the other militia mendepart, and then she turned back to Cait who was waiting patiently.

"I know the route she's taken." Cait said. "I will find her."

The bard reached out and clasped her shoulder. "I know you would Cait." She said. "But you won't have to. She'll come back on her own."

Cait studied her with interest. "Really?"

"Really." Gabrielle said. "And if something were to happen to you when you were out there looking, Cait, she'd never forgive herself for it and neither would I."

Cait blinked.

The last thing Xena would want, Gabrielle was sure, was for people to start heading out after her, that she'd only have to turn around and go find again. The bard was the only person who could journey out and absolutely track her down and though Gabrielle would have headed out in a heartbeat she knew she had a damned responsibility here.

Damn damn damn.

"Mama, we should get Boo." Dori conveniently read her mind. "Boo chase the bad mens out."

A thousand Spartans? Yeah, Xena would certainly do her best to chase them out. "I know she would honey." Gabrielle gently moved her daughter's dark hair out of her eyes. "I'm sure she'll be back soon. We wouldn't want to miss her if she came back, would we?"

"Mama find Boo." Dori said. "We could go an bring Guff and Gogo."

"So you've got it all planned out huh?" Gabrielle felt more than a little bemused "Let's get home and we'll see what's going on there, okay."

Her tribe, and the militia.. well, she wouldn't say they were helpless in the face of the Spartan army. After all those men, and her sisters had been part of the force that had beaten back the huge, frightening and truly evil force in the last war.

Gabrielle had learned, after all, to never say never. But that force the last time had been led by Xena, who had a true tacticians mind behind those pretty eyes and had spent most of the time in the war outthinking the enemy more than outfighting them.

Fight they had, and Xena more than any of them but in the end it had been her cleverness, her knowledge of human nature, and the bond she had with Gabrielle that had won the day not the strength of her sword arm.

Try that without her?

No way in Hades.

**

Xena looked around cautiously as they entered the jailhouse, not being fond of the places even now when her visit was more or less innocuous. She spotted two men in the uniforms of the city police and walked over to them. "Excuse me.

They turned, breaking off their conversation, and eyed them suspiciously.

The inside of the jail was small, and close. The outer door opened into a space with a table, and two chairs that the men were standing next to, and behind them a corridor extended with crudely made cells on either side.

It stank. It was hot, and the door behind them was the only way out.

Xena came close to simply turning around and taking it. There was a bad vibe here, and she felt all her senses come to alert. "Morning." She addressed the men.

"Yeah?" One the men approached her. "What do you want?"

"Just to ask a few questions." Xena tried her best to be non threatening. "I'm looking for some Amazons. I heard you had some trouble with them recently and some are here in the jail."

The man's attitude changed immediately. "Hades we did." He glanced at Xena, then behind her at the patiently waiting Iolaus. "You responsible for em? City's looking for someone to pay bail and damages."

"Depends who the ones you have here are." Xena said straightforwardly. "If they're the ones I'm looking for, I'll take responsibility for em. If they're not, sorry."

The man studied her, then nodded. "Worthless lot of women if you ask me." He said. "Got in a fight in Athelo's bar down the way. Broke the place up, put a handful of citizens in the healer's house. Big mess."

"What was the fight about?" Iolaus spoke up. "Usually Amazons don't' fight without a reason."

Xena eyed him.

"The ones I know, anyway." The blond man conceded.

The jailer shrugged. "They were drunk. Who knows?" He beckoned them to follow him. "But see for yourselves, and make it fast. Got a bunch of thieves they're taking back to Athens coming in here." He led the way down the corridor, seemingly oblivious to the stench wafting from the cells.

Xena wasn't. She set the stink aside and glanced in each one as they passed, seeing little but ragged figures huddled inside.

"Here you are." The jailer stood to one side and gestured.

Xena stepped warily up next to him and looked in the cell. She had mixed feelings when the two sullen faces looking back at her were complete strangers, since getting anyone out of the cesspit the jail would have been an undoubted good deed.

"Well?" The jailer looked impatiently at her.

“Not the ones I’m looking for.” Xena said, with some regret in her tone. “Sorry.”

“Wait, who are you?” One of the Amazons surged to the front of the cell, gripping the bars. “What do you mean we’re not the ones?”

“Let’s go then.” The disappointed jailer gestured. “Haven’t got time to hang about.” He walked back down the corridor, clearly expecting them to follow. “Manios! Get that cell door open. We’ll put all the new ones in there.”

Xena looked at the two women. “We’re looking for some friends.” She explained. “Two Amazons from the mountain tribe of Thrace.”

“Yeah?” The nearer Amazon looked skeptical. The other Amazon went back to the back of the cell and curled up on the dirty straw again. “Get us out of here and we’ll help ya look.”

“Their names were Ephiny and Eponin.” Xena ignored the jibe. “Seen em?” She added, without really needing to. She saw the jerk of reaction from the woman in the back, and the sudden shift in the nearer one’s expression.

“Get us out of here.” The one close to her repeated. “Or we won’t tell you anything.”

“You already told me what I needed to know.” Xena turned and started out, nudging Iolaus along in front of her. “C’mon.”

“Wait!” The woman said. “Help us, please!”

Both Xena and Iolaus stopped, and looked at each other. Iolaus’ pale brows twitched. Xena exhaled and turned. “Did the rest of your tribe leave?”

“Yes.” The woman said. “My name is Auheila. That’s my sister Regi back there. They all left, left us here when the boat left. Please. Get us out of here. I’ll tell you about your friends. “

A loud noise interrupted the discussion. At the front of the jail, the door slammed open and the soldiers worked their way inside, struggling with the two men and the woman they’d brought in. The men were yelling loudly, and all of sudden the jail seemed too full, and too noisy to stand.

“Let me go you stupid bastards! I’ll have your heads!” The older man was bawling.

They were blocking the exit. Xena could see Milena, still gagged and tied, twisting in the arms of two husky soldiers just behind him, and the third man she’d been traveling with was slumped in what appeared to be unconsciousness behind her.

She took a step backwards, out of their view.

“Shut up or I’ll knock you out again!” The soldier holding the older man said. “You’ll have your say in Athens!”

“Damned to Hades, Jos.” The jailer said. “You didn’t say there was a woman. Can’t put them in a cell together and I’ve only got one!”

“I got this.” Iolaus patted Xena on the hip and moved forward, emerging into the main part of the room. “Well, good fellow, today’s your lucky day.” He fished out some coins. “What’s the bail on those two? We’ll take em off your hands.”

His cheerful attitude distracted everyone, and even the older man stopped struggling and stared at him. Short and muscular, with obvious weaponry yet clad in the distinctive woven leather and sturdy trousers of his traveling gear Iolaus wasn’t easily categorized.

Appropriate, for one who consorted with the gods on a regular basis. He smiled at the jailor and hiked his eyebrows at him.

The jailer spluttered. “Thought they weren’t the ones you were looking for?”

“They’re not, but they know the ones we are.” Iolaus jingled the coins. “How much?”

The jailer brightened. “Ten dinars.” He said. “And lucky it’s not more.” He held out his hand, and took the coins Iolaus offered him, giving the blond haired man a crabby little smile. “All right, put the men in the first cell.” He directed the guards. “Quickly.”

The guards wrestled the men past Iolaus and shoved them into the cell before the older one could protest further, slamming the door after them. “Good riddance.” One of the soldiers said. “Hope they hang you in Athens, you lousy thief.”

“I’m not a thief you stupid bastard!” The man grabbed the bars. “And when I get to Athens, you’ll all pay! You’ll pay!!!!”

The jailer scuttled past the cell and came over to where Xena was waiting. “Many thanks citizen.” He unlocked the door. “Good riddance as well to these two, and I wish you much joy of them.” He waited for the Amazons to evacuate, then turned. “Bring the woman here!”

“C’m on.” Xena put her hand on both Amazons’s backs and guided them towards the exit, shifting so their bodies were blocking the view of the furiously twisting captive the other guard wereshoving past them.

Milena was a little worse for wear. The guards hadn’t been gentle, and she had bruises on her beautiful face. Her eyes were practically on fire with fury as she fought to free herself right to the very end, when the door slammed on her and the guards dusted off their hands.

“Bad piece of work that is.” One of them said, as he followed Xena and her new friends out. “Glad to be rid of her.”

“As will I be when she is taken aboard ship tomorrow and sails for Athens.” The jailer said. “Good riddance to all of you.” He shuffled back to the back of the room and drew out a book, and they all exited back out into the sunlight and the waterfront before them.

The Amazons paused, looking around uncertainly. They, too, were battered and covered in dirt and the several citizens passing them looked at them with twitching lip disdain. “Now what?” The older of them sighed.

“Now you tell me about my friends.” Xena reminded them. “There’s a horse trough there if you want to wash off.” She turned her face into the sea breeze, and exhaled deeply, then inhaled to clear her lungs of the stench of the jail.

Grudgingly the two Amazons followed them over to the trough, and made use of it. “Who are you?” Auhelia asked. “Those friends of yours acted pretty stuck up and said they knew people.”

Xena chuckled briefly. “I’m Xena.” She said. “This is Iolaus”

The woman took a step back. “Oh.” She muttered. “Yeah, okay. So that’s what she meant.”

Regi, the younger woman straightened from where she’d been rinsing her head off. She looked at Xena appraisingly. “So she wasn’t lying.”

Iolaus spotted a tavern nearby. “Why don’t we all go over there and sit down with a nice mug of cider and talk about it?” He gave the two Amazons a courtly half bow. “I’m sure you both could use something other than jail food too.”

Regi smiled at him. “You’re the one who goes around with Hercules, aren’t you?”

“I am.” Iolaus admitted.

“Figures. You actually have manners.” She glanced at Xena and finished wringing her hair out, stepping away from the trough and giving Auhalia space to wash. “Unlike some other people.” She went over to the low stone wall surrounding the trough and sat down on it, resting

her elbow on her knees and exhaling.

Xena didn't look or even feel ruffled, having never pretended to manners at any time.

"Sorry" Auhelia muttered, as she scrubbed her skin. "She's cycling."

The door to the jail slammed, and Xena looked back to see the soldiers who had brought Milena and her brothers in emerged, shaking their heads. One was holding his hand. "Bitch." He said loudly. "Should have cut her tongue out of her mouth for that."

"Serves you right for putting your hands that close to that mouth, Stefas." One of the others jibed him. "You won't forget that any time soon."

"Xena, who were those people?" Iolaus asked.

"C'mon, let's go." Xena jerked her head in the direction of the tavern. "Then we can talk."

They crossed the path and slipped into the tavern, finding it mostly full with sailors and dockworkers who nevertheless took one look at Xena and cleared space for them.

Trouble knew trouble, Xena mused, as she claimed a table just to one side of the bar and motioned them all to sit down. That had opened paths for her and Gabrielle on more than one occasion, and in fact the bard had learned finally to go with it and not protest when it got them where they wanted to be.

In fact, she vividly remembered the crowded city tavern full of overly hot bodies where she'd first heard Gabrielle say the words 'can we try this your way first this time?' to her. What a crossroads that had been.

Yes, sometimes it paid just to be intimidating. "Ale." Xena told the server briefly. 'And whatever you have to eat.'

She sat down. "Now." She addressed the Amazons. "Talk."

The server came back with a tray of mugs and spread them around. Auhelia took hers and drank, then looked over at Xena. "We met your friends on the road six days back. My queen had taken an honor guard with her."

"Which we were in." Regi said.

"And we journeyed in the direction of the port city, where she was to meet with another queen who was representing the Athenian army."

"Where do you come from?" Xena asked. "I haven't seen your markings around here."

Auhelia regarded her. "Nor I your friends, though your name is known to us. We live past the mountains, in the north." She took a mouthful of ale. "In any case, we were crossing through a small patch of forest when a gang of mounted men attacked us."

"For no reason?" Iolaus asked.

Auhelia shrugged. "None that we could see. We were just walking along the road. It was late afternoon, and we hadn't seen anyone else all day."

"What did the men look like?" Xena asked. "Were they in unmarked armor, well cared for?"

Regi leaned forward on her elbows. "Friends of yours?"

Xena ignored her. "We ran into the same type." She said. "Near the pass."

Auhelia shook her head. "No." She said. "They said they were a town militia, and were mostly in mismatched junk. They claimed to be chasing us away from their patch, not really too much of a

threat.”

“Morons.” Regi grunted. “Woulda been nothing if your buddies hadn’t shown up.”

Xena sipped from her mug for a long moment, enough for possibly a count to ten. Then she set the cup down. “Go on.”

“Guess one of the guys knew them, because next thing we knew they were all over the two of them trying to rope them up like cattle.” Regi said. “No idea what the Hades they were going after. Not like they were any prizes.”

“Well now.” Iolaus cleared his throat. “I wouldn’t say that. I know the ladies in question, and neither one of them’s ugly.” He said. “Not to mention, Ephiny is an Amazon regent, isn’t she, Xena?”

“She is.” Xena replied. “She and Eponin are highly ranked Amazons. Maybe they were looking for a bounty.”

Regi snorted and went back to her mug.

Her sister exhaled. “Well, after all, our queen was there too.” She said. “If that’s the case, why not go after her?”

Ah. Xena realized she’d stepped into Amazon ego hour. “Your queen probably isn’t married to me like the one Ephiny’s regent for.” She remarked dryly. “So let’s get out of the pissing contest and down to the facts. You met up with Eponin and Ephiny. Then what?”

“Hey, you lot.” A large man with a thick, full beard fairly screaming sea captain had opened the door and was now standing in the opening. “Get your grub and move it. We’re untying in twocandlemarks and heading back to Athens.”

The sailors groaned. “C’mon! “ The one nearest Xena stood up. “We just got here, and through that storm too! Don’t we need supplies? Fixing?”

“Shut up.” The captain said. “No questions. Get your cups and back to the ship with you. We’ve got double dinars to leave.”

He left and slammed the door behind him, leaving a large contingent of grumbling men who reluctantly started standing up and tucking bits of their lunch away to take with them.

As someone who had done time on a ship, and then come to shore, Xena sympathized with them. She wasn’t prone to seasickness, but the feel of solid land after a long time at sea was a good thing. Fortunately for the men, the trip to Athens wasn’t that long.

“So is this all about you?” Regi asked, staring at Xena.

Was it? Or was that just her ego talking? “If they really knew who she was, maybe.” The warrior admitted. “What happened next?”

Gabrielle was much better at this sort of thing than she was. The bard had a talent, probably linked to her own storyteller one, that drew information out of people almost effortlessly. With her, it was like yanking a yard wide chain through a hand wide opening.

She knew probably what had happened. The men had recognized Ephiny, and either knew her for a high ranking Amazon that the men from Athens were in search of, or knew her to be the regent of the mountain tribe Gabrielle headed, and knew there was money in either their persons or news of them.

“We fought them off, and our queen offered to travel with your friends the rest of the way here.” The older Amazon said. “And so , we learned their names. I have to say, they were very strange Amazons.”

Ephiny and Pony had always seemed to her to be completely ordinary Amazons, so Xena was intrigued. But she put that aside. "So you ended up here?"

"Yeah." Regi nodded. "Just in time to meet up with about a hundred other Amazons and start a damned riot in the middle of the town." She looked angry. "These little bastards here refused us rooms. Said we were only fit for the stables."

"It's true." Her sister said.

"Except your friends." Regi added sarcastically. "They were special."

Xena pondered with the idea of just letting all the Amazons go to Athens and have the Athenians have to deal with them. The mental picture of hundreds of bickering women in the middle of the Army made her smile.

"Well you know, from what I remember of those two, they are pretty special." Iolaus gamely dove in. "And anyway, I couldn't get a room here either."

They stared at him. "You?"

Iolaus shrugged. "It's not like I have Hercules stamped on my forehead."

"I could arrange for that." Xena propped her chin up on her fist.

"So anyway I ... what?" Iolaus gave her a look. "Xena."

The warrior chuckled. Then she gave the Amazons a dour look. "Did they go on the ship?" She leaned out of the way as a server dropped a tray of sliced meats and cold vegetables on the table. "To Athens?"

Iolaus pulled over a trencher and stabbed a few things onto it from the platter. "Everyone else is." He sighed. "I just hope Herc's getting some headway in stopping the whole thing."

The Amazons turned their attention to him. "Trying to stop what?"

"The war." Iolaus put a piece of meat between a fold of the dark bread they'd been given and took a bite of it. "He's up on Mount Olympus, arguing with the family."

"Good luck." Xena muttered.

"You should go help him." Iolaus commented. "You could keep his brother busy and out of his way in any case."

A silence fell around the table, as Iolaus munched his sandwich. The Amazons stared at him, then stared at Xena.

Xena took a sip of her ale and thought about that. "He's got a better chance of talking them out of it than I do the Amazons." She sighed. "So. Did they go on the boat or not?"

Auhelia shifted a little. "They all did. On one big merchant ship. The only one that would take them." She said. "After the fight broke out, they had a choice to either leave that day, or be evicted from the city. They picked the boat. We got caught in a mess while we tried to buy some stuff for the trip."

"So they threw you in jail for buying provisions?" Iolaus picked up the thread of the conversation. "Glad we could get you out of that, by the way."

They had the grace to look abashed. "Thanks." Regi said. "They threw us in jail for kicking the crap out of the city police chief's son." She drained her mug. "Hear he holds a long grudge."

The door slammed open again, and some of the city watch entered, with the typical faint swagger of those in power. One of them claimed a table that had been recently vacated by sailors,

and signaled the server over, while his mates surveyed the room before joining him.

Their eyes fell on the Amazons.

Xena sighed and rubbed her temples. "Eat fast." She advised Iolaus. "It's going to be one of those mornings."

**

Continued in Part 12

A Queen's Tale

Part 12

Gabrielle judged the angle of the sun as she climbed up the path back into the mountains. The light was fading, and she was approaching the time when she'd have to decide where and when they'd stop for the night.

However, the sense of urgency she'd started to feel was pushing her to keep going, riding through the night and ending up home as quickly as possible. That meant no stopping, and while she knew the Amazons and the soldiers were more than capable of that she had to wonder about her daughter.

Dori had fallen asleep on horseback before, cradled in her arms or in Xena's, but usually that had been during their daily travels, not because she'd been forced to. "Hey Dor?"

"Mama?" Dori half turned around to look up at her inquisitively. "Got cookies?"

"I sure do." Gabrielle fished in her saddlebag and pulled out a travel bar, breaking it in half and giving one portion to her daughter. "Here you go." She bit into the other half, and chewed it. "What do you think about sleeping right here, Dor, on Argo's back?"

Dori gave her a puzzled look.

"Here's the deal." Gabrielle continued. "Mama's got to get back hoe real soon, back to Grandma and everyone so I want to see if Argo will keep walking all night long so we can get there faster."

Argo's ears flicked back, then forward.

"So I wanted to know if you could be good for me, and stay here and just go to sleep on Argo's back, just like Xena does."

"Boo." Dori considered. "Boo loves Gogo."

Gabrielle smiled. "Yes, she does." She ruffled Dori's hair. "Boo loves Argo, and you, and me. And I know she'd want us to get home as soon as we can, so we can tell all our friends about the men we saw, right?"

"Ride Gogo." Dori turned back around and thumped her boots against the mare's neck. "Gogo, go fast!"

“Gabrielle.” Bennu was coming up fast on her left hand side. She drew Argo over and half turned, spotting the concerned look on his face at once. “We’re being followed.”

Of course. What were the odds she’d have seen an enemy army and made it back to tell anyone in peace and quiet? Her life just didn’t work that way. “How many?”

“Hard t’say.” Bennu grunted. “Comin fast.”

Run? Or stand and fight? “Let’s move.” Gabrielle squeezed her knees tighter against Argo’s sides. “See if we can lose them.”

Dubious, at best. But turning to fight on the path they were on, single file, was worse. Gabrielle slid forward a little and took a good grip on the reins with one hand, her other reaching down to untie the straps holding her staff to the mare’s side.

“We go?” Dori looked around.

“Stay down, honey.” Gabrielle felt the mare start to pick up speed, not quite running, but moving in an amble up the steep, rocky slope. “Bennu, let’s look for a place to turn around if we need to.”

“Aye.” The soldier answered shortly. “Could hold the cave, maybe.”

Maybe. Gabrielle could hear the Amazons getting their crossbows ready behind her. She got her staff unhooked and shifted it forward in her hand, careful not to smack Argo in the head with it. Should they head for the cave?

She could see it up the slope, the opening just visible. Or would that get them pinned down again... She thought about that, as her breathing deepened, and her body tensed, hearing the low rumble of hoofbeats behind them.

“Bad mens come.” Dori said. “Mama, I don’t like it.”

“I know sweetheart.” Gabrielle murmured. “I should have left you with grandma, huh? “ She looked behind her, seeing the grim faces. “I should have left all of us with grandma and sent some young, fast kid out here.”

“They’re gaining on us.” Solari called forward. “Damn I’m glad we let you go in front.”

“If they catch us, you won’t be.” Gabrielle yelled back.

Argo’s ears went back, and she surged forward as Gabrielle lowered her profile, hoping the men chasing them didn’t just start firing when they got a clear shot. She felt tense, but she was also surprised to find the situation really annoyed her more than scared her, despite having Dori huddled in front of her.

So many fights, so many battles. So many headlong dashes, and the clang of weapons, and eventually you just considered being in mortal danger sort of normal. Gabrielle shifted her grip on her staff as her eyes swept the ground before them.

She was in that place. They thundered towards the cave, and she heard the rasp and twang of crossbows firing behind her.

“Hurry up! Get to the cave!” Solari yelled. “Watch out! Nala! Watch it!”

Argo lunged the last few feet up to the cavern level and as she started to straighten, something made Gabrielle stop, and slack off the reins instead. “We’re not stopping!!!” She yelled at the top of her voice. “Follow me!”

“B.. Ga.. Ma... What???” Solari barked. “They’re almo... wheres she.... Oh Gods! Watch it!”

“Gabrielle! Where you going!” Bennu called. “Y’can’t go up the path there, it’s a dead end!”

"I'm not! Just follow me, damn it!" Gabrielle turned Argo down a smaller path just past the caverns, one that was steep and narrow, and caused the mare's eyes to roll and show their whites. "Easy girl. " She patted Argo's neck. "Don't fall down, okay? I can't jump off you like Xena can."

"Gogo!" Dori seemed delighted at this new turn and the rapidly increasing speed. "Go! Mama! Go!"

"We're going, Dor." Gabrielle risked a look behind her, to find Solari's horse just a length beyond Argo's tail, with the rest of them behind her trying not to overshoot and send everyone sprawling downhill. "Just stay with me!"

"Hades!" One of the soldiers yelled. "I'm off... watch the horse! Watch him! He'll fall... where.."

"Your majesty have you lost your mind!" Nala squawked. "Watch it! Help!"

"Let your horses find the path!" Gabrielle hoped she wasn't making one of the more abysmal mistakes of her life. "Just hang on! Trust me! Stay with me!"

"Like ticks." Solari agreed "Watch it, kid." She warned Cait, who was trying to turn around, shoot, and maintain control of her horse at the same time. "You're gonna shoot Benny!" "Bother." Cait ducked and squirmed around, then got a shot off that almost skimmed the ears of the horse Paladia was riding. "Pally, duck."

"Turn around and ride you nut!" Paladia yelled back. "You're gonna fall off! Those guys ain't gonna follow us they're not stupid!"

Gabrielle swiveled forward, and concentrated on the path, hoping Argo would be able to find her way down it without much guidance. She had one arm around Dori with her hand clutching the reins, and her staff in her other hand and she didn't have Xena's horse skills to help her.

The path narrowed, and now branches were slapping her on either side, and she had to hug her staff close to Argo's body least it be ripped from her grip.

"Ow!" Nala cursed. "Gods be damned.. where in the Hades..."

"C'mon! Stay close!" Gabrielle yelled back. "They still behind us?"

She felt a little crazy, and her heart was starting to hammer. Not from the impending fight, but because she was really going on instinct, and Gabrielle knew she really didn't have that kind of instinct in her in a useful way.

She'd once told Xena she followed her heart into compound disasters. That really hadn't changed much, she thought. But she half remembered where she was, and if she was right....

"Watch it!" Bennu yelled. "Here they come!"

Gabrielle focused on the path, and leaned a little to the left as the path veered that way, closing in even tighter as it wound it's way through rapidly overgrowing foliage. "Uh oh." She muttered. "Wasn't really like this the laa.... Oh, sheep crap."

"Mama?"

"Keep your head down honey." Gabrielle did the same. "Watch out overhead!" She yelled behind her as she heard the curses and the sound of breaking branches. "Keep tight to your horses backs!"

"Easy for you to say!" Solari groaned. "Oh Artemis's tit." She cursed. "Careful! Careful you idiots... no, don't pull up like that! Let the horse... oh damn it!"

Argo's hooves were starting to slide a little as the path abruptly got steeper, and after a brief glance forward, Gabrielle closed her eyes and trusted the mare, gritting her teeth as they slid and

stumbled down a long embankment, half running and half falling with the sound of huge crashes behind her.

“I think this was a bad idea.” She grunted. “Really bad idea. This is one of those ideas that ends up with me on my ass in some thorn bush with Xena standing over me and giving me ‘that look.’”

“Fun.” Dori commented. “Gonna go fishes.” She was clutching Argo’s mane and looking past the mare’s shoulder. “Go go!”

“Water?” Gabrielle’s head jerked back around. “Water? Oh.. yeah.. watch it guys, we’re getting wet!”

A moment later, Argo’s hooves splashed into water, and they were covered in it as the mare plunged into a chest deep running stream. She kept moving, the force of the creek pushing her forward and out of the way of the pile of horses and yelling Amazons behind her.

“Damn!” Bennu bawled. “Watch it man! W... aw Hades!”

“AHHHHHH!!!!”

“Bother.” Cait appeared at Gabrielle’s shoulder. “That was wicked.”

“Fun!” Dori kicked up her heels. “Mama, let’s go get fishes.”

“Not right now, Dori.” Gabrielle half turned, relieved to see the majority of her little force behind her in more or less one piece. “Those guys still following us?”

“No.” Cait shook her head. “The lot of them pulled up when the path went bad and we started falling off the mountain. I suppose they figured it was too dangerous.” She pulled a tangle of leaves out of her hair. “I can’t see why myself.”

Gabrielle looked up at the path they’d taken, which was marked by broken branches and trees and so steep she quickly turned back around. “Right.” She agreed. “Everyone okay?”

“Yeah, I think.” Solari was settling her weapons around her. “That was a ride to Hades.”

“Bigods.” Bennu looked a little the worse for wear. “Been through wars since I was a tot wasn’t that crazy.” He looked over at Gabrielle in question. “And now, little hawk?”

And sometimes, you just got lucky. “Okay. We can follow this right to Xena’s valley.” Gabrielle counted noses. “If they’re still behind us, there’s arms in there and friends to wield them.” She patted Argo’s neck, and slid her staff back into its holders.

She could hear faint sounds of surprise and muffled a smile. “I didn’t want to take a chance on the cave. They’d have trapped us in there.” She continued, glancing at Bennu’s face.

His head was cocked just to one side. “Stream goes down past the entrance, yeah?” He said. “Near the wall there?”

Gabrielle nodded, seeing a new respect in his eyes. It felt a little odd. “So let’s get going. We’d need to warn Jessan’s people there anyway.” She urged Argo forward, as the stream wound between thick leaved trees and soon swallowed them from the eyes of their frustrated followers.

“Mama, no fishes?” Dori looked into the water sadly. “Hungry!”

“Honey, there aren’t any fishes right here.” Gabrielle retrieved another bar and handed it to her, as her pulse started to settle. “We’re going to see our friends in the valley. You like them right? You remember Butterbean?”

Dori was instantly distracted. Her eyes lit up and she started to bounce around on Argo’s neck. “Yes!” She said. “When, mama? Soon?”

“Soon, honey.” Gabrielle felt better as the forest swallowed them. They were in a fold in the hills, and the stream they were wading in led almost directly down past the entrance to the valley they’d fortified in the last war and where Jessan’s people now lived in wild seclusion.

Wild, because they’d chosen to leave most of the valley that way, and seclusion because the area was unsettled and at least in popular view under Xena’s protection. The warrior had claimed it, after the war as some place to retreat to in times of danger and the walls they’d constructed were still there, still cared for, and still manned, or forest dwelled, just in case.

You just never knew. It was close enough to Amphipolis for there to be regular traffic between them, and yet far enough so that Jessan’s people didn’t feel the impact of living amongst their human friends.

Gabrielle had toyed with the idea of moving there, on occasion. When the village got a little too frustrating for her.

“Hey, that was pretty cool.” Solari edged up next to her.

“What, the path?” Gabrielle glanced sideways at her. “Now that we’re not squashed like a bug down here, right?”

Solari grinned. “Hey you got to take a chance sometimes, you know?” She put a brave face on it. “That kinda stuff’s old hat to you and Big X, huh?”

Hm. Gabrielle considered that. Would Xena have considered the plunge down the mountain, endangering her family and her beloved mare old hat?

Probably not. “Well, I guess I figured getting stuck in the cave, like being pinned down on the path, really didn’t get us anywhere.” She answered slowly. “I think we could have held them there, but I get the feeling their intent is to keep us from getting back and spreading the word, not just to attack us.”

Solari nodded, and next to her, Bennu nodded also. “Makes sense.” The Amazon said. “Maybe they think we fell down and cracked our skulls and did the job for them.”

“Maybe.”

“Figure they’ll go up and down the ridge and come up the other side.” Bennu shook his head. “Didn’t figure to give up so fast.” He disagreed. “Good thing for us to end up at t’valley. Got good people there and can pass the word too.”

Gabrielle nodded. “They won’t make it over the mountain before we do though.” She said. “And if they think they’ll storm the valley entrance, boy are they in for a surprise.”

Cait chuckled coldly. “Absolutely.” She said. “Get a face full of fangs, I bet.”

The Spartans would be shocked to find the forest dwellers. Gabrielle mused. She didn’t think their presence was known anywhere outside Thrace and they kept to the wildest parts of that, not wanting any contact with Gabrielle’s people if they could avoid it.

Hm.

“Get there round dark.” Bennu said. “Be glad of it.”

Murmurs of agreement surrounded her, as Gabrielle’s eyes went a little unfocused, and her eyes narrowed in thought.

Hm.

“Hey! Hey you there!”

Xena didn't respond to the hail, figuring if someone actually wanted her attention they'd have the sense to use her name. She shoved her way through the crowd, guiding the Amazons and Iolaus along with her as they tried to put as much distance as they could between them and the tavern.

"Xena, maybe we should have stayed and explained..." Iolaus glanced behind them. "I'm sure the chief of police would have understood..."

"Hey! Gods be damned woman! Stop! I'm callin ya!"

"I'm sure he would have if we'd given him every last dinar we had." Xena spotted an opening and directed them through it "Let's get back to the inn and stay out of sight for a while." She checked the angle of the sun.

A hand grabbed Xena's arm and she turned, cocking her fist to rid herself of it's owner. "Hey!"

"Hey!" The man yelled back, a voice she recognized from the previous calling. "You deaf or something?" He seemed oblivious to the threat of Xena's knuckles. "Been calling you for a damned quarter candlemark."

Xena glared at him. "I don't answer to hey you." She growled. "What the Hades do you want?"

He was an older man, with a thick, white beard and weathered skin, dressed in the thick cloth and boots of a seaman. "Go t'Hades yourself, woman. My master just told me to tell you if you want on the boat, get your ass down to the pier and get on it. We leave at the tide." He shoved her away from him and stalked off, his legs somewhere between bowlegged and just crooked.

Xena tracked his progress, and realized he was heading to the big ship her friend the Athenian patrician had pointed out as his own. Apparently it was the one taking sail early.

The one taking prisoners.

The one she was supposed to be sailing on chasing some damned ass fools across the Aegean. For a moment, Xena thought about it, standing there being an impressive roadblock in the stream of people, oblivious to the venomous stares in her direction from those having to edge past.

"I guess that's our new friends ship, huh?" Iolaus said. "Not a nice invite, but I'm going to take it, Xena. It's the fastest way to Athens."

Xena exhaled. "Yeah." She said. "Let's grab our gear and get out of here. Sticking around will probably just get us in more trouble anyway." She changed direction and started plowing through the crowd heading across it, away from the piers and back up towards the hill the inn stood on.

"Can we come with you?" The older Amazon said. "You'er going to try and find your friends right? They're with our people."

"C'mon." Xena waved her hand, not really caring if they followed her or not. Now that she'd made the decision to go the advantages of that were occurring to her rapidly, and she felt a sense of relief come over her that she wasn't going to be stuck in the city for much longer.

Even the thought of sharing the transport with undesirables wasn't bothering her that much, as she figured the ship was big enough, and they'd be down in the hold for the voyage.

This was better. It got her to Athens faster, she could find Ephiny and Pony faster, and then start back faster, getting home before things started heating up. She ducked under a log being carried by four men and got out of the way of heavy wagon, the heat and the noise pressing in around her.

It rasped against her like a rough piece of bark. The stench of the waterfront suddenly wafter over her as the wind changed, and she was abruptly glad she'd missed out on any food at the tavern. Even the ale was sitting uneasily in her gut.

"Ugh." Iolaus grunted. "Forgot how much I hated that stench."

Xena didn't answer. She just moved faster, pushing her way through the milling crowd and reaching the stepped cobblestoned path that led up the hill. There, it was easier going and she broke into a jog, heading upwards with only a thin stream of well dressed patricians going the other way to dodge.

Behind her, she could hear the noise of the city dropping away, and the sound of her own boots on the rock got louder. They reached the top of the hill and found it almost deserted, the top road quiet and windswept and a definite relief.

"Swanky." Regi commented. "Figures."

Her sister gave her a look. "Would you shut up already?" She snapped. "I'm not going to listen to your attitude for much longer. I'll turn you back over to the police."

The woman glowered, but remained silent as they crossed the path and the large stable doors that were now flung wide open.

Xena went to them, and caught the attention of a groom. "Hey."

The man came over touching his chest respectfully. "Yes, citizen?"

"Gold stallion. I need him ready to go. Ships pulling out." Xena said, crisply, handing over a coin. "Careful of his head. He bites."

The man took the coin. "Right away." He turned and headed towards the equine Iolaus and only then did Xena realize she probably had a personally embarrassing admission to make to her old friend and recent companion. "Ah." She turned to the human Iolaus.

"Nice horse." The blond man said. "One of Argo's?"

"Her son." Xena glanced furtively around. "She had twin colts. His brother got killed in the war."

"Ahh. That last big one." Iolaus patted her shoulder. "Sorry to hear it. He studied the stallion, who had spotted his mistress and had his head poking over the stall divider watching her alertly. "Gorgeous animal."

Xena raised one hand to pinch the bridge of her nose, glancing sideways at him. "His name's Iolaus."

"Really nice head a..." Iolaus stopped speaking and looked at her. "You're joking."

Xena gave him an appealingly wry grin, and shook her head.

"Xena, you named a horse after me?" Iolaus asked, plaintively. "Really?"

"Yeah." The warrior cleared her throat. "Wasn't meant to be an insult. I like horses."

Iolaus covered his eyes with one hand and exhaled, then he started laughing silently, his shoulders shaking. "Why is this a surprise, after what you named that wolf?" He finally sighed, lifting his head and resting his elbow against the door. "At least he's good looking."

"Yeah, well." Xena let out a private sigh of relief. "Let's get our gear." She turned to the two Amazons who had drawn a little away, and were sitting on a whitewashed limestone bench. "We'll be right back."

The elder one nodded and lifted a hand. "We'll wait."

"Figured you would." Iolaus muttered as they trotted up the steps into the inn's courtyard. "What sourpusses, Xena. They've got worse attitudes than you do."

"I wasn't locked up in the damn jail." Xena evaded the innkeeper who had been hustling in her direction the moment he saw her. "Grab your stuff and lets get out of here. "

They separated at the hall and went to their respective rooms. Xena unlocked her door and shoved it open, reaching to hang the key on the hook as she moved over to where she'd left her gear neatly packed and ready to go.

She picked up her saddlebags and slung them over her shoulder, turning and pulling up short as the door swung open and the innkeeper appeared. "Sorry. Nice place, but I need to get going."

"The ship, of course." The innkeeper was already nodding. "Many will go with you, in fact if all the hysterical hurrying by servants is any indication." He said. "I thought since you were one of the few delightful patrons who've graced my premise I thought I might gift you with a picnic basket for you to take aboard with you."

On the verge of simply passing right by him, Xena paused, surprised at the offer. "Why was I delightful?" She asked bluntly. "Because I didn't break anything?"

"Because you are as wonderful as you think you are." The man answered, with a smile. "So rare. So very rare." He gave a slight bow. "The basket is waiting right outside as I figured you were not the waiting kind. Will you accept it?"

Xena focused fully on him, meeting his eyes and producing an open, genuine smile. "Absolutely." She said. "And back atcha. Anyone who asks where to stay in Thera, I know where to send them."

"Not everyone, my dear." The innkeeper's eyes twinkled. "Only the best people, please." He opened the door and they emerged into the hallway which was, in fact, full of scurrying servants running back and forth.

Iolaus was waiting, his pack on his back, and standing tight against the wall was one of the inn servants, with a big wicker basket clutched firmly in both hands.

"Escaobar, please follow these good people outside to the road with this basket, then return." The innkeeper said. "Good voyage, sir and madam." He gave a slight bow again, then he disappeared into the flow of people without further word.

"C'mon." Xena headed back towards the stable.

"What's in the basket?" Iolaus asked, as he fell in at her side. "Kittens?"

"Yeah, for lunch." The warrior rambled down the steps and emerged into the street. "Hope you like yours raw."

"Yum. I can see where Hercules learned those cooking tricks."

Despite it all, Xena smiled, her humor restored by the innkeeper and his basket, and the prospects of getting out of the city. She gave the equine Iolaus's cheek a pat, then glanced past him to see a muddy, sad looking horse being tied up outside the stable.

With a start, she recognized the white mare, under a coating of mud and briars, and more than a little dried blood. "What happened to her?"

The groom looked up in surprise. "Ah. Was a criminal's horse, citizen. The soldiers brought her in, but she's not to their liking and too spirited, so they asked us to clean her up a little to see if we can get a dinar or two for her for them."

Both Xena and Iolaus reacted at once, reaching for their belt pouches. "Ah aha h!!" Iolaus jumped in front of her. "You have one. Just hope I don't name this one Xena."

"A white horse?" The warrior retorted.

"Never mind that." Iolaus went over and touched the mare's nose, stroking it gently. "I'll give five dinars for her, and take her with me. How's that boys? You don't even have to clean her up."

It'll give me something to do onboard the ship."

The groom stuck his hand out without hesitation. "Wish we had more patrons like you sir." He took the coins. "Take a dozen, any day. She's a sweet beast, bad used." He added. "Real fine blood."

"We'll take care of her." Iolaus stroked the mare's cheek, encouraged when she made a soft nickering sound and butted her head into his chest. "Don't worry girl, you're safe now." He smiled. "Mommy Xena and I will take care of you."

Xena's eyes narrowed. "My mother's got a new batch of piglets that need names." She commented, in a meaningful tone.

Iolaus smiled his bright smile. "Message taken." He said. "I remember your mother's hogs. I've fought hydras less frightening."

The Amazons had stood when Xena and Iolaus had appeared, and now they were standing to one side, watching them uncertainly. Xena spared them a glance, then she shifted her saddlebags to Io's back and fastened them in place. "Let's go."

"Madame?" The servant from the inn, who had been standing in silence as this went on, stepped forward. "Your basket."

Xena hesitated, then she took the wicker and fastened it to a saddle ring, ignoring Io's dubious look at it. "I'm sure there's an apple in there for you, boy." She muttered.

The servant turned and escaped back up the steps into the inn, leaving them alone in front of the stable.

In the distance, a faint rumble of thunder was heard. "Just what we needed." Iolaus sighed.

"Let's get onboard before it starts." Xena led the way down the slope from the inn, her hand firmly clasped on Io's bridle. The mare followed with no real urging and they made their way through the crowd onto the larger road that led down to the harbor.

Glancing to her left, Xena saw a train of servants hurrying down the steps they came up heading in the same direction, laden with burdens and carrying bags across their shoulders. She wondered at the sudden turn around, though. "Huh."

"You say something, Xena?" Iolaus was gently pulling the burrs out of the mare's mane.

"Wonder who changed the ship leaving?" The warrior mused. "They didn't seem to be in that much of a hurry last night."

"Good question." The blond man said. "Maybe they got word things are heating up faster than expected? Could have come in on the ship."

"Could have." Xena acknowledged. "Whats your plan once you get over there?"

Iolaus was silent, then he glanced around. "Tell you later." He said. "It's a little irregular."

Oh boy. Xena kept moving, and they wound their way down the harbor past the tied up ships, most of which were still offloading people and merchandise onto the docks.

Only the ship on the end, the largest and richest of them, had a frantic spate of activity around it, and wagons and men running to carry supplies onto the ship instead of taking them off.

She spotted a carriage approaching, a well built conveyance drawn by four matched horses, and they bustled through the crowd as they pulled up to the gangplank. A man hopped down and opened a door, and white robed patricians alighted, tugging their garments straight as they observed the ship.

Xena recognized a few of them as their dinner partners from the day before. She sped up her pace a little, drawing a determined path through the crowd to where the patricians were gathering.

She wasn't worried about talking her way onboard. After all, someone from the damn ship had sent an old salt after her. But getting the situation settled from the start would make it easier, especially since she was bringing the two Amazons with her.

As she drew nearer, she saw a man dressed in a gold threaded overtunic mount the gangplank and head down to greet the newcomers. From his stance and attitude, Xena guessed he was the captain on the ship, and watching his body language as he greeted the patricians confirmed it.

This was a man who was his own master. Xena muffled a smile, as they crossed the last bit of dock and dodged the last hurrying sailors to arrive just in front of the wagon in time to hear the captain speak.

"Gentlemen, your request is impossible." The captain said. "To prepare this vessel to sail in so short a time – out of the question."

The patrician in front, who Xena recognized as her dinner companion, merely nodded. "Are we ready, Captain?"

The man sighed. "We are not." He shook his head. "We have difficulty obtaining two items critical to the sailing, one of which being fresh water."

"Oh, that's a necessary thing." Iolaus said. "I've been on a ship without fresh water. They made us drink rum the whole time. Couldn't even remember my name most of the trip."

"Captain, we must sail." The patrician said. His head turned as he regarded the surroundings and he paused as he spotted Xena. "Ah, there you are." He seemed relieved. "Word reached you then, I see."

Thus addressed, Xena advanced through the crowd of robes and arrived to stand in front of the captain. "They found me." She agreed. "Are we sailing?"

"Of course." Denius said. "We must get back to Athens immediately. I had word from one of my men who came in on the Striped Duck over there that things have moved ahead far more quickly than I imagined."

The captain was regarding Xena warily, and the warrior had the feeling she knew him somewhere from back when.

"Well, here we are." Xena indicated the small group behind her. "I picked up a few Amazons. They're coming with me." She added, in an uncompromising tone.

"Excellent!" Denius seemed delighted. "The more the better. Let's go onboard, while the captain here finishes getting ready." He turned and stared at the captain. "We will be ready at the tide, correct captain? Whatever it takes to obtain your supplies, do so. I will pay."

The man touched his cap brim. "As you wish." He answered grimly. "But it'll cost dearly, I'm warning you."

Denius made a gesture towards him. "We're preparing for war, man. What kind of idiot are you? What cost could matter? Just be quick about it. We'll be getting settled onboard."

The captain stalked off, visibly angry, and the sailors busy coiling ropes and moving things onboard gave him wary looks as he passed.

One of the men, a tall, thin man in a linen tunic, came down the gangway and stopped before them. "I'm Teras." He said. "First mate. You need to bring all onboard? Them horses? The wagon?"

I'll get some to help."

"Just our bags." Denius indicated the pile of luggage. "I can find my cabin onboard. Please let us pass." He led his group up the ramp as the man stood to one side. Then he stopped and turned. "Make sure there are rooms made ready for our other guests." He indicated Xena and her little gang. "As good as ours."

The patricians disappeared, leaving the mate to face them. "Horses come at your hand or need hobbles?" The man asked. "Got room for them below."

"Lead on." Iolaus said. "I need to clean this girl up a little.."

"My tack kits in my bags." Xena said, as she started to lead the stallion up the ramp. "You can borrow the brushes."

The mate gave them strange looks, but shrugged and led the way onboard, edging past Xena and crossing to the deck to wait for them to follow.

It was a strange feeling. Xena felt the soft motion under her feet and she kept a good hold on Io's bridle as they walked up the broad wooden ramp and into the hold of the ship.

It smelled of old wood and pitch, and the sharp scent of rope and Xena remembered all too vividly the last sea voyage she'd chosen to make. She felt a pang in her chest, but she swallowed hard and dismissed it, acknowledging that this time, absolutely, was very different.

She just really hoped the trip would end in a much better place.

**

It was almost dark by the time Gabrielle lead them out of the forest through the thick swath of trees that bordered the entrance to the valley.

No one was arguing with her now, or trying to push in front. They were content to follow along where she led them, and had spent a last few candle marks in a quiet peaceful pace through beautiful virgin forest.

It was quiet and wild here, far from the road, and close enough to the borders of the high mountains to make settling out of the question for most.

They'd left the stream about a candle mark back, and Gabrielle figured her boots were about half dry as she guided Argo around some fallen logs towards the somber, now age darkened wood stockade fence.

"Glad to see this place." Bennu said. "Good to sleep inside walls with them lot out there."

"You got that right, Benny." Solari stretched her body out. "I'll be glad to see the fuzzies. Good people." She added, almost as an afterthought, as she caught Gabrielle's glance in her direction, and the grin at the words.

"They're awfully nice." Cait said. "Even Pally thinks so, finally. Don't you Pally?"

Paladia considered the question. "Yeah." She said, after a long pause. "We didn't start out so great, but they grown on ya." She conceded. "Kinda like other people around here."

Gabrielle's ears twitched, just a trifle, and she wondered if the ex rengade was referring to the Amazons, to Cait, whom she was partnered with, or to Gabrielle herself.

Or all of the above. Hard to say. She took a deep breath and let it out, looking very much forward to the end of a very long day. "C'mon, Argo, I think I smell a nice stall and some hay for you." She patted the mare's shoulder as they headed down the last little slope to the gates.

There was activity around the entrance, and after a moment a group of tall, robust, furry people

ducked out the gates and jogged in her direction.

Ah. “Jessan!” Gabrielle waved in his direction. “Hey!”

The forest dweller in the lead returned the wave and hustled over to her, his body posture already putting Gabrielle on alert. “Hey Gabrielle... glad you’re here.”

“Uh oh.” The bard reined Argo in as her friend arrived at her knee. She slid off the mare’s back and gave him a hug, as the second forest dweller distracted Dori. “Why do I always worry when I hear anyone say that?”

“Ah heh.” Jessan waved at the rest of the group. “C’mon inside. It’s not really bad, or anything. We just had some refugees show up here who didn’t expect walking carpets to be manning the walls.”

“Well.” Gabrielle took hold of Argos reins. “Stay up there, Dor, we’ll be inside in a minute, okay?”

“Mama, want to go play with the pipples!” Dori was fairly bouncing up and down on the saddle, despite the long day of traveling behind them. “C’n I go?”

“In a minute, honey.” Gabrielle slid her arm around Jessan’s back. “I’ve got some news too.” She said, in a lower tone. “Bad news.”

Jessan sighed, then he glanced around, looking back at Gabrielle in silent question.

“She’s out doing me a favor.” Gabrielle interpreted the look without effort. “That’s part of the news too. Let’s go inside first though I’d rather not drag through it more than once.”

“Uhgh.” Jessan wrinkled his muzzle up. “Well, glad to see you anyway.” He gave his friend a toothy smile. “We were just about to visit, too. We’ve heard some weird things lately.”

Gabrielle laughed wryly.

“That’s what I thought.” Jessan turned his attention to Dori. “Hey there, bittyboo!” He greeted the child. “My kids are gonna go nuts when they see you.”

“She loves playing with them.” Gabrielle said. “And I know she’ll be glad to sleep on something but rocks tonight as much as I will.”

Jessan led the way to the gates, which were swinging all the way open to receive them. Inside, a handful of forest dwellers were on hand, all toothy smiles as they entered the stronghold.

That’s what it was, actually, not so much a valley, or a village, but the first place Xena had fortified in the war, where they’d gathered their forces and she’d taught the Amazons to fight horseback. They’d built a huge stockade fence across the narrow valley opening, twice the height of a man and the forest dwellers had chosen to take it over after the battle and live there.

It was secluded, definitely, and well protected, and there were cave systems inside that could easily hold three times the number of people who lived there.

Plenty of space to spread out, a good size lake in the bowl part of the valley whose far end was closed, good hunting, good fishing... really it was all you could ask for if you were a secretive group of not quite humans looking for a nice place to live.

They exchanged greetings, and the big gates swung shut with a solid boom behind them, making Gabrielle able to relax fully for the first time in several days. Inside the gates there was a big round gathering place, and an outdoor cookpit that was sending sparks into the air.

“Wow.” Gabrielle looked around. “There’s a lot more people here than last time.”

Jessan smiled. “Finally got the rest of the village to move back here.” He commented. “Mom and Dad, too.” He waved across the open space to a figure Gabrielle recognized as Wennid, his

mother. "Truthfully, that whole ghost thing freaked em."

"Really?" Gabrielle mused. "Well, yeah, I guess with them worshipping the column and all that stuff." She remembered her own part in the drama. "But really, they turned out to be nice people." She paused. "Spirits." She paused again. "Whatever."

"Yeah, it was just a little too close to home." Jessan smiled as several younger forest dwellers ran up. "Will you guys be nice and take our friends horses down to the yard? They've had a long day it looks like."

"Sure." The nearer one grinned at Gabrielle. "Will you be telling stories later?"

Jessan rolled his eyes. "Nice." He sighed. "Can you let her get a drink first?"

Gabrielle chuckled as she swung Dori down from Argo's back, and unclipped her saddlebags. "I'm sure I will be." She said. "Thanks."

The group followed Jessan through the open space and past the fire to a path that led between thick leaved trees and opened up to a small grove with a half dozen round huts in it. "We just finished these for some newcomers due in a moon." Jessan said. "But you can test em out."

Loud squeals made them all turn, to see three tiny figures racing across the grass making a beeline for Dori.

"Honey, your friends spotted you." Gabrielle said. "Why don't you... careful!" She watched Dori bolt past her to go meet her little playmates. "Gosh they're so cute."

"That's one word for it." Paladia commented, but in a mild tone.

"Okay." Gabrielle turned around. "Split up and grab some bunks, guys. I'm going to talk to Jessan for a bit then maybe we'll see if I have to talk for our supper." She waited for them to split up and separate, taking five of the six huts, then she turned and looked at her friend.

Jessan looked back at her. "Want a drink?"

"Do I ever."

They linked arms and headed not to the sixth hut, but down another path into another secluded glade, this with a single homestead in it with space all around and it's own small brook. They pushed the door open and entered Jessan's house, which was cool, quiet and empty.

Jessan nudged her towards a bowl chair and went to the cupboard. "So."

"So." Gabrielle settled herself. "Where do I start."

"Want me to?" Her friend came back with two cups and handed her one. "Yesterday, one of our scouts came in and told us he found five strangers, in fancy clothing, nearly dead in the forest." He watched Gabrielle's eyes widen. "Freaked us out a little."

"I bet."

Jessan sat down in the bowl chair across from her. "Pretty big debate on whether we should bring them here or not."

Gabrielle merely nodded. Given how she'd met Jessan, it wasn't entirely unexpected that his people would rather shy away from hers.

"But we did." Jessan said, with a half shrug. "I think mostly because we were all so damn curious as to why they were dressed so funny out here in the forest." He grinned briefly. "Elani took care of them and finally this morning one of them woke up, then promptly passed out again seeing her."

“Ah.”

“Woke up again, and it turns out they’re from Athens.” Jessan continued. “Looking for Xena.”

“Ah.” Gabrielle repeated the grunt, with a completely different inflection. “Lot of that going around.” She said. “Athens is going to war with Sparta.”

“We know. They told us.” Her friend agreed. “Over and over and over again, like we were pussy cats walking on two legs who didn’t know better.”

Gabrielle took a long swallow of the cool ale. “So they missed Amphipolis?” She queried. “That’s a little tough, you know? It’s the only thing on the road on the way towards here. That and Potadeia.”

“I know.” Jessan said. “Apparently they got jumped near the pass and went on the run and ended up crossing the river up here, then they got attacked again. Not real friendly people in your neck of the woods.”

“No.” Gabrielle sighed. “I think they’re Spartans.”

Jessan’s eyes widened. “Really?”

“Yes.” The bard said. “We found a Spartan army about to cross into Thrace just below the river. The people who attacked the Athenians were probably scouts.... At least on this side of the river. Maybe even at the pass, since there was a big group of them who rode into Amphipolis looking to recruit Xena for their side.”

Jessan blinked. “The Spartans?”

“Yes.”

“But that’s what the Athenians wanted too.” The forest dweller said.

“It’s been that kind of moon.” Gabrielle sighed, taking another drink from her mug. “Poor Xe.”

“Which side is she gonna pick?”

“Neither.” Gabrielle said. “Matter of fact, she’s out chasing down Ephiny and Pony. They chased after some Amazons who were going to enlist to try and change their minds.”

Jessan cradled his mug, and watched her. “Staying out of it’s not easy.” He said. “Will they let ya?”

Good question. Gabrielle lifted a hand and let it drop in tacit admission. She knew Jessan didn’t believe they’d be allowed to stay neutral any more than she did. “Right now, I’m mostly concerned with getting back home and figuring out what we’re going to do when that army marches through here.” She said. “We ran into at least two of their scouting parties ourselves.”

“So... the’re going to sneak up from behind, so to speak?” The forest dweller asked. “Sounds pretty scummy.” He raised his mug in a toast. “But we’ll deal with the like everything else.”

Gabrielle lifted her mug and tipped it in his direction. “You know it. We heard here was a large bunch of people moving through. We thought it was conscripts from upper Thrace for the army. That’s why I headed out to just see for sure.”

“And because you can’t sit still.” Jessan grinned, to take the sting from the words.

Gabrielle smiled back, a bit sheepishly.

“So.” He stretched his legs out and crossed his ankles. “Been quiet at home?”

“Hum.” The bard scratched her jaw. “Where do I start?”

“Uh oh.”

**

“Mama, cn’ we stay here till Boo gets back?” Dori tugged at her mother’s arm, from the chair next to her.

Gabrielle put a bit of bone she’d just sucked clean down on her plate. “You want to stay here, honey? Did you have fun with your friends tonight?”

“Mama yes I did.” Dori said with wide eyed sincerity. “They gots boats, mama they want to go to the water and go around.”

“On the lake?” Gabrielle reached over and smoothed Dori’s hair back. Despite the fact it was long past moonrise, and she’d been up before dawn, the child looked as brightly energetic as she had at breakfast. “You want to go o the boats on the lake?”

“Go to fishes.” Dori nodded. “C’n we stay?”

Gods, it was tempting. Gabrielle looked over at the rest of her group, who were scattered at nearby tables intermingle with the forest dwellers, laughing and enjoying their late meal.

The forest dwellers were flourishing here. They were stalwart and friendly, and there was a part of her that felt very comfortable with them despite her sometime checkered history with different factions of their peoples.

It was good to see Jessan, and his wife Elani, the triplets who were growing like weeks, like Dori was, and who were the most favorite of her playmates. Little Xena, little Gabrielle, and little Warren, whose energy equaled her child’s own.

It was tempting to go back to Amphipolis, and talk everyone into coming here to the valley. They would be safe here, and probably even anonymous, since the chances of the Spartans wandering this far in the wilderness looking for people was pretty slim.

Just let them go past, let them wreak whatever havoc they intended to, and then after they were gone, go back and just build everything back up again. Maybe if they found Amphipolis abandoned, they just go on by.

Part of her conscience was horrified, knowing that so many people would be affected if she did nothing, warned no one, but another part of her had found itself highly tired of getting beat up time and again in the service of those who really didn’t give two squats about her.

I think I’m finally growing up. She mused silently. I mean, really growing up and not just piling up experiences that make me dodge one way or the other.

Feels weird. She gazed around at her friends, and for a long moment ached to feel Xena’s casual touch on her shoulder, or the offhand ruffling of her hair.

Then she twitched, and shrugged her shoulders, leaning back in her chair as she cradled her mug between her hands. Across the room, Wennid caught her eye, and smiled, and she smiled back, her eyes flicking to the tall, still thin figure of Lestan seated in a padded chair next to her.

Recovered, to an extent, the horrible injuries grown over by fur, only the missing arm and the loss of muscle on his chest remaining to mark what had almost cost him his life.

Almost. He had survived by a combination of Xena’s skilled hands, and his own iron will and looking at him Gabrielle felt a sense of accomplishment inside. This one little thing had been a success of theirs and she was proud of it.

A hard thing. But they’d seen it through, and Lestan had lived to see his new home raised, and watch his grandchildren run wild through it, and was glad himself no matter what the effort had

been.

So much of their lives was like swimming upriver, sometimes making some progress, other times being rushed back downstream. But she could look at Lestan, and this valley, and the thriving Amazons and her own family and know those few nuggets of positive reality.

“Mama, you tell story?” Dori changed mental directions. “Want to hear about Boo.”

Speaking of nuggets of positive reality. Gabrielle didn’t miss the pricked ears all around her. “In a little while, sweetie.” She told her. “Let mama finish her dinner, and you finish all of yours, then I’ll tell everyone a story. How about that?”

Dori eyed her thoughtfully, then she resumed plowing through her food, smacking her lips appreciatively. “See mama? Num num.”

Gabrielle chuckled and set a piece of sliced meat between a fold of waybread and nibbled on it as she waited for everyone to get through their dinner. She knew stories were welcome any time, but she liked people to pay attention, and it was hard to do that if you were busy with your food.

Jessan leaned on the arm of his chair. ‘Don’t take this the wrong way.’ He muttered. “But it’s a lot more relaxed here without your other half around.”

“Considering the last time?” Gabrielle said. “When Ares showed up? I bet.” She leaned on her own chair arm a little closer to him. “I forget sometimes how weird it is with them.”

“What’s he really like?”

Oh boy. Talk about your loaded questions. “Wow.” Gabrielle pondered the question, taking a bite of steak and chewing it. “That’s a tough one. Mostly because he’s changed over the time we’ve known him.”

Jessan studied her face in the firelight, noting the strong planes “Uh huh?”

Gabrielle swirled her ale in her cup and took a sip. “Yeah.” She said. “First I was afraid of him. Then I resented him. Then I was angry at him. Then I hated him with every fiber of my being.”

“Uh?”

The bard chuckled wryly. “Now I think I’m almost to the point of liking him. Sometimes.” She sighed. “He sure has a lot more shades of gray than he used to for me.”

“Ah huh.”

“You asked.”

“Boy, did I. So.” Jessan peered at her. “How’s the weather so far this year?”

Gabrielle laughed softly, and patted his arm, turning her thoughts to what story she’d tell, and whether she’d be able to avoid the one with the cow.

Talk about ruining the image.

**

Xena watched the barrels being rolled onboard by sweating sailors, the sun’s heat baking down on them in a muggy, ominous stillness. Under her boots she could feel the slight motion of the ship in it’s traces and found herself wishing they’d throw the lines off and at least break out of the harbor into a breeze.

She went to the side of the ship and looked over, idly watching the boat next to them offloading their cargo as the captain of her own vessel yelled strident orders behind her.

The Amazons had gone with Iolaus belowdecks with the horses, to get out of the sun, and then square away where they'd spend their time during the voyage.

She, herself, had been allotted a corner space in the forecastle, amidst the patricians. The fact that she had a shuttered window almost balanced the need to mingle with them, and she wasn't displeased to find the ship's crew treating her with an obvious, wary respect.

Iolaus had been put in a cabin nearby, smaller, but evidently to his satisfaction based on the relieved grin he had on when he emerged from it.

A week at sea. Xena leaned on the railing and exhaled. Then a day or two in Athens, if she was very very lucky and a week back. There was already a feeling in her gut that it was taking too long, and that something was going on back at home – she only wished she knew if that was real, or if it was just wishful thinking.

Wouldn't it stink if she got home and no one had missed her, right? Xena smiled to herself, and acknowledged how unlikely that really was. Two people at the very least would be watching for her return and even as she thought that she felt or imagined she felt a gentle tug calling her back.

The notion occurred to her that she no longer enjoyed being alone.

"Scuse me, lady."

Since she was the only woman on deck, Xena rightly concluded this unlikely hail was for her. She turned to find a small, bandy legged sailor standing next to her. "Yes?"

"Y'won't remember me but we met once." He said.

Xena scanned his face briefly. "I do remember." She smiled. "On Cecrops ship."

The old man grinned. "Aye." He said. "Been gone from that a time, yeah? S'prised to see you here. Heard you'd tossed up the army thing."

"I have." Xena said. "I'm doing someone a favor."

The man nodded. "How's your sweetie?"

Amazingly personal question. Xena actually felt herself blush.

"Gutsy kid, that one." The man went on, apparently oblivious. "Beautiful eyes."

Xena retrieved her dignity. "Gabrielle's fine." She said. "We got married and had a kid."

The sailor had been nodded in remembrance. Now he paused, and looked at her from under grizzled eyebrows, taking in the warrior's pleasant smile. "Didja now?"

"Mmhm." Xena leaned casually against the side of the ship.

"Well. Figure that." He wandered off. "Ain't that something."

Xena chuckled softly. "Yeah, ain't it?" She exhaled, pushing off against the wall and turning her head when she heard the commotion of a wagon approaching. She looked over the side again and spotted the soldiers, pulling their wagon up and getting ready to empty it.

Ah. Xena watched them yank the two brothers out of one side, and a trussed up figure tied head to foot out of the other and felt a bare moment of sympathy for her randy adversary.

She hadn't liked her, hadn't appreciated the attentions, but the girl had spirit and it twinged her conscience to see them toss her to the ground like a sack of tubers.

The soldiers shoved the men up the ramp, and one picked up the girl and threw her over his shoulder, marching up after them and crossing the deck to descend into the hold on the opposite

side of where they'd taken the horses.

The group of patricians chose that moment to emerge back onto the deck, and joined Xena at her post. "Was that the water coming aboard?" Denius asked. "It grows late. Where is that damned captain?"

"Barrels came on earlier." Xena said, briefly. "They just brought some criminals onboard."

"Ahhh yes." Denius nodded. "We'll get a pretty penny for turning those bastards over. They swindled three of the senior council out of hundreds of dinars before they turned tail and ran."

"Really?" Xena saw the captain trod up the gangway, gesturing to his men. "Pulled one over on em, huh?"

"Indeed." Denius said, gravely. "Posed as children of a very rich man, who was interested in investing in the war. Led them on, and ended up robbing them one night after they'd been supped like princes. " He shook his head. "With luck we'll see them hang."

Xena pondered what she remembered of the captives. Something wasn't quite adding up, since she clearly remembered the trio's statement that they were traveling towards the port city, ostensibly to return to Athens.

Heading towards Athen's soldiers? Knowing they were looked for? The warrior frowned. "They were on the run?"

"Assuredly." Denius nodded. "With a large price on their head, from the council. The guard captain who captured them will do very well."

Hmm. Xena's brows hiked, just a bit.

"Are they known to you, Xena? I thought I had heard from the police your name involved somehow?" Denius turned and regarded her with a more intent interest.

"I wouldn't say known." The warrior temporized. "Looks like we're taking off." She drew their attention to the captain, who had marched up the steps from the hold to the deck, and was bearing down on them. The sailors started to swarm around the deck as well, and suddenly the creak of lines and the flutter of the sails sounded loud. 'Captain."

"Eh." The captain grunted. "Two hundred dinars, that's what this haste has cost you, sir. " He addressed Denius. "And all the waterfront raped of water, mad as hind bitten goats and minded not to let me put in here again with ease."

"They'll get over it." Denius waved the idea off. "They have two hundred dinars to nurse their grievances, and buy ale with to wash their feet." He took a deep breath. "Are we off then? I want out of this stinking city."

"We are." The captain agreed. "Be warned though, sir, we could not take on the delicacies one of your station expects. It will be soup and travel bread, and smoked meat for the crossing." He glanced at Xena. "For everyone."

The warrior regarded him thoughtfully. "If you're nice to me, I'll fish for us on the way." She said. "If you're not, I'll use you as the bait." She retained her relaxed posture, but allowed a lazy smile to appear as the man stared at her.

After a moment he stomped off and started yelling orders at the crew, and the patricians around her started laughing.

"Well spoken, Xena." Denius chuckled. "The man's a pompous ass, even for those of us well used to them."

Iolaus emerged from the hold, dusting his hands off. He spotted them and approached, slowing

to a halt next to Xenas tall form. "All set." He said. "I can't believe what they did to that animal. She's such a beauty."

Denius cocked his head in question.

"Your crooks." Xena supplied. "One of them had a nice mare they brought along who was pretty banged up. Iolaus bought her."

"Ahh." Denius nodded. "Then we all profited by the capture, even the horse who surely will be better served with you as her master, sir, than the brigands who brought her."

Iolaus smiled politely.

Denius turned as they heard the crack of a whip belowdecks, and the ship started to move away from the dock propelled by the slave wielded oars extended to either side of her. "Come, let us refresh ourselves until we are out to sea and the breeze takes the stink away." He said, glancing at Xena and Iolaus. "Sir, madam, until later."

The patricians left the deck, climbing up the short flight of steps to the forecabin and disappearing inside the inner hall that led to their cabins.

Xena preferred to stay in the fresh air, and she leaned next to Iolaus as they watched the other ships slip behind them, knots of people on the docks yelling in outrage, with some pointing in their direction. The sailors worked to rig the ship for sea, ignoring the commotion behind them.

"I saw them bring those prisoners down into the hold." Iolaus said, after a few minutes of silence. "They're in cells at the very bottom of the ship. Stinks down there."

"Cells usually do." Xena remarked. "There's a lot of slaves and livestock down there too. Can't be nice."

"No. Well, at least it's only a week to Athens." Iolaus acknowledged. "I wouldn't want to trade places." He glanced around. "Your Amazon friends found some space near the merchants bunkroom. They seem happy."

"Happy?"

"Well, less enraged." The blond man smiled wryly. "I don't think they like you much."

Xena rolled her eyes.

"I don't think they like anyone much." He went on. "I sure hope they don't make trouble with all those merchants. Last thing we need is a riot onboard."

The ship slowly moved away from the shore, edging between the small boats in the harbor who turned out of their way and through the rocky breakwater that lined the inlet. As they cleared the rocks, the motion of the sea became more apparent and once the headlands were past the bow the breeze crossed the deck as well.

Xena blinked into it, appreciating the cool saltiness as she expelled the air in her chest and drew in a clean breath, glad enough to leave the stench of civilization behind her. The bow crested a wave, and the salt spray dampened her skin to counteract the heat of the sun and she decided she was glad at least to once again be on her way.

She looked ahead to the horizon, and saw a dark smudge on the far edge of it. Somewhere out there a storm was building but for now, she was content to let the breeze fill the sails and snap the lines taut and let the ship carry her hopefully in the right direction.

Hopefully.

"I'm going to go wash up." Iolaus said. "Much as I love that little mare, she sure smells like a

horse.” He pushed away from the rail and headed in the direction of the cabin, leaving Xena to stand alone at the rail as they moved farther out to sea.

After a few more minutes, and a few more salty splashes, Xena decided to join him, and she strolled across the rolling deck and left it to the sailors.

**

A candlemark later, she was sprawled in her bunk, shed of her armor as she took advantage of the sun pouring in her little window to read a few pages of her book. She had the window propped open, and there was a cool breeze coming through it, brushing across the bare legs she had braced against the bunk’s far end.

She had cleaned both herself and her armor and brushed out her leathers, which were hanging on the far side of the small cabin to dry while she relaxed in a simple linen tunic. It felt good to be rid of the sweat and dust of the day, and she’d even taken time to investigate what had been packed in her surprise gift basket.

That had surprised her. She had initially been a little suspicious of the present, half expecting the innkeeper’s twisted humor to have provided her rocks or well wrapped old dead fish but finding instead enough carefully packed stores to last her the voyage if she chose to avoid the ship’s mess.

Waybread, certainly, but also smoked meat and fish, two crocks of spreading cheese, apples and pears, flagons of wine and at the bottom a wrapped nut cake that smelled of honey and cinnamon.

Unexpected kindness. Xena glanced over at the basket, and smiled briefly. Gabrielle would have been delighted by it, but it did make her wonder just a trifle as to what the innkeeper wanted in return.

Just a good word? A favor?

She shrugged and decided she didn’t much care. If what he wanted was to be advertised, she’d be glad to do it basket or none. The inn had been more than comfortable, and she was disposed to do the man a favor in any case because of the way he’d treated her.

Maybe she’d have Gabrielle work his inn into a story, and have that spread around. The warrior glanced past her book and grinned, imagining hordes of patrons showing up at the inn. Yeah. That’s what she’d do.

One good turn, and all that.

She went back to reading, flipping the page over and studying the next one. The careful script detailed a poem that talked about snow and the fragrance of pine trees, and she remembered that trip up into the mountains of the north and how they’d found that still, beautiful lake at the top of an exhausting climb.

Two cold, irritated, snippy women at their wits end with each other pausing in their heated argument as they topped the rise and saw the last of the sunset gilding the water with a quiet peace that simply shut them both up at once.

After a long stretch of them just silently absorbing the beauty, Gabrielle had cleared her throat. “Can we put this fight on hold til tomorrow?”

And Xena had extended her hand in answer. “It’s a stupid fight. Let’s just not have it.”

Gabrielle had in the past refused to give up on arguments. She held them and worried at them like a dog with a bone until Xena wanted to bang her head against a tree in utter frustration.

“Okay by me.” But this time she just took Xena’s outstretched hand and they walked together

over to a fallen log, sitting down on it together to watch the last of the sun fade and the purple twilight fall around them.

Xena now couldn't even remember what they'd argued about. Probably Gabrielle had been pissed that she hadn't told her where they were going, mostly because Xena herself hadn't a clue where they were. What she remembered from that night was them sitting by the fire, on a double set of furs, full of broiled fish as she sharpened her sword and Gabrielle wrote in her diary.

She remembered the pop of the flames, and the feeling of just being glad to be living in that moment, a bit of quiet peace that morphed into something a little more when Gabrielle stopped writing, and turned to look at her.

"You know something, Xena?" Gabrielle had said. "I'm really glad every day of my life ends just like this."

Xena had felt tears sting her eyes quite unexpectedly, and she'd had to wait a moment to swallow the lump in her throat before she answered. "Yeah, me too."

Now, reading the words of Gabrielle's poem again, she remembered that feeling of contentment, and the commitment between the two of them. She flipped the page over, and read her partner's comments on it.

That was one of the strangest nights I could remember about us traveling together. I remember getting madder and madder all day long. My head hurt, and I was so angry at you, and the climb was impossible and then we got up to the lake and it was as though none of it mattered.

I didn't forget about being mad, really. It wasn't like the whole day didn't happen.

I just realized how incredibly blessed my life was that I could see new things, and find places like that, and have a friendship like ours.

That I wasn't stuck in a tiny village, feeding chickens, never knowing what it was to see the moon rise over a mountain lake or be able to turn my head and see the most beautiful person in the world looking back at me.

That was a stupid fight. Thank the gods you just threw it away like an orange peel.

G

You could let life get you down, Xena mused. They'd chosen that night otherwise, and she thought they maybe both had ended up better people for it. Certainly, the night had ended on a far higher note than the day had started on.

She rolled onto her back and stretched out on the bunk, feeling the motion of the ship under her as she folded her hands under her head and studied the wooden spars over her head.

What would Gabrielle do if she were here, and they were heading to Athens? Would she just collect Eph and Pony and turn around? What, Xena wondered, did she really want Xena to do? Did she really want her to ignore the war?

When she'd left Amphipolis, she remembered feeling very strongly that going and getting back were what Gabrielle most wanted her to do. She'd felt that way most of her journey. But now that she'd bumped into Iolaus, and found out what was behind it – she was beginning to wonder if there wasn't something she could do short of joining the fight to turn it around.

Could she help? Could she keep the Amazons from heading into a disaster? Could she do anything to thwart two pissy goddesses with a lot at stake?

Did she want to risk anything doing that?

Xena studied the age darkened surface not that far over her head, reminded suddenly of her

mother's barn and the hayloft she'd consummated her relationship with Gabrielle in. "You know what?" She spoke half to the ship around her, and half to the woman she'd left back in Amphipolis. "I don't owe anyone but you a damn thing, Gabrielle."

She would not risk. She would act in Gabrielle's best interests.

She would remember how blessed their lives were.

**

Continued in Part 13

A Queen's Tale

Part 13

Gabrielle walked with Elani down the neat, rock lined path that led from the central hall to the infirmary where she held sway. "Sounds like rain again." She commented, hearing the rumble of thunder overhead.

"It does." Elani agreed. "But at least it's raining at night, when we're all tucked in our bunks with a roof over our heads and not out working or hunting." She led Gabrielle into the first of the cave systems they'd used as barracks during the war. "Were you under cover last night?"

"Thankfully yes." The bard said. "In a cave. Last thing I'd need is either me or Dori getting sick."

"Hm." Elani glanced over her shoulder at her guest. "Especially when your family healer's gone." She said. "I don't think anyone can duplicate that TLC."

Gabrielle grinned briefly. "No."

Elani smiled herself, sensing the gush of emotion as her visitor thought about her partner. Gabrielle was always an open book about what she was feeling. The bard seemed in good health and spirits despite her partner's absence and Elani detected a stability about her she hadn't seen before.

She'd grown up a little, the forest dweller decided, grown up, and even filled out physically, her shoulders seemed a little broader, and her body looked more solid, more, in fact, like Xena's. "Bet you miss her."

"Oohhh yeah." Gabrielle cheerfully admitted it. "But it's my fault. I sent her. So I can only whine at myself."

They entered the caverns and moved to one of the larger ones in the rear, where a big fireplace had been constructed and there were pallets arranged for those needing the healer's close attention. Only a dozen or so were filled, though, and half of them by disheveled, human forms.

Gabrielle followed Elani over to the bedside of one of them, who was propped up on pillows talking to one of the helpers.

Apparently he'd gotten used to the forest dwellers. He glanced up as they approached, though, his eyes sliding past Elani's tall form and fastening on Gabrielle's behind her.

"Well sir, another guest of ours wanted to have a word with you." Elani said, by way of introduction. "This is Gabrielle."

The other forest dweller backed off, and Elani went on to see another of her patients, leaving Gabrielle to take a seat on the stool next to the man's cot.

"Hello." Gabrielle said.

“Greetings.” The man said. “My name is Regulus. Are you the Gabrielle? The great bard?”

“Well.” Gabrielle glanced down at her travel stained form, and then back at him with a wry expression. “I’m Gabrielle, and I’m a bard, anyway.” She said. “Elani said you were from Athens?”

He nodded. “Yes, myself and my colleagues were on our way to Amphipolis, to speak with your ..” He paused uncertainly. “With Xena.”

“I see.” Gabrielle rested her elbows on her knees and leaned forward a little. “Why?”

Regulus studied her. He had a thick bandage wrapped around his head, and his arm was in a sling. There were scrapes and cuts all over his face, and a big, mottled bruise on his other arm. He hesitated, looking uncomfortable. “The message was for her ears.”

Gabrielle smiled briefly. “There are a lot of words for what Xena and I are to each other. Some of them you can even say in polite company.” She said. “But they all mean we’re responsible for each other and what applies to her, applies to me also.”

He still hesitated.

“And, of course, I’m the only one who knows where she is, and how she’s likely to respond to whatever it is you want from her.”

His brows twitched. “Point made.” He conceded. “My apologies. It has been a long journey for us full of trouble and pain.” He took a breath. “But I am sure my traveling companions have already spoken out of turn and you likely know already that we seek out Xena to join our war effort.”

The bard silently revised her estimation of the man. “That’s partly true.” She responded straightforwardly. “But we didn’t have time to discuss it, and I’d rather hear the real story from you anyway.”

“Gabrielle, how about a cup of tea?” Elani offered her a mug on her way between the cots. “You’ve had a long day.” She gave the bard a look until she took it, then showed her fangs in a smile and went on her way.

The bard sniffed the tea and muffled her own smile, recognizing the herbs. Resignedly, she sipped on them, the almost lemon tang making her nose wrinkle just a bit and as she did, she could almost feel Xena’s approving tickle on her back right in the middle of her shoulder blades.

Regulus waited for Elani to disappear before he spoke. “What manner of c.. beings are these?” He asked in a low voice. “You seem to be well known by them.”

Gabrielle sipped her tea. “They’re called the Children of Ares.” She said. “They’re like us, in many ways. They live as we did, in days past. They’re smart, and they have an interesting culture.” She continued. “Xena and I encountered them a few years ago.”

The man watched her for a long moment. “You are accepted here.” He ventured. “I heard them speaking of you.”

The bard took a mouthful of the herb tea and let it roll around in her mouth for a minute. She swallowed and licked her lips. “We’re part of the tribe.” She acknowledged. “There are people here who are family to me.”

“You have an expansive view of family.”

Gabrielle studied him. “I’ve met a lot of different kinds of people. It’s made me appreciate the things we have in common rather than the things that make us different.”

Regulus nodded slowly. “My wife was in the amphitheatre during the games, and saw you. I was

not in the city. “He said. “She thought you were charming.”

Gabrielle’s lips twitched wryly.

“We came here looking for Xena, it is true.” The man said. “I was given two scrolls to present to her, an official request and offer from the Athenian council for her to lead our army in the war against Sparta.”

“Why?”

“Why?” His voice lifted in question. “Surely, you are not asking why we want her to lead our army.” He said. “Her reputation is well known to everyone.”

True. Gabrielle knew Xena’s martial skills better than most. “I understand everyone respects her both as a warrior, and as a general. But this is a conventional war, that Athens is starting. Isn’t there ample generals in the army already who want the chance to do that? Go for the glory? Instead of having a woman, an ex warlord, steal their thunder?”

Regulus considered that thoughtfully. “Yes of course.” He said, in a mild tone. “But the truth is, an oracle has come to the council, and speaking for the gods, has said unless a woman leads us, Athens is doomed.”

An oracle. Gabrielle sighed. Troublemakers from the gods, she regarded them, and since they’d already heard there were gods involved.... “Okay. But there are other women.”

He smiled faintly. “Bard Gabrielle.” There was more than a little chiding in his tone. “You will not sit here and tell me there is another woman in Greece who can match your Xena in the ways of war.” He protested. “Have you not heard the stories of her prowess?”

Hoisted. Gabrielle acknowledged the truth with a smile and a shrug. “I won’t deny it. “ She said. “But Xe’s retired.” She added. “She doesn’t want to go to war anymore.”

“And you truly believe that?”

“I do.” The bard said. “Partly because I’m one of the reasons she retired.”

The Athenian absorbed this. “Even were I to also believe that, I still would need to present my scrolls, and let her answer for herself.” He said. “No offense meant to you, Gabrielle, but there is a great deal at stake here. The future of Athens among other things.”

Gabrielle nodded. “I understand.” And she did, really. If it were true that the oracle told them they faced bitter loss, then that’s what they believed. Her saying Xena wasn’t interested wasn’t going to cut it. They wanted to hear it in person, and honestly she couldn’t really blame them. “However, it’s a moot point because she’s not in Amphipolis.”

“Ah.”

“I’m not sure when she’ll be back.” The bard continued. “And, frankly, you’ve got a much bigger problem to worry about. There’s a Spartan army heading up the river and no one to stop them.”

The man actually stopped breathing for a long moment, his eyes growing larger as he struggled to sit up a little more in his bed. “What?”

Gabrielle nodded. “We got word of some people gathering up at the pass into upper Thrace.” She rested her elbows on her knees again. “So we went to find out who they were, and who they were turned out to be the Spartans.”

“And you told no one”? The man blurted.

“Well, I’m telling you.” The bard said, in a wry tone. “I haven’t seen anyone else yet except the Spartan raiding parties. I think that’s who attacked you.”

“By the gods.” Regulus looked absolutely stunned.

“They came after us too, but we lost them.” Gabrielle concluded. “Do you think they realized who you were? Or did they just attack you because you were in the wrong place at the wrong time?”

Regulus blinked. “I hardly know.” He murmured. “We were riding on the main road, and had stopped in a small stand of trees to rest. We knew we were not that far from Amphipolis, and we wished to freshen ourselves.”

Trying to impress the natives? Gabrielle suppressed a smile. “I think I know where you mean. There’s a ruined ford, and across the river a path leading into the hills?”

Regulus frowned. “May have been.” He said. “A dozen of them jumped out of the trees and attacked us, with no provocation. It was terrible. They were armored, but carried no flag.”

Gabrielle nodded. “Same as we saw.”

“My men fought them off.” He straightened a little. “And to find they were Spartans and were beaten back by our smaller group – that does hearten me.” He said. “Then we took horse, and they chased us up the road until we were past the turn of the river. We could not ford there.”

“No, it’s full of rapids.” Gabrielle agreed. “The bridge across from Amphipolis is the last ford this side of the mountains.”

“So we found.” Regulus said. “They caught us as we fought to get through the forest. They beat us, and left us for dead.”

Gabrielle glanced at the other Athenians nearby. Two were very obviously gravely injured, and swathed in bandages. Two more were like Regulus, with splints and bruises. A fifth had a bandage across his middle. “And that makes so little sense.” She murmured. “Why just beat you? Why just chase us? Wouldn’t you be worth ransom?”

The man shook his head. “It was almost as though they were just told to randomly destroy what they found.” He said. “I lost three good men to them. If these... ah.. people.. hadn’t found us it would have been all of us.”

Gabrielle took another sip of the herbs, the ones that fought off coughing sickness a little bitter on the back of her throat. “It really doesn’t add up.” She said. “But sometimes in war things don’t I’ve found.” She stifled a yawn. “Tomorrow we’re heading back to Amphipolis.”

“May we go with you?” Regulus asked. “I realize your... that Xena isn’t there, but we would hope we could somehow get word of the invaders back to Athens. We would be willing to pay good coin for someone to go.”

The bard sat up on her stool. “What makes you think I wouldn’t do that without any prompting from you?”

He blushed a little. “Well, of course, but...”

“But what?” Gabrielle cocked her head to one side. “Buddy, I’ve been saving Greece for half a dozen years now without any help from people like you. I don’t need someone to tell me what the greater good is.”

His jaw dropped.

“Who in Hades do you think you’re talking to anyway?” The bard went on. “You’re going to stay here, and not bleed all the way to Amphipolis and slow us down. Leave warning Athens to me.”

She got up and lifted her mug in his direction, then she turned and wended her way through the cots and headed towards the door. “Unbelievable.” She muttered, as she passed two of the forest

dwellers, both who had grins on their faces. They gave her a big claws up sign as she passed, and the nearer one winked.

Gabrielle chuckled and shook her head, giving them a wave as she exited the cavern and turned her steps towards the hut she'd been given for the night. Dori was already asleep there, and the rest of her party had retired as well.

She almost had, then she'd seen Elani crossing the path and decided to visit the rescued travelers. Now she was wondering if that had been a good idea.

"Pay us to go warn Athens." Gabrielle made a disgusted sound. "Give me a break." She turned down the path to the huts, moving through the damp air as the sounds muted around her and the rest of the village moved off to bed.

A guard on the walls stayed up, of course. Hunters were out in the valley night hunting, as well. But the balance of the forest dwellers were tucked in their houses, soul bonded and not, adults and children enjoying the peace of a summer night here in the remote quiet of the valley.

Quieter than Amphipolis was, down in the town.

Gabrielle exhaled, feeling the welcome relax of tension as she pushed the door open to the round, spacious shelter she'd been given. Spacious both because it was, but also because everything in it was scaled a certain percentage larger to accommodate the size of the forest dwellers.

The chairs were higher, the round bed was, the tables, the doorframes. Xena had once told her the forest dweller village was one of the few places that made her feel small, and where chairs and benches were more than sufficient to accommodate her long frame.

And if it made Xena feel small... Gabrielle peeked into the second chamber, where Dori was curled up in a ball in the center of one of the round beds, her little Xena doll tucked under one arm. She stood there watching her daughter sleep and smiled, leaning against the doorframe and folding her arms across her chest.

Dori was having a ball on the trip, of course. She adored riding Argo, and loved having a chance to play with Jessan's triplets. She was as comfortable in the forest dweller village as she was in her own and even the crustiest of the residents always managed a smile for her.

She was special, this child of the spirit of theirs. Dori was both a proof of one of their legends, and a proof to them that Xena and Gabrielle's relationship was more familiar to them than they'd ever imagined.

She was natural here. Gabrielle went over to where she'd set her travel bags and pulled out a shift, trading her traveling clothes for it and savoring the gentle touch of the soft cloth against her skin. She left her diary where it was, and went to the other bed instead, collapsing into it as she gave in to the long day's exertions at last.

She thought ahead to tomorrow, when she'd head back home and decide what she was going to do about the Spartans. With any luck, they would just go past.

With her luck, though, they wouldn't.

So since she didn't have either soldiers or soulmate in sufficient quantities to beat a Spartan army, she'd have to think of some other way out of the problem.

Gabrielle exhaled, and closed her eyes, asleep almost before the last of the breath trickled between her lips.

**

Xena made her way across the deck, having found her sea legs with surprising quickness. It was dark, only the lantern at the bow and to either side on the rail were lit, fluttering hard with the wind that was tossing the vessel in the white capped seas.

She'd passed on the fish stew and wine the ship's cook had offered for dinner, contenting herself with nibbling from her basket and avoiding both the strongly scented meal and the queasy looking patrons who were consuming it.

Reaching the hold door she unlatched it and went down the steps, closing the door after her and pausing a moment to let her eyes adjust to the lower light belowdecks. She continued down the steps and followed her nose to the livestock area, easing the door open and slipping inside the space the animals were being held in.

Here, it was almost cheerful. There was a lantern on either end of the space hung carefully in swinging hooks that moved with the ship's movement and three or four of the crew had made their bunks in the space and were singing softly as she entered.

They looked at her in suspicion, and ceased their entertainment. Xena merely lifted a hand in their direction, then pointed at Iolaus's head. "Just visiting my horse."

The crew relaxed, and went back to their song, and the wineskin they were passing around to each other.

Xena went over to Io's head and scratched him between his eyes. He had spotted her coming, and poked his head out over the criss crossed rope that made the front of his makeshift stall. "Hey boy."

He nudged her with his nose. The stall was relatively comfortable, small, but the deck was covered in a thick layer of straw and there was a swinging bucket of water there half full.

Satisfied with the condition her horse was in, she spent a few minutes more affection on him, giving him a kiss on the head before she ducked past the thick spar support to the next stall that held the young mare.

The human Iolaus had done a good job on her. The mare's coat was clean and shining in the low light, her wounds tended to and all the briars and prickles worked out of her silky mane. Xena held a hand out to her and she lipped it at once, gazing benignly at the warrior from her dark eyes. "Hey pretty girl."

She patted the broad cheek. "See? I knew you'd luck out of you kept bumping into me long enough. Iolaus is a good guy, and he'll take good care of you."

The mare seemed content. She had a delicate, concave face and wide nostrils and Xena suspected she'd come from a place far away from where she was now. "You're a desert baby, aren't you? Some pretty thing from a Persian's string? I rode a horse like you once."

She remembered the heat, and the sand, and the powerful gray dappled body under her as she raced along at a speed so great it made her eyes tear until she had to close them.

A wild horse, from a wild herd they'd just happened to bump into on an ill thought out foray that had almost ended up with her, and Borias, and the rest of the rough gang they led slaughtered.

Out of their league, big time. Xena smiled, faintly. She'd been very young, and very stupid, but the ride had been worth it no matter that she'd scared Borias so badly he almost beat her when she finally got back to them.

Almost.

Instead, her completely out of character bubbling enthusiasm about the animals had shocked him so badly he'd just run away, unsure of how to deal with that side of her having never seen it

before.

Oh, but that ride had been delicious. Xena stroked the mare, smiling in memory. And it had turned out to be more profitable than they'd imagined, since the enemies who'd seen her do it inexplicably reversed their aggression and instead of being slaughtered they'd been accepted.

Hadn't really helped in the end, but it kept them from being killed for a little while. Long enough for them to get out of the desert and head off somewhere else.

Chin, in fact.

"Shoulda stayed with the Persians." Xena sighed, giving the horse a last pat. She made sure both horses had hay, then started back out of the hold intent on enjoying a turn around the deck. As she passed the crew, one stood, however, and moved to intercept her.

Xena was unarmed, and only in a linen tunic. She came to a halt and her hands curled lightly and automatically into fists, and she swept her eyes around instinctively looking for any weapons at hand.

Ah. A pitchfork, and within reach, too.

"You're Xena, aren't you?" The crewman asked. "The famous one?"

Xena nodded. "Yes, I am."

"Figured you were, since you came and checked on them." He indicated the horses with a nod of his head. "Rest of that lot we've got on wouldn't check on a bedmate unless they wanted to mount them."

Xena didn't necessarily disagree with that. She tilted her head in question, and waited.

"We heard you been looking for some Amazons." The man said. "Them women came on with you, said that."

"Yes." Xena walked over to where the group of the were sitting, and picked a crate to settle on. "I'm looking for some friends of mine who are Amazons."

The crew were all watching her curiously, but there seemed to be no malice in them. They settled down across from her, the iron brazier in the carefully cleared center set on a stone slab glowing softly.

The man who had approached her sat down on a stool. "Heard something on the dock, before we left." He said. "Something about some Amazon royalty, or something, and them being tied up when they went onboard the Yellow Dolphin coupla days back."

"Tied up." Xena mused. "You mean by the other Amazons?"

Another of the crew nodded. He was short, and had curly red hair. "Was me who heard it." He said. "Wasn't goin to say nothin, but Jod's right about you and them horses. Good people cares about them animals."

Funny, since she'd cared about horses even when she'd been a very, very bad person and even now she surely wouldn't characterize herself as truly good. Xena hitched up one ankle and let it rest on her knee. "And I already know you're all right or my stallion' would have kicked you all bloody already."

"e's a good looking horse." Jod said. "He fight?"

"Oh yes." Xena said. "So, you heard that the Amazons had two other Amazons with them, tied up, that they took on the ship with them?"

"Ayah." The curly headed man said. "Said they looked banged up. He only notic'ed cause there

was all that trouble with them women.”

“They caused a pile of trouble.” Iod said. “All them people on the dock were talkin about it. Said them ones that was tied up tried to stop em from something, and that’s why they’d done it.”

Xena pondered that, and found it brightened her spirits since if it were true, and the idiotic bastards had hurt either Eph or Pony, then she had no reason to try and stop them all from getting their asses killed and she could just rescue her friends and be done with it.

On the other hand, the thought of Ephiny and Pony tied up for the simple reason they’d tried to keep their putative sisters from harm really pissed her off.

Maybe she’d have a chance to express that. “Thanks for the info.” She said. “They expecting the weather to get rougher tonight?”

The men nodded. “Storm.” Jod said. “Big one. Cap’n’s fair worried. Mad as we had to leave early.”

She’d smelled the storm on the air crossing the deck. “Did you hear anyone describe these two Amazons?” She asked. “After all, with all those feathers they look alike sometimes.”

The men grinned, relaxing now in her presence. “You ain’t one.” Jod said. “Them women down the hold what came with you were saying that.”

“No.” Xena shook her head. “I’m no Amazon.”

“Guy said they were like all of em.” The curly headed man mournfully said. “Couldn’t see why they was tied up, but he said one had fire to her, yeah? Freckles, he said, and dark hair.”

Ah. Could be Eponin. Xena got up. “It could be the ones I’m looking for.” She admitted. “Can’t do much about it until we get there, I guess. Yellow Dolphin, you said?”

“Aye.” Jod agreed. “Good ship. Like this one, a bit, not so fast though.”

“Thanks for the info, guys.” Xena smiled at them. “And thanks for keeping an eye on my big boy there. I’ve been to sea before, he hasn’t.” She tapped the spar with one hand, the ring on her finger sounding loud as it hit the surface. “Good night.”

“And to you, ma’am.” Jod said.

They watched her leave. Xena deliberately closed her ears, and refused to hear their ribald whispers behind her, though she was more than human enough to be flattered by the few that got through her concentration.

She paused before the stairs, and considered paying the Amazon sisters a visit. After a moment, she climbed the steps instead and emerged onto the deck, which was pitching and rolling in the rising seas.

She spotted the captain near the wheel, and she walked in that direction, passing two sailors working hard at the rigging who didn’t give her a second glance. She mounted the step up to the tiller platform and waited, as the Captain had words with the man holding fast to the rudder.

Rain lashed unexpectedly across the deck, coming with a gust of wind that fluttered the cloth tight around Xena’s body. A roll of thunder rumbled over head, and a flash of lightning came with it, showing a wild, tossing sea and a thickly cloud layered sky over it.

The captain turned away from his steersman and spotted her. For a moment he glared, then he grudgingly approached. “Come to show your smart mouth to me again, woman?”

Xena looked at him with almost affection. “Captain, I’m the least of your worries.”

He glared a moment more, then he grunted and jerked his head. “Struth.” He muttered. “The lot

of them sick as pups and crying for their mothers.” He said. “Been to sea, have you?”

Xena nodded.

“Heard some crazy talk about you and that damn ghost ship.”

“It’s true.” The warrior said in a mild tone. “This weather going to get a lot worse?”

The captain studied her for a moment. “True eh? “ He mused. “Storm’s going to take us where it will” He said. “Idiot made me leave port early. We could be sitting on shore, watching this with a cup of ale and laughing at it. I was a fool to listen.”

Xena felt the violent motion under her, and blinked as the rain started to fall almost sideways. “We could be in trouble.”

“We could be.” The man said. “No sense in crying over that. We’ll just heave to the sails and do the best we can. You best get off the deck.” His voice was mild though, and held no insult. “Could take a wave over it.”

“Good luck.” Xena said. “I’ve got a strong arm. If you need any extra help, let me know.” She caught his eye and he nodded at her, serious now. She stepped aside as he left the platform, then she turned and started back across the deck .

The wind gusted against her with enough force to make her stop walking and hold her arms out to catch her balance, and she hastened over to the door and ducked through it before the storm got any other funny ideas.

Dripping wet, she sidled through the narrow hall and made it to her cabin, closing the door behind her very glad she’d closed the window before she’d gone out.

Now waves and rain were lashing at the leaded panes and she was happy the cabin was narrow enough for her to hold herself upright in the motion as she changed out of her drenched tunic into a dry one.

She pondered putting on her leathers instead. She was always more comfortable facing the unexpected in her armor but she knew in this case, with this foe, it would do her no good. As much as she adored the stuff, if she was thrown in the water she’d have a better chance without it weighing her down.

So she carefully packed the leathers and armor inside one of her saddlebags, and strapped her sword and chakram to it. Then she fastened it to the edge of the bunk in her cabin and lay down, letting her head rest on the pillow as she tucked her fingers into the saddlebag straps.

The ship creaked and groaned around her, but now that she was lying down and moving with the vessel instead of straining to keep her footing against it, the motion started relaxing her and she felt her breathing slow and her muscles unlock.

Her thoughts turned to Gabrielle, not unexpectedly. The weather would have made her partner totally miserable, and so in that respect Xena was glad she wasn’t on the ship with her. She would also have freaked out about Ephiny and Pony possibly being captives. Xena wasn’t happy about that, but she was a realist, and knew there was nothing she could do about it right now.

Gabrielle also knew that in her mind, but her heart would be overwhelmed with outrage and it would have been chewing her up inside regardless.

Which would, actually, have probably taken her mind off her seasickness, Xena reasoned. So sometimes there were small silver linings to be found in the worst of issues.

What was Gabrielle up to? Xena closed her eyes and concentrated, opening her thoughts and trying to imagine what her partner was doing.

There was just a sense of warm peace there. Xena decided the bard was sleeping, and she was glad of it. Sleeping quietly, and having good dreams.

She hoped Gabrielle wouldn't have any nightmares. They really bothered her, and she tended to have them when they were apart. For a long time, Xena had too, and it meant any separation meant sleepless nights for both of them.

Exhausting and unpleasant. As if worrying about each other wasn't enough? But at least now it was different, and they woke together with mutual smiles, if sometimes silly memories of what dreams they'd had the night before.

Gabrielle had once told her she was convinced that Xena could come to her in her dreams, that she knew she was there, that they interacted with each other.

Xena really didn't think so. She knew Gabrielle had an amazing imagination, since after all she was a bard and inventing stories was what she did. She also knew her partner dearly loved her and sometimes was ready to ascribe to her talents she didn't actually have.

At least now she did, again. For a while there... Xena sighed.

But Xena didn't think she could go into anyone's dreams. She remembered vaguely the one time her partner had been absolutely sure of it, something about a field, and some rabbits... it had seemed like just wisps of things – half remembered glimpses of sunlight, and maybe a book.

Had she done that? Xena really couldn't imagine how she would have. She knew she hadn't done anything deliberately. She'd just gone to sleep that night, with Gabrielle in her arms, just thinking about how much she loved her.

She thought about that and smiled, as the sounds outside the ship seemed to mute a little. She felt her breathing slow and she let herself think about that again, about how much she loved Gabrielle, and how much she wished she could be with her.

She could almost imagine she could hear her even breaths, and see the image of her asleep, curled on her side....

And then she sort of could. Or at least in her half asleep, half awake mind she imagined she could see Gabrielle, asleep in the shadows but not, she realized, in the Amazon village.

Must be just imaginary. She mused, as she recognized the surroundings as Jessan's village in the valley. It made her smile, and she continued the daydream, now confident it was something she was just making up since she knew her partner wouldn't be visiting their friends.

She could see her partner in her mind's eye so clearly though, and she settled into the soft, grass stuffed mattress of the round bed next to her, imagining that Gabrielle sensed her presence, and reached out for her, turning over and snuggling up against her with a tiny murmur of contentment.

By the gods, it felt so real. Xena wasn't sure if she was asleep or in a waking dream, but she went with it, tuning out the rumble of the storm and sliding her arms around her imaginary soulmate as she felt the warmth of their bodies pressing against each other.

Real or not. It didn't really matter to her. In her mind's eye, she kissed the top of Gabrielle's head and pressed her cheek against her hair, and let true sleep take her, regardless of the raging storm outside.

The ship plowed on through the storm, its sails lashed firmly to its spars, and the slave master belowdecks relentlessly lashing the men at the oars working without ceasing to keep the boat steady in the water.

The sailors sweated and worked, hauling the lines. The captain fretted on the bridge, wiping the

water from his eyes every second.

The patricians suffered, in their seasick misery.

Iolaus slept obliviously, his belly full of Xena's tonic.

Sitting alone and unheeded on the bow, unseen by the crew, Ares drummed his heels against the wood and watched the approaching storm. The wind lashed his dark hair, and the lightning caught sparks off his pale eyes as he spread his arms out as if to embrace the fury of it.

The ship came up over the crest of a wave, and slipped down the side of it, plunging into the water at the bottom and causing a blast of water to cover the bow and its occupant.

Ares only smiled, and shook himself off, flicking the moisture off his hands and back into the sea.

**

Gabrielle lay quietly on her back, her eyes idly searching the thatch high over her head. She'd just woken up, and she was sorting out the fading memory of Xena's close presence that had patterned itself on both senses and skin.

It was still dark, just before dawn, but the sense of warmth and affection still lingering around her was unmistakable, and she found herself more than a little befuddled by it.

It wasn't entirely unique. She remembered when Xena was trapped in an underground cavern, and she herself was in pain, a nighttime visit that had seemed so real it scared her at the time. Xena had told her later that they both had just had overactive imaginations – the stress they were under had been extreme – but Gabrielle knew the difference between imagination and reality.

She was a bard, after all.

Xena's spiritual presence had been there then, and had been with her last night. If she concentrated when she drew a breath, she could even taste Xena's scent on the back of her tongue.

Real as life. Real as the sound of crickets outside.

Real as her heart beating inside her chest.

Gabrielle smiled, wrapping her arms around herself and tugging the light blanket up around her. She thought about Xena, and about how their life's pattern had changed so much only to come right back around to where they were now.

It was hard, really to clearly remember how bad the bad times were.

She'd gotten used to being in love again. She'd gotten used to looking up and seeing Xena and having that make her feel warm and happy inside again. Her life had gone from bitterly hard to gorgeous as a spring day, and even something as horrific as their trial in the valley hadn't put a dent in that because they'd been together.

Riding down the River Styx to Tartarus would be okay, so long as Xena was in the boat with her. Gabrielle had to smile to herself at that, no matter how true.

It sounded so darn tacky.

Xena had finally come around back to herself too. Gabrielle had seen her soulmate fractured, as torn apart as she'd been only with all that history and guilt on top of it and it had made her a different person.

Quieter. More depressed. Even a little shy. It had been hard to adjust to. A little scary, seeing how fragile her partner was. How haunted those eyes were when she thought no one was looking.

But then the war happened. There hadn't been time to be shy, or fragile, or afraid. Not for either of them. They'd come back to the core of themselves during that nightmare and after that, things had changed again.

Now Xena had slowly worked back to being who she really was, and accepting the dark part of her back that put that edge on her character Gabrielle silently cherished.

People were a little afraid of her again. Gabrielle studied the outline of the window, still dark and still. And Xena wasn't hiding that part of her that made people a little afraid. She wasn't ashamed of it anymore.

Neither was Gabrielle.

They'd earned the right to be who they were paying the price of blood, and pain, and soul ripping sorrow and so, she reasoned, if Xena wanted to flout the possibilities of humankind and visit her in spirit at night, she was all for it.

"You go, Xe." The bard closed her eyes and resolved to drift off again for a little while, at least until dawn broke and she had to rustle everyone out and get headed back home. "Now we just gotta teach you to put your body where your mind is. "

She tried to imagine where Xena was by now. Approaching Thera? Had she found Eph and Pony on the road, maybe, and was headed back? She hadn't felt anything strong or urgent from her, so she figured her travels were going on as ordinarily as they ever did.

Which was sort of terrifying to think about, actually.

"Well, at least you can't blame me this time if things go crazy." She smiled, and thought good thoughts in her partner's direction, returning the affection she'd woken up to and sending out a silent wave of happiness, feeling her soul soar in response.

She had no idea if Xena could or would feel it.

She hoped so though. She hoped her partner woke up feeling just as good as she had.

**

Two candlemarks later, Gabrielle was sitting in the common dining hall surrounded by forest dwellers and her little scouting party. Dori was seated next to her busy with a meatroll, and there was an air of bustle and motion around them quite different from the previous day.

"Are you sure" Gabrielle asked, resting her forearms on the table. "They moved fast in the night."

"And the rain. No wussies there." Jessan agreed. "They're almost to the bend of the river, and after that, they'll just be across from Amphipolis. "

"Damn." Gabrielle said. "So my choices are, we leave right now and haul butt and try to beat them..."

"Or you stay here, and maybe they pass Amphipolis by." Jessan said. "Since the most interesting people aren't there."

It was tempting. Gabrielle was, in fact, tempted, for all of about five seconds. Then she exhaled. "Everyone get packed." She said. "Thanks for the offer of sanctuary, my friend, but we need to ride fast and get there before they do. I'm not leaving my home undefended."

All of the forest dwellers smiled toothy smiles. "You get more and more like us every day, little sister." Jessan teased. "Naturally, some of us are going too. If you think we're going to miss out on this good a fight you're nutty."

Gabrielle smiled wryly. "I've been called that before."

“Bet not more than once.” Jessan grinned back.

“I’ll get our horses, shall I?” Cait said. “Pally and I are packed already.”

“Us too.” Solari agreed. “But let me tell you, fuzzy, those beds are like to die for comfortable. So thanks a big one from me.”

“Aye.” Bennu said. “Grand place.”

“Well comb my fur and call me hedonist.” Jessan said. “Glad you enjoyed them!” He glanced at Gabrielle. “I know it wasn’t as soft as the one you’ve got.”

The bard smiled, a slight twinkle in her eye.

“Gabrielle, we’ll pull all together and meet you at the gates, yeah?” Solaris stood up. “Okay if I pick up your stuff, and Dori’s?”

“Great idea.” Jessan said. “Everyone, move out!” His voice lifted into a bark, and in a moment the place was in a whirl of motion, as forest dwellers and Gabrielle’s troops left the hall. Gabrielle kept her hands wrapped around the mug of warm tea and watched as Dori finished her breakfast.

It got very quiet, very fast. Dori looked up, then around in puzzlement. “Mama, where’d everybody go?”

“They went to get ready for us to go home.” The bard informed her daughter. “We’re going to run really fast back there. You like that idea?”

Dori’s eyes lit up. “Go fast?”

“Go fast.” Gabrielle agreed. “Do you remember all those men we saw, yesterday? We’re going to try and beat them back to where we live. Doesn’t that sound like fun?”

“Yes!” Dori said. “Gogo go fast!” She finished the last bite of her meatroll then she frowned.. “But mama, I wanted to stay here and play.”

“I know honey.” Gabrielle said. “But you know what, after we go home and make sure everyone is okay, maybe we’ll all come back here and you can play with your friends then.”

“Boo too?”

“Of course.” The bard smiled. “When do we ever do anything without Boo?”

Dori kicked her feet out. “Now?”

Aw. “Honey.” Gabrielle gently smoothed the unruly dark locks. “Boo’s always with us. You know that. Even when she’s not right here, she’s always thinking about us, and wanting to be with us just like we want to be with her.”

Dori poked her lower lip out, and looked up at her mother through her bangs. It was so in Xena’s image, that Gabrielle had to stifle a laugh. “Okay.” The child sighed. “We go on Gogo fast?”

“You bet.” Gabrielle drained her mug and set it down. “Let’s go, munchkin. Time for mama to go do the Amazon thing.” She took Dori’s hand and they walked outside. “You can help me steer Argo.”

“Gogogogogo.”

“Absolutely.” They emerged from under the trees canopy outside the dining hall and headed down a neatly lined path that skirted the lanes that led deeper into the surrounding forest where the forest dwellers had built their homes.

It was quiet. Around them the village was stirring and heading about its various tasks, but the barefoot residents made little sound as they passed, and Gabrielle could hear the gentle sounds of the wind brushing the leaves together over her head.

She could see her group already gathered near the big gates. She spotted Argo, standing a little aside as she cropped some of the green grass near the wall, and the rest of the horses were nearby with their reins gripped in the hands of their riders.

Argo spotted them, and lifted her head. She finished chewing, then she started to amble their way, dodging two of the other animals and walking determinedly in their direction.

"Here comes Argo, Dor." Gabrielle distracted her daughter, who had been distracted by a frog. "She's looking for you."

Dori looked around. "Gogo!" She released Gabrielle's hand and bolted for the mare, who watched her approach and slowed as the child reached her. She nibbled Dori's cloak as the child grabbed hold of her trailing reins and tugged her over to a tree.

"Dori, be careful." The bard warned.

Dori blithely ignored her, as she swarmed up the tree and balanced on the lowest branch, which let her get high enough to reach Argo's saddle.

"Hey Dor.. wait for me." Gabrielle broke into a jog, extending a hand out when she realized what Dori was going to do. "Hey! Dor!"

Dori released the branch she was holding and jumped for the saddle, grabbing hold of the saddlehorn and thumping against Argo's side with a grunt.

Argo lifted her head and peered around, taking a step away from the tree and slamming into Gabrielle just as the bard reached for her.

"Oof."

"Mama!" Dori got a small foot into the stirrup and pulled herself up into the saddle, sprawling over it and nearly falling off onto the other side. "Ow ow!"

Gabrielle grabbed her, and held her in place. "Okay, honey, I got you." She lifted the child up so she could sit in the saddle. "Next time just wait for me, okay? I don't want you to get hurt."

"Mama I want to jump up like Boo!" Dori complained. "It's too hard!"

"Well, maybe when you get bigger Boo will teach you to do that." Gabrielle gathered Argo's reins and started towards the gates. "Cause she never taught me that, and I'm really sure Argo's glad." She scratched the mare's cheek affectionately. "Right Argo?"

Argo snorted.

A dozen forest dwellers were also leading horses to the gates, and the din of voices were now growing louder as she approached

"Take the river road, right?" Solari was saying. "That's the fastest route."

"Unless you meet up with all those nice shiny guys." Jessan objected. "I think we should take the forest route, the one we use to get to Amphipolis. It's quiet, and no one uses it but us." He turned as Gabrielle came up behind him. "What do you say, boss?"

Gabrielle's eyebrows lifted. "Shes a little young for that isn't she?" She asked, giving Dori a sideways look.

"Ha ha." Jessan rolled his eyes.

“Just kidding.” The bard smiled. “I think the forest is the right way to go. I want to make the best time we can, but Jess is right. If we bump into the Spartans, any time we pick up on the road will be lost either fighting or escaping.”

She glanced around the group quickly, and didn't see any visible objection, not that she truly expected one. “Okay, let's get going folks.” She looked up at Argo's tall back, and sighed, catching an amused look from the mare out of the corner of her eye. “Yeah yeah, laugh it up.”

“What was that, Gabrielle?” Jessan turned from where he was mounting his horse.

“Nothing.” The bard got her boot up in the stirrup and pulled herself up, swinging her leg over Argo's tail as she settled into the saddle behind Dori. “I was just regretting, not for the first time, how damn short I am.”

The gates swung open and they rode out, the horses hooves making muffled thunder on the path as they moved away from the stronghold and down the forest track that lead deeper into the trees. Gabrielle was between Jessan and Solari, with two of the forest dwellers riding point, and the rest of them in a casual train of ones and twos behind.

“The guard who came riding back in said he thought they were going to stop for a while and get some breakfast.” Jessan commented. “Said that's what it looked like, anyway.”

Gabrielle nodded. “I hope so. I'd hate to have to see their backs as we head for the gates of Amphipolis.”

They were constrained to a walk this first part of the path, giving her time to talk to Jessan. His wife had stayed behind with the triplets, and it had been a while, she realized, since they'd talked. “So how are things with you guys?”

Jessan chuckled. “I was just about to ask you the same thing.” He admitted. He glanced at her, and caught the warm smile as she looked back at him, Seeing without effort the placid happiness just under the worry of her current thoughts.

Just from the quiet confidence in her body posture, he'd have known things were good with them. Gabrielle had a habit of hunching her shoulders a little when she was on the defensive, her muscles tense and wary, even when her words were ordinary.

There was no tension there now. Even though they were riding out, under the stress of a possible attack by Spartans the bard's powerful body was comfortable and relaxed, the reins held loosely in her hand as she moved with Argo.

So. Really no need to ask. “How's Xena?” He inquired instead. “We're doing great since everyone came down to the valley. We had a great crop this year so far, and the livestock is breeding like crazy.”

“Xe's doing fine.” Gabrielle related. “I don't know if you heard but we had a bad flood during spring thaw, and there was a lot of damage done to the town.”

“Yeah?” Jessan asked. “Wow, sorry to hear that. I know the rains were pretty heavy this year, but we're at the head of the waters in the valley, so we just see a little of it.”

“We lost the lower town.” The bard said. “A lot of people got hurt, some were killed. Xe and I got washed down the river when the bridge broke and ended up in a steep valley. It was a mess.”

“Ugh.” Jessan looked at her in sympathy.

“Mm. Xe ended up with the Sword of War for awhile. But we got that all sorted out.” Gabrielle related. “There were some pretty nasty creatures in the valley, and Ares died.”

Jessan gasped. “Your pet?”

“No.”

The forest dweller’s eyes nearly popped out. “What?”

“It’s okay.” Gabrielle patted his leg. “Xe and I got him out of it and back to his godly self.”

Jessan put a hand to his head. “You say that like it’s some ordinary stuff like making a sandwich.” He moaned. “Gabrielle!”

“Well, you know, that stuff happens to us.” The bard sighed. “So anyway we’ve been relaxing since then, and trying to get stuff sorted out with the town. The Amazons moved up to the plateau valley near our cabin.”

Jessan eyed her and lowered his voice after a glance at Solari. “That good or bad?” He uttered.

Gabrielle smiled. “It’s good. I’ve been trying to get them to do that for a while now. That spot in the hills was too much of a crossroads, and there were towns hemming them in lately.”

“Ah.”

“But I think we’re going to head out again after this is all over.” The bard admitted. “We thought maybe we’d take Dori and go overseas.”

Jessan was silent for a long moment. “Really?” He said. “But what about those guys.” He indicated the Amazons. “And the town, and your family?”

Gabrielle bit off a smile, and glance down at Dori’s head, ruffling her hair. “Everyone knows we’re not going to be there for long.” She said, keeping her voice low. “No one wants to talk about it, but we are... I mean, Jess, Xe and I are who we are. We’re not farmers, or merchants... what’s there for us to do in the town?”

“Well...”

“I adjudicate stuff, I tell stories, Xe messes with the militia, and practices with her sword. You really think we’re meant to live at home for any period of time?”

Jessan chuckled under his breath. “No.” He said. “Not really. But it’s tough on your friends and family, you know?”

“I know.” Gabrielle looked over at him. “But I want to go see things. I want to see lions. Xe said we could go to Africa.” She said. “I want to see that. I want Dori to see that. I want her to see the things I’ve seen, and go to places that make your heart stop they’re so beautiful.”

He nodded.

“So now we just have to get through this war mess.” Gabrielle concluded. “What a pain in my butt.”

“Poor Spartans.”

“What do you mean”

“Uh.. nothing.”

**

Xena was woken out of a very nice dream in the rudest of ways, as she was tossed violently out of her bunk and only her finely honed reflexes saved her from knocking herself senseless against the far wall.

She twisted in mid air and grabbed the one of the rafter spars, arresting her unexpected flight as the ship pitched back the other direction very violently, sending the warrior swinging from her

precarious hold.

“Son of a ...” Xena blinked the sleep out of her eyes. One moment she’d been curled up with Gabrielle in bed, her arm snugly tucked around the bard’s middle and the next she was being pitched halfway to Hades. “This sucks.”

Before the ship could pitch again, she dropped from her hold and landed on the deck, quickly grabbing her saddlebags, then wedging herself between the wall and the bunk as the ship rose up at the bow, then pitched down abruptly, slamming into the sea and shuddering.

Xena paused and listened hard. She could hear yells, and creaking, and far off, screams.

Rats. That meant she wasn’t going to be getting back in her bunk to continue her pleasant snooze. She got the strap on her saddlebag open and worked her boots out, bracing her feet against the wall to keep from being thrown up to the ceiling.

No doubt, Gabrielle would have been freaking. Xena studied the contents of her bag, then decided to change into her leathers after all. She managed this with only a small amount of aerobatics, then she locked one arm around the bunk support as she used her other hand to tug on the first of her boots.

The ship pitched, and she felt the strain in her back as she fought to hold herself in place. She gritted her teeth, then nearly bit her own tongue as the motion surged in the opposite direction, slamming her against the wall. “Ow.”

It was dark. The only light was coming in the leaded glass of the fastened window, a bare glistening of reflected lightning giving her just enough illumination to see by.

Most anyone else, would have seen nothing. But Xena could see the faint outline of the inside of her cabin, and enough detail to get a firmer hold as she tried again to get her boots on.

Tightening and tying the laces one handed was just a testament to her coordination, and she only got thrown around a half dozen more times before she was able to stand and sling her saddlebags with her armor and weapons over her back, fastening one of the straps around her to hold them still over her shoulders.

Not very comfortable. Xena shrugged her shoulders adjusted the leather, and finally sighed resignedly and managed to get herself to the door.

She opened the door and the ship pitched, sending her tumbling back as the door swung inward. The backs of her knees hit the bunk and she fell backwards, slamming her head against the wall.

“Ow.” Xena held herself in place, bracing her feet against the opposite wall as she waited for the stars to fade from her vision. She grimaced, working her jaw to relieve the ache that suddenly spread from the back of her skull.

The ship shuddered. Xena hauled herself to her feet and got to the door and through it before she could be tossed head over ass again.

The hallway was a lot more intimidating. It was creaking and at the end of it she could see the door leading to the deck swinging open, allowing rain and bursts of lightning in. She struggled to the steps and pushed the hatch open, stumbling out onto the deck just as the ship climbed up the front of another massive wave.

The deck was a nightmare. Xena got her arms around two spars just in time as the ship heeled to one side, lifting her feet from the planking and sending two sailors tumbling past her to slam into the sidewall.

Not good. Even in the storm thrashed darkness Xena had seen a spar cracked in half, and she could sense the anxiety in the crewmen as they stumbled back to their feet and grabbed trailing

lines.

Xena judged they didn't need her help, and instead she made her way along the rail up to the steering platform, where she could see two men lashed to the rudder, and the captain braced at their side.

Timing her lunge, she went with the ship's motion and it launched her through the air, depositing her right next to the man and scaring him half out of his knee laced britches.

"Yah!" He let out a squall that sounded over the storm, as the sailors jerked their heads around, their eyes white and rolling.

"Easy." Xena grabbed hold of the railing, as the ship rode down the side of another monster wave. "You weren't kidding about the storm."

"Bloody iggerant woman! Course I wasn't kidding!" He bawled at her. "What d'ye mean jumping at me like that? Coudla got yourself kilt!"

Xena took a breath as she was sideswiped by a blast of rain. "Buddy, don't start with me."

The captain eyed her.

"I told you before I'm the least of your worries."

"Agh." The man said. "Got the hatches battened. We'll make this. Ship's holding up."

Xena braced her boots on the deck and watched the spray explode from the bow, covering the front part of the ship. She could see whitecaps everywhere, and the wind was howling across the deck with a persistent, grating moan. "Sure."

"Want to do something useful? Them women you brought on are causing trouble belowdecks." The captain yelled at her. "Go tell em to shut their traps!"

Xena took her time considering the request. Then she sighed and released her grip. "See what I can do." She waited for the ship to roll, then she bounded down the steps and across the deck, somehow managing to keep her balance and avoid the half dozen sailors furiously lashing sheets to the main spar that was between her and the hatch to the hold.

She hit the hatch just as it was opening, and heard the rumble and crash of someone falling behind it, combined with a harsh yell.

"Whoops." Xena yanked the hatch open and got herself into the stairwell just as another wave hit, and she braced her hands to either side, keeping her body suspended as the world seemed to swirl around her.

Below, she heard men screaming, and the heavy thuds of horses hooves slamming against wood. She waited for the ship to steady momentarily, then she dropped downward as fast as she could, landing in the hold just as she heard a loud crack from up above.

Not a good sign.

There was a huddled form on the deck, shoved against a support beam. Xena grabbed onto the beam and looked around, giving her eyes a moment to adjust to the almost pitch darkness. Everything had been lashed down tight, but there were things swinging from the rafters that were between her and the horse holding area.

Deciding the Amazons could take care of themselves, she released the beam and dodged her way through the hold, ducking the swinging barrels and getting to the inner opening without getting smacked.

Her shoulder hit the doorframe and she looked inside, spotting Iolaus at the front of his stabling,

ropes holding him in place. His head was extending into the hallway and his eyes were rolling whitely with fear.

Xena pushed off the door and grabbed hold of the ropes, pulling herself close to the stallion as he recognized her presence and snorted hard. "Easy boy." She caught his halter and felt him breathing hard against her chest, making a rattling sound. "Eeeeasy boy. It's okay. Just a storm."

Next to him, the mare was also alert, pressed against one wall in the narrower space though she, too, was tied on both sides. The ground was also liberally covered in straw, in case the animals fell down.

Xena glanced up as she heard footsteps, looking up at the doorway just as the human Iolaus rounded the corner. "Iolaus!"

Her horse moved his head in her grip. "Not you." She muttered.

"Oh, good you're here." Iolaus stumbled over to her. "This is really Hades, right? We got tricked and we're heading down the Styx? It sure feels like it."

"Bad storm." Xena said. "Your stomach holding up?"

Iolaus grinned. "Whatever it is you gave me, worked." He held on as the ship rolled, and his expression grew serious. "Xena, is this thing going to hold together?" He pulled himself over to where the mare's head was sticking out, and scratched her ears. "Hey pretty girl. Don't worry. We'll take care of you."

Xena felt the ship shudder. "Captain knows his business." She said. "Let's just hope we get through the damn storm fast."

There were no other people around. The crew were off helping the ship survive and the small brazier they'd used was banked and put away. Xena spent a moment more gentling her stallion, then reluctantly decided she'd probably better go see if the Amazons were all right.

It occurred to her that Gabrielle would probably have been a little scandalized by her caring more for her horse than her putative sisters, but then again... Xena gave Io a kiss on his nose. Maybe she wouldn't.

"Want to stay with them?" She asked the human Iolaus. "I want to go check on our other friends."

"They're not friends of yours." Iolaus stated, with a half smile.

"No." The warrior said. "But I want to check on them anyway." She gave Io a last pat, then she headed for the hallway that led to the merchants quarters.

The ship seemed to be moving a little less, and she made good time as she worked her way across the beam and down the narrow hallway, where she could now hear a lot of people making a lot of noise. She edged between two doorways, glad of the closeness when the ship pitched downwards and shuddered.

Around the next spar was the common travelers quarters and as she cleared the doorway a blast of noise assailed her.

"You stupid bastards get off her!"

"Shut up you bitch! I'll knock you down again!"

Xena didn't wait to hear any more. She bolted into the room and took stock of the dim scene, lit only by a single swinging oil lantern that cast shadows darting every where. She surged forward and grabbed the first merchant she saw, a man with his breeches half off who stank of drink.

She didn't bother talking. She picked the man up and slung him across the deck, moving with the ship to add momentum and sending him flying.

The two Amazons were in trouble. One was pinned down by two men sitting on her, the other was half tied to a bunk, and already missing half of her leathers. Xena felt a sense of rage erupt and she lashed out and kicked the next man in the head, rewarded with a sodden crack as his neck broke and he slumped over next to the bunk.

The merchants started reacting, too late, to this terror in their midst. "Hey.. wh... stop that! We're important men!"

"You're dead men." Xena slammed him in the head with her elbow, then grabbed the man lying on top of the tied Amazon and lifted him up off her, letting the clean feeling of anger drive her motion as she turned and twisted, bringing him up and over her head before she slammed him not the deck just as the ship pitched hard to one side.

She turned to the men pinning the other Amazon and they scrambled to get off her, but not in time as Xena yanked her sword from the kit on her back and it flashed crimson reflections across the room. She advanced on the men, twirling the sword in her hand, apparently oblivious to the motion of the ship.

They screamed.

Xena caught up to the first one and lifted him up single handed, shoving him against the wall and pausing, her sword held at groin level. "Tell me why I shouldn't euench you?"

The man was shaking. "Wasn't... didn't..."

"Sure. Lie to me." Xena shoved him harder. "Tell me you and your buddies didn't want to rape her. Go on."

"I ddin't do nothing!" The man squealed. "I just held that bitch down she was trying to cut Alavar."

"And what was Alavar trying to do that she wanted to cut him?" Xena brought her blade up and rested the tip against his throat. "Was he giving her flowers?"

The man's face, ugly and scruffily bearded, was pale, and slack. Then he gathered his wits. "She's just a woman!"

"So am I." Xena reversed the sword and slammed it into his groin with all her strength. There was a sodden crack as she broke the wood he was held against, the pommel of her sword crunching bone and cartilage along the way.

He squealed soundlessly, his eyes rolling up into his head. Xena released him and let him slide to the ground, then she turned and surveyed the scene. The other man had escaped, along with the others still conscious and only the two Amazons were conscious. "You both all right?"

Auhalia was busy on her knees freeing her sister. She glanced over her shoulder. "That's two we owe you, Xena."

"Stupid morons." Xena glanced around the room. It was divided by rough sailcloth walls into spaces that gave some semblance of privacy, but there were no doors – just a flap easily cut through. The rough spaces opened into the common space that they were all in, that had some wooden trestle tables bolted to the deck and a few large waterskins hanging from the ceiling.

"My sister was sick." Auhalia said. "From the motion."

"I've got something for that." The warrior commented.

"I got thrown against the wall in the storm and lost my wits." The woman continued. "When I

came to they were all over her, and then two of them laid down on me, the bastards.”

“Bastards.” Regi ground out as she was freed. “May Artemis stunt their manhoods forever.”

There were footsteps, and suddenly one of the mates was there, the senior man Xena had seen upstairs. “What goes on here?” He demanded. “I hear tales of murder?”

“No one’s been murdered.” Xena still had her blade out and now she rested it on her shoulder as she gazed impassively at him. “But there’s at least two men dead here.” She said. “Better get them overboard before they rot.”

“Dead?”

“I killed them.” The warrior frankly admitted. “They were raping my friends. I don’t like that.”

The mate studied her. “Men said it wasn’t ...”

Xena merely raised her eyebrow at him.

The man shrugged and nodded, then he turned and left the room, calling out orders to his sailors. Immediately, three of them entered, giving Xena a wary look.

“The warrior pointed at the two dead men with her sword. “The other two are gonna wake up wishing they were dead.” She predicted. “C’mon.” She addressed the Amazons. “Get your stuff. I’m not gonna go through that again.”

The door was filled again, this time by one of the Athenian soldiers who were traveling with them. “What happened here?” He said, giving Xena a suspicious look. “Some merchants came to get me. Said there was someone killing people down here for no reason.”

Xena rubbed her thumb over the hilt of her sword. “Do I look like someone who kills people for no reason?”

The man barely glanced at her. “Can’t see you at all, so who would know? Did you kill them?”

“Those men were raping my sister.” Auhailia said. “No reason? Bastards. They were drunk, and attacked us.”

The soldier regarded them. “Well then, are you not harlots?” He asked in a reasonable tone. “What else were they do to with you?”

Xena’s sword moved in a flicker, and smacked him hard across the cheek. He stumbled backwards, grabbing his face. “They’re not harlots.” She stepped closer to the oil lamp and when he stopped blinking and reached for his weapon, he looked up and saw her more clearly.

His hand dropped from his sword. “Xena!”

The warrior was half in light, half in shadows, and standing there with the oil lamp glistening off the brilliance of her sword and the pale clarity of her eyes, she was worthy of the shock and dismay in his tone.

“Get out of our way.” Xena said, seeing that Auralia had Regi up and moving. “Before I forget I’m a respected citizen.”

The soldier scrambled back. “My apologies.” He said. “I did not know you were involved in this, Of course we’ll arrest those merchants. Can I help you?” He edged nearer to the two Amazons. “May I be of assistance?”

“To harlots?” Regi snarled at him.

“I could not see you.” The man said, stiffly. “And you are not dressed as I am used to seeing citizens dressed.” He looked pointedly at the Amazons bare skin. “I beg your pardon for the

assumption.”

Regi started to talk again, but apparently had better thoughts and clamped her jaw down instead, obviously wrestling with her stomach.

“Thank you.” Aurailia said. “You’re excused. I could use some help here.”

“Let’s get up on deck.” Xena was relieved to feel the ship moving less under her. “Get you some air. And get you out of this cesspit.” She waited for the soldier to take a gingerly hold on Regi, and they made their way up the back steps to the open deck.

As she had suspected, the storm had abated some, and instead of the near panic, she sensed a relieved order as the sailors worked to fix the damage. The rest of the passengers had come out on the deck also, and were gathered near the steering platform.

They were halfway there when one of the other soldiers spotted the man near Xena and stumbled over him. “Sir! Sir!”

“Can’t you see I’m busy?” The soldier sniped at him.

“Sir, the prisoners have broken out! They’re somewhere on the ship! They’ve taken a prisoner!”

Oh great. Xena groaned inwardly. Just what they needed.

Just what they needed.

**

Continued in Part 14

A Queen’s Tale

Part 14

Gabrielle squirmed between two tree trunks and climbed carefully up onto the rock crag above her. Cait was waiting, occasionally lifting herself up to peek over the top between glances behind her to judge her queen’s progress.

Despite her well known dislike of heights – Cait would never ascribe something so low as fear to her mentor’s partner – Gabrielle seemed to be comfortable enough, scaling the side of the cliff much as Cait herself had, pulling herself up with her powerful hands and making a steady if unspectacular progress.

She thought she’d heard something about Gabrielle climbing out of the valley she and Xena had gotten themselves stuck into, the one where Pony and Granella had gone to find them in. Was it true? She made a note to ask the bard if it was.

No one had really wanted to talk about that whole thing. Cait glanced through the gap, then turned back to watch Gabrielle. Pony and Granella had simply said they’d ended up being whisked through most of it – they’d started by falling down a waterfall and ended up flat on their backs up on the top of the ridge again, so there wasn’t much to tell.

But from the look in Gabrielle’s eyes when she and Xena had come back, Cait knew something terrible had happened. Something terrible, and heart wrenching, and soul changing, if nothing else by the fact the bard simply refused to tell the story of it.

Gabrielle’s stories weren’t all nice. Some didn’t reflect well on her, or sometimes even on Xena, though they usually worked out right in the end. So if she’d lived through something and didn’t want to tell about it, Cait reasoned, it was probably something most of them didn’t want to hear.

“Almost there Cait.” Gabrielle grabbed the last bit of a thick ledge, and pulled herself up over it, getting her booted feet under her and standing up. She dusted her hands off and joined Cait at the

rock. "What's up?"

"That is." Cait said, simply. She pointed, and moved back from the gap so Gabrielle could take her place and see through it. The bard was just a bit taller than she was, so she didn't hardly have to get up on her tiptoes, but by the stiffening of her back the Amazon knew her queen had seen.

"Damn." Gabrielle exhaled. They'd finally caught up with the Spartans but they were now on the road approaching the bend that would bring them even with the bridge, and the entrance to Amphipolis.

One bit of luck, the enemy army had stopped for a break, and the men were filling their waterskins from the river.

Bolting, which is what she felt like doing, would catch their attention. But Gabrielle knew there was no real way to slip out of the forest and make the road that would take them to the bridge without being seen.

So.

They would have to be seen.

Gabrielle turned and dusted her hands off again. "Okay, let's go." She started down the cliff with Cait right behind her. The rocks were a little loose under her boots, but the slope wasn't all that steep and she slid down and kept her balance with relative ease.

Tramping up and down the damn mountain to her home had done some good, anyway.

The rest of her group were waiting at the base, as she reached the last small ledge and jumped off it to land near them. "Okay folks – here's what we're going to do." She went over and took hold of Argo's bridle. "The Spartans are right over the ridge there."

"Nice." Solari nodded. "I knew it was going to be a fighting kind of day."

Jessan smiled.

"Well, that's not the goal." The bard shook her head. "Because we can't fight all those Spartans, and still get back to warn Amphipolis, not to mention Athens." She pulled her cloak out of her saddle bag and swung it over her shoulders. "So we're just going to be a visiting Amazon queen and some friends, riding down to Potadeia so I can visit my hometown. Everyone got that?"

Solari scratched her jaw. "You think they'll buy that?"

Gabrielle pulled herself up on Argo. "Well." She said. "I learned from Xena to try and keep as much truth in my charades as I could. So I am an Amazon queen, you are all my friends, and I was born in Potadeia. Not much for them to prove wrong."

"Think they'll let us go?" Nala asked.

"Depends on whether they think we're for or against them." Gabrielle smiled briefly. "Or whether they want get someone who potentially has lots of big, angry fanged friends mad."

Jessan laughed outright, the soft, throaty laughter of his kind.

"Well, if not, we'll get a good fight out of it." Solari concluded.

"To right." Cait agreed. "C'mon, Pally. Get on with it."

Gabrielle was now glad she had Dori with her. She settled behind her daughter, and raked her fingers through her dark, unruly hair. It made a story of traveling to see family so much more believable if you had a toddler with you, didn't it?

"Gabrielle." Jessan rode up next to her. "What do you think they'll do after the bend?"

“No idea.” The bard waited for the rest of them to mount then she nudged Argo gently and they started down the thin forest path that would end up dropping down through the grass to meet the road.

“What if they recognize us?” Solari asked. “Well, I mean, what if they recognize you.” She clarified, as she edged her horse up next to Argo. “Or if they know it was us, with those other guys. They were Spartans right?”

“No.” Gabrielle frowned. “I’m still not sure what that was all about.” She ran a hand through her own hair to order it a little. “Let’s just play it straight. Let me do the talking.”

Solari stifled a laugh, and Nala wrinkled up her nose to make her smile less obvious. Paladia merely snorted. “Who the Hades else is going to do any talking?” She asked. “None of us can make crap up like you can.”

“Pally.” Cait scowled at her.

Gabrielle just chuckled. “She’s right.” The bard said. “It’s what I do.” She sped Argo up a little, settling herself and sorting the details in her mind as they cleared the trees and started down the slope to the road.

From where they were, they couldn’t quite see the army, but Gabrielle figured the army, or more precisely it’s scouts, could see them. She took a few breaths to settle her nerves, then she glanced casually around. “Just one thing.”

They looked at her.

“If I say run, you RUN.” Gabrielle said. “Okay?”

“Would Xena...” Bennu started.

“Like the wind.” Gabrielle cut him off. “She taught me how to run. No arguments Bennu.”

The soldier subsided with a grunt.

It was quiet. There were no animal noises around, and the trees were only lightly moving in what little breeze there was. The air was moist and warm, and she was already regretting putting her cloak on as sweat started to form on her skin.

“Mama, it’s hot.” Dori said. “C’n we go get wasser, and see the fishes?”

“Soon, honey.” Gabrielle became aware, or really, consciously aware that she was taking herself and Dori into what could be a lot of trouble. “We have to go down to the road, then we’re going to the bridge, and over to our house. Grandma’s there and she’ll have some cool cider for you.”

“Gramma?” Dori brightened. “Boo there too?”

Well, it wouldn’t be unheard of. “I don’t know.” Gabrielle said. “She might be, but I think she’s still out there getting our friends back, Dori.”

Dori scowled.

“Yeah, I know.” Gabrielle gave her a one armed hug. “I miss her too.” She kept her arm around Dori. “Listen Dor, we’re going to probably see a lot of men now, the ones we found over the mountain.”

Dori looked up at her in question.

“I want you to just sit here, and be quiet for mama. Can you do that? No matter what happens?” Gabrielle lowered her voice. “Be quiet like Boo, right?”

“Okay.” Dori whispered. “Bad mens?”

“Maybe.” Her mother whispered back.

“Mama go boom?”

“I hope not, sweetie. We want to just go home, right?” She straightened up and glanced quickly around her at her little gang. The four Amazons were in rough group around her, with Bennu and his men behind them and Jessan’s people on the outside of the party.

They were all watching her.

Leadership, Xena had told her many times, comes from inside. You have to lead yourself, and then other people will follow you. Gabrielle smiled a little at the thought, since when they were together she really didn’t have any need to lead herself. Xena did a great job of leading everything in the vicinity.

But she had learned, over the years, little tricks and things from her natural born leader soulmate that let her give a creditable show of being in charge and now she gathered all of those little nuggets and prepared to put them to the test.

So she sat a little straighter in her saddle and lifted her head, slowly sweeping the vista as they made their way down to the road, catching in her peripheral vision a flicker of motion ducking back through the trees, heading for the bend.

So it begins. Gabrielle took Argo’s reins in the hand she had tucked around Dori, leaving her other hand free. She let it rest on her thigh, but shifted just a little, exposing the ties that held her staff in place and then she moved her cloak back just enough to expose the dagger she wore at her waist.

They crossed the last bit of trail and climbed up the embankment to the road, a wide, sturdy track that had been cut along the river in a time long before Gabrielle’s birth. It was lined with stone, and fitted with it in places, and you could take it most of the way from Athens to Thrace if you had a mind to.

By chance, it passed close by Amphipolis, and that chance had directed most of her adopted hometown’s fortunes.

Had directed her own fortune, since it was that very road she’d followed to find Xena that day, so long ago, when she’d left one world and found another. “C’mon Argo.” She broke the silence, giving the mare a pat on the shoulder. “Not too much longer now.”

As if by signal, the rest of them started talking also, low, general conversation that barely rose above the hoofbeats as they turned their back deliberately on the army they knew was behind them and headed down the road.

Gabrielle half turned her head, focusing her hearing behind them. “Anything?”

“Nothing yet.” Jessan muttered. “Don’t see anything behind us, they must be well behind the pass there.”

Run for it? Keep walking? “Okay.” Gabrielle held a steady pace, a rambling walk as they filled the road from side to side.

Her ears actually caught the sounds right before Cait reached out and put a hand on her wrist. “Okay.” She said. “Everyone just stay relaxed.”

“Score, coming up behind us.” Bennu rumbled softly. “These un marked no doubt.”

Gabrielle could hear the hoofbeats. “They riding to catch us?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Nala said. “Spreading out to circle.”

Should they ignore them till the last moment? Gabrielle pondered that, then elected otherwise. She slowed Argo and lifted her hand, then circled her finger and the entire party obediently turned around.

The Spartans were, indeed riding towards them. They slowed as they saw Gabrielle's party stop, and as they came up to face them, Gabrielle nudged her way through the crowd of men and Amazons and forest dwellers to the front.

She took Argo a bodylength past Jessan, who visibly twitched but let her pass, then she came to a halt and fixed the Spartan in the lead with her eyes.

He slowed further, and the rest of the Spartans did also. These were regular soldiers, Gabrielle recognized, with Spartan shields and surcoats, and carrying a Spartan banner. It seemed a very bold move to her.

The man stopped a horse length from where she was. "You there." He said. "Who are you?"

"You there." Gabrielle answered him, with a touch of gentle amusement. "Who are you?"

Behind her, she could hear the nervous stirring and it occurred to her, not for the first time, that all those years with Xena had stiffened her nerves way past the norm because she didn't even feel slightly anxious.

She wondered if that was a good thing or not.

The man facing her let his gloved hands rest on his saddlehorn. "You ride the road boldly for a woman." He commented. "Even so faced with armed soldiers."

Gabrielle lifted her shoulders in a casual shrug. "Seen one soldier, seen them all." She remarked. "Why do you seek to stop us?"

The man glanced past her, at Jessan sitting motionless at her side. "We are the vanguard of the Spartan army." He answered with surprising straightforwardness. "We are sweeping the road clear. You of no name can either answer my questions, or we will sweep you aside."

Jessan smiled at him, showing every tooth in his head. "Bet you don't." He said, cheerfully.

"Bad mens." Dori concluded. "Mama, go boom with him. I'm hungry." She frowned at the soldier. "Go 'way."

Gabrielle ruffled her hair. "Take it easy slugger." She told her daughter. "You're not Xena yet." She watched the soldier from the corner of her eye and saw the slight reaction. "Spartan." She addressed the soldier. "My name is Gabrielle. I'm the queen of the mountain tribe of the Amazons." She paused. "We're heading to visit my family in Potadeia and if you're a smart man you'll just leave us alone."

He studied her.

"You really don't want to mess with me." The bard concluded. "I know why you're here, and honestly, I don't care. We already turned down Athen's request."

The soldier signaled his men in. "So we have the famous Gabrielle here before us." He said. "Men have been searching long for you and have died for it and here you walk right into my hands."

"I'm not in your hands." Gabrielle said. "And I won't be."

"You will." The man said. "My name is Raurus. I am a senior captain of Sparta, and I have the authority to tell you that if you come with me, turn yourself and your little one in, we will bypass this land and not touch it. No harm will come to your family.. your... " His eyes drifted. "friends or suchlike."

Gabrielle felt her body slowly tense as the words penetrated.

“I know who you are.” The man said. “Come with me, and your friends are safe. Choose not to, and we will burn this valley out. I swear it.” He stared into Gabrielle’s eyes.

Gabrielle never flinched. “There’s really only one answer to that” She said, in a placid tone.

“Uh oh.” Dori ducked down against Argo’s neck.

“Good, I’m glad you see reason.” Rauros rode closer and reached out for her, his hand getting within inches before Gabrielle clamped her legs against Argos side and the mare surged into motion. She grabbed his hand and yanked him bodily off his horse as Argo raced by, then she let out a loud yell that galvanized her tiny army into battle.

She released Rauros arm and pulled Argo up as she reached for her staff, then her eyes fell on the army moving rapidly towards them down the road. “Oh boy.” She whirled the mare around. “Hang on Dor.”

Bennu and Jessan were in full battle with four of the Spartans and holding their own, but she knew it didn’t matter. “Jess! Bennu!” She yelled. “Cait! Paladia! Nala! Run!”

“Run? We just sta..” Solari protested, then she saw the army coming. “Oh! Oh crap! Run! Run!”

Jessan walloped two of the Spartans then he, too saw the army. He swiped at a third with his claws, then he turned his horse and whistled, and the group broke off and surged into a gallop down the road towards Amphipolis.

“That didn’t work well at all.” Cait sighed as she seated her dagger. “Bother, Pally.”

“Bother my ass.” Paladia only just kept from grabbing Cait’s horses bridle to haul it along faster. “Wouldja move ya nut! Move! Run!”

The army let out a yell and started moving faster, seeing their fallen comrades in the road. Gabrielle didn’t have time to worry about it, she got down low over Argo’s back and asked the mare for all she had.

She only hoped they made the bridge in time.

**

“The rocks!”

Xena whirled as she heard the yell, her eyes sweeping the area around the ship and catching the reason the wind had slackened. The storm had driven the vessel perilously close to shore, and now she saw through the driving rain a dark bulk of stone.

The sailors were running to the main spar, and the first mate fairly dove down into the hold to rouse the oarsmen as the captain grabbed the wheel from the two men and wrestled with it.

The warrior paused a bare instant, then she made for the steering platform, scattering the patricians who had inched their way onto the deck to see what was going on. “Go through that door!” She yelled at Regi and her sister. “Hang on!”

The two Amazons didn’t waste any time listening. They got to the door and went through it, ducking as a wave plunged over the sidewall and drenched the deck.

“Watch it” Xena grabbed the wheel along side the captain and they turned it hard together, hearing the creak of the rudder as it slowly shifted against the wind and sea.

“Bastard!” The captain yelled, more just to enunciate his feelings than at her.

“Poseidon sure as Hades can be.” Xena agreed, gritting her teeth. “Especially when he’s in a bad

mood.”

“Get that damn sail up!” The man bawled at the top of his voice., making Xena flinch since she had no hands free to cover her ears. “Up! Up!” He turned his head and stared at Xena. “Woman you have this wheel?”

“I’ve got it!” Xena yelled back, cranking it another notch to prove her point.

The captain let go and bolted for the mainsail, leaving the steering of the rudder to his troublesome passenger without a backwards glance. He grabbed one of the lines and started hauling along with his men, and the tattered sail started to inch up the mast.

Xena threw a little more weight against the wheel. “Get inside!” She yelled at the patricians. “If we hit the rocks, you want something to hang on to!”

They scurried across the lurching deck and she was left alone on the steering platform, as the other sailors rushed to help raise the sails.

The ship was lurching, and she could hear the rumble and scrape as the hull scraped against the rocks, a shudder running through the structure that set her teeth right on edge. She could feel the rain lash harder, and she wished the boat off the rocks, wished the flapping, ragged sail to raise, wished she heard the thunk and splash of the oars running into the ocean as they lifted the hatches below.

She saw the hatch at the far end slam open, and the three prisoners emerged, looking desperately around.

Briefly, she considered suggesting they jump. After all the rocks they were smashing themselves against had to be part of some land. But she held her tongue as they spotted her and she could see the woman’s eyes narrow and her hand tighten on the knife she had clutched in her fingers.

Uh oh. Xena braced her knee against the wheel and tentatively let one hand off the handles. The wood shifted under her and she grabbed hold again, feeling the strain in her shoulders.

“You!” Milena staggered as the boat lurched. “No matter if this damn thing sinks I’ll kill you first.” She came at Xena, knife extended.

“Don’t be an idiot.” Xena growled, fixing her with a glare. “I’m keeping the damn ship off the reef.”

Milena grabbed the wheel and swung around it. “You bitch. You set those soldiers on us.”

The boat lurched. “Can we talk about it later.” Xena felt the strain as the rudder tried to force itself the opposite direction. She looked up to see the sail filling.

“Oh no.” Milena got right up against her, shoving the point of her knife in the hollow below Xena’s ear. “We’ll do whatever I want now.” She shifted, and smiled as the edge of the blade pierced the warrior’s skin, and a bubble of blood appeared.

Xena hoped the ship didn’t tip upwards, or she’d end up spilling most of her blood all over the salt drenched deck. She could hear the captain yelling, and the agonized creak of the wooden spars, and belowdecks, the clamor of the oarsman.

“Milena! Let that damn woman go!” One of her brothers yelled. “C’mon! Let’s get out of here ! We’ll jump!” He had a coil of rope lashed to the rail on the side of the ship currently scraping the rocks. “C’mon!”

Milena looked quickly at them. “Not before I’m done.” She leaned over and licked the blood, then bit Xena’s earlobe. “And I’m not nearly done. How does it feel to be helpless, Xena?”

The warrior sighed. “I’m not.” She said. “I’m just making a choice.”

Milena ran the knife along Xena's neck, then slid under the powerful arm braced against the wheel's surge, the warrior's muscles standing out under the skin like iron bands. "You're going to choose to stand here, and take this. Let me do whatever I want to you, aren't you? Because you know I'll cut your throat."

"Milena! Come!"

"No." Xena turned her head and their eyes met. "I'm choosing to save the lives of everyone on this ship instead of killing you." She said. "Don't make me change my mind."

Though Xena's stance was rock steady, there were tremors twitching across her body, as her will held a tight rein on her animal instincts.

Through the salt air, she could smell her own blood. Her nostrils flared.

For a moment, Milena froze. Her beautiful face, washed clean of the dirt from the jail, was outlined in a blast of lightning. Then she growled and her hand moved with the knife in it at a rain spattered bare neck leaking a trickle of blood that was there before her.

And then was not. Her arm plunged past now in bare emptiness and she stumbled forward as something hard slammed her in the side of the head and sent her sprawling.

"Hold it! Hold it ya damned woman!" The captain yelled. "We're almost up! C'mon you slackards pull!"

Xena landed and hauled the wheel to again, bracing a boot against the chest bolted to the deck next to her. She cursed under her breath as she locked her arms in place again, hoping she'd hit the damn idiot hard enough to knock her out for a while.

There was a flap of the sail, and then she felt the ship moving under her as the sailors got the lines untangled and the sheets rode up, the wind grabbing hungrily at them as they swung the yard arm around and they belled with air.

With a wrenching creak the ship tore itself away from the rocks, and there was a scream on the wind, as two bodies flung themselves over the side.

Xena straightened up as the wind pulled the ship into deeper water, and she felt the rudder respond as she cranked the wheel around and straightened the course.

The rain came pouring down harder and as she watched, lightning hit the top of the mast, lighting them with a silver blast from Hades she only barely closed her eyes against.

Men screamed and grabbed for their heads.

Xena cracked her eyes open, and saw bodies on the deck, and sailors staggering around blinded. She kept her hands on the wheel though, and a moment later spotted Iolaus emerging from the hold and bolting in her direction.

He let out a yell as he came past her, drawing his sword as she heard someone scrambling at her back. "Knock that stupid bitch out!" She advised loudly. "Maybe you'll knock some sense into her."

"Stop!" Iolaus' voice echoed. "C'mon now, don't make me..ow! Cut that out! Stay still or.. you're going to bleed to death you crazy woman!!!"

"I'll kill her first!" Milena's voice gargled. "You ruined everything! You ruined my life! The gods DAMN you Xena!"

"Ah ah!" Iolaus grunted. "Too late for that, I'm afraid."

Xena kept her eyes on the sea, and adjusted the rudder as they inched away from the rocks, now visible in the blasts of lightning as an island jutting out in the middle of a wash of white

water. Against the blackness, she saw a figure hanging on the rocks, and got the impression of a pale face, and staring eyes.

“My brother!” Milena suddenly screamed. “Fool!”

The captain came back, running across the deck. “Steer it, woman!” He yelled. “We’re off! We’re off! Get the aft away from the damn rocks!”

Xena grabbed him and shoved him at the wheel. “Take it.” She said, leaving the platform and bolted for the rail.

A rope was tied there. She looked over the side and saw nothing but churning waves, and the single man. He thrust his hand out and she could see the terror in his eyes.

Good riddance? Xena felt her body move without any conscious thought on her part. She grabbed the rope and yanked it up out of the sea, wrapping it tight around her arm and jumping up onto the rail. Before she could consider, she crouched and leaped, the salt water pounding against her as she passed through rain and waves to a jarring landing on the rocks.

She had only a breath. A heartbeat at most before the ship’s motion yanked her back off the rocks, or else made her release the rope and trap herself here where she could only die slowly.

She didn’t wait even the heartbeat. She grabbed the man by the arm, the younger man from the town, and threw him over her shoulder as the ship surged in the opposite direction and before she could take a breath they were airborne.

Not enough to make it back. She felt the water closing in and she took hold of the man and grabbed a breath before she hit the water and the cold surge washed over her head.

A breath, and she was being yanked up again, into the waves as the ship moved ponderously through them. “Hold me around the neck!” She yelled at the man. “I need both arms!”

“Ahhhhghghghghgh!” The man screamed, almost witless with fear. “Death! D...”

Xena grabbed his arm and bit his wrist, cutting his stuttering off. “HOLD ON!” She bellowed. “Or you’ll meet Posiedon and he’s not a fun date!”

Shivering, the man clutched her tightly around the neck, and she released him, grabbing the rope and hauling them both through the water.

It was hard. The waves swamped them every minute, and she felt the strain in her shoulders and back as she moved the double weight along.

“Why in the Hades am I DOING this?” She screamed silently at herself. “Idiot!!!”

The ship suddenly loomed over them, and before she could stop she was being slammed into the side, coming perilously close to blacking out as the force stunned her. The ship dipped down at the bow, and she saw the wave coming at them and it was all she could do to hang on, hardening her will as she had with the wheel and giving all her effort to convince her body it could do this.

She felt the wave. She felt herself yanked out of the water as the ship climbed the side of it and the weight of both of them was suddenly on her as she swung wildly through the air, slamming against the side of the ship again as they reached the top of the wave.

And going over she just as suddenly felt airborne, as though she weighed nothing, was floating, there in the rain and the spray from the salt, as the world went sideways on her and she tumbled in mid air, seeing the sea, and then the boat, and then the sea in rapid fashion beneath her.

Instinct saved them both. Xena yanked herself sideways in the air and grabbed the siderail of the ship, flipping them both over it and onto the deck as the boat surged down the slope of the wave and they were pinned to the wooden surface by their weight redoubled.

Oh gods. Xena felt as though every bone in her body had cracked. She released the rope and slumped on the deck, as dizzy and disoriented as she'd ever been in her life. Salt water burned in her nose and throat, and she could barely hear the chaos around her for the ringing bells in her head from the pounding.

"Xena!"

She felt a warm hand on her shoulder and managed to get her eyes open to find Iolaus crouched over her in concern. His face was blurry, and she grimaced, blinking her eyes to clear the salt from them. "How was that for stupid?"

"Stay still." Iolaus urged. "You're hurt."

Flat on her back on the deck, Xena tilted her head and regarded him. "You a healer?"

"No, I." Iolaus looked around. "Let me go find one."

Xena grabbed his arm before he could take off. "Iolaus." She waited for him to look back. "I'm a healer. Why not let me figure it out?" She could feel her scattered wits returning and the ship's deck had regained its nightmare clarity.

"Xena, you're bleeding all over the place. Let me get someone." Her old friend was visibly very upset. "Now who..."

Xena was still holding his arm. "Hey." She said gently, getting his attention again. "It's okay. Just relax, willya? You're freaking out like Gabrielle used to."

"Used to???"

That brought a faint smile to Xena's face. "Now she just starts sewing me up without even warning me first." She assured him. "I'm okay, Iolaus. I've got a damn tough hide."

"Xena, that was crazy!" He sat down next to her, giving in. "That was a damn stupid crazy thing to do. You've got a family to get home to!"

It was. "I know." The warrior took a deep breath, cautiously. She was relieved when her ribs seemed to function without causing her undue pain, which meant for once she hadn't cracked any of them. She flexed her hands, then tensed the muscles along her legs and was even more relieved when everything responded. "Gabrielle's rubbed off on me. What the Hades can I tell you?"

"Hmph."

Her head hurt, badly. She reached up and felt blood along her skull, and a lump in the process of forming. That, along with the upset in her stomach and she reckoned she'd gotten away with a concussion doing something she should really have died from.

Just not her day. "Okay." She slowly pushed herself up to a seated position and looked around, with Iolaus anxiously hovering over her. "Know something?"

"What?"

"I told Gabrielle this. It hurts a hell of a lot more to be a hero than it does to be an evil warlord." Xena swiveled so she could lean back against one of the spars, and then she carefully extended her legs out. "Gets truer every day."

Iolaus exhaled and let his arms drop. "Crazy." He shook his head. "That was so crazy I don't even think Herc would have tried it."

"He's not crazy."

"He's not married with a kid, either." Iolaus said. "For Zeus' sake, Xena."

Xena leaned back and exhaled slowly. The ship had gained momentum, and they were now plowing through the waves again, as the sailors slowly got the ship back to rights, most of them skirting the area Xena and Iolaus were in with wide eyed, respectful stares.

The soldiers had staggered abovedeck, and taken the man she'd rescued back into their custody. Xena watched them surround him, then she looked over past the captain to find a trussed Milena tied to the rail, staring at her.

Staring intently at her, face twitching.

Impossible to say, what was in that stare. Xena had expected hatred and the petulant, frustrated anger that had driven the woman to torment her when she'd held the wheel. But she didn't see that in those pale eyes, almost as piercing as her own.

This was something completely different, and she wasn't sure what it was.

Her neck stung, and she remembered the knife, and the bite, and her face twitched into a grimace. "I think I'd prefer hatred."

"What?"

Xena sighed. "Damn I wish Gabrielle was here."

"What?" Iolaus got out of his feet. "Let's get you inside. You're not making sense."

"I only wish I wasn't." Xena very slowly joined him, feeling an ache in every single bone she had. "I only wish."

**

Gabrielle was, in fact, wishing she was anywhere but where she was. She was crouched low over Argo's neck, shielding Dori's body with her own as they thundered down the road, with what she figured was a rapidly gaining squad of Spartans on their tail.

What would Xena do if she were here?. Gabrielle spared a glance over her shoulder, a little surprised to see nothing on the road behind them. Xena would be cursing like sailor if she were here, that's what she'd be doing.

Bennu came up next to her. "Dropped back." He said. "Odd, that."

Odd? Oh yeah. "I'm not looking a gift horse in the... uh... mouth." Gabrielle said. "Let's just get home."

The soldier nodded "Aye." He said. 'And then what, little hawk? Tis you they're wanting, I'm thinking."

Exactly what Gabrielle had been thinking. "Maybe I should just keep going." She muttered. "Let them follow me and leave you all alone."

Bennu just looked at her.

Gabrielle understood the look. Bennu wouldn't leave her to flee alone, any more than any of the rest of the group she had with her would. At a pinch, maybe Nala would take a direct order from her but the rest of them knew her better as Gabrielle than as their Queen.

Bennu, in fact, was absolutely loyal to Xena, and she was sure he'd been told to keep her skin whole at risk of everything else.

Just like Cait had been.

Gabrielle got that. She really did. She got that Xena cared so much about her, she'd risk Gabrielle's anger at being babysat in her typical, well honed strategy of the end justifying the

means.

And of course, she wasn't angry. Not anymore. "When we get to the bridge, let's get over it." She said aloud. "You get the militia and get them into the woods, out of sight. I'll go for the Amazons."

"Right." Bennu nodded. "We'll fade off, quick like." He said. "Find us armed in the village, it'll be blood."

It was likely to be blood anyway. Gabrielle now wondered if she should send everyone else up to the Amazons and face the Spartans when they came in herself.

But it was her they wanted. So how could she bargain? All they would offer is Amphipolis' safety for her handing herself over.

She couldn't do that.

The road bent to the right and she felt a sense of somber relief as she took the bend and saw the lower town and the bridge, all looking quiet and peaceful in the sunlight.

She looked behind her again, and the road was still empty, then was out of her line of sight as she came fully around the corner and Argos' pace picked up as she recognized the way home.

Gabrielle wished now that she'd left Dori with the forest dwellers. Jessan came galloping up on her other side, the wind plastering his fur straight back. "Almost there." She called over.

"I know." Jessan said. "The bunch that was following us cut off the road and went through that cut forest path we left after we did all the rock moving for the dam."

"Huh?"

"They're trying to cut us off." The forest dweller clarified. K

"Jess, that path dead ends into a ravine."

"No, really?"

Could they have gotten that lucky? Gabrielle shook her head and took a hold of Dori. "Hang on honey, we're almost home."

"Fun." Dori was completely happy with the situation. "Gogo go fast, go Gramma and get cookies, and den we get Guff."

They thundered over the bridge and up the slope towards the gates of the town. Some of the militia were already mustering, having seen them round the bend and villagers were running towards the inn as they heard the sound of running horses.

Cyrene came out onto the porch, wiping her hands, and Gabrielle turned Argo's head towards the inn to meet up with her. She came to a stop and kicked her boots free of the stirrups, launching herself off the mare's back and sliding down to the ground. "Mom."

"Trouble?" Cyrene came down the stairs and reached for Dori. "Want me to take her?"

One of the militia ran up. "Can I take your horse? I'll wipe her down."

"Sure." Gabrielle said to both, leaving her free to wonder what the Hades she was going to do next.

The rest of Gabrielle's little group was dismounting around them and the brief confusion gave her a little time to think about what to do. It didn't do much to think about what Xena would do, because Gabrielle knew what Xena would do would involve swords and battle leadership skills she didn't have.

What did she have?

Good question.

“Okay.” “ She turned. “Mom, get the council here. There’s a Spartan army just down the road heading this way.”

Cyrene barked out a curse that shocked everyone except for her daughter in law who’d heard it many times before from her partner’s lips. The innkeeper turned and grabbed one of the men standing by and hauled him up onto the porch, talking insistently.

How to protect the village, protect the Amazons, and protect her family at the same time? She thought hard about all the things Xena had ever told her about Spartans and finally something she remembered triggered an idea.

Gabrielle took a breath. “Okay.” She said again. “Bennu, get the militia under cover. “ She said. “Jessan, take your guys and go up to my cabin. “

“Huh?”

The bard held her hand up. “Bear with me.” She glanced past them at the still thankfully empty road. Several of the elders ran up, looking alarmed. “Okay, we don’t have time to wait for everyone.” She moved up onto the porch so everyone could see her.

The quickly gathering crowd turned to watch her intently, falling silent and waiting for her to speak.

She wasn’t really sure what she was doing was right. In fact, she wasn’t really sure what she was doing. She just hoped no one laughed at her. “A Spartan Army is right around the river bend heading this way.”

Several people gasped.

“That’s what the gathering forces were. Not Athenian.” Gabrielle said. “They know who I am. So what I’m going to do is disappear.”

“Gabrielle.” Cyrene came over, looking at her in concern.

“Hang on, mom.” Gabrielle held her hand up. “When they come here, I want everyone.. “She looked around the crowd. “Everyone, to tell them I came here, warned you, changed horses, and took off. Okay?”

After a hesitation, they nodded.

“You don’t know where I am, or where I’m going. You can’t tell them anything. If they want to search the town, let them.”

“Gabrielle.”

“LET THEM.” The bard repeated. “I won’t be here, there’s nothing to find.” She started down the steps. “C’mon Jess. Cait, you all, with me. Dori, c’mon.” She held her hand out to her daughter. “Mom, sorry to leave you in the lurch, but if I’m here, they’ll take me.” She glanced at Dori. “Take us.”

“Go.” Cyrene nudged her. “We know who they really want. We’ll cover for you.”

“Right with you, your Maj.” Solari had shouldered her saddle bags and was already at Gabrielle’s side. They edged through the crowd and once they were clear they started at a run towards the back gate.

They were through it and had it closed behind them in a moment, and then Gabrielle and Dori led the way up the steep mountain path that led to the Amazon village.

As the forest closed around them, Gabrielle felt the tension ease out of her, once they were out of sight of the village and well up onto the slope.

“We lucked out.” Solari said. “Losing those guys.”

“Too right.” Cait agreed.

Dori pattered along next to her, climbing up the slope with casual ease. “Mama, c’n we get some fishes? I’m hungry.”

“Soon as we get up to where our friends are, Dori.” Gabrielle shifted her saddle bag on her shoulder. “Then we’ll get you something.”

“You figure you can hide out up there?” Cait asked. “It’s a terrible spot to try and get an army up, isn’t it?”

It was. Gabrielle sighed. But no matter how tough a path, she knew the Spartans would and could get up there, and then when they got to the entrance to the village? Then what? Would she throw the battle force she commanded there against them, and pit the two hundred Amazons against thousands of Spartans?

Just to protect her?

Just, really, to protect Xena?

“We can hold that entrance.” Solari said, confidently. “Don’t care how many guys they bring up. They can’t rush it, this path’s too narrow.”

“Absolutely.” Cait agreed. “Pally could hold it with a slingshot, really.”

Paladia, who had been climbing behind her, looked up. “What?” She said. “You nut. I’m not facing a whole freaking army with a slingshot. Get out of here.”

That broke the tension, and everyone chuckled. Then they fell silent as they approached the entrance to the village, and the sentries came out to meet them having heard them long before. “Your majesty!”

“Yeah, that’s me.” Gabrielle paused as they reached the entrance. “Jess, take your guys up to our place and hang out there for a while until we see what’s going to happen.” She said.

“Okay.” Jessan said. “If those guys show up at your door here, we can roll em off the hill from up there.” He motioned. “C’mon, guys. Let’s go take a bath in Xena’s bathtub.” He winked at Gabrielle and led his troops on up the path.

Gabrielle exhaled. “Let’s go.” She indicated the entrance. “Everything quiet inside?” She asked the guards.

“Pretty much.” The nearer one said. “Wild boar got into the provisions this morning. Hades of a chase, but they finally got him down. That’s about it.”

Well, thank good ness for small favors. Gabrielle crossed through the rocky entrance and up over the slight rise that then sloped down into the valley the Amazons made their home in. She was surprisingly glad to see it, and she released Dori’s hand as they walked across the large common area and people started noticing their return.

She was aware suddenly of how tired she was. Though they’d done little but ride the tension had given her a throbbing headache, all the more so when she realized she now had to call a meeting and tell her tribe what the plan was.

The problem with that was she had no idea what the plan was. “Solari, can you call a conclave please?” She said. “In about a half candlemark. I want a chance to get my thoughts together.”

“You got it.” Solari said. “C’mon, Nala.” She bumped the other Amazon, and they angled off towards the meeting hall.

“Are you going to stay here?” Cait asked. “I don’t think all that lot down in the town will keep quiet about where this place is.”

Paladia snorted. “Someone’ll offer one of em a coin and they’ll lead em up here. “ She said. “They were ready to sell their man’s parts when you guys were gone the last time.”

Gabrielle grimaced a little, but didn’t refute the statement. There were people she loved down in the town, and there were people she liked, but like anywhere else, there were some who would gladly betray both her and Xena cheerfully at the drop of a hat.

Or the drop of a quarter dinar.

“I don’t know.” She finally answered. “We’ll see. Anyway, you guys can take off and go get some rest.” She started angling towards the path to her own quarters. “See in you a little while.”

“Right.” Cait said. She watched Gabrielle head down the path, with Dori skipping along at her side. “This is a mess, Pally.”

“You got that right.” Paladia agreed, for once. “Those jackasses down the hill are gonna sell her out, and the jackasses up here might too.” She eyed her partner. “And you know what?”

“What?” Cait was nibbling her fingernail, her brow creased in thought.

“That’s lousy. She’s all right.” Paladia pronounced. “I didn’t used to think so, but compared to the rest of the people around, she’s all right and don’t deserve to have some of these cranks hauling on her.”

Cait turned, and patted her on the arm. “Oh, well done, Pally.” She said. “I knew you’d like her if you only just tried.”

“Didn’t say that.”

“C’mon.” The slim young Amazon latched onto her arm and started hauling her off. “We’ve got to get things packed up. None of this two day thingie either. It’ll be a quick, long march.”

“Wh...”

“Come along. You don’t really think we’re not going out with her after Xena, do you?”

“Ugh.”

**

Gabrielle was glad of a few minutes peace. Dori had gone out with one of her little friends, and she was alone in her quarters with a jug of strong cider, a fresh set of leathers, and a reasonably warm bath to enjoy.

The bath had been a surprise, and she hadn’t quite know how to respond seeing the private tub there in the sleeping quarters, gently steaming. The Amazons were communal bathers, and she hadn’t even been aware they had a private tub in the village.

Apparently they did and she was grateful for it. She stripped out of her travel gear and lowered herself into the water, exhaling as the heat soaked the ache out of her bones and she was glad to simply sit quietly for a bit.

She scrubbed her skin with a chunk of soap, smelling of mint and sage, a new experiment from Cyrene’s kitchens. She wasn’t entirely sure she loved the smell, but it wasn’t unpleasant and she used it to wash her hair before she gave it a good rinse and surfaced.

Then she put the soap down and laced her fingers behind her neck, gazing pensively at the ceiling as she tried to sort out what she was going to tell her tribe.

She was under no real illusion that she could hide out here in the village. She knew the Spartans would find them in fairly short order. The question was, what she was going to do about it.

She could stay, and let the Amazons battle the Spartans at the gates. It was a narrow slot, and easily defended, but the Spartans resources were extensive and people would surely die in an effort that would ultimately fail.

Even if she took the tribe back into the new valley, still, that was just another trap. Would it make the Spartans give up? Would it be enough to just stall them long enough for them to get antsy, and realize they were risking their invasion?

Maybe.

Gabrielle really didn't want to do that though. She didn't want any Amazons dying to keep her hidden, and she didn't want the Spartans to overrun the village and destroy what had just been built up.

She could give herself up to them, of course. Here in the privacy of her quarters, Gabrielle examined that idea thoughtfully. The Spartans seemed to value honor. They well might trade off the safety of the town for her captivity, and use her as a pressure point to get Xena to join them.

Stupid really. Given that taking Gabrielle would achieve nothing but getting her partner extremely pissed of it was very possible that Xena would agree long enough to get her hands on her and then start killing everyone in sight, or, more subtly, lead the Spartans into military disaster in revenge.

Stupid and pointless. Gabrielle reluctantly lifted herself out of her bath and picked up a linen cloth to dry off with. Stupid, because no one would gain from any of it, and pointless because of that, and because people would die in the process – with a chance of those people including her and Xena.

She ruffled her hair dry with the towel, and then she trudged over to her garment press and opened it.

So what was she going to do? The Amazons would be expecting her to tell them just that in now, a quarter candlemark.

She was their Queen. She had to make the right decision.

She studied her choices of clothing, then she pushed aside the Amazon leathers and pulled out her old traveling clothes instead, slipping into the mid thigh length skirt and fastening the tooled leather belt in silence. Then she put on the cropped top, pulling her traveling boots from the press and tossing them near her desk to put on later.

She riffled her fingers through her hair, and spared a glance for the staff resting near the weapons rack against the wall.

A little longer than the one she'd carried the past few days. Darker wood, with a tough surface well seasoned with hits. Leather wrapped hand holds, and near one end, a series of whittled notches just visible.

She sat down at her workdesk and rested her elbows on it, gazing thoughtfully past the end of the surface as her fingers played idly with the ring on her hand.

**

"Xena, why not come in off the deck?" Iolaus crouched next to her, his blond hair dripping with

sea spray. "It's nasty out here."

Xena was seated, with her back against mast, one leg hiked up with her arms circling her knee. "I know it is." She said. "I want to be uncomfortable. I go inside, chances are I'm gonna fall asleep." She looked over at Iolaus. "Not what I need right now."

"Head?" He hazarded a guess, watching her nod briefly. "Sure you don't want me to find a healer on here somewhere? You look a little rough around the edges."

"No thanks." The warrior gave him a brief smile. "I feel rough around the edges, but there's nothing they could give me for this."

He studied her. "Okay." He looked up as the soldiers appeared, dragging their recaptured prisoners along with them. "Now what?"

"Taking on water below." The soldier in charge said, briefly. "Going to tie them up here till the ship gets it sorted." His men lashed the three to the rail, as Xena and Iolaus watched. "Twas bravely done, citizen." He addressed Xena politely. "But a waste of your time and effort, to my mind. Here." He pointed at the nearest soldier. "Gag them. No need for these people to have to listen to their poison."

The three really didn't look talkative. They were sullenly quiet, refusing to look up at either their captors or the two watching.

"Leave it." Xena said. "I don't care if they talk. Don't risk your thumbs to their teeth." She let her head rest against the mast, trying to put the pain her body was experiencing out of her mind. She had plenty of herbs in her pack for that, but none of them were safe with the rattling of her skull and being on deck not only kept her awake, it also kept her from being tempted to take them.

"As you wish, citizen." The guard captain said. "Is there anything we can do for you? Was your cabin broken in the storm that you sit here so uncomfortable?"

"I'm fine, thanks." Xena said. "Just enjoying the weather."

The soldiers eyebrows twitched. "To each their own." He waved his men back belowdecks. "Men, to the hold. We'll help with the patching." They marched off, closing the hatch behind them.

"How about a hot cup of tea?" Iolaus suggested. "At least that's safe."

"Sure." Xena said. "Thanks."

He patted her shoulder and stood up, giving the three prisoners a stern look. "Be nice." He said, before he turned and headed for the galley.

Xena resisted the urge to close her eyes. They stung, a little, from the salt spray but she could feel a faint sense of dislocation that warned her against succumbing to the desire.

The rest of her body ached. Where she'd smashed into the ship, she could feel whole sections of her torso tense and tender and there were bruises covering most of her side from shoulder to hip.

Nothing was broken, she'd decided, but everything felt like it wanted to be and she wished more than anything to be home and in bed, with Gabrielle's solicitous attention around her. Xena took a breath, and let it out, watching the waves come at the ship instead. No point in that wishful thought.

"Xena."

And any distraction, really, was welcome at the moment. The warrior turned her head towards the prisoners, to find Milena watching her. The other two, the one she'd rescued and the older man, were slumped against the rail, oblivious. "Yes?"

“You saved my brother's life. Why?”

Why. Well you know that was a damned good question. Xena wasn't really sure she had a coherent answer to it. So she shrugged “Someone needed to do it.”

“Why?” Milena said. “You heard those Athenian bastards. No one would have blinked if we'd left him there.”

Xena studied her somberly. “I thought you were headed for Athens.” She countered. “Going to join the war effort wasn't it?”

Milena snorted, glancing away.

“So now they're bastards?” The warrior said. “Oh, I forgot. You're innocent.”

The young woman looked at her again. “You turned us in. Did my chasing your tail piss you off that much?”

Xena chuckled briefly. “I didn't turn you in. Someone asked me if I saw anyone fitting the three of your's description and I told the truth.”

“Why not just mind your own business?” Milena snapped.

“Got out of the habit.” Xena smiled at a private image, a quick mental picture of the warmly affectionate look she'd have gotten from her partner for the statement. “And anyway, you were jackasses. You gave me a problem, and your brothers would have given the town a problem if I hadn't stopped them so Hades with all of you.”

“And yet you saved his life.” Milena mused, now watching her intently. “At risk of your own.”

“Don't be impressed.” Xena felt the throbbing in her bones intensify. “I'd have done it for anyone. Even jackasses deserve to live sometimes.”

Iolaus came back, his hands cradling a wooden mug. “Here you go.” He crouched next to her again. “Just mint and honey, but it's not bad.”

Xena took the cup and warmed her hands with it, the mint laced steam rising and making her nose twitch. “Thanks Iolaus. I appreciate it.”

“Anytime.” The blond man rested a hand on her shoulder. “Sure you don't want to come inside? No good surviving a head bump only to catch your death of a cold.”

“In a little while.” Xena said. “I just want to make sure the swellings gone down first.”

“Okay.” He stood up. “Holler if you need anything.” He retreated back to the forecabin, and Xena drew her other knee up, resting her elbows against them as she sipped the tea. It was warm, and mild and her stomach didn't protest when she swallowed it.

The steam seemed to help her headache too. Xena breathed it in, feeling a little of the pounding tension ease. “So what was your game?” She asked Milena, turning her head to see the woman. “You really scam the council?”

Milena's nose wrinkled. “Mind your own business.”

Xena shrugged. “Suit yourself. You're the one tied to the rail.” She extended her legs carefully, stretching out strained muscles that had stiffened while she sat. She looked out over the sea instead, watching the waves approach as the ship plowed through them, the forward deck busy with sailors mending ropes and sail.

At the edges of her senses, she caught the scent of pitch burning somewhere, and realized they must be patching the hull below. Dangerous in these seas, both to the men who were wielding the pitch rods, and for the fire they'd have had to start to melt the substance.

Last thing they needed was a fire onboard. Xena grimaced, remembering being caught in one way back when. All that water but no good way to fight the flames, and no good place to run to. They'd ended up in the water as the smoking hulk sank, with only a few crates to cling to.

She'd earned her leadership then. She'd gathered the men with her, lashed the flotsam together and navigated them to a spur of land that had provided birds nests with eggs to revive them until they could make their way inland again and steal weapons and arms to move on with.

For once, she'd done all the right things. For once, the men had looked at her with honest respect, not based on fear of her temper or the unpredictable edge of her sword. She'd saved them, she'd brought them home, and then, she'd gone on to lead them in battle in her more successful days.

She'd grown up, in a way, floating there in the sea trying to figure out what to do. Stopped being a petulant jackass the men only tolerated.

Became someone people felt they could be loyal to. To trust beyond where the next dinar was being stolen from. She'd come out of the shadow of Borias and Lao Ma, on the road to becoming the Destroyer of Nations and all because of a fire at sea that could easily have killed her instead.

Life was funny that way. Xena mused.

She wonder if Gabrielle ever thought about her own life's crossroads in that way, when her path and Xena's path had intersected, and she'd gone from being a village kid with a bad home life to being a homeless vagabond facing death every other day.

She probably didn't look at it quite like that though. Gabrielle had dreamed for a heroic hero to carry her away and since Xena was all she got, she simply pushed and prodded her unlikely rescuer into the mold her mind had imagined.

Which is what had led to her sitting here on some damn boat in some damn storm hurting from her toes to her eyebrows because her body was totally invested in Gabrielle's vision even if her conscience wasn't.

Well, she liked to think her conscience wasn't. There was some badass left in her somewhere.

Wasn't there?

Sure.

"We scammed them." Milena spoke up unexpectedly. "Stupid sandal wearers. They were ready to buy whatever story we had to sell them if it meant they could stand up in council and say they'd brought bags of coins to the war effort."

"What did you get out of it?" Xena arched her back a little, glad to feel only a little strain there. She was more than glad to turn her attention to the prisoners instead of focus on her own reputation.

"Amusement."

Now the warrior looked over at her, one dark brow hiking up.

"And a thousand dinars." Milena smiled. "Advanced to us for expenses in bringing my father's wagons of gold to Athens." She twisted against the ropes. "They won't get any of that back. I.. we got out of there just in time, but not before I found out they were all in a dither about you."

"Me?"

"Oh yes. You were the talk of the council. I almost got into one before we got our cover blown and we had to take off and escape from that white mausoleum."

Hm. "They come after you?"

“For what it was worth, sure. We lost them in a candlemark.” Milena tossed her head, the only part of her body she could move. “Useless morons.”

“But here you are.” Xena reminded her.

“Because of you.” She said. “They never would have found us if you hadn’t told them where to go.”

“Why were you headed back to Athens if you knew they were looking for you?” Xena sipped her tea. She suspected the girl enjoyed her own cleverness and couldn’t resist talking about it. Gabrielle had taught her how to ask questions like that. The bard had that knack and after all, she’d gotten years of practice with it on a grumpy antisocial warlord.

If she thought a moment, she could even hear the ‘gee Xena, it’s amazing how you knew that. How did you?’ in her mind’s ear and it made her smile wryly as she waited for Milena to answer.

“We weren’t.” Milena gave her a bitter smile. “We’d just come from Thera and we were heading towards Amphipolis. I figured we could meet up with you, knock you over the head, and get paid to deliver you to Athens who would then forget about us gaming them.”

Xena started laughing, almost spilling her tea.

“It could have worked.”

Xena eyed her. “You’d have ended up dead.” She said, the laughter gone. “You don’t even know what kind of game you’re playing, kid.”

Milena didn’t flinch. “Maybe.” She conceded coolly. “You didn’t look so tough when we met you. There were three of us. No matter how good you think you are with that sword there are herbs that would make you no more than a halter led sheep.”

Xena realized why the kid was annoying her as much as she was, suddenly. Milena was who she’d been, all those years ago. An arrogant, cocky, precocious brat with no respect for anyone or anything and a total belief in her own ego.

Absolutely convinced of her own invincibility.

Twerp. Serves you right, Xena. She took a sip of her tea, and acknowledged the irony. “There are no herbs you could find here that would let you lead me like a sheep.” She said, in a quiet tone. “The one you could use from somewhere else doesn’t agree with me, and you’d have ended up with either a raving maniac with lethal combat skills or a dead body you’d have to get rid of.”

Milena stared at her. “You’re lying.”

Xena shook her head. “You and everyone in the area would have been lucky if they killed me.” She said. “Someone tried it once. Didn’t work out for them.”

“That’s just another one of those lame ass stories they tell about you.” Milena scoffed. “Like the one they tell where you died. Give me a break.”

“No thanks.” The warrior said. “I’ve had enough fun for today.” She decided it had been long enough for her head to clear, or at least, long enough of her enduring the wet, the cold, and the company. She drained her mug. “Ask me again tomorrow.”

The girl stared at her. “They’re just stories.”

“Are they?” Xena got up, her breath catching a little as her body protested. “Live as long as I have doing what I do, you’ve pretty much had everything happen to you at least once.” She eyed the girl. “Including death.” She lifted the mug in their direction and headed towards the door to the cabins. “Night.”

“Xena, wait!” Milena yelled after her.

The warrior merely waved a hand, and pulled the hatch door open.

Maybe it would give the kid something to think about. Xena closed the door behind her and was glad to move from the chill and the salt into the stuffy warmth of the forecastle. But if the kid was as much like she'd been at that age, probably not.

She bumped her cabin door open and shut it behind her, glad someone had thought to light the tiny oil lantern that shed enough light for her to see inside. Iolaus maybe? She set her mug down and stood for a minute, trying to decide what to do.

The pain was starting to get to her. She reached up to touch the lump on her head, glad to feel that, at least, had gone down some. The ship was still moving erratically in the strong seas, and she didn't want to be thrown around against the walls, but she also didn't want to stay in damp clothes.

“Damn it.” With a sigh, she got out of her leathers, and removed a piece of cloth from her bags to dry her skin with. The folded linen was soft, and carried the scent of home and she lifted it to her nose, sniffing it before she used it. It smelled of sunlight and the wood of their garment press and it's touch was gentle on her battered body.

Gabrielle's touch would have been even more gentle. Xena mourned the fact that her soulmate wasn't around, even though she was perfectly capable of taking care of herself. With the moving ship and reaching around things, an extra set of hands would have really been a help.

She gently tousled her head somewhat dry, avoiding the sore spot and finding a scrape still oozing blood she hadn't suspected. “Ow.”

Since it appeared they were going to stay afloat, and the storm wasn't getting worse, she put her shift back on then she set her saddlebags on her bunk and removed her healer's kit from them, opening it to study what herbs she had to choose from.

Two kinds for pain. She set them aside, since they were very strong and would put her out. She usually carried a much milder one with her she used on Gabrielle, but she'd left that behind this time.

She removed a small packet with some of the cleansing paste she used, prepared carefully in her mortar and pestle. “Glad I brought this.” She put a bit of it on the scrape on her head, then wrapped it back up again.

Her wrist was killing her where the rope had wrapped around, but the skin was unbroken, merely darkly bruised. She flexed her hands a little, then started putting the herbs back inside her pouch.

Her fingers touched something, and she tipped the pouch towards her, peering inside, her lips already twitching into a smile as she spotted the parchment wrapped stone at the very bottom. She drew it out and set it aside, then she put everything else away.

She drummed her fingers on the bunk, then the basket in the corner caught her eye.

Ah. She stowed her kit in her bags, then she went to the basket and removed one of the wineskins from it. She uncapped it and sniffed, then she brought it back to the bunk, sitting down on it and taking a long swallow.

It had a mild, sweet burn going down. Xena hadn't eaten anything since the previous afternoon and after another two swallows, she felt a gentle buzz start. Her body started to relax, and she eased herself down onto her back, letting her head rest on the straw stuffed pillow.

It didn't really help the pain, but the wine put a light layer of separation between her and the

ache. The wound up tension eased and she was able to settle her body with a little more comfort on the bunks surface.

She pulled the light blanket over her, warming her chilled skin from the long soaking outside.

Ah. That was better. She wasn't sure really if enough time had passed for her to safely sleep, but now that she was dry and more comfortable the urge to drift off wasn't as strong either.

Milena's words now came back to her attention, and she had to smile at the audacity of her plans.

“Capture me and sell me to Athens.” The warrior regarded the ceiling. “Didn't really think that one through, did she? Even if she had done it, I don't think I'd have been in any mood to lead the damn army after that. Waste of everyone's time.”

Audacious, though. Very audacious.

Then something occurred to her. “Why in Hades is Athens so damned anxious to get a hold of me?” She asked the wooden surface. “I already turned them down. They've got generals of their own. Sparta's no respecter of women,so it's not like I'd scare em... what's the deal?”

What was the deal? Why was Sparta, and now Athens so intent on her? Xena's eyes narrowed. Why would two city states be so anxious to get the same retired ex warlord to run their armies?

Why?

It made no sense.

She resolved to corner Milena again very soon and extract whatever she knew about what the Athenian council wanted from her. Audacious? She'd see how much this kid matched the juvenile brigand she'd been and whether she could stand up to someone who wanted something out of her the way Xena had been able to way back when.

Ah, Hades with it. Xena picked up the stone she'd found in her pouch and unwrapped it, setting the stone on her stomach while she tilted the parchment towards the oil lamp.

One side had a few unintelligible scribbles, and a small palm print on it. Xena felt her smile broaden as she traced the outline of the fingers, imagining Dori's hand making it. Then she held the paper out, and held her own hand out, comparing the two shapes.

“Damn.” She whispered, shaking her head a little. But for size, they were identical. “Look at that.” She bit her lip and turned the parchment over, where she could already see strong, dark script.

Hey there.

I was sitting down writing some notes to put in your bags, when Dori came over to see what I was doing. She wanted to give you a note too, so here you are. I think the scratches are supposed to say Love Boo – at least that's what she was saying when she was scribbling them.

Xena turned the parchment back over and studied the marks. Then she resumed reading.

I almost hope you don't find this one, because I'm putting it in your healer's kit. I don't want you to have to use it, especially if you need to use it on you. It makes me crazy to think you might be out there and hurting, and I won't be there to take care of you.

Yeah, I know you can take care of yourself. That's not the point. Anyway, if you do find this, I hope you're just getting some ground root for a headache, or aloe for the sun. Please be well, my love. I'm counting the moments until you come back.

G.

Xena smiled, and brushed the parchment against her lips. Then she folded it inside her hand and closed her eyes.

**

Continued in Part 15

A Queen's Tale

Part 15

Gabrielle entered the meeting hall, walking quietly between the rows of chairs as everyone already in the room realized she was there and reacted. She was still wearing her old traveling clothes, and she had a cloak slung over her shoulders that she gently swirled out of her way as she took her seat behind the table.

She rested her forearms on the wooden surface and regarded her sisters, as they all sorted themselves out and took their seats.

Hard to say what the attitude was. Word had certainly gotten out from Soli and her crew about the Spartans, and so there was some anxiety there, mixed with a certain amount of anticipation from the more martially inclined.

Some of the older Amazons were scowling. Some of the younger ones were almost grinning. It was really tough to guess how they were going to react. "Sisters, please be seated." Gabrielle said, after a few moments, wishing suddenly that Xena was perched on her little ledge behind her.

The Amazons settled down though, and fell silent, waiting for her to speak.

"It's been an eventful few days for us." Gabrielle said. "I'm sure you've heard by now that what we thought might be levies heading to Athens turned out to be a Spartan army, also theoretically heading for Athens."

Renas lifted a hand. "Was there really thousands, your Majesty?"

"There was." Gabrielle nodded. "And they had siege engines, and all the bits and parts and clanky bits you'd expect in an army that meant business." She added. "Though I have to admit we did not stay around long enough to carefully count them."

Renas nodded. "Surely they're not interested in little towns then, right?"

The Amazons around her nodded.

Gabrielle sighed. She got up and came around the table, leaning back on it and facing the tribe on her feet. She folded her arms over her chest. "I would say, no. They're not interested in all at little towns. Not really interested in Amphipolis, or Potadeia, or any of the settlements between us. Probably not anything this side of Thera."

The elders nodded. "Big army. Wants lots of supplies and a fast road." Renas stated. "We should just lay low out of their sight."

"We're not afraid of them." One of the younger women said.

"You should be." Gabrielle remarked. "Though I know we all know what's mystique isn't always reality." She waited for the muttering to die down. "I think they'd just pass these towns by. They're in a rush, they made it from the pass into upper Thrace down to the bend in the river in a half a day."

The elders nodded. "Good." The elder next to Renas said.

"Unfortunately." Gabrielle continued, after a brief pause. "I have reason to think the Spartans won't pass Amphipolis by, mostly because they'll be looking for me."

“You, your majesty?” Aalene spoke up.

“Me.” The bard swept her eyes over them, seeing a range of emotion from worry to veiled anger. “I think most of you realize I’m a little more notorious than your average Amazon queen.” She paused. “We met a scouting party from the Spartans on the road, and they made a grab for me. We got out of there fast.”

“They wanted Gabrielle to hand herself and Dori over in return from them leaving Amph alone.” Solari spoke up. “That wasn’t happening.”

“If they wanted to bother us, they would have anyhow. “ Cait piped up, from her spot near the wall. Though the youngest in the room, her status as a full warrior entitled her to speak, and she did, without apology. “Good job we got out of there fast as we did”

Gabrielle could easily read the body language, and she knew there were some, not as many as she’d feared, but some, who thought maybe she should have taken the Spartans up on the offer.

She’d briefly even considered it. Long enough for a couple breaths anyway, her natural inclination to self sacrifice surging to the fore before her hard won experience clamped a boot on it. “Cait’s right.” She said. “If their intention was to loot the area, they’d do it with our without me. The only thing having me gains them is they figured to use me either as bait or as leverage.”

“For Xena.” One of the older warriors said. eyes watching Gabrielle closely.

“Sure.” The bard nodded. “Both sides want her bad. Put myself in that kind of situation and chances are a lot of people are going to get hurt.” She stood up and walked over to the window, looking outside. “I don’t want anyone to get hurt. Especially not people I care about, like the ones down in the town, and the ones right here in this room.”

She could feel the emotion behind her changing, as they responded to her words. “The last thing I want is for anyone to be harmed because of a decision I made. I’ve had too much of that happen in my life.”

She turned, and saw the quietness in their faces now; even the ones who weren’t her biggest fans were watching her with pensive eyes. “Look.” She went back to the table and sat down. “I can’t change who I am. “ She put her hands on the wooden surface. “But I also can’t change what I am, and for better or worse you’re my responsibility.”

Now they were curious, wondering what she was going to do. Gabrielle studied them for a moment. “The safest thing for everyone is for me to leave.” She said. “Dori and I, that is. If we’re not here, then Sparta has nothing to pester anyone for. There’s not that much here, and harvest wont’ be ready for two moons.”

The Amazons watched her in silence.

“I realize that poses a problem,” Gabrielle said. “That’s something I have to think about, who to leave in charge here. “

“Where will you go?” Aalene asked. “I mean, Gabrielle, that’s dangerous for you. That’s not good either.”

A murmur went up. Gabrielle held her hand up in response. “I have a plan. But I think it’s better if I keep things up in the air for right now. “ Also, the idea that everyone would either laugh at her or call her crazy wasn’t appealing. Silence seemed a better course for the moment. “So what I’d like everyone to do is go out and pretend everything’s normal. I’ll call everyone back in when my decision’s made.”

After a moment’s shocked silence, the Amazons reluctantly rose, and started to file out. Gabrielle looked up and caught Cait’s eye, making a small gesture with her hand.

Cait looked outstandingly pleased. She remained where she was, her slim powerful form relaxed against the wall as the rest of the tribe moved past her, muttering under their breaths.

Renas moved against the tide, and approached her. "Well, your majesty, if you want some good advice."

"I don't." Gabrielle gently interrupted her. "Thank you for the offer, Renas, but I'm fine."

The elder hauled up short; her expression altering to swiftly concealed anger. "Well, all right." She turned and marched out, following the last of the Amazons out of the door. If it had anything other than beads for a door, she would surely have slammed it.

Cait waited a moment, and then she moved away from the wall and came over to join Gabrielle at the table. "She didn't like that much."

"I know." The bard said. "But really, Cait, what was she going to tell me I don't already know?"

"Rather." Cait sat down on the first bench. "Are you going to go find Xena?"

Gabrielle smiled, and studied her interlaced fingers. "Yes, I am." She said. "And I'd like you to come with us." She saw Cait's grin. "Because I know you're going to whether I want you to or not."

"I did promise." Cait said.

"I figured. I don't break my promises to her either." The bard felt a weight lift off her shoulders, now that she'd decided her course, and put it in motion. "Should I leave Paladia in charge?"

"No I'm sure you.. hello, what?" Cait sat straight up, her pale eyes blinking. "What?"

Her queen chuckled. "Just kidding. I figured I'd round out my complete pissing off of the tribe that way but yeah, it's not fair to her."

"Gosh." Cait put a hand on her chest. "That was a terror."

Gabrielle got up. "Sorry. Paladia can come with us if she wants to. Not sure if she's up for traveling rough all the way to Thera." She ran her hand through her hair. "I want to go soon, and keep ahead of the Spartans. We can warn all the towns we pass on the way."

Cait nodded. "Sounds wonderful." She said. "I'll start gathering and sorting things out right away." She smiled. "Thanks for not making feel rotten about chasing after you."

The bard smiled back. "Been there. Done that." She came around the table and clapped Cait on the shoulder. "C'mon. Let's get this bard and pony show on the road."

**

Gabrielle whistled softly under her breath, her mind on all the details she had to go through before leaving. It was a familiar routine. She had a mental checklist she went through when they were getting ready to go out on the road and now it was almost a pleasure to be going through it.

"No, Gabrielle, be honest. You were looking for an excuse, and you darn well found one." She told herself. "Granted, we could have done without the Spartan army, but still."

It was a serious situation. Gabrielle laid out her traveling bags, and stowed clothes for herself and Dori in them. It was a serious situation. She was sacrificing her safety and being with her friends and family because she wanted to warn Athens, and the surrounding areas, and to keep from being a hostage for her partner.

Absolutely.

Gabrielle heard pattering footsteps, and she looked up as Dori burst through the bead doorway,

her green eyes all alight. “Hey there, kiddo.”

“Mama!” Dori danced in a circle. “We’re going to find Boo!!!”

Well, so much for all that serious stuff. “Yes we are!” Gabrielle dropped her supplies and danced around in a circle with her. “How’d you know that, Dor?”

“Mama’s all happy!” Dori bounced around her. “Go find Boo! Go find Boo!”

“Shhh.” Gabrielle felt more than a touch guilty, as she glanced out the window hoping no one was passing by. “You have to go with me again, Dori, we have to go riding, and camping. That okay?”

“Go with mama?” Dori grinned. “Yes!” She whispered. “Mama find Boo!”

“Mama will, that I promise you.” Gabrielle said. “Cait is going with us too, and our friends the forest dwellers. Won’t that be fun? “ She had a bit of a trepidation on Jessan’s going, but her friend refused to take no for an answer. Much like Cait would have, and she was smart enough to know when an argument had no point.

“Mama, I love you.” Dori said. “You so good!”

Gabrielle picked her up and hugged her. “I love you too, honey. I’m glad you’re going to go on an adventure with me, and even more because when we’re done we’ll be with Boo.”

“Love Boo.”

“Me too.” Gabrielle let her down. “Now, you get the toys you want to bring with us and give them to me, so I can put them away, okay?”

“Okay.” Dori pattered off into the sleeping chamber, leaving her mother to continue packing.

It was an amazing sense of relief, to finally be following where her heart was so strongly leading her. She felt a lightening of her soul that suddenly, unexpectedly, put tears in her eyes as she tucked her diary away into its customary place, making her snifle and sending a scattering of droplets to make tiny, dark stains on the hide surface.

A soft knock came at the doorframe. “C’mon in.” Gabrielle quickly passed the back of her hand across her eyes.

Paladia entered, ducking her head a little to clear the door. “Hi.”

“Hi.” Gabrielle glanced at her. “What’s up?”

Paladia scowled at her. “You’re cutting out of here?”

Gabrielle sorted through the varying motives and statement she could have made and ended up simply nodding. “Yeah.”

“Why?”

The bard folded a shirt and stuffed it in the bag. “Oh, a lot of noble reasons like wanting to warn everyone about the Spartans, and get out of sight so I don’t get used as a pawn in the damn war but in reality I just want to go. I want to find Xena and stop being miserable.”

Paladia digested that in silence. “Thanks.” She said, briefly.

“For what?”

“Explaining to me why I want to go.” The tall ex renegade said. “I’ll go pack. Bye.”

Gabrielle looked up to see her leaving, the beads falling closed behind her broad shoulders. “Love is screwy sometimes, huh?” She shook her head and went back to her

packing. "Screwy and crazy and amazing and life changing."

"Mama, can I bring Oogy and bitty boo?" Dori came out with both her favorite toys, the stuffed cow now much the worse for wear, and the tiny stuffed image of Xena she adored. "Don't wanna leave dem."

"Sure." Gabrielle said. "Boo always found room in the bags for everything Mama really wanted to keep, so we can find room for your toys, okay?"

Dori grinned and brought them over, laying them carefully down on the chest. "Dere." Then she rambled back into the sleeping room. "Gots to get my rocks."

Rocks. Gabrielle hoped she didn't want to bring all of them. She made space for the toys, and then slid in the leather wrapped healer's kit Xena had left behind when she'd gone. It had a smaller selection of things, just basic stuff Gabrielle would know how to use, and she fervently hoped she wouldn't need it during the trip.

She added a block of travel bars Xena had just recently made, wrapped in waxed parchment to keep them and added two water skins, now empty to the load.

Another knock on the doorframe. "C'mon in." Gabrielle laid a bet with herself, and then collected it as Solari stuck her head in the opening. "Hey, Solari."

The dark haired Amazon entered. "Your Maj."

"What's on your mind?" The bard pulled out two extra shifts, and put them in the larger of the two carry bags. "Everyone freaking out?"

Solari came over and sat down in the chair across from Gabrielle's worktable. "Hard to tell." She said. "Some people think you're doing a pretty cool thing, but the old cranks are mad as Hades."

"Eh." Gabrielle shrugged her shoulders. "Don't really give a damn."

"I figured." Solari grinned briefly. "Can I go with you? I don't want to stick around here. Eph and Pony are the best friends I got these days."

Gabrielle stopped what she was doing and turned, sitting down on the chest. "I was going to leave you in charge."

"Yeah I figured." The dark eyes regarded her. "Don't really want that."

"Probably why I wanted to do it." Gabrielle smiled briefly. "You should never give that kind of power to someone who wants it. Ends up bad every time."

Solari looked up and met her eyes. "Please?"

There was something in the asking that went straight to Gabrielle's heart. She reached over and put her hand on Solari's shoulder. "Of course." She said. "Get your stuff together."

A look of profound relief crossed Solari's face. "Thanks." She said. "Want my advice? Leave Nala in charge. She doesn't take crap from anyone, and she's a big fan of yours and the champ's."

"Is she going to hit me if I do that?" Gabrielle chuckled. "I kinda liked her."

"Nah." The dark haired Amazon stood up. "She'll be all right with it once she gets over not getting to go with us." A puckish look appeared on her face. "And that I got here first."

Gabrielle chuckled gently. "Go on. Send her over." She said. "Let's get this all settled and get going. I don't want to give the Spartans a chance to wander up here."

With a grin, Solari left, whistling under her breath. Gabrielle watched her go, shaking her head a little. "Xe, you were right." She said. "I'm not sure that's what you meant when you said I'd need

my friends around me, but there ya go.”

“Mama.” Dori came out. “C’n I put the buppit in the bag? He said he’ll be good.” She had her arms wrapped around the animal, whose tongue was lolling out happily

Gabrielle turned and put her hands on her hips, regarding the pair.

“Pweese?”

**

Xena had very mixed feelings about waking up. On the one hand, her head felt better, and though the ship was still tossing, light was filtering weakly into the cabin and she couldn’t hear rain outside. On the other hand, trying to get out of bed brought a heartfelt groan out of her guts as her stiffened muscles screamed bloody murder in counterpoint.

“Son of a Bacchae.” Xena managed to haul herself up into a sitting position, resting her hands on the edge of the bunk as she slowly stretched herself out.

Everything hurt. She leaned forward and rested her elbows on her knees, feeling her spine pop and grudgingly ease into alignment. That last flip into the boat had been half sideways, and she remembered having to wrench herself around in mid air to get her feet under her in order to land on something other than her head.

Might have been better landing on her ass, now that she thought about it. With a sigh, she pushed herself up to a standing position, grabbing the ceiling planks for support.

“Ugh.” She let her head rest against her arm. “I hate mornings like this.”

One of the good things about them being at home more, she reflected, was that there were fewer mornings like this. She limped over to her bag and fished inside it, this time bringing out the herbs she’d pushed aside the night before.

She unhooked her cup from its holder and put a pinch of the ground herbs in the bottom, then poured some of the wine from her opened wineskin over it. The sweet scent made her blink, but she mixed it with her index finger then downed it before she could think about what it tasted like.

Peh. She stuck her tongue out. “Damn that’s rank.” She poured another splash of wine into the cup, then took it back to her bunk and sat down with it, nursing it cradled in both hands.

Outside her cabin, she heard very little noise. The creaks of the wood around her, and a steady thump from the deck, and a low buzz of sound seemed to echo under her feet. Otherwise, it seemed quiet and placid, the soft rush of the sea coming only gently inside the cabin.

She leaned back against the ship’s wooden wall, waiting for the herbs to take effect, an escape she didn’t often give in to especially when others were present. She was tough on her body, no one knew that better than she did, but she figured she went into it knowing that, so suffering the consequences was just part of the game.

Getting a splinter, then downing a cup of herbs to take the pain away seemed a little cowardly to her. You made your living as a fighter? Fine. Then accept you would spend most of that life aching somewhere or other. Just how it was.

But times like this, when she’d done something so outrageously stupid and it hurt just to breathe – well – Xena sipped the wine and felt the cramps in her body start to unwind a little. She was a healer for a reason, after all.

A soft knock came at the door. “C’mon in.” Xena briefly glanced to the side, making sure her sword was still where she left it.

The door opened and Denius poked his head in warily. “Ah. My good general.”

Xena was too sore to object. "Yes?"

He entered, leaning against the wall near the door. "I just wanted to give you my personal thanks for the help you gave last night. The captain gave me a full report of what occurred, and how your action kept the ship off the rocks."

Xena took a sip of the wine and rolled it around inside her mouth before she swallowed it. "This is yours?" She asked.

"It is." Denius agreed. "And I was not looking to see it broken to splinters with myself in it."

"Me either." She said. "Glad I could help."

Denius studied her. "Many think you should also have left that criminal to die. I wanted you to know that I am not one of them." He said. "I'm very grateful you saved him. He's worth a lot more to the council alive, than dead and food for the fish."

Xena indicated the small bench across from her. "Siddown." She suggested. "That woman that's with them was a literal pain in my neck last night." She turned her head and pointed at the thin, rusty line already healing along her jugular. "So I'd thought about gutting the bunch of them."

Denius sat. "It is well you did not." He said, in a grave tone. "Though I am the first to admit I share your impulse. I have just spoken with the harlot and got nothing but spat on for my troubles."

"Then why not kill her?" Xena asked. "You think she'll say more to some inquisitioner in Athens?"

"No." He said. "This is confidential."

Xena carefully turned her head and examined the room, then glanced up, and back at him. "We're alone."

He smiled wryly. "The woman is the bastard daughter of the head of the council." He said. "The two with her.. not quite the brothers she claims. We think them spies for Sparta."

Xena pondered that news, while she drank from her cup. "They're not Spartans." She said. "Thracians, maybe." She added. "Neighbors of mine, that could be. They've got the accent."

Denius slowly nodded. "So you see, the council wants them back for many reasons. My brother Ascenian told me Gaias, the leader of the council, has offered ten thousand dinars for the woman's return alive."

"His bastard?"

The man shrugged. "I don't claim to know his thoughts. Perhaps she has worth to him no matter what side of the sheets she was born on."

Xena smiled briefly. "I appreciate the viewpoint." She remarked. "Better hope this thing picks up speed then. Long as you have her onboard, she'll be trouble."

Denius got up. "True." He responded. "And I have asked the captain to pile on all sail to get us to Athens, believe me. But they are still repairing the damage from the storm, and its slow going. The hold is partially flooded, I am told. "

"I smelled them using pitch last night." Xena cautiously stretched her body out, relieved that the herbs seemed to have kicked in. She drained her cup and stood, balancing as the ship moved. "They still lashed to the rail?"

He smiled unkindly. "Yes."

Xena nodded. "Keep an eye on them, but keep the sailors away from there." She warned. "That's

a silver tongue she's got."

Denius studied her again. "Were you attracted to it?"

"No." The warrior went over to her gear. "I'm married to a bard and I know every trick of that trade." She glanced at him over her shoulder. "But those men out there don't."

He nodded firmly. "It's good advice, and I will have the captain act on it." He said. "We are gathering for a midday meal in the captain's galley. Would you join us?"

Sometimes, it was just some internal instinct that guided her, one that she didn't always understand or appreciate. "Maybe later." She said. "I've got some work to do on my armor. Thanks anyway."

He bowed, and left, closing the door behind him.

Xena turned and sighed, leaning against the cabin's wall. She slowly flexed her hands and leaned over, stretching her back out and hearing the soft pops as the bones eased into place. Then she stood straight and rocked her head back and forth, loosening the muscles on either side of her neck.

It would do. She rummaged in her basket for some bread and cheese, and with those tucked into her hand; she went over to the window to look outside.

Gray skies, as she'd expected. The water was a ruffled gray, with waves crashing into each other and she suspected there was more storm to come.

**

A candle mark later, she had cleaned up and was back in her leathers and armor, strolling on the deck. The damage from the storm was formidable, and only one of the two sails was raised, its center belled out from the wind as they moved steadily along.

The other had been rended by the storm, and the crew had it down on the deck, busy at the work of sewing the canvas back together.

Xena debated stopping and helping, then decided to give it a pass for the moment and went over to the side, leaning on it and gazing out over the water.

How many hours had she spent doing that on her way to Chin last time? Xena sighed and scanned the horizon. How many times had she wished she'd made a different choice, and turned around, and just done what her heart was prompting her to?

What her pride had prevented her from doing. Her pride, and her ego, making one last defiant stand against the giving in of self she'd suffered becoming Gabrielle's partner.

She should have gotten down on her knee and just said a simple. "I'm sorry." Was that so damned hard? It would have opened the door and started the healing so much faster. "I'm sorry I failed you in Britannia, Gabrielle. I should have honored our relationship more than my need for revenge."

So simple. So basic. So true, now, and then and she'd known it. As much as Gabrielle had insisted it all was her choice, they both knew this one basic truth would have changed everything.

And yet, she was who she was. Xena watched a seagull coast along, traveling low over the waves looking for a meal. She had acted in synch with the person she'd been since she'd left home, and that, Gabrielle had said, was also a truth neither of them could ignore.

You can change what you do, Xena. Gabrielle had told her. But you can't change who you are, and neither can I.

It had been liberating, in a way. She'd been haunted for so long by the need she felt to change change change... and to be told by someone who loved her dearly that it was okay to be who she was – that had made her stop, and think and understand herself just a little bit better.

Made her understand Gabrielle just a little bit better.

They were really just opposites. Gabrielle was a person who belonged to the light who chose to court darkness, and she someone who belonged in darkness who chose to court the light. Yin and Yang as they said back in the Far East, a perfect balance.

Xena smiled wryly. Well, not quite perfect.

What would she do now, given the choice again? What if she ran into those traders from that ship from Chin, and got handed a note, and given that challenge?

Xena thought about that, as the waves tilted a little, and she felt the spray hit her face as it had for so many days that last voyage. Would she honor that summons?

A smile tugged at her lips. She imagined getting that same message right now at this very moment in her life and felt, in her heart of hearts, she'd just hand it back and say no thanks. No thanks, I just got my life back together and you can take your note from some woman who'd seduced a young idiot and take it right back with you.

"I've got what I want." Xena remarked to the gull. "Screw you all."

She pushed off the rail and turned, surveying the ship. Then she walked up to the bow and climbed to the front of the ship, letting the wet wind lash her and drive the last bit of weariness from her body.

"There you are, you damned smartass woman." The captain joined her.

"Hello, captain." Xena replied. "Glad to see your sorry tub's still in one piece."

He chuckled. "Take more than a storm to sink me, or you either." He said. "Got more weather coming. Hope the dogs I have there finish their mending before then."

Xena smiled, but didn't answer. She turned her head a little, and caught sight of the prisoners still lashed to the rail, the men slumped over seemingly unconscious but the woman sitting in a cramped posture, glaring at everything around her.

Which wasn't much, Xena noted. There were no sailors nearby, and all the rigging and crates had been moved carefully out of reach. Milena had her arms tied to the spindles and in the driving rain, little was left to the imagination regarding her well formed body.

Just as well the sailors were warned off her. The warrior turned her head and then shook it, as the captain regarded the sea. "I'll be glad to see Athens."

"Me too." The man said. "Too much ill wind this trip, and a viper lashed to my deck on the top of it." He indicated the prisoners. "Bad blood. Glad you tipped his nips off and warned him to keep all away from that one. "

"Trouble."

"A sea full." The captain agreed. "Last thing I need now is a mutiny." He studied Xena's profile. "But then you'd have some persuasion yourself, I think."

"I might." The warrior concurred. "I've got no... " She paused, and blinked, raising a hand to shade her eyes from the mist. Far off on the distant horizon, there was a dark smudge. "Island out there?"

The captain peered in the direction she was facing. "Too small." He said. "Not sure what it is."

The wind started to pick up, and the sailors all scrambled, grabbing the edge of the canvas and holding it down. "Hurry up you mongrels!" The captain yelled. "We'll be back in Poseidon's pocket in a minute now!"

He trotted off across the deck, leaving Xena to ponder the unknown.

She studied the blot on the horizon. It seemed like a bump, almost like a sandbar, but if she squinted, and cupped her hands around her eyes she almost had herself convinced there was a blockiness to it that meant something other than a lonely bump of sand.

Xena had good eyesight. She'd always taken that for granted right up until she'd lost it on her journey with Palimon. That slow slide into darkness, coupled with the internal knowledge that Gabrielle was in trouble and needed her had come very close to driving her into the kind of internal panic she often scorned in others.

She'd almost completely freaked out. If she thought a minute, she could bring back into her mind the pounding of her heart, and the shortness of breath as she raced blindly through the corridors, the smoke half choking her, relying on only on Gabrielle's desperate need to guide her.

The whole damn experience had humbled her. For one, that she'd taken for granted the fact that she could open her eyelids and see the way she did. And for two, that Gabrielle now knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt what her worth was to Xena.

What she'd risk for her. Sobering moment for both of them.

With a sigh, she focused those eyes again on the blur, and then she started and leaned forward, as a flash seemed to erupt, for a tiny moment, from the mass and then disappear.

"All right, get that up the mast!"

Xena turned, to see the crew struggling to restore the sail to the second mast, which had been repaired with spars and splints and good stout rope. The captain was pacing around the deck supervising the work, whip clasped lightly in one hand he evidently intended on using.

Xena crossed to him. "Captain."

He turned. "You again?"

"Does our course take us towards that island, or whatever it is?" She asked. "I think I saw something out there."

"Naw." The captain said. "We're hailing southwest. That's southeast, we've got no business there." He paced forward. "Get the damn hooks in place!"

"We need to change course. I want to see what that is." Xena got in front of him, and made him stop. "It won't take that long."

"Are you crazy woman?" The captain said. "I've got a schedule to keep! Fool! Who the Hades cares w." He stopped speaking, as a razor sharp blade pressed against the skin at his breastbone. He looked up it., across the powerful forearm that held it steady up to the pale blue eyes that no longer had any sense of amusement or tolerance in them.

"I'm not crazy, and I'm no fool." Xena said, in a quiet voice. "I think that's a shipwreck, and the last ship that left before this one had friends of mine on it."

"Could be nothing." The captain stayed very still. "Could be pirates."

"I can handle nothing, and I can handle pirates. But we both know if it's a ship out there and it's in trouble, you've got to help." Xena replied. "Now are you going to do it voluntarily, or do I need to do it for you."

He looked her right in the eye. "I'd say over my dead body but that'd only encourage you." He said. "This is my ship, woman. No one masters her but me." He reached up and closed his hand around her blade, gently moving it aside. "If it's no shipwreck, you'll pay my price, even if that's to be whipped on the yard arm. How's that?"

"Deal." Xena said. She pulled the sword out of his grasp and seated it back in her scabbard. "But you better make sure you tie the ropes on me tight. I don't give any quarter."

Faintly, the captain smiled. "Woman, I'd marry you in an instant." He stated. "You gods be damned thing you."

Xena found a smile somewhere, and gave it back. "I'm taken." She said. "But you are my kinda guy, Captain." She gave him a slap on the shoulder. "Now get the ship turned. I saw a flash like they were trying to signal us."

He snorted. "Coulda said that first, ya wench." He turned to watch the sail go up. "All right you salty bastards, make the lines tight, and I'm turning the tiller about." He strode towards the steerage platform, waving at the helmsman.

Xena chuckled softly, spotting Iolaus emerging from belowdecks, a concerned look on his face. He saw her and started in her direction, as the fluttering sound of the sail going up filled their ears.

**

"So that's what we saw so far." Bennu concluded. He was sitting in the chair across from Gabrielle's worktable, having been ushered there by Solari a brief time before. "Army's just round the bend, seems like they're settling in and not coming round before nightfall."

Gabrielle braced her head on her fist. "That makes no sense, Bennu. Why not send at least an envoy around? I'm sure they know we're here."

Bennu shrugged. "Didn't want to send anyone around to ask em." He said. "Just got the militia all tucked up, as y'asked."

"I don't get it." The bard frowned. "Why did they stop?" She tapped her thumb on the desk. "We need to send someone to find out."

"Good thing though, if you're leaving out of here." Bennu said. "Get you some space ahead of them yeah?" He watched her closely. "Got an idea how to keep you safe, little hawk? I know the Gen'l minds it."

It was a good thing, but Gabrielle had lived in the world just long enough not to completely trust a good thing. "The problem is, there really is only one way out of here, and if they've had people spying here as long as we think they have, they know that."

"Aye."

"Well." Gabrielle reconsidered. "There's only one way out of here towards Athens. We could just go the other way of course, and run right into them."

Bennu frowned.

"Just thinking out loud." Gabrielle fell silent. "I figured on leaving with only a few people, that would be fastest."

"Little hawk." The soldier leaned forward. "You've got your own mind, surely. But would you take a bit of a notion from an old man who's been round a time or two?"

"Sure."

"Them people." Bennu said. "Figure you to tuck on out of here. They'll be waiting."

“A trap.”

“Aye.”

Gabrielle exhaled.

“You got a few people, you’ll get caught.” The militia captain said. “No question. Only one who’d be able to pull that off ain’t here.”

“Xena.” The bard said. “I could go anywhere with her and be safe.”

Bennu nodded. “Tis so.” He said. “Only way you can stay safe is stay up here, with these fighters and all. They’d watch you, or take a bunch with you and go.”

Gabrielle sat back and folded her arms over her chest. The last thing she wanted to do was take with her, and be responsible for a big group of people. But something inside her was telling her that Bennu was right, and leaving with only her picked handful might get her into trouble.

Of course, with her, doing anything including going fishing with Dori might get her into trouble.

So not what would Xena do, but what would Xena tell her to do if she could?

She thought hard about that for a long few moments, while Bennu waited in patient silence. “Well, here’s what I think we should do.”

“Your Majesty!”

Gabrielle paused, hearing the yell outside. “C’mon in.”

A scout entered, breathless. “Runner coming up from the town, already calling for you. About halfway up.”

“Okay, let’s see what this is.” Gabrielle got up and circled her desk. “C’mon Bennu, this might change what I was about to tell you.” She followed the scout out of her quarters then broke into a run towards the village entrance, hearing Bennu curse but follow her.

Heads turned. Gabrielle ignored them and increased her speed, glad of the excuse to rid herself of the building up of nervous tension that was starting to give her a headache. It felt good to feel the surge of energy and the wind against her face as she crossed the square.

She reached the guard point and hauled up, as two of the guards sprang up when they saw her. They cleared away though and she bolted through the narrow pass between the rocks, arriving on the path just as a young man gasping for breath stumbled up the last of it.

“G.. “He sucked in a breath. “Gabrielle, there’s a delegation f..from the Spartans.”

Ah. That was more like it. “Okay.” She responded. “Take a second, catch your breath. They’ll wait at least that long.”

The man was bent over, hands on his knees and he took her advice, his chest heaving for a minute. “Steep path.”

“It is.” The bard said. “Even Xe’s huffing a little if she runs up to our cabin. Don’t feel bad.”

The man looked up at her in surprise.

“Don’t tell her I told you.” Gabrielle said, solemnly. “It’s bad for her image.”

He relaxed a little. “The delegation said they wanted to talk to you, and only to you.” He said, after a long exhale. “They carried a white truce flag.”

“As if Amphipolis was an army?” Gabrielle had to smile.

The runner shook his head. "Said they knew you were here, and hadn't left. Said they were watching all the ways out."

Hmm. So Bennu's worry had been dead accurate. Gabrielle sighed. "I'm not sure if I should be worried or flattered at that." She patted his arm. "Let's go down there and see what they want."

"Gabrielle." Bennu had come up behind her. "What if all they want is t'grab you?"

Good point. "How many of them are there?" She asked the runner.

"Six."

Gabrielle turned around to the guards. "Call back and tell Solari I need a half dozen Amazons as an honor guard, please."

"Yes, your Majesty." The guard took off at a run, leaving the other guard behind.

"Hang out here a minute." Gabrielle told the runner. "I'm going to get a staff." Instead of heading back into the village, she turned and started up the slope to the cabin instead.

It was a steep path, and running up it took a lot of energy. She hadn't been kidding when she'd told the village man it strained even Xena, because the last time she'd seen the warrior do it, when she'd though there was something wrong with Dori, Gabrielle had teased her partner about how out of breath she'd been when she'd got there.

For a split second, she'd thought she'd crossed that line, as Xena had put her hands on her hips and given her 'that look'. That look that had always meant she'd pushed that old teasing threshold a little too hard and bumped into her partner's vanity the wrong way.

But then, amazingly, the warrior had just laughed and dared her to do any better, blowing off the pinched ego as though it didn't matter.

And for that, Gabrielle had given her a hug and a kiss and written her a poem that still made her blush just a little remembering it.

How very far they'd come.

She got to the top of the trail breathing hard herself, and quickly crossed the slight rise to the cabin, taking the steps at one jump and pushing the door open. "Jess?"

"Here." Jessan was flat on his back on their bed, looking blissfully comfortable. His four companions were strewn around the cabin like mobile rugs, and they all looked up at her as she entered. "Boy. You guys got it made."

Gabrielle took a breath, and released it. "Well, maybe we do, but right now all I have is a mess. The Spartans showed up in Amphipolis wanting to meet with me."

"Figures." Jessan rolled over and propped his head up on his hand. "All of them?"

"Only six, under a treaty flag." The bard said. "I want to go parley with them, but I need some help." She went to the side of the cabin where they kept their gear and picked up one of Xena's practice staves. "I'm taking some Amazons, but I'd like you guys to go down there and be around in case they try something funny."

"Funny like pull their pants down, or funny like try to grab you and run?" Jessan asked.

Gabrielle just looked at him.

"Sure." Jessan got up. "We'll hide around the inn... that's where you'll be with them right?"

"Can we hide in the kitchen there?" One of the other forest dwellers asked. "It smelled great in there."

Gabrielle chuckled. "Sure. I know Cyrene'll be glad to have you around." She said. "Just don't scare her cooks, okay?"

They left the cabin and started down the trail, getting to the Amazon village entrance a few minutes later. Solari was there, with Cait and Nala, and three other of the mature warriors, all with feathers flying and bristling with weapons.

"Ready, your Maj." Solari said. "I hear the Spartans are gonna surrender to ya."

Gabrielle chuckled wryly.

"Really?" Cait asked. "Should I get Pally down to draw it? I'm sure it'll be memorable."

"Come on, people." Gabrielle motioned to the lower path. "Let's go see what we're in for." She led the way down, sorting through the new information and wondering how it would impact her plans. Were they really watching all the paths, for instance? Even the ones she knew, but probably they didn't?

Like the very narrow, secret, hard to travel path that would take you from Amphipolis to Potadeia if you really had a need to go there, and not be seen?

She knew that one. Xena did, because Xena had made it. The warrior had patiently chopped her way through underbrush and scrub, winding between thickly grown forest and over cold, fast running streams creating a track between their home town, and Gabrielle's birth town.

Just in case.

They reached the bottom of the path and she went to the town's back gate, pushing it open and standing aside as the rest of her group came through. "Bennu, take six of your men, and get around in back of them. Jessan and his friends are going to secure the inn."

Bennu nodded. "Sounds good, little hawk. " He seemed pleased with the plan. "And ye'll take us with you if you go, yeah?"

"Yes." Gabrielle said. "I will."

Satisfied, the soldier rambled off, disappearing between the trees. Gabrielle motioned the Amazons and forest dwellers forward, and took the lead again as they crossed the lane to the stables and headed up the main path that would take them to the central town square where Cyrene's inn was.

"You think they're playing games?" Nala asked, glancing around somewhat self-consciously. She hadn't taken her temporary promotion well at all, and made it clear she was only doing this because it was Gabrielle who was asking and she understood the need.

Gabrielle had given her a hug for that, and was vaguely surprised at the tongue tied and flustered Amazon that stepped back from her.

"I don't know, but I know they aren't stupid or reckless." Gabrielle said. "Xena was telling me about her experience with them before she left." She paused. "She respects them."

The Amazons pondered that, as they reached the back of the inn. Rather than going around, Gabrielle motioned them to the back door, and they slipped inside before anyone could see them. They went single file down the corridor and Gabrielle motioned the forest dwellers into the kitchen while she led the Amazons on towards the front room.

She figured that's where they'd be. She could hear a low murmur of conversation in the room, and Cyrene's distinctive voice raised in mild argument. Gabrielle paused at the back of the door leading into the main room and listened, trying to judge what she was walking into.

She took a breath, a little surprised at how relaxed she felt. Then she pushed the door open an

entered, aware of the armed women at her back.

The sound cut off as she appeared, and she walked a few steps further in the center of the front of the room, sweeping it with her eyes as she came to a halt. At the table in front Cyrene was standing, her arms braced against the surface.

Three of the town council were there, sitting on the side facing the room. Four townsmen who were also incidentally militia were at the next table, and opposing them, standing in the center of the room were the Spartans.

And they were Spartans. She recognized the bearing, and the gear, and the martial attitude she remembered from the slave Xena beat in Athens. These were men raised as warriors, who thought of little else and who lived by a code even Xena raised her beautiful dark eyebrows at.

Gabrielle wished really hard that the outer door would open, and her partner would walk in. "I hear you wanted to see me." She said, coming to stand next to Cyrene.

The Amazons formed an arc behind her, watching the Spartans.

The man in front took a step forward. "You are Gabrielle?"

"I am." The bard answered mildly. "At least.. that's my name." She demurred. "And since you're here, looking for someone of that name, I'm pretty much what you got."

The Spartan studied her curiously. "But are you the one I seek?"

A faint grin twitched at Gabrielle's lips briefly. "Well." She said. "If you're looking for the one that's a bard and a queen of the Amazons..." She watched his facial expression, seeing the minute shifts under the skin. "and the partner of Xena of Amphipolis, then yes. That's me."

He jerked a little at Xena's name, confirming her suspicions.

"So, what is it you want?" Gabrielle continued. "We're busy people here."

The man nodded. "My name is Selenius." He said. "I am the chief captain of the first guard, commanding the Spartan invasion forces."

He fell silent, and the room echoed a little after that.

Just before everyone started to shift uncomfortably, Gabrielle shifted her stance, cocking her head a little to one side. "And?" She prompted gently. "We're just a farming town here. Not much for an invading army to be interested in."

The Spartans exchanged glances. It was hard to say what their attitude was. "You saw our force." He said. "So naturally you are not surprised to see us."

"Naturally." Gabrielle said.

"But you also seem ignorant of your danger, then." Selenius said. "Do you not find an army on your doorstep even a little alarming? It might be true you have nothing we need, though I have seen horses, and supplies, and men I could easily use."

"We don't intimidate easily here." Gabrielle straightened a little. "I certainly don't. But why don't you tell me what you want, and then I can decide what my response should be? It could be that you are asking for help, after all." She smiled. "Since you sent an envoy here to ask Xena for exactly that."

The man almost smiled. "May we break bread together, Gabrielle? The one who told me of you certainly described you to an almost perfection."

Gabrielle turned her head towards Cyrene. "Okay with that, mom?"

Cyrene gave her a look that was half wry and half exasperation. Then she turned to the Spartan. "Listen, buddy." She said. "I have no idea what you want with my kids, but I'm in no mood to clean up a busted inn, so mind your damn manners and you can eat here. Otherwise, out with you."

Selenius' eyes widened.

"Sorry." Gabrielle said. "Selenius, this is Cyrene. She's Xena's mother." She paused to give that statement the weight it required. "I wouldn't mess around with her if I were you."

The Spartan laughed briefly. "The gods themselves only know why a tiny town in the backwoods of Thrace holds such fire in it." He bowed to Cyrene. "We will behave, madam. We are Spartans. Not unnamed roughnecks stealing sheep."

The Spartans took a table and sat at it, and Gabrielle came around from the front table and approached them, lightly grasping her staff.

One of the soldiers stood back up and reached towards her and in a flickering of an eye the staff was up and whipping in his direction, smacking him on the fingers with the sound of wood cracking.

Gabrielle brought the end back, her body settling into a balanced pose as the soldier bit off a curse and grabbed his hand. "Please don't do anything crazy." She said. "I'd rather we just talked."

Selenius had half stood; now he sat. "Petrus, sit." He said. "He meant no harm. His family is noble, and he would pull your chair for you."

The bard exhaled and let her muscles relax, and she heard the rest of the Amazons sheathing weapons behind her. "My parents were shepherds in a town half the size of this one." She said, as she sat down. "Let's just keep it plain."

Then she stopped talking, and waited.

**

The storm hit again as they altered their course towards Xena's blot on the horizon, but in this case the winds were with them and it filled the sails, sending them barreling along the waves in the right direction.

Xena was up on the steering platform, braced against the rail as the rain drove against her. The patricians had disappeared back into their cabins, and Iolaus had gone back down into the hold to see to the horses after telling her the stalls weren't in any good condition.

Or at least, that's what he said he was going to do. He'd also asked Xena for another dose of her seasick remedy.

The prisoners were still lashed to the rail.

Xena knew she, too, could go into her cabin, and be dry and warm, but there was something wild and elemental about the storm, and the sea that touched something wild and elemental in her.

As she looked out over the waves and felt the ship moving under her feet she imagined all the terrors of the deep they were skating impudently over and smiled, giving her head a shake to clear the wet hair from her eyes.

Her leathers were drenched, but the rain wasn't so chilled that it bothered her and she stood there against the rail sucking in deep breaths of the salt air that almost tickled her nose enough to make her sneeze.

Almost.

The tillersman turned to look at her and she gave him a smile. After a frozen second, he smiled back, and then turned again to his task of holding the ship on course. "Want to take her a bit, lady?"

Xena chuckled. "Think I can?"

"Knows it." He answered. "Saw yer in the storm, holding us."

The warrior took a step forward and joined him, laying her hand on the tiller and feeling it press against her push as the sailor released it. "Know who I am?" She asked.

"Aye." The man said. "Poseidon's Bane."

"Ahh. Been a long time since I've heard that name." Xena burred softly. "Where'd you hear that from?"

"Fellers I sailed with." The man turned. "Fergus is my name." He offered a hand. "My father sailed with ye, long time ago. Name was Marco."

In the act of taking his hand, Xena paused. "Marco Half leg?"

The sailor grinned. "Aye." He said. "Came back from the sea and told the story of you savin the rest of him from that squid."

Xena grinned back, and felt ten years younger all of a sudden. "By the gods that was a long time ago." She took his grip and returned it. The sailor was young, maybe even younger than Gabrielle was. He had curly dark hair and smoke gray eyes and it brought back the memory she had of his father.

And that damn squid.

"Was yeah." Fergus said. "But y'know he tells that story every chance he gets, till the town's sick of it. Specially when we started hearing tales of you after."

Xena nodded. "I got around."

Fergus nodded back. "Year or so back he said you and another came through where he lived, he didn't get a chance to say hello to you. But the one was with you, told stories in the inn he said. Was a cute thing, he said."

"What town?"

"Don't even have a name. Too small. Just couple dozen farmers and a small inn. Near Hostace."

Could have been any of a dozen. Xena smiled ruefully and shook her head. "Wish I'd known. I'd have welcomed a chance to see how he was doing." She nudged the tiller a notch, her eyes running knowledgably over the sail. "The storyteller was my partner, Gabrielle."

"Seems I heard that name."

"She's been around too." Xena chuckled. "If you get home again, tell him to look me up sometime. Everyone knows where I live now."

The sailor grinned. "I will." He turned his head as there was a motion by the rail, and they watched the Milena twisting in her bonds, trying to wrench the gag loose from her mouth. "That's a bad lot, that one. Cap'n tried to give it water, bit him."

"Yeah." Xena studied Milena's violent frustration. "Hang on to this a minute. Maybe I can get her to settle down." She handed him back the tiller and crossed down off the steering platform to where the woman was tied up.

"Good luck w'that." Fergus shook his head.

Milena stopped writhing when she saw the warrior approach, going still as her chest heaved with the effort she'd been putting out. She watched Xena warily as she came over and settled to one knee in front of her.

"Listen." Xena said. "Don't be a such a jerk, and you'll get treated better."

Those pale eyes watched her intently, as a wave of rain lashed over both of them, spattering against Xena's bare arm and beading off the warrior's tanned skin.

Xena got the feeling if Milena could chew through the gag and then take a bite out of her, she would. "Stop fighting them." She advised. "It won't get you anywhere." She casually drew out her breast dagger and reached over, putting the tip against the woman's gag.

Milena stopped moving, staying completely still.

With a flick of her wrist, Xena cut through the gag, and eased back to watch as Milena spit it out of her mouth with a croaking curse.

"I'll never stop fighting them." She half coughed. "Bastards! Leaving us up here like this! The salt is rubbing us raw."

Xena could see the welts. "The cell you were in down in the hold is flooded." She remarked. "It's better up here than there." She rested her elbows on her upraised knee. "If you behave, I'll fix that for you."

Milena glared at her. "What do you mean, behave?"

"Listen kid."

"Stop calling me that. I'm not a kid."

Xena smiled tolerantly. "Listen kid." She repeated. "You're not ever going to teach me anything about being a badass. So just shut the Hades up and maybe I'll think about giving you something for those sores. Otherwise you can sit out here and rot for all I care. Your choice."

She watched Milena's face, understanding well the conflicting emotions there, idly wondering which side of the bed she was going to come down on.

Metaphorically speaking.

"I'm not a child." Milena finally said, but in a much milder tone. "I've just passed my eighteenth year."

"To me, that's a kid." Xena informed her. "Pick your fate, kid." She smiled easily, shaking the wet hair from her eyes again as the rain swept over them one more time. She saw the shoulders slump and bit off a smirk as the expression on Milena's face altered from arrogant anger to what came close to a little desperation.

"If you can help me, then do," She said. "Please." She added, grudgingly and late.

Xena had her healer's kit clipped to her armor from her session with Iolaus. She untied it and edged sideways to block the rain from hitting its contents as she sorted through what she had inside. She drew out a small wooden box with the paste she used for wound healing in it, and a piece of linen folded up in a square.

"Why are you doing this?" Milena asked after watching for a moment.

"Doing what?" Xena picked up her supplies and moved closer. "This?" She held up the paste. "A friend of mine would expect me to." She paused before she lifted the linen up. "I'll warn you once. Mess with me while I'm working on you and I'll knock you out."

Milena lowered her lashes, and then fluttered them open. "I won't." She said. "Being knocked on

my ass once was enough.”

Satisfied, Xena went to work on the sores, areas rubbed raw by the ropes and inflamed by the salt water. They hurt, she knew, but the girl stayed silent and still while she dried the spots, and then coated them with the salve. “That’ll keep the water out if you don’t rub it off.”

“What is it?”

“Mixture of an herb to kill the pain, one to keep the wound clean and a vegetable jelly my mother came up with.” Xena remarked absently. “Used it first on my horse.” She felt the motion as Milena reacted, and she looked up to see a smile on the girl’s face. “But it works on people too.”

“It feels much better.” Milena admitted. “Thank you.”

Gabrielle, Xena mused, would be so damned proud of her. She’d never quite gotten the knack of killing people with kindness, though the very idea made her chuckle inside. But she’d finally realized that sometimes, some places, a kind word or act often got the results she wanted faster than using her pinch, or beating people silly. “No problem.” She moved around to the girl’s other side.

“You’re a healer?” Milena asked, after a moment’s silence.

“Yes.” Xena studied a particularly large gall, which was seeping blood. She could bandage it, but she knew the rain and the wind driven seas would make the linen a sopping mess and negate its effectiveness.

Hm.

“You have gentle hands when you want to.” Milena observed.

Xena briefly glanced up, to see the captive’s eyes not far from her own, watching her steadily. “I have many skills.” She went back to her task, cleaning the spot and putting the salve on, then wrapping the linen bandage around the rope closest to it. “Stay still or you’ll be back where you were before I did this.”

“We changed course.” Milena changed the subject. “Why?”

Xena straightened up and tucked away her supplies. Then she rested her hands on her knee and studied Milena who was looking back at her with an interesting expression. Interesting, because it wasn’t hatred, and it wasn’t the youthful arrogance she’d displayed before. “I saw something I want to get a better look at.” She answered.

“Something more important than getting to Athens?”

“For me.” The warrior stood up and dusted her hands off. “Why, you anxious to get there?”

Milena’s face twitched. “I’d rather be swimming the other direction.” She shifted, just a little, tipping her head back to look up at the warrior’s towering form. “How about leaving me that knife?”

Xena grinned wryly. “And have it buried in my back? No thanks.” She glanced off to the horizon. The storm was now obscuring the dot, though she thought she caught sight of a shadow in the distance getting closer.

The ship was pitching a bit more now, and she felt a lash of cold saltwater blast against her side as she stood near the rail.

“Xena.”

The warrior turned back to Milena’s now still form. She was huddled against the rail, not moving

as Xena had suggested, but there was a bluish tinge to her skin and as Xena looked past her, she could see the two men shivering as well. "What?"

"You're really not going to Athens, are you?"

"No. Not if I can help it. I'm really just trying to find some friends who are out here and may be in trouble." Xena shaded her eyes against the spray. "Believe it or not."

"I do believe it." Milena said. "What I don't believe is that your ego would let you turn down their offer." She added. "Don't turn around and kick me for that. Mine wouldn't either."

Xena chuckled and laid her hands on the rail. "That's because you have no idea what that offer means." She said. "Doesn't even tempt me." She turned and headed for the bow to get a better look through the fog, leaving Milena to her own thoughts.

Milena's thoughts might have surprised Xena, as the girl watched the tall figure moving away from her with its characteristic swagger. Or then, maybe they wouldn't have. Unlike her partner, Xena had a relatively good sense of her own attractiveness and she knew how to use it when she had to.

"Milena. Stop messing with that demon."

She looked over at her brother, who was watching her with red-rimmed eyes. "Shut up, Rog." She said. "Don't even think you can tell me what to do now. Not after all this."

"She's bad news." Rog said. "Don't talk to her. She'll get something out of you."

"Yeah, she will." Milena turned her attention to the dim figure now on the bow, arms braced against the rail as the rain pounded her. "And I'll give it willingly. I want her."

"Milena."

"Sorry Rog. You can be slaves to our master if you want." The girl said. "I'm not just talking. I want her, and I want her so bad I'm willing to sell myself to Hades for her."

"You're crazy. She's not up for grabs. She don't want you." Milkas spoke up from behind Rog's huddled form.

"She will." The girl smiled briefly. "I'm going to worm myself into her and take her. You watch."

"Idiot." Rog turned as much as he could so his back was to her.

Milena ignored him. She watched Xena lean forward, then abandon the rain and head for the mast, moving with that bouncy, catlike grace. She reached the mast and started to swarm up it, climbing as easily as any of the sailors despite her armor.

The leathers hid so little. They clung to her body and outlined its muscular power, and yet took nothing away from the sensual beauty of her. From where she was, Milena could see her thighs tense, as her hands released and found another hold, pulling her up towards the crown's next.

Like an animal, steady and sure, fearless in the rain and the ship's motion as she swung over their heads in the pitching of the waves.

Wild and beautiful. Uncontrolled by captain or council, owner of her own destiny. Milena succumbed to the sense of envy and wanting, wishing her hands were free and her body unfettered. Oh yes, her mind echoed softly. You want her.

She remembered clearly those blue eyes, and that planed face, and that low, husky voice that even the memory of made her mouth dry out. She licked her lips and felt the rain on them, as Xena reached the top and swung herself into the basket, the sailors inside moving to make room for her.

As well they might. Milena could feel the ache in her guts, wanting to be up there with them. She'd tried to dismiss Xena when they'd parted in the town, enduring the taunting of her brothers... well, her half brothers, anyway.. but now?

Now that she was here, and Xena was here, she felt herself losing control to this burning desire that only got worse every time the warrior came near her.

Now she even knew what those fingers felt like, touching her skin. Gentle indeed, and skilled, and close enough for her to smell the rich scent of leather and brass around her.

Intoxicating. Her body wrestled with this new desire she could do nothing about, tied as she was to the wooden railing and haunted by the echo of that voice and that casual look as she'd glanced up from spreading her salve, those eyes filled with potent intelligence and mystery.

By the gods, I will have her.

**

Xena edged to the front of the crow's nest, shading her eyes again to look into the distance. "Damned weather."

"Ah, tis the law of the sea, lady." The sailor on watch said. "Weather is, as weather does."

"Yeah." Xena sighed. "I know." She could still just vaguely see the blurry dark blot on the ship's port bow and she wondered again if she was just sending the vessel into a wild hare chase for no reason. What if the blot was a small island, like the one they'd nearly crashed on?

With the winds as they were, what if she put the ship in danger again? A smash on those rocks would be just as deadly today as they were the previous, and what did she really think she was going to find there anyway?

Xena rested her elbows on the crow's nest and regarded the shadowy figure. "Why am I doing this?" She wondered aloud.

"Lady?"

Xena glanced at the sailor. "Nothing." She said. "Just talking to myself." She looked down at her hands, fingers laced together. For a minute she simply stood there, looking inward as she tried to puzzle it out.

Ah. She lifted her head. It was the itch. She straightened up and indicated the blur. "That's where we're headed. When you can see what it is, holler down."

"Aye, lady." The man nodded. "We know our bizness, yeah?"

"Sorry." Xena turned and leaned against the edge of the rigging. "Didn't mean to say otherwise. I'm just the crackpot who thinks that's a shipwreck so I'm interested to know if I'm right or not."

The sailor peered at the blot, and then cocked his head. "Might to be, lady." He remarked casually. "Ain't no rocks or islands past the narrows back there, where we almost lost 'er." He nodded. "So either that, or t'whale, or somesuch. " He glanced at her. "Cap'n turned her. Must be summat."

"Must be." Xena said. "Let's hope it's not a hundred year old ghost ship." She turned and hoisted herself out of the crow's nest, watching the deck sway far below her. She could see Iolaus crossing it, towards the prisoners and the captain making his way to the helm.

With a sigh, she grabbed sheet and swung herself onto it, wrapping her legs around the rope and lowering herself down to the deck. She swayed as the ship did, and she felt the ache erupt in her shoulders as the herbs wore off and she remembered what she did the previous day. "Ow."

But it was only a brief twinge, and she managed to get down and onto her feet without any slips and dusting her hands off, she started in the direction of the tiller again only barely aware of the intent eyes on her from near the rail.

It was the itch that was urging her towards the dark mass. The internal, infernal pecking of her own mental woodpecker that just kept nudging her in a direction regardless of the logic involved. Instinct, maybe. Sixth sense? Maybe.

Gabrielle had once said to someone, 'well, Xena just knows things sometimes. Ignoring that gets us in trouble.'

No ignoring for her. Xena raked the hair from her eyes as she bounded up onto the steering platform. Not this time.

She was staying strictly out of trouble.

**

Continued in Part 16

A Queen's Tale

Part 16

"So that is what the great Artemis told us." Selenius concluded. "Her oracle laid it out, and though we find it very strange, and not in line with our warrior tenets, we will not go against her wishes."

Gabrielle tucked her staff in the crook of her arm and rested her folded hands on the table in front of her. "Okay, let me see if I have this straight." She said. "You were told that you won't win this war unless a woman leads you."

"I was not told." Selenius clarified. "I am just a warrior. The noble oracle consulted with my masters, the high council of Sparta."

Gabrielle waited for him to finish then continued on. "So that's why you sent that note to Xena."

"She was the most logical candidate." Selenius agreed. "I'm sure you agree."

The bard considered the question. "Well, from your perspective I guess." She said. "Not from mine." She concluded. "Anyway, Xena said no when your envoy asked. I was here."

Selenius nodded. "So they told us. We met up with them two nights before last." He said. "They were in some disarray, they had been attacked they told us, and had escaped from some savages near here somewhere."

Solari cleared her throat.

"We brought that answer to the oracle, and the oracle consulted the Goddess Artemis." The man continued. "The oracle told us we should come here and enjoin you to lead us instead."

Gabrielle blinked. "Me?"

Selenius nodded. "The oracle assured us that since you lead Artemis' people, you would of course join our cause and assist us in winning this war."

"Me?"

"Yes." Selenius agreed. 'Does that surprise you?'

Gabrielle rested her chin on her fist. "About as much as you taking all your clothes off and offering to cook nude in my mother in law's kitchen would, yeah."

The Spartan blinked. "I beg your pardon?"

The bard exhaled. "Look, the Spartans who were here before made it pretty clear they don't appreciate women in battle. Why on earth would you want one to lead your forces? Even Xe?"

He looked puzzled. "Because the goddess commands it, of course." He said. "Whether I, or any of my brothers in arms thinks an army is any place for the... " He glanced past Gabrielle at the stolidly glowering Amazons. "Is any place for our fairer sex is not the point. Artemis has given us her blessing, and directed us, and that's all there is to that."

"Artemis." Gabrielle mused.

"We were honored by her support." Selenius said. "Of course. We also send a supplicant with offerings to Ares, but he has not yet returned, we hope to secure his blessing also."

Gabrielle was, at this point, just stalling. "Hm. Ares." The situation had taken a turn she hadn't expected, even given her experience in the unexpected. "I wonder what he thinks about all this."

Selenius gave her a strange little look. "Your pardon?"

"I wonder what Ares thinks about all this?" Gabrielle repeated. "About his war being turned over to his sisters?"

The Spartan looked affronted. "We do not wonder such things about the gods." He said sternly. "They are beyond our understanding."

"Hm." Gabrielle grunted softly. "Lucky you."

"Maybe you could call him and ask him?" Solari suggested. "Might be good to know, you know?"

"Maybe." Gabrielle agreed. "Well, Selenius.."

The Spartan focused on her. "Of course you have your doubts." He said. "After all, did my men not chase you only days before? All I can give you as an answer to that is that we had not yet gotten word from the oracle. We were concerned our presence would be noted and warned about, but we know from watching none have left this village and so, we know you do not intend to do that."

"They did chase us." Gabrielle said. "Were those your men in the forest? The ones who attacked us?"

Selenius frowned. "When was this?"

"When we were heading out to see who the soldiers were Xe's scouts spotted." Gabrielle said. "We had word of a big movement of people, so me and a few others rode out to see who it was."

The Spartan watched her face intently. "You saw us."

The bard nodded.

"And you were attacked.. before, or after this?"

"Both." Gabrielle said. "We were attacked on the way to the pass, and then again on the way back, we were chased but we took an alternate route I know and got away."

The Spartans all shifted a little, glancing at each other. "Regalas" Selenius turned. "Is this so? Have we sent out men to way lay those in the area?"

The Spartan directly behind him shook his head positively. "No, m'lord. You gave strict instructions none were to leave the army. Only the point scouts, riding a league before the troops went before us. We saw no one until we were heading up the road, and these people rode out of the forest and into our path."

Hm. Gabrielle wondered if they were telling the truth. She watched Selenius' face, but she knew the man was a canny soldier and probably well used to hiding his motives. If the ambushers weren't Spartans, then who were they? "We also heard that the Spartans who came to speak to Xena.. they were attacked also." Gabrielle said, slowly. "They weren't sure by whom."

Selenius was already nodded in agreement. "Yes, that is so." He said. "They made it back half their number."

"And remember, those guys in the cave." Solari spoke up.

Gabrielle remembered. "The men who attacked us weren't Spartans." She said finally. "But I think they wanted us to think they were." She leaned on her elbows again. "Selenius, we want no part in this war. Not my tribe, not this town."

The Spartan nodded. "So our agents said." He murmured. "But we do not require anything from your .. ah... tribe, or from Amphipolis. We only require you." He leaned forward now. "Let me put my cards on the table. If you come with us, my army will bypass this valley and go at all speed for Thera. Warships will meet us there and carry us to Athens."

"Thera."

"But if you don't, we must believe you to act against us, no matter how you protest neutrality." Selenius said, in almost a gentle voice. "And we will not leave you at our backs."

Gabrielle gave herself a few long breaths to think about what to say to that. She wasn't exactly surprised to hear the threat, but she hadn't really expected for it to be put on the table so bluntly. She decided to accept that as a mark of respect. "Selenius, do you really think you want someone who you are asking to lead your army to do that under duress, with the threat of destruction of my hometown?"

He shrugged slightly. "Gabrielle, you were presented to me as someone who understands war." He said. "Xena would not allow an enemy free rein at her back either, and we both know that."

True. "Did it occur to you that Xena will have a serious problem with this?" Gabrielle countered.

"Did it occur to you that we know that, and hope to draw her to us if you agree?" Selenius countered. "As I say, this is war, Gabrielle. We are willing to risk a lot for that. Are you willing to risk your friends and family?"

The bard nodded, almost as if to herself. "Are you willing to risk your army?" She asked. "Or are you just going to pay Artemis lip service and keep me tied up on the back of someone's horse?"

The Spartan leaned back and studied her. "You do us no service. We are honorable men."

Gabrielle smiled. "Then answer the question." She said. "If I had a dinar for every honorable man who's taken a shot at me I could buy a villa in Athens and give free wine to the whole city three times a seven-day."

Behind her, she knew the Amazons and the Amphipolitans were fidgeting. She herself now had a throbbing headache that was sending tiny sparkles into the periphery of her vision and it was all she could do to keep her body posture relaxed and her fingers laced casually together instead of clenching into fists.

What a mess. If she hadn't regretted enough sending Xena on a wild Amazon chase before, she certainly did now. She was mentally kicking herself in the back of the head so hard it was a wonder her body wasn't bobbing forward like a chickens. "Well?"

Selenius lifted one hand in her direction, and gave her a tiny smile. "There are many in the army who would not accept a woman leading us, no matter what god or goddess commanded it. You are wise to understand that." He admitted. "But if you are willing to stand at my right hand and allow

me the facade of leadership, we might both receive Artemis' favor as she surely will know the truth of it.”

Ah. Against her will, Gabrielle found herself liking this guy. He was ruthless, but honest. She leaned forward. “That's a fair statement, Selenius.” She said. “And so, since you've been fair with me, I will be fair with you.”

“And so?”

If you're lying, and I come to any harm, or if this place comes to any harm, Xena will find you, and she will kill you, and she will kill everyone around you up to an including the rest of the army you're with.” Gabrielle stated mildly. “You're playing with a much bigger fire than you know.”

The Spartan paused, then he sighed, and nodded. “I will remember that.” He said. “Though I think I'm man enough to know my risks.” He added. “So will you join us, Gabrielle? We have little time if we intend on making Thera before the moon wanes.”

The bard stood up. “I'm going to take a walk outside. I'll be back and let you know my choice. Please stay here, and I'm sure mom will be glad to give you some lunch.”

Cyrene snorted.

Selenius hesitated, then nodded agreement. “Very well, but do not take long, Gabrielle. We have little time.” He said. “Please.” He added, belatedly.

The bard pushed the chair back and went to the side door, pushing it open and slipping outside.

Once there, she simply leaned back against the wall of the inn and stared across through the trees towards the stable, her eyes unfocused.

A moment later, Cyrene came out of the door and found her there. “Gabrielle.”

“Yes mom?” Gabrielle rolled her head to one side and gave her mother in law a wry look.

Cyrene put her hands on her hips in a very familiar pose. “You are out of your mind if you go with these idiots.”

“Am I?” The bard said. “Am I out of my mind to want you all safe? Out of my mind to want them to leave Amphipolis, and all the other towns in the valley alone? Just how crazy is that?”

“Gabrielle, you can't go with them. Their word isn't worth a potato in my pot.” Cyrene said. “You'll end up a hostage and they'll still rape this place. It's an army. We both know what that means. They need all the supplies they can get.”

“I know.” Gabrielle folded her arms over her chest. “And despite what I told him, I don't really want Xe having to face off against that whole army.”

“She would.”

“Absolutely she would.” The bard almost smiled. “I can picture it in my head, you know? That whole army spread out across the plains, thousands of them riding in one direction and my partner, by herself, riding in the opposite direction with nothing but that sword and the chakram and more guts than three armies against them.”

Cyrene studied her. “You're not going with them.”

Now, a smile appeared on Gabrielle's face, if only briefly. Then she turned, and walked over to the back kitchen door, rapping on it lightly. It opened after a few seconds, and Jessan's head poked out. “Hi.”

“We outta here?” Jessan asked. “Those guys are lying like rugs, by the way. They're all the way nervous.”

“We need to leave by the back route.” Gabrielle said. “Can you get everything ready? We’ll take the high path out so we need to find a way to get the horses on the road some other way.”

“I’ve got that arranged.” Cait squiggled through the trees. “Goodness, that’s a bother.” She twitched the tunic she’d gotten from somewhere over her thin form. “Two of Xena’s fellows have a wagon ready, and we’re taking horses to market.”

Gabrielle felt a moment of intense gratitude. “Good move, Cait. Just get out of here casually, and meet us at the edge of the road where it bends towards Potadeia.”

“Right.” Cait said. “Pally’s gone up to get our things and then’ll she’ll be with me. I’m sure we’ll have a grand time.” She squiggled back out from the trees and loped towards the stables, her pale hair bouncing as she ran.

“Okay;” Gabrielle said. “Now let me go be the bard.” She turned to face Cyrene. “Mom, I’m going to try and buy some time for us to escape.”

“Good girl.” Cyrene said. “We’ll be fine, Gabrielle. We’ve been through this before.”

“Take everyone, mom.” Gabrielle took her by the shoulders. “Take them up to the Amazon village. You’ll be safer there, than here.”

“What about Dori?”

Ah. Dori. “She’s coming with me.” The bard said.

“Good.” Cyrene looked unabashedly relieved. “That’s the safest place for her.”

The bard gave her a wry look. “I promised her, and besides, she’s as big of a target as I am if they figure out who she is.” Gabrielle squared her shoulders and gently shoved aside her last reservations, as her heart naturally urged her to put herself in the way of danger to protect her friends.

It was unnatural for her to do otherwise.

But her guts were telling her she had made the right choice, even if she took out the knowledge that part of the urge she had to run was triggered by how damn much she missed her partner and wanted to be back with her.

What would Xena have done if she was here?

Gabrielle had to admit, she really wasn’t sure. But she also knew she wouldn’t have cared, so long as whatever it was, they’d done it together. So now she just had to trick the Spartans into giving her time to escape, then go down Xena’s path up by the cabin without killing herself.

Or anyone else.

It was just turning out to be one of those days, wasn’t it?

Gabrielle opened the door and entered the inn. She gave the Spartan leader a brief smile, and went back to the table, as everyone’s eyes once again focused on her.

“You have decided.” Selenius said.

“I have.” Gabrielle agreed. “Of course, I will come with you. My family and friend’s safety is the most important thing to me.”

The Spartan smiled broadly. “So the oracle said.” He stood. “Let’s go then.”

“Ah, just one thing.”

“One thing?”

Gabrielle sat down, with a pleasant expression. "It's a minor complication."

**

Xena closed the door to her cabin, grabbing a piece of linen and drying her face as she reveled in not being in the driving rain for a few minutes.

The ship was moving significantly again, but she rocked with the motion and leaned against the wall, debating whether it was worth changing into something dry for half a candle mark.

That would, she figured, give the ship enough time to plow through the waves and get close enough for them to identify the smudge on the horizon that was even now almost invisible in the heavy wind and rain.

She dried her arms off, then after a brief pause, she unhooked the straps on her leathers and peeled them off, draping them over the end of the bunk to, if not dry, then at least stop dripping.

The leather was great protection, but wet it was heavy and clammy and it rubbed against her skin uncomfortably. It felt good to get it off and let her sore body relax for a while.

It wasn't worth switching to a dry set, she knew. But she briskly removed the water from her skin and then gave in and pulled a set of dry under wraps from her saddlebag and changed into them, before donning a wool shift.

Half a candle mark. Might as well be comfortable. Xena sat down on her bunk and extended her still booted feet across the wooden floor, reaching over to snag her basket and drag it over to next to her on the rough linen sheet.

She was aware of being tired. The scant sleep and the constant stress were wearing on her, and she'd escaped to the cabin to escape the staring eyes as much as the falling rain.

She thanked the storm, privately. It kept the patricians off the deck and out of the hair of the captain who was doing her a big favor and didn't deserve being browbeaten for it.

Pain in the asses.

She dug the nutbread out and a crock of mild cheese, and spread the one on a slice of the other before she settled back to enjoy her snack.

Two bites into it, a knock came at the door. Xena sighed, and debated not answering, then shrugged a little. "C'mon in."

The wooden portal opened and Iolaus poked his head in. "Hey." He entered sat down on the low bench against the wall. "I heard the fellows from Athens talking. They're not happy with our detour."

"Don't care." Xena nudged the nutbread in his direction. "Have a piece."

Iolaus didn't hesitate. He cut a chunk off and nibbled it. "I'm kinda worried about it too." He admitted. "I really need to get to Athens."

"I know." Xena wriggled her shoulders into a slightly more comfortable position. "But I've got a feeling it will be worth it. Anyway, if it's really a shipwreck, we need to stop." She eyed him. "Insane as it is for me to be telling you that."

Iolaus had the grace to blush. He was drenched as she'd been, his curly fair hair plastered over his head and his leather vest dripping fat droplets onto the wooden floor. "You really think it is?"

"My gut is telling me it is." The warrior responded. "I learned the hard way that I should listen to it"

"Could be from anytime." Iolaus said. "Might be abandoned."

“Might be.” Xena agreed. “We’ll know in about a candlemark. Then we can haul around and head for Athens.”

Iolaus rested his elbows on his knees. “They finished fixing the hull.” He said. “Probably move those poor guys down off the deck.” He glanced up at her. “Saw you break out the first aid for the young lady.”

“Idiot.” Xena remarked. “Rubbed herself raw on the ropes, then wondered why salt water stings like hell. Some people don’t have the sense to get out of the rain.”

“Some people are tied up in the rain.” Iolaus chuckled briefly. “So, what did they do? I never got around to getting the story from you.”

“Depends who you talk to.” The warrior gave him a wry look. “Denius says they snookered the Athenian council pretending to be kids of some rich patron to be.”

Iolaus straightened, then leaned back against the wall. “Ah hah.” He said. “Well, I guess it’s technically against the law.”

“Mm. Anyway, I bumped into them halfway to Thera.” Xena cut herself another piece of nutbread. “I was minding my own business getting a mug of ale and they showed up and decided to start trouble with the villagers there.”

“Ah.” Iolaus nodded. “So you kicked their asses.”

“Not exactly.” Xena smiled. “But I threw a kink in their plans, and your little friend there decided to come after me.”

“What, that girl?” Iolaus’ eyes widened. “She attacked you?”

“Not that kind of come after.”

“Ooooh.” The curly haired man muffled a laugh. “Saucy wench.”

Looking back at it, Milena really had been very precocious. For all her lack of age, she definitely was grown up in her desires. “And then I kicked her ass.” Xena concluded. “After she tried to force her way into my room.”

Iolaus stuffed the last bit of the nutbread in his mouth and swallowed it. “Wow.”

“So when the stooges from Athens caught me on the road on the way here and asked if I’d seen anyone who looked like them... I told em.”

“You turned them in?” Iolaus asked. “So that’s why they were so pissed off at you. I heard the two of those guys talking and boy.” He shook his head. “Glad they’re tied up. You might get a quarter candlemark rest now.”

“Eh.” Xena reached into the basket and pulled out a wineskin, uncapping it and taking a sip. “They ticked me off trying to mess with those people. Serves them right to get caught.”

“Mm.” Iolaus grunted. “I don’t know if I’d have gotten in their way of bilking some of those council members. They gave me a hive the last time we were in Athens. I think crook’s a kettle calling a pot black coming from them.”

Xena studied him, a little surprised. It had been a few years, but she suddenly got the sense that her old friend had changed as much or more than she had. “We didn’t have a good time with them last time either.” She commiserated. “So yeah, I know what you’re saying.”

Iolaus grunted. “Ungrateful bastards.” He said. “It’s always what have you done for us lately, lately. Even Herc was pissed of the last time we were there at them.” He stretched his hands out and flexed the fingers. “Takes a lot to get him pissed off.”

Xena thought about the last time she'd seen the two of them and how much had changed in her life since then. "Yeah." She murmured. "He's pretty laid back." She remembered, though, finding him in a dungeon showing a harsh and cruel side to his person she hadn't suspected him to have.

He probably hadn't either, and Xena had come to wonder after that if it wasn't really the immortal part of him showing. The Gods were like that, sometimes, weren't they?

Xena took a slow breath, and let it out. Yeah, weren't they?

Iolaus stifled a yawn. "I wish this damn storm was over already." He glanced at the window. "I need a decent night's sleep."

Good subject change. "Me too." The warrior agreed. "Unfortunately, I think we've got a shipwreck and the rest of this storm between us and that." She took another sip of wine. "Tough night last night."

"Saw you hold the tiller during that whole thing." Iolaus said, a smile returning to his face. "Nice work, Xena." He said. "Even with that crazy girl hanging onto you."

Yes, and her shoulders still ached from it. Xena lifted the skin in his direction, then handed it over to him. Her shoulders and back, and the front of her thighs where she'd had to clamp herself in place trying to keep the ships off the rocks.

Hadn't that been heroic? Noble? Self sacrificing?

Painful and stupid, actually. Xena tipped her head back and regarded the ceiling. Though she'd saved herself some trouble in the bargain since she had no wish to be stranded on a damn rock. "I wasn't in the mood for swimming and we'd have been doing that for a long time." She said, then paused. "And by the way, you never did get around to telling me what you were going to do in Athens."

"Ah." Iolaus took a swig of the wine. "Thought you forgot about that."

Xena's eyebrow lifted eloquently.

"It's a little embarrassing."

Xena's other eyebrow lifted.

Iolaus' face scrunched into a half grimace. "Herc didn't get a lot of the scoop on what was going on with the war, but one of the things he did hear was that somehow, for some reason, both Athens and Sparta think they have to be led by a woman in order to win."

Well. Xena stifled a wry laugh. That did explain why they'd shown up on her doorstep. "That at least makes some kind of sense." She said. "Now I know why they were after me."

"Them too?"

"Not that kind of after." Xena rolled her eyes. "So – what does that have to do with you?" She asked, after a pause. "You going to pretend to be an oracle and tell them different?"

"I'm going to pretend to be a woman and play into their game."

There were very few times in her life that Xena could remember being caught as completely offguard as she was in that moment. For a long stretch of heartbeats, she simply stared at her old friend, jaw slightly dropped, eyes definitely widened.

Then her voice returned. "What?"

"That's pretty much what I said." Iolaus said mournfully. "Pretty much that same inflection too. Now.. " He lifted his hands. "I realize desperate times call for desperate measures, but I really thought Herc had gotten hit in the head by a coconut one too many times when he asked me."

Xena closed her eyes, then opened them, then raised one hand and rubbed them with her fingers. Then she shook her head rapidly back and forth.

“And I can see you agree with me.” Iolaus sighed. “At any rate, I finally agreed to try it, but man.” He shook his own head. “I’d rather be singing soprano in the Athens choir, let me tell you.”

“Iolaus.” Xena paused, uncharacteristically stifling her natural bluntness as she searched for a better way to phrase what she was thinking. “Um...”

“Iolaus.” Iolaus said. “You make a reasonably good looking man, but a hideously ugly woman. Right?”

“I wasn’t going to say that.” Xena said.

“Really?”

“I haven’t seen you dressed like a woman.” Xena’s nature reasserted itself. “Anyway, wouldn’t it be easier to just find a woman and have them do it?” She sat up and rested her elbows on her knees. “Was he serious?”

Iolaus took a long swallow of the wine. “He was serious.” He sighed. “See, the problem is... we’re a little short on women between the two of us.” He paused, and glanced at the woman across from him, who was looking back at him with a battle hardened stone face which nevertheless couldn’t keep the twinkle from her eyes.

It reminded him, again, of the mischievous sense of humor that lurked behind the warrior façade and he waited for the comment, but Xena remained silent and waited for him to continue. “You’re being good, Xena.”

Now the twinkle was definitely there, as Xena briefly grinned at him. Unlike the last time they’d traveled together, he found himself a lot more comfortable with Xena this time around. He wondered briefly if it was because she’d changed, time had passed, or he’d moved a little more towards understanding the dark side in more ways than one.

Didn’t matter, he supposed. “Anyway, Herc figured if I could get in there, and distract them, it would give him time to talk Artemis and Athena into finding something else to do other than make two armies fight and die to prove a point.

Xena nodded at that last, obviously in agreement.

“So here I am.” He concluded. “And boy, I’m glad I ran into you because if anyone would know how to be a sexy, ruthless woman warleader, it’d be you. Got any tips?”

Xena finally chuckled audibly. “Iolaus.” She shook her head. “That’s a damn crazy idea. What makes him think the council will listen to an anonymous woman, even if you do pull off the stunt?”

“Good question.” Iolaus passed the wineskin back. “I have a cover story, something about being his cousin so I can leverage his name with the bastards, but honestly I was just going to wing it.”

“Dangerous.”

He inclined his head slightly. “Isn’t it always?” He asked. “But if I can get in the middle of this and stop it, it’ll be worth it. A lot of people’s lives are at stake.”

And I could have stopped it. Xena, though, felt at peace with that. I could have stopped it, and I chose to live, and stay with Gabrielle, and to Hades with all of them. “I’ll do what I can to help you, Iolaus.” She said, in a quiet tone. “But I’m not going to Athens, and if that means they all kill each other, then they do.”

“You don’t owe them anything.” Iolaus nodded. “Herc has to do what he does. You don’t.” He

paused and studied her again. "That's why your heroic stunts are always so much more mind blowing. You could walk away from it all and you don't."

"Most of the time." The warrior said. "This time's different. There's no winner in this game."

Iolaus leaned back against the wall. "That's exactly what I told Herc. " he said. "Because y'know, no matter what he does, no matter how noble it is, he's just going to end up in his father's doghouse, his family hating on him, and no thanks from all these rock heads down here who want blood."

They looked at each other for a few minutes.

"Sometimes it's just not worth it." Xena concluded.

"That's what I learned the hard way." Iolaus said.

Xena took a sip of the wine, and tilted the bag at him.

If she looked objectively at it, of course the obvious solution was for her to go to Athens and put on the show that poor Iolaus was so ill equipped to do. She was the most likely candidate, and though Athens hadn't extended her an offer – everyone thought they had.

Made total sense. If fact, she was sure if Hercules had been there right now, he'd have asked. She was surprised Iolaus hadn't.

Unfortunately for them all, she wasn't going for it. "When we get to Athens, I'll see if I can hook you up with someone who can help you pull this off." Xena said. "Then I need to grab my damn missing Amazons and get back home."

"That'd be great, Xena." Iolaus smiled. "Anything you can suggest, I'm up for it. I don't even know where to start with acting like a woman. I'm not really. um..."

"No, you're not." Xena smiled. "But once the weather slacks off, I'll see what I can do to teach you that, too."

Iolaus' nose wrinkled.

"Might be fun." The twinkle was back in those very blue eyes. "Hey, I even taught Gabrielle to dance."

"Uh oh."

"I even have a dress you can borrow."

"Oh."

**

Gabrielle took the upward path at a jog, ducking under some branches as she heard the Amazons head up after her. "Let's get a move on people."

Solari caught up to her. "That was some kind of. Uh..."

"Storytelling?" Gabrielle grinned briefly. "Hey, they bought it." She kept a tight hold on Dori's hand. "You all ready to go for a ride, Dor?"

"Fun, mama!" Dori hopped up onto a rock and then down the other side. "We go wif Gogo again?"

Regretfully, no. Gabrielle glanced back through the trees, glad they hid the somewhat undignified rush up the mountain.

The Spartans had been given little choice but to accept her story of an Amazon fertility ceremony

of the moon. Gabrielle had thrown her considerable powers of persuasion into it, and off the top of her head had described the need and the ceremony in intricate detail.

But they had made it clear they wouldn't wait for long, and she had barely the night to get her group together, and escape before they'd start looking for her at first light.

They would ride through the night, she decided, and hole up near daybreak, hopefully on the other side of the pass. She wanted to get ahead of the army, but not so far that they neglected to chase her.

"Hey your maj?" Solari ducked past a branch. "You're really gonna piss these guys off, huh?"

"Not intentionally." Gabrielle headed to the right, where the path turned into the Amazon village. "I just can't walk into their clutches."

"You don't trust them."

"Hades no." The queen shook her head as they cleared the guard and entered the village grounds. "Not further than I can pick that guy up and throw him. He talked a good game, but they've got no intention of keeping their word."

"Huh."

"There's no reason for them to." Gabrielle turned and walked backwards. "Dori, let's go and get our stuff ready, okay? Soli, make sure everyone's ready at the gates in a candlemark. Bring all the supplies we can carry because I don't know how long we'll have to march rough."

"Right." Solari darted off. Nala hesitated, then followed her.

That left Gabrielle to turn back around and continue heading for her quarters, her mind abuzz with possibilities.

Chief among them was the possibility she wasn't making the right choice. Despite her words to the Amazons, her words to Cyrene, and the advice of everyone from the forest dwellers to the militia there was still that core in her that wondered.

Maybe there always would be that core. Gabrielle entered her quarters and went to the packing she'd left. She'd gotten so far as to add some extra shirts for Dori when she rummaged in the bottom of the trunk she'd brought down from the cabin and felt her fingers hit something unexpected.

A little puzzled, she pushed aside a stack of towels and spotted something glinting in the light. She closed her fingers around the unexpected item and drew it out, gazing in some confusion at the sword she now held.

"Where in the Hades did this come from?" She murmured aloud, her brow creasing. IT was a beautifully made weapon, reminding her a little of Xena's but smaller, and lighter and as she turned it in her hand, it seemed fitted to it.

Then she remembered. "Oh. Damn."

A sword that fit her hand, because it had been made to fit it, to the exacting specification of Xena's request. The blade was finely hammered, and the perfection of the finish made her wonder again if her partner had a hand in the making itself.

Wouldn't surprise her. Gabrielle started to put the sword back, then she hesitated and left it out on the top of the chest as she went back to get everything else ready.

"Mama, ready." Dori came out with her own little bag, that had a small collection of her rocks, and her Boo doll in it. "We c'n go now? Gotta go to Boo."

Her little face was serious and it made Gabrielle smile. "In a little while, Dor. I want to go too. We're going to have to climb down the mountain, wont' that be fun?"

"Go with Boo?" Dori cocked her small head. "Up the moutain?"

The trail they would take Gabrielle knew Dori knew well. It was one of the places her partner took their daughter flying in the morning, on the edge of the cliff they made their home on. "Yes. You can show me the place with the birds, okay?"

"Okay." Dori put her bag down and went to the door. "Mama c'n I go see my friends?"

Gabrielle glanced out the window, judging the light. "Yes you can, honey. You can go play, but stay near the middle, okay? So I can see you when it's time for us to go find Boo."

"Okay!" Dori disappeared in a flash, bolting across the grass towards the group of Amazon children playing ball in distance.

Gabrielle smiled, then she went back to her task, a little pensive. Dori would miss her friends, both here and in the town, and she felt a little sad taking her away from the kids she'd learned to play with.

Ah well.

The knock on the door didn't really surprise her. "C'mon in." She got the last of the laces tied up and straightened as Renas and three other of the elders entered. They looked upset, and angry, and the bard felt her body responding to that.

She stood a little taller, moving over her center of gravity as she glanced towards the corner where her staff was leaning. "What can I do for you? I'm a little busy right now."

"So you intend on running off and leaving us to the Spartans?" The elder next to Renas asked sharply.

Renas twitched a little and made a gesture.

"You shut up, Renas. No one asked you to come with us." The elder said. "You talk the talk, but it's time to walk the walk now, beat it."

Gabrielle felt a cold chill, then a flush work it's way over her skin. She curled her hands slightly and stepped forward, recognizing the elders in the room as those who had always borne that grudge.

Supported Velaska. Supported Arella.

Never really cottoned to this awkward shepherd's kid getting Terrais' right.

Well. "What's this all about." Gabrielle said. "I don't own an explanation for my decisions, but that one was made with the best interests of everyone in mind."

"If you leave, they'll destroy this place." The elder said. "Whose best interests? Yours, I guess, as usual."

Gabrielle felt that part of her that was part of Xena stirring. She could picture the bristling of her soulmate's hackles, and her own eyes narrowed, sensing the slow rush of anger building inside.

"Mara, don't be so.. " Renas said. "Look, Gabrielle, you've got a responsibility for this place. Now that you talked Ephiny into moving us here, you can't just let us get ripped apart."

Gabrielle leaned back against her work table, forcing herself to remain calm. "I don't actually owe you anything." She said. "But if any of you had any brains at all, you'd understand that my going to the Spartans or escaping has nothing to do with what'll happen to this place, and the town."

“B..”

“The town where my family lives.” Gabrielle rode over the interruption. “Where my brothers, and sisters, and the woman I call mother live, where my partner grew up and the place she considers the home of her heart.”

“Gabrielle.”

“Shut. Up.” The bard said. “Why don't you take your mindless gripes and go somewhere else with them. I've got work to do.”

“Then you're going to answer to us first.” Mara put her hand on her sword hilt. “I'm tired of having a queen who's no Amazon, and doesn't give a damn about us.”

Gabrielle stared at her. “Are you challenging me?”

“Yes.” Mara said. “I think its high time you stop hiding behind that soulless whore you sleep with and put up, or shut up yourself.”

Xena had known. Gabrielle took a slow, even breath. Xena had known, had sensed this, and had surrounded her with friends, and people and... “ Her eyes caught a glint of light against the surface of the trunk.

Had she even thought that far? Could she have known this was brewing, and not said anything?

No. Gabrielle decided after a bare seconds thought. If she'd have known this, she'd have never left. That was just where the sword had landed, when they'd moved their stuff up the mountain.

But now it was here. She rubbed her fingertips lightly together.

“Well?” Mara said. “Let's get this over with so we can decide for ourselves what to do and not have to worry about you screwing us over.”

Gabrielle slowly looked at all of them. “This what you wanted, Renas?” She asked the eldest of them. “I thought you liked Xena.”

The elder flushed. “It's not about her.” She muttered. “It's about who we are.”

“I see.” The bard straightened and dusted her hands off. She could see the smirks in their eyes, and now, she understood the resentment that ran just under their skin. “All right.”

She walked over to where the sword was resting and picked it up, slinging it over her back and buckling the finely made, supple leather harness across her shoulder and around her waist.

It fit perfectly.

Of course. She looked up at the group and saw the hint of surprise there, just a flinch, and a jerk of the head as they watched her. She reached up and drew the blade from the scabbard in a smooth move she'd seen Xena do countless times, and glanced at them across the extended metal. “Outside.”

Mara stared warily at her. “You accept?”

“Thought you didn't use a sword.” One of the other elders said.

“Listen, Gabrielle. You can just walk away and forfeit.” Renas said. “No one has to get hurt.”

Gabrielle merely smiled, and indicated the doorway with the point of the blade. Then she twisted her hand, and twirled the hilt in her palm, catching it again before she resheathed it. “I said, outside. I don't have time to mess with you people.”

She waited for them to back out, then she followed them, advancing until they were clear of the

trees and into the open. Amazons moving across the ground spotted them and halted, seeing the drawn blade.

“Hey!” Solari came running. “What in Artemis' left tit is going on here?”

Heads turned. “Amazons.” Gabrielle's voice rose over the central square, projecting across it without effort. “I have been challenged. Gather here to witness this.”

She could sense the emotion, puzzlement and outrage, Solari's face going bewildered to honestly angry in a blink of an eye.

“What?” Aailene came up behind Solari. “What's all this about? Mara, are you crazy?”

“Shut up!” Mara said. “You all talk, and no one's willing to do anything? Well I'm doing something! So join me or get lost!”

Gabrielle quickly scanned the group now surrounding them. “Aailene.” She turned her head and looked directly at the younger Amazon. “If anything happens to me, take Dori down to Cyrene.”

Aailene looked stunned and horrified. “B...”

“Take her to her family.” Gabrielle clarified. “Understand?”

Aailene stared at her, then she nodded. “I understand, my queen.” She answered quietly. “Surely that is her family as she has NONE HERE.” Her voice lifted on the last two words as she stared angrily at the elders.

They stared back at her, in silence.

Now a big enough group had gathered, and low murmurs were going around. “Lucky for you Cait's not here you old blowhard.” Aailene finally spoke up again. “She'd have your liver on the ground already Mara.”

Paladia came bolting up at that moment, her eyes nearly coming out of her head. “Now what the Hades is going on?” She asked Solari. “This place is nutsville today!”

“That moron is challenging Gabrielle. Go get Nala.” Solari urged. “This ain't ending good no matter what happens.”

“Ah, crap!” Paladia took one look at the sword on Gabrielle's back and for once, she just took off and didn't question anything.

Gabrielle turned and faced her opponent again. She made eye contact, and walked forward, stopping just out of blade reach. “Ready?”

“Mara, you're an idiot.” Solari said. “You all are, you old goats. Any idiot knows the damn Spartans are going after her, they don't give a crap about us. She goes, they go. “ The senior warrior stepped boldly between her queen and the challenger.

“Get out of the way, Solari. We know where you stand.” Mara said.

“Yeah. You do.” Solari stood a little taller. “Always have. I don't change sides like some around here every time a goat farts.”

The crowd stirred. “Watch your mouth, Solari.” Renas warned.

“Shut up, you old fraud.” Solari shot back. “You're not good enough to lick her boots.”

“Solari.” Gabrielle said, gently. “Thank you. But please get out of the way. I don't want you getting hurt.”

Solari turned and looked at her, seeing the faint smile, and the look of gratitude. Then she slowly

edged back again, with visible reluctance. "This aint' right." She said. "This ain't no time to be screwing around like this!"

Gabrielle drew the sword again, fitting her hands around the hilt and flexing them. "C'mon." She jerked her head at Mara. "You started this, now finish it." She watched the woman's body language with exquisite care as she stepped away from the safety of the other elders and approached.

They faced each other, and she waited until they were just paces apart, then let her eyes meet Mara's. "You really want to die, Mara?"

Mara licked her lips, and shifted. She was a big woman, almost Xena's height, with a burly build and powerful legs. "You really think you can take me, you little fraud?"

"Yes." Gabrielle replied. "Do you think you can take me, old woman?"

Mara's eyes narrowed.

The bard kept her eyes steady, and smiled just a little. "Either I'll kill you." She said. "Or Xena will." She said, in a mild voice. "You, and everyone else around you. There's no place in this world she won't chase you down to."

Mara stared at her, breathing a little more quickly. "Still trying to hide behind her?"

"Just telling you the truth."

The Amazon gripped her sword more firmly.

Gabrielle twirled the blade in her hand again. "You want me? Come get me." She curled the fingers of her free hand into a motioning gesture, and grinned. "Better hope she didn't teach me to do this as well as she taught me to do everything else."

For a moment, there was absolute silence. Even the rest of the elders were silent, the ones around Mara shifting a little, some of the others moving away a little. The younger Amazons were watching her intently, tense with anticipation.

Ready to fight for her, the bard suddenly realized. Not part of the rebellion.

Gabrielle's eyes never left her opponent. She got her balance ready, aware of the warm sunlight gilding her as it tilted down towards the trees. There was no time, really to be afraid, and less to be worried about the consequences.

She just hoped her partner's spirit would carry her through this. She was gambling everything she had at the moment and she motioned Mara forward again. "Now or never. I've got things to do."

Mara took a breath, then she stepped back. Her shoulders slumped, and she let the point of her sword touch the ground. "I withdraw the challenge." She muttered.

Huh? Gabrielle stared at her in disbelief, then slowly let her blade lift up and come to rest against her shoulder. "Good choice." She said, after a pause.

"Chickenshit." Solari stepped back in. "Always a big talker."

Nala raced up, with Paladia jogging after her. "Your majesty!" She pushed through the crowd. "Your poison finally got the better of you Mara? This is no time for crazy challenges."

Mara let the sword drop. Then she turned and walked away, shoving her way through the crowd and heading across the center square towards the furthest set of living quarters.

The rest of the elders who had come with her looked uneasy. Renas refused to meet Gabrielle's eyes.

"I'll take care of this." Nala said. "I can see some asses need kicking." She turned. "Sorry about that, Gabrielle. I heard these graybeards griping the last couple of days but didn't think they'd be this stupid about it."

"It's not stupid!" Renas finally spoke up. "We have valid complaints! Don't treat me like a child, Nala."

"Why not? You're acting like one." Gabrielle said. She sheathed her sword and flexed her now empty hands, giving her heart a chance to stop thundering. "I'll deal with you all when I get back here." She motioned to Solari. "C'mon. Let's get this show on the road."

"You got it." Solari followed her. "Boy I didn't see that coming." She added, under her breath.

"Me either." Gabrielle sighed, wishing her legs would stop shaking. She got through the door to her quarters and got to the chair, collapsing into it as Solari came in behind her. "Ungh"

Solari crossed over to her. "You okay?"

The bard rested her elbows on her knees and let her head drop against her fists. "The gods damn them." She said. "I can't believe they did that."

"Well." Solari sat down next to her. "They're old timers, you know? They keep long grudges."

Gabrielle lifted her head and regarded the dark haired Amazon.

"Yeah, I know. It's crazy." Solari admitted. "But hey, it worked out, right? She backed off. I think she thought you were going to cave, like be a creampuff or something."

A darkly humorous glint appeared in Gabrielle's eyes. "You think?"

Solari nodded. "She figured you'd hand over the title and take off. I know she didn't figure you to meet her with a sword." She paused thoughtfully. "Course I didn't either. That was pretty awesome."

"Mm."

"You been doing that long?" Solari asked, after a moments silence. "Swordfighting?"

Gabrielle pushed herself to her feet. She unbuckled the belt holding the sword on and removed it from her back. "About a quarter candlemark."

"Huh?"

The bard wrapped the belt around the scabbard and set it on top of her bags. "I can't use that any more than I could flap my arms and fly to Athens." She turned and put her hands on her hips. "Pretty cool bluff huh?"

Solari's jaw just dropped.

"Wait till Xe hears. She's gonna freak out.."

**

"Well, woman, you were right." The captain was holding onto the rail as the ship pitched side to side. He peered into the gloom, watching the hulk draw nearer as they eased through the towering waves.

"I usually am." Xena was standing right next to him. It was hard to make out in the rain, but she could make out an outline of a ship, half turned onto it's side, with it's mast collapsed into the water.

There was a hole in the bow, and she could see no people anywhere.

“Wasn't here when we were headed inbound.” The captain commented. “But looks like we were late to come to it. No one's survived.”

“They might be taking shelter. We are in the middle of a storm.” Xena remarked. “Got a horn on board? Blow it.”

“Wench.” The captain turned and motioned a sailor forward. “Ah , here comes some bad news.”

Xena glanced behind them and spotted Denius heading their way. “I'll handle him.” She waited for the man to close in on them then she turned and faced him. 'Problem?’

Denius had taken a breath, now he released it, grabbing the rail as the ship pitched. He stared over the rail, and looked at the shipwreck they were closing in on. “By the gods!”

Xena also turned. “Yours?”

Denius strained his eyes and shaded them from the rain. “Damned if I know.” He said. “Too destroyed.” He turned to her. “What is our profit from this, Xena? We all have to get to Athens. We've been half a day diverting.”

“Our profit?” Xena covered her ears, as the sailor let loose next to her on the horn and an off tone, blaring honk sounded through the storm. “Saving people's asses if there are any alive.”

“Is that a concern of yours?”

Xena looked at him.

“Cap'n!” The sailor bawled. “Lookie there, on the bridge!”

Xena turned back to the rail and spotted what the sailor was pointing at, a ragged figure hanging on to a piece of the broken mast, one arm weakly waving. As she watched, another figure appeared, then a third.

The third was an Amazon. Xena felt a smile crease her face, as she recognized Pony's distinctive figure. She stood a little taller at the rail, gazing at the forms until she saw Pony start, and point at her, then start waving frantically.

Xena waved back, her smile broadening as she watched Pony hop up and down, pumping her fist in the air. “Guess she's glad to see me.” She muttered under her breath. Then the Amazon disappeared, jumping off the top of the forecandle all the while waving her arms.

Obviously going to tell someone. Something.

Ah. The warrior's mood brightened instantly. Not only had she guessed right, not only had she found a shipwreck, not only had she found a shipwreck with survivors on it who deserved rescue, but she'd been right and found a shipwreck with survivors who also included the Amazons she was looking for.

Amazing.

Gabrielle would be so annoyed she'd missed it. She hated getting stories second hand, and even Xena had to admit this little voyage of hers was turning out to be very taleworthy.

“These seas, we can't close with her.” The captain commented. “Got any good ideas, wench?”

Xena was too cheered up to even be annoyed with him. “Get me a rope and a crossbow.” She directed. “We'll shoot a line over and bring em on one by one.”

“You heard the woman.” The captain nudged the sailor, who was standing there with his horn, gazing at Xena. “C'mon, you slug. Move your lazy bones.”

Now there were more people collecting on the bridge of the damaged ship. Xena counted at least

a score, and her face twitched, thinking of the crowding they'd have to suffer onboard their own ship.

She sighed, supposing just rescuing the two Amazons was out of the question.

"Poor bastards." Denius sighed. "We must help them, I fear. I will get my men to come on deck and assist." He left, shaking his head.

"Looks like they foundered on those rocks." The captain pointed. "Guess they didn't have the likes of you to haul em off em." He nudged Xena with his elbow. "Got more like you at home?"

"No." Xena shook her head. Then she paused. "Well, my kid." She amended.

"Hah." The captain chortled.

The sailor came back with the crossbow, handing it warily to Xena as he readied a coil of rope slung over his shoulder. "M'lady."

"Hah!" The captain chortled again. "Ain't no one's lady, you gull splat."

Xena examined the crossbow. She removed the bolt from the mechanism and fished in her belt pouch, pulling out a bit of gut from it and tying it to the end of the shaft. Then she took the end of the rope and tied the gut to it with a neat half hitch.

"Been with ropes before." The sailor noted.

"Oh yeah." The warrior murmured absently. "I do a mean hangman's noose too."

The captain laughed. He had his spyglass out and he was studying the other ship. "Hold her here, lads!" He called out. "Tell the oars to keep her aft, or we'll end up on the same rocks and lady Posiedon here's too busy to take the wheel."

"Dont' curse yourself." Xena raised the crossbow and put the stock against her cheek.

"Gonna blow your damned face off women. Take that down."

Xena ignored him, picking spot on the other ship that looked reasonably solid. She took a breath, then let it out, waiting for the ship to pitch to the side and steady before she squeezed the trigger mechanism.

It had a kick. But Xena's grip was up to the task, and she held it steady as the line played out. The bolt slammed into the ships mast, and she dropped the crossbow and turned to the sailor.

"Gonna do that swing trick again?" The sailor asked her. "Pretty crazy it was, the last time."

"No." Xena took the rope from him and went to a thick spar, tying the end of it firmly. "Keep the ship steady." She told the captain.

The captain was circling his arm and yanking it, ignoring her. He waved his hand again, then made the motion. "Stupid goats." He smacked the sailor. "Blow that damn thing. Look at those slags running like idiots."

Xena returned to the rail. "What's wrong?"

"Want em to tie off the damn thing, woman." The captain said. "Idiots!"

Finally the other ship seemed to get the idea and two men went to the crossbow shaft, reaching up to pull it out.

There seemed to be some kind of panic onboard, Xena realized. People were grabbing at the rail in some desperation, and she studied the ship carefully, wondering if it was sinking.

Then she realized it was. "Captain." She pointed at the waterline, which was bubbling heavily.

“Aye.” The man said. “Men, get ready to send the ropes down we’ll be pulling em out of the water in a minute.” He turned to Xena. “Better to let her go down, and we’ll save what we can from the water. Too rough to get closer.”

Xena studied the other ship, then she hopped up onto the rail and grabbed the rope. It had been tied off, and she gave it a hefty yank to make sure it was tied. “Be right back.”

“Woman!” The captain lunged for her. “Dont’ be daft!!!!”

Xena leaped out half twisting before she grabbed the rope, swinging herself up and locking her feet around the heavy hemp as it swung violently in the seas between the ships. She waited to make sure it was going to hold, then she started to pull herself along, heading headfirst towards the wrecked vessel.

It was hardly comfortable. The waves were rising up and lashing her, and the rain was hitting her from above and sideways. The rope swung and creaked as the ships moved apart and together, and she paused briefly as she reached half way.

She looked up, to see the clouds roiling and racing over head, and a low rumble of thunder shivered against her skin as lightning flashed.

Not so good. Deep in her guts, she suddenly felt a jolt of fear and she hung there as her body shivered from it, feeling her insides tense up in reaction to something she couldn’t see or touch.

Gabrielle.

And before she could take another breath, it was gone, replaced with an emotion of burning anger that flushed through her, then faded.

What the Hades was going on? Xena waited a moment more, then relaxed as the anger was replaced with a gentle warmth, confusing but real.

Another false alarm? Somehow, Xena didnt’ think so.

She continued, moving hand over hand up the slope towards the other ship, remembering too late how sore her shoulders were from the previous day. “Ow.” She grimaced. “Too late now.”

In another moment, she was passing over the railing of the other ship and she released the rope, somersaulting over the heads of the people rushing at her and landing on the slanted, moving deck.

Everyone was babbling, but in the storm and the chaos, she ignored them and focused on the familiar face now closing in on her. “Pony!”

Eponin let out a curse as long as Xena was tall and threw her arms around her, shocking the daylights out of both of them.

Xena recovered and returned the hug. “Eph okay?”

“Pissing mad.” Pony said. “Me too.” She got the words out. “Glad you’re here.”

Xena smiled and gave her a pat on the side. “C’mon. Ship’s sinking. We’ve got to get everyone outta here.”

“We know.” Pony started up the slanting deck, ignoring the people trying to grab both of them. “Okay to leave the rest of those Amazon bastards in the hold? That’s where I left em. I hope they drowned.”

Xena’s eyes popped wide open and she almost stopped short.

“Mother whores.” Pony said. “Tied us up and were going to sell us to the bastard Athenians. They can all die far as I’m concerned.”

“I heard they grabbed you.” Xena got herself back into motion. “Didn't make me happy.”

Pony snorted. She led the way towards the forecastle, the part of the ship that was highest out of the water, and as they cleared the mast and climbed up the slope a small group of people stood up to meet them.

Chief among them, Ephiny, who met Xena's eyes with a look of utter relief. She moved forward in the rain and gave the warrior a hug. “Damn am I glad to see you.”

Xena gave her a light rub on the back. “Likewise.” She released the regent and stepped back. “Glad you both are okay.”

“Now that we got that out of the way. What are you doing here?” Ephiny asked. “Are you doing here what I think you're doing here?”

“Gabrielle sent me.” Xena replied, simply.

Ephiny's face creased into a grimace. “She was that pissed?”

“She was that worried.” The warrior put a hand on her shoulder. “We found out a few things after you left.”

“See? Tolja.” Pony said. “Can we finish this stuff over on the other ship that ain't sinking?”

Ephiny raked her pale, wet curls out of her eyes. “Yeah. This is gonna take a while.” She glanced at Pony. “You tell her about the others?”

Pony nodded.

“You really want to leave them in the hold?” Xena asked.

“I really do.” Ephiny answered, looking her straight in the eye.

Wow. Xena considered, then she nodded in acquiescence. “Let's go.” She turned and started back towards the rope. “You up for crossing on the line?”

“I'm up for getting off this damn ship any way I can.” Ephiny was at her heels, with Pony right behind her.

They came around the mast and saw a crowd of people all fighting over the rope, pushing and shoving, with no one crossing on it.

“Looks like we need to kick some asses first.” Pony said. “Lemme at em.”

“Oh no, me first.”

Xena simply got out of their way, and picked up a discarded oar, thinking maybe there were a few details she'd leave out when she told Gabrielle what happened.

Yeah, maybe a few.

**

Continued in Part 17

A Queen's Tale

Part 17

Everything was in a rush to be ready to leave, but Gabrielle took a moment to sit down with Dori in her lap and have a cup of tea. “Did you say goodbye to your friends, Dor?” She appreciated the quiet around her quarters, having spotted the half dozen younger Amazons who were standing guard outside.

She was leaving the tribe in a state of uproar.

She hadn't really meant to. It had started off so innocently, just a minor change, a cooking class.. and here she was, having survived her first personal challenge getting ready to leave and cause chaos again.

Her first challenge. Gabrielle sipped her tea thoughtfully. She felt a little strange, thinking that. She'd once told Ephiny that she'd let Xena answer them all so long as the warrior was able to. Now that she'd done it for herself, did she still feel that way?

Xena had said she was more than capable of it, and she'd gotten very angry at her for that. She'd thought Xena was saying she didn't need her. Xena, on the other hand, had thought she was giving a compliment.

So now it seemed that Xena had been right all along. She was capable, and even if her challenger hadn't backed down, she'd have found a way to disarm her, to wrestle, to pick up a rock.. something, anything, because the truth was that Gabrielle had become a fighter after all.

In that respect, she was an Amazon.

But it was also true that if Xena had been there, Gabrielle would have deferred to her and she suspected that she would in the future. She was a fighter, it was true, but Xena was a master.

Heck, if Xena had been there, the old coot probably wouldn't have even looked cross eyed at her. Gabrielle lifted her cup in a wry toast to her partner, then bounced her daughter a little. "Well, did you?"

"Mama, I did." Dori said. "We had fun and we played horsies." She related. "But they said you go fghjfboom. You go boom?"

Gabrielle exhaled, and took a sip of her tea. "Well, not really, honey." She said. "I thought I was going to have to, but we talked instead, and decided to have fun. So no one had to go boom."

"They said you beated up ever'body." Dori told her. "I said go mama!"

The bard sighed. "It's always better to talk about things then go boom, Dor. Isn't that true? Isn't that what Boo told you?"

Dori looked up at her. "Mama, they said we won't find Boo."

Her mother's green eyes narrowed a little. "Who said that, sweetie?"

"Salty."

"Well, she doesn't know anything about it, does she? We always find Boo." Gabrielle reassured her. "They don't know about how mama and Boo find each other all the time."

"All the time." Dori nodded "I tolds them." She said. "But they said Boo ran away."

Gabrielle put her cup down and put her arms around Dori. "Dori, if there is one thing you know about Xena, it's that she never, ever, ever runs away from anything." She said. "Never ever. Boo went away because I asked her to go find our friends Ephiny and Pony."

"Did you want Boo to go?"

"Did they say I did?" Gabrielle watched her daughter nod, and came closer to becoming a short, somewhat ineffective berserker than she had in a long while. Then she counted under her breath, and forced her body to relax. "What do you think, Dor? You think I wanted Boo to go away?"

Dori shook her head emphatically. "Mama loves Boo."

"Well, you're right." She managed a smile. "I didn't. In fact, you and I almost went with Boo."

“We did?” Dori asked. “How come we didn’t?”

Because I’m an idiot. “That’s a good question, Dori. You know mama has to do things with our friends here, and because of that, I had to stay and you stayed with me. “ Gabrielle bounced her a little. “So now it’s time for you and me to go find Boo. Ready?”

“Yes!”

She’d had enough of the Amazon village for now. Gabrielle put Dori on her feet and drained her cup, setting it down on her work desk. She looked around, then shrugged her backpack onto her back and ruffled Dori’s hair. “Let’s go.”

The sword was strapped to her pack. Gabrielle had debated leaving it in her quarters, but she suspected she’d made an impression of some kind with it, and leaving it behind would leave questions along side the finely made weapon.

Worse came to worse, Xena could use it as a second sword if she needed one, in that two handed mesh of dangerous steel she’d seen her practice now and again.

They walked out and down the path. Gabrielle lifted her hand at the two guards on either side of the path to her quarters, giving them a smile as they respectfully saluted. “Keep your heads down.” She advised them. “We’ll see you guys when we get back.”

“My queen.” The one on the left said. “Have a good journey. Hope you find Xena soon.”

“Me too.” Gabrielle grinned.

“Me too!” Dori piped up.

Gabrielle took Dori’s hand and they crossed the big square, which was unusually quiet at this hour. There were only a few women around the dining hut and she was pretty much left alone as she neared the exit, and a small group gathered to join her.

It was a sort of lonely feeling. Gabrielle was aware, in a vague sort of way, that she’d crossed a line somewhere and she hadn’t figured out yet whether it was a good thing or a bad thing.

But Solari was waiting, with Nala, Aailene, and several others. “Ready?” Gabrielle asked.

“Ready.” Solari agreed. “Jess and the guys are waiting up by your place. Saw them head up a little bit ago.”

“Great.” Gabrielle said. “Bennu and his guys went with Cait and the horses. With any luck we’ll meet up with them just after sundown.” She turned to Nala. “You have all the party stuff ready here?”

Nala grimaced a little. “We’ll have some kind of party, but the mood’s kinda grim around here. Damned elders.”

Gabrielle patted her on the arm. “Just try to hold it together until we get back.” She said. “Between the two of us, Eph and I will figure something out.”

Nala nodded. “Do my best.” She said. “But I won’t lie and say I didn’t wish I was going with you.”

“Me too.” Aailene said.

“Me three.” Pasi, the third Amazon agreed. “They’re all in a funk, and all they’ll do is bitch at all of us. It’s so stupid. They’re just scared.”

“I know.” Gabrielle said. “Change is always hard. I’m sorry they don’t trust me to handle that, but when we get back, maybe we can all sit down and talk about it.”

“Maybe you could just knock them into the lake with your staff.” Mala muttered. “Probably be

more effective.”

And that, Gabrielle knew, was probably the truth. “Okay Solari, let’s go.” She turned and waved in the general direction of the rest of the tribe, then she and Solari started up the path to their cabin. Dori skipped along side them her small bag tied to her back, and her eyes scanning the bushes for any of her beloved bugs.

“Glad to be out of there.” Solari said. “Bunch of stuck up old geezers.”

Gabrielle smiled briefly. “I think it’s like Pasi just said. They’re afraid of losing the way they’ve always lived, and it scares them. It makes them mad.”

“Gabrielle.” Solari said. “That’s a centaur crap reason to throw a challenge at you when all this stuff’s going on. You know?”

“I know.” The bard admitted. “But the truth is, I wasn’t listening to them.” She climbed upwards. “They tried to talk to me about it.”

“That’s what Renas was saying.” Solari said.

“I wasn’t listening, because they kept saying the same thing over and over, no change, no change, no change.. and they couldn’t really tell me why.” Gabrielle went on. “Just that it was tradition. Well, in Potadeia the tradition is girls marry men who usually beat them, keep chickens and have kids.” She glanced at Solari. “I never was much for tradition.”

Solari smiled. “Big X ain’t either.”

“No.” Gabrielle smiled back. “Aside from the fact I fell in love with her at first sight, what intrigued me the most was that she did whatever she wanted to do and no one told her otherwise.”

“You did?”

“Did what?”

“Fall in love like that?”

“Gush.” Dori pattered after a butterfly.

Gabrielle chuckled. “Our biggest critic.” She indicated her daughter. “Yes, I did.” She answered the question. “Surprised the heck out of both of us.”

“I bet.” The Amazon said. “So, Xena too?”

“Yeah.” The bard smiled, remembering the moment Xena had admitted that to her, matter of fact and offhand as it was. She said she just didn’t see it at the time, and of course, neither had Gabrielle.

Or had she? Something sure had driven her from her home and family out into the wilderness chasing that grubby, wild figure.

Just like something had made Xena yank out that horse blanket and toss it to her instead of running her off home.

“Your heart knows, Solari.” She said. “Even if your mind doesn’t.”

“Huh.” Solari grunted. “That can be tough, though, you know?”

“Yeah.” Gabrielle agreed, with a slight sigh. “It sure can. Worth it though.”

They reached the cabin, and as they did, the forest dwellers came out all packed up and ready to go. Gabrielle saluted them with her staff, then she led the way past, heading on up the slope away

from the cabin.

The forest dwellers fell in behind her, and Jessan came up next to Gabrielle. "Nice night for a walk." He said. "Glad to be heading out?" He grinned at her, already knowing the answer.

"Sure am." Gabrielle took a deep breath of the summer air and tightened her grip on her staff, glad she'd chosen her old traveling clothes for the trip. The sun was warm on them, and she felt comfortable in the cropped top and wraparound skirt.

"Me too. This place was getting weirder than usual." Jessan said. "I thought I heard some stuff about you having a fight down there or something?"

Solari snorted. "Some pigheaded oldsters decided they didn't like her Maj's style. Didn't work out too well for them."

"Wow." Jessan frowned. "That's not cool."

"It was though. Gabrielle pulled out that sword she's got there and told em she was gonna cut their heads off, and they all skanked." The Amazon related. "Bunch of chickenshits."

Jessan eyed the sword strapped to Gabrielle's pack, then gave her a look. "Wow. Didn't know you took that up."

"I didn't." Gabrielle admitted. "It was a scam."

Jessan's jaw dropped a little, and Solari chuckled under her breath. "Yeah, I couldn't believe it either." The Amazon said. "Had me convinced."

"C'mon people. I'm a bard." Gabrielle said, after a moment's long silence. "Give me a break, will you? I spent half my time making stuff up. You think faking out a bunch of pissed of Amazons was really that hard?"

"You sure fooled me." Solari admitted. "Especially that twirl move. That was Xena all over."

"Please." The bard shook her head. "You've heard me... how many times? In stories? When I act like one of the people I'm describing, or change my voice?"

"Well, sure." Jessan said.

"I'm usually imitating someone I've seen maybe... once." Gabrielle said. "For a couple candlemarks." She added. "So believe me, imitating Xena is not a problem." She turned and walked backwards, changing her posture and tilting her head in a very familiar way. "You don't want to make me mad, do ya?"

Solari clapped her hand over her mouth.

Gabrielle produced a reasonable facsimile of her partner's sexy grin. Her voice had dropped almost an octave, and carried Xena's intonation perfectly. "I've seen her take that sword out and twirl it so many times I can imitate it in my sleep."

"Wow." Jessan laughed. "I've never seen you do that before."

"Xe gets embarrassed." Gabrielle turned back around and rejoined them. "Because I think all the stuff she does is cute, especially the faces and she thinks it's stupid. So I don't usually do that unless I'm messing with her a little when we're alone."

"What were you gonna do if she didn't back down?" Solari asked after a moment.

Gabrielle shrugged slightly. "Channel Xena, and hope for the best." She admitted. "After all, even though I can't use that sword, I can fight."

"That's for sure." Jessan agreed. "You had a great teacher."

“I have the best teacher.” Gabrielle gently corrected him. “Every day I learn something new from her.”

They walked along the ridge, passing through thinning trees and brush as the sun tilted towards the horizon. It was quiet up on the mountain. There wasn't much wind, just a gentle breeze, and it rustled the leaves faintly as they moved through the short scrubby grass.

“It's nice here.” Jessan remarked.

“It is.” Gabrielle glanced to the right, where a thicket of bushes hid the narrow path up to a small flat space and an old apple tree. She stifled a smile, and turned, taking the path upwards. It was only a few minutes out of their way, and she had an urge for an apple.

The group followed her without question, Dori bouncing up the path as she warbled about all the things she was seeing. “Mama, see that birdie?”

“I see it honey.” Gabrielle ducked a branch and they emerged onto the plateau. “Let's see if we can see what we're getting into.”

“Wow, great view.” Jessan went immediately to the edge, and scanned the horizon. “You can see to the pass from here.” His three companions joined him, as did Solari.

Gabrielle detoured to the tree, and patted its trunk affectionately. “Hello old friend.”

Dori pattered over. “Mama.” She pointed. “Dere's happles.”

The bard tilted her head and looked up. “So there are.” She agreed. “You want an apple, Dor?”

“Yes!”

Gabrielle put her hands on the lower limbs and boosted herself up into the tree, carefully climbing up to where the canopy was, resting her elbow on the almost circular bole at the top where once upon a time she'd lain with Xena.

On that magical, magical night.

“We should try that again when Xe gets back.” The bard decided, before she reached up and gently picked two of the apples, bringing them down to her nose to sniff them. “Mm.”

They had the same rich, sweet smell she remembered. She cradled them against her chest and made her way down, jumping lightly to the earth just as the rest of the party wandered over to join them. “Here you go, Dor.” She handed her daughter one of the apples.

“Save some for Gogo?” Dori asked hopefully.

“No, honey.” Gabrielle buffed the fruit she'd kept against her skirt. “Argo's not coming with us this time. She's staying home and keeping Grandma company. Isn't that nice of her? We can bring her one when we get back.”

“Okay.” Dori started munching. “Mm.”

“She's so cute.” Jessan chuckled. “Got any more where those came from?”

“Hmm.” Gabrielle turned and looked up at the tree. “You're more than welcome to go pick one.” She said. “But I should warn you this is the tree Xe and I slept in the night I'm pretty sure resulted in her.” She indicated Dori. “And we shared one of the apples.”

Everyone edged away from the tree as if by common accord. Gabrielle took a bite of her apple, and winked at them. “No, huh?”

**

Xena batted away a last, reeling sailor and got up against the rail, feeling the ship lurch under her as a wave of salt water can washing over the deck, sending the frantic people on it sprawling. "Over here." She motioned Pony and Ephiny towards her.

"They're gonna leave us! Jump in the water!" One man screamed, rushing past her to the rail. "Make them stop!"

"Idiots! Stop!" The captain was limping over. "Get in line! Get in lie before you all die!"

"Stop those women!"

Xena grabbed Pony and boosted her up to the rope. "Grab."

Pony needed neither urging or explanation. Roping through trees was second nature, and she got her legs locked around the creaking strand and pulled herself up and over the waves to make room.

Ephiny was next. Xena was a little gentler with her, but the Amazon regent caught the rope competently and swarmed forward. "Move it, Pon!"

Both started to cross towards the other ship. Seeing them, the crowd on the sinking one realized their one avenue of escape, and they all bolted towards Xena, standing alone at the rail.

Xena's eyes widened a little, and she took a step then leaped for the rope herself, getting clear of the grasping hands by a bare second. She swung over the sea, her legs dangling, as she watched the crowd start to climb on the rail to reach the lifeline and hand over handed herself further out of their reach before she swung her legs up and got them crossed.

"Hurry!" She called over the roar of the waves. "All those bodies get on this thing, we're going in the water.!"

"Gotcha!" Ephiny was moving up the line in a lithe, powerful motion, following her partner. "Never a dull moment, huh Xena?"

"Never." Xena could feel the strain in the line as more people climbed onto it. She peeked over at the ship, and saw bodies falling over the rail, splashing into the ocean and others hanging from their hands unable to pull themselves up to cross.

She could, of course, have stayed to help. But Xena had felt no urge to, sure that if she had, the people onboard would have run right over her, and stood on top of her to get to the line. There was no reason in them right now and she felt that she'd done her part in finding the damn thing and shooting the rescue rope to them.

Would Gabrielle have agreed? Or would she have wanted to stay and be the last across after saving as many as possible?

She might have. But Xena decided she would have wanted Xena to get clear and not risk being left behind.

They swung through the air, as the ships pitched and rolled and she tipped her head back, watching Pony grimly hanging on, moving forward despite the motion. On the ship side, there were sailors and others waiting and Xena could see the captain there, yelling something.

Probably calling her names. She grinned briefly.

Pony reached the rail and crossed over the deck, unlocking her feet and letting her body hang briefly before she let go and landed hard, going to her knees against the wood. She yelled something to Ephiny, who nodded as she got over the rail herself.

Xena didn't wait. She released her leg hold and dangled over the waves, turning with her hands to face the ship. She picked a spot and arced her body forward, releasing the rope as she tumbled

through the air.

The ocean flashed under her, then the warmth of wood and upraised faces. She twisted in mid air to get her feet under her and landed bent legged, turning and reaching up as Ephiny let go and catching her on the way down.

There was yelling around them, and she hustled both Amazons over to the mast and away from the chaos where they stood catching their breaths, and watching the others try to cross to safety.

In the end, they saved a score of people, the last two coming over two of the other Amazons, bedraggled and half drowned as they dropped off the line and fell heavily to the deck, grabbed at once by Regi and Auhalia, who were almost frantic.

A loud crack sounded, echoing over the waves and through the storm with ominous depth.

Everyone rushed to the rail and froze, as lightning flashed overhead and the foundered vessel creaked and shifted, its bow plunging under the waves.

“Heave to!” The captain yelled. “Cut the line! Cut the line!”

Xena saw the ship going under, and she whirled from her spot and leaped as she drew her sword, slicing through the line as their ship started to creak and pull in the sinking vessels direction. The rope parted with a snap, sending a spray of water outward as it slithered downward.

The captain filled the sails immediately, tacking the ship away from the swirling water and away from the wreck, the seas washing over his decks and making even the thought of looking for survivors in the water impossible. “Hang on you lot!” He bellowed. “We’ve got seas coming up big time!”

Everyone scrambled for the hold and the forecastle. Xena grabbed Pony and Ephiny and herded them towards the hatch to the cabins, getting them through it just as the ship lurched and rolled into the waves.

“Ugh.” Ephiny grimaced. “I think I’d rather go back to having morning sickness.”

Xena pointed at the door. “In there. It’s small, but I’ve got some herbs’ll help ya.”

They got themselves into Xena’s cabin and braced against the bunk and the wall, as the waves pounded the hull outside.

For a moment, they were all silent. Three drenched and battered women unexpectedly in each other’s company again.

Xena snagged a mug hanging on a hook and fished out her healer’s kit. “You two okay?” She asked finally.

Ephiny looked up at her, the blond woman’s face exhausted. “Where in Hades do I start?”

Pony braced herself against the wall with her boots and closed her eyes. “Tell her about how ya wanted to find out why this traveling crap appeals to Gabrielle.”

Xena chuckled briefly. “Yeah I know she says that.” She handed Ephiny the mug. “Here. It’ll help with the motion.” She eyed Pony. “You need some?”

“Nah.” Pony waved a hand at her.

“Xena, this traveling crap is a nightmare.” Ephiny drained the cup. “Thanks.” She paused. “We caught up with that pack of bitches halfway to Thera.”

“I heard.”

Ephiny looked up. “You did?”

The warrior nodded. She sat down on the bunk and extended her long legs out. "Couple of them got stuck in jail there. I picked em up and heard their story about meeting you."

"That's a whole nother story." Pony put her arm over her eyes. "Swear to Artemis those women nearly made me give up being an Amazon."

"Were they on deck up there? I thought those two looked familiar." Ephiny said. "Those two idiots started the whole brawl on the dockside. Some kids from the city were making comments about women fighting and they took off after them and killed three."

Xena shook her head.

"Idiots." Pony had her eyes closed. "We tried to stop them."

"I would have too." Xena pointed at the basket. "Got some grub in there if you want. Some light wine too. Probably all right for you Eph."

The regent rested her head against the dresser and regarded Xena. "After what I've been through in the past few days I'll risk it." She asked. "Xena those jackasses jumped us and tied us up. Dragged us onboard, and had them throw us in the hold, said they'd sell us to Athens for attacking them."

Pony was rummaging in the basket. She drew out a fold of travel bread with some smoked meat in it and handed it to her partner. "Here. "

"So I guess they didn't listen to you." The warrior smiled briefly. "I heard they had you tied up. How'd you get loose?"

"The ship crashed." Pony took a swig from the wineskin and passed it to Ephiny. "I don't think those guys knew how to steer it or something. One minute we were down in the hold with the donkeys the next there was a hole in the damn thing and water was gushing everywhere. "

"We lucked out." Ephiny said. "The hold we were in was close to the hatch to the deck. The rest of those assholes were all the way on the other side of the boat, far away from us as they could get."

"We got up on deck and it was just crap." Pony took up the tale. "We knew were in trouble. That tub was leaking like a old duck."

"So we were out there for a day." Ephiny said. "Then another storm was coming, and the captain figured that was it. He knew it would sink. We figured..." She glanced at Pony and fell silent for a moment. "You know, I finally understand now what Gabrielle said once about not caring what scrapes she got into as long as you were there with her."

They were all quiet for a minute. "Yeah." Xena finally said. "Makes a difference, having friends.. or your family with you when things like that happen."

"Still sucked." Pony said. "We were up on the high part of the ship when it was heading into the water, and it was like..." She fell silent in turn. "Anyway, one of the sailors all of a sudden got up and staggered to the rail to toss his guts up and saw this thing heading for us. "

"Mm." Ephiny said. "So Pony went to see what he was yelling about and then she came back and told me there was a ship coming to rescue us, and you were on it." She paused, and met Xena's eye with a wry look. "And in my head, you know – I said 'well, of course.'"

"Of course?"

"Of course. If there was a ship coming to rescue us you'd be there." Ephiny clarified.

That didn't make much sense to Xena, but she merely nodded. "We had the storm hit us a day back, almost went onto the rocks ourselves." She related. "We made it through, but after it got

lighter I saw something on the horizon and bullied the captain into coming to check it out.”

“Did you know it was a shipwreck?” Ephiny asked, curiously.

Xena was silent for a moment. “Thought it might be.” She admitted.

“Did you know it was ours?” Pony spoke up.

Again, the warrior was momentarily silent. “Thought it might be.” She repeated. “Just had a gut feeling about it.”

Ephiny leaned forward and put her hand on Xena’s knee. “The gods bless you and your gut feelings.” She said, in a serious tone. “I know it wasn’t easy for Gabrielle to send you. I know how precious you are to her, Xena. I’m sorry I put her in that place.”

Xena blinked a few times at this unexpectedly sensitive chat.

“Yeah. Thanks.” Pony nodded. “Next time I’ll know better and just tie her up if she’s got dumb ideas like that again.” She indicated the regent. “Because let me tell ya, this wasn’t no fun.”

“No, it wasn’t.” Ephiny sighed. “And it was a waste of time. They weren’t having any of what I was pitching.”

Xena felt the exhaustion creeping back, now that the rescue was done, and they were once again on their way. “You haven’t heard the worst of it.” She said. “You want to?”

Pony snorted.

“Gods.” Ephiny covered her eyes.

“We got a visit from the Spartans.” Xena went on anyway. “And Iolaus is here, on the boat. He told me the gods are involved. Some bet or something between Artemis and Athena, and the Amazons are being recruited to piss Artemis off.”

Now it was the Amazons turn to blink several times.

“So they are recruiting Amazons, and they are going in the front lines, and they are going to be sacrificed, because Athena thinks it will distract her sister and let her win the bet.” Xena plowed on. “Did I mention they also convinced both armies they needed a woman to lead them? Sparta offered me a nice deal.”

“Iolaus.. that’s Hercules friend.” Pony said.

Xena nodded.

“Is he involved too?” Ephiny apparently decided to divert from the whole Amazon question for the time being. “Hercules, I mean?”

Xena nodded again. “He’s in Olympus, trying to convince his family to stop the war.”

“Good luck with that.” Pony grunted.

“He wanted Iolaus to pose as a woman and take over the Athenian army.”

There was absolute silence after that comment. The creaking of the ship around them suddenly sounded loud as they all just sat and looked at each other. Then Ephiny slowly reached up and stuck a finger in one ear, wiggling it around and shaking her head.

“Yeah.” Xena commiserated. “And my partner’s not even here for us to blame.” She sighed. “But I’m damned glad I found you.”

“Us too.” Ephiny smiled. “This is the first time I’ve been able to relax in a sevenday.”

“Ungh.” Pony had her head resting against the wall. “Mind if I sleep on your floor, champ?”

Ephiny glanced around. “We probably could find some space somewhere else.” She said. “Not much in here.”

“Nah.” Xena shook her head. “There’s not much space on this tub, and those other Amazons got into some trouble belowdecks. You’re safer here.” She said. “We can get some hammocks rigged up once the storm dies down.”

Pony didn’t hesitate. She curled up in a ball and tucked her arm under her head, the exhaustion showing plainly on her face. Her eyes met Xena’s after a slight hesitation. “Glad you’re here too.” She then firmly closed her eyelids.

Xena smiled briefly in response, understanding the unspoken words behind the words.. “We might as well get some rest until this is over.” She indicated the pitching of the ship. “Chances are the deck’s not a good place to be anyway.”

“Sounds good to me.” Ephiny leaned back against the wall and extended her legs.

“Here.” Xena tossed her the lone pillow from her bunk. She dropped one of her saddlebags into it’s place and lay down in the bunk, pausing only to unclip her sword and lay it down next to her hand. She felt her body relax, and her mind did also, as she sorted out what had happened in the last little while.

It was dim in the cabin, and she could hear rain lashing the boat outside. She could also hear the breathing of the two women she’d rescued, and there in the gloom, unseen by them she smiled to herself.

Gabrielle, you got what you asked for. She silently informed her soulmate. I found them. I found them, and I rescued them for you. Piece of cake.

She knew the bard would be proud as well as happy. She could imagine the grin on Gabrielle’s face when she saw them and her muted frustration at missing it all.

She could imagine the warmth as Gabrielle leaned against her, and gave her that look of fond affection. The pat on the side and the kiss and as she lay there, the desire for that intensified.

It made her feel good inside. She’d done far more impressive things, of course. But it wasn’t often that Gabrielle asked her to do something specifically for her and she was glad this time had turned out pretty good after all.

The ship creaked and shifted. Now she just had to keep them in one piece getting to Athens, then do the same on the way back.

With any luck, in two sevendays they’d be back home, and their lives could go on. Surely by then the war would be on, and everyone’s attention would be far away.

Xena closed her eyes, glad to surrender at last to rest after the trials of the past two days. The rumble of thunder outside almost seemed comforting, and she imagined for a moment that she was home in their cabin, listening to storm in the mountains, safe and secure.

It had, in fact, turned out to be a pretty damn good day.

At least, for her.

**

Gabrielle perched on a rock, taking a sip from her waterskin. It was dark, and they’d stopped by the edge of a small waterfall on their way down the steep track that lead eventually to the river and the road beyond it.

They were well away from Amphipolis. The track she was leading them on would skirt the outer boundary of Potadeia and end up at the small ford they'd need to cross before they hit the road and bolted for the pass.

Getting through the pass was her goal for the night. Once past that, they could hole up either in some caves she knew the location of or in one of the small towns that bordered the road.

Same ones Xena had probably stopped at, matter of fact.

It had been a long day though, and she was tired. The moon was high overhead, and it was quiet, the soft night sounds fading away around them as they moved, then flooding in again behind them. Dori was sitting on the ground next to her, for once seeming out of energy.

"Gabrielle?" Solari came out of the darkness. "We're filling the skins, want yours?"

"Sure." Gabrielle handed it over. "Thanks."

Jessan wandered over. "You think they're buying it?"

"If the Amazons did what they were supposed to, sure." Gabrielle said.

"You think maybe they didn't?"

The bard flexed her hands. "We'll find out when we hit the ford." She said. "If there's an army there waiting for us, then we'll know."

Jessan sat down next to her. "You really think they'd squeal on you like that?" He asked. "Aren't they supposed to be like, your family or something?"

Or something. "It's complicated." Gabrielle admitted. "I got my title with them on a freak chance. The right holder got caught in a fight and I threw my body over hers... she gave me the right as she died. I had no idea what the heck was going on."

"Oooh."

"Literally, no clue." Gabrielle said. "All I saw was this person in danger and I didn't think about

"So then Melosa, the queen, challenged me for it, and Xena naturally accepted in my place... Xena had a sort of mixed history with the Amazons."

"Ah."

"So from the tribe's view, I sort of got sideways into it without really earning the title." Gabrielle continued. "Though I've always met the challenges... well, Xena's met the challenges, there's still a big bunch of them who think I'm a fraud."

"Gabrielle, you aren't any fraud." Jessan shook his head. "You're a good leader."

The bard gave him a smile. "I'm not bad, now." She agreed. "I've learned a lot and grown up a lot in the last couple years. But to add insult to injury, I forced Xena on them as my consort, and then uprooted them from where they'd lived a long time and brought them up here. They still don't view me as a true Amazon.. in fact, I think a lot of them really think Xena's more a tribe member than I am."

"They like her?"

Gabrielle laughed shortly, as she stood up and took her staff from its leaning position against the rock. "They hate her, they love her... they're scared of her... it's a mixed bag. The fact is though, she keeps putting it on the line for them so there's not a lot they can do about it."

"Huh."

“Here you go, your Maj.” Solari came back over and handed her the skin. “Nice water. Sweet.”

“Let’s go, Dor. We have to keep on going, okay?” Gabrielle tousled Dori’s hair. “We’re going to meet our friends, then we can get on some horsies.”

“Okay.” Dori got up. “Mama, I’m tired.”

“I know honey.” Gabrielle said. “I know you can’t just walk all night like Boo can, but do the best you can, and we’ll help you after that.”

“Okay.” Dori trotted over to where the rest of the forest dwellers were getting ready to start moving.

“I can carry her.” Jessan offered. “Want me to?”

Gabrielle peered ahead of them. “Once we get past this steep part.” She said. “That would be great. Thanks Jess. She’s gotten too big for me to carry around a lot.” She watched her daughter fondly. “Xe can still handle her though.”

“I bet.” Jessan walked alongside her as they started down the slope. “She still go flying with her in the morning?”

“Every day.” Gabrielle smiled, recalling Dori’s burbling excitement every time she came back with her buddy, and had been treated to some new trick of Xena’s. She knew, of course that the day would come when Dori would outgrow her partner’s ability to carry her but Xena seemed to be determined to postpone that day as long as possible.

Good for her. The bard caught up to the rest of the forest dwellers and Solari, and recaptured Dori’s hand. “Hang on, guys. It gets steep here.”

“Steep like that thing you led us down with the horses?” Solari queried warily.

“Not that bad.” Gabrielle took a firmer grip on her staff and edged into the lead. “Just hold on to the trees on the way down. That’s what Xe and I did the last time. “

The last time. Gabrielle thought about the last time they’d come that way, a short visit to Potadeia when they’d gotten word Gabrielle’s mother wasn’t feeling well. Xena had tired of all the questioning of their coming and going down in town, so they’d gotten Ephiny to watch Dori, and slipped away by themselves for the short journey.

At least, that was the excuse they gave. Gabrielle smiled, remembering them scuffling down this very path, hand in hand, stopping to bathe in the waterfall and make love among the trees, alone save the goggle eyed squirrels and a goat they nearly scared into losing it’s bleat.

She remembered laughing so long and so hard after that her stomach hurt, the two of them splashing in the cool spray and ending up sprawled in the leaf shaded sunlight for a late afternoon nap as they dried.

No real reason for them to take the hidden path other than that, a brief escape into solitude right in the middle of their part of civilization.

She had a certain fondness for the route, she had to admit.

It was steep though, and they made their way down carefully, moving from tree to tree in the darkness.

An owl hooted overhead, and Dori looked up at it. “Mama! A owl!”

“I see him Dor.” Gabrielle had a grip on the back of the child’s tunic and was bracing her weight against her staff. “Is that the owl from near our house? The one who sits outside your window?”

Dori blinked up at the tree. “No.” She said. “It’s a little owl. A buppit.”

“Okay, we can look for the other owl in a minute. Stay here by me and hold on to my staff.”

Dori clutched the smooth surface as they worked their way down. “Boom.” She patted the staff. “Mama go boom all the time.”

“Oh, not all the time.” Gabrielle grimaced as she felt her boots slip a little. “Watch it – it’s muddy here.”

“Whooyah.” Jessan nearly ended up on his butt. “Sure is!”

“Hey your Maj?” Solari eased her way down the slope. “I know we’re doing this to keep hidden, but you’ve used this way before right?”

“Sure.” Gabrielle grunted.

“Why?”

The bard got her staff grounded and skidded the last bit into the flatter area of the path. “You mean, why do I do this the hard way? Stay close here, Dori. Don’t go over past that rock.”

“Okay.” Dori spotted a lizard, and veered over towards it. “Mama! Izzard!”

“Yeah, sorta.” Solari looked relieved as she reached the easier going. “I mean, the way up to our place is steep enough. This is nuts.”

“Xe uses this as a training run.” Gabrielle paused to take a breath. “She likes to keep things fresh.”

“Ugh. Yeah, okay.”

The bard silently chuckled. “Anyway, it’s flatter from here. We need to just keep going. We’re already down past the midway point to Potadeia. Another candlemark or two, and we’ll be at the ford.”

Jessan hoisted Dori up onto his shoulders and they continued on the darkness.

Gabrielle found herself in the lead, and she fell into a comfortable pace, glad of the night breeze cooling her skin. She let the sounds of the forest surround her, and picked out the ones she knew with a sense of comforting familiarity.

Foxes, to the left. She could hear them sneezing, and briefly was glad she hadn’t brought Ares along since he loved to tear off into the trees hunting them. There were frogs out, with their ribbity singing, and the low hoots of owls accompanied them as they made their way down.

Every step brought them further from the Spartans, but in her heart, every step also brought her closer to her soulmate and that thought lightened her mood regardless.

She was already thinking ahead to the journey, for once glad they’d taken horses to speed their way. A daytime rest in one of the villages near the pass, then they’d head on towards Thera, warning everyone along the way about the advancing Spartans.

What would Amphipolis do, behind them? The thought made her grimace a little, thinking about the friends and family she’d left behind.

Had there been a choice? She wondered if the Spartans would trash the town, or if her warning not to would make them stop and think. It was a big risk and she knew it, but she also knew her choices had been very limited.

She’d given Cyrene two options, and they’d staged the militia the best they could. The villagers could escape to the forest dweller valley, or they could go up the slope to the Amazons. Privately, Gabrielle considered the valley the best option but there were a lot of stubborn people in that town, who might well decide to go nowhere at all.

She wished she knew what was going to happen.

“Gabrielle.” Solari caught up to her. “Smell that?”

Gabrielle wrenched her thoughts out of her conscience and took in a breath, opening her mouth a little to draw air in both ways. “Smoke.”

“Wood smoke.” Solari agreed. “Want me to scout ahead?”

Gabrielle thought about the path. It was a very narrow one, winding through the trees with a creek on one side of it that eventually joined the river down at the bottom of the slope. There wasn't many places to stop and make camp, and not many people who would be wandering around in the scrub wanting to do so.

Casual travelers would have stopped in Potadeia, this side of the ridge.

“Go on, but be careful.” Gabrielle said. “Jess, can you send someone with Solari? To find out what that smoke is?”

“Sure.” Jessan indicated one of his russet companions. “G'wan Esan. Let's hope it's just a lightning strike or something.”

The forest dweller and Amazon disappeared into the darkness ahead of them. Gabrielle now shifted her grip on her staff, and dismissed her thoughts to concentrate on the here and now. People on the trail – probably weren't a positive development.

The group fell quiet, footsteps grew silent and cautious as the minutes lengthened and the scent grew stronger. Gabrielle's ears twitched and she listened for other unusual sounds. A wild fire would mean animals running from it, and she didn't hear that.

She could hear the creek running to her right and the leaves rustling overhead. The path was just visible in the moonlight, and she felt her heartbeat start to pick up as the silence otherwise lengthened.

Jessan fell a few paces behind, talking in a low mutter to his two other companions and leaving Gabrielle to take point alone.

Curiously, that made her a little uneasy, despite her earlier exasperation at the rest of the group preventing that. Maybe it was the dark, or the uncertainty, but Gabrielle suddenly felt a shiver come over her, and her guts tightened into a knot.

“Never easy, huh?”

Gabrielle very nearly jumped out of her skin. She looked around, then nearly bit her tongue as Ares faded into visibility at her side. “Urp.”

The God of War joined her, strolling easily along the path. He looked past her at the rest of the group. “You hang around with the weirdest people.”

“You included?” The bard kept her voice almost subvocal, suspecting Ares wasn't making himself visible to them. “We're kind of in a mess here.”

“No, really?” Ares clucked his tongue at her. “Tch tch.”

Gabrielle sighed, but another look at his face told her that she was being teased. “I thought you'd be enjoying the show back on Olympus.”

“Peh.” Ares grimaced. “That mess? Boring me to tears.” He eased past a tree. “Unfortunately, I can't interfere.” He added. “Daddy's orders. Gotta leave those two amateurs alone.”

“So.. you're here just to say hi?” Gabrielle asked. “Hm. Y'know, I was wondering earlier tonight what your take on this was.”

“I heard ya.”

The bard eyed him, feeling a little prickle of surprise in her guts. He heard her? Since when did Ares bother listening in to her? “You did, huh?” She asked. “What is their game, Ares? This whole thing doesn’t make a whole lot of sense.”

“Does it ever?” The God of War sounded atypically disgruntled. “Stupid pissy women.”

The scent of woodsmoke got stronger, and Gabrielle blinked a little as it stung her eyes. She took a better grip on her staff, and glanced behind her. Jessan and the rest of the forest dwellers were taking out their swords, watching her intently.

With a sigh she looked forward again. “You sound upset.”

Ares was silent for a few steps. “I’m not upset.” He said. “I’m pissed off.”

Middle of the night. Running from the Spartans. What a time to be having a sensitive chat with the God of War. “I don’t get it.” Gabrielle fished gently. “This war. this was your setup.” She said. “You laid the ground work for it... why are they even involved?”

“Exactly!” Ares started walking backwards, facing her. “You got it. My gig. I planned it, I got you and Xena to make it happen for me, I did everything.”

“You did.” Gabrielle agreed. She heard something coming up behind her, and turned her head to find Jessan closing in, Dori asleep on his shoulders.

“Gabrielle, who are you talking to?” Jessan asked, in a low voice.

“You really want to know?” The bard replied.

“No.” The forest dweller responded. “I’ll just stay back here with the kid and the fuzzies.” He dropped back hurriedly.

Ares chuckled briefly. “That one’s got some smarts.” He said. “Anyway, so after I set up all this brilliance, then I go and have that stupid thing happen.”

Gabrielle studied him. “In the valley.” She said. “When you died.”

His face twitched. “Don’t say it like that.” He grumbled. “It’s so mortalistic.”

Well, it had been. Ares had been mortal, Ares had been stabbed mortally by Xena’s sword, and Ares had died tied to the both of them as they’d pulled him up out of the valley they’d all been trapped in. “Okay.” Gabrielle said. “I don’t like thinking of that word the time Xena did, so I get it.”

“Yeah, well, they don’t.” Ares said. “They figured maybe they could take my place. Like they could do what I do better.”

“Ares.” Gabrielle said, in a sincere tone. “Nobody does what you do better than you do.”

The God of War stopped walking, and waited for her to catch up to him. He had his hands on his hips and there was the faintest smile on his face as she drew near. “I must be getting to you, Gabrielle.” He said. “That’s the nicest thing you ever said to me.”

Gabrielle stopped walking, since the alternative was plowing into him. “Its just the truth.” She remarked. “They shouldn’t be trying to be you. Don’t they have their own stuff to do?”

Ares turned and walked along side her as they continued down the path. “The prize they want is Xena.” He said, in an abruptly serious voice. “They know that’ll piss me off more than this piddly war.”

All of a sudden the shadows seemed deeper. “What do you mean, prize?” Gabrielle asked, slowly. “Xena doesn’t want any part of the war.”

“She’s already a part of the war.” Ares put his hand on her shoulder. “She’s heading for Athens. Once she’s there, they’ll take her. She’ll end up leading them cause she won’t have a choice.”

“There’s always a choice.” The bard said, softly. “Ares, you know that.”

“Yeah.” He said, after a long pause. “Artemis thinks she’s got you.” He added. “Featherheads, home town... no way you’d back out.”

“But I did.”

The God of War smiled. “Yeah.” He said. “So I figured I’d better drop in and clue you.”

Gabrielle felt another chill. “I thought you weren’t supposed to get involved.”

“I can’t get involved with her. Or with them.” He said. “No one ever said I couldn’t get involved with you.” He pointed ahead of them. “There’s a bunch of Athena’s agents down there. They’ve got orders to kill you.”

The bard felt a jolt of energy. “Kill me?”

“You’re caught between two of the biggest bitches I know, baby.” Ares said. “And they think they’ve got you two in the palm of their hands.”

Gabrielle paused, and looked at him. “What are we...” She paused. “What do you want us to do, Ares? How do we get out of this?”

Was it just her imagining, or was that really a twinkle in his eyes. “Stop the war.”

Gabrielle stared at him.

“Yeah, the irony kicked my godly ass too.” The God of War commiserated. “But do it, and that pair of losers gets a taste of what I’ve been through and baby, that’s what I want.” He chuckled her under the chin. “You do that for me, willya? Remember ya owe me one.”

Stop the war. The irony that had kicked Ares ass made Gabrielle almost dizzy. “Can you send us to where she is?”

Ares looked genuinely regretful. “Wish I could.”

Gabrielle nodded. “We’ll do the best we can, Ares.” She said. “What happens if one of them wins the war?”

They looked at each other for a long moment, as Ares hesitated. “I don’t know.” He finally said. “Maybe they’d take my place. Who knows? Daddy has a twisted sense of humor sometimes. He’s playing with my half brother right now, making him beg. You never know.”

“Hercules?”

“Yeah.” Ares pointed down the path. “Better get the fuzzballs moving. Those skanks down the hill are kicking ass on your scouts.”

Gabrielle reached out and grasped his hands. “Thanks for the warning.” She squeezed them.

He looked embarrassed. “Don’t get all girly on me.” He said. “You two are just.. ah... uh...”

“Friends.” Gabrielle looked him in the eye.

He fell silent and just stood there, his hands clasped in hers. Gabrielle heard a gasp behind her that meant he was probably visible now to the rest of them. “We’ll do our best.” She released him.

“Yeah, you do that.” Ares gave the forest dwellers a look, seeing the round, wide eyes. “Later.” He snapped his fingers and disappeared, leaving a silver mist behind him.

A yell broke the silence. "Let's go. There's an ambush down there." Gabrielle didn't stop to explain. She turned and started to run down the path, taking a better grip on her staff, putting aside everything to think about later.

If, of course, there was one.

**

Xena let her eyes blink open, finding expected darkness around her. The seas had settled, though, and she could hear only soft creaking and the wash of gentle waves against the hull outside. The motion had returned to the gentle rocking, and she felt a sense of relief in no longer hearing the howl of the wind.

However, that wasn't what had woken her up. She probed the powerful image that had, seeing clearly in her mind's eye Gabrielle's intense expression, and the urgency in the call she was certain she felt.

Come back. I need you.

Absolutely positive and very different from the vague sensations she'd been feeling since she'd left. This wasn't Gabrielle just living her daily life and getting into the usual things they often did. This was her partner consciously wanting to send her a message.

She was sure of it.

Rare. Xena studied the dimly seen ceiling of the cabin. The last time she remembered feeling anything that strong was in the war, in that pivotal moment when she'd sent a simple message in the opposite direction, a razor edge of timing that had quite simply won the day for them.

So.

It was almost a relief. Xena now considered the various sensations she'd felt the past couple of days and decided they were probably more than coincidence. There was something going on at home, and it was just now that Gabrielle had gotten to the point where she knew she had no other option but to give her partner a tug.

Wouldn't be trivial, to ask her to give up on her task, abandon their friends and the Amazons though certainly more trivial to Xena than to Gabrielle. The warrior was glad she'd already achieved her mission, and now she put her mind to thinking about how she was going to turn the ship around.

Force was an option of course. Xena counted her assets, that now included Ephiny and Pony. Would the other Amazons fight on her side? Would Iolaus, who was obviously very intent on getting to Athens to help his partner?

Hm. Xena rolled over onto her side and stretched her body out a little. I should have gone and talked to those damn other Amazons. She chastised herself. With the two they'd rescued, the whole picture could have changed in terms of how they'd deal with her.

They would want to get to Athens, probably. The patricians would, and the soldiers.

So that left her, Ephiny and Pony against the rest of the ship. Xena turned her head and glanced at the other side of the cabin. The two Amazons were curled up sound asleep, obviously exhausted after their harrowing experience.

Not to mention, Ephiny was pregnant. So in reality, that left her and Pony against all comers. Xena suspected they could put a good dent in the opposition but she also knew she needed experienced men to sail the ship for her, so she wasn't sure force was her best option.

Convince the councilors from Athens? Xena sighed, wishing Gabrielle were here with her. The

bard was much better at that sort of thing but then, if Gabrielle had been here she wouldn't have had to worry about it.

Hm.

Xena nibbled the inside of her lower lip. Could she get the ship's crew on her side? The captain seemed to like her, and so far she thought she made a good impression on the crew she'd interacted with but the patricians had money and lots of it and she only had her personality and that damned reputation.

Tough call. She rolled over onto her back again. The ship was now crowded with the refugees from the other vessel and they were all an open question. She'd found and saved them, true, but she'd made no bones about what she was there for, and those that had made it over to their ship had done so with no help from her.

Xena sighed. Shoulda helped out. She admitted silently. Gabrielle's gonna spank me for that. If she'd acted the hero her task now would be much simpler but unfortunately she hadn't. So Xena put her hands behind her head and stretched the ache out of her shoulders. At daylight she'd go out on deck and see what her possibilities were.

"Hey, Xena."

The warrior turned her head, and Ephiny slid silently over to where she was lying. In the bare scrap of moonlight she could see the regent's disheveled, curly hair and a glint off her eyes. "Not time to get up yet." She kept her voice low.

"Yeah, I know, but in the morning it'll be the usual craziness and I wanted a chance to talk to you for a second before that." Ephiny said. "I got some sleep. I feel a lot better now."

"Good." Xena replied. "Me too."

Ephiny smiled. "You looked pretty wiped."

"I was." The warrior admitted freely. "Long couple of days."

Ephiny was quiet for a minute. "How upset is Gabrielle?"

Xena thought about that for a while before she answered. "I don't think she's upset at all at you, if that's what you mean." She eventually said. "Maybe disappointed a little."

"For not telling her?"

"Yeah. But she understood why not." Xena smiled into the darkness. "She's got a good idea of her own skills in persuasion."

"I wanted to give her a chance to do her own thing there too." Ephiny went on. "If I'm around, it's not always clear who's in charge. You know?"

"Uh huh."

"So I figured a couple weeks of me not being around.. who knows? I heard people wondering what it would be like for her to be in charge and I guess maybe I was curious too. Gab never really makes changes."

Xena chuckled softly. "She respects your position." She paused a moment. "And I think when you get back she'll hand it all back to you and more."

Ephiny leaned a little closer. "What does that mean?"

The warrior hesitated. "You should talk to her."

Ephiny frowned.

Xena decided to let the subject drop. "So tell me what happened with those other Amazons." She said. "What about those guys who attacked you, what was up with that?"

"On the road?" Ephiny allowed herself to be distracted. "Oh. I guess someone put the word out. One of the damn scumbuckets from that town recognized me and they tried to grab us for ransom."

"Word out?" Xena frowned. "About Amazons?"

"No." The regent gave her a wry look. "Anyone from Amphipolis. The guy from the town had been to the last market and remembered me.. and probably Pon, from the lists there."

"I don't get it."

"They said the word was, Amphipolis was full of Spartan sympathizers." Ephiny related, leaning an elbow on the warrior's bunk. "I wasn't sure what the heck we were getting into, but let me tell you that put us in the middens with the rest of those chicks once they heard it."

Okay, now it started to make sense. Xena nodded. "Maybe the word that Spartans visited us got out."

"Fast." Ephiny said. "We left just after they did."

"So why are they all so sure I'm going to Athens to help?" Xena wondered. "Every single person I met so far pretty much has heard that, and we have a pack of patricians onboard who assumed I was too."

"No, that's just what we heard there." Ephiny said. "Once we were closer to Thera, the tune changed. I wasn't sure what was going on, and then when we were in the city Pon and I were treated like visiting royalty based on the mention of your name."

"Ah."

"Pissed off the rest of them, I'll admit it." The regent grinned wryly. "I was cursing Amazon egos a lot like you usually do by the time we got into the scrap, and then..." Her eyes narrowed. "The queen who said she was in charge.. from Athens.. said we should be tied up and taken in just in case we were really spies."

"Spies???"

"Yeah." Ephiny looked a little grim. "Aleta, the one in charge was convinced she'd get me to admit you were really acting against Athens and there to assassinate the council."

Xena turned her head, and both eyebrows hiked. "What?"

The Amazon shrugged. "Made no sense to me. That's what I kept telling them and they just kept telling me I was full of horse crap."

"Damn."

"She figured she'd get a big bonus and kudos for turning me, and I guess by extention you, in." Ephiny said. "I asked her why an Amazon would turn on her own kind, and she told me she'd learned how to spot a traitor when she saw one and profit from it."

"Which one is she?"

Ephiny smiled again, reaching over and patting Xena's arm. "She's dead." She uttered quietly. "I killed her."

Ah. Xena wasn't sure whether she should be relieved or disappointed. "What about the two that got over in time?" She asked. "They trouble?"

Ephiny leaned against the wall and extended her legs out, resting her elbow on the bunk as she faced Xena. "They might be. I wasn't shy about what I felt about them, and I had enough time to flap my jaws until you showed up."

"Huh." Xena grunted. "What a mess."

"Sorry." Ephiny didn't look particularly penitent. "Most of the crew was with me if it's any consolation. Aleta rubbed them raw, and thought she could push her status around. She had a cousin on the council, I think."

"Ah."

Okay. So now she had two reasons not to land the ship in Athens harbor. One, because Gabrielle needed her back, and two, because after the story got out she was pretty sure she'd be getting Ephiny and Eponin out at swordpoint as half of the Athens guard tried to arrest them.

No fun for anyone.

Xena rolled onto her side to face Ephiny. "We need to go back to Thera." She said. "I got a gut feeling there's something going on, and Athens is the wrong destination."

Pony sat up, and then crawled over to the bunk, settling herself down next to Ephiny. She raked her dark hair out of her eyes and stifled a yawn. "Shoulda woke me up. I'm missing the good stuff."

"Sorry Pon." Ephiny smiled. "I just wanted to bring Xena up to speed on what happened."

"Big mess." Pony grunted. "What were you saying about going home? Sounded good to me." She looked up at the window. "Weather cleared up."

Xena pushed herself up, then half stood and opened the window, letting in a wash of salt tinged air. She could hear the faint flap of the wind in the sails and the sound of the ropes creaking. But every sound made her aware they were heading in the wrong direction, and she felt a sense of impatience taking hold of her.

"Xena said we need to head back." Ephiny said. "I think Gab's calling her."

The warrior looked over her shoulder at the Amazon, one brow lifting.

"You know what I mean." Ephiny said. "I'm all for it. Far as I'm concerned the rest of the Amazon nation deserves what it gets."

Xena sat back down on her bunk, facing the two Amazons. She didn't really think Ephiny meant what she was saying. She knew her two friends had undergone a tough experience, and she understood how angry they must have been.

But just as Pony's response to her and Gabrielle had turned dark and ugly in the valley they'd been trapped in, her usual attitude had returned with a snap of Ares fingers and she'd shown no evidence of the resentment she'd shown ever since.

Buried? Or was it just not real, an artifice of the situation they'd found themselves in with a mortal God of War?

Hard to say. Xena preferred to believe it was the latter. "They'll make their own fate." She predicted. "This war's going to happen. I just don't want to be any part of it."

"Aren't you sorta already?" Pony asked.

Xena sighed, resting her elbows on her knees. Despite the rest she still felt tired, and more than a little sore. She pushed that aside though, and pondered the door, wondering if she should go out and see what leverage she had with the crew.

Then she heard the distinctive thunk of the anchor holds being released, and the rattle and rush of the anchor as it was deployed. The flap of the sails now seemed far louder, and she could hear the creak of the rigging as the fabric was taken down.

They were stopping.

“What’s going on?” Ephiny asked, seeing her expression shift.

Loud boots sounded outside the cabin. “I don’t care a gull’s splat what you think, sir. Repairs must be made, and now’s the time for it. We’ll layup here till the ropes are mended, or you’ll end up bowing knee to Poseidon as the ship’ll founder.”

“Captain..” Denius’ voice sounded angry. “You’ll pay for this in Athens, I promise you. This will be your last commission.”

The boots faded, and the voices with them. “Guess they needed to fix some of the storm damage.” Xena said, thoughtfully. “Maybe we can make that work in our favor.”

“You got a plan?” Pony asked.

Xena stood up and ran her fingers through her hair. “Stay here, and get some rest.” She said. “I’m going to see if I can tip our odds a little.” She eased between them and opened the door. “Who knows? We could get lucky.”

Ephiny stretched herself out and sniffed the cool night air, catching the scent of pitch on it. “Y’know Pon, I think I’ll stay away from boats from now on.” She remarked.

“Stick to the trees.” Pony went back to her spot and curled back up again. “Hope she doesn’t start something out there. I’m still bushed.”

Ephiny scooted back over next to her, and shared her pillow. “If those guys out there are stupid enough to get between her and getting back to Gabrielle, they’ll deserve what they get.” She closed her eyes. “Hope she throws the pieces overboard.”

“Being preggers made you bloodthirsty, y’know?”

Ephiny chuckled.

“Sides she didn’t take her sword.”

“Only makes her more dangerous. She took her charm with her instead.”

“Hm.”

**

Continued in Part 18

A Queen’s Tale

Part 18

Gabrielle felt the shock of impact as she drove her staff around and whacked one of the shadowy armored figures in the head. She drew back a step then ducked the man’s returning swipe, feeling the faint chill as the sword passed just shy of her midsection.

She waited for it to pass, then she smacked the man’s arm, a short hard strike that sent the weapon from his fingers into the foliage.

No time to forgive. Gabrielle swung in the opposite direction as the man dove for the sword and caught him right over the eyes, with a crunch of breaking bone. He dropped to the ground and grabbed for his face and she brought the other end of the staff down on the top of his head with

all the strength of her arms backed with a hop that added some weight to it.

He lay still. Gabrielle didn't pause to look at him. She turned and dug her boots into the leaf litter, bringing her weapon around to mid thigh as she anticipated another enemy attack. But the leaves shivering in front of her split to reveal Jessan's powerful form, one big hand raised warningly in front of him.

"Hey! It's me!" The forest dweller barked. "Don't hit me!"

Gabrielle relaxed. "I won't." She said. "That all of them?"

"I think so." Jessan emerged from the leaves, just as Solari appeared, wiping her sword blade down. "I might be insulted. Did they really think a dozen of them were a match for us?"

Solari chuckled. "Glad you caught up with us. It was getting a little exciting down here when we found these guys." She put her hands on her hips. "More of the Spartans?"

Jessan eyed Gabrielle, one furry brow visibly lifting up. The rest of the group joined them, only a little the worse for wear after the battle.

Dori came over and stood next to Gabrielle, hugging her mother's leg with one arm. "Mama, bad mens." She complained. "Got to find Boo."

"I totally agree." Gabrielle dropped one hand on her daughter's head and stroked her unruly hair. Then she looked up at Solari. "Not Spartans. Looks like we got on the bad side of Athena. She sent these guys to ambush us."

There was a little space of silence after she spoke, until Solari cleared her throat, glancing both ways before she answered. "Um.. that a guess?"

"No." Gabrielle shook her head. "Ares stopped by and clued me in. So let's get going, because the sooner we catch up with Xena, the faster we'll get this all sorted out." She pointed with her staff down the path. "We're almost to the bottom. Let's go."

Everyone scattered and got weapons sheathed, forming up around the bard as she started to move forward.

"Gabrielle." Jessan had been kneeling next to the man she'd taken down. "This guy's still ticking. Want me to tie him up?" He glanced over his shoulder. "The rest of them are dead."

The bard paused, gazing reflectively at him. Leaving the man free wasn't an option, she knew. He could escape, and cause havoc and Xena had taught her better. And tying him up? "You know, Xena once sat me down and taught me a lesson when we'd gotten into a bad spot, and fought off some guys who were really meaning us harm and I asked her why she couldn't just tie them up."

Everyone watched her alertly.

"She asked me, Gabrielle, would you like to be tied up and helpless, on the ground, with ants and spiders and bugs chewing your skin and wild animals finding you and eating you alive?"

Even Jessan grimaced, his face wrinkling up. "Ah."

"She said, how merciful do you think that really is?" Gabrielle concluded. "And I guess, I'd never thought about it like that before." She looked at the man. "Go ahead and kill him. We can't leave him here, so close to home, to make trouble."

She knew she'd shocked everyone. Gabrielle took a breath and released it, catching a look of respect on Solari's face as she edged over to stand next to her. Her guts were urging her to move on, but she forced herself to stand there and wait until Jessan quietly broke the man's neck and stood, before she gave him a smile. "Thanks Jess."

“My honor, Gabrielle.” Jessan said, in a soft voice. He dusted his hands off and rejoined them as they moved off down the path.

Gabrielle sighed. Wasn't one of her favorite lessons. She probed her way down the path and they filed after her in silence, as the darkness folded in around them again. It had taken her a long time, even given the quiet and almost gentle way Xena had brought her to it, for her to work her way through the painful logic.

To the warrior's credit, she'd given Gabrielle the time. She'd gone off and done some hunting, wandering back into camp at pretty much the exact moment the bard had reluctantly accepted the inevitable conclusion.

Xena had known. She had come over and sat down next to her, pressing her shoulder against Gabrielle's in wordless communication as they simply watched the sunset together.

That had meant so damned much to her. Gabrielle smiled briefly to herself. Just that moment of being treated like a respected adult by her much more experienced partner.

Painful as it had been, she cherished it.

A quarter candlemark later, they were on level ground, and starting towards the lower ford. Dori was snuggled up in Jessan's arms asleep, and the tingle of adrenaline from the fight was quickly fading.

Gabrielle felt the long day catching up to her. She really wished Xena was there with her, silly as that sounded even to herself because the warrior had a knack of keeping her mind occupied and not giving her time to focus on how tired she was.

There were lots of things to think about when Xena was around. Like, what was she thinking? Why had she picked the route they were on? Was there something special about where they'd end up at dusk?

Was she thinking about a night fire and their bedroll as much as Gabrielle was?

Gabrielle amused herself by imagining her partner walking alongside her, with that stride that was just that much longer than hers that it made her push to keep up.

She would be cruising along the path, head turning slightly from side to side as she listened and smelled everything around them without much conscious thought. Her walk had a rhythm to it, and an overstated emphasis Gabrielle thought was from the armor.

Her arms would be relaxed, but held just a little away from her body and every once in a while she'd bring her hands up and flex her fingers, lacing them together and cracking her knuckles as she walked.

Gabrielle sighed, and turned her focus back on the path, reminding herself that the group was depending on her to not walk them into an ambush or fall into an unexpected turn of the creek.

She could hear the creek off to her left, a muted tinkling that almost obscured the night sounds of the crickets. A rustle sounded off to her right, but a quick look in that direction caught the retreating tail of a fox.

No danger there. She shifted her grip on her staff and looked forward, seeing the increasing glow of the moonlight as the trees slowly thinned out ahead. No danger, of course, since she wasn't tied up and helpless in the leaves since foxes were meat eaters, after all and even though they were small, they had sharp teeth and usually kits to feed somewhere deep in the brush.

“Hey, Gabrielle.” Solari caught up with her again. “That was pretty creepy, with Athena and all that.”

Gabrielle sighed. "Yeah, I guess." She shrugged a little. "You know, though, we get tangled up with them so often it just gets sort of annoying rather than creepy. I kinda thought, 'oh great. Here we go again.' When I heard it."

"Uh huh." Solari was silent as they walked. "So what's that like?"

"What's what like?" Gabrielle glanced at her.

The Amazon looked a little embarrassed. "I mean.. like hanging out with them? I heard the fuzzies talking back there and they said they came around a corner in the path and you were standing there holding hands with Ares. Were you?"

"Eh." Gabrielle smiled briefly. "Yeah, we were... you know, it's not like anything. It's just what it is." She rubbed an itch on her nose. "He's sort of on our side in this one."

"Our side?"

The bard indicated the group. "Yeah, our side. Mine and Xena's side, I guess, but you all fall under that. He wants us to help him stop the war."

Solari frowned. "Huh?"

"Yeah pretty much what I said. But there you go." Gabrielle held a hand up as they came to a break in the trees, and the landscape opened up into the slope down to the river, the moon lighting the grassland between them and it with silver silence.

"Let me check it out." Solari loosened her sword in its scabbard and eased forward. One of the forest dwellers silently followed her around the last of the branches so they could get a clear view of their path.

Gabrielle stood and watched, one hand curled around her staff as she leaned against it. "Boy, I'll be glad to catch up with those other guys and find a place to stop and rest."

"Tired?" Jessan had come to stand next to her.

"Yeah." The bard admitted. "I've got my fingers crossed that we can just move through here and there are no surprises."

"Yeah." Jessan glanced around. "We close to your birthplace, Gabrielle?"

"Yes." The bard kept watching Solari. "There's a short path just to the right there. Walk on it a little while and you come to a big tree, near a branch of the river. That's where Xe and I met."

Jessan chuckled softly. "Life changer, huh?"

Gabrielle glanced at him. "Change? Nah. That's where my life began." She shifted her weight off her staff as she saw Solari give the come ahead. "And it looks like we may get lucky this time. Let's get over the river. "

They emerged into the moonlight to a quiet, empty stretch of grass leading down to the river. Here, closer to Potadeia, the water ran a little slower prior to its wide curve bending back towards the hills. The ford here was small, beaten posts and guidelines rather than a bridge, but once across they could make their way to the road and the stand of trees just shy of it Gabrielle hoped held their friends and the horses.

It was very quiet. The moon had risen overhead and she could hear the rustling of the trees and the sound of the river, the gentle wind bending the grass before her feet as she led the way forward.

Was it all a trick? Gabrielle scanned the area. The grass was knee height; tall enough to hide an ambush. The wind was blowing across it into their faces though, and she found it hard to believe

that the forest dwellers wouldn't smell a bunch of human soldiers even if she didn't.

The river bent a little this far down, and she couldn't see the turn that would take her up to Amphipolis – but that also meant anyone there who happened to be looking couldn't see her either. She shaded her eyes, looking for evidence of the Spartan army, and there was nothing to be seen in that respect either.

Well, good. Gabrielle turned her attention to the ford, and the road beyond it. A flicker of motion caught her eye, and she felt her nerves jump- but it was just a figure emerging from the stand of trees, and waving.

“Cait.” Solari grunted in satisfaction. “Looks like everything's cool.”

Somehow, it surprised her. Gabrielle squinted the slight figure into focus, and felt a sense of relief as the young Amazon signaled the safe come ahead to them. That meant the horses were all there, and Bennu and his men and that her plan had actually worked.

She wasn't really sure why she was so surprised. The plan had made sense to her, and also to her companions – no one had demurred when she'd laid it out. She'd taken Xena's tenets in mind when she'd come up with it, and she could easily imagine her soulmate doing the same thing.

So why shouldn't it have worked? Gabrielle mused on that as she lead the way down to the ford, smelling the river as she worked her way down the bank towards it.

It was low, for the season. The ford had been in place there since the end of the last war, the posts firmly pounded in and newly wound with rope, the tickly scent of the fresh hemp strong and pungent.

The water was cold, and she grimaced a little as it penetrated her boots and she started across. Here, the river was shoulder height most of the way, only the center deep enough for her to need to swim and she looped her staff around her wrist and pulled herself through the mild current.

“Feels good.” Solari was right behind her.

“Yeah.”

“Mama! Fishes!” Dori's voice warbled from Jessan's hold. “Let's go catch em!”

“Not right now, honey.” Gabrielle felt the water close over the back of her neck and had to admit the chill did feel good. She wasn't sure she'd enjoy the drying off process, but she took a moment to duck her head under the surface and felt the cool liquid soak into her hair right to the roots.

Then it was shallow enough to stand again, and she started up the other slope. On either side of her, the ford posts rose and she moved past them as they angled across to the other bank marking a safe crossing.

To her right, she could see the branch of the river that angled off, and went past her hometown and for a moment, she wondered what her family there was up to.

Would Lila think, this late at night, that maybe her sister was swimming the river, escaping from a Spartan army?

Just as she thought that, she remembered she had an obligation to them. “Oh sheep dip.”

“Huh?” Solari was behind her and heard. “What's wrong?”

Gabrielle was emerging from the river, pulling her boots free from the muck at the other side. “We need to send someone back.” She climbed up the slope to the bank. “Warn my family. I should go.”

“Gabrielle..” Jessan hopped onto the bank, with Dori still on his shoulders. “You’re the boss here.”

“I know.” The bard said. “But it’s my family.” She glanced back across the river. “And it’s not like you can go in my place, Jess. I mean.. well, you can, but...”

“But they’ll all come running out screaming.” Jessan agreed.

“I’ll go.” Solari turned and headed for the river. “Your sister knows me. It’ll just take a minute.” She splashed into the water, as the rest of the forest dwellers emerged from the ford. “I’ll catch up to you guys.”

“Thanks Soli.” Gabrielle called quietly after her. “I’ll make it up to you when we stop.”

Solari turned around and grinned. “That mean you’re cooking?” She waved and plunged into the water, swimming with a quick, efficient stroke.

Gabrielle chuckled. Then she turned and raked the wet hair back out of her eyes. “Okay, let’s go meet up with the gang and see what’s going on.”

“That’s a cool Amazon.” Jessan commented, as he let the squiggling Dori down. “There you go, bittyboo. Don’t pull the fur, okay?”

“Soli’s always been a good friend.” Gabrielle agreed. “Now that we’re off the mountain, things should go pretty smoothly I think.”

Jessan gave her a look.

“Mama, look! A buppit followed us!” Dori rambled off through he grass. “Buppit!”

“Pretend I never said that.” Gabrielle broke into a jog after her. “Dori!! Dori!”

**

Xena strolled across the deck, letting her eyes scan the surface as she crossed over towards the hatch to belowdecks.

Men work working hard, splicing rope and mending the big sails that had been drawn down to the deck. The moon was fitfully poking out from behind the clouds, aiding their work but they had torches up too, and oil lamps lighting the deck.

The sailors had done what they could to set up tarp shelters for the survivors of the shipwreck. In odd corners, triangles of sailcloth were stretched, with figures huddled beneath them. A barrel had been set on the deck as well, with a dipper to provide the refugees with some water.

Pitifully few survivors. There had been probably a hundred or more onboard the ship. Xena walked between two of the shelters, seeing suspicious eyes looking out hearing her footsteps.

Poor bastards. Now that the whole thing was over, Xena had to admit she felt a little bad she hadn’t worked harder to rescue more people.

Damned conscience.

She spotted the captain up on the steerage platform and angled her steps towards him. He was standing next to the now still tiller, and another man was standing next to him. They both glanced up as she approached.

“Ah. There’s the wench.” The captain said. “C’mover here, woman. Man here wants to thank you.” He indicated his companion.

Xena recognized the man now as the captain of the other vessel. She vaguely wondered if the whole going down with the ship was a myth, but gave the man a gracious nod as he took a step

forward. "Captain."

The other man limped forward. "They tell me you're Xena." He said. "You brought Halgar's ship to where mine was wrecked. That true?"

Xena studied him. He was younger than their own ship captain, tall and thin, with a sharply angular face and thick, dark hair just getting a peppering of white at the edges. "True on both counts." She replied mildly.

"Woman knew it was a shipwreck." Halgar stated, rocking up and down on his heels. "Idiots in the forward cabins kicked their heels up, but she was right."

The other captain studied her. "You the Xena everyone's heard about?"

She took a step up onto the platform and leaned against the thick back wall of the ship. "I'm the only one I know of." She said. "And a couple people have heard of me."

There were two oil lamps on the platform, and the light flooded the three of them standing there. The rescued captain regarded the tall woman leaning casually nearby, noting the long arms and powerful hands along with the sharp eyes and angular face.

Beautiful, in a wild, almost exotic way, he thought. Dressed in a light tunic, the woman's body seemed well formed, the powerful legs crossed in a relaxed fashion that nonetheless showed a smooth bunching of muscle in them.

Xena, the warlord. He could see the killer in those eyes, no matter the smile on the face. Defender of Amphipolis now, perhaps, but he knew the stories, and knew men who'd fought against her.

Some who'd fought for her. More of those recently, who swore by her as a captain and who would, without reservation, bend knee to her and follow her banner again. Athens itself wanted her to lead them.

"Thank you." The captain held a hand out. "Whatever the reason for it, I'm glad you followed that instinct and found us. I've got a family back in Thera'd like to see me again."

"No problem." Xena uncrossed her arms and reached over to clasp his. "Glad we found you. I had some friends onboard."

"The two of those Amazons, the ones they had prisoner?"

Halgar eyed her. "Pox of trouble those women, eh?" He said. "Caused trouble in Thera, trouble in my hold, trouble on his ship.. Hades devils."

"That blond one, she's a wild thing." The captain of the wrecked ship said. "Got herself and the other cut loose, and went after one of the snooty ones. Killed her at my feet, she did. Knife through the ribs."

Both men looked at Xena.

"She had reason." Xena replied shortly. "As for the ones here, they were being attacked and raped. They didn't cause all the trouble. I killed the men that did it."

"Well.."

A sailor trotted up onto the platform. "Cap'n I.." He stopped, seeing Xena. "You're the one!" He blurted. "Damned prisoner belowdecks screaming to see you."

Xena sighed. She could imagine which prisoner. "How long are we going to be here at anchor?" She addressed Halgar.

"Long as it takes to fix her." The captain responded. "No rushing wood working. We don't want

to sink before we get to Athens, eh?" He cleared his throat. "By mid day, I'm thinking we'll be at sail again."

"Okay." Xena twitched her tunic straight. "Let me go see what's gong on belowdecks." She started for the hatch. "Maybe I'll take that problem off your hands too."

She disappeared down the stairs, leaving the captains to their own devices.

"Good looking, that one." The rescued captain remarked to Halgar. "Didn't expect that."

"Aye." Halgar agreed. "Love to have that in my bunk, but I'd be scared to wake up and find part of me missing from it."

"Dangerous."

"More than a hydra. Should have seen her holding the wheel with that daft prisoner putting a knife to her – never turned a hair. Gave her a look that'd curdle the milk of a stone goat."

"Well, no matter. Glad you listened to her, Halgar. I lost a crew but we'd all been lost in another candlemark. I owe you for this one."

"Owe her." Halgar pointed at the hatch. "Got the feeling we'll all do fore this is over."

**

Xena descended into a noisesome darkness, the holds full of working men and grumbling merchants, displaced out of their quarters as the sailors worked to fix the hull. Some had settled in the common room, and she gave them a brief nod as she slipped by and stopped to check on the horses.

"There she is."

She heard the whisper, and evaluated the color of it. Deciding it was just a remark on her presence, and not a warning about it, she continued through the rafters until she reached the small area Iolaus and the mare were confined in.

The stallion had heard her coming. He was watching out for her, and tossed his head when she appeared in the opening.

"Hey boy." Xena crossed over to him and rubbed his ears. "Not so bad now, huh? Ships not moving?" She felt him push into her chest, and breathe out, his skin twitching a little. "Poor guy. Now I bet you wish I'd taken your mother, and left you to laze around in the paddock, huh?"

Io flicked his ears.

Xena gave him a hug then peeked in at the mare, who was lying with her feet tucked up under her in the straw. "You all right, pretty girl?"

The mare shook her head.

"Yeah, well, we're kinda stuck here, so just suck it up for a while, okay?" Xena leaned against the ropes, but as she did, she felt her instincts prickle.

Her nape hairs lifted, and she felt a change in the air behind her. At once her ears shifted, moving a little away from her head and cupping. She drew a breath in, and caught the scent of grog and unwashed clothes.

"There she is." A voice sounded, low and snarly. "Now we'll see who's tough, eh? Got no armor or weapons, we'll get our own back from you, Xena."

Xena slowly straightened up and turned, keeping her hands on the ropes and leaning back a little against them. "Will you?" She asked, her voice dropping a touch, and taking on a low purring

rumble.

There were four men there, with short curved swords and knives in their hands and enough liquid courage to use them.

She crossed her legs at the ankles. "If you think that armor and that sword are all that make me dangerous, then c'mon boys. Bring it on." A smile appeared on her face that had no humor in it. "I'm sure those poor bastards on deck would love your bunks."

She had them. She could already see the muddled fear in their eyes, could see they were already regretting their drink induced foray. But as she took a breath to continue her verbal assault, six more men bustled into the space, equally well armed.

Hm. Things were getting interesting. Xena counted the steps it would take her to get to Io's ropes, to let the stallion loose to help her.

"Leave her alone." The leader of the new men ordered. "Or we'll cut you up and toss you to the fishes." He was dressed in the common garb of the sailors, and so were his friends. "Land scum. Get back to the mess room."

The merchants looked almost glad to see them. They made a show of putting their swords away and grumbling, giving Xena dirty looks as they retreated. "Wont' be the last you see of us!"

Xena remained where she was, interested to see where this was all going to lead. "Thanks." She drawled wryly. "I wasn't looking forward to getting blood on my skirt."

The sailors turned, and the one in the lead lifted his cutlass, touching his forehead with it before her put it back into its sheath.

Xena's nostrils flared a little, understanding the gesture.

"Fools." The sailor said. "Wasn't enough them others got kilt?" He said. "We were coming to find you in any case. Woman down in the hole yelling for ou."

"So I heard." Xena didn't move. "What does she want?"

The man shrugged. "Just says she needs to talk to you. Arrogant bitch. Was spitting oaths at us before, but now she's playing nice so we go do what she wants."

Xena smiled. "Women do that."

"Aye." The man looked her right in the eye. "But some's you don't mind it."

"All right." Xena straightened up. "Let's go see what the bitch wants then." She said. "Lead on."

The sailor gave a brief nod, then he turned and started further into the dark passageways. Xena followed him, then the rest of the sailors followed her. She was taller than the lot of them by a hand at least, and several times had to quickly duck before the spars emerging from the gloom smacked her in the forehead. '

"Low here." The lead sailor said, after the second time. "Sorry."

They went a deck lower. Here she could smell the pitch, and see the oil lamps flickering down a corridor. "What are they doing there?" Xena asked.

"Split a side board." The sailor answered. "Name's Dir, by the way." He eased through a narrow entrance and then they were climbing down one last set of steps into a space that stank of old fish and human bodies.

Xena could also smell blood and rusting iron. She could see two roughly made cells ahead and gathered her attitude around her as the sailor went past the second, then paused and gestured at it. "In there."

The warrior stepped to the entrance and peered inside. She could see Milena slumped against the far wall, her arms shackled to the wall and a thin layer of dirty straw on the floor. "Open it."

"You sure?" The sailor asked. "Bitch bites."

"So do I and I've got bigger teeth." Xena responded. "But thanks for asking."

Dir produced a heavy iron key and slid it home, unlocking the door and shoving it open. "Careful." He warned. "She'll probably jump you."

Xena entered the cell, stopping just short of grabbing range. "Hey!"

Milena jerked and cringed, holding her hands as much over her head as she could. When nothing happened to her, she moved them down and looked up, shuddering in surprise as she recognized the tall figure standing in the cell. "You!"

Xena put her hands on her hips. "You were yelling at everyone you wanted to talk to me. That big a surprise I'm here?"

Milena struggled to sit up. "I didn't think you'd listen to them." She muttered. "I didn't think they'd listen to me."

"What do you want?" The warrior asked, brusquely.

The girl looked up at her. "Why have we stopped?"

Xena looked around instead of answering. The cell was small, and contained only the straw, the prisoner, and a bucket in the corner that stank. The squalor offended even her hardened sensibilities, and she wanted to make this interview as short as possible.

"Listen." Milena lowered her voice. "Were you serious when you said you weren't joining the army?"

The warrior dropped to a crouch and rested her elbows on her knees. It put her head more or less at a level with the girls. "I'm going home." She said. "Take that for what it's worth."

Studying the girls' face, Xena could now see past the veneer of arrogance to the scared kid underneath. She suspected the rough handling had knocked a lot of the attitude off her. A tiny part of her even felt sorry for the kid.

"My brothers." She indicated the next cell with a jerk of her head. "They're Spartan agents."

Xena nodded. "The councilors know that."

Milena blinked, caught by surprise. "They do?"

"That all you wanted to tell me?" Xena studied her. "Yeah, they know."

The girl looked stunned. "Then wh... " She paused. "They're not my brothers." She said. "I met them on the road, and we decided to travel together. They told me they were trying to run a scam with silver bars."

"Uh huh." Xena didn't find it very interesting, but the kid wasn't cursing or spitting at her at least.

"But I heard them talking." Milena dropped her voice further. "If you help me get out of here, I'll tell you what they said."

Xena merely looked at her.

"Yeah, I guess that's a stupid thing to say." The girl muttered. "You don't make bargains, do you?"

"Not often." The warrior replied, in a quiet voice. "But if you tell me, and it's worth something, I'll do what I can."

Milena looked up right into her eyes. "You're the only one who's been decent to me. Even after everything." She whispered. "Even after I tried to hurt you. Why?"

The blue eyes painted silver in the dim light twinkled just a little. "If you ever meet my partner, you can ask her that." She said. "Did you want to tell me something? If not, I've got other things to do."

The girl glanced right and left, then back at up at her. "There's a Spartan army. It's coming through Thrace."

Xena felt a shiver twitch over her skin. She watched the girl's face carefully, seeing the minute shifts under the skin and wishing she had Gabrielle at her side, to help her gauge the truth. "How big an army?"

Milena shook her head. "A big one that's all they said." She answered. "They're coming over the hills and across the valley, and they'll be picked up by ships at Thera."

A flash of the urgent expression on Gabrielle's face in her dream prickled Xena's awareness. Was Milena telling the truth? Maybe. Maybe not. But a Spartan army coming down on top of Amphipolis sure would make her partner send that message, wouldn't it?

Yeah, it would. Xena studied the captive. Well, the news only made her mission that much more urgent for having a name to pin to the unknown worry in her guts. "I'm going to try and get this ship turned around back to Thera."

Milena's eyes flicked to hers, in surprise. "Are you?" She asked, in a low voice. "When we get there.. take me with you."

It was too dark for her to see the twitch that flickered across Xena's face at the words or the clenching of the warrior's fingers. "If we get back there, I'll do my best to get you free and off the ship."

Milena pulled at her shackles. "Let me go with you and .. you're going to stop the Spartans, right? I want to go too."

"Becoming a patriot?" The warrior asked, dryly. She stood up and flexed her hands. "Thanks for the information. Want some advice?"

The girl looked warily at her. "Advice?"

"Be nice to the crew." Xena told her. "It'll make the rest of this damn trip easier on you."

Milena's eyes dropped. "Tell the not to rape me then." She looked back up. "That's what they want."

Xena turned and went to the door. "You'll be safe." She said. "Good night." She left and waited for the door to swing shut, before she looked at the sailor. "Dir."

"Aye." The man waited quietly.

"Bring her some bread and fresh water." The warrior said. "Don't get close. I don't trust her."

"Aye." He nodded. "Nor do any of us." He motioned to the rest of the men. "Back up to the light, lads. Lead on."

They moved off down the hall single file, the slow progress giving Xena ample time to think about what she'd just heard.

As well as wondering what she'd ended up promising.

**

Gabrielle had never though she'd really be in a place to be glad to be getting up onto a horse, but now, in fact, she was. She patted the shoulder of the gray mare Bennu had brought out for her and Dori to ride.

The horse was pretty, a lightly dappled coat and a darker mane and tail, one of the string of young horses that had come out of the breeding program Xena had started way back when. Her name was Shadow, and she was a little shorter, and a little slimmer than Xena's favorite.

"Hello there." Gabrielle greeted her, as she swung Dori up into the horses saddle. "Look Dori, a new friend for you."

"Pretty." Dori hitched herself up further using the saddlebow. "Mama, c'n I have a horsie? Boo said I could."

Oh, Boo did, huh? "Honey, I'm sure you can have a horsie when you're big enough to ride around by yourself, okay?" Gabrielle told her. "Until then, you have to help me and Boo steer."

"Soon?"

The bard sighed, and glance to her right, to see Cait and Paladia grinning at her. "Just wait." She warned them. "You'll have one of these someday."

"Not like that one. Hardly." Cait answered immediately. Paladia snorted.

Gabrielle got her boot into the stirrup and hopped a little, then pulled herself onboard behind her daughter. "We're going." She took up the reins and glanced around. Bennu's men were mounting all around her, having had a several candlemark rest.

One of the sentries whistled softly, and she stood up in her stirrups, watching the edge of the grass as the men all turned that way. But a whistle responded, and they all relaxed, as Solari emerged from the waving stalks a minute later.

The Amazon was dripping wet, but looked in good spirits. She gave Gabrielle a thumbs up as she rejoined the group, and went over to find her pack to change clothing.

That was done, at least. Gabrielle mused, wondering how her family had reacted to the news.

Cait and Paladia were nearby, and the forest dwellers were also ready to go, mounted in their larger, shaggier animals.

Everyone was armed. Gabrielle gently guided her new mount over to where Jessan was waiting on his big chestnut. "Jess, I appreciate you guys staying with us, but we're going into some pretty busy areas."

"We know." Jessan rested his hands on his saddlehorn. "Save your breath, little sister." He gave her a small, toothy smile. "I want to see you safe back to Xena."

Well, she could get upset at that, she supposed. Gabrielle sighed. But she understood. "I don't think either of us would appreciate it if that ended up getting you hurt." She reminded her friend.

"Don't worry." The forest dweller patted her knee. "You can just make up some story about how we're a new kind of super soldier you're taking to Athens." He saw the skeptical look on the bard's face. "Or you can say we're a meat crop. Your choice."

"Ew." Gabrielle's nose wrinkled. "Okay, for now." She clucked to the horse, who tossed her gray head and flicked her ears backwards. "Let's get moving. We need to clear the pass before it starts getting light."

They emerged cautiously from the stand of trees and rode up the slight slope to the road, which was wide, and empty and silent at this time of night. The moon was behind the clouds now, and the only sound was the muffled hoofbeats against the packed surface as they started on their way.

Gabrielle adjusted her staff in its holders under her right leg and shifted in the saddle, adjusting to the stresses of riding after the long walk. She was tired, but she had to admit being up on the back of a horse whose legs were moving her forward helped.

Damned Xena was right as usual. She circled Dori with one arm. "You can go back to sleep if you want, honey."

Dori pulled her legs up and let them rest on the mare's neck, and leaned back against her mother. "Okay mama."

Gabrielle smiled, remembering times on the road when, near the end of a long tough day, Xena would brush aside her protests and insist they both ride, citing her need to 'get where we need to be' for the reason.

Hadn't been until much, much later that the warrior had admitted she'd known Gabrielle was at the end of her rope, and just wanted to give her a chance to rest and maybe catch a nap without embarrassing her.

Ah well. The bard smiled into the darkness. We'd sure have ended up in the same bedroll a lot faster if she'd just admitted stuff like that in the beginning. She remembered then how wonderful it had felt to get off her feet and settle into the back of Argo's saddle behind Xena, feeling the warmth of her body pressed against her.

Argo probably hadn't appreciated it though. Gabrielle knew she wasn't a heavy load, especially after they'd been out on the road a while, but still, it was just that much more the mare had to carry.

Just as well she'd left Argo home. And with that, a sudden thought came to her, wondering if the Spartans would scour the town for the rest of the horses and take them. Her heart lurched, thinking of Argo in their hands, and the mare's feisty temperament fighting them every minute.

"Crap." She muttered. "I should have thought of that before. I should have taken her with us, even just on a rein."

But in reality, there were a lot of things back there in danger. The rest of Xena's family, who were her family too, their home, nearby Potadeia... you couldn't protect everything. Gabrielle sighed and tried to remember that there had been times when Xena had simply let the mare run free, and take care of herself while they got involved in some crazy thing or other.

She was a canny animal. Wise in some ways more so than her human friends.

Gabrielle patted Shadow's shoulder. She turned her head to either side, seeing Solari and Jessan riding to either side of her, and just a bit ahead as they watched the road, and despite that, despite the solid cadre of men and horses around her, she felt very exposed and very isolated.

Strange, how she could feel so completely safe with just Xena there with her. Crazy really, since she knew better than anyone how fallible her soulmate could be.

The feeling of being watched suddenly increased, and she tightened her knees on either side of the horse and increased her pace. "Let's get through the pass." She called to Solari. "I don't like being out here with them behind us."

Solari nodded, and the troop increased their speed, from a walk to a canter, sending up tiny spurts of dust from the road's dry surface.

Shadow's pace was comfortable, Gabrielle found, smoother and with her lighter frame, easier on the bard's body. She relaxed into the motion, one arm still tucked around Dori and the other holding her reins.

She kept listening behind them though, halfway convinced the Spartans knew of their defection

and were heading after them. In her mind she could almost hear them thundering down the road and feel the vibrations.

Then she did hear thunder. She almost pulled up, glancing to either side of her to see if her companions heard it too.

“Storm’s coming.” Solari pointed at the horizon to their left. “Look at that.”

Lightning lit the sky in silver and purple, and Gabrielle settled back down in her saddle, slightly embarrassed. “Stop freaking out, okay?” She muttered to herself. “Yeah, we don’t want to get caught in that.” She added, louder.

“Good move going faster.” Solari replied. She stood up in her stirrups and looked behind them, waiting for a blast of lightning before she sat back down. “Clear back there.”

Of course it was. Gabrielle exhaled and fixed her eyes on the road ahead. It was only just visible in the gloom, a ribbon running through the rolling countryside, wild scrub on either side of it here in the backwaters.

The patch of forest the group had hidden in was where Gabrielle had thought the Athenians had been ambushed from. It was the last place for a group of men to hide near the road this side of the pass.

Also why she’d chosen that place to meet. So now she faced flatlands stretching to the hills on either side and in the distance, the bend in the road that indicated the gap between the ridges.

With a shake of her head, she aimed for it.

**

Dawn found them deep in the forest long past the far side of the pass, having seen no one so far in their journey. Gabrielle was glad to dismount from Shadow’s back, reaching up to take Dori down from her neck as soon as she hit the ground.

Cait and Solari were searching the nearby area, to make sure the spot they’d stopped in was safe. They were off the road by a good way, deep in a stand of trees that had a small stream cutting through it.

Dori looked around with interest. “Mama, go find rocks.” She pattered off.

“Stay close, Dori.” Her mother called after her. “This is not a safe place, okay?” She watched the child crouch down near a tree, and turned to take her saddlebags off Shadow’s rings.

“Found a place for a fire.” Bennu came up next to her. “Let me take that for ya, little hawk?” He reached for the bags. “Got all right shelter, men’r putting some windbreak up.”

“Sure.” Gabrielle nodded. “We need to keep watch, but everyone should get as much rest as they can. We can move out again when it’s dark.” Avoiding the small towns now seemed to her to be a good idea and since they’d picked up the pace she’d gone a lot further than she’d anticipated.

Less people to have seen them, and less people to explain Jessan and his people to. The foxes and owls didn’t care. Gabrielle took Shadow’s reins and started forward, only to pull up as another of the militia slipped deftly into her path. “Hey Jaz.”

“Take your horse, Gabrielle?” The man asked. “We’re hobbling them over in the next clearing.”

“Thanks.” The bard handed the reins over. “She’s a good girl.”

“Good breeding.” The man agreed. “We’ll take good care of her.” He led the mare off, and Gabrielle was left to walk by herself through the trees and into the campsite. “Dori, come on over here with me.”

“Mama look.” Dori ran to catch up with her. “I found dis!”

Gabrielle looked down. “Oh, that’s pretty honey.” She examined the stone. It was round and smooth, and looked like it had come from the river. “You found that under the tree?”

“Look.” Dori turned the stone over, and showed her. “Like Boo has.”

The bard’s gaze sharpened, and she took the stone, examining it carefully in the pale dawn light. It had a deep cut in it, with the telltale scrapes from being used to sharpen a blade. “That is like Boo’s, huh?”

“Yes.” Dori agreed. “We go find Boo now?”

“Not right now honey.” Gabrielle tucked the stone into her hand and led the way into the clearing, where Bennu’s men were busy making camp. “We’re going to rest for a while here in this nice forest, wont’ that be fun?”

“Fishes?”

“I think there are some fishes in the creek over there. We can find some.” Gabrielle promised. “But first we need to get warm, and have some tea, is that okay with you?”

“Yum.”

Lattice made of branches quickly interwoven were braced between the trees and the forest dwellers were already piling wood in the center of the space for a fire. Though it was warm, the clouds were still thick overhead and she was looking forward to a hot cup of mint tea and the chance to sit down for a while.

There was a spot near the back, in front of two large trees with plenty of shelter, and that’s where she saw Bennu had put her saddlebags. Gabrielle went over to them and sat down on the fallen log in front of them, stretching her legs out and flexing her toes.

Jessan came over and sat down next to her. “Looks like a good spot.” He said. “Two of my guys are out hunting.”

Gabrielle showed him the stone. “Dori found this.” She said. “Over where we dismounted.”

Jessan took it and examined it, turning it over with his clawed fingers. “Sharpening stone.” He said. “Used a lot.”

The bard nodded. The item was very familiar to her, accompanied by the rasping, scraping sound of metal against it that had been her evening accompaniment for many a night. This one looked something like Xena’s, but lacked the worn smoothness of years of contact that the warrior’s had.

It’s presence was troublesome. Though the tool was common enough, most carried a flatter stone used for axes. This seemed to indicate someone carrying a longsword. “I guess we could expect this, with all the people heading for the war.” She commented.

“Could be.” Jessan said. “Seems like a weird place to find it.” He stood up. “Hey kiddo – want to show me where you found this?” He held up the rock to Dori. “I want to see if there are more like it.”

Dori willingly got up. “We go over dere.” She pointed and started off, with Jessan in hot pursuit.

Gabrielle was left by herself to enjoy a quiet moment of peace and she took full advantage of it. She’d debated with herself on stopping, wondering if it wasn’t a better idea to keep going and put as much distance between herself and the Spartans and risk traveling the road in daylight.

With any luck, the Spartans would just be starting to look for her. There would be questions, and

evasions, and eventually someone would confess.

Then? Would the entire army take off after her? Gabrielle didn't think so. As good as the Spartans were, moving an entire army that fast wasn't easy.

But if they did?

She let out a breath, wishing again she had her partner nearby to ask. Xena would know what was safe.

Gabrielle had a feeling this wasn't safe. But on the other hand, people had to have rest and they'd been on the move for a day and a night. Xena had also taught her tired people make mistakes and she couldn't afford that.

So rest they would. If they left just a dusk, and rode through the night it would put them only a day or so out of Thera, and once there...

Once there? The bard decided to wait until they were closer to decide what they'd do once they were closer to the port city. It never really paid to plan in detail too far in advance in her life she'd found. You usually just ended up playing it by ear anyway.

The sound of the camp buzzed gently in her ears, and she felt a quiet sense of displacement, as the long day started to get the better of her.

Sitting there by herself on her log, she felt the absence of her partner come over her so strongly, it brought unexpected tears to her eyes. "Oh Xe." She murmured. "I need you." She leaned forward and rested her elbows on her knees, acknowledging the ache in her guts as it made her grimace.

"I don't know if I'm doing the right thing. I'm risking all these people, our families, all the people I left behind. I wish you were here to help me carry this damn rock I've got on my shoulders."

Was she imagining she heard the faint, wry chuckle? "Yeah, I know I was the one who was bitching that you never let me make the rules." She whispered. "Maybe I should have appreciated more the strain you took on all these years."

She let her head rest in her hands. "By the gods, I miss you."

"Gabrielle?"

She looked up, to find Cait there, with a skin in her hands. "Yes, Cait?"

"You all right?" The young Amazon approached and knelt down. "You look a bit down."

A bit down. Gabrielle managed a smile. "Just been a long day." She straightened up, letting her hands rest on her thighs. "What can I do for you?"

Cait offered her the skin. "Actually I rather thought I might do something for you. Would you like some cider? It's quite good."

A soft snick of a firestarter sounded nearby, and the gentle crackle of kindling catching sounded. "Thanks. I'd love some." Gabrielle took the skin and uncapped it, taking a mouthful of the contents. It was rich and fruity and the fermented buzz of it hit her empty stomach in a rush.

Cait took a seat on the ground, carefully not mentioning the sparkle of tears still visible on the queen's eyelashes. She watched Gabrielle take another swig from the skin, her gaze distant and somewhat unfocused.

She hoped everything was all right. It bothered her to see Gabrielle so out of sorts. Cait had thought everything was going quite well, actually, and she wondered what it was that had upset

her so. They'd made very good time, everyone was in fine form, and the plan was going along splendidly.

So what was the problem? Cait wasn't sure she wanted to intrude on Gabrielle's privacy enough to ask.

Gabrielle handed her back the skin, and managed a smile. "Thanks. That hit the spot." She reached out and patted Cait's knee. "When I'm out here, stopping after a long hike is when I remember the best times Xe and I had when we traveled together."

"Ah." Cait nodded, though she didn't quite understand what Gabrielle was getting at.

"So I miss her." The bard concluded. "I wish she was here."

Oh. Well. Now Cait felt a little stupid. Of course. "I'm sure we'll catch up with her right away now." She said. "You said she was probably coming back in any case, right?"

"Right." Gabrielle nodded. "Okay, enough of a break." She stood up. "Let's get some chow going." She scrubbed her eyes with the back of her hand, then headed for the fire. "Anyone want to help me look for herbs?"

Cait capped the skin and slung the carrystrap over her shoulder. She got up, hoping very much that Xena was in fact on the way, and that they'd meet up very soon – for Gabrielle's sake if not the rest of them.

She thought about that a minute. Oh bother. Absolutely for the rest of them.

**

Xena emerged back onto the deck, grateful for the wind over it as it washed the stench of the hold out of her lungs.

For a minute, she just stood there, thinking. Then she slowly made her way across the planking to the mast, leaning back against it as she looked out over the bow towards the rocky outcropping they were sheltering behind.

Just a pile of rocks – much like the ones they'd nearly foundered on. It made a break for the current though and the ship rested quietly at anchor while the work went on above and belowdecks.

She let her eyes idly drift around the open deck, seeing the eyes of the working sailors avert as they realized she was watching. She had their attention, no doubt.

One of the ones closest to her sitting on the deck edged over with apparent randomness. "Nother storm's coming at us, lady." He commented to Xena without looking up.

Xena had seen the signs on the horizon. "Yup." She agreed. "Dangerous weather."

"Aye." The sailor nodded. "Ship's a good one, but can't take it forever." He glanced up at the tall woman leaning nearby. "Good bit we found t'other one."

"Mm." Xena casually turned her head and met his eyes. "It's almost like we weren't meant to get to Athens, huh?"

She saw two other heads nearby turn, as they heard her. "Maybe the captain was right... we shouldn't have left early."

Slowly, the sailor near her nodded. "Cap'n thought twas bad weather chancing." He agreed. "Since we went out, we been in it."

"Good man, the captain." Xena mused. "Knows his craft."

The men nearby all nodded. "Them men, shoulda listened to him." The sailor at Xena's feet said. "Been sailing these waters all his life, he has."

"They should have." Xena straightened, then strolled off across the deck. She spotted Iolaus near the railing and angled her steps, heading for where he was standing. She took care to make eye contact with the sailors she passed – effortless on her part since they were all watching her.

One of them was hardly more than a boy, and he stared unabashedly at her. She gave him a smile and a wink, then circled the area they were working and arrived at where her friend was. "Couldn't sleep?"

Iolaus glanced at her. "I slept, for a while. Then the noise out here woke me up." He indicated the work. "Anything we can do to help it along? Athens isn't getting any closer."

Xena leaned her elbows on the rail and gazed over it at the choppy seas. She had some skills in woodworking, but she didn't figure one more body down in the hold would do much. "Stay out of the way."

Iolaus sighed. "Maybe I should have stuck to going overland."

Xena watched a seagull wheel over the waves, turning its head to eye her hopefully. "Iolaus."

The blond man turned and looked at her. "Uh oh."

Xena's lips twitched.

"That tone never means anything good's coming." Iolaus said, mournfully. "The last time you used it you told me you named a horse for me."

The warrior casually glanced around to make sure no one was that close. "We're not going to Athens." She said. "We've got to get back to Thera."

Iolaus blinked. "What?"

"I need to get back there." Xena said. "I don't have time to go to Athens."

"Xena." Iolaus moved a step closer. "I hate to say this, but it isn't all about you, y'know?"

"I know." She smiled briefly. "But I'm going to do everything I can to turn this boat around and go back and I wanted you to know that."

The blond man looked perplexed. "What am I supposed to do, Xena?" He muttered. "You know I have to get to Athens, damn it." He looked around. "Does this have something to do with that crazy woman? I heard she was yelling for you."

"She told me something." Xena admitted. "Said there was a Spartan army invading through Thrace."

Iolaus studied her. "And you believed that?" He sounded incredulous. "Xena, that woman would do anything to get from being taken in to Athens. They're gonna hang her!"

Xena looked out over the waves. "I don't know if I believe her or not." She said, finally. "But what I do know is something is making Gabrielle want me back there, hard."

Iolaus opened his mouth to speak, then paused. He looked thoughtful. "You mean, something other than the obvious?"

He saw the profile outlined in faint moonlight shift, and a tiny smile appeared on Xena's face.

There was that too, he was sure. But he also remembered being with Xena the last time when she'd gotten that urgent call inside, and it hadn't been any joke. Though years had passed, he wasn't sure it was this time either.

“Something other.” Xena responded. “So if I have to use a Spartan army as an excuse, that’s fine by me.” She glanced behind them. “Besides, ya never know. You may have a chance to get between two armies by sticking with me.”

Iolaus sighed. “Well.” He said. “At least you won’t make me wear a dress.” He grumbled “But Xena, I made a promise. I really don’t want to break it.”

Xena understood the statement. She could imagine Gabrielle, in the same position, making the same argument if her and Iolaus’s place had been taken by the bard and Hercules. No one really wanted to break promises, and she’d changed enough from her earlier years to feel a pang on conscience about putting her old friend into this uncomfortable position.

Only a pang though. Not enough to divert her from her goal. “Maybe you won’t have to.” She said. “If that damn kid’s telling the truth, the front lines might have just changed.”

Iolaus thought about it. “You think she is?”

Xena shrugged. “Gabrielle might know. I don’t.” She admitted. “All I know is something’s going on back there and that’s as good a something as anything else.”

Reluctantly, Iolaus nodded. “I get it.” He said. “But I’ll be honest and tell you if you don’t make them go back, I won’t be sorry.”

“Fair enough.” Xena patted him on the shoulder.

“Glad you found your friends, by the way.” Iolaus changed the subject. “Did you know that was their ship, Xena? Someone tell you , tip you off or something? It’s too big a coincidence.”

Xena shrugged again. “Just a hunch.” She said. “Try to get some rest. We’re gonna be here for another couple hours at least.” She turned and left the rail, making her way between the groups of working sailors and the refugees as she headed back to the forecabin.

Before she could get there, the door opened, and Denius emerged. He looked around and spotted her, then started walking to intercept her path. “Ah, Xena.”

Xena slowed to meet him. “Denius.” She said. “Everyone with you all right? “

The patrician paused, and visibly regrouped. “I thank you for asking, yes. Some have the sea sickness, but that’s to be expected. Fantastic rescue that you performed earlier. My retinue were spellbound.”

“It was a lucky guess.” The warrior demurred. “Glad we could help some of those people out. Too bad we were a little too late for a lot of them.”

Denius made a dismissive hand gesture. “It was the gods grace they had a chance at all. From what the captain tells me, the weather they drove into so was so ferocious, it ripped the masts off and nearly turned them over.”

“Hm.” Xena grunted in sympathy.

“Xena, may I speak with you a moment in private?”

Xena looked around at the men scattered over the deck, then back to Denius in question. “Not much privacy around here.”

“And we can be overheard in the cabins.” Denius pointed to the bow. “Perhaps up there? It seems deserted from the moment.”

They went up to the front of the ship, leaning against the ship wall. Xena waited for the man to start talking, idly watching the action on the deck behind him. She saw the other Amazons emerge from belowdecks and look around the deck.

She hoped she wasn't what they were looking for. "So." She turned her attention to Denius. "Whats up?"

"My men have been listening to what people are saying." He said. "They heard we have more bad weather ahead."

"There." Xena pointed in the direction they'd been heading. On the horizon, a dull flash of lighting could be seen. "If we run into another storm like the last one, not sure this thing'll hold together."

Denius shook his head. "So many storms in a row... does this seem natural to you, Xena? One of my men thinks it's the gods working against us. Keeping us from Athens."

"Or maybe driving us towards Athens advantage another way." Xena took the opening without regret. "I've heard a rumor the Spartans might be invading through Thrace."

Denius straightened abruptly. "You heard that?" He gasped. "My captain said he heard a rumor from the crew of the same thing!" He started pacing in agitation. "Xena, what if it's true? They'll take the port city. They'll take half of our farmlands!"

"Wouldn't be good." Xena agreed. She leaned towards him. "In fact, it's possible they picked that route because they knew I'd be heading the opposite direction. They'd have to come right past Amphipolis."

"They would." Denius eyed her. "What can we do, Xena? We have to do something. "

With a sense of inevitability, Xena smiled. "How many troops do you figure will be in Thera now?" She asked.

"Some few hundreds. Why?"

"That's enough for me to lead against whatever's invading." Xena leaned against the wall and smiled. "We can take the battle to them."

Denius exhaled, his eyes brightening. "It's as the oracle said." He breathed. "I'll talk the captain into turning around and heading back at once. Maybe if he knows he doesn't have to fight that storm he'll stop with all this precious fiddling with his ship."

He clasped her arm, then released it and headed off towards the captain on the other end of the ship with a purposeful stride.

Xena remained leaning against the wood. "That was easier than it should have been." She remarked aloud. "Why don't I trust it?" She exhaled as she saw the four Amazons spot her and head in her direction. "Why is everything going in my way and I've got the feeling it's going to run over me like a ox cart?"

The sky was lightening with the dawn, and she half turned to watch the shift in the clouds when she suddenly stopped, feeling her heart clench with a jolt of misery so powerful it almost knocked her to her knees.

Her mouth went dry, and she grabbed onto the edge of the rail, as the emotion moderated to a sense of melancholy loneliness.

She had her back turned to the Amazons and she blinked a few times to clear the tears from her eyes as she looked out over the water, aching for her distant soulmate.

"Xena, these people would like to speak to you."

"Gabrielle." Xena ignored them, staring sightlessly at the waves. "I'm coming, hon. Hang in there." She tried to think that thought at her partner, hoping the upset wasn't because she thought something had happened to her.

Surely she could feel Xena's presence? They weren't that far apart.

"Xena?"

Couldn't she? Xena closed her eyes and tried to compose her thoughts, concentrating on the bard and just thinking about her with as much affection as she could.

"Xena?"

"C'mon, Gabrielle." The warrior muttered. "I'm coming at ya. Feel that?"

The sadness muted a little, but it was impossible to tell if it was because of her efforts, or just because Gabrielle had gotten distracted by something. There was a faint sense though, of her coming closer.

Closer. Xena's brow creased. Was she headed towards where Xena was? Maybe towards Thera? She exhaled. No, surely the bard would stay home, and protect Amphipolis as best as she was able.

Right?

"Xena, excuse me?"

The impulse was to turn and roundhouse kick all four of them across the deck. Xena slowly took a breath though, and just turned instead, bracing her arms against the wood. "What?" She stared at the four women, anger erupting at this the source of the separation she was currently suffering.

Auheilia stepped forward. "This is Arigalia, Queen of my tribe and her consort Jesa." She said. "They would have words with you on several subjects."

The Amazon queen was tall and reminded Xena a little of Velaska. She had the same slightly bugged out eyes, and rich chestnut hair though hers was very liberally sprinkled with grays. Her consort was a very muscular woman with dark brown hair and eyes and a visible attitude.

Xena wasn't particularly in the mood for someone else's attitude at the moment. She could see the challenge in the two women's postures and felt her own instincts responding.

They were armed, as were Auhelia and Pasi, but that hadn't mattered to Xena for a very long time. "What is it you want?" She asked, leaning back against the hull and crossing her ankles. "I've got things to do."

"As do we." Arigalia lifted her head, responding to Xena's tone. "Our business is with the two Amazons you have taken under your protection."

Xena studied her in silence for a few minutes. "They don't need my protection." She said after everyone started to get uncomfortable. "But they are friends of mine."

"We have a claim against them." Jesa spoke up. "They caused us to be attacked on the road. Some of my people were hurt."

"Claim's canceled." Xena drawled. "Since you'd be dead right now if it wasn't for them being friends of mine." She kept her relaxed posture, getting some comfort at least in dumping more arrogance on the Amazons than she had in a long time. "And be thankful."

"For what?" Arigalia shot back. "You did nothing to assist us."

"For not killing you." Xena said. "I don't like my friends being tied up and treated like criminals."

Jesa put her hand on her sword.

Xena turned and looked at her, and smiled with absolutely no humor. "Go ahead." She drawled. "I'm in the mood to hurt something."

Arigalia put a hand on the woman's shoulder. "Jesa, stand down." She said. "We're all aware of Xena's reputation."

The way she said it, she made it a dirty word. Xena merely continued to lounge.

"Your Majesty." Auhelia stepped forward, and raised her hand. "In any case, we have a debt to Xena. Myself and Pasi. There are many layers to this. Maybe we can all just sit down and talk about it."

The queen looked at her. Then she looked over at Xena. "You're an arrogant bitch."

That got her a real smile from the warrior. "I've got good reason to be. Thanks." She responded. "But I could use a cup of ale and some bread. If you want to join me in the galley and talk about your problem, it's your choice." She pushed off the wall and started towards them.

They were blocking her progress towards the hatch, but she kept going, feeling her hands flex and curl into fists as her body recognized the imminent possibility of battle.

Suddenly wanting it, to release the stress. She closed in on them hoping they'd attack her, hoping they'd pull those weapons and start them towards her so she could take them and beat the living daylights out of them.

Maybe they sensed it. They split and let her pass, and followed after her.

Aw. Xena's sorely tested inner tiger let out a disgusted growl. What did it take, she wondered, to start a really good fight around here? She'd practically insulted their mothers.

"Did your friends tell you what happened?" The queen asked. "Did they tell you of the attack they drew on us, and the chaos they caused in Thera? You condone this?"

Xena reached the hatch and opened it. She turned and looked at the Amazon queen. "If they drew an attack on the road, that wasn't their fault." She said, in a quiet tone. "And if someone started something in Thera..." She looked at Pasi and Auhelia. "Who that person was is debatable."

She turned and went down the steps. She hardly had an idea why she invited them to break fast with her, except maybe she wanted something to distract her from the sense of forlornness she still felt coming from Gabrielle.

Maybe that's why she didn't want to be alone right now. The echo reminded her uncomfortably of the bad times... the worst times, really.

She didn't want to think about that. She was fine, Gabrielle was fine, and they were both going to stay that way.

Damn it.

**

Continued in Part 19

A Queen's Tale

Part 19

Gabrielle almost felt the silence close in around her, as the camp settled down to rest. She was curled up on the furs she had laid out over a bed of leaves, with thickly woven branch screens around her.

She was really tired. Dori was already asleep next to her, using Flameball as a pillow, but Gabrielle was taking a while to let her mind wind down after their tossed together meal and the long day and night that preceded it.

The Amazons, the militia, and the forest dwellers all seemed to be pleased with how things were going, and surprisingly pleased with Gabrielle's leadership.

That confused her, a little. She just wasn't used to it, even though she'd been the Queen of these Amazons for years now. When she'd spent time with the tribe before, Ephiny had usually been there and she naturally deferred to the older regent much like she naturally deferred to her older and occasionally wiser partner.

It felt very weird to be in charge and have people willingly listen to her.

Gabrielle lay down and put her head on her carrybag, with a faint smile for the ragged edged sack that had served as her pillow all during the long years of their wandering. It was comforting, to feel that soft leather surface under her cheek, and smell the faint hint of well rubbed dirt and mint on it.

She had started feeling better while she'd started the cooking off earlier. Her melancholy had faded, and she had found herself just thinking of Xena a lot, almost getting the sense the warrior was nearby and peering over her shoulder.

Was it real? Gabrielle felt like she didn't really care. It made her feel better and that's what counted right now. She let her eyes close, aware of the guards standing watch around them, who would take shifts during the daylight while she slept.

Was that fair? The bard felt her body loosening up, the aches from riding fading a little. She knew when they were traveling alone, Xena would stay partly awake during the night unless they were in town and even then, she knew the warrior never completely relaxed.

When they slept together, bodies tangled, she could feel it. That not quite tension in the muscles of Xena's tall frame and the faint twitches around her ears that Gabrielle would watch in fascination sometimes, mindful of the need not to make any sudden motions that would trigger those instincts.

Here, but not. Asleep, but not. Very different from when they stayed in town, or at home when the warrior could really rest.

So Gabrielle knew she'd had it easy. When she'd put her head down at night and closed her eyes, she could tumble into sleep as deeply as she wanted. Now she had militia who were standing guard, since they'd all had a chance to sleep before they'd met up the previous night.

What would Xena do? Gabrielle knew the warrior was sensitive to other people doing her that kind of favor, but with the militia there, the bard felt that she'd be curled up with Gabrielle right now, snoozing.

After all, it was her militia. She had nothing left to prove to them.

And, as an extension, Gabrielle supposed she really didn't have anything left to prove either, since she'd gone through the war with them.

Eh. Whatever. Gabrielle focused on the soft rustling of the leaves, listening to the small sounds of the forest around her that reassured her things were safe.

A squirrel, scampering up the trunk of the nearby tree. She could hear it's tiny claws scabbling

on the bark as it worked its way up, and the piping birdsong over her head that was answered from not far away.

They were real birds. The warbling was just that irregular and just that right not to be a human mimicking the sound and she could also hear the soft fluttering of its wings as it fanned itself.

No thumps of bunnies moving, though. Gabrielle licked her lips thoughtfully. They'd pretty much hunted those out to feed her big group. She enjoyed the roast rabbit, but as always felt a little pang at the thought of munching on such cute animals.

Goofy.

Maybe that's why they stuck to fish when they traveled. Xena usually said it was just easier for her to catch fish than trap game, and there was no sentimentality involved.

Maybe. Gabrielle stifled a yawn and felt her breathing slow. Certainly if it was hot, like it was now, she'd prefer to jump in a lake and start grabbing herself, rather than take the time to patiently lay traps or find a run and wait, knife or bow at the ready.

Or maybe.....

**

Gabrielle woke with a start, lifting her head up and swinging her head around as she fought through the daze of near sleep to figure out what had startled her.

The forest was still quiet. She could still hear soft rustlings, and the piping of birds. Her time sense told her she'd been sleeping for candlemarks and a quick look to the side showed Dori still curled up next to her asleep.

So what the heck?

She sat up and pulled her feet up crossed under her, running a hand through her hair as she let the thundering of her heartbeat slow down. It wasn't as if it had even been a dream – she didn't remember having one and she wasn't having the often discordant echoes of emotion they caused.

Gabrielle reached over and retrieved her waterskin, uncapping it and taking a long drink. Then she set it down and concentrated on listening, figuring maybe some sound had interrupted her sleeping and woken her.

After a moment, she got up and put the skin aside, emerging from behind the branch screens to the center of their little campsite. It was very quiet, but she could hear the gentle sounds of breathing from the sleepers around her and she crossed to the campfire, hoping someone had left a water pot to warm.

They had. She knelt by her herb carrybag that she'd left near the fire and rummaged out some mint leaves, rubbing them between her fingers before she left them to fall into the bottom of the cup. She poured some of the hot water over them and swirled the cup in her hand as she slowly turned in a circle herself.

Had it been a smell? The forest just smelled like she'd expect it to. Trees and grass, the musk of leather and the tickle of smoke from the campfire.

She felt the sun filtering through the leaves, though a rumble far off told her the clouds she could see would become less than benign.

She took a sip of her tea, then paused. Thunder.

Was that really thunder? Or a gust of wind bringing something else to her ears?

Then she heard a closer sound, soft footfalls coming at them at a rapid pace, and she quickly took

a long swallow of the warmed herbs before she tossed the rest out and grabbed for her bags. "Dori!"

A forest dweller burst into the clearing. "Army's moving fast." He said. "Heading through the pass in a minute!"

Gabrielle let out a sharp whistle, as her daughter came rambling out, her eyes blinking in confusion. "Dori, get your bags, honey. We need to make Shadow go fast."

"Go fast?" Dori turned and raced back for her things. "Good!"

Amazons and forest dwellers came tumbling out of the campsite, already strapping on weapons and pulling bags over their shoulders. "What's up?" Solari asked.

"Dag, what's the word?" Jessan asked the scout. "I hear you say the Spartans are coming?"

The scout nodded. "Got word from my partner." He said. "He's just on this side of the pass. He heard them coming up the road and tapped me." He said. "Got some time, but not much."

Not much.

Cait and Paladia appeared, already leading their mounts. "Good job you left someone back there." Cait said. "I knew they weren't going to stick around Amphipolis long. Silly elders."

Paladia grunted. "Yeah, but now they're after our butts bigtime." She remarked. "Bet they're pissed."

"They had to choose between taking their bile out on our hometown, or catching up with me in time to keep me from warning Athens." Gabrielle observed. "I bet they're pissed too." Privately though, she wondered.

Had they seen through the ruse so quickly? Or had someone tipped them off?

"Damn that was fast." Jessan was belting on his sword. "Gabrielle, you were right again." His snout moved into a wrinkled grin. "It's almost like having Xena with us only less scary."

"Eh." Gabrielle waggled her hand. She ducked back inside the little alcove she'd been sleeping in and started tucking her things into Shadow's saddlebags, as Dori romped around her, apparently delighted at this alteration of their plans and her sudden waking.

Children. The bard shook her head. She was sure she didn't remember being that damn carefree, even at the age Dori was. "We're going to have to ride a lot, Dor. You ready for that?"

"Horsies!" Dori galloped in a circle. "Mama, when can I have a horsie? Boo promised!"

"When did Boo promise you that, sweetheart?" Gabrielle got Dori's toys in her bag and stood up. "Hm? What did she say, did she say she'd get you a horsie right away?"

"She said.." Dori gallumped to a halt. "Mama she said when I was red. I'm red now!"

Ah. Well, that made sense. Gabrielle ruffled her hair. "Let's wait until we see Boo, and we can ask her if you're ready, okay? I'm sure if you are, Boo will help us find you a horsie." Dori wasn't, she didn't think, ready for a horse yet, really.

She could ride, no question. And she loved the animals, no question about that either, but taking care of a horse, especially a horse that was vastly bigger than she was – that was another story. She was satisfied that her partner hadn't gone and promised their offspring something immediate. "Let's go."

They joined the rest of the group by the campfire, which the militia were busy banking. One of the forest dwellers was quickly wrapping the leftovers from the night before into waybread, and was passing them out.

Gabrielle took a pair for her and Dori, stuffing them into her herb bag before she slung it over her other shoulder. She really wanted time for a swim, and a bath, but her mind was measuring the distance between the pass to where they were and wasn't finding it a comfortable thought.

Last thing she wanted to do was thunder through the countryside exposing every town between here and Thera to the Spartans with no time for them to do anything about it.

One of the other forest dwellers emerged, leading Shadow and two other horses. "Ho ho ho.. here we go." He said. "Gabrielle, here's your pretty friend."

"Thanks. Gabrielle hoisted her saddle bags up onto Shadow's back, strapping them in place and adding her staff into its holders. "Dori, ready to go?" She turned and picked up the child, giving her a brief hug before she turned and helped her climb up into the saddle.

"Gabrielle." Dag came over to her. "My partner tells me... there's a big party of horsemen riding ahead of the army. He thinks they're coming after us. He says.. probably a score of them, maybe two."

It wasn't the first time that Gabrielle envied the forest dweller's much greater talent when it came to soulmates. She would have given every gold nugget in the mountain she lived on to have been able to communicate that clearly with her partner. "Figures." She said. "But I bet they don't break out too far ahead. Even a score of Spartans could get into trouble if the countryside rose up against them."

Everyone nodded. "They may be stuck up enough not to think that." Solari did mention. "They were pretty arrogant when they were up at Amph."

And that was also true. "We'll find out." Gabrielle swung aboard Shadow and settled in behind Dori. She was pleased to discover she wasn't as sore as usual from riding and she gathered the reins in her hand, then realized she had no idea which way they needed to go.

Duh. She'd followed the lead of the scouts on the way in, and habituated as she was to being with Xena she hadn't worried about marking the path. Xena always knew where she was. And even when she didn't, she pretended so well Gabrielle willingly followed her anyway.

It was an awkward pause. Then Bennu appeared from between two trees and mounted his horse. "Got a shortcut up that way." He pointed to the left. "Get us to the road past the bend, quick like." He started off and the group followed him.

Gabrielle was fifth in line, as they passed through the trees. Bennu and two militia were ahead of her, and so was Solari and Dag. Jessan and the rest fell in behind them and their pace quickened, moving as fast as they could in the deep underbrush.

"Mama, there's a pretty bug!" Dori pointed at a butterfly in a nearby bush "Look! C'n we catch him!?"

"Not right now honey." Gabrielle ducked under a low hanging branch. "We've got to go fast for a while, and we can't catch bugs right now." She tucked one arm around Dori in case she got any funny ideas of flying off the back of the horse after the blue and yellow insect.

"Gabrielle." Bennu called back. "You want to try a back way?"

The bard hesitated. A back way might evade their pursuers and keep them hidden. But a back way would keep them off the road, and away from most of the towns. Now that the Spartans were truly on their heels, which was the better way?

She knew what Xena would choose. "But unfortunately for everyone, probably even me. I'm not Xena." She muttered. "Go on the road, Bennu. We need to warn everyone we see what's coming behind us."

“Aye.” Bennu turned around and urged his horse a little faster.

And as soon as the echo of the words faded, Gabrielle felt that sense of rightness at the decision that was a rare, and sometimes unreliable pointer for her. It was reassuring. Mostly.

Reliable, mostly.

She knew Xena had the same sort of instinct, but the warrior had lived longer than Gabrielle and had come to a belief in it, in her own internal judgement, that allowed her to accept that feeling of rightness as correct.

The problem was, it didn't always mean the choice, whatever it was, was the best choice for either of them. Xena had known that certainty over Hope, for example. She'd known, and she'd accepted that inside knowledge and it had almost destroyed both of them.

She had been right, though. That had been the right path, as much as it hurt Gabrielle even now to acknowledge it.

A little scary sometimes. Gabrielle exhaled, and leaned forward a little, as the trees closed in tightly around them and the horses had to step carefully between the roots. She herself had felt she knew that sureness, when she'd gone after Xena to Chin.

That had felt right too. No matter the cost to her, or who she had to deal with. But that had almost destroyed them also, and she'd hardly lived through the heartache of it.

And, she'd been right. Xena had told her afterward, long afterward, that she knew the choice she'd made that time was wrong, and that she knew it all the way to Chin but she just hadn't cared. She thought they were lost to each other, and it wasn't worth her living anymore.

Gabrielle felt a lump rising in her throat, and she pushed aside the morbid thoughts and tried to concentrate on something more productive. “Think positive, Gabrielle.” She uttered softly. “Every step this horse takes is bringing us closer.”

“Mama?” Dori turned around.

“I said, we're getting closer to Boo, honey. Isn't that great?” Gabrielle said. “Let's go real fast, huh?”

“Gogo!”

**

Xena entered her cabin and closed the door behind her, leaning on it as she regarded the room's two other occupants.

Ephiny spoke up first. “No luck?”

The warrior exhaled, and went over to sit down on her bunk. “Not exactly.” She muttered. “We're turning around.”

“Oh, great.” Pony stifled a yawn. “That was fast work, champ.”

“Yeah.” Ephiny smiled. “That's very good news. I'm looking forward to getting back home.”

Xena rested her elbows on her knees and stared pensively at the wall. “The prisoner they've got down there told me there's an army invading through Thrace.”

“An army.” Ephiny slowly repeated, sitting up and pushing her curly hair back. “As in, Spartans?”

Xena nodded.

“Thrace... as in the place just upriver from home?” Pony asked.

Xena nodded again.

“Ah heh.” The regent sighed. “So that’s why we’re heading back.”

“Well.” Xena sprawled out in her bunk. “That’s why they think we’re heading back. I have no idea if that damn prisoner is telling the truth or not.”

“Well, no point in risking it.” Pony commented. “I mean, like we’re going back anyway.”

“Yeah.”

Ephiny’s brow creased. “You don’t want to go back home?” She queried. “You sound bummed.”

“I do.” The warrior said. “It just all happened too easily.”

There was a brief silence. “So.. you’re bummed because everything worked out for a change?” Ephiny ventured.

“Yes.” Xena frowned. “Damn it.”

Ephiny rubbed her temples, but remained silent.

Pony stretched out again on the floor. “Damn I miss Gabrielle.” She said. “She can explain you when you say stuff like that.”

Xena grunted.

Ephiny chuckled. Then she got to her feet. “I’m going to take a walk around the deck.” She announced. “Not that I don’t appreciate the hospitality, Xena, but these bones aren’t used to sleeping on the floor anymore.”

“Be careful.” Pony warned. “Remember those two jackasses are out there.”

“Hm.” Ephiny brightened. “Hand me those chobos.”

It was Xena’s turn to chuckle. “I had a talk with them.” She said. “You should be safe.” She folded her hands over her stomach. “And for the record, I miss Gabrielle too.”

Ephiny patted her on the shoulder before she slipped out the door, closing it behind her.

**

It was quiet in the cabin for a short while. Then Pony cleared her throat. “So are we in trouble?”

Xena chortled softly. “Have you ever known me not to be in trouble?” She asked, in a wry tone. “If you ask my mother, it started at birth.”

“Not exactly what I meant.”

Xena put her hands behind her head. “Something’s going on.” She admitted. “Probably is the damn Spartans.”

“Huh.” Pony grunted.

“I told Denius I’d lead whoever he’s got there trying to join up against them.”

Pony remained silent for a while. Then she grunted again. “Thought you didn’t want any part of the war.”

“That was before the war decided to invade my hometown.” Xena said. “So if I have to end up leading the Athenian army out here to keep the Spartans out of my mother’s kitchen, so be it.”

So be it. Pony studied Xena’s profile, in the dappled shadows from the window. “Line in the sand? Something like that?”

“Something like that.” The warrior admitted. “Always been a weak spot.”

“Not to mention, Gabrielle’s there.” Pony said, in a practical tone. “That sorta counts.”

“Yeah. And Dori.” Xena said. “I promised her I’d get her a pony, before this all happened.” She reflected. “Dori I mean. She loves horses.”

“Just like you.”

The warrior had to smile. “Yeah. Just like me.”

“Sorry I didn’t stop her, Xena.” Pony said, after another small silence. “I shoulda.”

“How?” The warrior turned her head to peer at the weapons master. “Knock her over the head? I never could stop Gabrielle when she had an ideal between her teeth.”

“Surprised she didn’t come with you.”

Xena gave her a look. “She promised Eph she’d stay.” She said. “But even then, it was damn close.” She admitted. “She wanted to.”

She remembered walking out of that dining hall, and not daring to look back, knowing one meeting of their eyes, one twitch of her fingers in a c’mere gesture and Gabrielle would have. That even though this was something the bard had wanted, Hades, something she’d asked Xena to do there was always, always that faint hint of remembrance of partings, of her fear of being left behind.

How many times she’d heard that almost soundless whisper, in the depths of her partner’s bad dreams? Don’t leave me, Xena please...

Don’t leave her. Xena looked up at the cabin’s ceilings. And yet, in their lives together Gabrielle had been the one to leave, mostly.

Mostly. But then, she’d always expected her to. Gabrielle had always felt she was leaving for Xena’s sake, that Xena only humored her being there, or that she was putting her in danger or.. whatever.

Whatever .

But she knew she’d have seen that little echo there looking back at her in that dining hall and if she’d turned and smiled and jerked her head towards the door...

Well, then she wouldn’t be lying here in this damn bunk wishing, now would she?

“Well, sorry we put you guys through that.” Pony said, awkwardly. “I know it freaks her out.” She added. “It was really cool she asked you to come rescue our butts.”

Xena smiled. “You’ll owe her one.”

Pony snorted softly. “She doing okay back there? They’re not giving her a hard time? Eph was worried about that.”

“Yeah.” Xena exhaled. “She’s doing fine, but I sure hope you recognize the tribe you’re going home to.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“She was trying some new ideas out on them.”

“Uh oh.”

**

It was clouding up again. Ephiny stood for a little while outside the door to the cabins, simply enjoying the non moving deck, and the sense of quiet purpose in the sailors. There was a cool breeze coming in over the water, and she leaned against the wooden wall, thinking.

Thinking about being alive, for one thing. Now that she'd had some time to get a rest, and the rain had stopped, and she'd gotten used to the idea that she wasn't going to die in a cold sea on a dark night.

Die with Pony, and her unborn child. That had been a tough realization, knowing she'd never get to meet that person yet to be. She and Pony had finally talked about it, really talked about it, on the first night after they'd made camp.

Hard to say really which one of them had been more scared, or more relieved in pretty much any order.

She'd almost adjusted to being pregnant. She could feel the start of the changes in her body, and now that she was out of the Hades she'd gotten herself and Pony into, she could get back to enjoying the process.

Well, not exactly enjoying. Ephiny watched some of the Athenian patricians walking back and forth across the deck, arguing. They were too far for her to hear their words, but neither looked happy. She watched them for a few minutes, then she walked over to the edge of the ship and idly examined the sea.

It felt a little surreal, still. It was hard to believe the nightmare they'd been in for three days was over, and the storm was over, and she was on another ship, on the way home. Or, well, she would be on her way home as soon as they finished patching things.

These sailors seemed to know more about their business, though. They had the look of old salts and a sturdy competence in their motions as they sewed gaps in the sail and put braces around the mast.

Unlike the other crew. Unruly and ragged and nearly animalistic in their behavior. After she'd gotten free of her bonds and they'd gotten on deck, the increasing desperation of their shipmates had driven them to take a stand with a few of the officers, weapons at the ready.

If they all had to die, well, they were determined to die last.

She was glad she'd killed the Amazon queen. It had felt good, and she'd seen the woman's eyes widen in shock as she'd driven the knife home. It had woken that primal Amazon inside her, and she was looking forward to getting back home and telling everyone about it.

Sandal licking bitch. Boy, had she deserved it. The regent smiled briefly, wondering if Gabrielle would be shocked to hear what she'd done.

She thought about that for a while, pondering the unexpectedly robust backbone her queen sometimes displayed. No, she decided, Gabrielle would not be shocked.

Maybe disappointed. It was hard to say.

Traveling hadn't been nearly as fun as Gabrielle made it out to be. Ephiny was now firmly convinced that Gabrielle believed it was simply because it was her, and Xena or maybe them and Dori, alone together.

That mattered. She'd really enjoyed the alone time together with Pony. That part she got. She enjoyed not having two dozen Amazons constantly shuttling in and out of her sight and her quarters, asking her questions, asking her for advice, asking her to judge something.

That part she got too. It had been fun, though a little rough, right up until they'd met the foreign Amazons and then it had gone straight to Tartarus with all the sniping attitude and snippy meant

to be heard whispers.

Then, she'd envied Gabrielle. Both because the bard and her Queen was so much better at dealing with people like that and because she had Xena behind her if it got too crazy. Much as she loved Pony, and much as she had confidence in her own martial skills pregnant or not – having the Destroyer of Nations tucked into your bodice sure was a natural winner.

She'd been so damn glad to see her. Leaning on the rail and seeing that powerful body swarming it's way across the rope, she'd felt a sense of relief that was so profound it still bothered her a little thinking of it.

She and Pony were able to take care of themselves. But when you were on a sinking ship, with women trying to kill you, and a bunch of randy sailors determined to get one last hump in before they died it sure was nice to have someone like Xena show up.

Especially if she was on your side.

If she wasn't? Well, not so much. Ephiny turned and regarded the deck, pushing away from the wall and walking slowly along the port side. It felt good to stretch her legs, and the brisk sea air was settling her mildly upset stomach.

It felt good to know they were going home too. After all, she'd achieved her goal- she'd found the stupid morons and tried to talk to them, hadn't she? No one could say she just let the Amazon nation as a whole march off to war without a warning now could they?

She arrived at the bow and mounted the two steps up to go the very front of it, watching the seagulls wheel over the deck and the rocky escarpment beyond it.

Not too different from the one that had sunk her own boat. Ephiny paused, remembering the darkness, and the noise and the stench they'd been in. "Been a long time since I'd been that pissed off."

From the corner of her eye, she spotted one of the Amazons that had come with Xena, the older one who'd started the fight in town. Ephiny's eyes narrowed, but the woman was alone, so she stayed where she was until Auhalia came over to join her.

She'd been the lesser offensive of the two, the regent remembered. Sticking with her sister mostly out of family responsibility, she'd felt.

"Hello." Auhalia murmured. "You're Ephiny, right?"

Ephiny leaned on her elbows. "Yep." She turned her head and looked at the woman. "Are you suicidal enough to want more trouble with me?"

"No." The Amazon shook her head.

Ephiny returned her gaze to the water.

"I just wanted to apologize." Auhalia said. "We should have listen to you and just gone home."

The regent shook her head. "So what changed your mind?" She asked. "Or did you just figure out we weren't lying?"

The Amazon leaned against the wall next to her. "I guess I realized these people don't care about us, or want us. We're just something to leer at or have a go at to them. They don't respect us."

Ephiny glanced at her. "Xena said there was some trouble with the crew?"

"Not the crew. Merchants." Auhalia said. "But the crew would have let them do it, before Xena stepped in. Now they treat us like queens because she told them to. They follow her around like puppies."

Ephiny chuckled. "She has that effect on people."

"Is she the queen of your tribe?" Auhalia asked. "In truth?"

Ephiny thought about that for a while. Was she? "No." The regent said. "Xena's not even an Amazon. She's only one in name because she's our queen's consort."

"She said something of that." The other Amazon said. "It sounds very strange."

"Welcome to my world." Ephiny smiled. "It's not traditional, but it works for us. Gabrielle's the queen, I'm her regent, Xena's her consort, and between all of us we have a powerful tribe that feeds itself and is growing." She said. "We've fought wars. That's why we wanted to warn you all against getting involved in this one. It's not a forest skirmish."

Auhalia remained silent for a moment. "Now most of us all are dead." She said. "All but my queen and her consort and my sister and I"

"If you expect me to feel sorry for them, I don't." Ephiny turned her head and looked at the woman. "People who have me tied up and thrown in a lockdown on the way to selling me to slavemasters don't get my pity."

"They thought you were working against Athens." The Amazon said, almost apologetically.

"I was." Ephiny straightened up. "My mistake was thinking they were more Amazon than toadys for Athens." She started off. "If your queen knows what's good for her, she'll just stay clear of us, and go back where you came from when we get into port."

"It's true, we're going back then?" Auhalia called after her.

"It's true." Ephiny spotted another empty space and aimed for it. She didn't have anything in particular against Auhalia, and the woman hadn't had any part in her captivity but the whole tribe and it's leader had given Ephiny the hives and the further she could stay away from them the happier she'd be.

Bastards. She'd forgotten how damned prickly and stuck up Amazons could be. All wrapped up in their egos and who had precedence. She remembered it being like that, under Melosa.

"Old timers." It occurred to her that having had to live with Gabrielle's relaxed and laid back leadership for so long, she was getting out of the habit of thinking like an Amazon. "Hm." She paused to watch a man braiding a rope with quick, expert fingers.

A man in a silk toga emerged from the hatch and strode purposefully towards the working sailors. "All right, ya lazy pigs! Let's get moving! Altz – you and those useless brothers if yours get started hauling the anchor line!"

Ephiny got into a corner out of the way as the sailors all started scrambling.

The hatch slammed open, and more sailors emerged, carrying buckets of pitch, their faces wrapped in squares of linen. They filed away towards the back of the ship, and from below, Ephiny could hear the scrape and rasp as oars were seated in locks.

She looked over the side, and confirmed the sound. "Guess we're leaving."

There was a loud bang, and then men started a chant as they hauled the anchor up, and a flutter of canvas as the sails started to rise.

The door to the cabins opened and Xena hopped out, her blue eyes scanning the deck alertly. Pony was right behind her, and in a moment they joined Ephiny near the rail. "Faster than I thought." Xena remarked.

"All the better." Pony said. "I'm tired a Hades of being on a damn boat."

Xena, who had only been on board for a few days, heartily agreed. Now that they were actually starting on the way back home, she wanted it over. She wanted to be back in Thera, she wanted to be off the ship, and have Iolaus the horse under her, and she wanted badly to be riding for home.

The ship rocked under them, and there was a huge crack and a thump from the bow. Then the sails crawled up the mast and filled out and a low chant echoed through the floorboards.

They walked to the front of the boat, as the bow swung around and they started moving, heading towards clearer skies and leaving the storm for the moment behind them.

**

Gabrielle pulled her cloak a little more closely around Dori, blinking as raindrops pattered into her eyes. Overhead the thunder rolled, and she could barely see Bennu's back ahead of them as they made slow headway against the storm.

It was getting dark. The road had offered good passage until the rain had started, and now they were struggling to keep moving against the stiff wind and heavy downpour.

"Mama, this is no fun." Dori complained. "Too wet!"

"I know honey." Gabrielle shaded her eyes. "We're trying to find someplace dry so we can get away from the rain."

"Pfffffftttplug." Dori razzed the weather. "Where's Boo?"

"Hopefully she's some place nicer than this, and we're going to find her soon." Gabrielle gathered the rain slick leather in her hands as she saw Bennu pulling up ahead of her. He half turned in the saddle and gestured, and she guided Shadow up next to him. "What's up?"

"Village." He pointed ahead at an apparently impenetrable sheet of rain obscuring the road.

"Really?"

"Aye." Bennu said. "Point man come back and said. Probably fifty houses, maybe an inn. You want to stop and warn em?"

"We should." Gabrielle sighed. "Since this damn road goes right through their front yards."

She brought Shadow up even with Bennu's horse and they plowed on through the rain – a curtain that only grudgingly parted as they passed through it and revealed the shadowy outline of the town ahead.

No one was around. Gabrielle looked to her right and left as they crossed through the muddy lanes leading off to either side but saw no man or animal in sight, not surprising given the weather.

She saw a little bigger building off to the side, and just made out the lantern swinging next to the door that commonly marked an inn. "Over there. Let's see if anyone's around." She led the way over to the yard in front of the inn and slipped off Shadow's back.

"Not too long." Jessan was huddled under a cloak of his own, as were all the forest dwellers. In the storm, they looked mostly like big men, dark and anonymous. "We'll stay out here."

Gabrielle lifted Dori down and she and Bennu strode towards the inn, making it to the door as the rain came down even harder. "Sheesh."

"Summer weather." Bennu pushed the door open, and they looked inside. It was dim, but they could see two or three bodies outlined against the backdrop of the hearth. "Lo there."

Gabrielle pushed her hood back as she shoved the door closed behind her, leaving the rain behind for a moment. "Hello."

An older man was standing near the fire, and two younger ones were sitting at a table. Behind them, a young girl stood with a pitcher in one hand. "What do you want?" The older man said gruffly. "We've got no spare here. This inn's closed."

Gabrielle didn't answer for a moment, her mind busy evaluating all the tensions she felt in the room and in the man's voice. Lot going on here. She decided. "That's okay, we're not asking for anything. We just needed to warn you about something."

"Aye." Bennu agreed. "Got you someone in charge here?"

The older man shrugged. "Me if anyone."

"Stay here, Dori." Gabrielle walked across the room and faced the man, now close enough to see the scar running across his face. The nearer of the two at the table shifted, and she saw he was missing an arm. "I guess a lot of your people left for the war?"

The older man nodded briefly. "Left, or were taken." He said. "Where be you from?"

"Amphipolis." Gabrielle replied, seeing the reaction to the name. "Anyway, we don't have a lot of time. There's a Spartan army coming up the road. If I were you, I'd take whoever's left here and get back in the hills. They'll be looking for supplies."

The man stared at her. The two younger men stood up in reaction. "Spartans!" The nearer said. "But ..."

The older man took a step closer to Gabrielle and studied her face. "I know ye." He said. "Bigods you're Gabrielle the Bard." He turned towards the other men. "She's Xena's mate."

Mate. Gabrielle blinked a little, having never heard herself described quite that way. "So that's the warning. We can't stay, we're trying to stay ahead of them." She said. "But it's a big army, and there might be a vanguard through here.. maybe as early as the morning."

"Might be sooner." Bennu said. "Depends if they travel faster in the weather than we are."

The man nodded. "Aye, understood." He said. "Figured on trouble, but not so soon. Xena tried to warn us when she was here a few days back."

Ah. Gabrielle's mood brightened, despite everything. So she was on the right track. "We're going to join her. Be safe." She put a hand on the man's arm. "Don't take any chances." She added, aware of the irony of what she was saying.

"No place to be safe." The man with one arm said. "They took all we had towards Athens. Left us here with just cripples and old men, and a few children. Said they'd keep us safe." His lips twisted. "Yah. Safe."

"Be fair." The older man said. "They didn't come to take. They paid in coin. Xena warned us." He said. "She warned us, and still we took the coin. Even my son did."

"Mama." Dori came over and clutched at her leg, looking up at the man. "Hi."

"Gabrielle, we better get on." Bennu said.

The man was staring at Dori. "Your little one?" He asked Gabrielle.

"Mine and Xena's." The bard responded. "We do have to get moving. Good luck." She took Dori's hand and turned, heading back towards the door. "Try to tell anyone you see around here." She added with a glance over her shoulder.

And that one look saved her life as she caught a motion in the doorway to the kitchen hearth and her ears recognized the sound of a crossbow firing. She dove towards the door instinctively, covering Dori's body with hers as she hit the surface and sent the wooden portal swinging

outwards with a bolt buried deep just over her head.

Bennu drew his sword and yelled a warning, seconds too late.

Gabrielle felt the rain hit her as she rolled outside, letting out a yell of her own as her little force bolted towards her. "Help Bennu!" She called as Solari and Jessan raced past her. "They've got crossbows!"

The forest dwellers and militia headed for the door with weapons drawn, as Cait and Paladia went to Gabrielle's side as the bard got to her feet and picked Dori up in her arms. "Damn it." She could hear the fight inside and almost turned to join it, then realized there just was no way with her daughter there.

"What was that all about?" Paladia asked. "Thought these guys were friendly?"

"Yeah, me too." Gabrielle carried Dori over to Shadow and put her on the horses' back. "Dori, just hang on there okay."

"Mama." Dori's eyes were wide.

"I know, that was scary." Gabrielle patted her leg, and looked around. She could barely see past the wall of the inn in the rain, and realized they were exposed to anyone who came around the side of it. "Someone came through the back as we were leaving and shot at me."

Cait drew her dagger and slipped around the side of the inn without another word. Paladia regarded the hole in the mist, and came back over to Gabrielle instead of following. "This place gives me the creeps."

"Me too now." Gabrielle got her boot in the stirrup and swung up onto Shadow's back. "Go on and get mounted in case we need to get out of here fast." She said. "For some reason, I think we're going to."

Paladia snorted, but she went to her sturdy roan and climbed onboard. "Don't you want to go kick some ass in there?" She asked with typical bluntness.

Gabrielle had her staff out and in her hand, and she was turning Shadow in a circle, watching for anyone coming towards them. "You volunteering to watch my kid?" She looked over at Paladia.

The ex renegade looked back at her, then slowly lifted her forefinger, and licked it, then made a stroke in the air. "Gotme."

Gabrielle had no idea what that meant, but she figured it didn't mean yes. She felt more than useless sitting out there in the rain, and thinking of her people inside fighting without her bothered her like crazy.

Wasn't right.

She could hear crashing inside, and then she started, grabbing her staff and swinging it around as the door blasted open again and four figures tumbled out. Two were men in half armor, two were her own militia, and she turned Shadow and charged towards the struggle, lifting her staff up.

Dori was clutching the front of the saddle in wide eyed silence as her mother swung the horse past the first two fighters and leaned to one side, slamming her staff down on the armored man's head as she went by.

The sound was like a nut being cracked with a stone and the militia man rolled clear, covering his head as Shadow jumped over him.

Jessan bounded out of the inn just as she got to the second tangle of men and he jumped on the third with a roar, claws outstretched.

Hoofbeats sounded suddenly in the rain, and Gabrielle whirled Shadow around, but the thunder receded away from them rapidly, and she saw shadowy figures bolting past the lane and towards the road.

“Gabrielle!”

Gabrielle heard the warning in the tone and she turned Shadow again, whipping her head around to find the danger. She saw the lunging body and flash of metal coming at her and took her hand off the saddle, grabbing the other end of her staff and swinging it cross her body just in time to meet the edge before it cut into her leg.

The man reached up and grabbed her and yanked her hard, and without a hold she felt herself coming out of the saddle. She released a hand off the staff and grabbed the man’s head instead, shoving hard away from her as she clamped her legs down hard and tried to stay on Shadow’s back.

He grappled with her, and she yanked her boot from the stirrup and kicked him, getting just enough clearance to get her staff down and whack him one handed across the side of his head.

He stumbled, then thumped his body against Shadows and reached up to grab Dori from her perch, letting out a yell as he did so.

Dori screamed in counterpoint and Gabrielle dropped her staff and yanked her dagger from it’s sheath as her instincts overcame thought and she aimed for the man’s face in a pulsing rush of fury.

He ducked aside and dodged, right into Bennu’s sword as the militia captain bore down on him. His hands clutched at Bennu’s armor and he tried to reach for his throat, but he was already dying as Bennu yanked his blade back and he slid to the floor.

Then for a moment, it was quiet save the thunder of the rain around them.

Gabrielle fought to catch her breath, her entire body shivering. “Y.... you okay Dori?” She finally got out, watching the knife shake in her hand.

“Bad mens.” Dori turned around and clutched her arm. “Mama, that was scary.”

Gabrielle could hear her own heartbeat, thundering in her ears. “Yeah it was.” She swallowed with difficulty. “That was really scary.”

Cait appeared at her boot and handed her back up her staff. “Here you go, your Majesty.” She said. “I’m sorry, but a bunch of them ran away. I couldn’t get them all.” She sounded profoundly disappointed.

The bard felt maybe her hands had stopped shaking enough for her to sheath her dagger without stabbing herself in the midriff, and she slowly did that, before she reached out to grab her staff. “Thanks Cait.”

“Damned bastards.” Bennu came over and put a hand on her knee. “You all right, Gabrielle?”

“What a bunch of losers.” Jessan joined them, his fur dripping with rainwater. “Who in Hades were those guys? Did you say something to them in there?” He asked Bennu.

Bennu shook his head. “We were leaving, yeah?” He said. “Just turned to go and then Gabrielle looked over and next thing I knowed it, arrows were flying around the place.”

“From the people in there?” Jessan looked bewildered. “From the town?”

“No.” Gabrielle finally spoke up. “Raiders. Guys in armor. Guys just like thousands of guys Xena and I have had to deal with for years. Dirty guys in someone else’s pay for whatever reason.”

“Ah.” Cait murmured. “Well, I got six of them.” She remarked. “Why would they try to shoot you though?”

The door to the inn opened again, and everyone grabbed a weapon and turned.

But it was only the old man, who slowly emerged, one arm clasped across his chest. He stared out at them and then limped across the muddy ground to where Shadow was standing.

“Maybe we’re going to find out.” Gabrielle put her hand on her knife hilt as the man came near. She met his eyes and stared at him as he slowed, and finally came to a halt in front of her.

There was blood on his shirt.

She could see death in his eyes, already. “Why?” She asked, in a quiet tone.

He looked like he wanted to cry. “I’m sorry.” He said. “They’d my wife in the back, with a knife to her. I didn’t know how to warn ye.” He looked at the muddy ground. “She’s dead now. Should have figured that... but she was all I had left.”

Gabrielle freed her boots and again and slid down from Shadow’s back. “Hold this.” She handed her staff to Cait, who took it. She walked over and faced the man, reaching out and gently touching his cheek.

He gazed at her in silence.

“I understand what that feels like.” Gabrielle said. “I would have done the same thing.”

His entire body shivered in reaction, and he did start to cry, soundless droplets leaking down his cheek. “Bastards.” He whispered. “All gone now.”

Gabrielle ached for him, regardless. “What did they want?” She asked. “Can you tell me that?”

“You.” He muttered. “Looking for you, that’s all.”

“From Sparta, or Athens?” The bard persisted, gentle but inflexible. “I need to know.”

But he shook his head. “Wouldn’t say. Didn’t say who send em.” He glanced slowly around at the group surrounding him. Then he turned and slowly moved back towards the door to the inn, ignoring the silently standing figures.

When he got to the door he reached out, then hesitated, then fell to the ground, rolling half onto his back as the rain pelted him and diluted the red stain spreading across his chest. Solari was closest, and she crouched next to him, touching his throat.

Then she stood, and shrugged.

“Two inside tried to shield him.” Bennu said briefly. “Didn’t last.”

Gabrielle exhaled. “Let’s move.” She said. “From here on, we don’t stop.” She climbed up onto Shadow’s back and tugged her cloak around to cover Dori as well. There just wasn’t time to be horrified.

Everyone mounted up around her, mostly in silence. “Which way d’ye want to head, Gabrielle?” Bennu said. “These be wild parts.”

“Let’s get out of this town first.” Gabrielle pulled her hood up. “Then we’ll see what our options are.” They moved back out onto the road, the village utterly silent around them. Bennu and Jessan rode on either side of her, but no one seemed willing now to take the lead on where they were going next.

“Mama.” Dori was rubbing the water out of her eyes. “I wanna go home. This is no fun.”

Gabrielle put one arm around her and hugged her. "I know it isn't." She said. "But we can't go home right now, Dori. We have to keep going, and find Xena."

"Find Boo?" Her daughter said, wistfully. "Mama I miss Boo lots."

"Me too." Gabrielle agreed. "Keep your eyes open, folks." She said, in a louder voice. "No telling when those guys will be back and after us."

"Sitting ducks out here." Bennu muttered. "Rain's only thing hiding us."

Either side of the road was thick forest. Gabrielle couldn't see any paths other than the one they were on, and so they kept on it, riding a little faster despite the continuing downpour.

Around a long bend, they suddenly heard hoofbeats over the rain. "Gabrielle!" Bennu rode up near her.

"I hear it." Gabrielle half stood in her stirrup. "From behind us?"

"Ahead." Solari said.

"And behind."

The bard felt an odd prickle then, and she looked right and left, the tug catching her attention. "Over there." She pointed. "Lets take that gap ... it's heading up into the hills. Maybe we can cross over and gain some time."

"And lose some jerks." Solari turned her horse towards the small mountain path. "At least we'll get out of sight."

At least. Gabrielle fell in behind Bennu as they left the road and entered the forest, leaning forward as they started up the narrow track that somehow.. somehow felt familiar.

Imagination?

Whatever.

**

"So we're going." Iolaus was brushing out the mare's coat.

"Yeah." Xena leaned against the ropes. "Sorry about that."

"No you aren't." The blond man glanced at her. "But if you want to know a secret, neither am I really." He sorted the mare's mane between his fingers. "I thought about what you said, about the front lines moving with you, not back there in the capital. "

"Mm."

"And since I don't' really have a choice anyway, I decided you may be right." Iolaus chuckled wryly. "I didn't think the whole me acting like a woman thing was going to work anyway. I sort of think Herc maybe came up with that just to keep me busy."

Xena privately thought the same thing. "Distract them, maybe." She countered, however. "Draw their attention."

"Maybe." Iolaus conceded.

"I'm pretty good at that." Xena said. "Distracting people, I mean."

The blond man chuckled softly under his breath. "And you're so modest too." He said. "Not to mention, you're a lot more convincing in a dress."

"Depends on what you're trying to convince someone of." The warrior retorted. "Wanna see what

you look like as an Amazon?"

"Oh no."

Footsteps intruded into the animal hold. They turned to find the captain of the soldiers entering. He stopped when he saw them, and came over. "Ah, there you both are."

"Here we both are." Iolaus confirmed the obvious. "What can we do for you captain?"

"The prisoners have escaped the jail again." The man said, his tone indicating he didn't think much of the facility. "We're at sail, they will be found but have a care. Two of the crew were throat cut outside the doors and their blades taken."

"Oh. Yay." Iolaus muttered.

Xena sighed. "What in Hades do they think they're doing? Where do they think they'll go, over the side?"

"Make my life easier if they did." The captain agreed. "Nor will the Thera jailkeeper be smiling when I throw them back in his cell when we get there."

No, he certainly wouldn't. Xena sighed and glanced at Iolaus. "Should we?"

"Is there really a question involved here?" Iolaus responded in a mournful tone. "But Xena, surely the crew knows the ship a lot better than we do."

The captain had been swinging his head from right to left, following the conversation. Or perhaps not. "Denius asked me to ask you both to remain with one of my officers to protect you."

Xena turned around and looked at him, letting her hands rest on her hips. Iolaus leaned on the back of the mare and cocked his head, an incredulous look on his face.

"He is concerned especially that the men who escaped be kept away. They were speaking of wanting to kill you." The captain said, placidly. "So if you would be so kind, to please stay here. My men are guarding the door overhead, and that entrance." He indicated the hatch to the lower decks.

"B.."

"Sure." Xena overrode Iolaus. She smiled at the captain. "We'll stay right here."

The captain smiled back. "My gratitude to you." He half bowed, then trotted up the steps, already shouting orders to his troops.

"Xena." Iolaus came around from behind the mare. "What in the world do you mean saying we'd stay here?"

The warrior took a seat on a strapped down barrel. "If we're here, and they're guarding us, and the stupid bastards are bound and determined to come kill me, we'll find them with no effort on our part."

"They'll find us." Iolaus clarified.

"Yes."

The blond man considered that, then he shrugged and laughed, going back to his task of brushing out the mare's coat.

Xena relaxed and let her senses extend. It was lit a little from the torchlight, and from the cracks between the deck planks a dusty blueish light peeked through splashing over her thighs and picked up the faint silver highlights in the mare's coat.

There was lots of noise around her. The planks were creaking, the horses were moving, Iolaus was whistling under his breath. She could hear men calling belowdecks, and above them, the rattling flap of the sails.

Plenty of noise. She closed her eyes and just listened, one by one filtering out the sounds she identified as harmless.

Her heart settled, and she moved past the animal sounds and the human ones, letting the creaking fade and the thump of the oars and the tromp of the crews boots overhead.

She was unaware of Iolaus watching her, his eyes studying her face as she concentrated, taking slow breaths full of tar pitch and horses trying to detect something else.

Through the chaos, she caught the sound of a scuff, and a creak. It could have been any of the people around her, or the soldiers, or even one of the horses shifting, but she knew it wasn't.

She imagined the space around them. The horses in their stalls, criss crossed with rope, and the sturdy stairs leading up to the deck just in front of them. She filled in the door to the lower deck, with its stalwart soldier guard and the hallway that led back to the merchants quarters.

Ah.

Past the small alcove she'd spoken to the sailors in there was a doorway that led down further into the middle of the ship and that's where the creak had come from.

Xena let her eyes drift open. She saw Iolaus watching her alertly from behind the mare and she met his eyes, then she casually hiked up her knee and rested her arm on it, her hand and relaxed fingers pointed right at the alcove.

"So." Iolaus nodded in a natural way. "Tell me about your daughter. She cute?"

"Hm." Xena's eyes twinkled a little. "How do I answer that and not make you think I've got an even bigger ego than I do." She rested her hand casually on her boot, where one of her daggers was visible. "I think she's beautiful."

"She look like you?" Iolaus gave her a knowing look.

"She has Gabrielle's eyes." The warrior evaded the question. "And her smile. She's sweet like Gab is too."

"But?"

"No buts." Xena heard a second creak, and on the air, a taint of the dungeon. "Everything else, she's my kid." She wasn't even embarrassed at the pride in her voice. "You should see her swim like a fish, and climb anything she can reach."

Iolaus laughed. "I can't wait to." He said. "Once we get all this cleared up, we gotta come visit."

Another creak. "You and Herc 'll be welcome guests." Xena let her fingertips close on the knife hilt. "My mother asks about you guys all the time." She let her eyes sweep the interior, seeing the soldier shift a little, leaning against the door with hand near his sword.

She kept her head turned, watching the alcove with her peripheral vision. "And I know Gabrielle'll be happy to have someone else's stories to tell for a change."

"Haha." Iolaus casually put the comb into the brush and set it to one side. He eased around the ropes and came up next to Xena, leaning casually against the spar the barrel was strapped to. "Like she ever gets tired of telling yours?" He said. "Maybe she gets tired of being IN them..."

Xena felt the flicker of motion more than saw it. Her nape hairs lifted and her lungs expanded as she half turned and let fly with the knife, knocking the crossbow bolt out of the air just before it

hit the neck of the soldier guarding the door. "Get down!"

The soldier, to give him credit, was smart enough to listen and he dove for the floor as Xena rolled off the barrel and lunged for the alcove as it exploded with shadows, hands reaching for her outlined in metal.

She shot in and out of beams of sunlight too quickly for her attackers to catch her, then she dove over the short wall and caught the first of them in a bear hug that bore them both to the ground.

A crash sounded to her right. She felt a searing heat along her arm, then it was gone, and she was too busy to wonder about it as her attacker got her in a headlock. He was big, and he was desperate and the stench of his body alone was enough to nearly take her unconscious.

She went limp, and his hold shifted, and she spun around and yanked her upper body out of his grip, grabbing his leg as she rolled over and knocking him off balance.

They fought in silence. He didn't so much as curse, and she didn't either, as she felt another body pass over her head, and saw a glimpse of Iolaus drawing his fist back, his face tensed in a battle grimace.

Xena reached out and felt a line of fire down her forearm, and she followed the pain to the knife flashing towards her, jumping her hand over the pommel to grab the arm of the man wielding it. She caught the bright copper scent of blood and knew it was her own.

Her breathing came a little faster. She got her feet under her and shoved against the shadowy figure, sensing tough, heavy muscle in the body slamming against her own.

This was the kind of fight she knew she had to be wary of. It robbed her of her advantage of speed, and she didn't have space and her sword to fend off the man attacking her. She was strong, but so was he, and she felt herself losing her balance as he bounced off the wall and came back at her and they crashed together in mid air.

A flash of metal caught her eye and she ducked under the man's arm, feeling his knife whisper over her head as she dove for the floor, rolling along the straw and grabbing her own knife before she came back up onto her feet and met the man's next charge.

Now there were yells around her. She heard the door to the deck open, and a shaft of light flooded down interspersed with the shadows of soldiers pouring down the stairs.

Iolaus let out a bark of anger.

Xena felt her attacker lunge at her, and they grappled, going to the ground again as they were surrounded by moving bodies and armor and hard boots. She sensed the man shifting and reading himself for a blow and she head butted him under the chin, feeling a shock as his jaws hit and his head snapped back.

She pinned his knife arm down and took her own strike, sending the short dagger blade deep into his guts as there was a crash behind her, and a scream, and the next thing she knew, what felt like a thousand pounds fell on top of her, knocking the breath out of her lungs and making it impossible to draw it back in again.

She saw stars as she closed her eyes.

She could hear, far off, Iolaus' voice raised in serious alarm.

She remembered, once, getting trapped under the water, and feeling a little like this. Unable to breathe, unable to move.

It smelled like blood and horses.

She felt confused. It wasn't supposed to happen like this. She had a lot of stuff to do, and she

wasn't ready to...

The screams faded, and all she could hear was her own heartbeat.

She felt very alone, there in the dark, unable to breath.

The stars behind her eyelids started to flash in time with her pulse and then those stars began to fade away. The thunder got quieter.

She could feel that moment coming. She remembered it strongly, now, that place where the terrors of the world would fade out, and there would be just a little nothingness. Just a little. Or maybe a eternity you didn't know about before bad things happened.

She remembered the bad things. But right now, she was looking at the quiet time as everything faded.

Everything faded.

Then it wasn't, a rush of sensation that abruptly made her aware of every inch of her pain wracked body trapped under the crush of the weight on top of her, bringing her back into the now with an almost audible snap.

She felt a strong presence.

A hand touching her forehead. A voice whispering in her ear and she was no longer alone. She was aware of wild energy flooding her and her body was moving, shoving away from the ground and aware of the crushing weight exploding off her.

Heat. Xena shook her head violently and forced her eyes open, half in a roll upright as the fight erupted around her again and she was grabbing a man's arm and yanking him around in a circle, sending him flying into the wall.

He bounced off and slammed into one of the pylons, and slid down it, his hands gripping like claws into the wood and dragging the torch in it's holder down with him.

He screamed, as the fire caught in his hair, and rolled, taking the torch with him into the straw which quickly also caught.

"Fire!" One of the soldiers cried. "Fire!"

Xena shook off the remaining stiffness and moved around the edge of the stall. "Get the water buckets." She pointed at the horse's stalls. "Douse it!"

The horses were already frantic, smelling the blood and the fire and as she bolted for them Iolaus caught up to her and grabbed her arm. "What?"

"Xena." He gripped her arms with both hands. "By the Gods, are you all right?"

"Fine." She kept walking, taking him with her. "But if we don't get the fire out we won't be." She turned and saw the soldiers going for the buckets, but ducking as the horses reared. "Damn it."

"Lets get them out of here." Iolaus urged. "Let the soldiers handle it!"

Sounded like a great idea. The closeness of the hold and the sounds of the flames were giving her flashbacks from Athens and so she surrendered to better sense and grabbed the equine Iolaus' head as he landed back on all fours.

The stallion came with her willingly, and she unsnapped the ropes and pulled him forward clearing the way for the soldiers to dash past and get the buckets. She led him to the stairs and headed up wards, craving the sunlight that was pouring into the opening and finally bringing color back to her vision.

She could hear the human Iolaus behind her, coaxing the mare.

She was aware that she was bleeding, but figured it would wait until they were on deck, and safe and she led her horse up the last few steps and into the light just as Ephiny and Eponin hauled to a halt whiskers before plowing into them.

“Xena.” Ephiny backpedaled. “What in Hades is going on? Are you all right?”

“You’re bleeding like a stuck pig.” Pony chimed in. “What’s the.. is that smoke?”

“C’mon little lady.” Iolaus emerged with his hands tangled tightly into the mare’s bridle. “Oh, hello there.” He moved the horse past the opening and cleared space for the sailors now pouring down the hatch. “Got a bit of a problem down there right now.”

“Fire!” A yell came from the hold. “Water! Get water!”

“Crap.” Pony looked around. “Not again. What the Hades is it with us and these damn boats?” She ran over towards the side of the ship, where sailors were already lowering buckets to draw up seawater. “Gimme! I know what to do with that.”

Ephiny stayed at Xena’s side as they walked the horses to the other rail, as far away from the now smoking hold as they could get. She waited for the warrior to turn her stallion around and gentle him, before she reached gently out and touched her shoulder. “Xena?”

Wearily, bloodshot blue eyes turned towards her, one brow lifting.

Ephiny decided to swallow what she was going to say. “Want some water?” She offered instead. “To drink, I mean.”

“Sure.” Xena managed a faint grin. “Thanks.”

Ephiny made her way to the water barrel, and Xena had a minute to collect herself, leaning back against the rail and taking a few deep breaths just to make sure she could.

The fire seemed to be getting worse. The human Iolaus came to stand next to her, and they watched the chaos building near the hatch in silence together, as Ephiny made her way back over towards them.

“I was wrong.” Xena said, after a minute. “We should have hunted the bastards down.”

“Not let them get the drop on us.” Iolaus agreed. “You scared the Hades out of me in there.” He stared ahead of them, avoiding her eye. “I didn’t want have to explain that to Gabrielle.”

Xena studied the equine Iolaus’s neck, one finger reaching out to trace a whorl in his coat. “You wouldn’t have had to explain anything.” She said finally. “That would be my job.”

Iolaus looked at her.

Ephiny handed over a wooden mug of water, waiting for Xena to take it from her. Then she came closer and put her arm around Xena, simply standing there without a word.

A lick of flame erupted through the hatch.

**

Continued in Part 20

A Queen’s Tale

Part 20

Gabrielle wiped her brow with a bit of linen, blinking as sweat dripped into her eyes and made them sting. It was late afternoon and they had made decent time, though not nearly as good as if

they'd stayed on the road.

Climbing the mountainside to evade the main way had led them through thick forest and underbrush, they'd spent a good deal of the time walking the horses and only seen two people since they'd gotten off the road - but the downside was the lack of a breeze and the relatively slow going.

"Mama it's too hot." Dori was sitting on Shadow's back. "Want to go to fishes."

"Me too, Dor." Gabrielle leaned against the horse, glancing back to where the rest of the group was resting for a quarter candlemark. "I wish you and I were home up on our mountain, and we were swimming in our pond with Boo."

Jessan and his crew had gone back to scout the road, to see how much of a lead if any they still had. The rest were taking advantage of the stop, savoring a moment of golden peace as the sun started to drop into the tops of the trees.

"Boo boo boo." Dori warbled. "I want to go where Boo is."

"Me too." Her mother repeated, with a sigh. "I hope we'll find her soon, sweetie. I miss your Boo a whole damn lot." The long day and scant sleep were wearing on her, and she rested her cheek against the horse's neck, wishing she could close her eyes.

She knew they wouldn't stop tonight. The sense of being pursued was heavy not only in her, but in the rest of the party, and..

A chill came over her. She felt a sick clenching in her stomach and she gripped the saddle with both hands to keep herself upright.

"Mama?"

"Hold on a minute, Dori." Gabrielle whispered. She felt her heart start to race and she closed her eyes as flashes against the inside of her eyelids made her lightheaded.

It was dark. It was terrifying. She had no idea what was happening to her except that... She froze, as a dark, cold sensation she remembered deep in her nightmares erupted inside her, a stark emptiness that had last overwhelmed her as she felt Xena's hand grow cold between hers high up on a mountainside.

It was so sudden, she couldn't even cry out.

Couldn't even scream.

Barely even able to breathe, her stunned soul responded belatedly, reaching out into all that darkness unable to..

Unable to believe.

No, this wasn't happening. Again.

"Xena no." Gabrielle wasn't sure if she actually said aloud the words screaming in her heart. "Xena please... oh.. Gods please no!"

"Mama???"

Echoes in all that darkness and then between one breath and the next the shadows were sucked out of her soul and a blast of familiar fire replaced it.

The darkness faded, taking her strength with it until she was on the verge of utter collapse but leaving behind a sense of profound relief in its place.

Life was back again. Just like that.

“Mama!” Dori was clutching at her in fear. “Mama!”

Gabrielle slowly opened her eyes, hearing the footsteps approaching rapidly as the rest of the group reacted to Dori’s calls. Her heart was still beating so hard she couldn’t speak, but she clutched that heat to her and savored it, staring at the whorls in the leather of Shadow’s saddle without really seeing anything.

“Gabrielle!” Solari reached her first. “Hey!”

Now her whole body was shaking. Gabrielle suspected if she let the saddle go, she’d drop to the ground so she kept her grip despite the tremors in her hands. “I’m okay.” She managed to get out. “It’s okay. Dori, it’s okay.”

“My goodness.” Cait came up on the other side. “What’s going on?”

“Mama!” Dori scrambled over and thumped onto her belly on the saddle, reaching out to pat her mother on the head. “Okay mama?”

The bard straightened up and risked releasing the saddle. “Sorry.” She said. “I got a cramp in my back.” She reached behind her. “Thought I was going to fall right down.”

She didn’t want to tell them what really happened.

Didn’t want to talk about it, and her mind blanked out might have been hovering on the fringe of her conscious thoughts.

Both Amazons relaxed. “Boy, ya scared me.” Solari said. “Dori was freaking.”

Gabrielle ran a hand through her hair. “I must have had a pretty bad face from it.” She said. “Sorry about that. I’ve had problems with my back since the war. Goes out sometimes.”

“From that bitch. I remember.” Solari said. “Boy, she sure deserved killing.”

Gabrielle felt the tremors recede. “Well. I killed her.” She glanced up. “Dori, stay here. Mama’s going to go get a drink of water, okay?”

Dori studied her, the child’s lower lip poking out in a pout.

“If I see a fish, I’ll catch it for you.” The bard patted her foot. “I’ll be right back.” She ducked between Solari and Cait and slipped between the trees, kneeling beside a small rivulet busily winding its way down the mountain.

She wasn’t really thirsty. She had a full skin of water on the saddle ring. But she needed a few minutes of privacy to collect the shattered bits of her soul and tuck them back inside her.

By the gods. Gabrielle dipped her hands in the water and raised them, taking a swallow of the cool liquid. Her heart had slowed down again, and right at the back of her mind she could sense that low level something present that was her connection to Xena.

Sometimes, she wasn’t even aware it was there. She didn’t think about it often. But it’s sudden absence had shocked her senseless and now even thinking about that hurt.

What had happened? How real had it been?

Tentatively she thought about her partner. She thought she could sense weariness, and worry but it was very hard to tell. There hadn’t been any strong emotion before what she’d felt earlier – it wasn’t as though Xena had been in some terrible trouble that had gone wrong, just all of a sudden she’d just...

Gabrielle felt her stomach clench, and she let the thought pass.

It was over. Whatever had happened, was past.

Xena was okay.

As she thought that, she felt a faint warmth, an odd disconnected sensation that made her imagine Xena was just behind her, dropping her hand on Gabrielle's head and ruffling her hair.

More imagination? Gabrielle studied her reflection in the water and shook her head. She dipped her hands in again and drank her fill, then shook her fingers out to dry them. She watched the droplets fall and then turned, as she heard tiny footsteps coming up behind her.

Dori thumped down next to her. "Mama, horsie wants water."

"Oh yeah?" Gabrielle gazed at that small profile, that was already taking on Xena's familiar shape. "How do you know that, hm? Did she tell you?"

Dori patted the water's surface. Then she looked up. "Yes." She nodded solemnly. "Mama owie?"

The bard exhaled. "Not anymore, honey." She said. "I was, before, but I'm okay now." She dipped her hand in the water. "Do you want some?"

"Fishes." Dori put her hands on her knees, looking into the water. Then she looked back up. "Mama, is Boo owie?"

Gabrielle reached over and touched her cheek. "Shes fine, Dori."

Dori poked her lower lip out and rocked back and forth a little.

"I promise." Her mother added, in a soft voice. "Xena knows how much we love her, and how much we need her, and she would never let anything bad happen. Right?"

"Miss Boo." Dori picked up a pebble, slick and wet from the stream. "No fun."

"Yeah." Gabrielle sat down and pulled Dori into her lap. "I know, Dor. I know." She hugged her. "We're going to run real fast all day and all night until we're back with Boo again. I promise you." She rocked them both a little. "Nothing would make me happier than to be with her right now."

"Me too." Dori said. "C'n we bring water back for the horsie?"

Gabrielle took a deep breath and released it. "Dori, how about if you went over to Shadow, and brought her over here so she could take a drink. Can you do that?"

"Yes!" Dori wriggled free and dashed off. "C'mere horsie!"

That gave the bard a few more moments of quiet. She leaned against a tree next to the brook and looked across the water, into the deep green underbrush running alongside it.

She was glad, suddenly, that they'd be traveling all night. She really had no desire to fall asleep now, afraid of what her dreams would be.

"Gabrielle." Jessan knelt at her side and touched her shoulder. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah." She didn't bother to dissemble. "Now I am."

"Any idea what happened?"

"No." Gabrielle looked up at him. "It happened so fast."

The forest dweller's expression shifted into grim sympathy. "It did." He said. "But hey, it's over." He patted her arm. "Xena wouldn't let anything happen." He paused. "Permanent, I mean."

"Yeah." Gabrielle nodded. "You know, that's true." She looked up as Shadows hoofbeats approached, watching Dori lead the horse towards her with a seriously intent expression.

So cute.

So like Xena.

“C’mon horsie.” Dori tugged the mare forward. She pointed at the brook. “Dere!” She said. “Go drink water!” She rambled right into the stream, her boots kicking up water as Shadow followed her.

“Dori!” Gabrielle started to get up, then paused as Jessan put a hand on her shoulder. “She’s going to get soaked.”

“I’ll get her.” Jessan got up and stepped across the water, grabbing Dori as Shadow dipped her head to take a drink. “C’mere, bittyboo.” He lifted the child up and tucked her under his arm. “Your mama doesn’t want you to get sick.”

“Don’t get sick from fishes.” Dori protested. “Mama! Fishes!” She pointed. “Look!”

Eels, actually. Gabrielle got to her feet. “I see them, Dor.” She said. “Any sign of the Spartans on the road, Jessan?”

“Have no idea.” The forest dweller said. “I left my guys to go look and came back here.” He glanced around. “We didn’t see anything on the way out there though except a bunch of vultures. We didn’t stop to see what they were circling.”

Vultures. The bard stroked Shadow’s smooth neck as the mare finished her drink and shook her head, scattering cool drops of water over Gabrielle’s legs. “Let’s get ready to move as soon as they get back.” She said. “We can’t risk getting caught.”

“Mama, up.” Dori came wandering back between Shadows legs. “We go?”

“We go.” Gabrielle lifted her up into the saddle. She led Shadow back over to where the others were standing, now quietly watching her with varying looks of concern. “Sorry about the scare.” Gabrielle produced a brief smile. “Let’s get ready to move as soon as...”

A loud whistle interrupted her. They turned to see the forest dwellers pelting towards them at top speed.

“Uh oh.” Jessan swung up on his horses back. “I don’t think it’s good news.”

“No.” Gabrielle pulled herself up on Shadow behind Dori. “Get ready people.”

Everyone did, and the incoming forest dwellers headed for their horses as they came through the trees. “Legion’s on the road just past the last bend.” One said, panting. “They’ve got prisoners.”

Oh, Hades. Gabrielle grimaced. “Great.” She turned Shadows head towards the road, then paused. What was she intending on doing? Riding right into the Spartans? She had a handful of fighters against a hundred hardened soldiers.

“Let’s go.” Bennu motioned with his hand. “Let’s make way there, through the trees. Quick like. Got to go find the Gen’rl.”

“Go Boo.” Dori agreed, tugging on Shadow’s mane. “C’mon, mama! Go go go!”

Gabrielle turned Shadows head and squeezed her with her knees, heading for the trail Bennu pointed out. She dodged between the trees and fell in line in back of Jessan, who was in the lead with his big, shaggy stallion Eris.

There was no time to think about the prisoners. No time to wonder if they were someone she knew, or cared about. With any luck, she wouldn’t have time to worry of any of that or anything else for that matter.

There was too much to think about. She still hurt too much inside. The memory of that sudden emptiness was just around the corner of her mind, waiting for a lull to slip back in and make her

remember what it was like to lose half her soul.

They headed down hill and a few minutes later were cantering, the path they were on now wide enough to easily pass between the trees and they started making better time.

Gabrielle was glad enough to focus on the trail, sweeping the forest around them with her eyes as they followed Jessan, spotting a thinning in the trees ahead that suddenly prickled her nerves. “Jess!” She called, pointing when he turned to look. “Watch out!”

The forest dweller half stood in his stirrups, shading his eyes as he tried to see what had alerted her, and then it became evident as the leaves parted and they could see color between them, the flash of chestnut and bay of horses hides and silver of armor. “Ware!” Jessan bellowed. “Get ready to fight!”

“Uh oh.” Dori grabbed Shadows mane as Gabrielle reached down and released the ties on her staff, letting it drop into her hand as the way ahead was filled with men and horses and the flash of weapons. “Mama...”

“Bad mens.” Gabrielle was almost glad of the coming battle. It was something she could focus completely on. “Watch out!” She called behind her “Ambush!”

Everything turned to thunder, as Solari and Cait both came galloping forward, swords drawn with Bennu and his men right behind them. Gabrielle pulled Shadow to one side and as they came even with her, she released the mares head and charged with them.

The path ahead was blocked and she ducked as an arrow came slashing through the branches, clamping down with her legs as Xena had taught her and bringing her staff across her body in a two handed grip. “Dori, stay down.”

“Yeah!” Solari let out a yodel, and they crashed into the ambushers, close quarter fighting in the scant clearing making it hard to see who was battling who and which was the swords were moving. “Bastards! Die ya!”

Gabrielle swung her staff at a fast moving body, which got close enough for her eyes to focus and they did, the familiarity of the design on the armor suddenly becoming clear to her. She let out a yell of her own. “Hold IT !” She smacked the man’s sword out of his hand with a hard strike. “Hold it! They’re from Athens! Hold it Hold it!”

The man grabbed his stinging hand as he staggered back, lifting his helmed head and staring at her. “Hold!” He yelled himself after a moment. “Men! Stand fast! Don’t attack!”

The battle wound it self down rapidly, men stepping back and forest dwellers sheathing swords and fangs. Bennu released the man he had grabbed and hauled up onto his saddle and for a moment, everyone just stared at each other.

The man Gabrielle had disarmed pulled his helm off, revealing hair as blond as hers, and a familiar face. “Gabrielle.”

“Jens.” Gabrielle exhaled.

They looked at each other. “What are you doing here?” They both asked at the same time.

He sighed. “Looking for Xena.” He said. “But all I have found so far is dead men, and rumors of worse.”

“Worse.” Gabrielle extended her hand to him. “But we don’t have time to stand around and talk about it. Let’s go.”

He gripped her arm and released it. “Have you heard about the war?”

“Have you heard about the Spartans invading from Thrace?”

Jens stared. "You've trumped me." He admitted. "Lead on."

**

"Xena?"

Xena could tell by the tone it wasn't the first time she'd been called. She lifted her head from where it was resting on her fist and regarded Ephiny quietly. "Yes?"

Ephiny sat down on the deck and offered her a steaming mug. "Mulled cider." She said. "They've got a brazier set up over there."

Over there was the bow, where many of the crew were clustered. From the hold, a dirty gray smoke was still issuing, evidence of the destruction belowdecks. Everyone was outside, forced to take shelter there since the holds were now half collapsed and dangerous, the sails now their only transport.

"Thanks." Xena took the mug without protest. She suspected she was in a kind of shock, and a sip of the warm beverage burned in her guts bringing a welcome boost of energy. "They get it out?"

"I think so." Ephiny was glad she had her back to the rail, bracketed between the two horses as they stood quietly, the wind whipping their manes. "I don't think they got any of the rowers out."

"No." Xena could imagine the charnel pit the hold had become. "Poor bastards."

"Mm." The Amazon grunted. "That bitch made it out." She pointed at Milena. Covered in dirt and soot, the woman was tied to the mast, her dirty clothes stained deeper with blood. "They found her hiding near the armory. Good thing she didn't get inside."

Xena leaned back against the side of the ship and cradled the mug in her hands. She hurt in a lot of places, and the gash on her arm was still oozing a little. "The two men with her are dead." She remarked, after a moment's silence. "They're the ones that jumped me."

Ephiny studied her with a sideways glance.

"One of them dragged the lantern down and set the straw on fire." The warrior continued in a very quiet voice. "That's what started it."

"You want me to fix up that cut?" Ephiny indicted her arm.

"No. It's fine." Xena half shook her head. "It'll close." She took another sip of the cider. Flashes of her experience belowdecks kept surfacing uncomfortably, and she wished everything would stop shifting in her vision.

It was like there was a low level buzz going on in her head, blocking things out. She knew there were things going on around her but try as she might, dredging up the will to care seemed beyond her at the moment.

Iolaus came back across the deck and joined them. "Oh boy." He sighed. "You know, if I could get out and push this thing faster back to Thera, I would." He said.

Pony lifted her hand. "I'm in." She was sitting quietly on the other side of Ephiny, just watching all the confused activity on deck.

"Me too." Ephiny agreed. "Never wanted to see land as much as I do right now."

Xena also nodded, but remained silent. The memory of being under the wall replayed in her mind again, and she exhaled, rubbing her eyes.

She knew Gabrielle had felt it. That sharp jolt of horror had been unmistakable and now the ache in her guts was poignant and familiar, a reaching out that was full of both hope and fear at

once. The knowledge that they were so far apart was now a growing torture.

“You really gave me a scare in there, Xena.” Iolaus spoke up, distracting her. “When that wall dropped on you and those guys jumped on top of it.. boy.”

Xena looked at him. “Wasn’t my favorite moment.” She said after a pause. “Glad they got off me.”

“Got off you?” Iolaus blinked at her in surprise. “Yeah I guess you couldn’t see what happened... they were forcing that wall down on you and then .. well.. they just went flying.” He gestured with his hands. “And that wall came to pieces like it was soggy driftwood. You took it apart.”

Xena nodded, and took a sip of cider. “I don’t much like things falling on me.” She tried to remember doing what Iolaus had related, and failed. The memory just wasn’t there, not of that. All she recalled was the pain, and the darkness.

And the voice from the shadows. Gabrielle’s voice, without question. As though her partner had grabbed her and pulled her back with all the strength of her will.

Again.

But this time there had been no warning, since Xena herself had none. She hadn’t expected the aborted ambush to turn so bad so fast, nor seen any danger in the wall that had separated the horses, from the men’s work area.

“Well, who does?” Iolaus patted her shoulder. “I sure don’t. And I have to admit it, Xena. I’m glad those bastards aren’t around anymore to cause trouble.”

“Me too.” Pony agreed. “I just hope this tub’ll make it back in one piece.”

As if in answer to her comment, the wind started picking up and filling the sails, and Xena could hear the slap of the waves against the hull as they surged forward. It gave her a profound sense of relief, and she only just prevented herself from getting up and going to the bow.

Her focus was narrowing, she suddenly realized. She didn’t really care about getting to Thera, or the army, or the Spartans or getting home to Amphipolis. Right now all she cared about was finding Gabrielle, and giving her a hug.

She felt like Gabrielle needed it. She could almost feel the distress .. no, she could feel the distress she was in. It was like a hand clenching her heart.

Really. Everything else just paled out into insignificance and she closed her eyes, leaning back against the side wall so she could imagine doing just that, sensing the warmth of Gabrielle’s body and the solidness of it as she put her arms around her in her mind and squeezed.

She could feel the exhale of her breath, and the muscles shift under her touch as Gabrielle returned the affection in her imagination.

She had no idea if her soulmate would sense it. But it felt real enough to her, and some of the ache inside her chest relaxed.

A faint spray came over the rail, and dusted her face with sea salt. Xena opened her eyes and reached up to wipe it away, at last seeing her surroundings through something other than a complete mental fog.

Now the smell of the salt water made her nose twitch, and the sounds of the crew yelling penetrated her awareness. She could taste the cider on her tongue as something more than just warmth and she shifted a little, drawing her legs up crossed under her and leaned forward to stretch out her stiffening back.

“Xena?”

She swung her head around to face Ephiny.

“You okay?” The Amazon asked, watching her face closely. “You seemed a little out o it.”

Dying does that. Xena lifted the cider towards her. “Nah. I’m fine.” She demurred. “I was just thinking.” She flexed her free hand, feeling the sharp pain as her skin tightened where she’d scraped her knuckles. “Damn lucky they put that fire out.”

“Very.” Iolaus agreed. “But unfortunately most of that deck is wrecked. We’ll have to keep the horses up here until we get back to Thera.” He patted the mare’s leg. “Hope they don’t mind poop on the poop deck.”

Xena smiled in reaction. “Well, we’re heading into better weather.” She indicated the sky. “So it wont’ be too bad up here I guess.”

“I’ll be happy to sit right here.” Ephiny said. “With those skies clearing, it’ll be a beautiful night.”

Xena set her cup down and stood up, managing to keep the movement smooth despite the screaming outrage of her overused body. “Gonna take a walk.” She eased out from their little camp and moved along the deck slowly, letting her muscles stretch out a little.

She hurt. The collapsing wall had bruised her back and her knees ached intensely. She suspected she’d pulled more than one something in doing whatever she’d done to get the damn thing off her. It felt like she had when she’d launched herself into a mountain wall, in fact and she seriously craved a nice hot spring to soak in.

“Getting too damned old for this.” She muttered, shaking her head. She caught sight of Denius approaching her, and slowed, waiting for the patrician to catch up. “Yeah?”

“Xena.” The man looked as exhausted as she felt. “They tell me those prisoners attacked you.”

“Yeah.” Xena nodded. “Guess they were pissed off I turned em in.” She paused and put a hand on the rail. “Doesn’t matter now.”

Denius nodded. “I know. They’re dead.” He turned and looked across the deck. “That one remains.” He pointed at Milena. “But I have spoken with the rest of my party and with the captain. We feel she deserves to die for her complicity.” He hesitated. “What are your thoughts?”

Xena considered. “A lot of people deserve to die.” She acknowledged. “But she didn’t attack anyone down there. She wasn’t around. Just the two men were.”

“Even so.” Denius shook his head. “I find myself mortified that my need to bring these criminals to justice overwhelmed my responsibility to keep my guests safe onboard. If harm had come to you, Xena, I do not know what I would have done.”

The warrior wasn’t sure how to feel about that. “A lot of people died down there because of them.” She acknowledged slowly.

“Exactly” Denius was nodding his head. “Five of my soldiers, three crew, the rowers... terrible.”

Almost a retired ex-warlord among them. Xena considered “Let me think about it.” She said. “I’m going to..” She glanced down at herself. She was covered in soot and blood. “Clean up. We can talk later.”

The man nodded. “Fair enough.” He studied Xena. “You are bleeding.”

The warrior examined the still seeping wound on her arm. It was deeper than she’d realized, and belatedly she wished she’d let Ephiny sew it up. “Yeah.” She turned and started for the door to the cabins.

Her hand was on the door and she was entering the hallway before the closeness of the space

suddenly made it self very present to her, and she stopped abruptly, her knees shaking a little as her heart started to pound.

Damn it! She took a breath. It had been a long time since... She forced herself to keep moving forward, shoving open the door to the cabin and lunging for the window to swing it open before the door shut behind her.

The light was her only salvation. She gripped the bars and sucked in the fresh outside air, letting her heartbeat start to slow and her breathing to relax.

After a moment, she let her head rest against the iron. It had been years since she'd had to deal with that insidious terror and now it seemed fresh and sharp, bringing back old memories into vivid relief.

She was glad she was alone. This was never something she liked sharing, even with Gabrielle, who if anyone did, understood its hold on her. She'd worked herself into a place in her head where she could deal with the fear, most of the time, and it hadn't bothered her in a while.

Not even in Athens, crawling through the tunnels. Probably because that tunnel, far from being a trap, had been their miracle route of escape from a fire she'd feared they'd die from.

But this.

Xena took a deep breath and released it. The entrapment below had stirred that old fear and made it sudden and relevant to her. That terror of being held down, in the dark, with no escape and no breath...

She felt her mouth go dry. Then she resolutely put the image away and turned, regarding the small cabin with a sense of distaste. It's cramped confines now moved past merely inconvenient and into the realm of unbearable.

She could barely force herself to sit down on the bunk, hyper aware of the wooden walls around her. Only the fact that she knew getting herself wound up in a full on freak out would drive her partner nuts kept the lid on it.

She sat there for a few minutes, waiting for the discomfort to fade a little. Then she pulled over her basket and rummaged in it, glad beyond words at the little innkeepers courtesy. She took the wineskin and tilted it back, sucking the sweet, rich liquid into her mouth and swallowing it.

Several swallows later, and she was able to relax enough to think about getting herself cleaned up. She set the skin down and stood, stripping out of her mostly ruined clothing and tossing it aside. Going over to the water basin, she picked up a bit of soap and linen and washed her skin, grimacing a bit as the soap entered her cuts and stung.

"Ow." She scrubbed her shoulders, far as she could reach, then her torso, She twisted cautiously, feeling the strain in the muscles on either side of her body still sore from keeping the ship off the rocks days back.

Being clean felt good though. She washed her hair, then dumped the remaining water in the basin over her to rinse off, glancing down as the wooden deck boards quickly absorbed the moisture.

It smelled a little smokey, from the fire. She picked up a dry piece of fabric and gently sopped the water off her body, patting herself dry and feeling much the better for it. She went back over to where her saddlebags were and pulled out her leathers, donning them despite the discomfort of the leather against her raw skin.

She tightened the straps, then picked up her healer's kit and sat back down on the bunk with it, as close to the window as she could get. With a sigh, she threaded a bone needle with some thin gut, then she braced her arm against her thigh and started putting neat stitches into herself.

Not a pleasant task. Xena felt her lips twitch every time she punched the needle into her flesh and wished for the nth time she had Gabrielle at her side to take the task on. The pain made the fingers of that hand contract and she had to wait for her muscles to relax before each stitch.

A knock came at the door and she cursed under her breath. "Yes?"

The door opened, and Pony stuck her head in. "Hi."

"You lose the coin toss?" A faint, wry smile appeared on Xena's face.

"Yeah." Pony didn't bother dissembling. "Okay to come in?"

"Sure."

Pony entered and settled herself on the floor. "Want me to do that?" She indicated the stitching. "We get almost as much practice as you do at it."

"Nah."

Pony nodded. "Figured you'd say that." She looked up at Xena, her caramel colored eyes mild. "This whole thing really sucks."

That about encapsulated how Xena felt, and she grunted in agreement. "We're in decent weather now at least." She glanced briefly at the window. "Good thing because I'm sleeping out on deck tonight."

Pony blinked. "Um." She shifted. "Listen if we're crowding you here we can do that."

"You're not."

The Amazon pondered. "You think they're going to do something to the horses?"

Xena glanced up. "If you want to accept that as an excuse, sure." She went back to her work. "I just want to do it."

"Okay."

Xena got the end of the cut, tying off the gut and bending her head to bite the tough sinew through with her teeth. She straightened up and regarded her handiwork, then she put the needle back in her kit and then dusted the area with a powdered herb she used to protect against infection.

She decided against a bandage, closing the kit and taking a few sips from the wineskin instead. "Ephiny doing all right?" She tilted her head to one side to watch Pony's face. The Amazon looked tired, and more than a little overwhelmed. Her face was pale, and there were dark circles under her eyes.

"Better than me." Pony admitted frankly. "I don't like this stuff, Xena. I don't want to be you. I wanna go home."

Xena exhaled. "Sometimes I don't want to be me either." She responded. "Like right now."

Pony tilted her head in question.

There was an urge in her, to talk about it. But even as she thought about that, the urge passed, and her natural inclination reasserted itself. "Anyway." She removed a fold of waybread and some cheese from the basket and nudged it towards Pony. "With any luck, we'll be back in Thera tomorrow night."

"You really going to run the army then?"

Xena chewed for a minute and didn't answer. She swallowed. "I'm going to do whatever it takes

to go find Gabrielle. “ She said. “If men with swords want to follow me doing that, I could care less.”

“What about the Spartans?”

“Don’t give a damn.”

“What about home?”

“Don’t give a damn.” Xena repeated. “I got one thing on my mind. “ She took another bite. “You and Eph are welcome to ride with me, if you want.”

Pony grunted.

“Just being honest.”

Pony grunted again.

**

Gabrielle urged Shadow onto the road, leaning forward as the horse climbed up the embankment and joined the half of her group that had preceded her. It was dark, and very quiet, and they started forward as soon as the last of them scrambled up to try and make time up where they could.

“By the gods.” Jens wiped his forehead with his sleeve.

They numbered now almost two dozen and Gabrielle was a little worried about the size of the group and keeping track of everyone. She held on as the pace increased to a canter and the breeze blew her hair back off her sweaty forehead and cooled her off.

It was overcast and hot. She could hear rumblings of thunder and smell rain on the air but no one was thinking of stopping knowing the Spartans were right on their heels.

She was exhausted. Most of the others were too including the dozen Athenian soldiers that now were their escort. Jens had listened to her for only a few breaths before deciding his mission was now moot and the soldiers had melded in with her Amazons, her militia and her forest dwellers in a broad and unlikely bunch.

Not really different from the last war though. She’d spent a lot of time then getting different groups to cooperate.

“We can make good time now, till dawn.” Solari was riding next to her, with Bennu on the other side. Cait and the rest of the Amazons were ringed around them, and the militia and the forest dwellers had taken the lead.

“Yeah.” Gabrielle tried to shake off the need to sleep. Dori had snoozed on and off the whole night, but now the child was clutching the rim of the saddle and peering ahead, enjoying the pace. “You doing okay, Dori?”

“Go fast.” Dori patted the saddle with both hands. “Mama it’s goooood.”

One bit of amusement in a day of pain. “See, I told you we’d go fast, and find Xena.” Gabrielle resettled her knees, knowing from the ache that now was spreading up her back that she’d pay for the long hours riding.

There was no stopping. They’d already made that decision. The Spartan advance force was no more than four candlemarks behind them, and Gabrielle was afraid their choice to stay off the road was cutting that time down as they fought their way through forest and underbrush.

So here they were.

“Gabrielle, it’s so hard to believe this is going on.” Jens said. “Our captains in Athens would never have thought it. They’re still trading envoys with Sparta even as we speak!”

Gabrielle didn’t consider what the Spartans were doing was actually that startling. “But Jens... if you wanted to win a war, wouldn’t sneaking up on your opponents and attacking them from the rear be.. uh... right?”

The Athenian guard captain sighed. “That’s now how we do war.” He explained. “I know... well, I’m sure Xena would think what they are doing makes sense. Maybe even I would, if I wasn’t part of our army.”

The bard was glad to know apparently what Xena would think made sense and what she thought made sense seemed to be meshing. “Why not?”

“Well.” Jens settled his gloves more firmly on his hands. He was dressed as a proper soldier of Athens, with a set of plate armor and a thick tabard over it. “We know that Sparta, and us also, treat war in a much more formal way. There are things you must go thorough, Gabrielle, when you are pitting two great city states against each other.”

“Except that Sparta seems to have forgotten that since they are charging up the road back there after us.” Gabrielle said.

“Are you sure they’re Spartans?”

“Is there some other city state that could field an army of thousands you’re expecting to attack us?” Gabrielle countered. “Yes, I’m sure. I saw them. I also had some of them visit Amphipolis and they definitely were Spartans.”

“Visiting?” Jens eyed her.

“They wanted me to lead their army.” Gabrielle pronounced, with a certain exhausted internal glee. “Since they couldn’t get Xe to.”

Jens rode alongside her for a few minutes in silence. “Is that supposed to be funny?” He finally asked.

“Not to me.” The bard answered. “They did say something about the goddess Artemis telling them what to do.” She glanced behind her. “You do know Artemis is the patron goddess of the Amazons, right?”

Jens seemed surprised. “Really?” He frowned. “But we’re...” He broke off abruptly.

“You’re recruiting Amazons.” Gabrielle said. “For what, Jens? To throw them at the Spartans?”

He remained silent.

“They bought the pitch.” The bard kept the sharpness of her voice down. “That’s where Xe is, by the way. Chasing down some of my people who tried to stop the ones who think being target practice is a good idea.”

“That’s not what the idea was.” Jens protested. “Where did you hear that? The Amazons are trusted allies near Athens, and they were wanted to help us infiltrate the Spartan marshlands when we took ship to attack them.”

Hm. Gabrielle pondered that. “Why them?”

“Why not? Are they not warriors?” Jens frowned. “They were not conscripts. We were offering handsome pay for the help and land for them. My captain’s sister knows the head of the Amazons near us and always they were looking for good land to settle on.”

Was it true? The bard knew a moment of self doubt now, and she wondered.

“But if what you say is so, that Artemis is their patron...” Jens now looked very worried. “I wonder if it’s a trick that they were so eager to say yes.”

They rode through a section of forest, the sound of their horses sounding muffled now that they were between the trees. The clouds were getting thicker over head, and in the distance flashes of lightning lit up the sky.

“But wait, Gabrielle.” Jens spoke up after being silent a while. “Aren’t you an Amazon?”

Ah, the central question of her life these days. “They came and asked us to join in the effort.” Gabrielle avoided the question. “I turned them down. We’ve had enough war in our homeland.”

Jens moved his horse closer to hers. “Were you directed by Artemis?”

“No.” Gabrielle answered honestly. “We just want to be left alone. Two of my people, close friends of mine, decided to go after those Amazons and try to talk them out of joining up. I don’t know what the intent was, but the Spartans think they’re just fodder.”

Jens almost pulled his horse up. “They know?” He asked, in an astonished voice.

The bard nodded.

“Spies.”

Probably true. Gabrielle slid forward a little and gripped the reins with one hand, sliding the other around Dori’s body. “It just seems like everyone is on a different piece of parchment in this.” She said. “We tried to warn the first town we saw on the way from Amphipolis and almost ended up hurt.”

“This areas a lost cause.” Jens said. “We need to get to Thera, and fortify it. There are soldiers there, men we can use to block them. Then I can send the fastest ship to Athens.”

Gabrielle felt the first drops of rain. “Gods be damned.” She sighed, releasing Dori and digging in her pack for her cloak. Despite the heat the last thing she wanted to do was ride wet again, suspecting she and Dori were both on the edge of getting sick.

Too much running, too little rest, too few good square meals. Recipe for illness, as Xena was always telling her even when both of them were guilty of the same thing at the same time for usually good reasons.

She got the cloak out and shook it open, settling it around her shoulders and around Dori as the rain started coming down in earnest. The pace had slowed as the weather worsened, and now they were only at an amble.

Gabrielle got her hood up over her head and wiped the water out of her eyes. To either side, the Amazons were donning cloaks also, but the soldiers and her militia suffered the rain in silence as it started turning the road into a muddy mess.

She felt as though it was conspiring against them, and then, she thought about that and wondered if it really was possible. After all, there were gods and goddesses involved .

“Damned rain.” Solari grunted. “We can’t catch a break, huh?”

Gabrielle could sense the grim mood. “Well.” She raised her voice. “It’s annoying for us, sure, but it’s also slowing them down. They wont’ be able to move those wagons in this mud shortly.”

The wagons, the siege engines, all would be mired down if the rain continued, and as they considered that, expressions around her perked up. It seemed a little ridiculous to her, since what she’d said was completely obvious and they should have thought of it themselves.

Shouldn’t they?

Gabrielle got an insight into something Xena had once told her. That being a leader was fine, and she always enjoyed doing that, but sometimes when you were too good of a leader, the people you led sometimes stopped thinking for themselves and depended on you for that.

At the time, she'd thought the warrior was insulting her. Gabrielle remembered clearly how angry she'd gotten, accusing her soulmate of saying she was stupid.

Xena had almost gotten mad back. It was a sort of singular reaction, because there wasn't any reason for her not to get mad but she didn't. Her body had tensed up and she'd started to get into that exasperated pose with her hands on her hips and then just stopped.

Gabrielle had stopped. They'd just looked at each other.

They'd both shrugged and decided to go swimming. It was one of those moments they just didn't want to deal with each other and by then they'd learned to just move on.

Now, she understood what Xena meant. No one around her was stupid. She wasn't stupid. People just sometimes like to be lead, including her. "So let's keep positive, guys. We're doing good. It's just a little water for us."

The militia men chuckled, and Jessan dropped back a few paces. "Got a story to tell us, Gabrielle? Maybe something funny?"

"Mama, can you tell the cow pweese?" Dori spoke up for the first time in a while. "Wanna see Boo in my head."

Oh dear. Gabrielle looked down at her daughter, who was, given the circumstances, being as good as any child her age could have hoped to be. "Honey..."

"Pweese?" Dori begged. "Mama that's my favrite story."

"Cow?" Solari looked at her.

Now she was surrounded by a tight cluster of riders, conveniently blocking most of the rain. "Okay." She said. "But you all have to promise me cross your heart that you'll never mention this to Xena."

Solari's eyebrows hiked.

"And anyway, that's a good idea unless you want to get punched." The bard concluded. "So everyone agree?"

Everyone nodded hastily.

"Moo!" Dori yodeled.

"One day, we were all out for a walk." Gabrielle started the story. "We were walking around the whole day, and all of a sudden, a big storm caught up with us and picked up all sorts of things into it and carried them off over the hills."

"Seen that type of thing once or twice." Jens allowed. "Funnels."

"Yes." Gabrielle said. "This was the biggest one I'd ever seen, and two of the things it picked up were me and Xena."

"I remember that." Solari said. "Scared the crap out of me."

"Me too." Gabrielle agreed.

"Mama, what about the cow?" Dori frowned at this interruption in her favorite narrative. "You go

with the cow? You never said.”

No, she hadn't. “Well, Dori, you know I think I thought you were too little for me to tell about that before.” Gabrielle ruffled her daughter's hair. “So now you get to hear the other side of that story, okay?”

Dori seemed dubious.

“So Xena and I got sucked up into this cloud. It was really cold, and we were moving very fast and I don't mind telling you I was petrified.” Gabrielle said. The noise of the horses hooves was muffled now, the mud obscuring the sharp staccato pocks.

“How high were you?” Jens asked.

“I have no idea. Last thing I wanted to do was look down.” The bard said. “We were in the cloud for a little while, then the wind started to die down, and we felt ourselves falling.”

“Mama!” Dori's eyes were wide.

“Yeah.” Gabrielle nodded. “It was very scary, honey. But it was okay, because Xena was there, and we were holding onto each other, so we knew we'd be all right.”

“Boo fix ever'ting.”

“We fell down into a barn. But Xena knew how to do it, and we went right through the roof and we landed in a big pool of mud.”

There were a few startled chuckles.

“Good thing.” The bard said. “If we'd hit anything hard we'd have died.” She let the silence go on a moment. “But we didn't. We fell into the mud, and we were surrounded by piggies!” She smiled at Dori.

“Piggies!” Dori's eyes lit up. “Mama! You bring me one!”

“Well, we couldn't, sweetie, because the mama piggie loved her little babies a lot, and she didn't want us to take any of them away from her, just like Xena and I wouldn't want you taken away, right?”

“Buppits.” Dori thumped her heels against Shadow's neck.

“Cute.” Jessan grinned.

“Not really.” Gabrielle muttered. “Sow had a worse attitude than Xe.”

“Oooo.”

“So anyway, we went outside and it was raining, so we started to walk again, over the hills and the forest and all the way home.” Gabrielle related. “But the storm that picked us up, hadn't stopped there. On the way it picked up a house, and a mouse, and a sow, and a cow. Right Dori?”

“Moo!”

“And it carried the house and the mouse to the meadow and put them down, then it took the sow and the cow and when it got to the river, it put the sow down. But the cow was still in the air, turning around and around.”

“Cow Cow Cow.” Dori bobbed her head back and forth. “Round and round.”

“And where did the storm put the cow?” Gabrielle asked.

“Cow came down on Gramma's barn!” Dori said. “And it walked round and round and went moo!!”

“Is that true?” Jessan whispered.

“Believe it or not, yes.” The bard whispered back. “So grandma went outside and saw the cow and said now how do we get that cow back down?”

“Get the cow!”

“And how do we get the cow, Grandma asked?” Gabrielle found herself enjoying the tale, not so much for the content which was childlike in the telling, but in the happiness in her daughter’s face on hearing it and the memories it brought to her of a time of returning if fragile happiness.

“Grandma knew!”

“Grandma turned around, and who did she see?”

“Boo!!” Dori threw her hands up “Boo knew what to do!”

“Boo?” Jens asked, from slightly behind her.

“That’s what Dori calls big X.” Solari informed him. “Mama was already taken so that’s what the kid picked.” She saw the confused look on the man’s face and just grinned.

“Xena knew exactly what do to. She climbed up onto the roof and she went over to the cow and she said...”

“Go down brown cow!”

“Gabrielle.” Jessan interrupted. “Horses behind us. Closing fast.”

Damn. Gabrielle glanced over her shoulder and saw the smudge in the darkness. “Okay, let’s go.” She let out a whistle. ‘Move people!’

Jens came up next to her. “Spartans!? We should fight them.”

“Was a legion after us.” Bennu broke in. “Need to find a spot to turn guard.”

The horses lunged into a labored canter in the mud and Gabrielle tucked Dori back under her cloak. “Finish the story later honey.”

“Boo got the cow down.” Dori said. “Mama, I’m scared.”

“I know.” Gabrielle loosened the ties on her staff. “Mama’s scared too, Dori. Just hang on, and we’ll do the best we can.”

“Bend in the road ahead!” Jessan called back.

“Look for a spot to stop and defend after that.” Gabrielle yelled back at him. “We need good cover!”

Lightning flashed overhead, and thunder rolled so loudly, it almost deafened her. Gabrielle grimaced as Dori screamed in fear.

Can’t catch a break. Damn it.

**

The stars were out in force. Xena lay on her back on the deck and watched them wheel overhead, savoring the space and the peace and the gentle rasp of the water against the hull.

She was using her saddlebag as a pillow, and had her furs rigged as a hammock stretched across the sidewall between the two horses as it swung with the movement of the ship.

First peace she’d felt in days. Xena studied the bright pinpoints of light, aware of being relatively comfortable with her cloak tucked around her. She could hear people on the deck around her, but

the spot they'd put the horses in was isolated and so far everyone was keeping their distance.

Ephiny and Pony had accepted her abdication of the cabin with some bemusement. They had offered to trade spaces with her, but after a few minutes of her glaring, they knocked it off. So here she was, her head not far from the equine Iolaus's listening to him rip at the haybag she'd managed to salvage from the wreckage below.

Life for the moment seemed okay. She could taste the herbs on the back of her tongue ; a little bitter and a touch salty – from the cup she'd taken to ease the aches and now the discomfort had finally faded.

It felt good not to hurt so much, at least for a little while. Xena tried not to think about how much damage she'd done to herself and hoped some rest would let her heal. She was tired, but even so, and even with the herbs putting a little bit of fog between her and the world she wasn't entirely sure she wanted to drift off to sleep.

Bad dreams were nothing new to her. Xena traced a pattern of stars over her head. She just wasn't sure she wanted to wake screaming and have to explain that to all the refugees and crew around her. It was embarrassing, would be so even if it was just her usual ego involved but she was counting on her reputation giving her leverage with some of these people and having them hear her yelling her head off set bad precedent.

Footsteps approached her and she slowly lowered her hand, closing her fingers on the hilt of her sword.

“Xena?”

Ah. “C'mon over.” Xena relaxed her hand, and turned her head as Ephiny picked her way across the scattered straw and came to stand at her side. “Something wrong? Thought you'd be sleeping.”

“I was, for a little while.” Ephiny said. “I came out here to check on you, make sure you were okay.”

Xena's finely arched eyebrows hiked up. “I already have a mother back in Amphipolis.” She commented, but smiled a trifle.

“I know.” The Amazon leaned against the side of the ship, gazing out at the sea. “But I was talking to some of the sailors who were down there fighting and they told me what happened with you and half the ship falling on you.” She turned and regarded Xena. “And I talked to Iolaus.”

“Yeah.” Xena wasn't sure whether to be annoyed or mildly grateful for the concern. “Couple of close minutes in there.” She admitted. “But it worked out all right. I'm just pissed off and sore from the last couple of days.”

“I can imagine.” Ephiny moved back over and put her hands on the edge of Xena's hammock. “Iolaus was telling me some of the stuff you went through. I have to tell you I'm feeling like a first class jerk listening to that and knowing we were the reason.”

“Ah.” Xena waved off the concern with a motion of her hand. “Gabrielle and I tell each other that's what friends are for, right?”

The Amazons' hands tightened on the furs and then relaxed. “I want to make sure you get back to Gabrielle in one piece then, friend.” She leaned forward a little. “Because I can't face her if you don't. So please be careful, okay?”

Aw. “She wouldn't blame you.” Xena answered, in a quiet tone.

“No, she'd blame herself, since she sent you.” Ephiny sighed. “Pony was right. I should have listened to her, and stayed my ass right back in the village.”

There was definitely some truth to that. However. “Ephiny, knock it off.” Xena said. “If I had a dinar for every damn time I did something stupid we could have bought half of Athens by now.”

Ephiny smiled.

“And if I had a half dinar for every time I had to pull Gabrielle out of trouble...”

“I get the picture.” Ephiny gazed affectionately at her. “Thanks, Xena. I really mean that.”

Xena studied Ephiny’s face, remembering all the things they’d had between them over the years. They’d met when Ephiny was just a junior warrior, one of Melosa’s bodyguard.

Long road. “I’m all right.” She said, again. “I took some stuff. Just want to get some rest before we hit Thera again.”

Ephiny hesitated, then she nodded. “Okay. Sorry to be a hen.” She patted the warrior’s shoulder. “See ya in the morning. Hope it’s dull till then.”

She ducked past Iolaus, giving him a scratch on the ears before she headed back toward the cabins.

Xena smiled briefly. Gabrielle would be charmed to hear of the concern. She relaxed in her hammock, feeling the herbs start to work on her, drawing her slowly towards a light sleep she hoped would be peaceful.

The thought of falling sleep worried her a little. She knew she had Iolaus nearby and he was trained to protect her, but still. He was young, and he wasn’t his mother who had long experience knowing what to do to help her.

It would have been safer staying inside the cabin. But the thought of being inside the cramped space even now made her queasy. So the hammock was the best of bad choices. She wriggled into a more comfortable position and tried to relax, letting the sway of the ship lull her again.

What was Gabrielle up to? This late Xena figured her soulmate was asleep somewhere. She had figured her to be home, or in the village, but now she wasn’t entirely sure where the bard would be given the potential crisis around them.

Something inside her was telling her she wasn’t where Xena expected her to be.

Something was... she felt a tug, all of a sudden, a strange and uncomfortable sensation that made her body tense up and her breathing restart with something of a hiccup.

She closed her eyes and focused her attention on her partner and was drawn immediately into a whirlwind of concern and frustration. She felt her hands clench in reaction and she reached for her sword despite having nothing near to wield it on.

She could hear the thunder of hoofbeats, and feel the sting of rain against her face. Gabrielle’s breathing was coming a little hard, and she could feel the bard’s racing heartbeat as though she were there with her hand on Gabrielle’s chest.

So real.

She could hear Dori’s voice, and the desire to be where her family was felt like it was tearing a hole in her.

Xena no longer was aware of the ship around her. Now she was caught up in whatever was going on with her soulmate and as she heard thunder overhead she became aware of many bodies surrounding the bard.

Not at home, that was obvious.

A voice, Bensus. A brief glimpse of a face, Solari’s. A sense of urgency all around that made her

think they were running from something.

Running from someone.

She could see ahead, briefly. The rain paused, and she could see a road stretching before Gabrielle, a road familiar to her as she recognized the landscape as one she'd recently rode through.

They were running hard, the horses splashing up mud and sweeping around a curve through a small valley.

She could sense Gabrielle searching for something. People were yelling around her, but she couldn't focus on the words but if they were being chased she reasoned her soulmate was looking for some place to hide and defend.

She flicked through her memory of the area. It was mostly scrub brush lowlands not far from where Ephiny had met up with the stranger Amazons. There weren't too many towns, no caves or anything like that to hide up in.

Her heart started beating faster. In her mind, she was seeing through Gabrielle's eyes, and her partner tipped her head down briefly to look at Dori tucked in front of her in the saddle.

Dori was holding on to the horses mane and her eyes were big, as she shook her head and blinked to avoid the rain. She turned to look up at her mother and for a second Xena was looking down into her daughter's eyes.

Then Gabrielle picked her head up and looked forward again and Xena remembered a spot they might be able to use. She focused her attention on it, reaching out to try and force Gabrielle to look in the direction she wanted her to go.

Not easy. There was no true connection there, the bard had no idea of what she was trying to do. It was akin to what she'd felt when she'd had to take over Gabrielle's body only this time she wasn't on the other side of the veil.

She didn't stop to think about what that inferred. Unable to get the bard to look, she concentrated instead on what the place looked like, making a picture in her head and projecting it at Gabrielle as hard as she could hoping she'd remember her own memories of the place.

Then it was gone, and she was only aware of anxiety and urgency as Gabrielle faced whatever it was she was facing. Frantically, she reached out again, trying to make the view reappear, but all she got was tense emotion, and then a brief sense of triumph.

Had she gotten the message? The warrior exhaled in a growl of frustration. "Damn it!"

Xena let her eyes open. She looked up at the stars and listened now to the thunder of her own heartbeat.

Staying in the hammock was impossible. She rolled out of it and sheathed her sword in a single motion, shaking herself to get the nervous tension out.

The deck of the ship was almost eerily peaceful compared to what she'd seen in her head. She went to Io's side and leaned against him, looking out over the huddled figures of the crew, passengers and refugees who no longer would or could use the hold for shelter.

The bodies of the two thieves had been pitched overboard, along with the perished slaves from the oar compartment. Two more of the merchants had gotten caught in the crossfire below and also died.

Across the deck, the four strange Amazons were watching her, huddled together in a corner and even from where she was, Xena could see the glares.

She didn't really care. She felt sick inside. Gabrielle most definitely needed her and she was out here on this damn boat.

She walked out across the deck and headed for the bow, which was empty of anyone at the moment. She walked up the steps to the raised platform and went to the front of the ship, leaning on the rail and clasping her hands together.

All the pain in her body was forgotten. She focused on the waves, the moon painting a line on the surface leading them back to Thera and for a few heartbeats, she almost simply launched herself over and into the water, to follow that moonstripe herself.

Logic kept her from it. The sails were full and they were making good speed and she didn't think she could outrace it no matter how great the need.

Would have probably made her feel better, though, since just standing where she was hurt.

So Gabrielle wasn't at home, and she had a number of friends around her. Xena figured the bard was heading for Thera, and that, at least, was a good thing as it cut their time in finding each other in half.

Except she was in trouble. Xena leaned against the rail, feeling as though she wanted to throw up. She was in trouble, and Dori was in trouble. Something was chasing them, and she suspected the something might be Spartans.

She needed to be there. Much as she was fond of Bennu and Solari, if it was Spartans that needed fighting she was the one who should be doing it.

She felt a sudden sense of relief flow through her. Gabrielle finding the hideout? With any luck. But what was going on? Why was she being chased? Xena stared out to sea and growled under her breath in frustration.

A line of clouds were skudding along the horizon, their fronts lit with ghostly light from the moon overhead. Were they the same storm raining on Gabrielle?

Xena exhaled.

After a few more minutes she turned around and started back across the deck. She could hear the creaking of the hull and the thrum of the wind in the sheets and she willed the wind to blow stronger as she walked past the mast.

"Xena."

She almost didn't hear the call, it was so soft. But she turned, and swept the deck with her eyes, finally realizing it had come from a huddled figure tied at the base of the mast itself. She cursed under her breath, but she changed her path and walked over to where Milena was tied.

The girl was much the worse for wear. She was covered in soot and grime and the look she gave Xena had no arrogance left in it, only pain, and exhaustion and fear. "Yeah?"

"I told them not to try that." Milena said. "I told them to leave you alone."

Xena knelt down on one knee. "Too bad they didn't listen."

Milena nodded slightly.

"Want to tell me the truth about them now?" Xena asked, bluntly.

Milena gave her a wary look. When Xena didn't say anything further, she looked away not able to meet those clear blue eyes. "It's a long story."

Xena settled herself down on the deck, wrapping her arms around her knees. "Got all night." She welcomed the distraction and figured she might get some information she could use in the

bargain. "If you tell me enough, I might get you something to drink."

Milena lifted her head a little at that. "I could have gone in with them and come after you, but I didn't."

Xena nodded. "And you ended up alive. Good choice."

"Did you kill them?"

Xena pondered the question, aware she was being put off. Had she? "It was dark." She said. "I might have after they jumped us."

"Do you like killing people?" Milena asked.

"Sometimes." Xena answered honestly. "If they piss me off enough, or they're doing something bad.. hurting people I care about." She watched the girl's face. "Some people need killing."

Milena nodded a little. "That's what they said about you. That you needed killing." She looked boldly up into Xena's eyes to find nothing but mild amusement there. "That doesn't surprise you."

"People have said that about me since I was fifteen years old." Xena said. "I'm just a tough kill."

Ironic really, when the two damn bastards had nearly done it. Xena wondered if anyone else in there realized it – she thought Iolaus might have guessed, from his reaction.

Milena shifted, her discomfort apparent. Then she exhaled and looked down at the deck. "My mother was a slave in Athens.." She said. "She served for the head of the Athenian council, and he took his pleasure with her resulting in me."

Xena grunted.

"She already had two sons with a man she called her husband. They lived in the slaves catacombs under the Council chambers." The girl glanced up. "Those two men traveling with me were them. My half brothers."

"So you told a half truth both times." Xena remarked.

"I did." The girl agreed. "My father liked me, for some reason. Even though I was base born he never minding me being around. " She shifted again. "So I decided I'd go out and help him with the war. I figured maybe if I did, he'd take that final step and acknowledge me."

Xena studied her face. "He might have." She answered. "You'd bring him a decent dowry."

Milena jerked her head up, looking at Xena with a startled expression.

"Why were Athenian soldiers looking for you if you're all cozy with your dad?" Xena changed the subject. "Did you run a scam with them or not?"

"It wasn't a scam." The girl replied, with some fire. "The bastard promised he'd give half his holdings to the war. That's what it was when we left, and then.. I had no idea he backed out until those soldiers ambushed us."

Truth or not? Xena wasn't sure it mattered. "Tough luck."

"My half brothers and I decided to head out and drum up support if we could. We figured Thrace was a good start to find people since they'd already scoured all the lands closer to Athens." She exhaled. "We were on our way back when we met up with you."

Xena had a feeling it was all lies. Nothing the girl was saying had even the slightest ring of truth, but since she was really just looking for entertainment to keep her awake she didn't really care. She made a note to ask the guard captain his side of the story.

“I don’t want to go back now. I’ll end up down in the catacombs or worse.” Milena went on. “And anyway, I can’t go tell my mother what happened to her sons.” She spared a brief glance at the listening warrior. “Their father will kill me.”

Now that, Xena judged, was probably the truth. She got up. “Don’t go anywhere.” She told the girl, circling the mast and heading for the small mess area the sailors had set up. She rummaged in the supplies, picking up a waterskin and a piece of bread and slab of cheese.

Then she returned to the mast. She set the wood slab down with its supplies and went over to Milena’s side. “I’m going to cut you loose.” She said. “If you so much as spit at me I’m going to nail you to this mast up to the hilt with my dagger. We understood?”

“Yes.” Milena murmured. “I won’t do anything.”

Xena drew her dagger and cut the ropes holding the girl to the mast. She half fell forward, catching herself on her hands, stifling a cry. The warrior went over to the water barrels and dipped out a portion into a demi cask, which she brought back over with her and set down. “If you feel like washing.”

Then she settled back down on the deck, waiting to see what other amusement the girl was going to provide her.

Anything to keep her from falling asleep.

**

Continued in Part 21

A Queen’s Tale

Part 21

“Get in here, quick.” Gabrielle ducked out of the way and peered between the trees, watching the road anxiously as her little army swarmed past her and through a pair of moss covered wooden gates standing half ajar.

Lucky break, just when she thought she was out of them. “Hurry.” The bard shaded her eyes from the rain and watched the gap they’d come through, seeing a blurry glimpse of the road they’d so recently left and finding it blessedly empty.

The last of the group passed her, and Gabrielle turned Shadow and followed, glad beyond reason as she heard the gates close behind her and she got her horse beneath the half roof the fortress had left.

Once the rasp and thump of the gate bar had closed, there was relatively quiet. The rain pattered down on the wood and the group moved under shelter with sighs of relief and looks of gratitude in Gabrielle’s direction.

“Great find, your Maj.” Solari got off her horse and walked around in a circle to stretch out her cramped legs. “I thought this poor animal was gonna fall right on his ass out there and send me halfway back to Amph.”

“For sure.” Paladia had also dismounted, and was trying without much success to wring the water out of her leathers. “Score.”

“Everything looks clear.” Cait arrived at Gabrielle’s left knee. “Lots of lovely space, and mostly dry too.”

“Dry?” Jessan held his arms out. “I feel so water logged it’s amazing I can walk.” He gave Gabrielle a wry look. “Thanks, boss.”

Gabrielle produced a grin, lifting her hand and letting it drop. "Just a lucky memory." She said. "Xe and I helped some of the towns around her fight off a nasty warlord in this place. Way back when." She got off Shadow, holding on to the saddle until she straightened her legs out and was sure they would hold her. "Ready to get down, Dori? Had enough riding today?"

"Had fun when we go fast, mama." Dori informed her. "Tired and hungry now!"

"I bet. Me too." Gabrielle lifted her down. "Let's make sure everyone's under cover. And someone.." She glanced at the gates, where two of the militia and two of the Athenian soldiers were already standing guard, watching through crudely cut holes in the wood towards the road. "Oh, good."

"Good find, little hawk." Bennu came over to her. The soldier looked tired and he clapped her on the shoulder. "Horses and us needed a break."

"Yeah, we couldn't just keep running in this weather." Gabrielle agreed.

"How long we going to stay, yeah?" Bennu cocked his head at her.

Gabrielle let her eyes scan over her little group, seeing the exhaustion in the eyes gamely looking back at her. "We'll stay here until the storm stops, or the morning. Whichever comes first." She said. "Let's get as much rest as we can."

Bennu was nodding. "Dangerous to keep going, No saying as they had some advance men eh? Could run right into em."

"Yeah." Gabrielle took a few steps, trying not to grimace. "And there's.. well, there was a path that goes along the river outside that we might be able to take to bypass the road."

Both Bennu and Jessan looked relieved. "Sounds great." Jessan said. "Let's get some camp set up I sure could use a cup of hot tea."

"Betcher." Bennu patted the forest dweller on the back and they moved off towards the interior of the fortress.

Gabrielle idly watched Dori explore a pile of stones and took a moment to collect herself. It really had been a miracle, that flash of recognition just as they swept around the bend and hurtled into a forested no man's land between the last two big towns and Therma.

Amazing. She exhaled, feeling a sense of relief. The Spartans might catch up to where they'd been, but the storm would protect their tracks – the road had turned into a muddy mire that would erase their hoof prints and the thick brush and trees were just far enough apart to let the horses through without breaking a lot of branches.

They could take a rest. They had to take a rest, she felt the exhaustion in her own bones, and knew the rest of them were tired as well. There was only a handful of candlemarks left before dawn and no matter if the Spartans were on their heels, she knew they had to take a break if only for the horses sake.

"Water trough in t'back." One of the militia came up and gathered up reins. "C'mon you beauties. Let's get yer a drink."

The animals followed him willingly, their sides still heaving. Gabrielle shouldered her saddlebag and moved towards the back of the ruined fortress where there had once been a smith's forge and where she'd watched Xena kneel in the firelight working on broken bodies instead of iron.

Now it was quiet, and mossy, the roof still covering the area made of hard stone. Gabrielle went over to the hearth and sat down on its edge, stretching her legs out and letting her saddlebags drop onto the hard surface.

Thunder rumbled overhead. She didn't think anyone really minded though now that they were under cover and the storm gave them an excuse to rest. Gabrielle let herself lay back onto the ground, grunting in relief as her back relaxed.

Damn, she was tired. She resisted the urge to close her eyes. Damn she missed Xena's presence and those nice strong hands that knew how to ease every knot.

"Mama." Dori climbed up onto the platform and sat down next to her. "I found a izzard."

Now Gabrielle closed her eyes and lifted one hand to shield her face from long experience. "Did you?" She peeked at her daughter between her fingers.

"Yes." Dori nodded her head. "But I did what Boo says and let him go."

"Good girl." Gabrielle put her hand down. "How about we get you into some dry clothes. Would you like that?" She sat up and opened the saddlebag, removing one of Dori's jumpers. "I know Boo wouldn't want you to stay all wet."

"Mama, I saw Boo." Dori squiggled closer and dropped her voice to a whisper.

"Did you?" Gabrielle smiled, glancing up at her. "Did you see her with your eyes closed? I do that sometimes."

Dori shook her head. "No mama she was with you on the horsie." She explained earnestly. "I sawed her she was in you."

Huh? The bard frowned, as she took off Dori's little out fit and set it aside to dry. "Honey, I don't think..." Then she paused, and thought about it. "Well, you know Boo is always with us."

"Saw Boo." Dori plucked at the sleeve of her cotton jumper. "Mama, like this color."

What was Dori talking about? Gabrielle handed her a trail bar. "Here, why don't you have some of this while we figure out what we're going to do about dinner, okay?"

"Okay." Dori munched on the bar.

"Gabrielle, we've got enough scrap wood to start a fire there." Bennu came over and sat down beside her. "Nothing'll see any smoke this night, but we've most got trail bread and dried bits and pieces around to cook w'it."

The bard glanced around. "Grab that pot." She indicated an overturned iron lump. "Someone wash it out and get it full of water and we'll put everything together and make a soup"

Bennu motioned to two of the militia. "You heard the lady."

Gabrielle felt nothing like a lady. She felt like curling up and going to sleep. But she pulled herself together and stood up, looking around to see how the camp making was going.

The horses were now in the back of the fortress, where one part of a wall had half collapsed and allowed thick grasses to move inside and grow there. The group had gathered on the hearth and a fire was already being started.

Everyone was mixed together. Amazons and militia and forest dwellers sharing space with the Athenian guard and digging out supplies to add to the common pot. Gabrielle had to smile a little at that, as she went over to the broken stone trough that still held a running rush of water in it.

They'd won the battle, she remembered. Her and Xe and the men from three villages who'd finally had enough and were willing to grab their pikes and pitchforks and side with Xena in defeating a man who'd taken over this part of the hinterlands and made them all suffer for it.

She remembered sitting on that hearth, with Xena's head in her lap as the warrior finally got to

relax at the very end of a very long day, her hands gently cleaning a gash on Xena's head as the half lidded blue eyes watched her in tired contentment.

Long, hard day.

Not too different than this one, really. Except that Xena wasn't here to share it with her. Gabrielle knelt beside the trough and scooped up a double handful of the water, scrubbing her face with it despite the fact she'd just spent candlemarks in the rain.

The cool liquid felt good against her skin anyway. It was sweet and smelt a little like the path leading to her cabin at home. There were little lizards scurrying around and one perched on the edge of the trough, watching her.

The bard waggled her fingers at him, and then she pushed herself to her feet and started back towards the rest of the group. She could see the watch men at the gates keeping an eye out for them, and she remembered, then, seeing the rain coming down that she'd neglected to change her own clothing yet.

Well, sheeps. She went over to her saddlebag and sorted through the contents, finding a heavy woolen shirt inside it. Her eyes flicked up to the rest of the group, pausing when she realized none of the others was making any effort to get themselves into something dry.

She cocked her head. Was she really the only one who had brought spare clothes?'

Really?

The forest dwellers had taken their battlecoats off, and they were hanging over a wall, but they had their thick coat of fur to protect them. The militia and soldiers kept their armor on, and resigned themselves to just flicking bits of mud off their boots.

The Amazons stayed near the fire, trying to get their leathers dry while wearing them.

With a slight shake of her head, Gabrielle slipped the warm shirt over her and felt immediately better, using the length of it to let her slip out of her skirt and top and set them out to dry. Then she sat down on the hearth and unlaced her boots, intent on swapping her wet socks for dry ones.

When they first had started traveling together, Xena had nagged her a lot about all the stuff she collected on their journeys and carried with her. She pulled her boots off and set them aside, digging a dry pair of socks from the bag.

But then as the years went on, the warrior had come to realize that maybe it was worth carrying a little extra if it meant you could live more comfortably when you were far away from home.

Or if you really didn't have a home.

She was still trying to convince Xena to bring hammocks with them though. Maybe the next trip.

Gabrielle paused, and studied her now snugly socked foot. "Let's get back from this one first, okay?" She muttered under her breath. "Dori, c'mere. Let me get your boots off."

Dori pattered over and drummed her hands on her mother's knees. "Mama, dis is a fun place. There's froggies everywhere."

"I'm glad you think so." Gabrielle sat her down and removed her boots, drying off her feet with a bit of linen.

The soft crackle of the fire sounded nearby, and she could feel the warmth on her back. "Any sign of anyone out there, Bennu?"

"Naw." Bennu was helping to wrestle the now washed iron pot onto the stones that ringed the

fire. "Got a feeling they pulled off fore that curve figgered us was going to ambush em."

Hm. Gabrielle gave Dori one of her toys. Should she have done that? She leaned back onto one elbow. "Should we have?" She asked the question directly.

Bennu looked over his shoulder at her. "Never could get a count of em." He said. "Might could have done it, but twould be dangerous with the weather."

Solari came over and sat down next to Gabrielle. "What are those?" She pointed at the bard's feet.

"Socks." Gabrielle answered. "I wear them under my boots."

The Amazon studied them. "I saw you with them in the village and wanted to ask." She said. "They look cool."

"They are." Gabrielle wiggled her toes. "We found them..." She paused. "Out on the road. Xena loves them."

"She does?" Cait settled down on the other side of her, giving Dori's hair a ruffle. "I'd hardly think she'd notice."

Gabrielle removed her edible odds and ends from her pack and got up to add it to the common pot. "Boy, she's got you all fooled" She found comfort in talking about her partner, she realized. Just saying Xena's name soothed a little of the anxiety in her heart. "She wears silk under those leathers, I'll have you know."

Jessan chuckled.

"Really?" Solari asked.

"Really." The bard smiled. "And she loves bubble baths."

Everyone looked at her. "Hey." Gabrielle shook a finger at them. "They called her the warrior PRINCESS for a reason, okay?"

"Pwincess." Dori rolled onto her back and wiggled her feet in the air. "Go Boo!"

Everyone laughed, and the atmosphere around the fire grew perceptibly more relaxed.

Gabrielle inspected what was already in the pot and added her supplies to it, and then she combined a handful of dried herbs she'd also had and contributed that too. "Let's let this cook while we sleep." She said. "By the time we wake up, it'll be worth eating."

Everyone was already picking spots to curl up and Gabrielle did too, making space for Dori next to her as she spread her furs out. The rain started to come down harder and she was glad. Rain was their ally tonight.

She got Dori to lie down, and settled down next to her. The stone hearth was far from comfortable, but she was tired enough for her body to relax despite of it. The stout walls and gates would keep their fire from being seen, and she could feel sleep creeping up on her.

She hoped she was too tired to dream. The hectic day had kept her from thinking about what had happened earlier and she consciously now shuttered her mind away from it. Instead, she focused on happier memories of her partner, and she reached out along that link with wistful affection.

She could sense warmth there. Just a gentle presence that, as she thought about it, brightened and seemed to reach back towards her.

Was it Xena? It was a new sensation, and Gabrielle let herself be completely distracted by it, closing her eyes tight as she reached out again, picturing her hand extending out towards her

soulmate invitingly.

The fire faded from her hearing, and became aware of her own heartbeat. She reached further in her imagination and just as she thought about giving it up as a silly notion she felt strong fingers clasp hers.

Oh no that was real. I love you. She whispered soundlessly. Xena?

Hang in there.

Were they really words? Echoes? Pure imagination?

Gabrielle felt her heart pick up its pace and she felt a moment of pure joy at this phantom and unexpected contact, all the more precious given what she'd felt earlier.

Her hand was squeezed, then released, and it was over, but it left her with a sense of amazement, the exhaustion evaporated like it was never there.

She took that feeling and held it close, a smile on her face as sleep took her.

Far off down the road, in the rain, hoofbeats sounded, fading off into the distance.

**

Xena looked up as Iolaus arrived next to her, and sat down. "Why aren't you sleeping?" She asked bluntly.

"I was." Iolaus leaned back against the side wall of the ship next to her. "Then I woke up and decided to take a walk." He studied the huddled form against the mast. "You two having a nice chat?"

Milena was once again tied to the structure, but this time in a way that allowed her to move. Her clothing had been neatened up and her hair and face were washed, courtesy of Xena's water bucket.

"We had a chat." Xena allowed.

Iolaus smiled. "Bet you're glad we turned around, huh?" He addressed Milena.

"Yes." Milena replied. "There's nothing for me in Athens now."

"Your brothers did a very stupid thing."

"I know." The girl said. "I tried to talk them out of it. They got very angry at me, and said I was just.." She paused, and let the words trail off. "I guess they paid for it."

Iolaus shifted. "Well, you know, I've seen a lot of people die." He said. "And it's not always a case of them deserving it, or paying for a deed, but sometimes you just accept that the consequences of something you do may put you in that kind of trouble."

"I guess." Milena said. "Xena, if you're going to let me go in Thema, you could let me go now. I'm not going to try anything like that."

The warrior studied her. "When we get to Thema, I'll let you loose." She said. "You're better off where you are."

"Xena's right." Iolaus chimed in. "Besides, most everyone else on board has the same accommodations, right?" He gestured around him. "Even Xena's sleeping with the horses."

"I'm sure she could find something more interesting to sleep with if she wanted to." The girl said.

"I'm not sleeping." Xena let the conversation flow over her as she tipped her head back and looked up at the sky. The stars overhead suddenly reminded her of Gabrielle, and her eyes went to

the bard's favorite pattern, and traced it.

The Warrior. She remembered the night her partner had pointed it out to her, long before they were more than friends.

She remembered the reflection of those stars in Gabrielle's eyes, and the feeling of confused bemusement she'd experienced when she'd recognized the meaning of what she was saying.

Not 'the' Warrior, but her Warrior.

She wanted to be with Gabrielle. The frustration of the slow boat, and the never-ending swish of the water against the hull were wearing on her nerves.

She wished.

She wished right now that she could just close her eyes and want enough and that would bring her off this boat and across the water, past the chaos of Therma, down the road, through the trees, hopefully to the fortress her soulmate was sheltering in.

She could almost feel Gabrielle reaching out to her.

She closed her hand around the warmth of a grip. Hang in there. She wished at her partner.

"Right Xena?" Iolaus turned to her. "You'd do that, wouldn't you?"

The illusion faded, and she was back on the boat. "What?" She felt an irrational sense of loss. "What the Hades are you talking about, Iolaus?"

He had his head cocked to one side, regarding her. "You go off some where?"

Milena was also watching her. "What were you thinking about, Xena? You have such an odd look on your face."

What was I thinking about. Xena could feel that warmth still brushing against her, wanting her presence. "Nothing." She said. "Just wishing this damn thing would move faster." She got up and looked over the rail at the sea. "We've got a lot to do."

"What are you going to do?" Milena asked, her eyes glued to the tall figure at the rail.

Xena turned. "Go home." She said.

"Through the Spartan army." Iolaus leaned back on his hands. "Poor Spartans."

The warrior managed a smile. "They could have stopped at the border." She said. "After all, if they came past Amphipolis..."

"They had to get past your mother." Iolaus chirped at her. "What's the chance of that? Heck, Xena, you'll probably have them all camped out on the doorstep there taking turns doing her dishes."

Xena was about to answer, when she heard a whistle from the crow's nest. She tipped her head back and saw the sailor on watch peering out over the dark waves and pointing. Glad of the distraction, she circled the mast and started climbing.

Milena and Iolaus watched her go. Then they regarded each other. "It seems so strange to think of the great warrior with a family." The girl commented.

Iolaus smiled briefly. "She has one." He said. "Do you, really?"

"Yeah." The girl answered. "But they're not worth anything."

Iolaus tilted his head at her. "Well now." He mused. "You'd be surprised, really. You never can tell with family, sometimes." He laced his fingers together. "Xena's got her mother, and her brother

Toris back in Amphipolis.” He paused. “And Gabrielle, of course.”

“Yes, the famous storyteller.” Milena said. “Xena’s bard.” She tilted her head up to watch the warrior climb up the mast. “She doesn’t have to look far for a story, does she?”

Iolaus’ eyebrows lifted. “Ah, no. She doesn’t.” He murmured. “Not far at all.”

Xena was glad there was something else to do. She climbed up the rigging, pushing aside both the fatigue and the aches as she joined the watch in the nest. “What’s up?”

“There, lady.” The man pointed. “Got som’tin on the horizin there.”

Xena leaned on the edge of the crows’ nest and studied the spot he was pointing at. Against the clouds, far off on the edge of where the darkness of the sea met the slightly lighter gray of the sky she could see the faintest hint of a skeletal outline.

Like a couple of branches, held up against the sky. Except that to Xena’s eyes they were nothing so innocuous as that. “Ships.”

“Aye.” The sailor agreed. “Pile of em.”

Ships. Xena studied the outlines. What were ships doing off the coast? “Athenian navy?” She hazarded a guess.

The sailor scratched his stubbled chin. “Them lot were in Piraeus harbor we left it.” He said. “Stockin up.”

Which is where they should be, Xena agreed silently. Taking on stores and getting ready to defend the coastline from what would surely be a sea attack from the formidable Spartan navy. Only the big armed merchant ships, like the one she was on, would be going between Athens and Therma, picking up men and supplies for the war.

She squinted into the distance, trying to bring the masts into focus despite how far away they were. The clouds were shifting across her vision though, and she had the impression the ships were stationary.

Another blur on the horizon, and she realized that was the edge of the coastline, very far off just to one side of the ships. She turned and went to the other side of the nest and looked down. “Iolaus!”

Near the side, her stallion picked his head up and looked around for her. It made Xena smile a bit.

“Yes?” The human Iolaus had stood up and was looking at her.

“C’mon up here and look at something.”

Iolaus sighed. “I knew you were going to say that.” He grumbled, but started up.

Xena went back to the other side of the mast and studied the horizon; glad of the cool breeze that was blowing the hair back out of her eyes.

“Other ships got into weather maybe. Waiting to sail.” The sailor offered. “Was some due in port after us.”

Could be. Xena allowed. They might have moved out of the harbor if the weather was as bad as what they faced to avoid having the ships dashed against the wooden piers. That might have been what she’d have done.

But then, why anchor outside the harbor, just out of view?

Something didn’t seem right.

Waiting for Iolaus, she found the memory of her contact with Gabrielle coming back and she recalled suddenly being on Cecrops ship, heading home.

Just sitting on the bow shoulder to shoulder with Gabrielle content to do nothing more than watch the seagulls coast overhead and enjoy each other's company. No need to talk, completely comfortable for once with themselves.

Sharing a big mug of ale, passing it back and forth to each other. She could taste it on the back of her tongue right now, and feel the warmth as Gabrielle's head rested against her shoulder.

Accepted and totally unselfconscious. Both of them contented and at least briefly, at peace.

"Okay, what?"

Xena jerked upright a little, and blinked. "What?"

Iolaus was standing there, hands on his hips. "What do you mean what?" He demanded. "You told me to come up here!"

"Oh, sorry." Xena muttered. "There." She pointed at the horizon. "What do you make of that?"

Iolaus leaned forward and peered into the distance. "Make of what?" He asked, puzzled. "The clouds? Or.. wait, is that the coastline?"

The sailor snickered.

Xena tilted his head over. "There." She said, in a not so patient tone. "A bunch of ships?"

Iolaus paused then nodded. "Ooooh." He said. Then he looked at her. "Sorry, Xena. I know I'm supposed to get something here, but if it's a bunch of ships, and you know that, why make me look at it?"

The warrior sighed. "Why are ships parked outside the harbor?" She suggested.

"I have no idea." Iolaus replied promptly. "I assume you know?" He studied her. "Honestly Xena, I'm not a seaman, remember? If you ask me how to get from Macedonia to Delphi I could help you out but don't ask me what a bunch of sails on the horizon mean."

"I don't know." Xena admitted. "I was hoping you might suggest something." She leaned on the edge of the crows' nest. "I don't think its merchanters like this one."

Iolaus leaned next to her. "You think its Spartans?"

There was nothing about the sails that suggested it. She hadn't seen enough of the Spartan navy for her to be able to spot a difference between that, and the masts of their own ship.

And yet. "I don't know." Xena said. "Wouldn't make sense if they were invading. There's plenty of land between Therma and Athens to plunder."

"Maybe they want it to be a surprise?"

"Then why invade by land?" Xena asked. "Just take ships down the Aegean and land near Cyme. Cross the peninsula and hit Athens that way. Why bother coming down through Thrace?"

It made no sense.

"Well, if it's the Spartans it's going to be tough getting back into Therma." Iolaus said. "They can block the harbor."

"Buggers." The sailor agreed. "Ca'pn'll know what to do."

Xena was willing to bet her friend the captain, canny as he was, wouldn't know half what to do about facing off against a bunch of possibly hostile ships. "We'll see." She stepped out of the

crows' nest and started down. "C'mon Iolaus."

"Up, down. Up down." Iolaus sighed. "Can't keep these hero types happy. Now I know why I'm not married."

Xena pretended she hadn't heard that. She dropped down the mast quickly, kicking out from the base as she dropped the last body length and landing with a little bounce. She headed immediately towards the captains quarters, threading her way through the refugees on deck.

At least the night was proving entertaining enough to keep her awake. She was halfway across the ship before Iolaus caught her up, falling into step next to her. "Hey Xena?"

"Mm?"

"Sure you're okay?"

Xena gave him a quick, sideways glance. "Fine. You?" She answered crisply. "You're not getting to be a hen on me, are you Iolaus?"

The blond man smiled briefly. "You just seem a little out of it."

"Out of it?"

Iolaus lifted his hands in a light shrug.

The door to the cabins gave her an excuse to ignore the question. Xena opened it and ducked inside, feeling a rush of apprehension she powered through with stolid determination. She spotted the captain's cabin ahead, and she managed to get to the door, knocking on it loudly.

"Bet he's sleeping." Iolaus gave up the interrogation.

"Bet he is." Xena pounded on the door again, and stepped back as it whisked open, letting a gust of leather and wood scented air into the corridor.

"Ship better be damned sinking!" The captain stuck his head out and glared at them. Then he paused. "Ah. Well, at least it's a good looking woman." He studied Xena. "What trouble you causing now?"

"We might be running into a problem." Xena ignored the banter. "Lookout spotted some ships moored outside Therma harbor."

The captain squinted at her. Then he looked over at Iolaus. He pulled his head back inside his cabin and slammed the door, leaving them standing there in the hall in smoky, torch lit silence.

"Well." Iolaus said, after an awkward pause. "So much for charm."

Xena reached to pound on the door again but held up as it jerked open before she could touch it, and the captain emerged belting his tunic and stamping his feet into his boots.

"C'mon you iggerant landies." He shoved past them. "Let's see what you think you saw and I'll tell ya what it really was. Probably just some damn moonbeams."

The followed him through the corridor and out the hatch, emerging back into the starlit night to be watched by the refugees on deck.

Xena was aware of the heightened interest. She ignored it though, and simply followed along as the captain went to the bow and pressed up against it, shading his eyes from the moonlight.

She stepped up onto the platform next to him and waited, her hands resting lightly on the railing as she felt the salt spray blow against her face.

"Well,, Hades." The captain muttered. "Them's ships all right but no saying whose." He stepped

back. "Could be ours, y'know."

"I know." Xena agreed. "I hope they are. It means we've got supplies and maybe men to fight the Spartans with."

The captain frowned. "Won't know much more till dawn." He muttered. "Damn you all, woman." He turned and looked, then turned back again. "You should sleep with me to make up for all this trouble you cause!"

Iolaus grimaced and closed his eyes.

Xena merely chuckled. "Sorry captain." She held her hand up. "I'm happily married."

The man laughed. "We're at sea, woman! Who's to know?"

"I'd know." Xena replied, her voice dropping and becoming serious. "If those ships aren't friendly, I hope your men know how to fight as well as you know how to talk."

"Same could be said of you." The captain smiled, then he nodded his head, and turned to leave. "I'll see the men ready, but this tub's cracked and limping. Wont' be a picnic." He disappeared behind the forecastle, and they heard a whistle rise up that began to gather the sailors.

Xena leaned against the rail. "Some days, I'd rather have stayed a bartender." She sighed.

"Bartender?" Iolaus stared at her.

"My mother's convinced I'd make the inn a bar and whorehouse." The warrior said. "All right, the damn bastard's right. We might as well get some rest while we can, I guess." She glanced across the water in frustration.

"Wish you could fly?" Iolaus guessed.

Xena smiled faintly. "Something like that." She left the rail and headed, finally, back towards where the horses were patiently waiting, swishing their tails. "See you in the morning, Iolaus."

The horses looked up as she approached, and she patted the equine Iolaus' neck as she eased past their supply of hay and made it back to her hammock. This time, the makeshift bed looked a lot friendlier and she settled into it with a sense of relief.

She removed her sword from her back and tucked it at her side. Behind her, she could hear some stirring and the creaking of doors opening along with the patter of footsteps from the sailors suddenly more active.

She felt a little bad about that, since the men deserved their rest too, but the reality was what it was, and aside from helping to sharpen weapons, there wasn't much she could or was willing to do to help them.

That sounded bad. She knew it. Xena closed her eyes, feeling the exhaustion finally overcoming her. It sounded bad, but if she ended up fighting the next day, having rest would do both her and the crew more good than her meddling would.

She really wished she could fly, now that she thought about it. It would be damn handy right now to coast over those far off silhouettes and find out what they were, and then take a detour over the hills to find Gabrielle and see what she was up to.

So much had happened, that she wanted to talk to her about. Xena opened her eyes and studied the stars, realizing she was really over being alone. She missed Gabrielle and she was damned tired of not having her around.

Yeah.

Wings would be nice.

She closed her eyes. She could feel the wind pushing them forward and at last let the gentle rocking lull her into sleep.

**

“Gabrielle.”

The shaking on her shoulder brought Gabrielle out of her dreams and into reality with a sense of foggy disbelief. “Ah.” She hiked herself up onto one elbow. “Yeah, I’m up.”

“It’s okay.” Jessan was crouching down next to her. “No panic. Just getting close to dawn.” He peered at her. “You okay?”

“Yeah.” She scrubbed her face. “Just was dreaming.”

“Ah.” Jessan murmured. “What were you dreaming about?” He asked, after a pause.

Gabrielle’s eyes went a little unfocused. “I don’t know.” She answered, with a slight shake of her head. “But it was a deep one. I can feel it.”

Jessan watched the silvery glow in his Sight mingling with her normal golden one fade slowly out. “I bet.” He answered, giving her a light pat on the shoulder. “Anyway, we’re stirring up that soup.” He glanced behind him. “Rain’s still coming down.”

Gabrielle pulled herself upright and sat cross-legged. “Okay.” She said. “We can take the back trail. If I remember it right, it joins the road just before the slope down to Therma. If it’s clear, we can make for the there.”

“Great.” Jessan stood up, just as Dori came rambling over, drenched with rain. “Oh boy.”

“Dori.” Gabrielle gave her daughter a wryly exasperated look. “What have you been doing?”

“Mama I gots a froggy.” Dori produced one hand, clutched firmly around a squiggling green form. “He was groaging.” She displayed the unhappy animal to her mother. “He’s so pretty!”

Jessan made a show of tiptoeing off and leaving mother and child behind. Gabrielle eyed the frog and ran her fingers through her hair, still more than a little fogged with sleep. “Honey, let him go.” She said “You’re squishing him. I’m sure that doesn’t feel good.”

Dori sat down and released the frog between her knees. It sat there for a second, obviously collecting it’s wits, then it hopped over her ankle and made a beeline or the wall. “Mama, liked the froggy.” She said sadly. “Wanted to make him my friend!”

“I know you did.” Her mother said. “But I’m sure he had a family to get home to, just like we do, right? You wouldn’t want to keep him from that would you Dori?”

“No.” Dori drummed her heels. “Mama, what we do today?”

Gabrielle stretched her body out, feeling better than she’d expected to. “Well, we’re going to have some of that nice smelling soup for breakfast, then we’re going to ride on Shadow for a while until we get to a place where all our friends are.”

“Boo?” Dori perked up.

“Boo might be there, yes.” Gabrielle found herself smiling at the thought. “She might be heading there right now to meet up with us, or we may need to wait a little while for her.”

“Boo will come there too?” Dori said.

“Absolutely.” Gabrielle replied, with a sense of conviction that surprised her.

Or maybe it didn’t. She couldn’t remember her dream, but she knew Xena had been in it. She

had that feeling she sometimes did when she woke that she and Xena had crossed paths in that gray twilight.

She almost never remembered the details. Xena professed to never understand what she was talking about even when she did. But there was just this feeling she had inside that made her believe anyway.

“I want Boo.” Dori announced. “Mama, we should go to Boo today!”

Her mother smiled. “You know what, munchkin? I think we will.” She could feel in her guts that building sense of anticipation. “We sure will try.”

Gabrielle got to her feet and rolled her head around to loosen up her neck muscles. She went over and felt her traveling clothes, glad to find them dry. “I guess you washed up already huh Dori?” She eyed the child.

“Went to fishes.” Dori confirmed, making a swimming gesture with her hands. “It was fun!”

“I’m glad you think so little miss fishie.” Gabrielle got into her traveling garb and removed her shift, folding it up neatly and tucking it into her saddlebag. She glanced up as she heard footsteps approach, pulling out her hairbrush as Solari appeared out of the dusky dimness. “Morning.”

“Morning.” Solari said. “Glad we got a little shut eye. I was swamped.”

“Me too.” The bard agreed readily. “I know we’d probably have done better to keep going but sometimes you just can’t.” She smiled briefly. “I learned that from a master of knowing just how hard you can push yourself.”

“Big X?”

“That’d be the one.”

“Mamamamama.” Dori danced around Gabrielle. “C’n we go fast soon?” She hopped several hops. “Go Go Go!”

Gabrielle observed her with a wry smile. “Boy you sure can tell who she takes after sometimes though.” She sighed. “She’s so much like her.”

“She is.” Solari agreed quietly. “She’s gonna be a kickass leader someday. She already rules the kids in the village.”

Gabrielle knew that was true. Whether because of her own feisty personality or because the other kids knew who her parents were, Dori was definitely showed deference. To her credit though, her daughter never took advantage of that and her sunny presence usually got her more friends than otherwise. “She’s a little terror alright.”

But it made her think, after a moment. Dori was a natural leader. Gabrielle supposed that wasn’t unusual, given her and Xena’s own strong personalities but the child also carried Gabrielle’s right of caste and could end up being a true Queen of the Amazons when she was grown.

Could be. A lot of things could happen before then. Gabrielle got the rest of her things together and a dry outfit onto her daughter as she considered that. Dori herself could choose another path, that was her own right when she came of age.

Nothing forced you to be an Amazon. Some kids grew up in the village, and decided to leave, the bard knew. Some wanted to see the world, or go be a busker, or sometimes they just met a boy in a nearby town and, like Granella, decided that was the life they wanted.

“She’s smart though.” Solari commented. “Not like some of the featherbrains I’ve seen grow up in the village. “

“Are you smart, miss fishie?” Gabrielle got Dori’s shirt sorted out and straightened. “Did you tell your auntie Solari how smart you were when you figured out how to open Gramma’s pigpen the other day?”

Dori giggled.

The bard chuckled in response. “She’s too smart for her own good sometimes.” She acknowledged. “All right, let’s get this thing going. Breakfast ready?”

“Gogogo!”

**

The path was overgrown with trees, far more so than the last time she’d traveled it but she’d halfway expected that. Gabrielle took a firmer grip on Shadow’s bridle and led her along the slippery surface, guiltily glad herself to have her sturdy boots firmly on the ground.

They were making pretty good time anyway. It was mid morning already, and they were climbing up the slope to the ridge that would then pitch down into the valley that led to the harbor city. Despite the rain and the mud and the tough going, Gabrielle could feel her heart getting lighter and lighter with every step she took.

She was heading for Xena. There was no doubt in her mind of that, she could feel that gentle pull – half sensed, half imagined, getting stronger. She knew she was going in the right direction, now all it would take would be to clear the forest, and make a run for Therma.

So there was a bounce in her step as she walked and she was tempted to whistle cheerfully as she ducked under a pair of dripping branches and leaned forward against the slope.

Dori was bounding along next to her, apparently tiring for the moment of riding Shadow. She had her little cloak on, and the edges were bouncing as she walked almost exactly the way Xena’s did, and it was making Gabrielle inwardly chuckle.

“Mama, see!” Dori pointed. “Pretty bird!”

Gabrielle glanced up to see a robin, huddled in the rain and looking very cross on a branch just over their heads. “Aw, cheer up.” She advised the bird. “It can’t rain forever.”

“Don’t give the Fates any ideas, huh?” Solari and Cait were walking on either side of her, and Solari gave her a look after she spoke. “Glad we’re going up and not down. I bet that spot we hid in’s flooded by now.”

“We weren’t hiding.” Cait objected. “We took up a strategic location.”

“Oh please.” Paladia rolled her eyes from her spot a step or two behind Cait. “You’re such a fruitcake.”

“I am not, and if you say that again I’ll pound you.” Cait responded.

Gabrielle glanced down at the small river of water coursing down the path between her feet, and found herself in agreement with Solari. “Sorry to say, Cait, but we sure were hiding. I didn’t want those Spartans to find us.” She glanced to one side. “Right Jens?”

“Much as I enjoy a good fight, yes.” The Athenian captain agreed. “Right now, my whole attention is on getting to Therma, and getting word back to Athens of the invasion.”

“Jens, did you hear anything about oracles, Athena’s oracles being involved in the war?” Gabrielle asked, after a moment’s more climbing. “The Spartans were telling me that Artemis’ oracle was involved on their side.”

Jens climbed along next to her for a minute in silence. “In truth, Gabrielle, I am reluctant to talk

to you about it.” He admitted. “Not because it isn’t true – I have heard rumors that the council have gone to Delphi to consult Athena’s oracle.”

“But?”

The soldier looked around. “It seemed to me that those who say this were looking for an excuse to war.” He said. “When Xena left the city, after the games, many said it was an omen that we should not go to war.”

Gabrielle’s ears pricked. “Really?”

“It was a strange time.” Jens admitted. “There were those who were all for starting battle immediately, but a portion stood up and said, it wasn’t a good idea.”

“I guess the ones that wanted to fight won that argument.” The bard said. “Because I know Athens is going to war with Sparta.”

Jens nodded. “They were silenced.”

“Careful Dori.” Gabrielle warned. “Those rocks are slippery. You don’t want to get owie.”

“No mama.” Dori hopped off the rocks and came over to her, splashing in the running rainwater and sending spurts of mud up from her small boots.

“She’s a beautiful child.” Jens commented. “She’s gotten taller since I saw you in Athens.”

“Yeah.” The bard looked fondly at her daughter. Then she looked over and met Jens eyes. “Did they silence those people by saying Athena was commanding the war?”

He nodded.

“And you think that’s bogus?”

The soldier smiled wryly. “Harsh way of putting it. Let us just surmise that we have thought maybe the council used that story without it being strictly true.”

How much should she tell him? Gabrielle caught Solari and Cait watching her. How much really could she say that he would believe given where her knowledge of the subject came from? “Well.” She said. “If that’s the case, then Sparta’s doing the same thing.”

“As if they need an excuse for war?” Jens seemed skeptical. “You see it yourself, Gabrielle. We treat with them in good faith, and they invade us.”

True. Gabrielle took a breath to answer, then looked up as she heard a scuffle ahead of her. Bennu was making his way down the path at a good clip from his point position and the militia and forest dwellers were moving aside to clear room for him. “Hold that thought.”

“Gabrielle.” Bennu thumped to a halt, and they all stopped. “Looks like was a battle up top. Nasty work.”

“Okay.” Gabrielle said. “Then lets get up there. “

They climbed more quickly, passing a line of trees and up into a rockier part of the trail with less mud and easier going despite the continuing rain. Ahead, Gabrielle could see the ridge that was the top of the trail, and past that she knew they’d be looking down the last slope down to Thema.

One of Bennu’s men was standing just short of the crest, his sword drawn in his hand.

“Dori” Gabrielle looked around for her. “C’mere. Do you want to ride on Shadow for a while? I think she misses you.”

Her daughter came galloping over. “We go fast now?”

“Not right now.” Gabrielle lifted her up and put her on the horses back. “Hold on now. We’re going to go up to the top there, and there might be bad men. So hang on, okay?”

“Okay.” Dori wriggled into place. “Pretty horsie.” She patted Shadow’s neck. “Mama, c’n my horsie be like this one?”

Gabrielle unstrapped her staff and wrapped one hand around it. “You want one this color, honey? Or like Argo?”

“Yes!”

The militiaman waved them ahead, and they climbed the last bit up to where he was, and Gabrielle spotted the circling buzzards overhead. “Hold these.” She gave her reins to Solari and eased between the horses, joining Bennu and Cait at the top of the ridge. “What is it?”

The militiaman grimaced. “Hard to say.” He said. “Six, maybe seven bodies there, or parts of. “ He hesitated. “May be Amazons.”

Gabrielle jerked, and so did Cait. The bard turned “Solari, come on up here please.”

Solari gave over Shadow’s reins to Paladia and started climbing up the path, with Jessan at her side. “What’s up?” She asked, as they arrived.

“There’s some bodies in the trees there. Milat thinks they’re Amazons.” Gabrielle said. “We better take a look.”

She led the way up through the grass, the smell of death tainting the air around them. Unpleasant, but it was something Gabrielle knew from long experience and she was able to push past the smell as they approached the bodies lying on the ground.

“Gosh.” Cait said. “Their gear looks Amazon.” She separated from them and approached what apparently had been a campsite.

A cook fire, cold now, was in the center and there were two iron pots overturned next to it. Cait crouched to touch the ashes. “Cold.”

Solari picked up one of the packs, which had been emptied and tossed to one side. “Same type as we use.” She commented quietly.

Gabrielle went over to one of the bodies and knelt next to it. She studied the disfigured face, and the huge wound in the side she figured had been caused by a pike. The body was dressed in Amazon leathers, bloodstained now, but to her eye natural to the wearer and not assumed as some costume.

Flies were everywhere. Maggots hadn’t started yet though, so she figured they were likely a day or so dead. She reached down and picked up the feathers braided in the woman’s hair, the color and design striking a faint chord.

“They fought.” Jessan commented briefly.

The bodies had weapons in their hands or nearby, and two had arrows piercing their chests. Gabrielle stood up and rested her weight on her staff. She walked over to look at another body, face down in the dirt with a huge gash in her back.

“Gabrielle?” Solari came over with a dirt covered pouch. “They missed this.”

The bard took it, and opened it, finding a folded parchment inside. She removed it and opened it, scanning it quickly and shading the parchment with one hand from the rain. “It’s from Athens.” She said. “They were responding to the same offer those other Amazons passed on to us.”

“We know these guys.” Solari said, unexpectedly. “They were the offshoot from Jonae’s people

that ended up staying near the forest.”

Gabrielle frowned. “The Spartans are behind us. These Amazons were heading to Therma, I guess, for the conclave. They were attacked, that’s plain... but why?”

“Those Spartans what came first came from this way.” Bennu said. “Maybe they wasn’t carrying notes. Maybe they was spying out the land.”

“Maybe.” Gabrielle murmured. “But they weren’t here a day ago, Bennu. “

A yell of warning made them all whirl, and through the rain Gabrielle caught sight of dark bodies moving too fast and too close. “Ambush!” The bard yelled at the top of her voice, bringing her staff around and getting her balance set. “Look out!”

**

Xena sheathed her sword and headed for the steering platform, where the captain was standing with the helmsman. She joined them as a heavy gust of wind fluttered the sails overhead. “Morning.”

“Morning you damned woman.” The captain said. “Looks like our friends are gone from last night.” He indicated the horizon.

The port of Thema was now a good deal closer, and it’s mouth was clear of any ships Spartan or otherwise.

Xena was a little perplexed about that, but glad as now her passage into the town was unimpeded. “Maybe they went into port.” She suggested. “Could have been moored outside waiting for a pier.”

“Aye.” The captain said. “Either that or they sailed on up the coast and are past the point now. We can’t see em.” He nodded. “Good riddance at any rate. Ship’s too crooked to stand battle.”

Xena nodded. “We made good time last night.” She glanced up. “Wind was in our favor.”

“Better than I thought.” The captain admitted. “Two, maybe three candlemarks to the harbor. Be good to tie up and get this damn lot of bastards and animals off my deck.”

“We’ll be gladder to get off it than you are to see us gone.” Xena said. She turned and left the platform, walking across the deck and past the mast where Milena was still securely tied. The girl was sleeping, though, curled up in the pre dawn light in apparent exhaustion.

Xena paused. Then she drew her sword and made a slight detour, coming around behind the mast and slicing through the ropes binding Milena with a flick of the long blade. She returned her blade to its sheath and continued on, moving to the bow and looking over it.

The line of the land was now taller, and far clearer. The cliffs that surrounded Thema harbor obscuring the city from sight and the seas were gray and ruffled, the clouds building overhead as evidence of a coming storm.

Far off, she could see black clouds, past the city and she wondered if they were raining over her family. She frowned at the thought, hoping Gabrielle had brought her warm cloak and was taking care to keep it on.

Hands resting on the rail, she bounced up and down on the balls of her feet. “Go go go.” She muttered under her breath. “C’mon you bastard. Sail faster.”

“Good morning.” Ephiny came to stand next to her. “What’s going on?”

“Morning.” Xena responded. “We’re almost back.”

“So I see.” The regent leaned on the railing. “Get any sleep?”

Xena glanced at her. "Couple candlemarks." She allowed. "You?"

"It was a pretty good night." Ephiny replied. "Thanks for the loan of the bunk. We really appreciated it." She glanced up at Xena. "What's the plan?"

"Does the plan include breakfast?" Pony came up on the other side of her. "I could eat a deer's hind hoof." She studied the coastline. "Hey! We're almost back! Damn I'm glad to see that harbor."

"Me too." Ephiny agreed. "I'll be glad to be back on land."

"If I could get out and pull this thing faster I would." Xena said, unexpectedly. "I can swim faster than we're moving."

Ephiny patted her shoulder. "C'mon, champ." She said "Let's go find some hot tea and crackers or whatever they're serving over there." She pointed. "Before you decide to act on that."

Xena allowed herself to be steered towards the area set aside for the ships cooks, where they were busy ladling some liquid into pitchers and cutting up squares of way bread and some kind of hard cheese.

It didn't look that appetizing, but after all, they'd be in port before long so they three women took their rations from the busy sailors and went to sit down on the steps up to the forecastle. Xena set her bread and cheese on her knee and put the mug to her lips, pausing and drawing it back with a look of surprise. "What the Hades is this?"

"Grog." Pony supplied. "Same crap they gave everyone on the other tub. Got a kick to it."

Kick? Xena sniffed it cautiously. It smelled like rotten apples mixed with port and it was making her eyes water. "You're gonna drink this?"

"Sure." Pony took a swallow. "Not bad. Not near as bad as that stuff you gave Soli that one time. Holy Artemis. She smelled like the inside of a season old ale barrel."

Silently, Xena handed her mug over. Then she took a nibble of the cheese, finding it bland and mild on her tongue.

"Xena, that kid's loose." Ephiny grabbed her arm. "Look." She pointed at where Milena was very cautiously standing up and looking around.

"I know." The warrior took a bite of the bread. "I cut the ropes." She watched the girl. "Figured she wouldn't be stupid this close to port."

Pony snorted.

'She's a good looker." Ephiny said. "Better not go belowdecks or those couple men working down there'll probably have a party with her."

"Kid." Pony said, shaking her head.

"Poor grandma." Ephiny bumped her with her shoulder. "Forget your cane in Xena's palace?"

Xena chuckled under her breath, but acknowledged a pang in her chest as she envied the relaxed bantering between these two partners.

If Gabrielle had been there, she knew, the bard would have been seated right next to Xena, her knee touching the warrior's knee, and their shoulders brushing. Gabrielle would be joining in the teasing, leaning over Xena to talk, resting her elbow on the warrior's thigh in unselfconscious possession.

She could almost hear her voice, low pitched and warm, full of mischief as she traded jokes with their friends and feel the pressure against her skin where Gabrielle would be touching her.

“Xena?”

Oh damn. Xena glanced up from her cheese, realizing she'd been caught daydreaming again. “Yes?” She tried not to blush as she saw Ephiny's grin. Part of her felt very idiotic that she was letting herself be so affected by Gabrielle's absence.

After all, they'd only been separated for a damn seven-day. This was nuts. She felt like she had when she and Gabrielle were first falling .. okay – when they admitted...

“Xena?”

The warrior sighed. “Yes?” She propped her chin on her fist and eyed Ephiny. “Can I have a minute of peace to figure out what I want to do after we tie up?”

“Uh huh.” Ephiny gave her a knowing look. “That's fine. You sit there and strategize.”

Xena knew she was blushing. She could feel the heat in her ears.

“Eph, cut it out.” Pony said.

Xena's brow quirked.

Ephiny regarded her partner with some bemusement.

“Just be glad we got this end of it.” Pony went on. “Yeah?”

Ephiny chuckled wryly. “Oh yeah.” She admitted. “Good point, Pon.” She gave Xena a pat on the back. “Sorry, Xena. I'm not trying to give you a hard time. Much.”

Xena sighed.

“Want more bread?” Pony got up. “I don't wanna be around here if you decide to teach wrestling again.” She headed purposefully back over to the cooking area.

“I'm really not.” Ephiny said. “Actually I think it's gorgeous, and besides, your being here's my fault.”

“Would you shut up with that already.” Xena gratefully took the subject change and ran with it. “Doesn't really matter why I'm here.” She turned her head slightly as she spotted Milena approaching with caution. “Here comes trouble.”

“Pot. Kettle.” Ephiny smiled at the girl. “Good morning.”

Milena looked warily at her. “Hello.” She turned her attention to Xena. “My ropes were cut. Did you do that?”

“Yes.” The warrior answered. “Don't make me regret it.”

Milena smiled at her. “Thank you.” She said, and then half turned. “We're almost back to Therma.” She looked back at Xena. “What happens when we get there?”

“Hopefully, nothing.” Ephiny said. “If we're lucky, we'll get off the boat, and get home before we have to tangle with Spartans.” She studied Xena's profile. “But you don't think that's what's going to happen, huh champ?”

Xena spotted the captain and Denius emerging and she got up. “Excuse me.” She said. “Gotta see a jerk about a moron.” She stepped neatly between them and headed in the direction of the two men.

Milena looked uncertainly at Ephiny.

“Siddown.” The Amazon offered. “You're not a prisoner anymore but I wouldn't push it with the crew.” She waited for the girl to sit down next to her. “My name's Ephiny.” She proffered an arm.

“You’re an Amazon.” Milena observed, clasping it hesitantly, then releasing her grip.

“I am.” The regent agreed.

“There are other Amazons on this ship.” The girl said. “They were pretty rude.”

“We can be.” Ephiny watched as Pony intercepted Xena, and they both continued towards the captain. “But don’t take it personally. They were rude to me too.” She said. “They tied me up and were going to hand me over to the slave master in Athens.”

Milena blinked. “They were?”

“Yeah, me and Pony.” Ephiny pointed at her partner. “Until the ship started sinking. Then I got pissed off and killed some of them so they left me alone after that.”

Milena absorbed this. “Oh.” She said. “Well, I guess they probably deserved it huh?”

Ephiny smiled.

“Are you a friend of Xena’s?”

Ephiny turned her head and looked at her.

**

Xena settled Iolaus’ saddle on his back and cinched it tight. “Ready to head home, boy?” She patted his shoulder. “Bet you’ll be glad to get off this damn deathtrap huh?”

Iolaus snorted, shaking his head.

She could already hear the break of the waves against the rocks as they approached the harbor. It would take a lot of skill to get in, she knew, since they had lost the slaves who rowed the boat in, and the space they’d been housed in. The captain would have to bring her into the harbor under sail, then drift in and hope the crew on shore could tie her without her slamming into the docks.

Xena suspected the captain was up to the task. He already had sailors lining the rails with ropes and bales of wrapped cloth to fend the pier off with.

She wasn’t concerned. She was focused on getting her gear ready, and the horses packed so they could get off the ship as soon as the ramp was put in place, relieved that the trip was almost over at last.

“Hey Xena.” The human Iolaus appeared, carrying his pack. “I finally got some decent sleep last night. You?”

What was this sudden interest in her sleeping habits? Xena wondered. She’d seen her reflection in the water basin and she hadn’t noticed any dark circles under her eyes or other obvious indications of fatigue. “I sat up and tied knots in my horses tail all night.” She said. “Then I untied them. It relaxes me.”

Iolaus stopped in mid motion, and looked at her, finding the warrior staring back at him with utter seriousness. “Ah hah.” He said. “To each their own, I guess.”

He stroked the gray mare and scratched her behind the ears. “You doing okay, pretty girl? We’re going to take you off this crazy ship, and you’ll be able to run around in the grass soon. You like that?”

The mare nuzzled him, batting her eyelashes against his vest.

“That kid say she want this horse back?” Iolaus asked Xena. “I see you let her loose.”

The warrior shrugged. “I doubt it. She didn’t acknowledge the damn horse when I asked her

about it, and something that good looking deserves better.”

“The kid or the horse?” Iolaus grinned.

Xena shrugged again. “Kid would do better to go home to daddy.” She opined. “She’s just going to get her ass in trouble out here. Some warlord’s going to pick her up.”

“You know, I agree.” Iolaus said. “Maybe I’ll take her with me when I head back to Athens.” He paused. “Eventually.”

Xena nodded, the matter settled to her satisfaction. She finished attaching her saddlebags to Io’s saddle and tucked the last of her things into them.

Her mind, now, truly, was moving ahead to what she’d do after their arrival. Denius, she was sure, would want her to meet with any troops inside the city and there would be confusion and delay as they brought their news to the city and perhaps time to fortify it.

Xena didn’t really want any delay. She wanted to just ride right through the city and out the gates, and there was part of her that insidiously intended on doing just that. Hades with the Spartans, or the Athenians for that matter.

Maybe she’d just grab horses for Eph and Pony and they’d all take off. Xena glanced over her shoulder to where the two Amazons were waiting, watching the approaching land with makeshift packs, supplies gathered from the wreck and here onboard strapped to their backs.

Things to travel with. They, at least, would go where she went. Xena acknowledged. She wouldn’t leave them behind and they had as big a stake as she did waiting back in Amphipolis.

They were... Xena paused and considered, then she nodded. They were family.

The sound of the waves against the rocks was getting louder. Xena tilted her head as she spotted the gray and white seagulls wheeling overhead. The cliffs were now towering over them, and the ship was angling towards the harbor opening with its dogleg turn that let into the larger, sheltered basin that held the docks and the slope up to the city.

Xena hoped it wasn’t busy in the harbor. The mostly out of control ship she was on wasn’t going to be a picnic to bring in and she had left the horses cross tied just in case.

“Half mast, bring er down!” The captain called out, over the sound of the fabric being wound in tightly.

The thrum of the wind diminished a little, and Xena turned her head as she caught another sound. Leaving the horses, she walked across the deck to the bow and cocked her head, straining her ears to listen.

Harbors were noisy places. There were always ships creaking, the wake of the water, the gulls, the wind in the lines, sails flapping, the steady hammer of repairs.

What there usually wasn’t was the sound of swords clashing and the screams of dying men, two things Xena identified in a heartbeat. “Captain!” She let out a yell.

“I’m busy woman!” The captain yelled back from his position near the bow. “Shut the Hades up while I set this ship into its berth!”

Xena grabbed his arm, as she bolted down the rail. “There’s fighting in the harbor.”

The captain turned to her. “What the Hades are you some kind of damned oracle?” He bellowed. “Y’can’t see the harbor from here you idiot woman!”

“I can hear it.” Xena enunciated each word with intense precision. “So before you bring this tub in, better have your men grab some bows and tell the sandals to duck before they end up being

target practice.”

The captain studied her for one ferocious moment. “Can’t stop her. Can’t steer her hardly that close in.” He said. “Best we can do is ram the bastards. Point em out.”

Xena smiled, at this finding of an unlikely kindred soul.

“Man ya battle stations!” The captain bawled at the top of his lungs. “Trouble ahead!”

Sailors dropped the lines they were carrying and rushed to pick up their weapons as Iolaus bolted across the deck with Ephiny and Eponin a step behind him. The door to the cabins slammed open and Denius appeared, staring around in confusion as men rushed to the rail and soldiers poured across from the forecastle where they’d been gathered.

They entered the harbor and started around the turn as the sound of battle now was heard over the waves accompanied by the ominous thunder of flames.

Xena took her place in the bow, her sword drawn in one hand, already straining her eyes as they started to clear the cliffs and give her a view of the battle. Her heart rate was already climbing, and she could feel a flush of energy across her skin.

“Now we know where the damn boats went.” Iolaus was next to her, his own sword already out and in his hand. “Xena, doesn’t it annoy you to be right all the time?”

“No.” The warrior craned her neck to see and as they came around her eyes took in the scene, automatically sorting out the elements.

Colors faded a little as her tacticians mind absorbed the three ships in port, and the burning buildings, and the line of troops holding the pier, and the Spartans swarming up the streets into the city.

Seconds to take it all in. Seconds to sort it all out. Seconds to clap her hand on the captain’s shoulder and point. “There.” She said. “Put her bow in there.”

“Haul to port!” The captain yelled. “Haul her to port and between the two ships on the left! Put her between em! Get ready to board!!! Ready to board men!”

Xena hopped to the bow and readied herself as they closed, aware of the men behind her, and her friends at her heels.

She let out a battle yell, hearing it ring off the stone cliffs and seeing the eyes of the sailors on the ships as they prepared to ram. “Kill em all!” She yelled. “Follow me!”

And they did.

**

Continued in Part 22

A Queen’s Tale

Part 22

They weren't Spartans. Gabrielle was getting to be an expert at knowing that. She ducked under a mace blow and swung her staff into the ribcage of her opponent, who was on a little rise ahead of her giving him an even greater height advantage.

No matter. She was used to that. She followed up the blow with a reverse that slipped past his short sword and smacked him in the side of the head glad, at least, that the rain had stopped.

He growled and shook himself, making the half helmet obscuring most of his features rattle.

Gabrielle slid around to the side, and suddenly spotted a man about to spit Bennu. She turned her back on her own opponent and slammed the end of her staff into the soldier's face, knocking his head back and giving the militia captain a chance to shake loose from the two other fighters he was battling and shove a dagger into the man's guts.

Instinct dropped her to one knee, and she ducked her head as the man she'd been fighting lunged past where she'd been, his mace flying past her ear and just grazing it.

Didn't faze her. Gabrielle got up and took advantage of his lack of balance. She whacked him on the back of the head, then whirled and set herself, kicking out with one boot as she saw his jaw turn towards her and nailing him on it.

His head shot back at an awkward angle, and he dropped, his body going limp. She thought she heard a crack at the same time, but didn't have the luxury of wondering about it as she heard footsteps charging at her from behind.

She turned and saw the enemy powering towards her, a yell on his tongue and both hands flung out in her direction, one with an ax, and the other with a spiked ball and chain, which was whirling. There was no time to dodge, so she took three steps towards him, thumping her staff down into the dirt and leaping into the air.

Her boots struck him right in the chest and her weight took him right over backwards, his ax flying off into the bushes and the ball getting tangled in a branch as he landed on his back and Gabrielle landed on her knees on top of him.

"Got him." Cait whipped by and cut his throat, showering her with blood on her way towards another soldier. "Good one!"

Gabrielle grimaced and rolled off, getting to her feet and looking around as she found herself in a small pocket of quiet in the middle of the battle. Roughly two dozen attackers had jumped them. She could see a dozen fighting with her people and a bunch of bodies on the ground, some of them hers.

None of the enemy were running. She could see them fighting fiercely, but now they were outnumbered and having to face the forest dwellers who were roaring as they attacked.

Gabrielle quickly glanced back down the trail, where she could see the horses standing with Paladia stolidly at their head. Was the ex renegade wishing she could join the fight? The bard watched her glance up at the passenger on the gray horse next to her and then look back. No, she didn't think Paladia did.

Jens came running up to her. "Almost got the bastards." He said. "Damned if I know who they are."

"Me either." Gabrielle went over to one of the dead soldiers and knelt next to him. Unmarked armor, unmarked gear. Again. "Jens, we've been bumping into these guys all over. What's going on here?"

The Athenian captain dropped to one knee next to her. "Wish I knew." He admitted. "But Gabrielle, if anyone might know it would be you as they were going for you the lot of them."

Gabrielle glanced up at him. "Me?"

Jens nodded. "Had a chance to see it." He said. "All of them, fighting, looked for you."

"Me." Gabrielle exhaled. "You know, sometimes it's a pain in the behind being me." She stood up and wiped her forehead with the back of her hand.

"Gabrielle." Jens touched her arm, then pointed.

Gabrielle turned, and saw a figure on a horse near the top of the path and her nape hairs prickled. It had a helmet on obscuring their face, and a cloak doing likewise for their body but she had a edgy, twitchy feeling she usually associated with Ares.

This wasn't Ares. "Now what?" The bard walked forward and put herself between the figure and her still fighting troops, facing the intimidating and silent watcher. She grounded her staff and wrapped her hand around it.

The figure rode forward, half turning to display a sword drawn in their hand. The fighting fell off behind Gabrielle, and she could hear the sound of clashing weapons fade to be replaced with silence, broken by the wind through the trees overhead.

The figure studied her, shadowed eyes barely visible inside the helmet. "Kneel, mortal."

The voice was female, but it had a deep and arrogant resonance. A little like Xena's, when she was in that old warlord mood. Gabrielle remained standing, sorting through her immediate choices. "What do you want?" She asked, in as clear and cold a tone as she could muster. "I don't kneel to anyone." Exactly what Xena would have done, she was pretty sure.

She saw the figure jerk slightly. Then its free hand raised and she was abruptly caught in a blast of purple brilliance, a searing light that crawled all over her skin and stopped her breathing. Gabrielle had little time to do anything but brace herself as she felt the overwhelming compulsion to kneel.

Far off, she heard Dori scream. Deep inside, a feeling of rage erupted inside her and she fought the command, locking her knees and tensing every muscle in her body as she forced her eyes to focus outside the brilliance on the figure head of her.

It hurt. She could feel the darkness gathering at the fringes of her consciousness as her lungs fought to bring air into her and failed.

Frantically, she reached out for Xena's presence, afraid suddenly as she realized she wasn't her partner, and she wasn't endowed with that little something extra that let Xena get away with challenging the gods the way she did.

Thunder clapped, abruptly loud and harsh and she felt the ground rumble around her and with a blast of cold blue light, the compulsion disappeared and she gasped, sucking air into her lungs as a dark, heavy blast of sound rattled her teeth in her head and she was aware of a tall figure at her side, and the now frozen into immobility warriors all around her.

Time, it appeared, had stopped. She panted, trying to catch her breath, as her heart thumped loudly in her chest.

"Stay out of this." The figure on the horse said. "You were warned."

"Ah ah ah." Ares draped a casual elbow on Gabrielle's shoulder. "Temper temper." He shook a finger at her. "No interfering with your little plan, dear sister. But this one's mine." He pointed at Gabrielle. "Keep your paws off."

"It's a mortal." The figure said. "Fair game."

"My mortal." Ares merely smiled. "Go find your own." He glanced around. "If you can find more. You're running out of these losers."

"They are Amazons. They are mine." The figure disagreed. "She's an Amazon. I claim her."

Gabrielle opened her mouth to answer, but felt a poke in the ribs and stopped.

"Not this one." Ares shook his head. "Scram. We both know daddy will grant an exemption for her and we both know if she belongs to someone it sure ain't you." He paused. "Some mortals it

doesn't pay to piss off.”

Gabrielle straightened a little as she realized who he was talking about.

‘So you say.’ The figure said. ‘Maybe that's why daddy wants to get someone to take your place. Mortal lover.’

Ares merely smiled, making a shooing gesture with his free hand.

‘You'll pay for this, Ares.’ The figure said. ‘Dearly.’ The horse turned and slowly moved off, up over the top of the pass and down the other side until it was out of view.

Ares sighed. ‘Bitch.’

Gabrielle was, honestly not sure what to feel. ‘Thanks.’ She finally murmured. ‘I think.’

Ares turned and looked at her. ‘Get a move on.’ He said. ‘You don't have much time to stop this.’ His voice was unexpectedly serious. ‘Go find Xena. She needs you.’

The bard blinked in utter shock.

‘Scoot!’ He snapped his fingers and disappeared, and in that moment the sound of battle erupted around her again and she was back in the middle of the fight hearing screams and yells and... A body thumped into her knees, almost knocking her down.

‘Mama!’ Dori's eyes were wide as Argo's hooves. ‘Mama!’

‘It's okay, honey.’ Gabrielle knelt down and hugged her. ‘Mama's okay.’

‘Gabrielle!’ Jens stumbled up to her. ‘Where did that rider go! They just disappeared!’

The bard felt sick to her stomach, her body aching from the assault. ‘I don't know.’ She muttered. ‘Let's get this over with. We've got to move on.’ She turned and started towards the fight, but as she did, the last of the enemy soldiers fell and she was surrounded by dead bodies, and recovering warriors.

Stupid.

Senseless. She looked around, and saw one of the forest dwellers still in the dirt, and two of her militia. A quick glance told her Cait and Solari were all right, though Solari had a cut across her ribcage that was dripping blood. Two of the Athenian soldiers were also dead.

Stupid.

She felt tired and disgusted. ‘They all think it's damned game.’

‘What was that, your Maj?’ Solari was cleaning her sword. ‘Boy, good thing you yelled that warning. We just got these guys. They were tough.’ She sheathed the weapon and tossed the bit of fabric she'd ripped off a dead body to clean it with to one side. ‘You figure it was a trap?’

‘It was a trap.’ Gabrielle agreed quietly. ‘Looks like someone laid an ambush for us.. made it look like something we'd stop and check out.’

‘Someone.’ Jessan studied her intently.

‘Someone.’ Gabrielle agreed giving him a wry look.

‘Yeesh.’ The forest dweller went back to his task, carefully straightening the limbs of his fallen comrade.

The bard walked over and put her hand on Jessan's shoulder. ‘I'm sorry.’

Jessan looked up at her. ‘Thanks.’ He said. ‘But we're warriors, Gabrielle. It's part of the deal.’ He

patted her on the shoulder. "You okay?"

None of them had seen. None of them knew. Should she tell them? "Yeah" Gabrielle replied.

"We in trouble here?" Jessan let his voice drop. "Seems like there's stuff here out of our league."

The bard exhaled. "That's why the sooner we find Xena, the better." She half evaded the question. "I'm not sure we can get out of this at this point."

"Go find Boo." Dori agreed. She was still holding on to Gabrielle's leg, staring at the bodies on the ground. "Mama this is scary."

Jessan grunted

"Dori." Gabrielle stroked her hair. "Could you do me a favor sweetheart? Please go back over to where the horsies are, and I'll come right over, okay?"

"Wanna stay with you mama."

"I know." Gabrielle knelt down, so her head was even with her daughters and they were eye to eye. "But there are some things here that are bad, and I don't want you to look at them, because I love you and I know they'll make you have bad dreams."

Dori looked at her. "Bad mens?" She asked. "They do bad things?"

The bard sighed. "Yeah." She said. "We're going to go really fast after this and get to Boo. Okay?"

"Okay." Dori released her and walked slowly back down the path, looking at everything around her then trotting back towards where the horses were.

"Gabrielle." Bennu came over and knelt. "We'd like to give em a pyre. Plenty of dried wood around."

Gabrielle watched his face. She understood the request, more than most. There were pyres burned into her memory that she'd carry the image of until her dying day and the cleansing of the fire was good, and right and the proper thing to do for these men who had died in her service.

Died, in her service. Gabrielle suddenly felt like crying. "Make it as fast as you can, Bennu." She said. "We have to find Xena." Though the urgency of Ares warning was sounding in her head like a bell, she knew leaving the bodies behind wasn't something she could do.

"Aye." The soldier touched her shoulder. "Men'r already getting the wood."

Gabrielle went over to all of them, the fallen ones as they were being moved to a clear spot, looking at their faces, now at peace, their battles over.

She remembered, suddenly, Xena's quiet, exhausted face after a direly hard battle, and her plaintively saying all she had wanted was to not see anyone get hurt and she understood those words now in a gut level way that she'd never had before. It hurt, when people died for you.

It hurt her now, even though everyone around her was a volunteer and knew the dangers.

She left them to start the fire and walked down the slope to where the horses were waiting and went to Shadows side, where Dori was impatiently waiting. "Thank you for being a good girl, Dori." She murmured. "Thanks Paladia."

"No problem." The ex renegade seemed very subdued. "This all kinda stinks."

"Yeah." Gabrielle leaned against Shadow. "It really does."

They led the horses up the path to the crest, just as the flames started rising from the hastily gathered pile of wood where the fallen had been laid.

“Mama what's that?” Dori asked. “Howcome they doing that?”

Gabrielle wrapped her arms around the child and gazed at the pyre. “Dori.” She paused. “You know sometimes things happen, and our friends have to stop being with us and go to some other place.”

“Like Boo is gone now?”

The shiver that went down Gabrielle's spine at that nearly made her throw up. “No, honey.. not at all. Boo just went for a walk, she's coming back to us.” She said. “But sometimes people go away forever, and they don't come back. That's because it's time for them to go to a different place.”

Dori looked confused. She glanced up at her mother. “Where?”

“A nice place honey.” Gabrielle whispered. “A very pretty place, with flowers, and lots of birds. And everyone just has fun there all the time.”

“Can we go there?”

“Not right now.” Gabrielle watched the flames. “Dori do you remember when we were in the big white place? When we were in the rock house and it was all hot?”

“Yes.”

“Do you remember when we were in the room, and it was all bad and I told you we'd be going to some place nice after that?”

“Yes.” Dori nodded, more confidently. “Mama, I remember that. You said we would go, and Boo too.” She said. “But mama if it's a good place why can't we go now?”

Sometimes, Gabrielle reflected, Xena's far more direct way of talking had it's advantages. “Because we have things we have to do here first, Dori. We'll go, someday. You and me, and Boo.”

“Go Boo.”

Gabrielle motioned to Solari and Cait. “Let's go up over the rise.” She said. “I don't want her to see the burning.” She led the way up over the crest and down the other side, just far enough so that the pyre could no longer be seen.

On this side of the ridge, they could see most of the way down to the plateau, and if Gabrielle craned her neck and squinted, she could see the edge of the road leading down to Therma. She heard footsteps behind her, and she turned to find the rest of the troops joining them, their faces quietly grim.

Everyone mounted, and she led the way down the path, heading downward. Bennu and Jessan got in front of her and led the way, and by common consent, they started going faster.

The sound of the horses hooves drumming on the wet path rumbled through her. Gabrielle had a moment to think about what had just happened, and she felt herself getting angry again, at the presumption of the gods, or in this case, goddess who had attacked them.

Artemis? Based on what she'd said about Amazons, it must have been. The bard frowned. She was grateful that Ares had stepped in again, but the fact that once again gods were meddling with them and causing her friends and colleagues to be hurt and killed made her angry.

And what, really, was Ares angle in all this? Was he really just stepping in because he was concerned about them? Gabrielle found that extremely hard to believe. There was a reason, somewhere, for him to be doing what he was doing. Collecting favors?

Maybe.

She was aware of being wet all through, and of the aches from the fight and from Artemis's

attack on her. The lifting of her spirits from earlier was gone, replaced by a sense of heavy dread, as they rode in silence through the trees and down towards the city.

Xena needs you. Ares words echoed through her head. Xena needs you. And yet, she could feel no dire pull from her partner through their connection, just the usual sense of restless energy...

Gabrielle paused, as she felt the familiar dark flood of emotion that was Xena in a big fight. Fierce and wild, it coursed through her and washed the fatigue away, feeling very close and very potent.

They were near the bottom of the path. They reached the flat and threaded through the trees, emerging at the edge of the forest with the road in sight.

"Let's go." Gabrielle nudged Shadow in the ribs. They picked up speed and reached the road, clearing the thick brush on either side of it to scramble up onto the hardened surface.

"Gabrielle!" Bennu pointed.

Oh, sheeps. Gabrielle spotted the legion of troops thundering towards them. "Move it people!" She turned Shadows head and urged her into a gallop. "Get to the city!"

The surged into motion, sending mud flying in every direction as they headed towards the city walls. Already above it they could see smoke rising, and Gabrielle wondered if they were heading towards a sanctuary or just more trouble.

What she was sure of, is that they were heading towards Xena. She could feel her partner in a very close and vivid way, knew she was fighting, knew she was in the city they were barreling along towards.

So she didn't care.

"Mama we go fast!" Dori clutched Shadows mane and grinned in delight. "Go fast! Go go go!"

"We're going Dor. Fast as we can." Her mother promised her. "You know who's there, in that place?"

"Boo!"

"Oh yeah." Gabrielle looked behind her. The Spartan legions were picking up the pace, having spotted them. Outriders were thundering forward, gaining on them.

She turned back around and leaned forward over Shadows neck, urging her fast. "C'mon girl. We're almost there."

**

Xena leaped onto the Spartan ship, cutting down the first man who obstructed her without even looking twice at him. These were sailors, not soldiers and she powered her way through a line of them trying to defend themselves with little more than boat hooks and sticks.

The Spartans hadn't expected someone to attack from the sea. They had taken the waterfront and a line of soldiers were holding it, but left their ships with few guards and now were paying the price.

One of the guards came at her, sword drawn. She engaged him, his sword clashing against hers as the ship shifted against its morning blown by a gust of wind. Xena caught her balance and deflected a second slash, swinging her blade around and holding it two handed as he lifted his over his head and slammed it down towards her.

She brought her arms up and caught the edge on her flat, then she half turned and kicked him in the groin as hard as she could. He staggered back and grabbed a rope to steady himself, then stopped and jerked as an arrow pierced him in the throat.

Xena turned her head to see Pony reloading. "Nice shot."

Pony grinned.

Xena turned and raced across the deck, hearing the clash of swords in the distance as she slammed her body into three men trying to get in her way and knocking them back onto their asses. Behind her, the Athenian sailors and her Amazons, plus a few stragglers had jumped onto the ship after her, and as she reached the gangway they caught her up.

"We going to fight all of them?" Ephiny asked, sheathing her sword.

'Sure." Xena backhanded a sailor who reeled up trying to hit her with a pike.

Pony was behind her, and so, Xena noticed, was Miliena. The girl had picked up an ax and looked like she might actually know how to use it. Denius arrived at her shoulder. "Now what?"

Horses. Xena turned and looked behind her, relieved to see Iolaus leading the two of them over a hastily set gangplank from their crippled ship to the Spartan one. The Athenian soldiers were driving back the ship's crew, but the other ships crews were now swarming off their decks and heading over to help.

"Whew." Iolaus arrived, handing Xena her reins. "Don't want to have to do that again. I thought all of us were going get pitched into the harbor for a minute."

"What's the plan, champ?" Pony slung her borrowed crossbow over her shoulder and drew her sword out.

She had about a dozen people to fight three ships worth. Xena sighed. "Denius." She turned. "Do you have contacts in the city? We need to find the soldiers waiting to enlist here."

The patrician looked shaken, for once. "I hadn't expected this." He said. "They would be in the hostels and rooms near the docks... but surely they are already fighting these invaders."

"Let's find out." Xena let out a whistle, and started down the gangway with her stallion willingly following her. She could hear the rest of them start down but her attention now turned to the soldiers starting to move towards her across the dock. She reached the bottom and hauled herself up on the equine Iolaus' back, drawing her sword as she turned the horse to meet them.

Her little horde poured down the gangway after her and the human Iolaus joined her on the mare's back. The soldiers formed up behind her and the rest of them, including the sailors off their ship who decided to fight clustered behind them.

Xena lifted her sword. "Better think twice." She let out a yell at the men. "I left a dead ship there. Wanna join them?" She pointed at the ship they'd just come off of. It was creaking and silent, the rails sporadically dotted with slumped bodies.

The Spartan sailors hauled up.

The sound of fighting was a little further off. Xena urged her horse a few steps towards the men and half turned so they had a good look at her. "Go back to your ships."

"What is she doing?" Milena muttered to Ephiny.

"Pulling a Warrior Princess on them." The Amazon replied.

"What?"

"Shh. Just watch." Ephiny said.

Xena sidestepped forward. "Make your choice!" She yelled. "Go back to your ship or we'll kill you where you stand." She twirled her sword in her hand.

One of the sailors stepped forward, dressed in the tunic of a ship master. "We are Spartans!" He yelled back at her. "Who speaks!"

"Xena of Amphipolis." The warrior replied, as she let her sword rest on her shoulder. She had a fifty fifty chance, she figured, depending on if the dumb bastard had heard of her, and when. "Now choose. I've got people to kill, and cities to conquer."

The man stared at her. Then he held up a hand. "You'll be taken down soon enough." He said. "No need of my men to suffer for it." He signaled and the sailors slowly retreated back to their ships. As they reached them, the man gave an unheard order and the men started to take the lines up as though they were getting ready to leave.

Good. Xena turned and went back to her little troop. "Let's see if we can take the high land up there." She pointed to the ridge overlooking the harbor. "Then we can gather troops and fight our way down."

"Might have some horses up there too." Denius said. "Very well, let's go." He added. "I will attempt to contact my people here once we arrive at the upper street."

"Sounds like the fighting's that way." One of the guards said, pointing to the left.

It did. But Xena was sure charging up the slope into the old market area would result in them fighting an unknown number of Spartans in close quarters and she wanted to get a look at the enemy first. She started up the stepped slope, seeing the smoke start to rise more thickly over the city and now to the right she could hear screams breaking out.

She felt a certain lightness coming from Gabrielle, and definitely sensed her coming closer. Was she near the city? Xena felt her own heart lighten thinking of it. She hoped so.

"Those guys just backed down." Milena said to Pony, as she trotted up the steps next to the Amazon.

"Sure." Pony said. "She wasn't kidding. They were smart enough to know it." She watched the burning flames shoot up from a building on the other side of the hill. "Seen her hold off a hundred men with just that sword. She'd have killed em."

"So.." Milena studied the tall figure ahead of them. "Those stories are all for real?"

"Stories an't half of what's real about Xena." Pony said. "But if you're carrying that thing you better know how to use or stay the Hades out of the way."

Milena frowned. "I know how to use it." She muttered, shifting her grip on the ax, as she tried to keep Xena in sight.

Iolaus urged his mare to catch up to the fast moving warrior. "Xena."

"Hm?" Xena was leaning forward a little, guiding her stallion's steps carefully up the crooked path.

"What's the game here? Three Spartan ships? That's not enough to pick up an army.":

"No." Xena said. "But it's enough to take over the port town. They've probably got a fleet on the way."

"Ugh."

The warrior had her sword out again, and she was holding it ready as she reached the road at the top of the hill, which was silent and deserted. There were bodies scattered up and down it, and the doors to the villas were hanging open. One was smoke filled.

"Check the stable." Xena sidestepped her horse in a circle, listening and watching carefully in

both directions. One of the Athenian soldiers jogged past her and entered the big structure. "Iolaus, knock on the door and see if the innkeeper's there. "

"Bet he isn't." Iolaus hopped off his horse and went to the inn's door, banging on it.

Xena dismounted and went over to the nearest of the buildings. She crouched a little, then jumped up and caught the edge of the roof, pulling herself up onto the flat surface. She walked across it, easing between the buildings until she had a view of the next street over, inside the wall next to the main concourse.

It was full of fighting bodies. She recognized Spartans who were making good headway against the lines of half armored and lightly armed men defending the city, a mixture of guard and conscripts with their backs to the wall.

Good a place to start as any. Xena turned and recrossed the roof, exploring the passageways the walls fenced in. She found one that led down to the lower street, and, satisfied, she returned to the edge of the higher roof and stepped off it.

She somersaulted lazily in the air, landing on the street just behind her horse. He started, and turned his head, snorting when he spotted her.

"No answer." Iolaus told her.

"Stable's pretty empty, but a pony, ma'am." The Athenian soldier reported.

Xena nodded. "Put these two in here, and then follow me. We've got a fight a street over we can make a difference in." She turned and studied her troops as one of the sailors led the horses into the stable. Steady eyes looked back at her, and she smiled. "Gonna be a busy day."

Ephiny smiled back. "I'm just glad to have solid ground back under my feet." She seated her daggers and ran her fingers through her curly blond hair. "And that I got a decent night's sleep."

"Got that right." Eponin nudged Xena. "Let's go. Sooner we start this, sooner it's over."

Xena turned and led the way up to the door to the inn, throwing her shoulder against it and knocking it inward. She half walked, half ran through the big front room and through the corridors in the back, exiting into the empty inner courtyard where everything was knocked askew. She went through the small gate in the back that led downward, and a moment later was moving through the servants quarters that bordered the lower street.

Those, too, were empty. There was evidence of a hasty departure though, the beds were overturned, and possessions were scattered over the floor. Xena headed down a last flight of stairs and paused, holding her hand up.

The sound of fighting was much closer now. Steel clashing and the grunts and screams were just outside at the foot of the stairs. Xena turned. "Try to double team the Spartans. They're tough bastards." She said. "They're in the street, the Spartans on the top side, pushing the city people down the slope. When we come out of here, we'll be in it. Ready?"

"Gwan, woman." Surprisingly, the captain was there, a curved scimitar in his hand. "Move your butt!"

Xena chuckled and turned, heading down the steps and out into the street right in to the middle of the battle. She let out a yell, the sound ringing off the walls as she swept her sword around and down and cut off a hand with a sword in it about to spit one of the city guard.

She leaped past him to clear the stair entrance and found herself in a circle of four Spartans, all of whom had full armor and longswords on them. She picked one and dove at him, driving her sword towards his head and waiting for him to counter it, then kicking him in the chest with a roundhouse boot that knocked him out of position and drew them all back a step.

The rest of her force poured into the street, swarming over the men fighting and using bow and knife to good effect. The captain was hacking at a Spartan's kneecaps and Xena caught sight of Milena meeting a Spartan sword with her ax, a determined look on her face.

Xena went back to her own fight, satisfied so far with the results. She locked her hands on her sword hilt and faced off against two soldiers, setting her boots a little apart and putting her back to the wall mindful of the fact she didn't have anyone watching it.

Been a while, for that. She'd become accustomed to having Gabrielle's protective presence at her side, her staff ready to knock anyone trying to get at her off balance. Another pair of eyes, another pair of strong hands - she missed having her there.

Not to mention the Spartans were tough. She parried a powerful blow and twisted her shoulders to deflect it to one side, ducking and jerking herself backwards as the second Spartan lunged at her with a dagger.

Now she was glad she'd gotten some rest herself during the night. She sharpened her attention and watched her opponents carefully, remembering the Spartan she'd fought in Athens to win the games.

These two were not his match. They were shorter, and younger, less skilled than he had been. But there were two, and they were strong and they came at Xena in a way that made her understand they were used to fighting together.

Like she and Gabrielle were. Xena took a deep breath and focused, her peripheral vision watching the other battles, and catching sight of Ephiny and Pony tucked behind a half wall, firing arrows into the melee with calm precision.

She wove a net of flashing steel in front of her, deflecting the swords of the two Spartans in a series of rapid counterstrokes, feeling her wrists pop a little as she whipped the sword into a figure eight and take both of theirs out of position. She took advantage of one, releasing one hand off her sword and shaking her dagger into her hand, letting it fly with a side swipe of her arm.

It got him in the gut. He wrenched at it, as she parried his partner's slash then had to duck fast as he reversed his motion and nearly skimmed the top of her head with his blade.

She kept the motion going, turning and lashing out to kick the man she'd knifed backwards, and he stumbled, still trying to pull the knife out of his stomach.

"Bitch." The other man redoubled his efforts.

Xena saw the other man get the knife out of his flesh and start to get to his feet, picking up his sword. She deflected one attack from his partner, then had to duck again, this time getting a little too far forward as the man slammed his hilts down and caught her on the shoulder.

Rather than resist it, she went with the motion and tucked and rolled, getting her boots up and slamming him on the hip as he swiveled to attack her, shoving off against the ground and sending him flying against the wall.

Her nerves jangled a warning and she got her hands up just in time to catch the other soldier's down sweeping sword against the hilt of her own, rolling and shunting it off to the side as he hacked at her.

She heard the sound of an arrow over her head and felt the hacking slack off and she continued her roll right back up onto her feet just in time to meet the lunge of the other soldier. Her elbow slammed him in the jaw, and he rocked back, but reached for her and swiped sideways with his sword as his hand caught hers.

Xena yanked him towards her and the stroke just slammed against her ribs as the sword twisted in his hand and the flat hit her instead of the edge. She head butted him in the face and then

they were grappling, as she shoved him over and bore him down onto the ground.

She could hear yelling behind her. Off in the distance she thought she heard a horn. But right now all her focus was on the grunting struggle she was involved in as both of them fought to control the sharp blades trapped between them and she reached for her boot dagger.

He beat her too it, grabbing it and slashing at her but she shifted like a snake and got a knee up to pin his arm down, then her free hand reached over and stabbed into his neck, finding the pressure points she almost never used in actual battle. The man went limp, and she grabbed the knife from his slack fingers and drove it into his chest.

No time to review. Xena swept her eyes around as she rocked up onto her feet and picked up her sword, heading already for the next patch of soldiers. She could see the city guard now moving closer, and some of the bodies on the ground were Spartan. She let out a yell, and picked up a mace on her way towards her next battle.

They wouldn't surrender. She saw Milena engaged with one of them, frantically trying to keep from being killed as the man stalked her with murderous intent. Changing her angle, Xena took a step up onto a half wall then vaulted into the air, tucking her body into a somersault as she used her forward momentum and lashed out at the man facing Milena, her boots striking him in the head. He stumbled forward and she landed with a half twist, using his disorientation to give her the time to grab his arm and whirl him around, slamming him face first into the wall.

He bounced off and she got a knee into the small of his back, yanking him over and breaking his back with a loud cracking sound. She let him roll off and stood, ducking a slash from another Spartan and getting behind him. She caught sight of Milena, who was staring at her in a mixture of awe and relief. "Find a bow!" She advised, before she had to twist and knock a mace out of position just as it was about to hit her in the gut.

Close quarter fighting was a special talent. Xena turned and grabbed a dagger from a man's belt and cut him with it, then ducked past him and buried the knife into the next man's neck. It took speed, and nerves from Hades, and strength enough to wrestle through the melee.

Xena preferred a more open sword fight where she had space to maneuver and use her speed to advantage. But she could pit fight when she had to and now the memories of that washed through her as she spun and stabbed, and kicked, working her way through the Spartans until she was at the edge of the fight, coming to stand with the city guard who let out a yell when they saw her.

She let out a yell back, and joined them, driving the Spartans back step by step until they were against the wall and the conclusion was foregone.

True to their nature, the Spartans fought to the last man, a tall, weathered warrior who fell to Xena's sword after a short tussle with her. As his body sank to the ground, the warrior turned and lifted her hands, facing the city fighters behind her.

"Xena!" Denius shoved his way forward. He and his guard had joined the fight and he even had some blood on his silk surcoat "Magnificent!"

The warrior lowered her sword to rest on her shoulder and took stock. She saw most of her little group safe, Ephiny and Eponin were standing nearby with Iolaus, and a little behind them, Milena was clutching her ax in one hand, and a longbow in the other.

"We won this little battle." Xena told Denius as he arrived at her side. "Now we need to win the rest of them. I don't know how many Spartans are in the city."

"Enough to be burning half of it." Ephiny joined them. The regent pointed at the sky, which was filling with smoke. "You were right though, Xena. Those men died hard."

They had, and taken at least one city fighter with them as they did. Xena studied the men who were now picking up discarded weapons and realized she didn't have that much to work with. "We're gonna have to do this one street at a time." She sighed,

Turning, she started to consider where to go next when she stopped, a cold rush coming over her along with a stark blast of terror from her soulmate.

It was like being hit in the face. Xena grabbed onto a piece of wall and forced herself to stay upright, almost overwhelmed with the frantic fear.

Then it stopped. Then everything stopped and it got so quiet inside her head she could hear her soul gasping.

"Xena?" Ephiny touched her shoulder. "You okay?"

Gabrielle was nowhere she could sense. Xena felt her heartrate double.

"Xena?" Ephiny moved closer, her voice lowering in concern. "Hey."

It was hard to breathe. Xena threw her senses out as far as she could, reaching out to touch a partner she had a sudden, terrible fear might have moved beyond her reach.

No.

No! Not now! Not yet!!!! Gabrielle!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Ephiny's hands on her face. "Xena!"

And then, like a candle flaring, her awareness of Gabriele flooded back, chaotic and surging with emotion. Xena breathed it in, and slowly, slowly let her eyes focus on Ephiny's. "I'm all right."

Ephiny released her, but the worried expression didn't fade. "What the Hades just happened?"

What answer really, was there to that? "Something.. " Xena felt exhausted, and for a moment she was afraid her knees were going to unlock and dump her on the ground. To prevent that, she turned and sat down on the half wall, blinking as she felt the tremors in her hands.

She could feel Gabrielle now. There was sadness, and grief, and a sense of impatience there, and despite the grim mood, Xena savored it. "Gabrielle must have run into some trouble." She finally said. "It's all right now." The noise around her now rose, and she was aware of the troops again. She saw Denius headed her way, and heard the sound of fighting now not far off.

She didn't give a damn about any of it.

Not a bit. "I gotta get to the gates." She said, as her heart finally settled, and she was able to breathe normally again.

"Lot of Spartans between us and that." Pony had come up alongside Ephiny and she was standing close by. "Want some water?"

"Yeah." Xena responded. She closed her twitching fingers on the hilt of the sword now resting between her knees, and exhaled, putting the sudden terror in the past. "And the Spartans are just going to have to get out of my way."

**

"They're picking up on us." Solari leaned over towards Gabrielle. "Hey listen.."

Gabrielle looked over her shoulder and saw the leading riders indeed catching up to them. She turned her head around and looked at the city, seeing the smoke rising over it, but also noting the very closed gates. "This could get ugly."

“Get?” Solari queried. “Listen, how about some of us falling back and giving those guys a hard time, you know? Give you all some space to get to the wall.”

Gabrielle understood what Solari was offering. “We’re all gonna get there.” She disagreed. “Just keep going. The city’s not that far!”

Dori was clutching Shadow’s mane, delighted with the long run. “Mama, we go fast!”

“That’s right honey.” Gabrielle felt her body getting exhausted with the constant strain of keeping her balance and holding onto Dori with one arm. “You hang on tight, okay?”

They were halfway to the city, the walls growing larger and more substantial ahead of them. Not soon enough though, since the riders behind them seemed to have fresher horses, or maybe just faster ones.

“Gabrielle.” Bennu now rode up next to her. “Keep going, lass.” He said. “We’re going to pull back and stop em.”

“No.” The bard yelled back. “Everyone stay up. No one gets left behind.”

“Gabrielle!” The soldier said. “For the sake of the gods, it’s you they want!”

She knew that. She also knew they were outnumbered five to one at least and anyone who stayed behind didn’t have much of a chance.

Maybe she should just turn around and let the rest of them go on.

“Go go go!” Dori squealed.

Gabrielle looked down at her daughter. Of course she couldn’t. She could put her back to a wall and fight to the end with Dori behind her but she couldn’t throw herself into a death trap and leave her behind.

Wasn’t in her.

Neither was letting friends sacrifice themselves so she could escape. “Bennu, you stick by me.” She told the man. “We all make it, or none of us does.”

“Gabrielle!”

“It’s too late for that, damn it!” Gabrielle said. “They’ll just run you over and come after me anyway.” She yelled. “There’s at least a hundred of them chasing us!”

“We could slow em down!” Solari threw in from the other side. “C”mon, Gabrielle! You’re the damn queen! You need to make it !”

“Damn it I said no!” Gabrielle felt her temper flaring. “Don’t pay me lip service as the queen if you’re not willing to listen to me!”

“That’s not what I meant!” Solari bravely shot back.

“We all need to make it.” Gabrielle said. “Besides, if they don’t open those gates you’ll be making your last stand soon enough.” She pointed ahead of them. The gates were shut tight, and now that they were closer they could see bodies lying on the ground before them.

“Ah.” Bennu grunted. “Yah.”

“Great time for them to be closed.” Solari said. “Maybe we can...”

Gabrielle closed her eyes and thought about her partner as hard as she could, blocking out the labored breathing of the horses, and the thunder behind them. She concentrated on needing her, wanting her – calling out for help as she so very seldom did.

She thought she felt a response, but the sound and the exertion of the ride washed it out of her mind and forced her to turn her attention back to the road ahead of them.

Thunder rumbled over head again. Gabrielle could feel Shadow tiring, and she patted the horse on the shoulder. "Easy girl. Not much further."

An arrow arched over her head.

"Uh oh." Solari turned and pulled her crossbow off her back. "Ware!" She fitted her bolt and turned again, raising the weapon and squeezing of a shot. "Damn it."

"Gabrielle! Duck!" Cait's voice, from the left of her.

She sweved instead, and another arrow whipped by this time so close it's feathers touched her arm. "Dori, stay down." Gabrielle wished she'd thought to take her wartime armor, the leather scales fitted to her torso protecting her far better than her light clothing and cloak.

"Got one!" Cait crowed.

Jessan brought his horse up next to her, as Bennu dropped back a pace. "Hey."

"You're not going to tell me something stupid like you'er going to stop and fight them right?" Gabrielle asked.

Jessan's golden eyes twinkled wryly. "You're gonna need me when we stop at that wall." He said. "If they don't get the gates open." He indicated the closed structure. "They can sure see us... what's the deal?"

"They'll get them open." Gabrielle stubbornly looked ahead, seeing a stark lack of people on the wall. At least, she hoped they would since the thought of dying at the very gates of the city she knew her partner was in was devastating. "Just hang on, Jessan. We'll make it."

The forest dweller drew his sword, and clasped it, pulling his horse back so he was just behind Gabrielle and between her and the Spartans coming up on that side. "Watch out!" He pointed across the back of Shadow's hindquarters. "They're coming up fast!"

Gabrielle heard the Spartans start yelling, and knew suddenly they weren't going to make it. Arrows started to pepper the ground around them, and one stuck in her saddle.

She felt Shadow stumble a little.

"Get ready boys!" Bennu yelled. "We'll turn at the rock there! Give a bit o room against the wall!"

Gabrielle gathered herself, and got ready to fight. She loosened the straps on her staff and tried to gather her energy, ready to jump off Shadow as soon as they got to the silent and unfeeling stone wall.

More arrows. Gabrielle heard a stifled cry just behind her, and her heart clenched, then she almost went bolt upright as she saw the gates start to open. "They're opening!"

"By the gods." Bennu said. "Go! Go.. we'll... ahugh!"

No Gabrielle turned and saw him pitch over his saddle and she grabbed for the reins to haul Shadow around. "Bennu!"

"Got him!" Jessan hauled the militiaman over Eris' saddle. "Keep going! Keep... hurry!"

A spear came out of nowhere, so fast Gabrielle just barely had a chance to release Dori's body and smack it with her hand, feeling a painful sting as it just missed hitting Shadow's neck. She could hear the thunder of the Spartan's catching up with them and from the corner of her eye saw a man with a crossbow almost even with them taking aim at her.

She threw her body over Dori's at the last second and felt a searing pain across the back of her neck. It almost knocked her off Shadow's back, but she gripped with her knees and grimly hung on, her heart hammering loud in her ears.

"Mama!" Dori cried out. "Ow!"

"Just stay down!" Gabrielle whispered. "Dori, please."

They bolted for the gates, angling across the road towards them as they swung open and revealed a tumbled chaos inside, a swarm of horses and men and wagons that all seemed to explode outwards towards them.

A bold yell rang out over all of it, and the chaos parted to reveal a golden stallion racing out of the opening, his rider making enough noise to split stone as she charged towards the Spartans, sword drawn.

Just like she'd imagined. "Xena!" Gabrielle let out a bellow that came from her very soul.

"Mama!" Dori squealed with almost the same volume. "Boo! Look! Dere's Boo!! Boo!"

Caught between elation and exhaustion, Gabrielle could only smile, even more so when she heard her partner's distinctive battle yell sound out in answer.

Yeah.

"Mama! Go Boo!"

Yeah.

A stream of riders followed Xena out of the city and they thundered down the road, passing through Gabrielle's beleaguered band as they headed right into the faces of the Spartans, at least a hundred of them, most in armor and all of them carrying some kind of weapon.

"Keep going!" Jessan caught up to her, Bennu balanced over his saddle. "These guys have had it!"

Gabrielle wasn't sure if he meant the Spartans or the horses but she could feel Shadow faltering and knew racing out after her partner wasn't in the cards. "Got it!" She pointed. "Over there!"

Horns blew. A volley of arrows came from the walls, over their heads as they slipped between the city defenders and rode through the gates into the square, almost plowing into a crowd of men and women, milling around with smoke rising from buildings all around them.

Gabrielle had no idea what was going on. She hauled Shadow to a halt and turned around, hearing the horns blaring and cheers rising from the wall.

"Gabrielle!"

Her head whipped around, and she spotted two very familiar faces coming at her fast through the crowd. With a stifled yelp she slid off the horses back and found herself enveloped in Ephiny's arms, with Pony right behind her. "Eph!"

Ephiny released her and stared into her eyes. "Damn am I ever glad to see you."

"Me too." Pony got an awkward hug in. "Hey Dori."

"I gotta go." Gabrielle got herself loose. "Is there a..."

"Hey hey hey. Relax. They're coming back in." Ephiny put a steady hold on her shoulders. "She's coming back."

Gabrielle took a breath to protest, then she heard the sounds of pounding horse hooves and got a

blast of frenzied impatience from a very close source. “So she found you?”

Ephiny and Eponin exchanged glances. “Long story.” Ephiny said.

“Get back! Get back! Let ’em in!” Yells now rose up and there was noise and more chaos and shoving, accompanied by the thunder of horses and the sounds of screaming nearby. “Look at them! The bastards ran! They were afraid of her!”

“Look out!”

They were shoved back, almost stumbling as motion and sound filled the square and then Gabrielle saw the gates swinging shut as the space was filled with horses and men and spears and she blinked as the smoke stung her eyes. She barely kept her balance as Shadow was pushed from the other side, and she could hear Ephiny yelling.

Everyone was yelling.

Then the horses moved aside and the people were dodging too, out of her way, diving to the side as something was coming towards her and she knew without Dori’s squeal what it was.

Who it was. She ducked under Shadow’s neck and threw her arms open and in the next breath Xena was in them, wrapping Gabrielle up in a ferocious hug and lifting her into the air, right off her feet with an inarticulate growling roar.

“Ungh.” Gabrielle groaned softly herself, feeling a deep breath come out of her partner’s chest, and she was let back down to the ground, and rocked slowly back and forth in Xena’s embrace.

She sucked in a lungful of leather and metal in a moment of perfect relief.

So beautiful.

So incredibly sweet. “Ah, Xe.” She breathed. “So glad I found you.”

Xena didn’t say anything. She just hugged Gabrielle tighter.

There was noise around them, and shoving bodies, and panic. Gabrielle didn’t give a damn about any of it. She felt like she was rooted in that one spot, in those arms, all the terrors of the recent past gone.

Just gone.

She felt Xena kiss the top of her head. Tears stung her eyes and she finally looked up, finding those gorgeous blue eyes gazing back at her, equally damp.

They touched foreheads. Then Xena hugged her tightly again and exhaled. Finally they separated, and turned towards Shadow, putting their arms around each other as they went over to get a frustrated Dori out of the horses saddle and into Xena’s arms.

“Hey shortie.” Xena’s voice was raspy, and very, very tired.

“Boo!” Dori hugged her enthusiastically. “Mama said we go fast, and find you. We did!”

“You sure did.”

Gabrielle soaked in every word. She was aware at some level of the chaos around them, and she could hear men yelling urgently nearby and she really just didn’t care. She knew there were people around, knew Ephiny and Pony were there to talk to. Knew they had things that needed to be taken care of.

Didn’t care.

She leaned against Xena’s body and wrapped her arms around her, only barely keeping from

bursting into tears.

“Xena, they’ve turned around good.” A man edged in between the crowd. “Went back down the road, we can’t see em no more.”

“Caught a break.” Xena said. “Let’s get the defense organized. Get everyone back from the gates, get the horses back to the stables.” She said. “All you people get those wagons into the store rooms and get a fire started. Got a lot to burn.”

“Rain’s startin!” A yell went up. “That’ll put the fires out!”

“Let’s get inside.” Xena pointed at a large building. “In there. Jess? Bring him in there, I’ll look at it.”

Gabrielle was aware of being guided and she was content to simply follow Xena out of the rain and into a big stone room, followed by people she knew and some she didn’t. Thunder rolled over head and she could hear rain outside the open windows bringing a puff of smoke tinged wet air against her face.

She was conscious of Ephiny on the other side of her, of Cait and Paladia getting between the crowd and them, and of a strange girl standing next to Pony staring at them.

Aware, but really only caring about the warm body under the leather her hand was resting on, and the resonant voice and the deep sense of comfort she now felt having Xena once again at her side.

She let her head rest against Xena’s shoulder, savoring the touch.

Somehow, suddenly, it was quiet.

Gabrielle looked up, to find Xena seated next to her on the bench she’d half fallen down onto, with Dori in her lap and absolutely no one else in the room, a smaller room than she remembered walking into.

“Hey.” Xena said.

“Hey.” Gabrielle almost whispered. “Where’d everyone go?”

“They’re in there.” Xena pointed to a door at the end of the room “I thought we needed a few minutes.” She paused. “Alone.”

Gabrielle looked around, then back at Xena. “Was I that out of it?” She watched her partner nod. “Wow.” She took a deep breath, then exhaled. “Yeah I guess I was. It’s been..” Her voice trailed off. “Yeah.”

They looked at each other. Xena bounced Dori on her knee a little. “Next time.” She said. “You’re coming with me.”

“Oh yeah.” Gabrielle snorted slightly, rubbing her face with one hand. “I regretted that decision every single damned second.”

Xena put her arm around her partner. “Me too.”

“Thanks for finding Eph and Pony for me.” Gabrielle had to smile.

“That was the easy part.” Her partner informed her. “Then there was everything else.” She added, with a sigh. “You too, I guess.”

“Yeah.” The bard exhaled. “So much happened.” She reached over and touched Dori’s foot. “She was such a good girl, too, weren’t you Dor?”

“We had fun.” Dori said. “Lots of go fast, bugs, froggies, too many bad mens.” She frowned. “We

got Boo now so it's all good."

Gabrielle considered, then nodded. "Yeah, that bout covers it." She picked up Xena's free hand and brought it to her lips, ignoring the dirt and blood on it as she kissed the knuckles. "I'm... " She felt her throat tighten. "So much I have to tell you."

"Yeah." Xena agreed quietly. "Me too." She said. "Spartans really coming?"

Gabrielle nodded. "You knew?"

"Someone told us. Wasn't sure if it was true, they had a reason for lying." The warrior said. "But I knew something pissed you off."

"They wanted me to come lead their army since you said no."

Xena turned her head and peered at her, both brows hiked.

"Stupid. Some game with Artemis and Athena." Gabrielle muttered. "They're fighting over who should take Ares place."

Xena covered her eyes.

"He popped in and saved my butt twice."

Xena looked at her from between her fingers, then dropped her hand. "What's his game?" She asked. "I haven't heard a peep from him."

Gabrielle rubbed her temples. "He said he can't mess with you. He said we need to stop the war."

"Ares said that?" Her partner's voice rose in disbelief. "He wants us to stop this thing? After all the crap that happened to get it started? Does he remember that?"

The bard shrugged. "Something about bets and whatever. You know Xena, it's the usual mess with them." She looked up. "Did I see Iolaus here? I just remembered that."

"Yeah."

Gabrielle gazed ahead of her at the stone floor. "Damn, I'm tired." She said, finally.

"Yeah." Xena agreed, in a soft voice. "Me too."

Gabrielle looked up and studied her. "Honey." She finally said. "You look as tired as I feel."

Xena leaned back against the wall. "I'm beat." She said. "Every damn inch of me hurts, and I think I need stitches in a few places." She said. "And now I have to figure out how to stop a gods be damned war?" She asked, in a plaintive tone.

Gabrielle folded her hands over her partners. "Know what, Xe?"

"What?"

"It's amazing to be whole again."

Xena rolled her head to one side and studied her soulmate. A faint, tired smile appeared and she nodded "Yeah, it is." She reached over and ruffled Dori's hair. "We'll figure something out."

They were both quiet for a few minutes. Then Gabrielle exhaled softly. "What happened?"

Xena didn't have to ask what she meant. "Had some trouble on the boat." She said. "Some guys... Hades, it's a long story but they had a grudge and came after me belowdecks. A wall fell on me in all that. Got a little..." She hesitated. "I thought I..." She paused again. "Anyway, I got out of it but I know I was ... um."

"Close to the edge?" Gabrielle suggested quietly.

“Yeah.”

The bard kissed her on the arm, then put her cheek against the spot. “I guess we have time to talk it all out later, huh? We’ve got a lot on our plate here.”

Xena turned and ducked her head a little, giving Gabrielle a kiss on the lips. “We have time.” She said. “Let’s get some of this started then maybe we can go somewhere and you can patch me up.” She stood, cradling Dori against one shoulder and extending her hand to her partner. “Dori can tell me about her froggies.”

Dori put her head down on Xena’s shoulder. “Love you Boo. I tried to bring you a froggy but mama made me let him go.”

“Mama’s so mean to you.” Xena circled her partner’s shoulders with her arm.

“Mama’s going to put the froggy down your leathers next time.” Gabrielle promised, unable to keep from feeling just a bit on the giddy side.

It did feel good to be whole again.

**

They were gathered inside the larger room in the villa, around a hastily found table that Xena now had a map of the city spread out on.

It was an odd group. Gabrielle was seated just to Xena’s right, content to mostly listen as the city guard captain explained the layout to them. There were some patricians to one side, they knew her partner apparently. There was a big collection of soldiers and wanna be soldiers, along with the forest dwellers, the Amazons, and a bunch of sailors.

“There are Spartans still in the city.” The guard captain concluded. “Ambushing us, killing citizens.. they disappear like smoke.”

Xena was leaning on her hands as she peered over the map. “Too many damn twisting courtyards.” She traced a few of them with her finger. “Lot of places to hide.”

“There were a lot of buildings burned out.” The soldier agreed. “Plenty of places they could hole up in, and ambush us from.”

“Not to mention.” Gabrielle cleared her throat gently. “The fact that their army is a days march from here.”

“What about the ships in the harbor?” Denius spoke up. “I would ask our good captain to take the ship we captured and make haste for Athens.” He said. “Now that we’ve cut the gangways to the other two, and they’ve sailed out.”

“Me, sail a Spartan ship?” The captain glared at him. “Hades with you.”

“But captain..” Denius lifted a hand.

“Been through enough for you ya bastard!” The captain barked. “Lost good men I did!”

“Captain!”

“Surely captain...” Gabrielle stood up and smiled at him. “That would definitely back up your story, wouldn’t it? After all, I’m sure you’d impress everyone by sailing a captured Spartan warship into Athens harbor.”

The sailor drew breath to answer, then paused. “Eh.” He grunted. “Who in Hades are you?”

“Gabrielle.” The bard answered. “And after all we need to get word there as soon as possible.”

The captain grunted again. "Women." He shook his head and started for the door. "Let's go you lot. NO sense standing around here and getting our asses kicked anyway."

The sailors filed out obediently after their leader leaving the room a bit emptier.

Everyone was quiet, then they all looked over at Gabrielle. The bard smiled, and sat down, folding her hands. After a moment of awkward silence, she looked up at Xena, who was gazing very fondly down at her. "What?"

Xena chuckled and put a hand on her shoulder. "Did I ever miss you." She sighed.

"Xena." Jens stepped forward. "Is it true the army numbers a thousand or more men?"

"That's what Gabrielle said." Xena turned to him. "You want to with him, or stay here?"

"Stay here." Jens responded immediately. "By the time we get to Athens, this battle will be over, and I want to be a part of it."

Ephiny was very glad to be perched on a bench near the window, just watching. She could see Gabrielle was tired, but it was worth her being there to see the profound change her presence made in her partner. The twitchy, dour, half spaced out woman was gone, replaced by the normal Xena she'd become used to.

Focused, confident... despite the chaos of the situation relaxed and in control.

Guess it helped when your mind wasn't totally focused on something happening to the person you love most in the world. Ephiny smiled.

"So, that's the famous Gabrielle, huh?" The girl Milena said.

"Yup." Pony agreed. "That'd be her. Glad she made it here."

"Me too." Ephiny said. "And I'm glad she brought some of our gang with her. Good to see Soli and the nutball twins."

Pony glanced at the next bench, where the other Amazons were perched. "You talk to them yet?" She asked her partner.

"No. Why?"

"Some weird stuff happened. Gabrielle got challenged before she took off."

Ephiny straightened and peered at her companion. "What?"

"That's what Soli said." Pony nodded. "Didn't get a chance to get the whole scoop."

Milena wasn't really listening. She was intent on watching what was going on around the table, with Xena standing at it's head and this new intruder sitting next to her.

Gabrielle wasn't what she expected. She wasn't really sure what she had expected but this short, sun tanned, muscular woman wasn't it. Maybe something like a vestial virgin? Walking around with scrolls dressed in a toga. Not half naked with scruffy blond hair.

Peasant, definitely. Milena shook her head a little. Even had a tattoo on her shoulder, a black birds head. This was the great bard? The great friend of Xena?

"Xe." Gabrielle stood up again, circling her partner and putting a hand casually on her back. "Do you think .. what do you think their plan was? Take this port town?"

Xena nodded. "I figure they've got a fleet out there to pick them up." She indicated the direction of the harbor. "Those three were sent in to pave the way."

"So." Gabrielle said. "Now that they left, you think they'll tell the rest of the fleet? Will they come

in to help, or run back home?"

Xena pondered the question.

"Can we block the harbor?" Gabrielle asked.

"But then we won't be able to send men to Athens." Denius protested.

"If the Spartan Army is here, we won't be able to do that anyway." Gabrielle gently reminded him.

"No." Xena said. "We don't want to block the harbor because it also blocks the only escape route for the people here." She indicated the city. "We can clear the Spartans here out, maybe, but when a thousand of them with siege engines hits this place, we need options."

"Run from them?" Denius sounded outraged.

Xena gave him a dour look. "You've got a hundred men here, Denius. Untrained. I can make a damn pretty last stand with that, but I'm not stopping a thousand Spartans with them."

"What are we going to do then?" Jens asked.

"First things first." Xena leaned over the map again. "Jens, split up your guys, and take ten men each. Quarter the city and see if you can get rid of some of our unwanted guests." She said.

"Hey, we'll help." Jessan showed his fangs in a big grin. "That's the fun part."

The Athenians looked at him uncertainly.

"Good idea." Xena agreed. "Jens, this is Jessan. He and his group are part of my family. They'll give you a hand."

"What are those?" Milena asked Ephiny.

Ephiny turned to regard her. "People. Friends of Xena and Gabrielle's. They helped in the war out there. Good folks." She said. "Good to have at your back."

"You betcha." Pony interjected. "They kick ass."

Jens and the forest dwellers left, taking the rest of the Athenians with them. "Someone want to volunteer to climb up to the cliff top and watch out for that fleet we think's out there?" Xena asked.

"Gosh, I will." Cait volunteered. "Looks like a lovely cliff to climb up."

Xena gave her a smile. "Sure you're up to it?" She asked. "I hear you had a tough ride."

"Absolutely." The young Amazon responded.

"Nutball." Paladia muttered.

"Right. C'mon, Pally." Cait grabbed her partner by the leathers and started for the door, leaving Paladia with the choice of following her or exposing herself to the entire room. She deferred to better judgement and lunged after Cait, following her unwillingly out the door.

That left the Amazons, Denius, Milena in the room with Xena and Gabrielle and the map. Xena turned and perched on the edge of the table, folding her arms over her chest. "So."

"So." Gabrielle leaned against her, resting her elbow on her partner's shoulder. "Is it time for me to take you and get you cleaned up?"

Denius came over. "Xena, I'm disturbed – you seem to be saying we have no chance against this army. I thought you were willing to lead our men against it?"

“You said you had a couple hundred soldiers.” Xena said. “Not a hundred untrained farmboys.”

“Well but...”

“No, she’s not going to lead a hundred of anything against that army.” Gabrielle gave him a direct look. “I’m not going to let her. You people need to find a way out of this that doesn’t involve all these people getting slaughtered.”

Denius stared at her.

“It wouldn’t do us any good anyhow.” Xena said after an awkward silence. “Those kid’s’ll just get killed.”

Denius looked at her again, then he turned and left the room, shaking his head.

Gabrielle looked at her partner. “Did you really tell him you’d do that?”

Xena returned the look. “I was ready to tell him anything to get him to turn the damn boat around so I could get back here and find you why you were hollering my name.”

“Hm.” Gabrielle scratched her nose.

Ephiny and Eponin came over from their bench and joined their two friends. “So what is the plan?” Ephiny asked. “Don’t get me wrong, we love a good fight and would follow you two into any of them but I hate lost causes.”

“What she said.” Pony agreed.

Xena let her eyes drift over all of them, then returned her attention to her partner. “I need to think about it.” She said. “Let’s all take a break. Give me a chance to go over what our options are.”

“Sounds good.” Ephiny said. “We’ll go scrounge.” She bumped Pony, and they started for the door.

“Where’d they take Bennu?” Xena asked.

“Here, Genr’l.” Bennu appeared from behind her. He had been sitting quietly on a bench. His shoulder was thickly bandaged and his arm was in a makeshift sling. “Wasn’t but a scratch.”

Gabrielle muffled a chuckle as her partner narrowed her eyes. “Glad you’re okay, Bennu.” The bard said. “I felt terrible when I saw you get hit.”

“Still woulda like to give ye a spare chance, little hawk.” The militia captain said. “Genr’l, we wanted to hold back and hold em off for her.”

Everyone looked over at Gabrielle, who flushed a trifle. Xena cocked her head to one side. “You really thought she’d let you do that?” The warrior’s voice was honestly astonished. “You’re kidding me, right?”

“Genr’l!”

“Thanks, hon.” Gabrielle bumped her gently.

Xena rolled up the map and fitted her hand around it. “C’mon.” She said. “Let’s not put poor Iolaus through more of our daughter.” She tapped Gabrielle on the butt and pointed to the door. She glanced around, taking in the militia and Milena standing near the wall. “There’s an inn top of the hill. Probably has some provisions there we can grab.”

Everyone left the room. Gabrielle and Xena left last, and the warrior pulled the door shut behind them. The rain had tapered off and a bit of wan sunlight was filtering through, dull orange from the oncoming sunset. They walked through the burned out sections of the city, past the men

dragging what dry wood they could find for a pyre, and up the steep path to the hill that overlooked the harbor.

Halfway up, she spotted two figures heading down towards them, one rather larger than the other. When the larger of the two spotted them, he waved, then turned and retreated. "See you when you get up here!"

Xena and Gabrielle both waved back. "

"Boo!" Dori bolted downhill as fast as she could. "Boo Boo Boo!"

Xena handed Gabrielle the map and opened her arms, as Dori jumped into them. "Hey shortie." She hugged the child. "What have you been getting into?"

"Boo, I missed you." Dori told her earnestly. "There was lots of bad mens and mama was mad!"

"I missed you too, squirt." Xena hugged her, then shifted her to one shoulder as she kept walking. "I know your mama was mad. I could feel her be mad, you know that?"

Gabrielle slipped her hand inside her partner's elbow. "Could you?"

"Sure." Xena slowed a little, letting the rest of the group get a distance away from them. "Thought you were fighting a few times"

"I was." The bard nodded. "Tell you about it later."

Xena's brows hiked up a little. "Okay."

They walked along in silence for a few steps. "Who's the kid?" Gabrielle finally asked, indicating Milena. "The one in the warrior princess haze?"

The warrior princess in question grunted. "Long story." She said. "That's who we heard about the Spartan army from. Some screwed up kid, with a couple of half brothers out for bounty. "

"Uh huh."

"Got arrested. Ended up on the ship and tried trading some info for me cutting her loose."

"Uh huh."

Xena eyed her, aware of the hand tucked firmly inside her elbow. Gabrielle didn't look upset though, she had a faint grin on her face. "Something funny?"

"She keeps looking at Dori. Can't get the dots to connect." The bard observed.

Xena felt Dori tug at her hair, and she knew a moment of tired contentment, glad beyond belief she'd been reunited with her family. "Glad you're here." She said. "You can kick her ass for me if she tries jumping me again."

Gabrielle merely rolled her eyes. "Another one's fallen." She mock sighed. "Why do they always do that?"

"Dunno." Her taller companion said. "Why don't you tell me?" She gave her partner a cheeky grin.

Finally, the bard's expression relaxed into a smile in return. "Because you're gorgeous and sexy." She said. "And you attract feckless kids like a bee to flowers."

They stopped on a landing halfway up, to gaze out over the harbor. It was hazy, the sunset cutting through the smoke from the fires and they could see a mist rising over the water. Xena tilted her head up and spotted Cait up on the bluff, her slim form outlined against the darkening sky. "Glad you brought them."

“Glad you left them.” Gabrielle said. “You were right, Xe. I needed all those friends.” She sighed. “Now, where do we start?”

Xena shifted and slipped her arm free, lifting her hand and cupping Gabrielle’s cheek. “Let’s start here.” She tilted her head and kissed Gabrielle on the lips, feeling the bard’s short intake of breath, then the warmth as their bodies pressed against each other.

“Gush!” Dori scolded them.

“You bet.” Gabrielle murmured, as they parted. She looked up at Xena’s profile, outlined in gilded crimson, and saw that gentle smile shape her lips. Past the warrior’s shoulder, she could see they were being watched, and she smiled back, reaching up to pull Xena’s head down for another long, slow kiss.

Her body reacted, and she felt a powerful surge of passion, making her skin tingle. This time when they parted Xena’s expression was knowing, and her grin was far more sexy than gentle. Gabrielle held her hand out and waited for it to be taken, then they continued their stroll up the hill.

Damn, that had felt good.

Yes, she’d missed Xena for all the emotional reasons she could care to name, but her body really didn’t care about all that stuff. Her body had missed her partner for very carnal other ones. Gabrielle grinned and reached up to ruffle her fingers through her hair as they got to the top of the hill and joined the group standing there watching the captured Spartan ship being maneuvered around to leave.

There was another ship nearby, with Athenian colors. It had burn marks on the upper deck entries and the portholes were all black with soot. One mast was snapped, and the furled sails looked very tattered. “What happened to that one?” Gabrielle pointed. “Was it in a fight?”

Xena let Dori down. “Not exactly.”

“Xena happened to that one.” Iolaus eased from the crowd and came over. “Boy, do I have some stories to tell you about that, Gabrielle.”

The bard’s ears visibly perked. “Oh really?”

Xena sighed.

“Boo, where’s da horsies?” Dori tugged her leathers. “Want to bring happles.” She held up her hand, with a somewhat dented, withered fruit in it.

Xena turned and knelt, pointing at the stable door. “They’re in there, Dor. Be careful, okay?”

“Okay.” Dori agreed and pattered off.

The warrior straightened back up, finding Iolaus looking at her with a knowing grin. She shrugged slightly. “Told you.”

“You did.” Iolaus said. “And you were absolutely right.” He clapped Gabrielle on the shoulder. “Gabrielle, it’s good to see you. Even though I could have thought of a couple dozen places I’d rather see you in.”

“It’s crazy.” The bard agreed. “Now.. what was that about stories?”

Xena let the discussion drift past her as she studied the harbor, her mind at last free to drift and consider what options they had open to them.

“Feel better?” Ephiny came over to stand next to her.

Xena glanced at her. “Like the weight of Mount Olympus is off my shoulders.” She replied

candidly. “You going to stop acting like I was a sick elder now?”

The Amazon regent chuckled wryly.

In front of the building that held the inn they had gathered all the provisions they could find, and now someone had made a fire in the firepit in front of the stables and set up makeshift tables to put everything on. Xena became aware of how hungry she was, and she hooked a couple of fingers into the back of Gabrielle’s belt and started tugging her in that direction.

The bard’s skin felt so warm and nice against her knuckles. She could feel the muscles shifting under her touch as Gabrielle responded to the motion and she just left her grip there as they made their way over to the front of the inn to join the rest of the crowd there.

The sunset was painting the stone street in a smoky golden light, the sea breeze starting to come in and take the haze away. She could smell the salt on the air now, and hear the rush of the waves as the chaos in the city started to die down a little. She turned and surveyed the destruction, seeing wisps of smoke now rising rather than billows of it.

Off to the left, she could hear the clash of weapons. She knew somewhere her putative troops were fighting with Spartans, but she felt no urge to go join them, content to be standing in the dying light of the day, distracted by an olive being touched to her lips by Gabrielle.

“Mama!” Dori wriggled through the partially open door and bolted for them. “Mama! Boo! Come see what I found!”

“Uh oh.” Gabrielle muttered sub vocally. “In a stable that could be pretty much anything.”

Xena cleared her throat.

Gabrielle looked up at her. “Uh oh.” She repeated, for a completely different reason. She took her partner by the arm and they joined Dori at the stable door, pushing it open so they could enter behind her.

“Mama! Look!” Dori ran back to the rear of the stable, past where Shadow, Iolaus and the light gray mare were contentedly munching hay. At the back, in a smaller section, stood a pony, with a shaggy, reddish color coat and creamy mane and tail. The pony was regarding them with some bemusement, stalks of hay sticking out of his mouth.

“Honey, he’s adorable.” Gabrielle approached the animal, whose head came to her shoulder. “I wonder where he came from?”

Xena cleared her throat again.

“Mama, he’s pretty!” Dori went up to the animal and patted his shoulder, easily within her reach. “I can get him!”

Gabrielle looked over her shoulder at her partner, who was standing by, with a faint grin on her face. “Do you know where he came from, Xena?”

The warrior came forward, and stood next to her. “Maybe.” The slight grin widened.

“Boo, c’n I ride him?” Dori was already hopping up to grab the animal’s mane to scramble onboard. Gabrielle went over and boosted her the rest of the way up, settling her on the pony’s back. “Boo! Look!”

Gabrielle looked at her partner, who was watching their daughter and saw such a mixture of deep emotion there she forgot to be miffed at her for not asking first. “Doriana.” She put her hand on Dori’s back. “I think you have to give your Boo a very very big thank you kiss for this very nice present she’s giving you.”

Dori looked at her, then looked at Xena, her eyes getting big and round.

Thus appealed to, Xena stepped closer and scratched the pony on the forehead. "I know you wanted a horse." She looked gravely at her daughter. "But this one's more your size for now." She said. "So this pony's yours, but you need to take really good care of him, just like I do with Argo, okay?"

Dori blinked, then looked down at the pony. She looked back up. "Mine?" She asked, in a soft, surprised voice. "Mine, Boo?"

Gabrielle bit her lip inside as she felt tears sting her eyes.

"Yeah." Xena patted the pony's cheek. He snuffled against her leathers, taking a step forward in the hay. "All yours, Dor."

Dori unexpectedly scrambled to her feet on the pony's back and jumped off it, landing in Xena's arms. "Boo Boo Boo. Love you!"

The pony merely shook his head, unfazed. Gabrielle patted his neck as she watched Dori hugging her partner. "Welcome to the family, little man." She met Xena's eyes, seeing unrestrained joy reflected there back at her. "Today's turning out to be a pretty amazing day."

**

Continued in Part 23

A Queen's Tale

Part 23

"You." Gabrielle leaned over and gave Xena a kiss on the cheek. "Have created the most crazy happy kid anywhere."

Xena was seated on the half wall outside the inn, now lit only by the fire burning in the firepit as darkness had fallen over the city. She turned to look at Gabrielle and grinned. "This inn was run by a pretty all right guy. I stayed here the night before we went on the ship." She indicated the building in back of them. "Left a couple of dinars with him and asked him to find me a pony if he could."

"I guess he could." The bard said. "A really cute one, too."

Xena met her eyes. "You mad at me for doing that without asking?"

Was she mad? Gabrielle thought about that for a minute. Then she smiled. "No." She said. "She's your kid, Xe. I suspected something like that was in the works because it's all she's been talking about since we left Amphipolis."

"Mm. Yeah." Xena cleared her throat and glanced out over the water. "She's been asking for her own horse. I figured a pony was a good compromise."

Gabrielle sat down next to her. It was quiet here on the hilltop, the harbor now free of ships save the broken down one that was tied to a slip at one end.

An eerie peace had fallen. All the sounds of fighting had faded and Bennu had limped up and reported the streets were empty of Spartans, though they knew there were many hiding places they hadn't checked yet.

Gabrielle had been exhausted before they'd walked up to the inn, but now she'd gotten her second wind and found energy somewhere. Dinner had been a weird mixture of whatever they'd found inside the abandoned inn kitchen, but she was satisfied and it was good to just sit quietly next to Xena and enjoy the night breeze.

They had watchers on the walls leading into the plateau, looking for the first signs of the Spartan army. So far, all they'd seen were some torches in the distance, tucked against the forest and Xena thought those were the advance legions that had been chasing Gabrielle.

Waiting.

Just like they were waiting.

'Pretty night.' Gabrielle said, after a while.

'Gorgeous.' Xena agreed. 'Could be raining like Hades and it still would be.' She turned her head and looked at her partner. 'Now that you're here.'

Gabrielle grinned. 'Know what I'm the most sorry about?'

'Not being on the boat?'

The bard laughed, a light sound that echoed softly against the stone. The roadway outside the inn had been turned into a campsite, and heads turned on hearing it. 'Yeah.' She admitted. 'I would love to have seen you rescuing Eph and Pony, and steering that thing.'

Xena kicked the stone wall a little with her heels. 'Could have helped more of them.' She admitted. 'Wasn't much interested in anyone else.'

Gabrielle was watching the faint hint of starlight on the harbor waters. 'That's okay, Xe.' She said. 'I left behind my nation, and our friends and family because I wasn't much interested in anyone but you.'

There was a long silence. Then Xena cleared her throat again. 'I'm glad.'

Gabrielle tilted her head and looked over at her, eyebrows rising a little.

'What did you expect me to say?' The warrior asked. 'That I wasn't glad you really didn't much care about anyone else?'

Gabrielle sighed.

'You did the right things, hon.' Xena saw the look. 'Regardless of why. Leaving was the right choice. They'd have taken Amphipolis apart, and your Amazons would have thrown themselves against those guys with high losses.'

'Hm.'

'Leading them off was the only thing you could do to protect them.'

'Hm.' Gabrielle grunted again. 'I knew that' She admitted. 'But it's not why I left.'

'No, huh?'

'Nope.' Gabrielle smiled briefly.

Xena reached over and took her hand, squeezing it. 'No argument from me.'

The bard returned the squeeze, lifting their joined hands up and kissing Xena's knuckles.

'I'm sure they'll be fine back there.' Xena said. 'The Spartans went right by them, it looks like.'

'I got challenged.' Gabrielle changed the subject. 'Back in the village.'

Xena went still for a long moment. Then she half turned and looked at Gabrielle. 'What?'

Her partner nodded. 'Elders. I made some changes and they got pissed off. Got one of the Velaska crowd to challenge me just before I left.' She reached up and rubbed her neck. 'Ow. Damn arrow clipped me.' She grimaced. 'Anyway.. I bluffed her and she backed off. Stupid.'

“Bluff?” Xena frowned. “You didn't need to bluff anyone. You could kick anyone's ass with that staff.”

“Yeah, I know.” The bard said. “But I was so pissed.” She peeked at Xena. “I had that ... one of the chests I brought down from our place had that sword you had made for me. Remember?”

“What sw... oh. From the war.”

“Right.” Gabrielle said. “Well I found it.”

“Uh huh?”

“So I took that out and started waving it around... doing that flip thing you do all the time.” Gabrielle gestured with her hands.

“Okay.” Xena drew out the word, visibly confused. “Oh, you mean this.” She drew her sword and twirled it.

“Right.” The bard half shrugged. “So we went out side and I was all like.. 'bring it on, bitches.' “ and they got all freaked out and backed off.”

Xena started laughing silently, covering her eyes and tucking her elbows close to her body as she shook.

“Yeah, I was saying... 'c'mon ya chickens come and get me!' - you'd have cracked up.” Gabrielle said. “Of course if you'd been there it wouldn't have happened, but boy, I laughed after I got over being pissed.” She sighed. “Jerks.”

Xena laughed harder, starting to audibly chuckle.

“Solari was so funny. She was all like. 'wow, when did you learn to use that?' so I said 'like right now.' And that I was making it up and she almost passed out.” Now Gabrielle started to chuckle too. “Just dumbass, you know? Over a few cooking classes, and me letting the singles have their own quarters. You'd have thought I wanted to start having them all wear dresses or something.”

Xena's laughter finally wound down. “Damn, I'm really sorry I missed that.” She sighed. “I figured someone might get some damn ass stupid idea while I was gone, but I didn't count on you prodding them like that. Those elders are hidebound.”

“Did you? Really think they'd try something?” Gabrielle asked.

The warrior nodded. “Yeah. I could see some of them were stewing.”

“How come you didn't say anything?” The bard asked, with a frown. “Xena, that's not cool.”

Xena gazed off into the distance, then she looked back at her partner. “I figured if we started having that conversation we'd end it with you coming with me.”

Gabrielle took a breath to answer, then thought about that, and ended up just exhaling.

Xena chuckled softly.

“I thought maybe all that stuff about us finding those metals in the v... oh, darn. I didn't tell you about that yet.” Gabrielle hiked one boot up and put it over her knee. “So freaking much has happened since you left. We got into that valley up top and it's got silver and a bunch of other stuff in it.”

“Yeah, I knew.” Xena said. “I figured if I signed it over to them, and they found that, it'd set them up for a long time and make them happier about moving up there.”

Gabrielle blinked. “You knew?”

Her partner nodded. "It is my homeland." She remarked. "Figured if they wanted to work hard to get that place open, they deserved it."

"Xe."

"Didn't want you to think I was trying to buy them off." Xena smiled. "It was just there. You know we've got stuff like that up in the slopes by us."

Gabrielle exhaled, shaking her head a little. "Well, it certainly made them happy. Some of the senior warriors were saying this was something Melosa used to tell them, that what they needed was a source of hard coin, and they could make the nation stable for a very long time." She leaned against the warrior.

"You think maybe the thought of that money made them take a swipe at you?" Xena asked.

"Oh, no I'm..." Gabrielle stopped talking again and sighed "Boy, I sure hope not. That'd be depressing."

"We should get some rest." Xena said, after a short pause. "Spartans will be here tomorrow."

"What are we going to do, Xe?" Gabrielle asked in a soft tone. "Ares said we had to stop the war. That was the only way to keep the gods from their stupid bet. Can we do that?"

"I have no clue what we're going to do." Her partner answered honestly. "I'm hoping if I go to sleep, I'll wake up and some brilliant plan will have occurred to me in a dream."

Gabrielle eyed her.

"And if not, at least I'll have slept with you." The warrior stood up. "Let's get our child out of the barn. I know a room in this place that'll fit us."

They went into the stable, finding Dori sitting in the straw near her new pony. The animal had lain down in the small stall with his hooves tucked under him and had his head near Dori, who was stroking his mane.

She looked around as the door opened. "Mama!"

"Hey honey." Gabrielle crossed the stable and joined her. "Are you having fun with your new friend?"

"Yes." Dori patted the pony's nose. "Mama what's his name??"

"Rusty." Xena supplied from where she was checking Iolaus' stall. "That okay with you, shortie?"

"Wusty." Dori pronounced. "Good! I like that Boo."

Gabrielle watched her daughter's face and had to smile. "Are you ready to get some rest, Dor? We had a long day today, didn't we?"

"C'n I stay here with Wusty, mama?" Dori said. "He might get lonely."

Gabrielle could hear her beloved soulmate snickering behind her. "Sweetie..."

"What are you going to say?" Xena asked. "That she can't sleep in a barn? She was conceived in a damn tree." She came over and knelt next to her partner. "Don't worry kiddo. He's got some friends here. See?" She pointed at Iolaus and the interestedly watching Shadow. "He'll be okay."

Dori pouted.

"C'mon, hon." Gabrielle ruffled her hair. "Don't you want to get all clean, and have a nice soft bed for tonight?"

"No."

The bard sighed. "Dori."

Xena picked up a bit of straw and tickled her ear with it. "I don't mind barns." She drawled. "Especially not with you in them."

"You're such a troublemaker." Gabrielle rolled her head to one side and regarded her partner. "But you know what, I just spotted those pallets stacked up against that wall there." She pointed. "And our bags are already in here."

They got up and Xena went to grab the pallets, apparently stored there for busy times in the inn. She set up three of them in an unused stall at the back of the barn, and set about arranging their things, taking a seat on a discarded wooden box.

The horse trough supplied them with running water and she set their waterskins down, for a moment almost forgetting they were in the midst of a serious problem as she went through the familiar motions.

It felt great to just listen to Gabrielle talking to Dori, to hear those two voices at her back as she set out their things and took her armor off.

"Sore?" Gabrielle's hands touched her shoulders and gently kneaded them.

Xena swallowed against the sudden surge of emotion that tightened her throat. "Yeah." She muttered. "All that craziness catching up with me."

Gabrielle leaned against her, and kissed the back of her neck. "I missed you so much." She whispered, sliding her arms around her partner and hugging her.

Unseen, Xena's eyes closed. "Likewise." She said.

Gabrielle released her, and then gave her another kiss on the neck before she started her massage up again. She could feel the knots and she worked them gently, slowly easing the stiffness as she felt Xena relax.

"Mama, c'n I show Wusty Bittyboo?" Dori held up the doll, that she'd retrieved from Gabrielle's casually tossed bag. "He can be friends too?"

"Sure honey." Gabrielle kept working. "Just don't let him get too close. Remember how Ares likes to chew on her."

"No! Bad buppit." Dori went back over to the pony, sitting down and starting to explain something in earnest whispers.

"You've got a big bruise back here hon." Gabrielle unhooked the straps on her partner's leathers and eased them down. "Wow."

"I think that was the wall." Xena remarked. "It hurt." She added. "It fell on me and.. I couldn't breathe."

Gabrielle put a kiss over the darkened spot across her back. "I had a run in with ... I think it was Artemis."

Xena's shoulders twitched. "Artemis?"

"That was the second time Ares showed up." The bard confirmed. "We got ambushed in the path, we stopped to investigate some dead bodies.. Amazons... and a bunch of soldiers jumped us. Next thing I know one of them is coming at me and telling me to kneel down."

Xena snorted.

"Yeah, well.. let me tell you something. I found out right then I'm not you. She grabbed hold of me with some light or something and it was like.. " Gabrielle paused. "I couldn't move.. I couldn't

breathe. My chest wouldn't move – that's when Ares showed up and made her stop it.”

Xena was staring straight ahead. “I think I felt that.”

“Everything else stopped moving.” The bard went on. “It was weird.”

“She took you out of time.” Xena answered, slowly. “I couldn't sense you anywhere.”

Gabrielle's hands stilled. “Oh.”

“Bad moment.”

“Yeah.” Gabrielle leaned forward, so their bodies were pressed together. “So I get the feeling that this whole war thing is a big deal up there. Ares said he thinks Zeus wants to give whoever wins this war his job.”

“So that's why he wants us to stop it.” Xena reasoned. “That makes sense.” She patted Gabrielle's leg and stood up, picking up a piece of linen and wetting it before she started cleaning herself off. “And I bet part of the challenge is to get both armies led by women to prove the point that they're good at it.”

“With everyone dying in the middle.” Gabrielle joined her in cleaning up. “That pisses me off.”

“Yeah.”

“So, no matter what we do, we play their game with this.” The bard frowned. “Xena, that sucks.”

Xena pulled her hair back and knotted it. “Yeah.” She said. “But if I'm choosing between helping Ares and helping those other jokers, I'll pick Ares.”

Gabrielle thought about that, and then she nodded. “Me too.” She admitted. “It's just all so stupid.”

The warrior slipped out of her leathers and threw a shift on in their place, shaking them out and shaking her head at all the sand that flew out from them in every direction. “No wonder I feel so damn raw.”

Gabrielle pulled her own shift from her bags and traded her traveling gear for it. This would likely be the only bit of peace they get and she wanted to make the most of it. She went over and put her arms around Xena and hugged her, savoring the feel as their bodies connected fully. “I don't really care what we end up doing tomorrow. I'm just glad we found you, and we're together again.”

“Me too.” Xena returned the hug. “Let's get some rest.”

They finally coaxed Dori into lying down; putting her pallet as close to the edge of the pony's stall as was practical. The sounds outside had died down completely, and through the stable's shuttered windows they could hear the wash of the sea against the harbor.

Xena settled into their joined pallets closest to the door, and rolled onto her back as Gabrielle joined her, snuggling up to her and twining their bodies together.

They both exhaled at the same time, and Xena chuckled a little.

“I think this is the first time I've been able to relax since you left Amphipolis.” Gabrielle said. “Even when I was in the village, I was on edge the whole time.”

Xena rubbed her back. “Getting on that boat was tough.” She admitted. “Glad it's over.”

Gabrielle thought about that, remembering herself the last time they'd been separated by the sea. It wasn't the same this time, she knew it and she knew Xena knew it, but still, the memories stung. “Sorry, Xe.” She snuggled closer, slipping her arms around her partner.

“Thanks for the notes.” Xena let her eyes close.

“Thanks for the presents.” Her partner responded with a faint chuckle.

Silence settled over them. The stable was full of small noises, though, the horses moving around, and the clink of water buckets being pushed against the stall walls. Xena had opened the shuttered window over where they were lying, and she could hear the scuff of boots on the stone outside, and the faint clash of armor.

Voices floated in the air, a touch of laughter. She thought she recognized Ephiny's tone and Solaris.

There were a lot of people here expecting her to find a way out of this, the warrior acknowledged privately. She'd promised Denius, for one thing, and the people Gabrielle had brought with her were all looking to her for leadership. The city patricians, drawn out of hiding as the fighting slowed down seemed to expect it too.

But really, what was she going to do? Gather the conscripts and newly joined farmers in the city and lead them against an army ten times their number?

Really?

What would that do, aside from getting a lot of them killed? It would feed right into the damn goddesses bet. It would work against Ares. It would possibly be deadly to her, and those who would stand with her regardless.

What actual choices did she have?

Take her gang and escape the city? Run down the coast? She'd told everyone she wasn't going to be a part of this war, right up until she had to convince Denius to turn the ship around. How much was that promise worth?

What in Hades was she going to do?

Xena felt Gabrielle's breathing, warm against her neck, and she decided to put the problems away for a while so she could enjoy this reunion.

She let her cheek rest against Gabrielle's head, absorbing the sensation of having her wrapped up in her arms again. Her body relaxed and she felt sleep calling her, a smile on her face as she let the stable around them fade away.

**

Xena wasn't sure what had woken her. She stiffened, and lifted her head off her makeshift pillow, feeling Gabrielle wake and tighten her grip on her.

“What?” Gabrielle uttered, almost sub vocally.

Xena shook her head, ears twitching. It was still very quiet outside. She figured it was a candlemark or more before dawn, and outside in the back alley, she could still hear the soft rasp of the watch, walking up and own the stone street.

Was it a sound that had disturbed her? Brought her out of a sweet dream full of sunlight and laughter?

A puff of air blew in through the window, and she flared her nostrils, catching the smell of smoke, with an acrid hint on it. She took a breath, and felt Gabrielle release her, the bard rolling off her side of the pallet and getting to her feet just as Xena did.

She didn't have to tell Gabrielle what to do. The bard was already getting her staff, and changing from her shift into her clothing just as Xena was slipping into her leathers and snuggling the straps

tight. They both pulled boots on and headed for the door, Gabrielle pausing to kneel next to Dori's pallet.

A moment later they were at the door, Xena clipping her sword to her back as she eased the big wooden portal open. She paused, aware of the solid figure at her back as Gabrielle put a hand on her shoulder.

They slid out into the street and moved over to the edge of the steps that led up to the inn. Xena stopped there, surveying the faintly starlit road that ran along the harbor.

The encampment looked quiet. There were figures rolled up in furs near the cookpit, and two men standing guard a little way down.

Quiet.

Xena swept the area again, unable to detect anything out of place. Torches fluttered down the road, and she wondered if it was that scent, the tar pitch tainted smoke that had alerted her.

Gabrielle edged up next to her; sleep disheveled hair just visible in the faint light. She leaned against her staff, and rested her free hand on Xena's hip. She didn't make a sound, but she looked up at her partner in obvious question.

About to admit to seeing phantoms, Xena paused as she heard the faint shift of a body against stone, somewhere above them. She put her finger against her lips, and pointed.

Gabrielle's head tipped up and she regarded the window over their heads, then she tightened her fingers on Xena's side as they saw a flare of light, then a blast of fire as they both ducked instinctively.

Xena pulled them both against the steps, and then she drew her sword as she heard rapid footsteps on the stairs. The guards started running towards them, and doors started slamming in the inn, accompanied by shouts that rang out in the stillness.

She waited until she sensed the closeness of the body moving down the steps and then she reached over the railing, grabbing the person's arm and hauling them over the side of the steps and then against the wall with a solid crunch.

The figure bounced off and went for her, but was stopped by the crack of Gabrielle's staff as she swung it against the figure's head.

They reeled back and slumped against the wall, just as the guards arrived and Pony rattled down the steps with her sword drawn.

"Nice." Xena patted her partner's shoulder. "Damn I missed having you around." She ducked forward and grabbed the slumped figure on the ground and swung it around so the torchlight from the guards shone on their face. She paused for a second, and then released the dark tunic. "Figures."

"Who is that?" Gabrielle peered over her shoulder.

"One of those stupid bitch Amazons." Pony supplied, coming around the end of the steps and sheathing her sword. "From our ship. That sorry ass consort."

They all turned to look at the room, which was issuing smoke out the window along with licks of flame. The stone of the walls was staining with black soot.

"Xena." Gabrielle stared down at the woman. "Are you telling me this is an Amazon, and she was trying to hurt us? That's the room we were supposed to be in."

"Don't surprise me." Pony said. "Those two were part of the group that had me and Eph hog tied and were gonna sell us."

Gabrielle's jaw dropped. "Wait." She said. "What?"

"We didn't have time to catch you up on stuff." Pony said. "Want me to go find this creep's friend?" She glanced behind her as Ephiny appeared.

A crowd was gathering now. Xena picked up the Amazon and shoved her against the stairs, smacking her across the face to get her out of the foggy stupor Gabrielle's staff had put her in. "Wake up, sunshine."

The woman shook her head and glared at Xena. "Bitch."

"Amateur." The warrior responded mildly. "You set that fire?" She pointed at the window.

The woman just stared at her.

Xena reached forward, jabbing her fingers into the Amazon's pressure points. She slumped back onto the ground and jerked, her eyes bugging out as she tried to move and couldn't. "Talk"

She was aware, in her peripheral senses, of a disturbance behind her but kept her attention focused on the Amazon, knowing Gabrielle had her back.

And as she thought that, she realized abruptly why she'd nearly died in the hold of the ship, under that wall that had fallen on top of her. "Talk." She repeated to the woman. "You've got about a count of thirty, then you die."

"I set it!" The woman coughed at her. "Too bad you weren't in there you traitor!"

Xena released the points, coming over her center of balance as she waited for the woman to react. Behind her, she heard footsteps and yelling, and the Amazon before her glanced behind her and couldn't avoid a triumphant expression. She grabbed the woman by the throat and shoved her against the wall, just as she sensed Ephiny reacting and heard the sweetly distinctive crack of Gabrielle's staff against something hard.

She had nearly died on that ship, because she'd lived so long now what that presence at her back, that she'd forgotten what it was like not to have it, and she hadn't heard a yell of warning Gabrielle would have given if she had been.

Sobering thought. "What makes you think I'm a traitor?" She asked the Amazon, who tore her gaze from whatever was going on behind them to face her. "Don't worry about your girlfriend. If she's lucky and not as stupid as you are, she'll only get bruised."

"You told the councilman you wouldn't fight the Spartans." The Amazon said, looking as though she wanted to spit at Xena. "After all your big talk! You're nothing but a damned coward!"

Xena heard a few more whacks behind her. "I didn't say that." She stood and hauled the woman up with her, turning and spotting Gabrielle swinging hard at an older Amazon and sending her drawn sword flying off into the crowd. "I said I wouldn't lead a hundred farmboys against them."

A loud whistle caught her attention, and she turned, her eyes sweeping the area looking for the source. Then she spotted a figure on slope waving their arms. "Eph, see what's up with Cait." She pointed with an elbow. The Amazon regent turned and shoved her way through the crowd.

Footsteps behind her. "Xena!" Jens ran up panting. "Spartans are coming at the gates!" He gasped out, one hand to his chest. "Coming down the road!"

Xena glanced at the Amazon struggling in her grip, then she released one hand and slugged her, knocking her out. Then she stepped between Gabrielle and her reeling adversary, as the other Amazon came stumbling back at them and did the same for her. "Sorry to interrupt your fun." She said. "We've got bigger problems."

"Who in Hades are these people?" Gabrielle was fuming. "Xena she was trying to stab you in the

back!”

“Xena!” Ephiny bolted over and jumped the rail. “Cait says there’s a fleet out there heading for the harbor.”

“Way bigger problems.” The warrior glanced around. “Jens, sound the horns and wake everyone up. Get everyone on the walls with crossbows and arrows and start a pit fire going to boil pitch.”

“On the way.” Jens signaled to two of his men and hastened away from the group gathered at the foot of the stairs. Xena walked to the edge of the road and peered at the cliff top, where Cait was now standing, her back facing them staring out at the sea beyond.

“Looks like the plans just changed.” Pony came over to stand next to Xena.

“Yeah.” Xena considered. A thousand Spartans at the gates, and a fleet coming to hit the harbor. Time to go the route of prudence?

“Want me to toss those jokers into the jailhouse down there?” Pony asked, with unconcealed glee. “No sense letting them loose to poke you in the ass again.”

“Sure.” Xena said. “While you’re down there, find some sailors and someone who can steer a boat. Send em up here.”

“Right.” Pony looked around. “Hey, Fuzzy. Wanna give me a hand?”

“Sure.” Jessan grabbed one of the women and tossed her body easily over one shoulder. “You thinking of getting out of here on that tub, Xena?” He pointed at the broken down vessel and lowered his voice. “Looks pretty beat up.”

“Not exactly.” The warrior said. “Get back here soon as you can. I gotta figure out what we’re going to do to push em off.”

“Got it, Chosen.” Jessan motioned one of his troop to follow with the other Amazon and they trooped after Pony, who led them down the stepped hillside towards the waterfront.

“Xena.” Gabrielle got a word in edgewise. “What was that all about? Why was she trying to hurt you?”

“She’s an idiot.” Ephiny joined them. “Those two were part of the hunting party who were gathering the tribes. They were the leaders, I guess.” She put her hands on her hips. “They didn’t like me and Pon.. I figure she realized after we got ambushed we were either more valuable or higher ranking than they were so they ended up jumping us and knocking us out cold.”

“You got ambushed?” Gabrielle put a hand on her head and looked over at Xena. “I’m going to be six moons catching up with all this and you were only gone a sevenday. You better not either of you ever say I make things happen ever again!”

Ephiny chuckled. “Okay.” She turned to Xena “What can I do?”

“You can watch my child.” Gabrielle pointed at the barn. “Paybacks are a bitch.” She grabbed Xena’s arm and turned her around. “Panic in the streets hon, I think they need you.”

A huge crowd was, in fact, gathering in the streets and there was more than a little panic in them. Xena felt, for a short moment, very overwhelmed by this acceleration of the war past what she’d expected. She hadn’t started with a plan, and the sudden waking and even more sudden attack by Amazons hadn’t helped her in developing one.

Nevertheless, she didn’t really have time to be at a loss. “Okay, let’s go up to the gates and see what we’ve got.” She put a hand on Gabrielle’s back, and steered her towards the alleyway between the houses. “Take the back row.”

They squeezed between the walls and emerged in the small roadway in back of the villas, no doubt there to provide a way for the servants to bring provisions up and to take the garbage away before the high paying patrons could see it.

It was narrow and crooked, and mostly empty. Xena and Gabrielle loped down it at a good clip, the air around them lightening as dawn started to break over the city, a gray light with a hint of rose at it's edges. "Thanks, by the way." Xena said, after they'd been on the move for a couple minutes.

"For?" Gabrielle had her staff in one fist, carrying it slanted to prevent it from hitting the steps.

"Watching my back before."

Gabrielle gave her a strange look. "Huh?" She said, after a moment. "What was I supposed to do?"

Xena drew her sword, feeling a prickle along her senses. "Exactly what you did." She swept the path ahead of them intently. "I just realized how much I missed it."

"Oh." The bard's face twitched into a grin. "No problem."

The path in front of them abruptly erupted into a swarm of dark armor, coming at them fast up the slope.

"Problem." Xena sighed. "Damn it."

"Yeah." Gabrielle got her staff up, moving it mostly forward so as not to whack her beloved soulmate in the kneecaps. "Didn't even get a chance to have a cup of tea to wake up to."

"Make it up to you." Xena let out a yell and bounded up into the air, swinging her sword down to meet the first of the Spartans attacking them.

There were six. But they'd picked a very bad spot to ambush them from and Xena was momentarily almost disappointed as she was able to power her way through the guard of the soldier and knock him to his knees as he fought to defend from a lower position working his way up the steps.

It was too narrow for the others to help him, and any attempt brought stinging whacks from Gabrielle's staff from where the bard was positioned behind her.

"Xena!"

The warrior ducked gracefully, hearing an arrow go over her head and hit the stone wall.

Another pair of hands. Another pair of eyes. She stepped back and slid to one side, as Gabrielle slammed her staff into the man's head and he toppled back down the stairs into the way of his companions.

Another focus. Xena unsheathed her dagger and let it fly as the next man in line aimed at Gabrielle's chest, nailing him unerringly in the throat right between the bottom of his helmet and the top of his armor. He dropped the crossbow and fell backwards, and they advanced after him.

Stalking their ambushers. In the gloom it was hard to see features and Xena found herself battling a man taller than she was even with the step advantage and being pushed back against the wall as a second engaged Gabrielle with a mace. "Hey!" She yelled in warning.

Gabrielle ducked in response, and then brought her staff up in a short, hard arc as the soldier backswung, meeting the shaft of the weapon on hers in a solid crack.

Xena kept her in her peripheral vision as she squared off against the monster in front of her, raising her sword and meeting his on a sideways slant as he tried to bash through her

defenses. The sudden challenge to her skills woke her up thoroughly and she got her back to the wall as she twisted her shoulders to one side, and then ducked and turned, bringing his sword with hers around in a circle in the tight spot.

Their swords clashed and grated down their length to the hilts, and Xena shoved against the pressure with all her strength as her eyes caught a flicker of motion and without really thinking she lashed out with one boot and knocked the knife heading for Gabrielle out of the air.

“Show off.” Gabrielle returned the compliment, smacking Xena’s opponent in the head and then poking the end of her staff right at her own opponents’ groin.

Xena dropped onto her back, surprising the man who had been trying to overpower her. He lurched forward, and she got her boots up and into his chest as he fell, his weight pressing against her before she straightened up and kicked him backwards.

The last soldier dodged him and was on her before she could roll up to her feet, throwing himself past his companion engaged with Gabrielle and onto her with arms outstretched, pinning her down.

Xena tucked her blade under her thigh and grappled with him, grabbing the hands that were grasping her throat and yanking them back as she evaded what she suspected was an attempted bite. She didn’t make the mistake of slamming her own head into his helmeted one, but she got a knee up between his legs and as he twisted to avoid the impact she released one of his hands and jammed the heel of her hand up against his chin shooting his head backwards.

He grunted as his teeth snapped shut and she got a grip on his helmet and ripped it off. The end of Gabrielle’s staff promptly came down on top of it, and a moment later he was slumping to the side next to her and it was quiet again.

Gabrielle was standing over her last adversary, legs braced and her hands wrapped around her staff. Her breathing was a little fast, and she had a little pink in her cheeks and in the rose dawn light Xena considered the sight more than beautiful.

“What?” Gabrielle tilted her head. “What’s that grin for?”

“Nothing.” Xena sat up and dusted her hands off. The man she’d kicked backwards had hit his head on the stone steps, and was currently sprawled motionless, leaving them for the moment with no further opponents.

“So, who let these guys up here?” The bard asked. “And why didn’t anyone come running when they heard all this noise?”

Two good questions. Xena got to her feet, sheathing her sword and shaking her armor back into place. “Maybe it’s all the commotion at the gate.”

Gabrielle looked skeptical.

“Or maybe some folks don’t want the city to fight back.” The warrior concluded, advancing on the tall soldier she’d so recently been fighting and rolling him over with a jerk of her boot. “Let’s find out.”

But the man’s eyes were staring and open, a dagger hilt protruding from his stomach. Xena stared at it in surprise, leaning closer to look at it as she realized it wasn’t hers. “What in Hades?”

The man’s hand flopped to the ground lifeless.

“Xena. Did he do that himself?” Gabrielle looked quickly around.

“Must have.” The warrior murmured. “I didn’t draw... mine.” She checked her sheaths to be sure. “Just the one..” She walked over and examined one of the fallen soldiers. “Yeah, this is it.”

She yanked her dagger out of the man's neck, where it had cut right through his jugular.

One by one, she checked the Spartans, and found them all dead. Either from her hand, or their own, and she frowned, aware of Gabrielle's close attention at her shoulder. "Huh."

"Xena, did they kill themselves? All of them?"

"Looks like it." Xena indicated the path. "Let's get to the wall. Something's not adding up right here. Spartans..."

"Maybe they were ashamed of being beaten by women?" Gabrielle followed at her heels. "They seemed that type. When Solari and her gang beat them up back home they ran off, remember?"

"Huh." Xena grunted again, speeding up her pace. "Maybe."

"Ego?"

Xena thought about that. "They did say they didn't consider women fit opponents." She said. "Didn't they?"

"Mom said they were totally freaked out when Solari and the gang started beating on them."

"Hm."

They traveled down the narrow path, meeting no one else until they reached the bottom and emerged into one of the main streets, which was filled with nervous citizens and men in half armor. They parted as they spotted Xena and made way for them.

"Xena!" Denius pushed his way through the crowd. "Xena! What's the meaning of this!?"

Xena kept moving. "Meaning of what." She went past him, grabbing his arm and hauling him along as she headed for the entrance to the lower town. "The Spartan army's at the gates. You think I sent for em?"

"Didn't you send to parley with them?" The patrician hurried to keep up, more or less ignoring Gabrielle. "That's the word that came back to us, that you had gone to make a deal with them."

"What were you drinking?" The warrior wondered. "I didn't do anything last night except sleep."

"Sleep!"

Gabrielle's fingers tightened on her staff at the tone. "Despite popular opinion to the contrary, she does that at night. Occasionally." She paused. "Generally with me."

Denius glanced at her, and then returned his attention to Xena. "With an army bearing down on us!?"

Xena ignored him. She scanned the open space in front of the gates, a flash of memory hitting her from the previous night. She remembered riding through the now closed portal, driving Iolaus through the crowd and spotting Gabrielle on the fringe, sharing a hug with Ephiny and Eponin.

Relief and happiness had turned her dismount into a headlong run and she vaguely remembered bowling over everything in her way including a donkey in her haste to get to her partner.

"Xena, I'm talking to you."

She wasn't going to make this any damned last stand.

The warrior turned her head towards Denius. "What did you expect me to do?" She asked. "Go out there and fight them all off? It's a damned army, Denius. We don't have enough men here to take the battle to them."

“But...”

But. Xena looked around, and spotted the pile of Spartan bodies from the late battles of yesterday. Her eyes narrowed.

“Genr’l, got us some pitch boiling but..” Bennu limped up to her. “Bastards are comin right at us.”

“Take those bodies.” Xena let out a yell, turning and pointing at the pile. . “Get that half wagon over here, and put a couple of them in the bed. C’mon! Move it!”

Conscripts and volunteers rushed over to do her bidding, half afraid and half excited, bumping into each other in their rush.

Denius reached out to grab Xena’s arm and found himself blocked by a long, hardened stick. He jerked back and stared as Gabrielle put herself between them. “Get out of my way.”

“You really do need to let Xena do what she does.” Gabrielle said, conversationally. “Asking her questions just pisses her off.”

“Take their leggings off!”

The men turned and stared at her, then back at the Spartan dead.

“Just do it!” Xena ordered. “Strip their asses naked and get em on the cart!”

“You heard the genr’l!” Bennu fell into the plan without hesitation. “Move it!”

Xena helped the men pull the half wagon into position, and waited for them to place the Spartan bodies on the back of it. “Okay, I need a lot of volunteers.” She directed them in pushing the wagon to a specific position, and then she grabbed a spare board from a trough nearby and slapped it over the yoke, grabbing a rope and lashing it into place. “Grab that bench there, and put it near the wall.”

“What is she doing?” Denius asked, sidetracked by all the action.

Gabrielle grounded her staff and wrapped her hand around it. “I think she found an angle.”

“What?”

The bard watched them set up the makeshift catapult and exhaled. “They should be careful what they ask for.”

“What?”

**

Xena leaned against the wall, watching through the arrow slit. “Get ready!” She called over her shoulder. Ahead of her, stretching across the flat area leading up to the city was the Spartan army in all its glory. One of the siege engines had survived the trip up from Amphipolis, but the two others Gabrielle had reported were nowhere to be seen.

There were also wagons close to breaking down that her knowledgeable eye spotted, and the horses in the front legion looked exhausted.

Hard ride. Xena figured they’d marched on short rations and even shorter sleep in order to catch up with her soulmate – only to get here and find out they hadn’t.

So, she reasoned they had only a few options here. They could no longer stop Gabrielle from sending a warning. They likely thought the warning had already traveled on, and in fact, it had so long as the captain hadn’t gotten caught by that fleet coming crawling up her back.

To get to the fleet, they had to conquer the city. The fleet was their only option of escape, since

any response from Athens would come down the coast so either they got onboard, or they went back the way they came.

Xena didn't want them going back the way they came. She scratched her jaw thoughtfully.

The front ranks broke, and a group of riders started to approach down the road, the man in front carrying the Spartan war banner seated in his stirrup.

"Looks like they want to talk." Gabrielle pressed in behind her, putting a hand on Xena's shoulder to steady her balance as she peered through the slit. "Think they know we're in here?"

"They will in a minute." Xena raised one hand and waited until the advance party was close enough, and it looked like they were about to stop and make a pronouncement. She let her hand fall. The sound of a heavy weight landing on wood followed, and then there was thwacking noise that soon followed.

Xena didn't watch. She kept her eye on the Spartans as they sorted themselves out then jumped, and looked up. A yell went up and the horses scattered in every direction as a body fell heavily to the ground, smacking the legs of the horse of the banner carrier who reared and almost dumped the man on his ass.

It was grotesque, in all the senses of that word. Half naked, the body's stiff limbs were rakishly askew and the Spartans scrambled around it, one of the men sliding off his horse to turn the body over.

"Don't think they liked that, Xe." Gabrielle mused.

"Weren't supposed to." Xena lifted her hand again. "Get another one on there!" She yelled over her shoulder, then turned back to see the Spartans staring at the gate.

"Go!" Xena dropped her hand again, rewarded by seeing another Spartan body fly over the wall, twisting as it went. "That's pretty good for a makeshift catapult, huh?"

Gabrielle exhaled, turning her back on the weapon. She was more used to war than most, but the dead, staring faces were putting a chill of horror down her spine she found she had little defense against. She felt a little raw, the strong smell of blood and hint of death on the air making her grimace.

Xena glanced up at her, one hand reaching out to rest on her partner's thigh. She could see, suddenly, the exhaustion the night's rest hadn't touched, and as Gabrielle looked back at her, there was a shadow of her much younger self there. "Hey." She curled her arm around the bard's leg. "You okay?"

Gabrielle put a hand on her shoulder and leaned, just a little. "Tired." She said. "Too much blood lately." She traced an idle pattern across the warrior's skin. "One too many nightmares maybe."

Xena kept hold of her, as she turned and studied the result of her attack. The Spartans were now riding around in a tight circle, watching the sky as two of their numbers were struggling to get their dead compatriots up on to their horses.

The horses didn't like the idea. They could smell the blood and the beginning of decay and made it clear they didn't want that anywhere near their backs. "Ready!" Xena lifted her hand, judging the sharp, jerky gestures of the envoy. "Go!"

Another hollow sound, another body flying over the wall. As Xena suspected, this was too much for the men, who scattered as the body hit the dirt next to them and a half severed arm went flying all the way off.

Xena glanced up, watching Gabrielle's somber profile. "They're dead anyway." She said. "If I can use them to knock the Spartans off balance so they'll deal with me, we all win."

"I'm not.. ' Gabrielle leaned a little more. "Hon, I'm not judging what you're doing."

"You look like it's bothering you."

"Xe." The bard sighed. "I've had a tough week and I'm about to start cycling. Give me a break, okay?" She watched the crowd watching Xena instead of the catapult. "Cait's heading this way."

The warrior watched the Spartans retreat back towards their lines, dragging the dead soldiers with them as the sun lifted up over the trees and drenched them in anything but appropriate gentle pink light.

"Hold!" Xena called over to her erstwhile troops. "Let's see what that does." She half turned. "Keep an eye on them, Jens."

The Athenian soldier gave her a salute, and went back to his own arrow slit, pressing his face to the wall as he watched.

Xena swiveled around and bumped her shoulder against Gabrielle's hip. She felt the bard press against her, as they both watched Cait approach with Milena at her heels, descending from the road up to the harbor, followed at a trot by Iolaus. "Know what I feel like?"

"What?" Gabrielle ran the fingers of one hand through her partner's unruly hair. "I sure could use a cup of cider or something. Want me to go find some?"

"That and a piece of bread and cheese." The warrior agreed. "I figure they're going to spend a quarter candlemark getting pissed off then try their next approach. Maybe I'll go out to meet them."

"We will go out to meet them." Gabrielle corrected her.

Xena tickled her calf. "Of course we." She amended. "After all, we're the ones the stupid bastards are looking for."

Gabrielle ruffled her hair, then leaned over and kissed the top of the warrior's head, before she eased herself out of Xena's grip and started towards an area where city folk were gathering and collecting supplies.

Xena watched her, until Cait mounted the ledge that ran along the inside of the wall and climbed up to where she was sitting. "Any luck?"

"Rather." Cait half turned as Milena and Iolaus joined them. "We found about six men who said they could sail that boat out you mentioned." She said. "But they say it won't sail far. It's broken."

"We knew that." Milena spoke up. "I'm sure Xena wasn't looking to run away in it. Were you?"

Cait turned so fast she was almost a blur. "Now look here." She grabbed Milena and shook her hard. "Stop saying such dumb things before I thrash you."

"Let me go!" Milena grappled with her. Cait was slimmer than she was, and perhaps an inch or two shorter, but the Amazon was all whipcord and iron and she didn't budge. "You little..."

Iolaus came over and sat down next to Xena. "So." He said, observing the struggle. "We going to watch until Gabrielle gets back to adjudicate?" He asked. "My dinars are on that Amazon. I saw her climb that cliff."

"No." Xena whistled. "Cait!"

Cait released her victim and turned, coming back over to Xena. "Sorry about that." She said. "Anyway, the sailors said they'd work the ship."

"Don't." Xena looked past her at Milena, her voice suddenly cold and sharp. She waited to make sure the woman wasn't going to do anything stupid, and then she turned back to Cait. "Tell the

sailors to load as much straw and pitch onto the ship as they can. Get it into the harbor entrance, in the narrow part.”

“And set it on fire to block the opening.” Cait finished. “Splendid idea, Xena.” She said. “May I go with them? I know exactly what you mean.”

Xena studied her. “Be careful.” She said. “We can’t afford to lose you.”

Cait grinned wholeheartedly. Then she turned and raced off, heading at full speed towards the harbor road.

“That cuts us off from any rescue from the Athenian navy.” Iolaus commented. “But I’m guessing you think they won’t be in time anyway.”

“Right now, they’re the least of my concerns.” Xena stood up as she spotted Gabrielle making her way back. “Jessan!” She lifted her voice, projecting it towards the forest dweller who was halfway up the slope. He turned and waved. “Bring our horses down?” Xena indicated herself and Gabrielle. “We’re gonna go parley.”

Jessan waved and started up at a trot.

Milena watched him leave, and then she turned back to Xena. “Why did you stop me? Afraid I’d hurt your little kid there?”

“No.” Xena leaned back against the wall. “I didn’t want you to end up with a knife in your gut. Cait has less of a sense of humor than I do.”

“That kid?”

“That kid is a full Amazon warrior.” Xena said. “And she’s family of mine.” She half turned and glanced through the arrow slit, seeing the Spartans still milling around, the group that had approached them surrounded by a big group of compatriots.

Milena snorted. “You sure aren’t picky with who you call family are you?”

Slowly, the warrior turned back around, her eyes rapidly cooling to an icy almost gray.

“Excuse me.” Gabrielle came up behind Milena, her hands mostly full. “Don’t want to spill this on you. It’s cold.”

Milena turned her head and stared at her for a moment, then reluctantly stepped aside. “Speaking of.”

Gabrielle merely gave her an amused look as she settled on the rock ledge next to her partner. She set down one mug of the two in her hand, and passed the other over. “Here you go, hon.” She patted Xena on the leg. “It’s pear cider.”

“Thanks.” Xena took the mug and took a long, deliberate sip from it, as the pulses of red anger faded from her suddenly focused vision. She’d understood the disparaging reference and the tone in Milena’s voice and had come very close to something very violent.

Her temper on the edge of snapping so quickly it shocked her. She exhaled slowly, tasting the cold cider finally through the copper tang in her mouth.

She could tell from the girl’s smirk that she knew she’d gotten to her. She could see the disdain in her eyes when she looked at Gabrielle. It started a deep burn of anger in her guts that put a twitch in her fingers as her body shifted restlessly in pure reaction.

“I was listening to the stonemasons.” Gabrielle said, apparently oblivious. “They think the walls will last maybe a day, against that catapult outside.”

“Yeah.” Xena answered briefly. “We need to take that out of action.”

Gabrielle took a bite of bread and cheese, then ripped off another and offered it to Xena. "C'mon, open up."

Caught between her growing anger and embarrassment at the offering, Xena turned her head to meet her partner's eyes and saw the wry, wicked amusement there looking back at her. She sighed soundlessly, but opened her mouth and took the bite, feeling her lips twitch just a little as the bard winked at her.

"Xena, you think they'll send anyone climbing the cliffs there, trying to get over the wall that way?" Iolaus pointed to the distance, where the ridge of rock that the city was built over met the stone. "They might."

"Might." Xena conceded. "Have them bring buckets of lard from the kitchens up there and spill it down over the stone while we're out there talking. Just in case."

Iolaus regarded her. "Nice." He said, after a pause.

"And it's oily. You can set it on fire if they keep trying." Xena continued. "If we run out of dead bodies to toss at em."

Gabrielle winced.

"Hey, your maj." Solari climbed up to join them. "We found the armory." She held up a big fistful of well-made arrows. "Pon found like a dozen maybe two Amazons down in town too. They missed the last boat, but they want in on the action."

"Two dozen?" Gabrielle mused. "Is that good or bad?"

"They seem okay." Solari said. "They got here after all the crazy stuff happened. They heard of ya." She grinned at her queen.

"Ah heh." The bard cleared her throat. "Is that good or bad?"

"They wanted to pay me to bring em up here to meet ya." The Amazon warrior assured her. "So I think it's good yeah?"

"Yeah." Gabrielle finally smiled. "We can meet up with them later once we get back." She glanced past Solari and found Milena watching her. "I think I'm the ranking queen here, matter of fact."

The girl looked away, returning her attention to Xena.

"Proably true." Solari agreed, oblivious to the drama behind her.

"So you'll end up fighting anyway, Xena?" Milena asked. "So much for staying out of it.. or was that, you were going to lead the armies?" She added. "Do you just come up with different stories every time?"

"Here." Gabrielle diverted Xena's attention with another bite of bread. "She doesn't come up with the stories. That's my job." She commented casually. "But anyone who knows anything about war knows your plans change in time to the battle you're fighting." She leaned closer and blew in the warrior's ear. "Right, Xe?"

Xena truly wanted to be angry. But her body simply gave up on that, unable to maintain the cold rage faced with the sweet affection in the bard's eyes, and the mischievous grin. "Gaabbrielle."

"Xeena." The bard burred right back at her.

It was a frustrating, funny, exasperating sensation and Xena finally just gave into it, dismissing Milena's jibes. "Whatever you say, my queen." She drawled. "About time we tried it your way first. I'm tired of beating the crap out of everyone this moon."

“You’re tired of it?” Gabrielle rested her head against her. “If we pull this off I’m going back with you to Athens just so I can stand on the steps of the Bards Academy and tell the whole damn city about it.”

“Thought you didn’t like Athens.” Xena saw Jessan on his way down from the hilltop, the equine Iolaus and Gabrielle’s gray Shadow behind him. She watched Milena’s face from the corner of her eye as she draped her arm over her partner’s shoulders and saw the girl turn away.

“I don’t.” Gabrielle shared her bread. “I just like bragging about you.”

Xena chuckled wryly. She felt the anger fading away, and she turned her mind instead to what she could say to the Spartans once they rode out the gates.

And they would, just ride out of the gates. Her and Gabrielle, alone, once the Spartans got their wraps undone and decided to come back at them again. A massive bluff? Maybe a surprise frontal attack? Hm. She accepted another chunk of cheese and sipped her pear cider. “What are they doing Solari?”

“Still talking.” The Amazon reported. “They look pretty pissed off.”

“Glad I got their attention.” Xena said. “They getting ready to ride back over here?”

“Not yet.” Iolaus was next to her. “They’re putting those bodies in one of the wagons.”

Xena finished her cider and put the cup down. “C’mon.” She held her hand out to Gabrielle, and they stood up together. “Excuse us.”

Gabrielle picked up her staff, and they stepped off the ledge, moving away from the wall towards the front of the gates where Jessan was now waiting. She barely kept from glancing behind her, having caught the look of venom from Milena as they passed. “That kid’s got it bad, hon.” She bumped her partner’s hip.

Xena sighed.

“I remember the days when I’d be so jealous about that I’d be coughing up green from my guts.” The bard added casually.

“You’re not now?”

“Nope.” Gabrielle said. “You’re mine.”

Xena eyed her.

“You are.” The bard said. “I earned every damn inch of you.”

The certainty in her soulmate’s voice made Xena smile. It was true. They’d earned their relationship the hard way and though she’d often found Gabrielle’s testy jealousy funny, the confidence that had replaced it was far sweeter.

Jessan was waiting when they got there, and handed the reins over. “Sure you guys don’t want company?” He indicated the crowd around them, now made up of militia, Amazons, and some of Jen’s soldiers.

Xena put her hand on Io’s nose, and studied them. “No.” She said. “Let me and Gabrielle go talk to them first. If we need backup, then everyone can haul ass out.” She said. “Stay behind the gates until then. They don’t know what kind of force we have in here. They don’t really know what’s going on. Keep them guessing.”

She swung up onto Io’s back and settled her self, while Gabrielle climbed aboard Shadow. “She do all right for you?” The warrior asked, eyeing the young mare.

“She’s been great.” Gabrielle put her staff into its holders, and gave her horse a pat on the

neck. “Even with Dori bouncing around all over her.” She glanced behind them. “Glad her new friend’s keeping her busy.”

Xena gathered her reins. “Okay, open the stock door.” She indicated the heavily barred, small portal to one side of the gates. “We’ll go through that.” She said. “We won’t be long.”

Jessan put a clawed hand on her thigh. “Be safe, my friend.” He said. “The last thing we need is to lose either of you.”

“We will be.” Xena touched his shoulder. “I want to see my kid ride that pony.”

Jessan smiled and stepped back. Xena led the way towards the stock door, waiting for Gabrielle to catch up as they approached the wall. She paused as they swung the door open, then she ducked gracefully and they went through. The door closed behind them quickly, and then they were outside the gates.

Outside in sudden quiet, after the chaos of the courtyard. Outside where the road stretched out before them, ending in a solid wall of Spartan soldiers who only now were becoming aware of their presence.

“C’mon.” Xena guided Io onto the road and they started towards the Spartan lines.

After a moment, Shadow came up next to her and she and Gabrielle were riding knee to knee along the hard packed roadway. The city wall fell behind them as they approached the Spartan army – and now the front lines were scrambling and men were getting mounted on their horses as banners fluttered into place.

“Weren’t really expecting us huh?” Gabrielle was very glad to have left the city behind them for the moment even if they were riding into Hades together.

“Does anyone ever expect us?” Xena countered. “If you were a thousand man army, would you expect two chicks with a big knife and big stick to come riding out to kick your ass?”

Gabrielle started to chuckle. “Oh, Xe.” She exhaled. “What in the world are we going to do?” She asked. “We’re not really going to attack them, are we?”

“Depends.” Xena watched the soldiers gathering to ride towards them. “Let’s see what they do.” She saw the banner rise up again, and a group of six soldiers started towards them, riding with slow caution in their direction. Behind them, the rest of the army was getting into position for battle.

Not a really good sign. She watched them bring up their shields, and saw the forest of spears shiver into place. The siege engine was being cranked back, the creak of the ropes clearly audible to her on the wind. The army was clearly ready to attack.

And she and Gabrielle rode slowly towards them. She was relaxed in her saddle, and next to her, the bard also seemed comfortable. “That saddle work better for you riding?” She asked. “You look like it does.”

“Yeah.” Gabrielle nodded. “I wasn’t nearly as sore, and my back was even mostly okay this trip.” She said. “Shadow’s a little smaller than Io, or even Argo.”

“Good stock.” Xena said, aware from her peripheral vision that the Spartans were closing in on them, helmets down, with spears at the ready. “She was easy to train.”

“Hey Xe?” Gabrielle said, after a moment’s silence.

“Mm?” Xena kept Io going at a steady pace, riding right down the center of the road towards the oncoming soldiers.

“I’m glad you gave Dor her pony.” The bard said. “I think it’s her best present ever.”

Xena smiled.

“And you never know what’s going to happen when you and do crazy things like this.” Gabrielle continued, in a soft voice. “You never know, you know?”

“I know.”

They slowed to a halt as the Spartans did too, and for a long, silent moment they faced off against each other, taking each other’s measure.

Xena finally broke the silence. “Who’s in charge of this bunch?” She asked, in a casual tone. “Either come forward, or get the Hades out of the way so I can find someone willing to volunteer.”

The six men stayed still for a very long moment. Then one finally moved his horse forward a few steps and stopped, doffing his helmet as he turned a little in his saddle. He was wearing more ornate armor, and his helmet had a crest, but otherwise he was indistinguishably from his companions. “I am Thurdor. I command here.”

“Good.” Xena said. “My name is..”

“I know who you are.” He cut her off. “Are you responsible for the desecration of my brothers?” He turned and pointed at the wagon. “Those men?”

“Yes.” Xena met his eyes with a faint smile. “I’ve got a pile more in there. Want em?” She asked, in a light, mocking tone. “Or do you want to sit down and talk with me, and maybe save the rest of your men the same fate.”

Gabrielle watched him watch her partner. Xena had this absolute confidence in self that often overwhelmed people – had, in fact, overwhelmed Gabrielle for a long time in their relationship until she’d finally gotten an inside understanding of her. She knew, now, that Xena was bluffing and even knowing that, there was a good solid part of her that believed utterly that Xena could deliver whatever she was offering up.

She had no doubt. She’d seen Xena do too much; achieve too many impossible goals not to believe anything was possible if Xena said it was.

But would the soldier buy into that? Or were they about to be in the fight of their lives?

The man looked over at her. Gabrielle rested her hands on her saddlebow and smiled at him, waiting for his decision. “So.” She said. “What’s it going to be? Am I going to tell everyone about you being a brave and noble general, or just another of Xena’s conquests?”

The corners of Xena’s lips twitched.

**

There was a tree, and they sat under it. Xena, Gabrielle, and the Spartan Thurdor. He left his guard standing by the road, and they sat with their backs to both the army and the city in the shade on a fallen log and the boulder right next to it. Facing the headlands far off, with sea birds circling them it was a bit of unexpected peace.

The Spartan looked tired. He had removed his helmet and set it between his boots and pulled his gauntlets off. “You have led us a merry chase, Bard Gabrielle.” He addressed her. “Long and tough. I lost men and supplies in it.”

“Well.” Gabrielle was seated on the fallen log, her boots tucked under her and her staff resting across her knees. “I didn’t ask anyone to chase me.”

“You gave your word you would join us.” The man said. “You broke that promise.”

"I lied." The bard agreed. "But I couldn't let you take me prisoner and use me against Xena."

The soldier stared at her. "You knew?"

"Of course I knew." Gabrielle gentled the words with a smile. "So I really didn't feel bad about lying because your men were too."

Xena chuckled. "People have been trying that old dodge for years." She remarked. "They all think she's my weak spot."

"Isn't she?" Thurdor asked, boldly.

"Absolutely." The warrior replied. "So your idea of kidnapping her doesn't make me very happy." She gave him a level stare.

"Your idea of disgracing our dead makes me even less so." Thurdor replied. "That can not be forgiven. Those men died in honest battle."

"Did they?" Gabrielle shifted a little. "We met up with six of them who tried to ambush us on the way to the wall." She said. "When we beat them, they killed themselves. How honorable is that, really?"

The Spartan looked at her. "You do not tell the truth."

"Most of the time I do." The bard said. "And in this case, I am."

Thurdor shook his head. "Spartan warriors would not do that."

"Okay, well, six guys that look like you dressed as Spartans with Spartan weapons and armor attacked us then." Gabrielle said. "And when we kicked their asses, they stabbed themselves."

"The ones that didn't die the usual way." Xena said. "Guess they didn't want to face being defeated by a couple of women."

The Spartan frowned. Then he shrugged. "Still, those you desecrated died with honor. We saw the sword and arrow wounds."

"They served my purpose." Xena spoke up. "They derailed your pompous ultimatum and got you to talk. If that saves lives on both sides there's no dishonor."

The Spartan grunted.

"It's called the greater good." Gabrielle said. "It's why I left my family and friends behind, and risked my homeland. I knew in the bigger scheme of things putting myself in your hands would be worse." She considered. "For both of us."

Thurdor studied them. "And if your home is no more now because of it?"

"Wouldn't be the first time." Xena returned his gaze. "But I know those people. They don't kill easily and you're here too fast." She laced her fingers together. "And I don't think you're stupid enough to admit to destroying the place because if you did, I'd have to cut your heart out."

"Would you?"

"Yes, I would." The warrior's voice was quiet, and very serious. "Right here where you sit, in front of that army, regardless of the fact we're under a truce flag at the moment."

"Have you such confidence in yourself, Xena?" The Spartan smiled a little.

"Yes." Xena smiled back. "I do."

Thurdor snorted a little and shook his head. "You're all crazy, the lot of you. They tried to keep us down by the river. Told us there was silver to be found, and stories about wild naked women in

the hilltops... anything to keep us from chasing you.”

Xena and Gabrielle exchanged glances.

“We knew it for lies.” The Spartan said, with a shrug. “But in any case, you said you wanted speech before this battle begins, Xena. What is it you had to say? The day grows older, and my men are anxious to go forward to the assault.” He looked over at her. “I assume you would not presume to say you wish to join us.”

“No.” The warrior said. “I don’t want this war to happen at all. It’s wrong.” She leaned forward. “I want it to stop.”

Thurdor stared at her, nonplussed. “What?”

“We don’t want a fight.” Gabrielle clarified.

“It’s a sham.” Xena went on. “Athens and Sparta are being goaded into fighting each other to satisfy the whims and egos of a couple of goddesses.” She said. “Nothing good will come of it for either city state.” She concluded. “It profits no one. We need to stop it.”

The Spartan continued staring at her. “Are you mad?” He asked, in an honestly curious tone.

“She’s not.” Gabrielle picked up the conversational ball. “It’s true. It’s all about a bet between the gods, to see who’s the better battle leader, Athena or Artemis.” She said. “And if this war happens, and one of them does win... something even worse could happen.”

“What???”

“Didn’t Artemis tell you to find a woman to lead you?” Xena asked. “Why?”

“And Athens sent for Xena.” Gabrielle chimed in. “Why?”

Thurdor looked from one to the other. “You are both mad. I do not question the gods.” He replied.

“You should.” The bard said. “You find out things that way. I asked Ares what was going on with this war, and he told me about it.”

“Ares.”

“Yes.”

Thurdor crossed one armored knee over the other and wrapped his hands around it. He studied the two women for a long moment. “Do you truly expect me to believe you speak with the gods?” He asked, sounding just a touch plaintive. “What type of fool do you take me for?”

“No fool at all.” Gabrielle said. She gave Xena a sideways glance, but the warrior seemed very content to let her do the talking.

Not really surprising. The bard smiled a little. “We don’t think you’re a fool, and I hope you don’t think we are either. Xena and I have been through a lot of different situations involving the gods. We’re not oracles, but for better or worse they’ve taken personal interest in our lives and so, yes, when I say I’ve talked to Ares about this, I mean it. I have.”

“And I am supposed to believe this claim???”

“It’s true.” Xena replied. “You can believe it or not, that’s your choice but that doesn’t change the fact.”

Thurdor remained silent for a while. He turned and regarded Xena thoughtfully. “One of the names I have heard for you is Ares’ Chosen.”

Xena nodded. "He was my mentor." She replied honestly. "He's been part of my life for a long time."

"Is that where your vaunted skills come from?"

Xena shrugged slightly. "Maybe." She added. "He wants this war to stop."

"He is the god of War." The Spartan said. "Assuming I do believe you are telling me the truth – and you have lied, Gabrielle." He looked over at the bard. "Why would he want this to stop? He should be craving it." He lifted his hands. "Why not believe, instead, that we should attack this city before us, and take it over as my masters have ordered me?"

"Because I'm not gonna let you do that." Xena replied.

"You are but one person, no matter how skilled." Thurdor pointed out. "We are an army, Xena."

"Two people." Gabrielle corrected him. "It wouldn't be the first time we stood up against an army."

He looked from one of them to the other. Xena was seated casually on a boulder, arms braced behind her, and boots stretched out and crossed at the ankles. She had her sword on, and two daggers visible, but compared to his own her armor was almost pitifully light.

And Gabrielle? She had nothing on but a half shirt and skirt, and her stick. Nearby, their horses contentedly cropped the grass, two beautiful, well-bred animals.

Insanity. They both must surely be insane, and yet, looking at them he saw only confidence. Were they insane? Or was this story somehow true? "What does he look like?" He asked, finally. "Tell me that. We have our own tales of the God of War."

"He's tall." Gabrielle said, after a pause. "He's got dark hair and a beard, and moustache and thick dark eyebrows." She met his eyes. "And very blue eyes."

Thurdor's attention flicked to Xena, who said nothing. She merely smiled a little.

"He wears black leather, at least, he usually does when I've seen him." Gabrielle went on. "And a leather wristlet with a big red stone in it."

"Do you worship him, Gabrielle? You do not seem the type." The Spartan said, watching her closely. "I thought you more an acolyte of Athena, perhaps, or Aphrodite."

Gabrielle glanced at Xena, who smiled. "I don't worship him. No." She said. "But I have come to appreciate him, over the years."

Thurdor frowned.

"Listen." Xena said. "You're just going to have to either accept this on faith, or not. Your army's being used as a pawn in a power play. It's all about them, not about you. Those men mean anything to you?"

The Spartan remained thoughtfully silent for a few minutes. "What alternative do I have?" He finally said. "I am here. The city is here. We are warriors."

Ah. Gabrielle felt the gentle hitch as he took the bait. She half turned her head and looked at Xena, one eyebrow cocking up slightly as she invited her partner to lay out whatever ploy she'd come up with.

She was sure Xena had something in mind. At least, she hoped she did, because Gabrielle had worked the Spartan skillfully to the place he was in now, where he was ready to at least consider what they had to say.

Xena straightened up and folded her arms over her chest. "You have a fleet out there trying to

pick you up.” She stated flatly, watching his face twitch in surprise. “My people inside the walls are holding them out of the harbor. If you give me your word you’ll have your men bond their arms, I’ll let you through the city, and let the ships into the harbor, and you can get out of here.”

Oo. Gabrielle inhaled a little, a touch surprised at the brazen offer. Risky and bold, even from her admittedly far too easily risk taking soulmate.

The Spartan was equally surprised. “Are you saying you would open the gates to us?”

“If you give your word your men will touch nothing, and attempt no harm to anyone.” Xena said, slowly.

“My word.” Thurdor mused. “That means something to me.”

“I know.” Xena stood up. “In return, you have my word we won’t ambush and slaughter your army in those narrow city streets and those ships will be there for you to board.”

Gabrielle just sat and watched. It was hard for her to fathom that this Spartan would take the bargain, seeing as his force was so much greater, and he surely knew the city had little defense other than it’s stout walls.

And Xena, of course.

She examined the Spartan’s face, his square skull with its grizzled cap of short-cropped hair glistening in the morning light. He was older than Xena was, probably closer to Bennu’s age and he had the worn, leathery look of a man who had spent a lot of time on campaign in Sparta’s many wars.

There was a lot of experience in those eyes that were now studying her partner’s face with direct intensity. Gabrielle debated stepping in, and then decided she should just let the thing play out.

“There were three ships supposed to land first.” Thurdor finally said.

Xena pointed at the wagon that held the dead bodies. “Want the rest of them?” She asked. “I boarded one of those ships myself, and gutted the captain of it.”

The Spartan chewed the inside of his lip, his eyes watching Xena closely. “All of my life, and in my career as a soldier I have worshiped the God of War.” He said, at last. “And now I find myself caught between an oracle’s word from a goddess who never had interest in my people, and the word of one who calls themselves Ares Chosen.”

Xena spread her arms out, and then let them drop. “Life’s full of tough choices.”

Thurdor stared at her, then he turned and walked a few steps away, pausing with his back to them as he considered.

It was, Gabrielle knew in her gut, just the right thing to say. Not to try and persuade him further, or to make a better argument, just put it out there and say, take it or leave it. This is what it is.

Very Xena. Blunt in a way she herself couldn’t get away with and usually didn’t want to. She preferred gentle diplomacy but sometimes, sometimes you needed the rough, raw edge Xena provided. Made it more real, with that potential for violence lurking so plainly behind those gruff words.

She got up and went over to stand next to her partner, feeling the rising sun warm her back. “That was bold.” She uttered softly. “What do you think?”

Xena laid her arm over the bard’s shoulders. “Eh. Fifty fifty.” She whispered. “Gets him what he really wants with less risk to his men. See if that matters more than glory.”

“What would you do?” Gabrielle asked.

Xena paused. "When?" She hazarded. "Before or after?"

The bard chuckled wryly.

Thurdor turned and came back over to them. He seemed slightly surprised at their relaxed posture, and was even more surprised when Xena pulled Gabrielle closer and gave her a kiss on the head, before she released her and straightened. He paused. "Why did you run from us, Gabrielle? Did you truly think we would harm you?"

"I wasn't running from you." The bard answered straightforwardly. "I was running to her." She indicated her partner with a jerk of her head. "I just didn't want you to get in my way."

Thurdor regarded her, his head slightly cocked to one side. Then he nodded. "Now that I believe to be true. He looked at Xena. "I accept your offer. I will need some little time to arrange my troops to march through the city."

"Good." The warrior extended one arm, hand open and turned up. "It will take me a while to get the street cleared to let you through. We'll arrange your dead for you to pick up on the way."

He covered her hand with his. "With respect?"

"They died as warriors." Xena said. "They deserve it." She paused. "I apologize for the use of them before. Sometimes in war you have to do things like that."

Thurdor nodded again. "And I apologize for our intent to capture and use Gabrielle. Sometimes in war, you have to do things like that."

They gripped and released each other. Then the Spartan simply turned and left, going to his horse and pulling himself up into the saddle before turning the animal and heading back towards the guard he'd left behind.

"Hm." Gabrielle grunted. "He was all right. I liked him." She said. "He felt a lot more real than the other guys they sent to Amphipolis." She decided. "They were sorta slimy."

"He's an old timer." Xena agreed, as she put a hand on her partner's back and guided her towards where Shadow and Io were patiently waiting. "Been around long enough to know better."

"Like you?" Gabrielle bumped her.

Xena chuckled wryly. "Yeah, something like that." She waited for Gabrielle to get up on Shadow, and then she vaulted into Io's saddle. "Now we go do the hard part." She settled her knees and turned her stallion with a nudge, as they started back towards the stock gate in the wall.

She could see the top of the battlements lined with faces, watching them as they crossed the road and went up the lightly beaten path through the grass towards the city. The sun was rising higher over the trees now, and she could smell the rich earth they were riding over.

Ahead, the stock door opened, and Jessan poked his furry head out. "Hey." He waved. "Lots of freaking out humans in here. Glad you're back."

"Hey." Xena waited for him to draw back, as she guided Io inside with Gabrielle close at her heels. She waited for the door to close, and then half turned him to face the crowd of friends and city dwellers standing there.

How could she put this? She'd basically surrendered the city and offered the Spartans free passage. Would they listen to her, or just go crazy, and then she'd have a rebellion and fight on her hands as her own forces would gather to defend her?

"Okay folks." Gabrielle half stood in her stirrups, taking the decision out of Xena's hands. "Denius, could you gather a few of the leaders of the city and meet with us in the hall? Jens, you too." She indicated the Athenian captain. "Let's talk about what we discussed with the

Spartans, and what the plan is.”

Bodies shifted and started to move, as the patrician, looking annoyed but resigned, lifted his hand in agreement and turned towards the hall. A way was cleared for him, and the city leaders joined him as he walked, their heads bent towards his.

“Thanks.” Xena turned her head towards the bard.

“Figured you needed a few minutes to figure out what to say.” The bard replied quietly. “I sure would.” She added. “That’s for sure.”

“Love ya.” Xena reached over and slapped her leg. “Okay, Jess, you too, and Bennu if he can make it.” She spotted Pony. “You too.”

“You bet.” Pony wormed her way through the crowd to Xena’s side. “Eph’s up the hill watching out. They got that boat burning out there making a big old mess.” She reported. “Cait said the big bunch of them is outside in the water, going around in circles.”

A mess they’d have to now clean up. “Great.” Xena got down off Io’s back. “They’re not going to rush the gates, but keep watch. You never know when someone might get a bright idea.” She said. “Marlas, can you get a start getting the rest of those bodies lined up on a wagon? Put them back right.”

“Aye, gen’rl.” One of her own militia nodded. “Take care of it.” He turned and started towards the charnel pit, waving a few other militia to join him. “C’mon boys, you heard the gen’rl.”

“So that got their attention eh?” Jens asked. “Damned good idea.”

“Got their attention.” Xena agreed, but then fell silent.

Gabrielle got down off Shadow and patted her on the shoulder. She took the reins and followed Xena through the crowd, which gave way as they proceeded away from the wall towards the meeting hall they’d used the previous day. Had it only been the previous day?

It felt longer. Already the discomfort of her long ride here and Xena’s absence were fading, replaced by the far more normal to her now of them being together and dealing with something.

It was always something. Gabrielle chuckled wryly to herself. They never really had much peace in their lives, did they? If it wasn’t raiders, it was journeying to help people, and if it wasn’t that, it was floods or invasions. So very rare were periods of just living a normal day-to-day existence.

Dori’s birth year, in fact, had been the last time. Those long moons of learning to be parents, and dealing with their active infant – she remembered though a few times when she’d thought being out on the road fighting every day would have been less exhausting.

Hm. She caught up to Xena and put a hand on the hollow of her back, below where her sword was, feeling the shift and move as the warrior’s body felt the touch.

“Hm?” Xena turned her head and looked down.

“Nothing.” The bard smiled.

Xena draped an arm over her shoulder. “Let’s go ride the Styx again. See where it takes us this time.”

“Ugh.” Gabrielle sighed. “Can’t we just go walk on the beach instead?”

**

Continued in Part 24

A Queen’s Tale

Part 24

Gabrielle took a seat next to her partner, just to her right at the head of the long, rectangular table. They were still waiting for everyone to file in so she took the opportunity to share a honey cake she'd found lonely and abandoned on a platter, handing half to her partner.

"Is it my birthday?" Xena sprawled in the seat next to her. "I may need your help with this."

"With the honey cake? Sure." Gabrielle broke off a piece of her share and popped it into her mouth. "Anytime."

"Explaining my plan."

"Ah." The bard said. "Explaining to all these overheated machoheads you intend on letting the Spartans waltz through their city, you mean."

"Mm."

"Hon, are you really sure they're not going to mess with these people if we open the gates?" Gabrielle asked, lowering her voice. "That would kinda be raunchy, you know?"

Xena sighed. "I know." She laced her fingers and tapped her thumbs together. "We don't really have a choice. The walls won't hold them back."

"But.. they know that don't they? Why bargain with us when they can just take the city?" Gabrielle watched Xena's profile, seeing the faint twitch to her lips and the wry look in the blue eyes that roamed her way. "What?"

"One of two things." Xena rested her chin on her hands. "Either they think they're putting us into the jaws of a trap." She watched Denius walk in with a half dozen of the town's leaders. "Or..."

"Or they're scared of you." Gabrielle finished.

"Something like that." Xena put her hands on the table, getting ready to push herself to her feet to start her review.

"They should be." The bard uttered. "I've seen you stand up to an army, Xe. Those stories I tell aren't made up." She finished her piece of honey cake and dusted her hands off, as Xena rose next to her and waited for the chatter to die down. "Much."

Xena chuckled soundlessly. "How many men was I holding off that last time?"

"Shh." Gabrielle tapped her on the butt. "Be quiet so everyone else will shut up and listen."

It did, almost immediately. Everyone looked at Xena, falling silent and waiting for the warrior to speak. The faces were concerned, and more than a little wary, and Gabrielle now spotted her partner's love struck little vagabond slipping in at the rear of the room.

She remembered her younger self being very unsure about anyone else showing interest in Xena, but now, as she'd told her partner, it no longer bothered her.

Gabrielle watched the girl watch her partner, and her own face crinkled up into a sheepish grin. Well, she liked to tell herself that, anyway. Her head turned as Ephiny made her way through the crowd and took the seat next to her. "Hey."

"Hey." Ephiny smiled briefly. "You should have given your kid a horse a lot earlier, my friend. Haven't seen anything keep her interest like that before."

The bard grinned. "With my luck she's going to want to keep him in her bedroom."

"All right" Xena said. "Here's the situation. The Spartans have about a thousand troops outside the gates. Half are mounted, half foot soldiers. The foot soldiers are in condition to run along

side the horses and they made a fast trip here from Thrace.”

She put her hands together in front of her. “They lost some gear on the way, but they’ve got siege engines and plenty of battering rams.”

A few people muttered under their breath at that, and the city leaders looked concerned.

Xena started to pace a little. “Their goal is the harbor.” She said. “The fleet we’re keeping at bay with that fire in the entrance was sent here to pick them up and take them to attack the Athenian fleet and the coastal cities.”

“Xena.” Jens spoke up quietly. “How do you know this?” He asked. “Why not take ship the entire way? It seems strange they’d attack over land from Thrace.”

“Not if you consider the attack here.” Xena said. “They meant to take this city, and make this a stronghold, denying the harbor to Athen’s navy since this is the only large landing spot this side of the mountains.”

Jens paused, then nodded.

“We rushed them.” She said. “I think their intent was conquer everything from here to Thrace, giving them a breadbasket to fall back on.” She paused and watched them. “At least, that’s what I would have done.”

Gabrielle felt the prickle up her spine just hearing those words, and sensing the cool intent behind them.

“I have heard.” Denius spoke up. “That they asked you to lead them.”

“They did.” Xena said, after a brief pause.

“So perhaps that’s why they came from Thrace.” The Athenian councilman. “They expected you to be at their head.” He continued. “Or perhaps you know so much because that was your plan to begin with.”

Gabrielle stood up at this point. “Let’s not waste time going down the wrong streets.” She said. “The Spartans were looking for Xena, it’s true, but so was Athens.”

Jens nodded. “That is true. A mission from the council went to Amphipolis not two sevendays ago.”

“They did.” Gabrielle agreed. “They ended up being attacked on the road, and taking shelter with some friends of ours.” She indicated Jessan. “I found them when I was on my way back to Amphipolis after spotting the invading army.”

“So you say.” Denius said.

The bard spread her hands out. “Everyone in the city saw that army chasing me right to the gates. Why do you think they were doing that? For exercise?”

“Or you led them here.” The patrician said, coldly.

“Right to the same port city an entire navy happened to be heading for?” Xena responded mildly. “That’s a lot of coincidence.”

“And besides, they asked me to lead them.” Gabrielle spoke up. “They were desperate for a woman to do that. It’s what the gods want.”

That got a lot of uneasy looks.

“How do you know what the gods want?” Milena spoke up from the rear of the room.

More uneasy looks, and low mutters.

“Because there’s really no point in my lying.” Gabrielle felt her temper flaring, a little. She caught sight of Xena’s profile from the corner of her eye, noting the slight shift of her weight and flexing of her hands. “We don’t have to stay here. We could take our friends and leave, and just let the army take you.”

The murmuring died down.

Xena took the conversation back. “Right now we’re keeping them from what they want.” She said. “But those walls won’t last more than a day and we don’t have enough people in the city to keep them out.”

“We defeated the ship invaders.” One of the city captains spoke up.

“That was only five or six score of them.” Xena said. “And you lost almost that many in the fight, didn’t you?”

The man glanced down.

“There are a lot of people here, volunteers for the army, families, children... is it worth for us to throw their lives away and ours trying to keep the Spartans out?” Gabrielle asked. “I don’t think so. I don’t think it’s worth risking my family for that.”

Silence. “Alright. So what are we doing to do then?” Denius asked, after an awkward pause.

Here it goes. “Nothing.” Xena said. “We’re going to make a path to the harbor, throw open the gates, let the ships into the harbor and let them go.”

Gabrielle leaned on the back of the chair she’d been seated in, careful to keep her expression unsurprised and confident. There were times and places she would challenge her soulmate’s plans, but this wasn’t one of them.

As it happened, she agreed with Xena. She wasn’t sure everything was on the up and up, but she had absolutely no desire to face off against that army in what she was sure would be a catastrophic battle. Her eyes swept across the crowd, seeing a variety of reactions she’d expected.

Disbelief. Outrage. Thoughtfulness.

Relief.

Ephiny half turned and looked up at her. “Nice’ She muttered under her breath. “Really nice.”

“You must be out of your mind.” Denius spluttered. “You cannot be serious.”

Xena folded her arms. “I am serious.” She said. “You have no choice unless you intend on throwing yourselves in front of them. If that’s what you want, we’ll be leaving and you’re on your own. The only thing that might keep them from destroying this place is me.”

“You!”

“Me.” Xena said. “I made a deal with the general of that army.” She shifted and put her hands on her hips. “You’ve got two choices. Do what I say and let them go through, or fight them on your own. I’m out of it.”

The room shifted, and several figures moved, sorting themselves out from the crowd and walking around the table to join Xena. They didn’t say anything, but there really wasn’t any need to. Jessan and his troupe of course, and her militia, and bringing up the rear, Pony and Iolaus.

Ephiny stayed where she was, close enough to Gabrielle’s elbow to make her point.

“Are you all such cowards, then?” Denius accused.

“Nah.” Jessan showed all his teeth in a big grin. “When Ares Chosen talks war, we listen.” He said. “You’re an idiot if you don’t.”

“Besides.” Xena waited for the muttering to die down again. “They’ve lost a lot of men so far and they haven’t even started fighting. They lost their surprise. They get on those boats, chances are their next stop isn’t Athens, it’s home.”

“You don’t know that.” Denius said.

The city men behind him had thoughtful expressions. They were watching him, and also, watching Xena.

“You don’t know they won’t.” Xena said. “But like I said, it’s your choice. Wanna fight? It’s up to you. I won’t.” She punctuated that by pulling the chair out and sitting down in it, bracing her knee against the table and leaning back.

Gabrielle took up a position behind the chair and draped one hand on her partner’s shoulder, watching the crowd with a quiet, intent expression. She saw Denius take a breath and she lifted her hand. “Call her a coward again and I’ll come over there and knock your head off.”

Denius paused, and stared at her.

“You have no idea what courage is.” The bard said. “Anyone standing in this room who thinks letting a battle pass them by is cowardly has no clue.” Her tone was measured. “So unless you’ve been where we have, bled what we’ve bled and given what Xena and I have given in the cause of the greater good then just keep your damn mouths shut.”

Xena folded her hands over her stomach with a small grunt of satisfaction.

“Very well.” Denius said. “We will discuss.” He turned and motioned the city men to follow him, pausing when they didn’t. “Is that how it is?” He looked at them and then he shook his head and left the hall, closing the door with a dignified quiet behind him.

Gabrielle leaned over her partner’s chair. “Was that too over the top?” She whispered.

“Gorgeous.” Xena tilted her head and gave Gabrielle a kiss on the lips. “Just like you.”

The bard felt all the eyes on her, and she blushed, a rush of unexpected heat that had become rarer these days for her. She drew back a little and met Xena’s eyes, seeing pride and gratitude there and feeling all of a sudden half a decade younger.

She sat down in the nearby chair as the rest of the crowd started to gather around them. A sound made her look up, to find Ephiny offering her a mug. “Thanks.”

Ephiny clinked her mug against the bard’s and lifted it in her direction. “Long live the queen.” She pronounced, and then took a drink from the cup.

A little puzzled, Gabrielle did the same. She wasn’t entirely sure what that meant, but the cider in the mug was cold and crisp, and she sucked down a mouthful before she offered the cup to Xena. Most of the people in the meeting had stayed, and now Jens was approaching, slowly taking a seat next to Xena and leaning in to talk to her.

She noticed that Milena had stayed around, the girl lurking in the background, always with her eyes on Xena.

Hungry eyes. Gabrielle settled back in her chair and studied the crowd. They were still uncertain, she could see the doubt in some eyes, and the distrust in others. But no one looked like they were going to publicly challenge Xena’s actions.

Except maybe Denius. Gabrielle granted that the man had the right, being of the Athenian council, but she suspected his ego was overriding his common sense and that could be trouble.

“They took that pretty good.” Ephiny spoke up. “Better than I figured.”

“Most of the city people are merchants.” The bard said. “They’re not stupid. They know where their profit is, and having the city wrecked with everyone in it isn’t in their benefit.” She glanced at the crowd. “Xe gets it.”

“Of course she does.” Ephiny said. “She’s an innkeeper’s kid.”

Gabrielle smiled, hearing her partner characterized that way. “Want to come with me to check up on Dori?” She asked. “I just want to make sure she’s not racing down on the waterfront by now.”

“You got it.” Ephiny drained her cup and set it down, standing up as Gabrielle did likewise. She watched the bard lean over and whisper in Xena’s ear, and receive a pat on the cheek in response. Then Gabrielle joined her and they circled the table, heading for the door.

“So, now tell me about this challenge?” Ephiny asked, as they stepped out into the bright sunlight. “Solari said something about you and a sword?”

“Ah, eyah.” Gabrielle had picked up her staff on the way out and was now using it as a walking stick. “Well, it started with the kitchen.”

“The kitchen?”

**

Xena remained seated, watching her partner leave from her peripheral vision. She was glad Ephiny had gone with her but there was a knot of unease in her guts that tightened as she lost sight of the bard.

There was reason for that, she felt. The city was anything but safe, and she’d just made herself unpopular with many. Chasing after Gabrielle, though, would likely annoy her.

Or would it?

Jessan came over and sat down next to her. “Lot of freaked out humans around here.” He said. “Weren’t expecting that.”

“No.” Xena leaned back in her chair. “I wasn’t sure the Spartans would buy it. I’m still not sure they did. But I didn’t want to just let them wipe the city out without at least trying this.”

Jessan nodded. “So what happens if they decide halfway to attack?”

The warrior shrugged. “We fight.” She turned her head and regarded her friend. “We’ll funnel them down the main road to the harbor, and block off all those damn side streets. Put archers the whole way, and we’ll do it at dusk, to keep them guessing.”

Jessan nodded again. Then he looked up as Iolaus approached, taking a seat on Xena’s other side.

“Well.” Iolaus said. “I think you made some enemies and some friends, Xena. The folks from Athens are not happy at all.”

“So let them go fight the squareheads.” Jessan said. “No one’s stopping them. Humans are so funny that way, you know? Always anxious to have other humans bleed and die for them while they stand back and watch.”

Iolaus blinked.

“Not all humans are like that.” Xena said. “Amazons aren’t, for instance.”

“You know we really wanted Gabrielle to cut and run ahead of us.” Jessan said. “I know she was

totally against it, but it would have killed us.. me especially, if something had happened to her before she got back to you.”

Xena smiled at him. “Thanks, Jess.” She said. “But don’t sweat it. I’ve never been able to keep her out of trouble the entire time I’ve known her. She does what she does.”

“Xena.” Iolaus scooted a little closer. “It’s not really whacky for those guys from Athens to be upset we’re going to let an entire Spartan army come through here and head over to attack the capital.” He glanced at Jessan. “It’s not all as selfish as it seems.”

“I know they’ve got reason to be pissed.” Xena braced one booted foot against the table. “The problem is, Iolaus, we can’t stop the Spartans from destroying this city. So what makes more sense – to let them through and onto their boats which might or might not be headed for Athens, or throw ourselves in front of them and lose the city and a lot of lives?”

“They think you could stop them if you wanted to.” Iolaus answered, bluntly.

Xena rolled her eyes.

“I think Xena could stop them.” Jessan said. “But she doesn’t want to.”

They were all quiet, and Iolaus and Jessan studied the tall, dark haired woman between them. Finally, Xena laced her fingers together and exhaled. “I think I’m being maneuvered into a place where I have to put my life on the line to prove someone else’s theory. I’m not going to go there.” She said.

“But Xena...”

“But nothing.” Xena looked directly at Iolaus. “You want to lead those hundred or so half armed men against them? Go ahead. Be my guest.”

“That’s not what I meant.” Iolaus said. “Damn it, Xena, Gabrielle led that army right to the gates, and now you’re telling us we have to let them in, and let them escape. How does that look?” He said. “What are these people supposed to think?”

“I don’t care what they think.” Xena said, moving to sit up straight in the chair. “They’re not the ones who’ll be standing in the front of the line risking their necks. Jess was right. It’s bad enough Gabrielle had to risk her life, and Dori’s riding here to warn everyone.”

“They’ll call you a coward.” Iolaus said.

Xena just laughed.

“Don’t you care, Xena?”

The warrior sobered. “No.” She said, in a quiet voice. “I’ve had a lot worse said about me, Iolaus. Some of it by you.”

Iolaus’s jaw snicked shut. Jessan just rested his rounded jaw on one hand, with his elbow braced on the table.

“I have nothing to prove to anyone.” Xena continued. “Least of all a bunch of brainless patricians from Athens.”

Iolaus lifted his hands, then let them drop. “Okay.” He got up. “I hear you. Let me go talk to them again.” He turned and trudged out of the room, closing the door behind him.

Xena leaned back again and sighed. Then she turned to Jessan. “So. What would you do?”

“Me?” The forest dweller pointed at his own furry chest.

“You.” The warrior said. “You’re a fighter. What would you do? Just face em?”

Jessan studied her face. “Gosh.” He said. “Well, aside from how I’d not have gotten in the middle of a human war in the first place, you mean?”

Xena smiled wryly.

Jessan glanced around. There were only a few soldiers left, near the door. Everyone else had gone out to start preparing the city as Xena had requested. “It’s hard.” He said. “I’m a warrior. When I know I can do something, I do it.” He watched Xena’s face. “You could stop them.”

Xena nodded. “I could.” She agreed. “With the city defenses, and the men I have here, I could at the least stand them off until their supplies run out. Probably I could send enough scouting parties out to knock off their edges.”

“So why aren’t you?” Jessan asked.

“I don’t want this to be a war.” Xena said. “I want the fighting to stop. It’s bigger than we are, Jess. This is something that’s being fought up on Mount Olympus.”

“Ah huh.” The forest dweller made a face. “I saw Gabrielle talking to Ares.” He said. “I’m sorta getting used to that with you guys but it’s still really freaky.” He said. “So.. you’re trying to ... um...”

“Mess him up?” Xena supplied mildly, watching his face scrunch in discomfort. “I do sometimes.” She said. “But not this time. This time I’m working on his side, believe it or not.”

Jessan sighed. “Xena you scare me.” He admitted. “I don’t know if I like being one step from someone who messes with the gods.”

Xena lifted her hands and then put them together. “I can’t change that.” She said. “I’ve had gods meddling in my life for a lot longer than I’ve known you.” She exhaled. “But this war’s all about them, and we can’t play into it, Jess. There’s a lot at stake.”

Jessan studied her, noting the shadows in those pale eyes. “Been tough here, huh?” He said. “I heard there was some fighting.” He added. “Gabrielle thought something happened to you.”

“Something did.” Xena admitted. “I got into trouble onboard that damn ship. My own damn fault. I got lazy and forgot I didn’t have someone watching my back onboard and nearly paid for that with my life.”

The forest dweller put a hand on her wrist.

“Anyway.” Xena got up and gave in to the pull in her guts. “C’mon.” She said. “Wanna go see my kid ride?” She waited for Jessan to stand up, and they headed for the door.

Once outside, they dodged a lot of activity in the central square. Men were pulling wagons into place, Xena’s militia moving here and there and giving instructions. Bennu was standing on the edge of the well so he could see what was going on, and he gave Xena a wave as she went past.

“Genr’l.” He called out. “Got things movin.”

“Good job.” Xena watched the blockade slowly being built. “What are our friends doing outside?”

“Just sorting themselves out, Xena.” Jens came over to her. “Arranging supplies. Doesn’t look like they’re setting up for an attack.” He told her. “Good thing. I think it will take us most the day to get this rigged up.”

“I want them to come through at night.” Xena told him. “We’ll line the path with torches.”

Jens nodded. “Some people are pretty upset.” He said. “With you, and with me. They don’t understand.” He looked her right in the eye. “I’m not sure I do either, but I trust you.”

Xena clapped him on the shoulder. “Thanks.” She moved past him and entered the main road,

heading down towards the harbor. City workers were on either side, dragging boxes and bales of supplies to the edge of the crossroads and they all looked up and watched them pass before continuing their work.

Xena noted the attitudes. The city, she felt, was more relieved than insulted. The men on either side rolling barrels across the road smiled at her, and in one crossroad, she spotted a group of the volunteer soldiers gathered counting some arrows.

It was sunny, and warm, and she felt the sun baking her shoulders as she walked next to Jess, absorbing the hubbub. At the base of the street she could see the turn that led to the harbor, and over the water she could now see clouds moving in.

Another storm? Xena wondered briefly if the storms weren't something else god driven towards them to throw even more complications into the mix.

Abruptly, she wished it was all over. She was tired of the games, and wanted nothing more than to take Gabrielle and Dori and the rest of their friends and just leave.

Xena thought about that, and about how she felt. Her brow contracted. "I think I am getting too old for all this crap." She muttered. "I'm tired, and my bones hurt, and I just want to go to Hades home."

"Did you say something, Xena?" Jessan leaned closer.

"No." Xena cleared her throat and craned her head to see through the entrance to the harbor. "I was just talking to myself."

"You pissed off?" Her friend asked. "You look like it."

"Mmph." Xena grunted. "Yeah, annoyed we're in the middle of this when it's not any of our business."

"Ah hah." Jessan said. "Everyone else thinks it your business."

"Tell me about it."

They crossed through the last road and entered the harbor, the stretch of the waterfront spreading out in front of them covered in debris from the fighting, and damage from the Spartans attack. To one side they'd built up a pyre, and men were dragging wood over to it in preparation to start the fire.

Nearby, there were piles of bodies. Some were Spartan, some were from the city, and a few, Xena noted, were dressed in the rags of conscripts.

That made her think about the conscripts she'd seen on the road, and again here in the city. Were they still around?

Had they run away in all the confusion? She hoped so. She hoped they weren't all dead. She swept her eyes over the waterfront until she spotted familia figures near the far end, and a smile appeared on her lips. "Ah."

Dori was on her new pony. Gabrielle was standing next to her holding the pony's reins in one hand and her staff in the other, and Ephiny and a few others were loitering nearby. Xena lifted her finger and put them between her teeth, letting out a sharp whistle.

Everyone looked over at her, then Gabrielle hastily released the pony's bridle as Dori pointed in her direction and gave the animal a smack the ribs, sending him a rapid trot towards her.

"Oh oh!" Jessan yelled. "He's loose!"

Xena just smiled. Dori was perfectly balanced on the pony's back, and she was sitting

comfortably in the saddle, her feet in the stirrups and her body weight even. An absolutely natural rider, and had been since she'd been old enough to sit upright.

Without question, Dori had inherited that from her. Gabrielle was a competent rider now, after many years of practice but Dori had taken to it just as Xena had when she was a child. Looking at her now, her face alight as they neared where the warrior was standing gave her a strange sense of watching herself at a much younger age. "C'mere shortie."

The pony slowed as they approached and Xena patted his nose, smiling as Dori started burbling at once.

"Boo! Wusty goes so fast!" She put her arms round the pony's neck and hugged him. "We're having fun!"

"Are ya?" Xena gazed fondly at her. "You like him, huh?"

"Wuv him!" Dori grinned at her. "Wuv you too Boo!" She said. "We were up dere, and Wusty came down so fast! We scared mama!"

Uh oh. Xena peered past her daughter, spotting her partner jogging over towards them with some Amazons in tow. "You scared mama, huh?"

"Yes." Dori seemed pleased at that. "Boo, c'n we go home? Want to show Wusty all the froggies and wrocks at our house." She explained. "Too hard here."

"We'll go home soon, Dor." Xena gave her partner a wry grin as she reached them. "She rode him down from the stable, huh?"

"Scared the feathers off me." Gabrielle confirmed. "I got around the corner and she was just heading down towards the water. I nearly broke my neck getting down and grabbing his bridle before they reached the bottom and just kept going."

"Hey. She can swim." Xena responded mildly.

"Xena." Gabrielle gave her a fondly exasperated look. "Were you going to haul that pony up out of the water? There's no beach here."

Jessan chuckled. "Boy, does this kid take after her parents." He said. "Hey there bitty boo. You having a good time with your new friend?"

Dori grinned at him. "Yes."

"Sorry, Gab." Xena put her hand on her partner's sun warmed back. "I should have probably come down sooner."

"Eh." Gabrielle leaned against her, then she tilted her head and looked up, watching Xena's profile. "You okay?" She asked in an undertone.

"Tired." The warrior admitted in the same low tone. "Last couple of days catching up to me again."

The bard put a gentle hand on Xena's hip. "Want to go find some quiet space?"

Xena hesitated, then she nodded. "Yeah."

"Okay, little ms fishie." Gabrielle addressed their offspring. "How about we go up and give the horsies some carrots? Boo can come up and help us, right? We can sit down for a little while and I'll tell you a story."

"C'n we ride more mama?" Dori pouted.

"Sure, but not right now." Her mother said. "Maybe Boo will go riding with you and Rusty later

on, won't that be fun?"

Ephiny edged around them. "Cait just sent word down from the ridge." She said. "The fleet is still milling around out there. She thinks they're going to try and rush the harbor, knock that wreck out of the way." She pointed to the still smoking hulk blocking the entrance.

So much for quiet time. Xena sighed silently. "I'm going to go check it out." She said. "If they come in early we don't have enough troops to hold them off and I don't think I can pull the same game with them as I did with the guys outside the walls."

She patted the pony on the shoulder and moved past them, breaking into a lope as she headed across the waterfront towards the cliff.

Gabrielle watched her. A little worry was niggling her about her partner, not in the least belayed by the fact she'd admitted to being tired. Xena had gotten much better about that over the last couple of years but it didn't lessen the pang of concern she felt. "You guys must have had a tough time on that ship." She said casually to Ephiny, as they started walking back across the harbor.

"Did we ever." Ephiny didn't seem to be aware of anything being wrong. "I don't think your one and only got a candlemark of sleep the whole time we were onboard, between those damn criminals, the bitch Amazons and the weather."

Ah. "Yeah, poor Xe." Gabrielle shook her head. "When this is over, I think we're going to go down the coast and chill out for a few days. You interested?"

"That those beach cookouts you were telling me about when you got back the last time?" Ephiny grinned at her. "You bet."

The bard smiled back. She remembered how tired she'd been the previous day, and she'd gotten sleep most of the nights they'd traveled. How tired must Xena have been after all that? "I'm going to see what I can rustle up in that inn kitchen." She said. "We might as well get a meal in before all the craziness starts."

"What do you think of the plan?" Eph asked, as they walked.

"Well." The bard glanced around. "I hope it works." She saw Milena watching them. "Xe's really playing with fire here. I hope it doesn't end up backfiring on us." She frowned. "There's so much going on behind the scenes it's hard to say what's going to happen."

"Mm." Ephiny grunted. "Well, if anyone can pull it off it's her. You should have seen her take over that ship, Gab. Those sailors were crawling around after her like crazy. She had them in the palm of her hand, I think that's why those Athenians caved like they did. They realized it."

"She's got that charisma." Gabrielle smiled.

"Is that what you call it?" Ephiny teased.

"Well." The bard chuckled a little. "In polite company."

"Who are you calling polite?"

**

The climb up the cliff side - a mixture of crudely cut steps and rope ladders - was tedious but Xena found the stiff breeze refreshing when she got to the top, and it reinvigorated her as she pulled herself up onto the top of the rock and stood facing the sea.

"Hello there." Cait trotted over. "Nice of you to come see us."

"Ephiny said the ships were getting closer." Xena walked along the roughly cut path into the rock and up onto the lookout point. Paladia was seated up there, a sheet of parchment on her knee

already covered in sketching.

The Spartan fleet was out there, all right. Xena walked to the end of the cliff and looked out at them, a good score or more, spread out at anchor save the three closest who were busy preparing for something. She could see ropes piled on the deck, and men were seating shields on the railing and she figured it wouldn't be long before they'd sail into the harbor opening and try to get it clear.

The brisk wind off the water blew against her, and she blinked a little into it, shading her eyes as she studied the foremost ships intently, working out what the men on deck were doing.

Behind her, Paladia took advantage of this addition to her landscape and quickly sketched the warrior into her picture, grunting in satisfaction when Xena propped one foot up on a rock and unknowingly struck a perfect pose.

Xena made a good drawing subject. Paladia drew in the warrior's profile, and the strong, powerful body. She had good proportions and nothing stuck out weird. She didn't have crazy freckles or uneven bodyparts and it was easy to see the bone and muscle under her skin and not have to guess where her joints and stuff were.

Much better than a lot of the Amazons.

"Oh, Pally. That's nice." Cait came up behind her. "Well done."

Xena walked a step further, going to the very edge of the cliff and facing directly into the wind. She drew her sword and let the sun catch it, sending reflections out as she lazily twirled it in one hand and then let the blade rest on her shoulder.

She watched the ships closely, focusing on the closest one until she saw one sailor glance up and spot her standing there high over their heads. She twirled the sword again, ending up with it gripped in one hand, blade pointed backwards.

The sun glanced off the blade.

She saw the sailor point, then call out to the rest of the men on the deck, and slowly attention switched from preparing the boat for battle to watching her.

"What's she doing?" Paladia whispered.

"Well." Cait studied her mentor. "Looking out, I guess."

Paladia gave her a withering stare. "Really?"

Cait cleared her throat and returned to watching Xena. The warrior did, in fact, seem to be looking out over the water, but why she was messing about with her sword was a mystery. Maybe, Cait thought, she just liked to handle it.

It was a beautiful weapon, after all.

The sound of rattling rocks made them both turn around, to see Gabrielle climbing up over the edge of the rocks, her eyes firmly shut. She got all the way up onto the top of the rock surface before she squinted one eye open.

"Hello." Cait ventured. "Everything all right?"

"Now it is." Gabrielle opened her other eye and put down a pack she'd had slung on her back. Then she eased past them and went over to join Xena in her silent vigil, standing on the warrior's left hand side and putting her hand on her shoulder.

Paladia went back to sketching, now that she had two subjects so willingly posing for her.

"Hey." Gabrielle peered cautiously down. "Do you have to stand so close to the edge?"

Xena grinned briefly. "I want them to see me." She said. "Look." She pointed her sword at the nearest ship, whose sails were flapping gently as its sailors lined the rail and pointed up at them. "Think they recognize me?"

Gabrielle warily edged over and eyed the ship. Sure enough, the men were pointing, and gesticulating. "Well, either that or they've been at sea a long time and are just freaking out from seeing a woman."

Xena chuckled. "You didn't have to climb up here. I just wanted to see what they were doing."

"Mm." Gabrielle edged back. "I brought some lunch. I figured Cait and Paladia might want some too." She said. "So – you want them to know you're here?"

Xena twirled her sword again before resheathing, then she moved back from the edge, taking a grateful bard with her. "I need to buy time." She said. "And I don't have a single dinar to buy it with, so I figure maybe I can at least make them think twice before they go hauling that hulk out of the harbor."

"You think they will?" Gabrielle said. "They don't really know what's going on, do they?"

"Hard to say." Xena studied the ships closely. She checked the outline of all of them, looking to see soldiers and shields in place, and not the conspicuously empty shell that would be the captured vessel her captain took off in. "But ... yeah. Look." She pointed.

Gabrielle shaded her eyes. The ships seemed to be moving closer together, and now she could see a boson's line between two of them, a figure crossing between them quickly. "Oh, wow." She murmured. "That's not what you did, was it?"

Xena cleared her throat.

"In a storm?"

The warrior cleared her throat again. "Without that safety rig." She admitted. "Wasn't the smartest thing I ever did, but we didn't have much choice."

Gabrielle turned away from the sight of the man swinging between the ships. "Right. Well, they saw you. Now how about lunch?"

Xena gave her a smile, and wrapped an arm around her, squeezing her in a one armed hug.

They walked back over to where Cait and Paladia were sitting. The rest of the watch seemed to have left, and they were alone on the top of the cliff.

Xena took a seat on a rock and braced her hands behind her, blinking a little in the bright sunlight. It was very quiet up on the bluff, and she found that soothing her tempers ruffled feathers as she considered what her next steps might be.

'Xena.' Cait came over. "Could you tell me really what we're going to do?"

The warrior eyed her. "We're going to let them through the city and onto those boats." She pointed. "I wasn't kidding."

"Really?" Cait seemed puzzled. "It seems a bit wishy washy to just let them go."

"Ah, yes." Gabrielle came over and offered everyone pocket sandwiches. "Well, it's like this. It's my fault."

Xena paused in mid motion as she took the sandwich, her brows lifting. "What?"

"Hush, honey." Gabrielle sat down next to her partner, facing Cait. "On the way here, Cait, I got a visit from the gods."

Paladia's ears perked. She scooted around a little so she could see this new tableau to sketch.

"Well your majesty I'm sure you didn't... excuse me, what?" Cait said. "You did?"

"I did." Gabrielle picked a bit of greens from her lunch and chewed them. "Ares showed up, and so did ... I think... Artemis. It was just before we met up with you guys with the horses."

"Solari said something about that." Paladia spoke up, eyeing them warily. "She heard the fuzzies talking."

Gabrielle nodded. "He told me this whole war has become a pissing match between Artemis and Athena, and the only way to make things right is to stop the war. Not fight." She took a bite of her sandwich. "Which was pretty weird coming from the God of War."

"Oh." Cait said. "So that's why you don't want to fight them?"

"I don't want to fight." Xena clarified. "Me, I mean. I think I'm some sort of prize in this whole damn mess." She shook her head and took a bite of her sandwich.

"Well, you are." Gabrielle gave her a gently knowing smile. "But you're my prize." She clarified, after a moment's silence. "So they're out of luck."

The warrior stopped in mid chew, giving her partner a look and flushing a little as the other two Amazons started to chuckle. Gabrielle rested her head against Xena's arm and batted her lashes at her, until finally she swallowed and stated to laugh herself.

"So anyway, it's my fault because I hauled my butt here fast as I could go dragging a Spartan army after me and then tell Xena she's got to make them stop fighting and go home." Gabrielle continued. "I don't know why she puts up with me."

"Because I love you." Xena answered simply.

Now it was Gabrielle's turn to blush a little, not really expecting the response given the mood her partner had been in.

"You guys are gross sometimes, you know?" Paladia said.

"Shut up." Xena replied. "I only don't want to fight the Spartans." She said. "I don't have a problem fighting with anyone else."

"Oo." Cait grinned. "That'll teach you, Pally."

"Pft" The taller woman went back to her sketching, with a scowl.

Xena gazed thoughtfully at the horizon. "We need to get some cauldrons up here, and some logs." She said.

"For what?" Gabrielle asked.

"Pitch tar bombs at the ships. They're wooden." Xena chewed her sandwich. "Make em go up like dried moss."

The three of them lookd at her. "Aren't you the woman who just said she didn't want to fight with those guys?" Paladia asked. "Willya make up your freaking mind?"

Even Gabrielle looked puzzled. "I thought you wanted to let the ships in to take the Spartans away."

"Sure." Xena kicked her boots against the rock. "But they don't know that." She licked a bit of orange sauce from her thumb. "Spicy. I like it." She eyed her companions. "if they think we're going to bomb them, they won't be so anxious to get closer."

“Oh.”

“Ah.” Gabrielle nodded.

“Huh.” Paladia went back to her sketching. “Whatever.”

They sat their quietly for a few minutes, finishing the lunch Gabrielle had brought up with her. Then Xena stood and dusted her hands off. “Let’s get to it.” She started for the steps leading down. After a brief pause, Gabrielle followed her.

“We’ll be back.” The bard promised, as she tried to avoid looking at the steep drop Xena was now working her way down. “Yell if anything else happens.”

“Absolutely.” Cait assured her, watching until they disappeared. “Pally, that was very rude.”

Paladia leaned closer to her parchment, working on a corner of it. “They don’t care.” She said. “Not like the stuffed skirts in that Amazon village. You can say stuff to them.”

**

Xena waited at the bottom of the cliff for Gabrielle to finish her climb down. She stood just close enough to grab hold of her if she slipped, but just far enough so that the bard didn’t think she was hovering.

“Ugh.” Gabrielle flexed her hands as she finally made it back to the ground. “Oh. You’re here.” She had turned, surprised to find her partner standing there waiting for her. “You didn’t have to wait for me hon.”

“I know.” Xena said. “You didn’t have to bring me lunch either.”

“I know.” Gabrielle echoed her. “But I was hungry, and you looked like you could use a break.” She slipped a hand through Xena’s elbow. “We didn’t get that much rest last night.”

Xena grunted. “I wish this whole damn thing was over. I’m tired of it.” She admitted. “Too much crazy stuff.”

They walked side by side along the edge of the harbor towards the waterfront. Along the piers merchants were busy putting stores in wagons, and moving everything away from where eventually the ships and the soldiers would meet.

The area looked bare already, and so was the long sloping hill that overlooked it. Windows were swinging open, doors stood adrift and even the dockside tavern was abandoned. Down the curve they could see the jail, the only building that seemed to have activity around it.

“Do we want to talk to those Amazons?” Gabrielle asked, as though reading her mind. “I’d like to know why they were trying to set us on fire.”

Obligingly, Xena altered her path, steering towards the jail she already felt she had far too much familiarity with. “Dag.” She called out to one of the militia. “Get me some logs, willya? One of the big iron pots from that inn, and rope. Haul it all up to the top of that cliff. Start a fire up there too. A big one.”

“Aye, Genr’l.” Dag half saluted and headed in the opposite direction. “I’m on it.”

A few moments later and they were closing in on the jail. There were a handful of men outside, two with horses, and they glanced around at them as Xena and Gabrielle approached.

Their attitude shifted. Two men drifted over to block the door, the others turned to meet them, hands straying to weapons hung at their belts.

Gabrielle wished suddenly she had her staff. Her hands twitched, and she looked up at Xena, seeing that faint, mocking almost sexy smile on her face. “Are they trouble?”

Faint shrug. "We are." Xena answered. "Hi there." She addressed the men. "What's the story in the jail?"

"No story." The man closest to her said. "We're just waiting for a friend."

They were lying. Gabrielle knew it. She could see the shifting of their eyes, and the one man behind the horses quick, almost anxious look at the door to the jail. A horrible suspicion occurred to her. "Well, great. Then you won't mind us getting on with what we need to do."

She started forward, heading for the door. After a split second of surprise, Xena followed her. She kept the man's eyes locked on hers and saw the others begin to move, one of them hammering on the door loudly.

"Hey. What's up in there!" He yelled.

Xena drew her sword. She caught up to Gabrielle and slipped past her, coming face to face with one of the two men blocking the path. "Move." She said. "I won't ask twice."

The man looked like he was going to bluster, then he stepped aside, as the two with the horses got onboard and started to ride away.

"Hey! Hey! Wait! That's my horse!" The man who'd given way took off at a run. "Wait! You bastard!"

Xena shoved past the man banging on the door, yanking him back and sending him spinning to the ground and then continuing with the motion around as she lashed out in a kick that slammed against the door's lock.

The rest of the men ran, not even wasting a minute in looking back. Xena shoved the door all the way open and went inside, with Gabrielle fairly hanging on her leathers.

Inside, it still stank. The front space was empty, but she could hear sounds of conflict in the cell area. "Damn it."

Gabrielle spotted a spear leaning against the wall. She darted over and grabbed it, hefting it in her hand as she joined Xena at the door back to the cells. "Locked?"

Xena yanked at it, and found it open. "Only idiots would lock themselves in side." She said grimly, throwing the door open and going inside.

In front of one of the cells were two men, obviously drunk. They were rooting on someone inside the cell, so focused on what was going on they didn't even hear the two women enter.

Xena got across the dirty floor and slammed one of them in the back of the head with her elbow. He went to the floor, and his partner turned and grabbed for Xena, leering at her as he squinted in the low light.

Gabrielle took the man's knees out with her spear, then she went to the bars and looked inside. In the darkness, she could barely make out four figures in motion, a blur of struggling bodies and low grunts, and the animal growls of angry women.

Without thinking, she yelled. "Hey!" Then she shoved her spear inside, aware of Xena coming up behind her and grabbing the bars, preparing to yank them hard.

The point of the spear impacted something, and she heard a muted scream, then she pulled it back as Xena wrenched the bars out of the floor and darted inside.

She smelled copper.

It was dark, but she followed right at her partner's heels as they entered a pit of chaos, bodies writhing in front of them in shadows and a sudden shrill scream as Xena's blade flickered in the

smoky torchlight .

Then there was a booming roar. Gabrielle dropped the spear and covered her ears, stumbling forward as she felt something big and heavy rushing towards her and then there was a brief touch of Xena's hand against her arm before it all got very very dark.

**

It wasn't like waking up. Gabrielle just suddenly became aware she was somewhere else, and she opened her eyes to find a hazy formless sky overhead, and the sound of waves nearby. She turned her head and saw the sea and in a flash of memory she knew.

She knew.

She remembered this seashore, and those far off gulls, and the hazy light that seemed to fill but not cast shadows.

She was on the other side. She was dead.

In a surge of panic she got up on her knees and whirled around, only to freeze in place as her eyes met a pair of blue ones very close by.

"Oh." She sat down again and stared at Xena. Her partner was stretched out on the sand on her side, one hand propping her head up, a quiet, intense look on her face. She was wearing a simple, white tunic and after a second, Gabrielle realized she was as well. "Are we...."

"Well." Her partner cleared her throat a little. "We're not in Thema anymore." She looked around, then down at herself, then at Gabrielle. "And I don't remember packing this."

"Oh." Gabrielle eased over and leaned on her elbow in the soft sand. "What happened?" She asked softly.

Xena shook her head. "I wish I knew." She answered. "One minute I was fighting, then next minute I heard a loud noise, reached around to grab for you, then something hit me."

"Hit you."

"Yeah." Xena took a breath, and released it, then examined her hand. It was clean and unmarked and she flexed the fingers of it. "Then I was here." She said. "I didn't even have time to feel any pain." She seemed very surprised at that.

"Me either. I just heard a noise then you were grabbing me and then nothing." Gabrielle looked around, searching the horizon.

They were on a seashore, that stretched endlessly away in the distance, surrounded by a formless gray haze. Gabrielle slowly turned her head and looked back at Xena. "I've been here before."

Xena studied her. "At Thessaly."

Gabrielle nodded.

"I've seen this place once too." The warrior said. "Wait. No, twice now."

"Twice?"

"That time with the flood." Xena said. "In the river... before you found me on the bank."

"I remember."

"Then.. on the boat." Xena looked up at the formless sky. "Just a glimpse." She exhaled. "When that wall fell on me. I saw a little bit of this before you called me back."

"I called you back?" Gabrielle mused. "Like you called me back at Thessaly."

They were both quiet for a while. “Damn.” Gabrielle eventually spoke. “I wasn’t ready for this.”

Xena exhaled. “Yeah.”

“So many things – so many people.. and Xe... oh gods, poor Dori.” Gabrielle felt the tears well up and she lifted her hand to cover her eyes, only to find it captured by Xena’s, a warm, strong contact that only made her cry the harder. “No....no. no.”

Xena pulled her closer into a hug. She pressed her head against her partner’s and rubbed her back. “I know.” She whispered. “ I know.”

“I didn’t want to leave her.” Gabrielle choked out. “Oh damn.”

Xena wrapped her arms around her and just held on, as they grieved together.

After a while, Gabrielle caught her breath, and sighed. She could hear Xena sniffing a little, and finally the shock of finding herself in the afterlife was fading just a bit.

Just a bit.

She lay there quietly in Xena’s embrace for another little while, thinking.

It hurt to think about everything she’d left behind. Heartbreaking to know she’d never hear the laughter of her friends, or experience the company of her family again.

Never go back to their cabin.

Never hold Dori in her arms.

It hurt. It made her heart ache. It made her soul ache to think of all those people she’d left behind. It brought tears to her eyes again at the sense of loss thinking of all the things left undone.

She was grateful they’d spent the last night together. Glad she’d found Xena. Glad they’d let Dori sleep with her new little friend and shared in her delight with him.

Glad Xe had seen their baby ride, even just the one time. She remembered Dori’s face, in that barn eyes alight.

“Mine Boo? Mine?”

Gods. Gabrielle exhaled, feeling the grip on her tighten, and the warmth of Xena’s breath against her scalp. It hurt, by all the gods it hurt.

But there was one thing that could have made it hurt beyond bearing and that one thing hadn’t happened.

Hadn’t. They hadn’t been parted. Gabrielle felt a sense of tired calm come over her. They hadn’t been parted even in the afterlife no matter what either of them had truly expected.

“Xe.” Gabrielle rested her cheek against her partner’s collarbone. “So here we are.”

“Here we are.” Xena replied, the faintest of stresses on the second word.

They separated a little, still in each other’s arms, but enough so their eyes could meet without crossing. “Here we are.” Xena repeated softly. She glanced casually around, then returned her gaze to Gabrielle’s face. “Better scenery than last time.” She tried a faint joke. “Definitely better company.”

Gabrielle reached over and put her palm against Xena’s cheek.

“When I realized where we were.” Xena continued. “When I saw you here with me.” She paused and shook her head. “I couldn’t believe it... I still don’t.” She said. “But.... “ Another shake of her

head. "Here we are."

"Believe it." Gabrielle leaned over and gave her a kiss on the lips. Then she looked her partner in the eye. "And I'm glad, Xe. If you weren't here, I don't think I could handle this."

Xena gave her a painfully open look right back. "Me either." She covered Gabrielle's hand with her own. "So.." She took a breath. "Where do we go now?"

Gabrielle slowly sat up and looked around. Behind them, where they hadn't looked yet or noticed was a soft, pulsing gateway full of light that she now remembered. "There." She pointed. "You go through that."

Xena turned around and looked. "To Elysia?"

"Well." Gabrielle regarded it. "That's where it took me the last time. " She said. "Was it like this for you ... um... "

"No." Xena looked down at the sand. "There wasn't any place like this. Just dark.. then... " She hesitated. "Fire. Screaming." She drew a line in the sand with her fingertip. "Pain."

"Xe." Gabrielle got slowly to her feet and offered her hand. "C'mon."

Xena took her hand and stood up and they watched the waves roll in for a minute together. "I don't understand though." Gabrielle said after a pause. "What about Hades, and Charon, and the Styx? The legends don't say anything about this place."

Xena put her bare foot in the water, and splashed it. "Maybe that's all just stories to scare people."

"Elysia's real." Gabrielle said.

"So's Tartarus." Xena replied, in a quiet voice. "But maybe no one really knows how you get there, so they make up stories."

"Hm." The bard murmured. "Maybe." She looked down the shore. It was long, and in the distance, she thought she could see some gulls soaring overhead. "It's peaceful here."

"Yeah." Xena said. "Want to take a walk before we go through that?" She pointed at the gateway. "Who knows if they have beaches there."

Gabrielle had no objection to that. She took Xena's hand and they walked down the shoreline. The air was cool and had a just a tinge of salt and it felt good ruffling through her hair. It was strange, she thought, that she really didn't feel that different. "Xena?"

"Hm?" Xena looked over at her.

"Can I ask you a really dumb question?"

A faint smile appeared on her partner's face. "Sure."

Gabrielle reached up to scratch her nose. "Aren't you supposed to feel.. um... deader?" She asked. "I mean.. outside of not having all those bumps and stuff I sort of feel the same."

Xena considered the question briefly, then she made a noise between a grunt and a laugh. "Damned if I know." She said. "The last time... " She exhaled. "it was so different. I was ... well, anyway. Once I got out of Tartarus.."

"Xe?" Gabrielle gently interrupted her. "How did you do that?"

"Do what?"

"Get out of Tartarus? I don't think that's where you were when you were trying to help me."

Xena stopped and gazed thoughtfully out at the gently rolling sea. It was hard... really hard to remember back then, especially now that she was here though she still didn't really believe it. "I think..." She mused. "I sort of remember just concentrating on you so hard Tartarus just kinda faded out. Then I was..." She frowned. "Sort of in another waiting place."

"Oh." Gabrielle said. "Are we supposed to be hearing the thoughts of the living now?" She asked, after a brief silence. "Because I don't."

"Me either." Xena said. "They may not know yet." She put a hand on her partner's shoulder. "I don't know what happened to us there, Gabrielle. The place could have collapsed on top of us." She watched the bard look up at her, seeing a sadness in her eyes. "So no one might know yet."

"Jess would know."

Xena shook her head a little. "He might... I don't know. Maybe when we go through there?" She indicated the portal behind them. "Gabrielle, I'm as lost here as you are. I don't know what's going on."

"Sorry hon." Gabrielle put her hands on her partner's stomach and leaned closer. "I'm just really freaking out you know?"

"I know."

They looked at each other. Then Xena put her arms around Gabrielle and hugged her. "Damn, I'm sorry." She said. "I wanted more time there with you."

Gabrielle returned the hug fiercely. "Life was never really fair to us, Xe." She felt tears starting again. "We had to fight for every minute of it."

She could feel the hiccups as Xena started crying and it shattered what composure she had. All that fighting, all that suffering they'd both done – all the times they'd stood together in the cause of the greater good.

Now it was over. Gabrielle drew in a shuddering breath and released it. She felt Xena do the same. Now they would go on, to something unknown. "Okay." She wiped her eyes with one hand. "I guess we should go."

Xena sniffled. Then she laced her fingers behind Gabrielle's neck and studied her gravely. "Before we do, I want to tell you something."

Gabrielle gazed up at her, suddenly almost overcome with a surge of love and affection. Here, despite the somewhat hazy light she could see her partner's face with absolute clarity, beautiful and a bit wild.

Here, she could see the stress and strain erased, and the bruises and cuts that had graced her tall body gone.

She felt whole herself, the weariness of her journey gone, and all the little aches faded away. That alone made her believe. Seeing her partner whole sealed it.

"I love you." Gabrielle said. "No matter how short it was, Xe, I'm glad we had the time we did. I wouldn't have wanted to live a hundred years with anyone else."

"Thanks." Xena leaned forward and touched her forehead to Gabrielle's. "And I feel the same way. But what I was going to tell you was this." She glanced back over her shoulder. "No matter what happens after we go through that, you're mine." She said. "And if anything tries to separate us, it's gonna get ugly."

Gabrielle kissed her, savoring the jolt of passion in her guts. "Deal." She felt Xena press against her and the jolt became a steady burn. She had never really thought about what you could feel in

the afterlife but she was glad at least this one thing hadn't changed.

Xena returned the kiss, cupping her face very gently. "Let's go." She said. "See where the Fates are leading us."

They held hands and walked back towards the gateway, now seeming larger, and filling most of the way from the water to the formless haze. It seemed to brighten as they approached, and in the center they could see a bit of blue.

They paused just short of it. "We just walk through?" Xena asked. "Just like that?"

"I did last time." Gabrielle agreed. "So.. let's go." She gripped Xena's hand a little more firmly and started forward, feeling a sudden gust of air come through the portal and flutter the fabric draping her body.

It was a little scary. She was glad she had Xena at her side as they both stepped up to the portal and the light surrounded them. She could feel a buffeting of the wind and her hand got warmer as Xena's grip tightened.

She took another step forward and then the wind took her off her feet and she would have taken off if a strong arm hadn't wrapped itself around her waist and held her securely. "Xena!"

"Hang on!" Xena yelled back and then they were in the air and being pulled along the light, ripping through bits of cold and vapor.

Not at all like the last time. Gabrielle felt a chill of fear.

Then they were falling, but only briefly before they landed in a thick patch of grass, in a blast of brilliant sunlight that quickly warmed them where the cold air had previously chilled their skin.

They rolled twice and then Xena released her as they came to a halt surrounded by sweet smelling green and yellow blades and purple stalks.

"Oof." Gabrielle blinked. She lifted her head and looked around in puzzlement. The grass they landed on was part of a pretty meadow, lit with warm golden sun, and full of colorful wildflowers.

It was rich, and beautiful, but the end of it disappeared into a cloud bank and as she looked up, she could see a mountain stretching above her. She looked around again and then she turned around to look at Xena.

"Not where you expected?" The warrior hazarded a guess. "It ain't Tartarus. I can tell you that."

Gabrielle looked around again. She wasn't sure exactly how to feel about it, since the mountainside wasn't the same place she'd come to the last time. That had been green and sunny also, but filled with a sweet golden presence she'd sensed more than saw and many others there enjoying their rewards.

Here, they were alone, and she felt no presence. She studied the ground, which was covered in rich earth. So maybe she hadn't made Elysia this time. Her eyes lifted to Xena's. "I don't know where we are." She felt a sense of disappointment. "I'm sorry, Xe."

The warrior shrugged. "Looks pretty nice to me." She said. "Maybe I was holding on too tight."

Gabrielle smiled wryly. "I always said I'd go where you go." She said. "So here we are."

"Here we are."

Xena rolled over and studied the mountain that stretched above them. Its peak was shrouded in thick clouds much like the ones that ringed the meadow and at the fringe of her vision she could make out, or thought she could, a series of steps leading up. "Question is where is here."

Maybe it was a challenge. Gabrielle stretched out in the grass and savored the sunlight that

warmed her skin. She wouldn't put it past the gods to make it tough on them, would she?

No she wouldn't.

"Gabrielle."

Gabrielle spotted a ladybug and watched it in delight. "Yeah?"

"I think I know where we are."

"Yeah?" The bard reached out a finger and let the bug crawl up onto her hand. "It's not so bad here, Xena. See? Look what I found."

"I think we're on Mount Olympus."

Gabrielle turned her head and stared at her partner. "Mount Olympus????"

"Mm." Xena crossed her ankles and made a face. "Now I wonder what in Hades THAT means."

**

Continued in Part 25

A Queen's Tale

Part 25

"So what does it mean?" Gabrielle stood next to Xena, both of them regarding a set of moss covered stone steps warily. "Us being here, I mean? You think we're being messed with again?" She asked. "Like they can't even let us die in peace?"

Xena had her hands on her hips. She glanced at Gabrielle, then shrugged faintly. "Probably." She conceded. "It sort of felt like we were being yanked sideways before."

Gabrielle frowned a little. "Going through that gate thing?"

"Yeah." Xena returned her attention to the steps. "Like we were on our way somewhere and got pulled here." She pushed aside some bushes. "We can start up behind this." She indicated the stairs which had seemed to start far higher up the mountain until she poked around and found otherwise.

Gabrielle thought about the experience. Had she felt the same thing? "Yeah." She said, in a mildly surprised voice. "I think you're right. Just after we stepped through." She joined Xena at the bottom of the stairway. "We're going up there?"

Xena sat down on the bottom step, resting her hands on it's surface. "Got any better ideas?"

Gabrielle sat down next to her. She looked around, watching the wisps of clouds around the edge of the meadow. "We could try to go down." She suggested. "Maybe we'll end up ... " She hesitated. "No, I guess we wouldn't, huh? I don't think there's anyone down there looking for ambrosia for us."

Xena put a hand on her shoulder. Gabrielle reached up to cover it with her own. "Xe, I don't like this."

"Me either." Her partner agreed. "We can try to go down if you want to, but I think the fastest way out of here is going up there and finding out what the Hades they want from us."

Gabrielle exhaled. "Why didn't they just poof us up there then?" She glanced up over her shoulder. "Those steps look creepy."

"Hm." Xena leaned over and nibbled the back of Gabrielle's neck, feeling the skin prickle under her lips. "We could piss them off by just hanging out down here and making out." She suggested.

“Sounds more fun than climbing the stairs, huh?”

Gabrielle felt her body reacting to the touch, even with the thought of the entire panoply of Olympus looking down on them. It felt very earthy and intense and drew her attention away from what was happening to them.

She was conflicted. It was hard to deal with the so sudden knowledge of their passing, and then the confusion they were currently in when it was contrasted by the almost matter of fact attitude Xena was displaying.

Didn't she care? “Xe.” Gabrielle half turned and reached up to put her hand against Xena's face. “I'm scared, and I'm freaked out. What's happening to us?” She asked. “What's going on?”

Xena's face twitched, then she frowned a little. “I'm not sure.” She answered honestly. “What I am sure is that we're here for some reason. We should find out what that reason is. Then maybe we can figure out what's going on.”

It made sense. “Okay.” The bard said. “You think this has to do with the war?”

“Bet on it.” Xena stood up, and held her hand out. “C'mon.” She started up the stairs and it was then they both realized they were barefoot. “Slipper.” Xena muttered, as she took a careful step up. “Watch it.”

Gabrielle took a firmer hold on her hand and joined her on the step. It felt strange, and the cool moss under her toes was a little on the uncomfortable side. The stairway wound its way up the mountainside and as she followed Xena up another step, the rest of them became a little bit clearer.

Mount Olympus. Despite her long association with the gods, the thought of being her chilled her. Gabrielle understood they'd both been dodging literal thunderbolts for years in their interactions with Ares and the others, but that somehow had always been different.

On their turf, so to speak. This wasn't and Gabrielle had an uncomfortable suspicion that their dual lifetimes of resisting the will of the gods might be coming home to them. Maybe Tartarus wasn't the worst place they could have ended up after all.

What if they ended up like Sisyphus? Rolling a rock up a hill through eternity? The gods had been fickle in the best of times. What if all their rebellions were about to come home to them?

“Hey.” Xena said, after a few minutes climbing. “Wanna do me a favor?”

“Sure.” Gabrielle was glad of the distraction from her gloomy thoughts. “Anything.”

“Got a story handy?” Xena indicated the stretch of steps. “Gonna be a long climb.”

Gabrielle felt a certain stiffness in her shoulders relax, as she studied the wry look on her partner's face. Xena was as freaked out as she was, she realized, but as usual was making a better job of hiding it. Some things never changed and right now, Gabrielle found that enormously comforting.

Okay, so they were dead. “I guess you don't want to hear the cow on the roof one, huh?” The bard suggested. So they were dead, and on Mount Olympus. Who knew what would happen next?

Xena cleared her throat.

Probably end up making a good story. Gabrielle smiled. “Okay, I was working on a new one on the ride from Amphipolis. Wanna hear that?”

“Sure.”

Assembling the story in her head, Gabrielle tried to set aside where they were and what they'd gone through and pretend it was as though they were just on another journey together, walking in the sun, sharing their lives.

The hardest part was thinking about what and who they'd left behind. But Gabrielle knew for the moment maybe she should stop thinking about it, until they figured out really what was going on. There would be time, then to react.

Gabrielle studied the mossy stone they were climbing up. Was she just fooling herself? Putting off the need to deal with it?

"Hey." Xena nudged her. "Story?"

"Sorry." Gabrielle said. "It's hard not to think, you know?"

Xena squeezed her hand. "I know." She answered in a quiet tone. "I keep hearing Dori laugh."

It almost made Gabrielle start crying again. "Let me get to that story." She squeezed her partner's hand back as they mounted yet another of the apparently endless steps. "So I was thinking before we left about how the Amazons might have gotten started."

"Two women who got tired of their husbands and thought they might as well cycle together?" Xena suggested.

Gabrielle smiled. "I guess we know who the bard in the family is."

"That was in doubt?"

"Anyway." Gabrielle cleared her throat. "I was thinking about how the Amazons might have gotten started so I was looking in the tribal archives to see what legends they had about it. You know what?"

"What?" Xena replied amiably.

"They have no clue."

"Could have told you that."

"Xena."

Xena chuckled faintly.

"So I thought I would make up a story about how it might have happened." Gabrielle plowed ahead. "You know, how the first Amazon tribe came into existence."

"Good idea." Xena said. "Tell it often enough they'll all believe it and we'll meet up with some old crone someday who'll sit down and tell you back your own story as ancient Amazon history."

Gabrielle was briefly silent. "Well." She said. "But I guess no one will hear it now but you."

Xena glanced at her, then she slowed and came to a halt. "Want to sit down for a minute?" She pointed at a rock nearby. They sat down side by side on the rock and looked out over the clouds, the lower layer of which spread out to the horizon as far as they could see.

They had already walked a fair distance up the mountain, and Gabrielle could see the steps below them dwindling to invisibility, the green meadow tiny below them with wisps of cloud obscuring it. "Steep." She commented quietly.

"Yeah." Xena agreed. "Tired?"

"Not at all." The bard said. "Do you get tired when you're dead, Xe?"

Xena remained quiet for a time. "I don't remember." She finally said. "I remember being in a lot

of pain in Tartarus. Fire. But it never burned you, just made you feel like it was burning. Then in the other place... I don't really remember."

"Mm." Gabrielle took a deep breath. "Do you sleep?"

"No." Her partner shook her head positively. "I didn't. I remember when Ares was mortal... down in the valley? He said something about sleeping being strange for him."

"I remember that." Gabrielle murmured. "And it's not getting darker here. Does it stay light all the time?" She peered around. "We climbed all that way up, and it doesn't even feel like it to me. I'm not tired at all."

"Me either." Xena said. "Actually, that's the one nice thing about the whole damn situation. It's nice not to be hurting for a change. Been tough couple weeks for me." She flexed one hand. "Everything feels good."

Gabrielle studied her profile. "Been a while for that?" She ventured.

Her partner nodded. "I realized the last couple days I really was getting older." She said. "Maybe that's why I wanted so little part of this war. It's getting... well, it was getting too hard." She looked at Gabrielle, who was regarding her gravely. "Feels good to be able to move without aching again."

Gabrielle reached over to stroke her cheek gently, then moved the windblown hair from her partner's eyes. "Sorry, Xe."

Xena shrugged lightly. "Part of life. Or at least that's what my mother always says."

"I know." The bard murmured. "But.. it's different for you." She kept up her light stroking, watching Xena's eyes flutter close. "Because we all depend on you so much."

Slowly, the dark head nodded. "I knew... I felt like this whole thing was pushing me to put myself in one of those me against the army situations and I didn't..." She fell silent. "I didn't think I had it in me this time."

"Mm." Gabrielle gave her a little scratch on the back of the neck. "You hate losing."

"I do." Xena agreed. "I didn't want to go out that way." She lifted her head and regarded Gabrielle. "I didn't want that to be the way people remembered me."

Oh. Ow. The bard winced herself, at the expression on her partner's face. There was a rawness there, a baring of the soul she hadn't really expected. "Xe." She said, after swallowing the lump in her throat. "I wouldn't have let that be the way anyone remembered you."

Xena's eyes dropped to the ground, and she studied the mossy rock for a long moment. Then she looked back up and smiled. "No point in worrying about it now, huh?"

"No, I guess not." Gabrielle kept watching the shifts of the muscles under the skin of her companion's face. "We both went in the service of the greater good, didn't we? Saving some crazy Amazons we barely knew and who tried to kill us."

"We did." Xena's smile turned wry. "And we never thought twice about it, Gabrielle. It didn't matter those damn idiots were against us."

"No, it didn't." Gabrielle felt a smile tug at her own lips. "All our friends are going to say, can you believe those two nutcases?" She exhaled a little. "But I'm glad, Xena. I'm glad we died in idiotic selflessness."

"Really?"

Now it was Gabrielle's turn to study the ground. "We all have to go sometime." She said, after a

long pause. “So yeah, I am. But...”

“But.” Xena put her arm around Gabrielle’s shoulders. “Leaving Dori hurts.”

Gabrielle clamped her jaw shut, and just nodded.

Xena was silent for a while, then she gave Gabrielle a hug. “She’ll find us.” She said. “And anyway, we’re not in Hades realm yet.”

Gabrielle looked at her. “What does that mean?”

Xena returned her look with a mild expression. “It’s never over till it’s over, hon. We got called to Mount Olympus for something.”

“Hm.” A breeze puffed through the rocks, lifting locks of their hair and moving them. Gabrielle leaned against Xena’s shoulder and felt the warmth of her skin through the light fabric they both were wearing

Fabric that was still silky white, with no smudge of dirt to mar it. Gabrielle thought about how she felt, and decided it was like waking up at your own pace after a restful night’s sleep – that feeling of energy and peace with her body she didn’t get that often.

It did feel good. She felt a little better, a little more optimistic all of a sudden.

“Wow.” Gabrielle finally said. “I wonder if you could sleep if you wanted to. Maybe just because it felt good. Like a nap in the afternoon.” She closed her eyes, and was aware of a little bit of fading out, and decided maybe you could.

Maybe they would find out. “Should we head up?” Gabrielle looked over her shoulder. “I think we’re getting closer to those clouds up there. I’ve never walked through clouds before.”

“Sure.” Xena got up and offered her hand again. “I have.” She added, after they started walking up the steps again. “Walked through clouds. I was in the mountains once and climbed up to the top of one, on the far side of Amphipolis. A storm rolled in and fog socked the mountain in solid.”

“Mm.”

“I had to walk down through it. Weird.” Xena said. “Going through it was like taking a shower sideways.”

Hm. Gabrielle looked up at the fluffy white cloud bottoms. “That might be interesting.” She said. “So. Back to my story.”

“History of the Amazons, by Gabrielle.” Xena agreed. “Your theory doesn’t have harpies in it, does it?”

“Xena.”

“How about a Gorgon?”

“Xena.” Gabrielle had to chuckle a little, responding to her partner’s efforts to be funny. “No, no Gorgons and no Harpies.”

“I think there’s some big black crow in there somewhere too.”

“Ahem.” The bard laced her fingers more tightly with Xena’s. “Once upon a time, there was a little girl who lived in the forest in a village with her brothers and sisters and mom and dad.” She started on the tale. “She had a lot of fun with her friends, but one day, soldiers came and ...”

**

They stopped again just short of the thick layer of clouds. The steps disappeared into it and

beyond it they could see nothing.

Gabrielle turned around and looked down. They were so far up, she couldn't see the little grassy plateau they'd started from and now the world below them looked like just a long gray stretch of rock surrounded by clouds.

She turned back around. Xena was examining the clouds, sticking her hand into the fog and pulling it back out with an air of bemused studiousness. Gabrielle leaned against the rock and watched her for a minute, the golden sunlight outlining her partner in a particularly pretty way.

Her hair had grown out a little and it framed her face, softening the sharp planes just a touch. With the exhaustion of their recent trials erased, there was a simple beauty about her that gave Gabrielle a sweet pang in her chest no matter where they were or what had happened to them.

Xena looked up, sensing the attention. "What?"

"Nothing." Gabrielle moved closer, and touched a bit of the fog with her finger. It felt cold and wet, but nothing more. "So what does this mean? Is it here to block us or just scare us?"

"Both maybe." Xena confirmed. "Ready to give it a try?"

Gabrielle held out her hand. "Lead on." She waited for Xena to take a firm grip on her hand and they started up the steps and into the cloud.

It felt very strange. It was soft, and cold, and wet, and it smelled like... Gabrielle stuck her tongue out and tasted the fog. It tasted a little brassy. It folded itself around them as they climbed upward and blocked out everything.

All she could see was Xena next to her. Her partner was climbing steadily, but slowly, her free hand stretched out ahead and slightly to one side of her into the open space past the steps that fell away into the clouds.

It seemed dangerous, to be walking up into the unknown but after all, Gabrielle reasoned, they were already dead so what was the worst that could happen? Maybe if Xena stepped off into space they'd learn they could fly here.

You just never knew. But in the mean time she was content to be on solid ground. The moss on the rocks had lessened, and now was just bare patches here and there and the wet stone beneath her feet seemed to be growing darker and more even.

There was still no effort in climbing.

Now the fog had surrounded them completely and it had grown very quiet. "This is creepy." Gabrielle said, to break the silence.

"Creepy and nothing but a pain in the ass." Xena agreed. "But y'know what?"

"What?" Gabrielle was just glad to hear another voice, the matter of fact tone in her partner's even more welcome.

"Glad I have someone to share it with."

Gabrielle responded with a grin. "Yeah, me too." She said. "I would be freaking out if I was here by myself. I'd probably still be down on the grass down there watching ladybugs." She fell silent for a few steps. "Who am I kidding? If I were here alone I'd be curled up in a ball somewhere screaming."

"I'd be in the same shape back on the other side." Xena said. "But we're not, and we're here." She added pragmatically. "So no one's curling up screaming anywhere."

“We are and you’re right, no one is.” Gabrielle confirmed. “I’m not sure how that happened but maybe I’ll get a chance to thank someone for it when we get out of this darn fog.”

Xena chuckled briefly. Then she blinked and peered upward through the clouds, trying to make out anything ahead of them. “Something dark up there.”

Gabrielle looked up and saw nothing but mist. “If you say so, partner.” She inhaled, and the fog felt strange in her nose. It almost made her want to cough, just like it almost had a taste on the back of her tongue.

Her skin was damp from it’s touch, and the white tunic she’d found herself in was clinging to her body, having absorbed moisture from it. It felt cool, but not cold, and not clammy as she’d expected. “This is weird.”

Xena wiped the moisture off her face and licked her lips. “More or less like I remembered from that other place.” She admitted. “A little less..”

They both heard a growl off in the mist and they stopped walking. “You hear that?” Xena asked.

“Yes.” Gabrielle agreed.

“Didn’t sound friendly.”

“No.”

“Hm.” Xena leaned forward and stared intently into the gray mist. “Hello?” She called out.

A growl came back in answer, louder this time.

Xena straightened up. “C’mon.” She started up onto the next step. “Let’s go see what this is all about.” She waited for Gabrielle to join her and they slowly moved upward. “Stay behind me.”

“Ah heh.” Gabrielle muttered. “Even when we’re dead, nothing changes.”

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“Gabrielle.” Xena sighed. “What’s the problem?”

“You think it’s going to attack us? Whatever it is?” Gabrielle asked, as she stuck close to her partner’s side. “Does it matter if it attacks us? Do you bleed if you’re dead, Xena?”

That made her think of something, and she put her free hand up to her throat and felt her pulse point.

To her immense surprise, she felt a steady beat against her fingertips. “Whoa!”

“What?” Xena stopped and looked at her. “What are you doing?”

“My heart’s still beating.” Gabrielle said. “Xena, why in Hades is my heart still beating? “

Xena stared at her in deep puzzlement, then she lifted her hand and felt her own neck, her brows creasing sharply. “Huh.” She reached over and put her hand on Gabrielle’s chest. “Well, we still breathe, too I guess.”

Gabrielle moved closer and laid her head against her partner’s body, pressing her ear against the warrior’s skin. After a moment, she grunted and then she moved away and shook her head. “This is nuts.”

“What’s nuts?” Xena frowned at her. “What are you talking about?”

“Xena I don’t get it.” The bard said. “We’re breathing, our hearts are beating... heck. I’m even

hungry.” She lifted her hands. “What is the point of being dead if you have to deal with all that?”

Xena cocked her head, then started chuckling.

“Does this mean we still have to poop?” The bard’s voice rose.

Xena leaned back against the rock wall and held her stomach, her laugh ringing out over the mountainside and through the thick fog.

“I mean, what the heck?” Gabrielle let out an exasperated grunt. “Sheeps! If that stupid thing attacks us I bet we bleed like stuck pigs all over this darn mountain!”

Xena covered her eyes with one hand and kept laughing.

After a pause, Gabrielle started laughing too. She leaned against the wall next to where Xena was standing and they both finally let the chuckles wind down, as the fog swirled around them, giving the uncanny impression of being pissed off.

Xena rubbed her eyes and cleared her throat. “Now my stomach hurts.”

“Sorry.” Gabrielle started laughing again. “I don’t really get why I think this is so funny.” She sighed. “I think I’m just going nuts.”

“Stress relief.” Xena put her arm around her partner. “I needed that. Thanks.” She pulled Gabrielle closer and gave her a kiss on the top of her head. “All right. I don’t know what the Hades is going on here either, but let’s go see what that thing is.”

“Okay.” Gabrielle wiped her eyes and latched on to Xena’s hand. “It’s just so weird, you know?”

“Yeah.” Xena crossed the next step and eased cautiously up one more. She could hear the growling getting louder, and the dark shape she’d seen from below was now looming over them.

As they moved up one more step a wind swirled through suddenly, whipping around them. Gabrielle tucked herself instinctively behind her partner’s taller form and they both went flat against the rock wall, as the fog blew out of the area and they could see ahead of them.

Gabrielle actually wished it hadn’t. There was a huge stone gateway ahead, and in the center of it, a creature blocking the way. It was huge, and it had three heads, and all three of them were growling. “Uh oh.”

Behind the stone gateway, the fog was gone. The stone lightened from dark gray to light gray and beyond that she could see white stone in the sunlight and clear blue skies.

She looked back at the creature. “What is that?”

Xena was briefly silent, then she cleared her throat. “I think it’s Cerberus.” She said. “Which I guess would make sense.”

Gabrielle studied the creature. She could see the dog shape of the three heads, and behind them, whiplike writhing things that might have been snakes. Cerberus was taller than Xena, and his spread heads blocked the entrance to Mount Olympus effectively. “I thought he was supposed to guard the Underworld.”

“That’s the theory.” Xena slowly started forward. “He’s supposed to let the dead in, but not out. Maybe he also keeps the dead from ganging up on Mount Olympus.”

Gabrielle stayed behind her, as they moved closer and the creature’s growls got louder. She could see the heads now, big blocky skulls with a pushed in muzzle and small round ears. “Kinda ugly.”

“Mm.” Xena grunted softly. Then she took another few steps closer, coming within range of the creature and standing up straight. “Hey!” She addressed the three headed figure.

“What’s your problem?”

“Xe.” Gabrielle peeked past her nervously. “Maybe now’s not the time for the attitude, huh?”

“Stay here.” Xena released her hand and walked boldly forward as the creature snarled hideously and bared its triple heads worth of fangs at her.

“Xena!” Gabrielle bolted after her. “What are you doing!” She hauled up abruptly as the warrior stopped and pointed at the creature.

“Sit!” Xena barked commandingly at it.

Gabrielle wasn’t sure if she should grab Xena and yank her back or start yelling. She opened her mouth and then shut it again as the creature glared at her partner for a long moment, then meekly sank down onto its haunches.

“Wow.” Gabrielle exhaled. “Dead or not you sure still have that animal magnetism”

“Good boy.” Xena walked forward and held her hand out to the nearest head, which sniffed her, its small round ears twitching. “It’s okay, Gab.” She said. “I remembered something Aphrodite once said, about Ares having one of Cerberus’s puppies.” She explained. “I figured this might be him.”

Gabrielle approached the creature, who was now sitting with all three tongues lolling, one head watching Xena and the other two kind of glancing around. “Oh yeah. The bowls.” She murmured, keeping her hands away from the animals mouths. “So.. he’s not trying to keep us out?”

“I don’t know.” Xena started to move past the gates guardian. The heads swung around to look at her, then it edged aside and let her past. “I guess not.” She said. “Maybe Ares sent him to meet us.”

“Maybe Ares sent him to scare the poo out of us.” Gabrielle muttered. “Nice dog.”

The animal blinked at her.

‘C”mon.” Xena dismissed the creature and headed for the opening.

Gabrielle followed her, almost stopping when one of the heads turned towards her and she was looking into a pair of ageless golden eyes with a hint of a sparkle at the back of them. The big nose twitched and she felt a shiver go down her spine, but then they were past him, and he was turning to walk after them.

Creepy.

She looked up as they approached the huge stone gate, feeling a sense of trepidation as they started through it. Her body felt twitchy, and she felt a sensation on her skin of almost pain as she moved between the tall standing stones. Quickly, she glanced at Xena, but her partner seemed unaware. “Xe?”

“Hm?” Xena looked at her. “Sorry I didn’t warn ya. “ She indicated the creature plodding after them. “Just occurred to me as I was looking at him.”

“No, it’s..” Gabrielle winced a little as the sensation increased. “I feel weird.” She felt like bees were buzzing around her. “Ow.” She rubbed her arms.

“What’s wrong?” Xena touched her arm. “You okay?”

The feeling spread over her and she almost cried out. “Oh!”

“Let’s go over there and you can sit down.” Xena focused on her, brow creasing in concern. “I don’t feel anything, here... over near that rock.” She wrapped her arm around Gabrielle’s back,

looking around to see what could be affecting her soulmate. “Damn it...”

“Augh.” Gabrielle felt like her skin was on fire. The next thing she knew she was being lifted up and cradled in Xena’s arms and she put threw her own arms around Xena’s neck and hid her head in the warrior’s shoulder.

They angled through the gateway and towards a bit of squared off stone, but as they did, Gabrielle felt the uncomfortable sensation ease. “Oh.” Her shoulders relaxed. “Okay, that’s better.” She said, breathing a sigh of relief. “It’s going away.”

“Better?” Xena sat down on the stone, still cradling her. “Gab? You okay?”

The sensation faded completely, and she felt normal again. Gabrielle exhaled. Well, as normal as she’d felt before it happened anyway. “Yeah, I’m oka... Xena.” She looked past the warriors shoulder. “Look.”

Her partner turned her head, and they both went still for a moment.

Behind them the stone gate was filled with blue fire, arcing from one side to the other and completely obscuring anything past it. The three headed dog was seated nearby, paws crossed, apparently waiting for them.

“Did we walk through that?” Gabrielle asked in disbelief.

“I guess we did.” Xena answered after a pause. “How come you felt it and I didn’t though?”

Gabrielle looked up at her and after a moment, Xena met her gaze. They looked at each other for several breaths, then Xena looked away. “We’ve always talked around it.” The bard said, in a gentle tone. “But I don’t think we can do that here.”

She carefully worked herself out of Xena’s grip and sat next to her on the stone as her partner stared at the rocky ground. After a long silence, she rested her head against Xena’s shoulder.

“No, probably not.” Xena finally said. She leaned her elbows on her knees and laced her fingers together. “You think my having god’s blood got us through that?” She jerked her head towards the gateway.

It was shocking, even now, to hear Xena say it. Though they both had known the truth of it for a long time, those words made her skin prickle. “Well.” Gabrielle said. “Something got me through it.”

Of course they’d known. Of course it had been obvious, from her coming back from the dead to her fathering Dori. No true mortal could have done either one of them, not to mention the hundreds of other things Gabrielle had seen her partner do over the years.

Of course. Xena for some reason seemed to believe if she didn’t talk about it or acknowledge it then it wasn’t real – but they both knew the truth.

Xena shrugged. “Hope it’s good for more than that then.” She sighed. “Got a feeling we’re gonna need all the help we can get up here.” She glanced at Gabrielle. “You ready to keep going?”

The tingles were gone. “Yeah.” Gabrielle stood up and dusted herself off. “I’m okay.” She took Xena’s hand again as she stood up and they started slowly walking away from the gateway. The three headed dog got up and followed them.

The rocky surface slowly smoothed out and became lighter and the path they were on evened out and broadened into a lane that sloped upward. The sun bathed everything in warm light up here, and the wind whispered past, cool but not chilling.

It was very quiet. Ahead of them, she could see gates and walls, and if she tipped her head all the way back, she could see the colonnades of a large building rising above the rest at the very top

of the mountain.

It was hard to take in the fact that she was here. “Xena.”

“Mm?” Xena had been looking around, her head cocked slightly to one side to listen. “Don’t hear much going on.”

“Is that Zeus’s palace, up there?”

Xena looked up at the peak. “I guess it must be.” She said. Then she smiled a little. “Y’know everything I learned about Mount Olympus I got from those stories you tell.”

“Me? Oh. The legends.” Gabrielle spotted figures off in the distance, moving. “Oh, look. There’s some people.”

Xena nodded. “I hear voices.” She said. “Wonder how long we’ll have to walk around before someone figures out we’re here?”

A loud horn abruptly broke the silence. Xena and Gabrielle both stopped and waited, as the horn blast happened again, and again. Then a glistening golden horse emerged from a gate in the near distance and headed towards them.

On the horses back rode a tall, golden haired man in the same brief, white robe they themselves were wearing. He rode up to them and halted, staring at them down a straight bridged nose. “Follow me.” He commanded. “Zeus awaits.”

He turned and started back towards the gates, at a walk.

“Oh great.” Xena muttered under her breath. “I knew we should have just stayed in bed this morning.”

“You can say that again..” Gabrielle said, as they followed the horse. “And how.”

**

They climbed up sets of winding staircases that surrounded beautiful gardens. Their haughty guide strode ahead of them, paying them little attention as they wound their way through what was a very large, very sprawling marble palace in the sky.

Gabrielle looked over at the garden, her nose twitching as the scent of grass, and flowers and rich earth came to her nose. She could see fruit trees and herbs growing, and spotted silent figures moving among them, tending to the plants. “Xe?”

“Yeah?” Xena glanced over at her.

“Who are those people?” She whispered, pointing.

Xena regarded them. “I don’t know.”

“They’re not gods, are they?”

Xena frowned. “I don’t know. I guess... I never really thought about what went on up here. Maybe they’re servants. You don’t figure they all get their own cups of nectar and mix up their own ambrosia, do you?”

Gabrielle thought about that. Did it make sense that the gods had servants? “Can’t they just snap their fingers?” She asked. “Why bother having minions?”

Her partner shrugged.

“What if they want to make us minions?” The bard asked. “What if they want me to sit around telling them stories for eternity?”

Xena kept walking a few steps, silently digesting this. "Would you want to do that?"

"No."

"Why?" Her partner asked, in a mild voice. "You like telling stories."

"I like telling stories that I want to tell, to people I want to tell them to." Gabrielle said. "How would you feel if they wanted you just so you could fight in a ring for them for entertainment?"

Xena grunted.

"So seeing people having to serve like that forever bugs me." The bard concluded. "Not that I think there's much I can do about it."

"What if they liked being here, doing that?"

"Xena." Gabrielle gave her a direct look.

"Remember Alain?" Xena replied, still mildly. "He was very happy to spend his whole time taking care of the horses, and sweeping the stable out." She watched two women cross the path at a distance, bundles of herbs balanced on their heads. "Not everyone's like us."

Gabrielle was about to continue objecting, then she paused and considered.

Then she grunted.

Everywhere she looked was beauty and order. The trees all grew straight and tall, and she could smell ripe apples on the wind. The figures she could see in the distance working the land weren't being watched, and as far as she could see they seemed at ease, and untroubled.

Johan had once told her that there was nothing more peaceful than doing a day's work, and resting at the end of it. She remembered days when she and Xena had done their thing from sunrise to sunset, and that wonderful, satisfied feeling they'd had at the end of the day, resting in their campsite.

Sharing a cup of cider, and warming their toes.

But for eternity? "Maybe they just do it for a while." She temporized. "Then they go somewhere else."

"Back to Elysia?" Xena suggested. "Maybe."

Gabrielle felt obscurely comforted by that idea. Then she glanced at her partner. "Am I being nuts?"

Xena smiled. "You're just being you." She gave the bard a scratch on the back. "Never stop asking questions. Gives me something to think about beside where this path is leading."

Gabrielle looked up, to see the path, in fact, leading to the entrance of a huge temple – the one she'd spotted from below. It stood alone and magnificent, and could only be one thing. Their guide was leading them directly to it.

He stopped at the base of the steps going up. "Enter." He indicated the door. "And face your consequences." He studied them. "Do not dawdle. He doesn't like to be kept waiting." He turned and walked off, letting out a whistle as he did.

"Nice." Gabrielle glowered after him. "Good to know you can always find a jerk up here too."

The bard moving away from them stiffened, but he didn't turn. He walked through a gap in the perfectly green hedges and disappeared.

"Happier now?" Xena guided her up the steps. "C'mon, let's get this over with."

Gabrielle didn't think her partner was really mad with her. "Sorry." She rested one hand on Xena's hip, not willing to take any chances. "I hate people like that."

"Me too." Xena tipped her head back as they walked up the steps and approached the entrance to the temple. It had no door, just a large opening, and beyond it they could see an endless span of marble and light. "Here we go."

"Here we go." Gabrielle repeated as they crossed the threshold and entered the temple.

It was vast. The center was an open path, but on either side were five huge thrones, bathed in golden light from the windows cut into the walls above them. They were empty, and silent.

Spears of light crisscrossed the temple, and they walked in and out of them as they headed towards the rear, where large steps led up to a marble dais draped over with billowy white silk much like what they were wearing.

On the dais were two thrones, larger and higher than the rest, and on those thrones two figures sat, waiting for them.

It was intimidating. Gabrielle felt her guts clenching, and her heart beat speeding up. She could see the two figures bathed in sunlight at the end of the temple, a stern, broad shouldered man, and a tall, spare woman that she knew without recourse to her scrolls were the king and queen of all the gods, Zeus and Hera.

Oh boy. She felt her throat go dry.

There were a set of broad, shallow steps that led up to an open area, below the level of the thrones that right now was lit by two blocks of sun coming in from either side of the temple. There was no sound but their bare soles on the marble as they walked up the steps and came to a stop on the platform, facing the two figures.

Gabrielle glanced quickly at Xena. Her partner was standing easily, her hands at her sides as she regarded the two gods. She had no particular expression on her face, just a silent waiting attitude. The bard squared her shoulders and tried to assume the same.

It was hard. She was scared. She looked up at the tall figures, and took a deep breath. Zeus was tall and broad shouldered, with a fully bearded face and thick silver white hair. His face was rugged, with strong planes she almost recognized from Ares.

Hera was also tall, with a slender figure and creamy silken skin and the same silver white hair. They were both draped in fabric much like what she and Xena were wearing, a shifting white with a hint of rainbow color that flickered briefly when the sun hit it.

Intimidating. Gabrielle remembered being wary and a little afraid of Ares, and a little awed by Aphrodite, but this was something else entirely.

"So." Hera spoke. "These are the two that I have heard so very, very much about."

Xena apparently felt that needed no answer. Gabrielle waited anyway, feeling the goddesses eyes firmly fixed on her. After several awkward moments, she took a breath in, and wryly remembered their old bargain.

She fights, I talk. "I guess we could say the same." Gabrielle answered, projecting her voice into all that golden stillness.

Xena's jaw muscle twitched, and she glanced away, visibly muffling a smile.

Hera got up and walked down the steps to where they were standing. When she reached the last step, she paused and remained there, instead of descending to their level. Zeus remained where he was, watching frostily.

“You have brought dissention among my family.” Hera said. “So mortals here on my sufferance should keep their tongues in their head. “

Oddly, Gabrielle felt her fear fading. “My tongue is inside my head.” She remarked, opening her mouth and displaying the appendage. “We didn’t ask to come here. What do you want from us?”

Hera raised her hand and before Gabrielle could react Xena stepped in front of her and a purple flash came around her partner’s body, stinging her skin as it went past. Gabrielle gasped in reflex, and reached out to touch Xena’s back, as the light faded.

“Don’t do that again.” Xena spoke for the first time. “You brought us here. Answer the question. What is it you want from us? If it’s just to yell and send sparks, just blast us off on our way to wherever we’re going to go.”

Gabrielle peeked past Xena’s shoulder. She could see Hera’s face tensing in anger, but a quick look up also showed her an unexpected smirk on Zeus’ face.

Hera let her hand drop. “So.” She said. “We have yet another bastard among us.” She looked up at Zeus accusingly. “Is it not bad enough you have the entire family in disarray, you have to bring this creature in to rub the salt?

“Thanks.” Gabrielle whispered.

Xena draped an arm over her shoulders. “In for a dinar, in for a thousand of them.” She said. “Just stay behind me if bolts start flying, okay?”

“No problem.”

Zeus lifted one hand and put it back down again. “This creature is none of my doing.” He said. “It is true, we have much discord and I have seen the root of it in these here.” He indicated the two of them with a finger. “You wished to have this discord end, I made it so.”

I made it so. Gabrielle felt a chill go down her back. “Are you saying we were annoying you so you just killed us?”

Zeus stared at her.

“Are you kidding me?” Gabrielle felt anger replace the lingering fear. “Like it was our fault you guys had nothing better to do than start a war?”

“Gab.”

“Xena, I don’t care. What are they going to do, kill me twice?” The bard said. “You’re darn lucky you guys decided to kill me because if I knew what I know now, and was still alive I’d be spending the rest of my days telling everyone I knew why you shouldn’t be worshipped.”

Now, she caught a faint smirk on Hera’s face. The queen of the gods folded her hands. “Discord indeed.” She said. “Mortal, your presence here is suffered only because of this creature’s bastard blood. Do not push our good will. There are worse pains to suffer than death.”

Xena cleared her throat. “What do you want from us?” She asked. “Blood or no blood I didn’t ask to come here.”

Zeus was still staring at Gabrielle. With a visible effort, he turned his attention to Xena. “Four of my children squabble with out end over possession of you. “ He said. “I will have an end to it. No bastard creature is worth this disharmony.”

He clapped his hands, and six soldiers entered, stolid and stone faced. “Take these away and hold them until I call again for them. I will summon my children and we will see what we will do with them.”

The six soldiers advanced obediently.

Gabrielle looked at Xena and saw the smile appear, and she quickly got her center of balance up over the balls of her feet as the body next to her flexed and surged into raw animal motion.

As the first soldier reached them Xena took his spear from his hands before he could react and tossed it to Gabrielle then she grabbed the man bodily and hurled him to one side, as the others rushed her.

With a wild yell the echoed off the marble, Xena slammed her elbow into a jaw and lashed out to kick the sword from the hand of another soldier. She picked up the man by his crotch and his armor chest piece and lifted him, pressing him over her head and then throwing him against two of his companions.

Gabrielle dodged a reeling man and whacked a second with the spear, then knelt quickly as the man lunged for her, swinging the spear around and taking his legs from under him. She got up and slammed the end of the spear into a man about to grab Xena, knocking him backwards just as her partner took his arm and spun him around, leaning him over and yanking his shoulder out of its socket.

He let out a hoarse yell of pain and Xena shoved him to the ground, turning and going back to back with Gabrielle as silence fell.

Six men were on the ground, most of them still, a few groaning in pain. They were standing alone on the platform, Zeus and Hera watching from their thrones high above.

Xena straightened up, lifting her head and staring up at Zeus. "Tell us where to wait, and we will." She said. "Don't waste anymore soldiers."

Zeus was watching her, with a faint, cruel smile on his face. "You intrigue me, creature." He said. "Behind that door at the end of the stairs is a room. Go there. Take what you are given. Come when you are called."

He waved his hand towards the steps.

Xena stared at him in silence for a very long moment, then she put a hand on Gabrielle's back and guided her towards the doorway. As they passed the last soldier, Gabrielle dropped the spear on the marble ground, making a sharp cracking sound that echoed after their footsteps.

They got to the door and walked through it, leaving the temple behind as they went down a hallway that seemed dark and dingy in comparison.

"We're really in big trouble huh?" Gabrielle asked, suddenly.

"Hard to tell." Xena admitted. "I think I might have either made it better or worse I can't figure out which."

"With the fight?"

"Yeah."

They got to the end of the hall and entered another chamber, this one with a low ceiling, and couches around the walls. There were two big openings towards the top letting in sunlight and there was a small pool in the corner, tinkling away.

It was empty. Gabrielle was glad. She walked over to one of the couches and sat down, as her shaking legs were just about to give out on her.

But they had gotten through it.

Xena walked over and sat down next to her, bracing her hands on the couch and letting her legs

sprawl out in front of her. “Damn.”

Gabrielle leaned over and little and gave her a kiss on the shoulder. “Thanks.” She said. “Even though I’m already dead, thanks for blocking that stuff. I know it would have hurt.”

“Are you?” Xena turned her head and studied her partner. “Are we?”

“Xe, we’re on Mount Olympus.” The bard said. “We were in that waiting place. I remember that. You remember that.”

“I know.” Xena sighed. “But Hercules is supposed to be up here too.”

“Well.” Gabrielle pinched the bridge of her nose and felt her ears pop just slightly. “Zeus is his father, Xena.”

“He comes back.”

They were both silent for a while. Then Gabrielle took a breath. “Well, maybe only one of us is dead then.” She said, quietly. “After all, I’m just here apparently because you are.”

Xena frowned. “Gabrielle, you know I can die. You saw me.” She protested. “I died and went to Tartarus. That was real.”

“I know.” The bard put a hand on her shoulder. “I know. But you came back.” She felt the tall body next to her shift restlessly. “Xena even when you were dead, you weren’t. You were here. I could feel you around me.”

Xena stared at the floor. “I had help getting back.” She muttered.

“Xe, c’mon. This is no time to pretend.” Gabrielle pressed closer. “You were there, you took over Autolykus.. you took over me. You remember that? You took over my body.” She said. “Could a normal dead person do that?”

Xena gave her a sideways look, and then she sighed. “I remember that.” She said. “How could I forget that damn moment? Finding out...” She fell silent.

“Finding out what?”

Xena’s lashes flickered a few times. “Finding out how you felt about me.” She said. “Truly.”

Gabrielle felt her mental cart go off the road and into a ditch. She blinked a few times. “You really only figured that out THEN?”

Xena chuckled wryly. “Anyway.” She said. “I don’t really give a damn what blood I have or whether I’m really dead or not. Whatever’s going to happen is going to happen to both of us.” She ended the words with a decisive nod. “That’s all there is to that.”

And sometimes, Gabrielle admitted, you just had to go with Xena’s will. Sometimes she could just make things happen. “I’m all for that.” She gave Xena’s bare shoulder another kiss. “No matter what happens, I want to be right there with you.”

**

It took a while to relax. The room was quiet, and filled with the peaceful light from outside. Two women entered bearing a tray and a flask, and served them without speaking, offering them goblets and a plate of small cakes. They left once they were done, disappearing with the same silence as they had come.

Gabrielle studied the goblet. “Is it okay to drink this?”

Xena sniffed the substance, taking a cautious sip and mouthing it. “Tastes fine.” She said. “Like fruit juice.”

“Oh.” Gabrielle took a sip and blinked. “It’s good.” She swallowed the mouthful, aware of the cool liquid sliding down her throat and into her stomach. It was sweet, but not too sweet, and just a touch effervescent.

Xena picked up a cake and bit into it without hesitation. “I figure they’d come up with better ways to get rid of us than giving us poison food.” She said. “And the only thing I’ve heard of that does anything we’ve both already eaten.”

Ambrosia. Gabrielle took a cake and nibbled it. It tasted good, with a hint of spice to it she thought maybe was cinnamon. Not at all like ambrosia. She washed her cake down with the juice and wondered what was going on in the temple.

Had Zeus called in his family yet? Were they arguing? “Xena, is it true when the gods argue it thunders over Mount Olympus?”

Xena settled back with her goblet and another cake, extending her legs out on the couch and crossing them at the ankles. “Nah.” She shook her head. “Just folk tales.” She patted the spot next to her and waited for Gabrielle to settle into it and they relaxed shoulder to shoulder.

It was the first time since they’d ... Gabrielle found herself wondering now about it, since Xena had questioned their dying, but still. Since they’d died when she could just sit down and be still and quiet for a while and think.

It felt good. She wiggled her toes and took a drink from her goblet. The drink had a hint of pear to it, and it felt nice on her tongue. Then she paused. “Xena, this isn’t nectar, is it?”

Xena studied her cup. “Probably.” She admitted. “Why, is there some story out there that says once we drink this we turn into rabbits or something?”

“No.” Gabrielle said. “I mean.. I don’t think there is. I never heard one. I just never...” “ She took another sip of the drink. “I never ever imagined tasting it.”

She never imagined sitting on a couch with Xena on Mount Olympus either, of course. That made her think of other things. She watched her partner out of the corner of her eye, seeing the tensing of the skin around her temples and the motion as she bit the inside of her lip. Usually that meant she was thinking serious thoughts.

Maybe she was thinking about being a demigod. Gabrielle wondered what that felt like. Xena had always been so dismissive of the idea, so determined that her accomplishments should be her own. Gabrielle didn’t think that wasn’t the case, after all she knew better than most people how hard her partner worked to do what she did.

She knew how much sweat went into those flips. “Hey Xe?”

“Mm?”

“Dinar for your thoughts.”

“You don’t have a dinar.” Xena remarked. “Unless you’ve got more on under that thing than I do.”

Gabrielle spared her a wry look. “Okay, how about a kiss for your thoughts? I’ve got a couple of those in here somewhere.”

Xena sighed. “Not sure they’re worth it. I was trying to figure out at what point in my life I could have stopping being of interest to the damn gods and not ended up where I am right now.”

“Xe, none of this is your fault.”

“C’mon. Of course it is.” Her partner says. “If I wasn’t who I am, we wouldn’t be here.”

“If you weren’t who you are, we wouldn’t be anywhere because we’d never have met and I’d be a slave somewhere or probably dead by now.” Gabrielle said. “Xena, you can’t help who you are. You didn’t ask the gods to mess with you your whole life.”

Xena sighed again. “I know that.” She admitted. “But maybe I could have decided not... “

“No to be a warrior?” Gabrielle kept her shoulder pressed against Xena’s, feeling a sense of discomfort from her. “You think you could have?”

Xena let her head rest against the gently sloped arm of the couch. She studied the ceiling, her eyes flicking across the marble surface as Gabrielle waited patiently next to her. Finally she shook her head. “I don’t know.”

Gabrielle nodded a little. “You want to believe you could have changed that.”

“Yeah.”

“Xe. You know, sometimes people just are what they are. Like you were telling me on the walk up here. I didn’t choose how I am. “ She put her hand on Xena’s thigh. “I didn’t wake up one day and say, boy, I’d like to be a storyteller. It was something inside me. It came out even when all that got me was getting kicked around.”

Xena watched her, a thoughtful expression on her face.

“I don’t think I could have changed that.” Gabrielle went on. “I tried. That last half season before we met... gods I tried, Xena. I stopped arguing with my father, I stopped telling stories.. I stopped all the things that got me slapped and beaten, and I did my damndest to be what he wanted me to be.”

Xena reached over and ran her fingers through Gabrielle’s hair. “Hard?”

“I wanted to die.” The bard met her eyes, gravely. “I felt like I was. Like I was killing the person I was.”

“Hm.”

“Then I met you.” Gabrielle leaned into her touch. “Then I met you, and aside from how I felt about you here.” She put a hand on her chest. “You were my salvation as a person.”

“Given who I was then, that’s insane.” Xena said, in a mild voice.

“Yeah.” Gabrielle smiled. “But it’s true, Xe. You know it is. You didn’t make me who I am, but you made it possible for me to become it. Without you, even if there hadn’t been slavers there that day, I would have lost my soul.”

“It’s true.” Xena replied. “I always thought the biggest part of my redemption was you.”

Gabrielle felt a lump rise in her throat. They looked at each other in silence for a moment, then Xena reached over and gently wiped the tear that had escaped from her eye off with a fingertip. “I think you are what you are, Xe.”

The pale blue eyes gentled and softened. “I was born fighting. You’ve heard my mother’s stories. I don’t think I could have changed that. I wish I’d changed why I was fighting a lot earlier though.” She exhaled. “I look back at some of the things I’ve done and I’m just ashamed.”

“Well, you were really young.” Gabrielle said. “I’ve done some things I’m pretty ashamed of too.”

They both looked up as they heard sounds outside, the first in what seemed a very long time. “Huh.” Xena said. “Let’s see what’s going on.” She got up and extended a hand to Gabrielle, who took it. She pulled her partner up to her feet and they walked over to the square, open window and looked out.

Now there seemed to be activity around. There were groups of what were apparently servants crossing a big, sunlit grassy area in front of the temple, wagons trundling back and forth and men carrying huge silver and golden platters behind them.

They were all in simple linen tunics. The style was more or less like what Xena and Gabrielle were wearing, but the fabric was plain and they had black hems at the bottom and along the openings where their arms emerged.

They were of all ages. Some had bells around their wrists or ankles, and the gentle tinkle of them carried across the space to Xena and Gabrielle's listening ears.

Two women walking along carrying pitchers caught sight of them, and turned their heads to look, nudging their companions after a moment. The group they were in slowed a little, but didn't stop eyes shyly watching them as they went past.

"They're whispering to each other." Xena noted. "So I guess they can talk."

"The two that stopped in here sure didn't." Gabrielle remarked. "I wonder why?"

The sound of footsteps behind them made them turn, to see another one of the servants entering, bearing a tray. Gabrielle walked towards the woman. "Hello."

The servant jerked, as though she'd been stung. She stared at Gabrielle with wide, alarmed eyes, and started to back up.

"No, it's okay." Gabrielle lifted her hands. "We won't hurt you."

Xena stayed where she was, leaning against the edge of the window. She folded her arms over her chest and let her partner go to work, content to wait to see what was going to happen.

"It's okay." Gabrielle repeated. "What's your name?"

The servant looked overwhelmed, she held the tray out in front of her, as though to keep Gabrielle away from her while she glanced around looking for a quick escape, since the bard had gotten between her and the small entrance she'd come in by.

This deeply puzzled Xena. Of the two of them, there was no question which one was the less threatening. What was the girl afraid of? What did she think Gabrielle was going to do to her?

"I'm not going to do anything to you. I just want to know what your name is." Gabrielle said. "My name's Gabrielle." She added. "I'm a storyteller."

The woman stared at her. Then she looked around cautiously, giving Xena a very wary glance.

Xena stayed where she was, backing up a little in fact as she took a seat on the edge of the square opening and leaned back against the cool marble wall.

"It's okay." Gabrielle repeated. "Honest, neither of us is going to do anything to you." She eased down onto one of the couches, though the woman was taller than she was by a hand at least. "What's your name?"

"Who are you?" The woman whispered. "They don't speak to us. Everyone knows that. Just to the one in charge." She slowly lowered the tray to the low table next to the couch, then she knelt next to it, carefully looking around again.

"Oh. Well." Gabrielle said. "We just... I guess we just got here. They wanted to ... um. Talk to us." She looked uncertainly over her shoulder. "That's my partner, Xena."

The girl looked over at Xena, then back at Gabrielle. "Are you gods?"

"No."

“Yes.”

Xena and Gabrielle answered together, then exchanged looks. “It’s complicated.” Gabrielle finally said. “Where are you from?”

“Sparta.” The woman whispered. “I died there, in an avalanche.” She said. “I was in Elysia and they came and got me. Now I live here, and serve the gods. It’s a great honor.”

“It’s better here than Elysia?” Gabrielle asked.

The girl moved the tray a little. “I liked being in Elysia.” She said. “But all you do there is wander around and talk to your ancestors, and enjoy how pretty it is. Here, I have a purpose.”

Gabrielle slowly nodded, understanding that at a deeper gut level perhaps than the girl expected. “Are they nice to you here?”

“Oh yes.” The girl nodded. “We’re all nice to each other but..” She looked over her shoulder at the entrance to the temple. “They don’t speak to us. We can get in trouble if they do. That’s why.” She gave Xena an cautious glance. “I don’t want to get into trouble. They may send me somewhere bad.”

She got up. “I have to go. Please enjoy what I have brought you.” She slipped past the couches and disappeared into the small door she’d entered through, leaving Xena and Gabrielle alone in the waiting room again.

“Huh.” Xena got up and came over, sprawling on the couch and reaching over to examine the contents of the tray. “Least we’re not going to starve here.”

“What did you think of that, Xe?” Gabrielle squirmed backwards and put her head in her partner’s lap. “Wasn’t it a little weird?”

“What the grapes?” Xena offered her one. “I guess they had to get servants from somewhere. What she said sorta made sense.” She admitted. “I always wondered what you did once you got to Elysia.”

Gabrielle tried to remember her very brief visit there. She thought she recalled it being green and peaceful, a little like their walk up to the temple had been, full of sweet flowery scents and warm sunlight.

She remembered seeing her uncle there, and how surprised he’d been at her presence. She never thought about what it would have been like to stay there but now that she’d heard what the girl had said, she wondered. “You think people get bored there?”

“Where, Elysia?” Xena bit into a peach and munched it contentedly. “Never crossed my mind.” She said. “Never thought it would be something I’d have to worry about, to be honest.” She bit off a chunk and leaned over, feeling Gabrielle raise her head a little to take it from between her teeth.

Gabrielle chewed the bit of fruit and swallowed it. It tasted wonderful. “If we’d ended up in Elysia, you think we’d have found a way to get into trouble?”

Xena smiled at her, a frank, sexy grin that lit up her eyes.

“Yea, me too.” The bard chuckled. Then she got up and went back over to the window, gazing out it again as more people walked by. “Why do you think they won’t talk to them, Xe?”

“The gods?” Xena came over and peered over her shoulder. “Beats me. You’d think they’d welcome a chance to get a change in the conversation once in a while just talking to themselves.”

“I’m sure they’ve got... well, people who sing and entertain them, right? Storytellers?” Gabrielle mused. “Or is that different?” She sat down in the marble opening and regarded the outside. The waiting room they were in was at the top of a little slope, which then went down to the path the

servants were walking on. “Hm.”

“Got a story you want to tell?” Xena eyed her knowingly. She sat down on the opposite side of the opening and extended her legs across it.

“Me?” Gabrielle mimicked her. “How about I tell you a story. That work for you?”

“Sure.” Xena watched her partner carefully position herself so that she was facing the marble wall outside, which would catch and bounce her voice out over the grass.

As a bard, Gabrielle had grown to really know her business. She had become savvy in the ways of gaining and keeping an audience, and understood just how powerful her spoken word could be if she really wanted it to.

They were already attracting attention outside. The two of them sitting in the window was evidently an odd enough sight that even the men and women hurrying to their work slowed and paused, watching them.

“Let’s see.” Gabrielle cleared her throat a little, idly catching a grape her partner tossed over at her. “Should I tell the one about the Titans?”

Xena chuckled, low in her throat.

“I think I will.” Gabrielle popped the grape in her mouth and made short work of it. Then she launched into the tale, taking a parenthetical moment to introduce her erstwhile audience to the tale knowing full well Xena needed no such reminding.

Surely she remembered it. But the figures walking by wouldn’t, and so she shaped the words to tell them about what the story was, and who it involved, and why they’d want to listen to it.

As she moved into the body of the tale, she focused her attention on Xena and watched her partner’s face, the blue eyes flicking past her as Xena watched the crowd.

Her ears were cocked. She could hear footsteps slowing after a handful of minutes and she projected her voice a little more, watching the faint grin begin to tug at Xena’s lips.

“And then, before I knew what was happening, the Titans woke up..”

Xena had the best view. She not only could see the warm sunlight on her partner’s face, she could see the crowd starting to gather, pausing to listen to the bard’s words, and stopping as they rang out against the marble walls.

They were afraid. Many looked over their shoulders anxiously, but stood still anyhow shifting their weight from foot to foot. A wagon stopped rolling and it’s driver hopped off, coming over to see what the disturbance was, meeting Xena’s eyes as he edged through the crowd.

Xena’s hair almost stood up straight as she realized she recognized the man, and after a brief, startled second, he recognized her.

His eyes lit up and he gave her a big grin.

Xena drew in a breath, finding herself shaking a little as the truth of where she was now really came home to her. She gave Alain a little wave, her mind erupting with the image she still had of carrying his broken body to the pyre in what had been left of Potadiaea.

Her skin prickled.

She felt as though she was waking up, after a long sleep.

Gabrielle cocked her head in question, then turned to see what Xena was looking at, her voice almost breaking as she, too, recognized her childhood’s old friend.

He settled in the grass cross legged, listening, and after a brief pause others joined him.

Gabrielle eased herself around to face them, pulling her legs up under her and addressing them directly as she kept glimpsing others pausing to listen and imagining she recognized more than a few.

She hoped she wasn't going to get everyone in too much trouble.

**

Continued in Part 26

A Queen's Tale

Part 26

Gabrielle saw the stern face and the fancy toga just as she was finishing up her story and she made a point of catching the man's eyes and folding her arms as he drew a breath and showed every sign of wanting to shout at them.

He paused, and clasped his hands in front of him instead, though his face was profoundly disapproving.

Next to her, Xena chuckled soundlessly, the faint vibration translating through the hand she had resting casually on her partner's leg.

"So that's how that happened." The bard concluded, to a round of enthusiastic applause. "Glad you enjoyed it." She kicked her heels against the edge of the window she was seated in, pleased with the response.

Now, the man in the toga clapped his hands. "You are expected." He said, loudly, as the crowd started to move and those who had seated themselves hurriedly stood up. He waited for them to begin walking towards the road again before he started through the crowd towards where Gabrielle and Xena were sitting.

"Alain." Xena called out, as their old friend hesitated. "C'mere."

Grinning gladly, he trotted over with out hesitation ignoring the scowl from the man in the toga. "Hey!"

It was a hard mixture of emotion to take. Gabrielle slipped off the window and opened her arms as he approached, giving him a big hug. Part of her was remembering that silent, broken form in Xena's arms as she carried him to his pyre, with a sting of remembered grief at war with the honest joy she felt at seeing him again. "Hey there!"

She remembered Xena standing, watching the fire and shaking her head, tears rolling down her cheeks in silence.

"I'm glad to see you guys here!" Alain said, as he released her and was hugged by Xena in her turn. "I knew I would."

So many meanings to those words. "We're glad to see you too." Gabrielle said. "Do you like it here?"

"Sure." Alain gave her a sunny smile. "I was in the other place too. It was all right." He told her. "But I like it here better. More stuff to do."

Gabrielle nodded. "Yeah, I bet."

The man in the toga was hovering in the background. Xena looked past Alain's shoulder and met

his eyes. "You want something?"

The man warily came over. "I'm not sure who you are." He said. "But.."

"I'm Gabrielle." Gabrielle promptly supplied. "And this is my partner, Xena."

He fell silent.

"Doesn't she tell great stories?" Alain seemed unaware of any tension. "She's from my hometown. Potadia. I used to listen to her when I was little."

Xena watched his face, catching both fear and envy there. He seemed to be some sort of major domo for the gods, and as such, she figured Alain was under his charge. "Scram." She told him. "We'll send him over when we're done talking to him."

The man stared at her hard, and Xena stared right back. He averted his eyes after a few seconds of this, and nodded. "As you wish." He turned and started back towards the road, not without a look at the wagon Alain had left sitting there.

"He's gonna be mad." Alain said. "He yells a lot."

"If he does, tell him he doesn't want to hear me yell." Xena smiled. "And he sure doesn't want to get me mad."

Alain grinned back at her. "It's okay." He sat down on the window edge between them. "He just yells. Nothing else."

"Ahh, all talk huh." Gabrielle said. "It's really great to see you, Alain." She hesitated. "I was sorry we didn't get to say goodbye."

"Yeah." He nodded. "It was bad. I heard a noise, then I was somewhere else." He looked at Xena. "I could sorta see stuff but like it was through a glass." He added. "I saw the bad guys, and I saw you comin."

They were all briefly silent. "Yeah." Xena said. "That was a bad day."

"I was sorry to leave pa." Alain said. "I miss him."

Gabrielle felt tears sting her eyes. "I know he misses you too." She said. "But you'll see him some time again, here or in the other place."

Alain nodded. "Yeah I figure." Then he looked at Xena again. "Did you beat up the bad guys?"

Xena's hand clenched, a little. "Yes, I did." She said. "I beat up a lot of bad guys that day." She looked past him. "They paid for what they did to you."

"I just saw a little. Then I had to go." Alain said. "I told everybody you'd beat up the bad guys but they all wanted to go in the door and then.. " He turned to Gabrielle. "Then your papa came over and he said.."

Gabrielle reached out and clasped his wrist. "My father?"

Alain nodded. "He came right after me." He said. "He said we should go fore Xena sent all the bad guys out. We went in the door." He blinked a few times. "It was nice there. Pretty."

It was a little hard to breathe. Gabrielle felt Xena's hand touch her back, her partner's thumb rubbing the edge of her spine lightly. "That's wonderful, Alain." She murmured.

"Anyhow. I should go help." Alain stood up. "I'll see you guys lots now, huh? You going to tell stories in the big room?"

Gabrielle looked up at him. "Maybe." She said. "We'll see."

He waved, and trotted off, going over to the wagon and taking hold of the bridle of the white oxen pulling it, whispering into the animal's ear and pointing his thumb over his shoulder at the still seated women.

"You okay?" Xena asked, after a long moment of silence.

The bard shook her head a little. "Wow." She sighed. "I wasn't expecting that."

Xena swung her legs inside the room and caught Gabrielle's hand. "C'mon." She led her back over to the long couch and they sat down together on it, leaning back.

Gabrielle half turned and wrapped her arm around her partner's waist. Then she put her head down on Xena's shoulder and exhaled. "What do you think of that, Xe?"

"What do I think of that?" Xena mused. "I think we were way too worried about me getting into Elysia, that's what I think."

Gabrielle lifted her head and peered at her partner.

"You asked." Xena said, bluntly.

The bard put her head back down. "I don't know whether to be really happy, because I think in the end he was okay and because he and my mother will be reunited or really angry because what he did to me, and to Lila just.."

"Wasn't that important?" Xena put her arms around her.

"Something like that, yeah." The bard murmured. She thought for a few minutes more. "I guess I'm going to be glad. There's nothing I can do about it anyway." She snuggled closer. "Did you like my story?"

"Don't I always."

"No."

Xena smiled. "Yes, I did." She admitted. "Was there a particular reason you told a story where the gods were at a disadvantage in front of everyone on Mount Olympus?"

Gabrielle chuckled.

"Troublemaker."

"Takes one to know one." The bard relaxed. "I'm glad we saw Alain, Xe. I felt so bad about what happened to him. It's nice he's having a good time here."

"Yeah, me too." Xena agreed. "He's a good kid." She rubbed Gabrielle's back idly. "Wonder how long the'yre gonna keep us waiting here?" She craned her neck and looked at the inner doorway. "Maybe we should go back there and poke them a little."

Gabrielle buried her face into Xena's chest. "And she calls me a troublemaker." She muttered.

Xena laughed. Then her ears twitched and she turned her head, spotting a figure standing in the window. "Something we can help you with?"

Gabrielle stayed where she was, savoring the sound of her partner's heartbeat under her ear. Things seemed to be getting strange and random again, after a bit of normality she'd gained telling the crowd her story.

Seeing Alain..

Strange. Just like hearing her father was in Elysia was strange and gut twisting and made her feel upset and uncomfortable.

She just wasn't sure if that was because she still had hard feelings about him, or if she was pissed off he got to be there.

Gabrielle thought she'd forgiven him.

"I am a messenger."

Gabrielle opened one green eye and lifted her head, to observe the man cloaked in a soft, white fabric like theirs. "Never liked that saying." She shifted and sat up, as Xena also sat up and parked her elbow on the back of the couch, watching the man warily.

He didn't seem scary. He had a rugged, honest face and the cloak hood was down around his neck, not framing his head. "I have been sent by the watcher of the portal to Elysia. He wants you to know there are those within who wish speech with you."

Xena's eyes narrowed. "With who?"

"With you, Xena of the Sword." The man replied in a courteous tone. "They are known to you."

Xena's nape hairs lifted. She could think of any number of good souls who might be there who would want to have a word or two with her. "Like who?"

She felt Gabrielle's hand, startlingly warm, come to rest on her stomach.

"It is not mine to say." The man said. "Come, or do not. I merely bring the message."

"Can I come too?" Gabrielle asked.

"You may go." The man answered. "But you will not return. Once you pass into the realm of Elysia, you must stay there."

"Must?" Xena frowned a little. "Can I stay there too?"

The man remained silent.

"Can I?" The warrior demanded, as the man merely stared at her with gentle impassivity.

"Maybe we better not take a cha... but what if you don.." Gabrielle put a slightly shaking hand to her head. "Sorry Xe." She murmured, after a moment. "I'm sure it's okay."

Xena rested her head against her partner's shoulder, and exhaled slowly. "Scares the leather off me to separate right now." She admitted. "I just don't know what the rules are here. I could walk through that gate and never see you again."

Gabrielle stared mutely at the dark head pressed against her, shocked to hear her own thoughts so exactly echoed in Xena's deep tones.

"Dying's always made me afraid of that." The warrior went on, then sighed wearily. "Wears on you. Y'know?"

"Xena." Gabrielle stroked the side of her face. "It'll be okay. Maybe... maybe it's your brother."

Xena inhaled sharply.

"I wish I could meet him." The bard went on. "Let me walk you to the gate, okay?" She gently kissed her partner's forehead. "We've lost so many friends over the years. It would be cool to know they were okay."

Xena lifted her head up and tilted it so she could kiss Gabrielle on the lips. Then she got up off the couch and waited for the bard to join her. They walked over to the window where the man was standing. "All right."

The man nodded and backed up to let them exit into the garden, then he quietly led them up the

slop across the soft green grass towards the road the workers had come down.

The wind seemed a little cooler, and the light seemed a little dimmer, with a faint purple tinge to it. Gabrielle and Xena walked along side by side and looked around as they made their way over a small rise and then down a slope.

Faintly, they heard a bell ring. "What's that?" Xena asked.

"The great ones call to join for dinner." The guide said. "The great Zeus gathers his family."

"Dinner." Gabrielle looked around. "Does it get dark here?"

"It does." The man's eyes flicked his eyes at her. "But the gods have commanded the heavens to light up with such brilliance, you wouldn't think it." He moved a little to the left, where the slope seemed to end abruptly and there was a stone gateway there.

It was much smaller than the one they'd seen from the path up the mountain. This was barely large enough for a man on horseback to pass through it, and there were so many glyphs carved into it's surface it seemed ready to crumble.

"Who made that?" Gabrielle asked. "It's beautiful."

"The gods may know. I do not." The guide paused in front of the gateway. Between it, they could see a thick swirl of fog, impossible to look through. "You may both pass, though it was only one who was called." He said. "But it is true, mortal, that you will not return through it. Go to Elysia if your heart wishes it. There is much beauty there."

Gabrielle gazed at the portal. "Only if Xena can stay there with me."

"That is not for me to say. Hades judges here." The man said. "Make of that what you will."

He stood aside and waited in silence.

Xena turned to Gabrielle and took her hands. Then she turned her head towards the guide. "But I can come back through there, right?"

"Yes. The law allows for you to cross between." The man said.

"Can we trust him?" Gabrielle whispered. "This feels like such a trap."

Xena chuckled wryly. "If I don't come back, just come after me." She said. "We'll figure it out from there." She kissed Gabrielle again. "I hope it's Ly. I really would like to see him."

Gabrielle smiled, but after a second, it faltered. "If ... if you see Solon."

Xena squeezed her hands. "I'll give him a hug for you."

"Tell him I'm sorry." Gabrielle got the words out in a rush. "Please."

Xena gave her a hug, then she patted Gabrielle's cheek and released her, turning and heading for the gateway. About to step through it, he paused and regarded the guide. "If this's a trap." She said. "There aren't enough levels in Hades to keep me from getting back here and finding you."

The man blinked benignly at her. "Safe passage." He said. "There is no deception here."

Ah heh. If she had a dinar for every tie she'd heard that... Taking a breath to steady the nervousness in her gut, Xena stepped forward between the arches, and disappeared into the fog.

Gabrielle sat down on the grass, glad to feel it soft and dry underneath her. She pulled up a blade of it and split it in half, putting one half in her mouth and chewing it.

She could no longer sense Xena. It was hard to realize that, and still keep her breathing even, and her body where it was instead of plunging into the fog after her partner.

But it wasn't the soul rending grief she'd known before. This was just a quiet emptiness that made her uneasy rather than insane.

She hoped it was over quickly.

"Don't you wish to go with your friend?" The doorwarden asked.

"Sure." Gabrielle glanced up at him. "But if I get stuck there, and she gets stuck here, we're both going to be really unhappy."

"Why?" His face was open and curious. "Do you not want to spend your eternity in Elysia? It's beautiful there." He looked around. "And to be taken into the immortals.. your friend should be so honored."

The bard chewed her grass bit. "If I told you we'd both rather stay together in Tartarus than be here apart, you'd probably think I was nuts."

"Yes, I would." The man said honestly.

"Maybe we are." Gabrielle smiled briefly. "But I wouldn't want to be anywhere without her."

The doorwarden studied her. "We all have left loved ones behind." He said. "It's hard, at first. I remember it. I missed my wife, and my children very much and I know they missed me as well."

"Mm." The bard looked past him. "Yeah, I miss my little girl a lot."

"But after a bit, that fades." The man said. "Their lives go on, and you find other things to think about, and soon you feel the peace of Elysia and it is good." He met her eyes. "You don't seem like someone who has known much peace, Gabrielle."

Gabrielle thought about that. "I don't think that's true." She said. "I've known many times of peace, they just don't usually last too long." She added. "That makes them all the sweeter though. You can't appreciate the good times if you don't know what the bad ones are like."

The man started to answer, then he stiffened and knelt, averting his gaze. "My lady."

Gabrielle half turned to see a beautiful winged horse approaching, its delicate features almost glowing in the fading light. On his back was Artemis, her expression frosty and taut with displeasure. The bard decided to stay where she was, but she turned to face the patron of the Amazons with her legs pulled up crossed under her.

Artemis here looked different than she had in the forest. Gabrielle watched as the goddess guided the halterless horse to a halt and stared down at her. Draped in silvery white fabric with gilded threads she also wore a belt with a golden hilted knife and a sword on her back.

She had a fine boned face, and reminded the bard of Hera but she had a strong, uncompromising brow that looked more like Zeus.

"Mortal scum." The goddess addressed her.

"Hi." Gabrielle felt she was simply too freaked out to be scared. "My name's Gabrielle, by the way. It's nice to meet you when you're not trying to kill me or my friends."

Artemis stared at her. "My father has sent for you to be judged." She said. "Though were it up to me, I wouldn't have him bother with you. I would judge you myself."

Gabrielle didn't get up. "I'll be happy to come with you as soon as Xena gets back." She said. "Though for someone who is supposed to protect the Amazons, you do a pretty lousy job."

The doorwarden had frozen in place, staring at the grass.

“You dare.” Artemis said.

“Yeah.” Gabrielle hiked up one knee and rested her arm on it. “That’s how I ended up with Xena as my soulmate.”

Artemis dismounted and walked over to stand over her, one hand resting on her golden knife.

“Amazons were being pulled into this to be offered for bait.” Gabrielle met her eyes steadily. “Why weren’t you protecting them? Why did you let Athena do it?”

The goddesses head cocked to one side slightly. “Because we knew it would draw you and your creature out.” She said. “They live for war. It would be a honor for them to die in one.”

Gabrielle’s jaw moved, the muscles bunching and relaxing. “Even though they worship you?”

Artemis shrugged.

The bard nodded slowly.

“But what matter to you?” The goddess went on. “You are no Amazon.”

At one time, it would have stung. But now, Gabrielle merely smiled. “That’s true.” She agreed. “But I love some of them dearly, and I care about what happens to them.”

“I don’t.” Artemis said. “Now, you will come with me to face my father, willing or not.”

“Soon as Xena comes back.” Gabrielle said.

“She’s not coming back.” The goddess smiled unpleasantly. “She’s gone to Elysia. May they have joy of her.”

“She’ll be back.”

“You little fool.” Artemis lifted her hand. “Do you really believe she would give up paradise for you?”

“Yes.” Gabrielle replied with utmost certainty. “Because I have for her.” She slowly stood up. “Is that why you separated us? Get her over there, so you could bring me to be judged without her?” She put her hands on her hips. “That would be like you guys. You never have been fair.”

Artemis stared at her. “Every word you say makes your doom more certain, mortal.”

“Story of my life.” Gabrielle lifted her chin a little. She saw Artemis’s hand twitch, and a blue glow appear. “Go on. Demonstrate your courage there. Blast someone who can’t defend themselves.”

Artemis’ eyes narrowed.

“You want to know why we mortals have started to not believe in you?” Gabrielle glared right back. “You’re not worth it.” She took a step forward. “So as soon as Xena gets back, we’ll come over there and see how this judging thing works out.”

“They only reason I don’t turn you into nothing, is my father wishes to speak to you.” The goddess said. “You refuse him? Very well. Wait then. You can take no step away from this place unless your creature returns, and she will not.” She lifted her hand and a second later, a searing red line encircled Gabrielle. “When the dark, and your hunger comes, remember your rudeness to your betters.”

She turned and snapped her fingers, disappearing in a flash of purple light.

Gabrielle let out a held breath, and licked her lips. “I think that was stupid.”

“You are very stupid.” The watchman informed her. “What did you hope to accomplish?”

The bard held her hand near the glowing red, and then moved it back when she felt the itchy pain start along her skin. She moved back from the line and settled in the grass again. “Personal satisfaction.”

“I don’t understand you.”

Gabrielle pulled her legs up crossed under her again and rested her elbows on her knees. She sighed, as the light slowly started to fade around them. “I’m not sure I understand me sometimes.” She admitted. “Maybe it’s just that I’ve lived with Xena long enough to make me refused to accept anyone thinking they’re better than I am.”

The watchman blinked. “The lady Artemis is a goddess. She is the daughter of Zeus.” He said. “She is better than you are, and me as well.” He added. “How can you even say those things?”

How could she? Gabrielle plucked another stem of grass. “Not that long ago.” She mused. “I was climbing up a cliff, with her brother’s dying body strapped to me trying to keep him alive long enough to get him back his godhood.”

She looked up after a few minutes, getting no answer. The man was staring at her. “I guess I just have a different perspective on them.”

The light faded further, and above them the dome of the sky started to display a scattering of stars. The watchman glanced up, then he turned and started to walk towards the palace. “It is time to go to my rest.” He said. “It will be a long darkness for you. Your mind may break before the dawn.”

“Xena’ll be back before then.” Gabrielle said.

He stopped and turned, giving her a pitying look. “I am sorry.” He said. “But those that go into Elysia, don’t return.”

“But you said..” Gabrielle sat up.

“Those such as your friend, they can cross between. They just choose not to. “

A faint smile appeared on the bard’s face. “She won’t make that choice.” Gabrielle said, confidently. “She’ll be back.”

The man shook his head, and then turned and went on his way, walking up the slope and getting smaller and smaller as Gabrielle watched him go.

In a minute, he was gone, and she was utterly alone there in her ring, in the gathering dark, at the edge of Mount Olympus. For a few minutes, Gabrielle just listened to the silence around her, more profound than any she’d ever experienced.

There wasn’t even the sound of wind. Just a stillness as the light faded and the stars came out over her head.

She lay down on her back and looked up at them, awed by the clarity and how dense they seemed here with no tree leaves or clouds to block them. They spread completely over the sky and as she let her eyes wander over them, the patterns of her old friends became clear.

She traced them. No matter how terrible her life had been at times, there had always been these stars to keep her company. To give her dreams.

To remind her of the good times, spent on long winter nights playing the game with Xena and trying to figure out how her friend could see such different things than she did – not to mention cherishing the few times they’d seen the very same thing.

She remembered the night – their night – in the tree, when she'd looked up on a canopy of stars not that different from this one, in that unobstructed view from the top of their mountain surrounded by the magic of their union.

How beautiful that night had been. Gabrielle traced the pattern of the Warrior. How wondrous that moment even though she hadn't known then what it had really meant to both of them.

Gabrielle took a breath. Xena not come back? Xena stay in Elysia and not return for her?

They really didn't know much about Xena, did they?

Of course she'd come back. Then they'd find a way home.

**

Halfway through the foggy entrance, Xena almost turned around and went back. The further she went the fainter her sense of Gabrielle was, and that was making her throat dry and her hands twitch in reaction.

Did she really want to go talk to someone in Elysia? She could easily count handfuls of people who'd have a thing or two to say to her she probably didn't want to hear.

The fog was lightening though, and she could see warm sunlight ahead so she reluctantly kept going, moving through the end of the gateway and emerging into a beautiful valley full of wildflowers and a soft, almost unheard music she caught just at the edge of her ears.

As she stepped clear of the stone portal she was aware first of a sense of peace – stunning enough for her to stop in her tracks and just experience it.

A soft, sweet breeze blew in her face and she felt her entire body relax, aware that for the first time in her life she was in a place where anger, and hatred, and strife just didn't exist.

Here there would be no ambushes, no one would attack her or come after her in revenge. Even the souls she'd put here would smile at her and knowing that Xena felt somberly humbled. She walked over to a boulder and sat down on it, feeling the warmth of the rock's surface against her skin.

She let out a held breath and rested her hands on her knees, wishing Gabrielle were next to her to enjoy the experience. The colorful wildflowers spread to the horizon and she could almost taste the contentment on the back of her tongue.

No one was around, at least within her vision. But off to the left she could hear hoof beats approaching and she half turned on the rock, watching in that direction. A moving figure rounded a curve in the grass and her heart nearly stopped, as she took in the golden coat of the horse running towards her.

Then she stood as the animal approached, kicking up it's heels and shaking it's head in evident, joyous recognition.

Xena reached out to him as he got to her side. "Hey boy." She felt a smile stretch the muscles of her face. "How are ya?"

Long lost to her, the stallion nuzzled her chest, ears flicking back and forth. Iolau's brother, cut from under her in the war and killed as he tried to defend her. "Herc. It's good to see you." Xena gave him a hug, knowing a moment of unexpected joy that he had been brought here as a reward for his short but courageous life.

This was good. Xena scratched his ears, and gave him a kiss on the nose. This was very good. "You having a good time here, huh?"

Hercules snorted and bobbed his head.

“You always did love horses.”

Xena started, as she heard a voice from the dimmest of her memories. “Hello, Ly.” She half turned to face her brother. “I was kind of hoping it was you that wanted to talk.”

Lyceus moved through the wildflowers, parting them with gentle hands as he approached. “Thanks for coming through.” He stopped just short of her. “I guess everything makes a lot more sense to you now, huh?”

Xena leaned back against the stallion’s body, regarding him. “Nothing makes sense to me, except seeing you here.” She answered honestly.

He nodded, taking another step forward and opening his arms. “I didn’t really have much to say.” He said. “I just wanted to give you the goodbye hug we missed that day.”

Without hesitation Xena enfolded him in her arms. “Sorry about that day, Ly.”

“Don’t be.” Her brother answered. “The thing I’ve learned here is, when it’s your time, it is. I’m glad I didn’t have to go through what you did in life.”

Xena closed her eyes and sighed. “Hasn’t been the easiest, no.”

He released her and leaned back a little so he could meet her eyes. “Would you trade with me?”

They studied each other seriously for a long moment. “No.” Xena finally said. “Hard a life as I’ve had, I’ll keep it.”

Lyceus nodded, almost in relief. “It’s beautiful here, Xe. Everything’s nice, and you hear laughter all the time. But you know what? Nothing touches your heart here. I had to stop watching what went on the other side because I couldn’t feel any of it. Couldn’t feel for you.”

Xena’s brows contracted, and she frowned a little.

“I’d watch, and I’d want to be upset, and I couldn’t. You can’t here.” Her brother explained. “And I wanted to. I wanted to cry when you hurt and I couldn’t.”

“Oh.” Xena murmured. “I never thought about that.”

“People try at first.” Lyceus said. “But after a while, the people they love on the other side forget about them and go on with their lives, and we don’t. Then you just let go.” He studied his sister’s face. “But I couldn’t let you go. I always worried about you.”

Xena felt a sudden wash of comprehension. “I guess no place is perfect.”

“No.” Her brother agreed. “But it’s all right here, and I’m happy.”

“I’m glad.” Xena touched his face. “I missed you.”

Lyceus reached up to cover her hand with his own. “Same here.” He said. “There’s a lot of people here, but none of them are like you.”

“C’mon.” Xena consciously tried to lighten the conversation. “Don’t tell me you don’t have girls running after you.”

He watched her face intently. “It’s not like that here.” He said. “We really enjoy each other’s company – but not that kind of passion. Not love like that. Just..” He looked around. “We love everyone.”

Another revelation.

“But I’m happy.” Lyceus concluded. “Come with me? There’s a lot of people who want to talk to you.” He pointed into the distance. “There’s a place we meet at, over there. It’s pretty. Spend

some time with us.”

“I can’t.” Xena said, in a gentle tone. “I need to go back.”

Lyceus turned and took her hands again, this time there was a strange visible relief in his eyes. “Back to Gabrielle?”

“Yes.” Xena said.

“I’m sure she wouldn’t mind if you stayed a little.”

No, Gabrielle wouldn’t if she knew. Xena acknowledged. Gabrielle would probably be heading there right now, tugging her after. But Gabrielle didn’t know. Gabrielle was back beyond that portal, in a scary place, waiting. “I know. But I can’t.”

Now, Lyceus smiled. “Okay, I understand.” He said. “Boy you ended up tall.”

That brought a smile to Xena’s face. “Yeah, took a while to get used to it. I banged my head on a lot of stuff until I did.”

Lyceus pulled her into a hug again. “Go on.” He said. “Thanks for being here.”

“No problem.” Xena returned the hug.

“Xe.” He whispered, cocking his head a little to get close to her ear. “Be careful.”

For an answer, she lifted him up off his feet and squeezed him hard before she let him back down and let go. “Take care, bro.” She put her hands on his shoulders. “You’ll always be a part of my heart and soul, Ly. Never forget that.”

“Never.” He smiled through sudden, startling tears. “Never.”

Xena released him and backed away. “Take care of my friend Hercules here.” She gave the stallion a pat as she moved past him. “He’s got a good heart.” She kissed the horse on the nose, then she turned and walked towards the portal, her senses suddenly prickling as she did.

She sensed motion to her right, but before she could turn Hercules thundered past, neighing loudly.

“Go!” Lyceus yelled behind her. “Xe! Go!”

And she did, obeying her instincts and plunging into the portal, picking up speed and bounding across the space that was suddenly dark as pitch in front of her.

**

She wasn’t expecting the night sky as she bolted out the other side of the portal, hauling herself up as she looked around in consternation.

Instead of the afternoon sunlight she’d left in, now the area was dark and full of silvery shadows, lit only by the brilliant stars arching overhead.

Far off, she could see the walls of Zeus’s palace, but she ignored them as she turned in a circle, looking for Gabrielle, convinced she was as near as her senses told her she was.

A cry alerted her, and she turned away from the path to the palace and started searching around the side of it.

A moment later, she spotted her partner, lying on the ground and writhing in silent agony. With an incoherent yell, she hurled herself in that direction, diving to her knees at Gabrielle’s side and reaching for her as she let out a howl of anguish of her own.

Gabrielle’s body arched in agony.

“Gabrielle!” Xena grabbed the bard’s shoulders and was nearly knocked back off her feet as Gabrielle reacted and grabbed for her back.

“No!! No!! Stop!” Gabrielle yelled, her hands tangling with her partner’s clothes. “No ! NO!” She lunged forward and bowled Xena over, landing on top of her. “NOOOO!!!!

Xena only just kept herself from reacting automatically. She got hold of Gabrielle’s hands as she landed on top of her to hold her still. “Gabrielle!”

“NOOOOO!!!! “ Gabrielle yelled hoarsely. Then the bard’s eyes finally popped open and she stared down with both anger and terror showing.

“Hey!” Xena barked. “It’s me!”

Gabrielle froze in place, blinking rapidly. Then her arms collapsed and she dropped down on top of her partner with a groan.

“Oof.” Xena grunted, as the breath was knocked out of her by her partner’s solid form. “Glad to see you too.”

“Xe.”

Xena could feel Gabrielle's heart hammering against her skin and feel the short, panicked breaths as her partners entire body shook in reaction. “Easy.” She rubbed Gabrielle's back. “Easy hon.”

After a long moment, Gabrielle inhaled deeply, then exhaled. “Damn.”

Xena slid her hand up the bard's back and felt the sweat dampening the hair over her neck. She riffled it a little, and then kneaded the rigid muscles at the top of her spine. “Breathe. Take it easy.” Slowly, she could feel the heartbeat easing where Gabrielle was pressed against her, and the bard's breathing was becoming deeper and more regular.

As were her own.

Xena could remember a time when she'd have been shaking the bard impatiently to find out what had happened to her. Sometimes, the urge was still there, but life experience had painfully taught her that letting Gabrielle talk in her own time was a lot better for both of them.

Especially when there was so much emotion involved.

Finally, she felt the tension go out of her partner's body. “You okay?”

“Don't look at the stars, Xe.” Gabrielle whispered finally. “They start talking to you.”

Xena blinked, having been caught doing exactly that. The pinpoint of light seemed bright and vivid, but had shown no signs of being communicative so far. “Okay.” She murmured. “Is that what happened? Did they scare you?”

Gabrielle exhaled slowly. “They've always been such good friends.” She said. “You know they have, Xe. How many times did we lay there looking up and playing that game?”

“I can't count how many.” Xena studied the points of light with a frown. “Years and years worth. They look the same here. Brighter maybe.”

“They started telling me...” The bard paused. “They told me what an awful person I was. All the stuff I've ever done.” She got the last out in a rush. “Whispering. Xe it was horrible. They were accusing me...” She stopped talking.

Xena's eyes narrowed and her thoughtful expression turned into something darker. “They did, did they?”

“Everything.. with Hope.. Solon...” Gabrielle was crying now. “It felt like I was getting stung by

wasps... everywhere I looked it was another one.. saying... “

“It’s okay, hon.” Xena cradled her partner’s head against her chest. “Easy.”

“All the things I’ve done to you.” Gabrielle’s whisper sounded forlorn, and Xena could feel the warmth of tears soaking through the light fabric on her chest. “How selfish I’ve been.”

“Gabrielle.” Xena kept her voice soft and gentle. “C’mon now. You know that’s all not true.”

“They said I was keeping you from staying in Elysia.” Gabrielle whispered. “That if I really loved you I’d go after you and let you stay there.”

Xena glared up at the stars. “Oh yeah?” She addressed them. “You wanna try that with me, you little bastards?” She could feel the anger ignite inside her, cold and clean and curiously welcome. “Or do you only have the guts to do that to innocent souls like her?”

“Xena, I’m not..” Gabrielle started to protest in a whisper.

“Compared to me you are, kiddo.” Xena informed her. “Gonna contest that?”

The bard fell silent.

“So?” Xena addressed the heavens again. “Gonna come mess with me?” She asked. “Or are you cowards just like the rest of the losers that live here?”

Gabrielle’s eyes popped wide open and she lifted her head to peer up at her partner in astonishment. “Xena!”

“Gutless bastards!” The warrior yelled, at the top of her voice. “C”mere and try that again!”

Not even a whisper of the wind answered here. Only silence.

Wild blue eyes dropped to meet hers in the silvery light. “They were trying to separate us.” She said. “Ly met me in there. He warned me.”

“Wh.. Why?” Gabrielle seemed to be recovering her composure. “They told me... Artemis came here after you went through and said you wouldn’t come back. The door guy said it too.”

“Ly asked me to go with him to a meeting place there.” Xena said. “To spend time with him, and some others.”

Gabrielle studied her face. “But you didn’t.”

“No.” A smile unexpectedly appeared. “He made a feeble attempt to change my mind, but it was like something was making him do it.” She said. “I was afraid if I moved away from the portal, they’d never let me find my way back.”

Gabrielle put her hand on her partner’s ribs and rubbed them slightly with her thumb. “Then.. I did keep you from staying in Elysia, didn’t I?”

Xena laughed. “If you want to look at it like that, sure.” She agreed. “I was glad to see Ly. I saw Hercules too.”

“Hercules? I thought he was on Mount Olympus.” Gabrielle frowned.

“No not... Io’s brother.”

“Oh!” Gabrielle murmured. “I didn’t know animals went there.”

“Me either. Glad he did.” Xena rubbed her back. “Don’t feel bad about it. These bastards were just trying to get to you.”

Gabrielle exhaled. “They did.” She raised a slightly shaking hand to her head. “Not sure how

much of it was them and how much was my own conscience.” She looked off past Xena’s shoulder. “They sure knew where to hit me though.”

Xena eased her over and turned onto her side so they were facing each other. She could see the weary misery in her partner’s face and it made the anger inside her burn a little more brightly. “Sorry.” She reached up and wiped the tears from Gabrielle’s cheeks. “You could have gone back to the palace and waited.. no?”

Gabrielle was shaking her head. “Like I said, Artemis showed up. I mouthed off to her and she put a..” The bard looked around. “It’s gone now. Anyway. A circle I couldn’t get past. She said I’d have to stay out here until you got back.. but she said you wouldn’t.”

“Moron.”

That brought a smile, however faint, to the bard’s face. “Well, I said you would. I pissed her off.”

“I would never have left you here.” Xena said, after a moments silence.

“I know that.” Gabrielle replied. “But it was almost like she was trying to make me think that. She wanted me to go with her and be judged by Zeus.”

“By yourself?”

Gabrielle nodded. “I told her I wasn’t going anywhere without you.”

Xena gently brushed the pale hair back from her partner’s face. She could see the reddened rims of her eyes and now regretted even the few minutes she’d spent on the other side of the portal. “Bastards.”

Gabrielle reached over and touched her fingertips to her partner’s lips. “For a minute... until you woke me up I felt like I was back in that purging hut.” She admitted softly. “They just wouldn’t stop. I couldn’t even find a place to hide from them.”

“You weren’t trying.” Xena gently traced one of her ears. “You were fighting them.”

“No.. no I wasn’t.” Gabrielle shook her head. “Was I?”

“Well, you grabbed me and threw me on my ass.” The warrior informed her. “You were fighting someone.”

Gabrielle’s face took on a thoughtful expression. “Hm.” She turned her head and kissed Xena’s palm. “Maybe I was. I think I might have finally gotten mad, there at the end of it.”

Xena smiled. “So we’re supposed to go there now?” She indicated the palace with a thumb over her shoulder “To get judged?”

The bard nodded. “That’s what Artemis said.”

Xena leaned closer and kissed her. “I say let them wait.” She murmured, sliding her hand up Gabrielle’s bare arm until she reached the knot holding her tunic on. “It’s too pretty a night to waste on them.”

The bard looked into her eyes, a faint smile twitching at her lips. “Xe, wont’ that get us in trouble?”

“Maybe.” Xena loosened the knot, kissing her again. “But we’re on the edge of Mount Olympus, we’re dead, and I just told the gods to kiss my ass. How much more trouble you think we can get into?”

She felt Gabrielle move closer, and the pressure of the bard’s hand on her thigh in answer. Deliberately she shut out all the anger, and focused entirely on the woman next to her, thinking about the love between them and how much she cherished that. “I love you.”

A rush of gratitude enveloped her as Gabrielle responded to the kiss and pressed her body against her soulmates. "I love you too." She whispered, as she slid her hand under the soft fabric and loosened it. "No matter where we damned are."

Xena chuckled softly. She untied the knot and eased the cloth away, exposing Gabrielle's lithe body to the starlight. She cupped her partner's breast in one hand, and felt the soft inhale of breath at her touch, matched to the teasing brush of Gabrielle's fingers against her hip.

It felt right, to do this here on the edge of the unknown. Right to experience this most personal manifestation of their love when everything around them seemed to be working against it.

She kissed Gabrielle deeply, then moved her attentions further down her partner's body as the bard's knee slid between hers and their focus turned completely inward, oblivious of their surroundings.

Brash. Insanely carnal. Xena felt her now bare body brush against Gabrielle's and a surge of heat washed over her.

It felt wonderful. Gabrielle's knowing touch on her felt wonderful. The bard's teeth and lips nibbled their way down the centerline of her body and she heard the low growl as she eased Gabrielle over onto her back and slid her hand up the inside of her thigh.

Their passion built.

It became all about the two of them. Xena felt her breathing shorten as an irresistible pressure grew inside of her and she had to pause as Gabrielle took possession of her in a rare way and sensation ramped up so quickly she barely had time to grab hold of the bard before her entire body felt like it was turning inside out.

Eye popping, and Xena's did, riding a crest of pulsing waves that made her vision blur before she was rolling Gabrielle over to return the favor. The intensity made her shiver. She could feel Gabrielle in her and around her and as she felt strong hands grip her shoulders the bard arched against her and let out a wild howl.

Then they were rolling into each other's arms, out of breath and sweating, savoring the passion and the love that was so evident Xena was sure they were both glowing.

She could smell the grass now and the earth beneath it as though they'd pulled a bit of the real world back into Olympus with them. Gabrielle's head came to rest against her collarbone, and the bard licked a bit of sweat off her skin and looked up at her with knowing, frank passion.

Gorgeous. Xena kissed her on the head. "Feel better now?"

Gabrielle's nose wrinkled up and she grinned. "Do you?"

Xena hugged her. "You know something?" She felt the bard's hands start to gently wander over her. "You and I... we'd never survive in Elysia."

Gabrielle's hands stopped, and she glanced up in puzzled inquiry.

Xena kissed her on the lips, then tilted her head to look back at her. "There's love there, but not this kind."

The bard cocked her head, her brows knitting. "Not what kind?" She asked. "Two women you mean?"

"No." Xena nibbled her ear. "Two anything."

"Huh?" Gabrielle reached up and cupped Xena's cheek. "You mean... what do you mean, Xena?"

The warrior rubbed noses with her. "They don't make love, hon."

“What?” Gabrielle almost sat up. “In Elysia? Are you kidding me?”

“That's what Ly told me.” Her partner confirmed. “Weird, huh?”

“Weird? Xena that's nuts.” The bard protested. “How in the world can it be Elysia if you don't do this?” She stroked Xena's face and their eyes met. “If you don't know this.” She added, in a much softer tone. “You mean they have all those souls there, and they can't share what we have?”

The warrior shrugged.

“Wow.” Gabrielle wrapped herself around Xena's body and hugged her fiercely. “That never crossed my mind.” She said. “You're right. We'd never survive there.”

Xena laced her fingers along the back of Gabrielle's neck and kissed her with casual passion. The darkness around them was now a friendly cloak and even the stars seemed to have dimmed overhead. She felt her partner's fingertips stroking her and surrendered again to the craving for the touch.

It filled her with a rich warmth and a happiness she hadn't really expected, lightening her spirit as she took a moment to appreciate this one, greatest gift in her life.

Did the gods understand love? Xena felt her guts start to clench again. Well, she understood it. So if that put a stamp of mortality on her, she'd take it.

**

They watched it get light from the edge of the portal, Xena's back leaning against it as Gabrielle curled up in relative comfort in her arms. It wasn't as if the sun came up – the sky just faded from black to gray, and then to that indeterminate golden color she'd noticed the prior day.

It was quiet. Far off, Xena could hear soft sounds of work going on, and at the edge of her vision she spotted the door warden heading back down to the portal.

Xena was almost sad to see the light. The dark time had been full of passion and she knew the day would only bring unpleasant confrontation to them.

Gabrielle stirred, and opened her eyes, glancing up before she looked around at the newly bright surroundings. “That was weird.”

Her partner's brow quirked. “What was weird?” She asked cautiously.

“It's not really sleeping.” The bard said. “It's just sort of like day dreaming.” She clarified. “I just kept thinking of you, and all the happy times we've had.” She grinned. “It was nice.”

Xena responded to the grin with one of her own. Then she took one of her partner's hands in her own. “Ready to go face the music?”

Gabrielle lifted their linked hands and kissed Xena's. “Yes.” She said. “Whatever that fate turns out to be, I'm ready to go share it with you.” She said. “Thank you for coming back last night and saving me.”

“Did I?”

Gabrielle smiled. “You know you did.” She uncurled herself from Xena's arms and stretched, both of them glancing around as the doorwarden arrived, clearly very surprised to see them. “Good morning.”

The man blinked at her. “You came back.” He stared at Xena. “You came back, from Elysia.”

Xena stood up and likewise stretched, flexing her hands. “Sure I did.” She said. “I said I would. Don'cha remember? I told you if this was a trap I'd come back and find ya.”

He blinked again. "You did."

With no warning, Xena pounced on him and grabbed his tunic, turning and shoving him against the portal. "So I'm back. And it was a trap."

The man's eyes grew wide. "W.."

"They tried to keep me there." Xena lifted him up easily. "So now I'm gonna take it out on you."

Gabrielle folded her arms and watched her partner with a bemused expression. She knew Xena's body language more than well enough to know the warrior wasn't really going to hurt the guy – and anyway, how do you hurt people who were already dead?

"N... no. I told the truth!" The man said. "There was nothing to keep you from coming back!"

"Then why did you tell me she wouldn't?" Gabrielle asked. "Remember? Before it got dark? You told me she'd stay there."

"They all do." The man was swinging in Xena's grasp. "No one comes back, who goes there!"

"But the workers here all came from there." The bard said.

"That's different."

Xena let the man down. "Why is it different? They came through the portal."

The door warden tugged his tunic straight. "They are called." He said. "They must come when they are called, then we let them through here. It's not the same thing! They're coming here. Those of us who belong here... if we go through, we stay."

"So you're not from there?" Xena asked.

"NO." The man said. "Those who work, come from there. That is all." He straightened. "I was brought here by the lady Athena." He said. "I never came through there." He pointed at the portal.

Gabrielle walked over to stand next to her partner, giving the portal a thoughtful look. "It sounds like Elysia's there for the purpose of getting people to serve the gods."

"Of course." The door warden looked at her like she was simpleton. "Those who are obedient, and who worship the gods well go there to wait, until they are called. Their reward is to serve."

Xena and Gabrielle exchanged long, silent looks.

"Learn something new every day, huh?" The bard finally said.

"Uh huh." Xena grunted. "I guess all the grumpy rebellious types go somewhere else."

"Why are you here? The lady Artemis said you were wanted by the great lord Zeus." The man said.

"Didn't you go to him? You said you would do that when this one got back." He edged away from Xena.

"We're going now." Gabrielle fit her hand in Xena's. "We just had something better to do last night. C'mon, Xe."

They left the man gaping.

They walked up the slope towards Zeus' s temple, the fresh, gentle breeze lightly fluttering the cloth they were wearing. No one was in sight and they strolled across the grass back towards the low marble building in silence.

When they were almost there, Gabrielle sighed. "You know something, Xe?"

“What?” Xena thought she heard the sound of thunder.

“I wish sometimes we didn’t learn about stuff.” The bard said. “I don’t think I wanted to know that about Elyisia. I wanted to be happy for everyone who went there.”

The silence was almost eerie. Gabrielle craned her neck as they walked across the grass, looking for signs of the people from the day before. Where there had been men and women walking in the distance, now there was nothing but emptiness, save a soft rumble in the background.

Where was everyone? They hadn't gone back through the portal, they would have seen them unless... Gabrielle felt a faint blush. Unless they'd gone back the night before, passing the two of them in their oblivious ardor.

And it had been oblivious. They'd been so involved in each other she was pretty well convinced that whole Spartan army they'd left back outside Therma could have marched by and she wouldn't have noticed.

Wow. What a night. Gabrielle felt a flush coming to her skin just thinking about it. They hadn't been that wrapped up in each other for that long since.... She paused, and thought. Since that night in the tree, matter of fact.

It felt a little like that had. Like she was going through a crossroads in her life as surely that night had been before both of them. Except they were no longer in life, were they? Or were they? What really was life and death, considering what she'd seen here? Was death just a door into some other place, and if it was, and they were.. where would they go from here?

Had they really left all they'd ever known behind? All their friends, and family... would she truly never see Dori again?

Was she a ghost? Or something else? What was Xena?

Xena was a demigod. Gabrielle glanced at her partner, who was extending a hand to her as they came to the windowsill they'd left through. Xena was.. part god. But hearing how Hera and the others spoke of her... did she belong here? “Thanks.” Gabrielle allowed herself to be guided over the wide sill and they crossed from the mild sunlight into the dimmer recesses of the room.

She went over to the couch and sat down on it, watching Xena roam around the room. As she passed through the sunlight from the windows it was easy for the watching bard's imagination to put a glow around her.

The warrior stopped at the inside door, where they'd seen the servant come in the day prior. She opened the panel and peered inside, then backed out and closed it. “What are you looking for?” Gabrielle finally asked.

Xena turned and gave her an appealingly sheepish grin. “I’m just stalling.” She admitted. “I feel like when I did when I was five, and broke mom's mixing dish. Didn't want to face her.”

Aw. Thoughts of glows and godhoods evaporated, and Gabrielle stood up. “I guess we should get it over with though, huh?” She glanced up as they heard another rumble of thunder.

“Yeah.” But Xena continued her wandering, ending up over near the shelf where there were new trays that had pitchers and a covered plate on them.

She went over to it and uncovered a plate of the small cakes. “You could get bored of this stuff pretty fast.” She offered one to Gabrielle.

“Shouldn’t we go into the temple?” Gabrielle accepted the cake anyway, taking a bite of it. “We can only delay this so long, hon.”

Xena poured a cup of the golden liquid and handed it to her. “All the more reason we should get

something to eat and drink first.” She said. “No telling where we’ll end up after.”

“Ah.”

They finished the tray and then faced each other. Xena rested her arms on Gabrielle’s shoulders and paused, just as they heard a distinct rumble of thunder. “Listen.”

Gabrielle let her hands rest on her partners waist. “I’m listening.”

The thunder rumbled again.

“I’m not sure what’s going to happen now.” Xena looked into Gabrielle’s eyes. “But if it turns out bad, I’m sorry.”

Gabrielle smiled briefly. “Whatever happens, happens.” She said. “And if it is bad, just know I’ve savored every single minute of my life with you.”

“Every single one?” Xena’s brows lifted wryly.

“Every single one.” Gabrielle replied firmly. “Even the rotten ones.”

Xena leaned forward and gave her a kiss. “All right. Let’s go.”

They went back down the long corridor that led to Zeus’s palace, as the walls started to echo with loud rumbles. “Whats that?” Gabrielle asked, after a moment. “Are there storms up here? Or is that down below?”

“Don’t now. Xena rubbed her ear. “Getting louder?”

It was. As they got closer and closer to the temple, the sound got progressively louder, until Xena was holding her hands over her ears in true discomfort.

“It s coming from the temple.” Gabrielle got a few steps ahead of her partner, gaining a curve in the corridor that let her see into the room. “Oh my gosh!”

Xena bolted to her side and peered over her shoulder, eyes widening as she saw what appeared to be a thunderstorm happening inside. Bolts of fire were criss crossing the vast stepped opening and every few seconds thunder boomed in counterpoint.

“What are they doing?” Gabrielle edged forward. She couldn’t see the inside of the temple due to the tunnels roof and she flinched, as a blast hit the edge of that making her skin tingle. “Yow!”

Xena dodged in front of her and took a few steps forward, trying to peer past the corner to see what was going on. She could hear laughter, and between the booms she suddenly caught the sound of someone running.

Hands touched her back and she felt Gabrielle press against her, the bard’s head peeking around from behind her shoulder. “Hear that?”

“Xena, I hear all sorts of things that sound like spring rains near our cabin.” Gabrielle said. “What the heck’s going on?”

“Someones running. Looks like they’re having some fun blasting something.”

They both edged forward again and a moment later, the flash from the room lit them both as they got to the end of the tunnel and were able to see the expanse of the temple.

Xena swept her head back and forth rapidly, seeing bolts flashing from at least four spots . From Zeus’s pedestal, and from the right hand side set of seats they’d seen on the way in. The bright flashes made spots in her vision, but she blinked fast, and finally spotted a moving object running across the floor.

“Xena!” Gabrielle had spotted the same thing. “It’s Hercules!”

“I see him.” Xena inhaled sharply as a bolt hit their friend, and he tumbled to the ground. Without a lot of thought she took off running towards him, with Gabrielle right at her heels, the bard having started moving actually a whisker before she had.

She dodged a blast, her senses warning her before it came close and bounced off one of the steps, diving over Hercules just as another blast caught up with them.

“Xena!” Gabrielle’s alert cut through the thunder and she grabbed the dazed demigod and pulled him to one side behind a step just as the marble where he lay was blasted by godfire.

Gabrielle jumped over the step and dove to her knees behind the step also, ducking as a blast hit the top of the marble and sent chips flying. “Hey!”

“Xena.” Hercules rubbed his head. “Get out. Get out of here.”

“And go where?” Xena shoved him back against the marble wall and examined him. “I got my ass dragged up here against my will in case you didn’t hear.”

“Where are you – spineless half mortal!” A woman’s voice thundered, with a laugh behind it. “Hiding?”

“Artemis.” Gabrielle said. She dodged over to the next step and carefully peeked over it. “What a bitch!”

Hercules glanced at her, sandy eyebrows rising.

“Why are they chasing you?” Xena asked, aware that the blasting had stopped.

He exhaled. “Finally got tired of me arguing I guess.” He said. “Listen, there’s a gate I can take you through.. let’s go.”

“Both of us?” Xena said, in a soft voice.

“Hercules!” Zeus’s voice thundered. “Your cowardice shames me!”

Hercules sighed. “No.” He started to get to his knees. “Damn it. “ He stood up. “You mean you aren’t bored yet?” He put his hands on his hips.

Xena stood up next to him. She found herself looking at two goddesses, dressed for battle whose hands were lit with godfire. “I think we know who the cowards are here.”

“You.” Athena’s eyes narrowed.

“Us.” Gabrielle distracted her, getting up on top of the step and making herself the most obvious target. “You look surprised. Did you really think Xena wouldn’t come back?”

“Back from where?” Hercules whispered.

“Tell you later.” Xena walked out into the open, catching sight of Zeus and Hera in her peripheral vision as she crossed in front of Gabrielle and stopped, putting herself between the goddesses and her partner.

To their credit, they did look surprised. Artemis lowered her arms a little, a wary look on her face. “You should be trapped.” She said. “I thought...” The words trailed away after a moment.

Xena smiled. “If that’s the best you can do for a trap, you need to go back to school, kid.” She heard Hercules made a sucking in sound and heard a slight grunt. “Did you really think my brother would sell me out?”

Artemis glared at her.

Xena took a few steps closer to the two goddesses. "So."

Gabrielle hopped off her step and walked over to Xena's side. "So here we are." She said. "Now that you badgered and threatened and put so many people in harms way just to have your fun. Here we are."

Xena glanced quickly around. She could see stern figures lounging on the chairs to the left, but the ones on the right were empty. She couldn't see either Ares or Aphrodite anywhere.

"You insolent.." Athena raised her hands. "I'll turn you into a coal!"

"STOP IT!" Gabrielle let out a yell, surprising everyone. "For goodness sakes! You're gods! Not unfeathered Amazon children!" She balled her fists and planted them on her hips. "We dare? I dare? You maneuvered two armies to go to war with each other and forced us into it for what? A bet? "

She took a step towards Athena. "You were going to slaughter the Amazons." She pointed at the goddess.

"And?" Athena gave her a haughty look. "What are a bunch of ugly mortals to me?"

"And you were going to let her." Gabrielle looked at Artemis. "After how many generations of them worshipped you?"

"That is not your affair." Artemis said. "This is be.."

Gabrielle headed for her. "Not my affair?" She growled. "Not MY affair? " She looked around as though searching for something. "Where's a damn staff. I'm going to beat the ..."

"Gabrielle." Xena caught up with her and circled her with both arms. "Don't waste your breath. They don't give a damn."

"Xena." Gabrielle gripped her arms.

"They don't." The warrior said, aware of motion to her left from the tall pedestal that held Zeus's throne. "We're play toys." She looked up and met Artemis' venomous glance. "They're not patrons anymore. They're bored and we're entertainment."

Athena laughed. "You're smarter than you look."

Gabrielle was briefly silent. "If you don't care about us, why should we care about you?" She asked, finally. "Why should we worship you?"

"Because you're sheep." Artemis told her. "Your creature there is right. You have no purpose. It amuses us to play you on a board, like a gamepiece. Does that bother you mortal?"

Gabrielle blinked. "It makes me sad." She said.

"Sad?" Hera spoke up and they all turned around, to find the Queen of the Gods standing there. "Why sad, mortal? Are you not on Mount Olympus? You don't have to worry about the cesspool you came from."

Gabrielle looked down at the marble for a long moment, then she lifted her head back up. "Sad because those sheep back there are my friends, and my family." She said. "Sad because Xe and I have given everything we had to make that place better, and protect them from bad things." She looked Hera in the eye. "Sad because after all the times we helped you when you came asking, after that, after all the grief and horror we've been through you call us here and tell us it's all a game. Yeah. That makes me sad."

Hera watched her very thoughtfully.

"Knowing I'll never ever see our daughter again.. just because of some stupid game of yours?"

Gabrielle's voice took on a deep edge. "You stupid bastards."

"Father" Athena stepped forward. "Let me take care of this insolence... "

"No." Zeus had been standing by, watching. "Be still." He gave Artemis a look. "And you, who told me these two were in Elysia. Silence."

"Father, I thought.." Artemis protested.

"Silence!" Zeus barked.

Hercules came forward, and put his hand on Xena's shoulder.

"Must you meddle in this too?" Zeus gave him a look.

"Xena's my friend." Hercules said simply. "That's what friends do. They stand up for each other."

"You have spent far too much time with mortals if you believe that." His father said. "But nevermind." He turned to Xena. "The realms of my brother Hades are closed to you, as they are to my son here." He said. "But you intrigue me."

Hera made a sound like a spitting cat.

"So I will make this offer to you." Zeus ignored his wife. "You may join us here on Mount Olympus."

Xena felt Hercules hand squeeze her shoulder. "I see."

"Your companion I will return to her life." Zeus regarded Gabrielle, who was standing very still in the circle of Xena's arms. "Back to her friends, such as they are, and her family." He looked back at Xena. "She will go to my brother's kingdom when her life ends."

Xena felt like time had slowed infinitely. She could hear Zeus's words, and as they penetrated her understanding, she drew in a slow breath, feeling the jolt from Gabrielle as the bard, too, realized what they meant.

"You will only get this chance once." Zeus said. "If you decide otherwise, you will wander in the outlands for eternity. Alone."

Xena remained silent, watching his face.

"You returned my son's godhood to him." Zeus said, apparently feeling there was some explanation required. "And did not take what wasn't yours. For this, I make you this offer."

Gabrielle stayed completely still. She could feel the warm hold of Xena's arms and almost sense the racing thoughts, but she knew in the depths of her heart there was nothing she could say her partner didn't already know.

What could she say? What could she really say and not be lying? Tell Xena to take the offer? It was okay?

Yeah. Sure. Gabrielle let her eyes close, and simply waited.

When Xena did speak, it was almost anticlimactic. "Send me back with Gabrielle." She replied. "I want no part of Olympus."

Zeus gazed coolly at her. "You would give up immortality so easily? "

Xena nodded. "I'd rather spend the rest of my mortal life with her." She clarified, looking him right in the eye. "Than eternity with you."

For a frozen moment nothing moved. Nothing breathed. Gabrielle felt every hair on her body prickle and she got lightheaded, her heart thundering in her chest as she felt the gentle squeeze of

Xena's arms.

It was all happening too fast. Xena should have had time to think.... To think... Gabrielle felt overwhelmed. To think about what? Xena probably hadn't spared more than a half breath on it.

"Why?" Zeus asked, in a mild tone. "Here you would have great power. Perhaps that which you gave up before? That has worth to you."

"Why?" Xena mused. "Because I love her."

To one side, Athena screamed.

Zeus smiled. "As you wish then. Stay here. I have a matter to attend to, then I will return you to your cesspool." He turned and looked at his daughters and raised his hands. "Perhaps you will both learn something."

They both screamed. "Father no!" Artemis begged, just as she disappeared in a blue flash., with Athena a breath behind her.

"What's going on?" Gabrielle whispered.

"Not a clue." Xena whispered back. "Herc?"

Hercules sighed. "Long story."

Zeus turned and clapped his hands. "Summon the banished ones." He ordered. "This tiresome affair is over." He turned and faced Xena, Gabrielle and Hercules. "With no help from you." He gave Hercules a dour look.

His son didn't react. "Just send me back with them." He said quietly. "I miss my friends and family too."

Zeus raised his hands, then paused as a horn sounded. Then he smiled.

**

Continued in Part 27

A Queen's Tale

Part 27

Gabrielle felt a huge sense of dislocation, as though her body was turning inside out and then just as suddenly as she'd left the world, she was back in it – in the same place and time and the darkness was closing in on her again and she felt Xena's touch and then....

And then a powerful force yanked her sideways and she was in the air and there was heat and noise and something brushed against her back as she felt Xena slam against something hard.

Then a crack sounded and light flared as the noisome air of the jail was replaced by the smell of salt and tar and she landed on the ground and rolled in Xena's arms down a slope. "Whoa!"

Xena stood up and hauled her up as well, and they rambled down the rest of the slope before they turned and looked behind them.

The jail was in complete ruins. Flames licked up from it on all sides, and there were men running towards it, carrying buckets pulled from the waterfront.

They stared at it in silence, then they turned and looked at each other. Gabrielle reached up in reflex and touched Xena's face, their sudden return so overwhelming neither of them had anything immediately to say.

Xena finally let out a breath. "Whoa." She echoed Gabrielle's earlier grunt. "We're back." She

looked around, seemingly dazed to find the port town around them.

Gabrielle felt a little dizzy. “We are.” She murmured, looking around at the daytime chaos of Thema. “You okay?”

Xena took a breath and released it, blinking a little. “I think so. You?”

Gabrielle nodded. She drew in a breath of air herself, pungent with the smells of the town and shivered as the damp air brushed against her bare shoulders. The sounds of the waterfront were sharp in her ears, and everything seemed just a little too loud.

Just a little too colorful, and overpowering. “Feels a little weird.”

Xena winced at the scream of a gull, and let her body slowly relax from its sudden return to life. Her skin was still tingling from the adrenaline of the building collapse and her heartbeat was just starting to settle down to normal again.

Weird. “Yeah.” She agreed. “Got used to the quiet up there.” She admitted.

Gabrielle glanced around, glad they were hidden in an alleyway behind where the jail had been. She took Xena's hand and clasped it, pressing the back of it against her cheek. “We're back.”

“We are.” Xena agreed, stressing the first word just slightly, and smiled as Gabrielle's eyes lifted and met hers. “Glad we got out of there when we did.”

The bard could feel the intensity of it. “Glad we got out of there.” She answered. “Thanks for sticking with me.”

“Gabrielle.” Xena's voice deepened and warmed, and her expression altered to one of wry affection. “C'mon.”

“I know. It wasn't really even a choice, was it?” The bard said. “It wouldn't have been for me either. But thanks anyway.” She paused. “Even though I don't know what that means for us, in the long term.”

Xena circled her with both arms and gave her a gentle hug. “I don't know either. Lets worry about it when the time comes.”

Classic Xena. Gabrielle had to smile, savoring the rich scent of leather and metal she was pressed against. But she felt more than willing to go along with it this time. “Okay.” She gave her partner a healthy squeeze, then released her. “Let's go find Dori.”

“Good idea.” Xena flexed her hands and shook herself, reaching back to make sure her sword was in place before she gave the burning jail one last look. “Bastard.”

“Don't look gift gods in the mouth, Xe.” Gabrielle put her hand on Xena's back. “At least we're back.” She felt a rush of relief almost make her knees weak just saying the words. “Back where we belong.”

“He could have put us back somewhere else.” The warrior groused. “We could have died all over again in there.”

“But we didn't.” Gabrielle gave the leather covered surface a little scratch.

“No.” Xena finally started to walk towards the path that would lead them back up from the waterfront. “I moved fast enough this time.” She flexed her hands again. “Least he didn't put me back with all those damn bruises. Gave us a chance.”

Gabrielle drew in a breath. It was too much to take in all at once, so she spared herself a moment to consider her own condition and realized she didn't feel all that different than she had up on Mount Olympus.

Well, that made sense. Their odd journey had erased the long trip from her bones, and the hectic heroics from Xena's. At least it had done them that good.

At least. "Xe?"

"Hm?" The warrior guided her towards the steps, putting a hand lightly on her back as they started up. Then she paused and grabbed Gabrielle's arm. "Hold on."

"What?" Gabrielle looked around, then up at her partner. "What are you doing?" She felt the feather light touch of Xena's fingers on her neck, then on her back. "Xe?"

"Your scars are gone."

Gabrielle felt a shock travel up her spine. "What?"

"The one here." That touch, on the top of her neck where she'd fractured a bone in the valley. "And here." Another, across the lower part of her back where she'd gotten cut in the war. "Gone."

Gabrielle reached up and felt her own throat, where one of the oldest of her injuries was and felt another chill as her fingers touched nothing but smooth skin. "Wow." She looked up at Xena, then just as suddenly looked down at the warrior's bare thigh, reaching out to touch a spot. "You too." She traced a line where a jagged white line had been for as long as she could remember.

The warrior straightened a little and looked at her arms, turning her hands over to look at the palms only to find unmarked skin everywhere she could see. "That's gonna be a little hard to explain."

Gabrielle glanced around, realizing they were being watched by many curious people. "Okay, well, let's go talk about this inside somewhere before someone comes and asks us what we're doing." She felt distinctly unsettled.

"Wonder if Herc came back too." Xena spotted Dori's pony near the stables, and a short figure next to it, and she let out a silently held breath. "There she is."

Ephiny was standing next to her and spotted them as they came up over the rise. "There you are." She echoed. "What's going on? We heard the alarms."

"Mama." Dori turned and saw them. "Dere you are!" She rambled over to them as Gabrielle dropped to one knee and threw her arms around her mother.

Gabrielle felt Xena's hand on her shoulder as she came close to losing her composure. She wrapped her arms around her daughter and hugged her tightly. "Hey honey."

"Mama, Wusty found a birdie and he chased it!"

Like nothing happened. Gabrielle reluctantly released her. "Did he?" She said.

"He sure did." Ephiny came over. "A pelican." She added. "Chased the damn thing all the way down the waterfront with all of us chasing after her. Pretty funny." The Amazon grinned.

Dori started climbing up Xena's tall body. "Pretty birdie, Boo." She got a handful of leathers, then giggled as Xena reached down and picked her up, cradling her against her chest. "Pretty! Big fevvers like mama likes."

Xena hugged her. "We'll have to go see if we can find it again, huh?" She silently savored the sound of the fluting voice, and the wriggling energy.

"Yes!" Dori nodded vigorously. "You go ride wif us Boo? You said!"

"Sure."

"There was a.. fire." Gabrielle got to her feet and faced Ephiny. "The jail burned down."

“Yeah?” Ephiny's pale brows hiked up. “With our friends inside it?”

Gabrielle nodded. “We tried to help but...” She shook her head. “It all happened too fast.”

Which was the truth. They had gotten involved too fast, threw themselves into a fight too fast, and gotten caught for once. Sometimes that did happen to them. Usually it was for a good cause.

“Hey listen! No harm to a hair on your head for that pair of bitches!” Ephiny waved her hand back and forth. “Not worth it! I'm telling you, Gabrielle. I spent three days tied to an iron post because of them.”

“Yeah, I know..”

“No, you don't.” Ephiny stepped closer and put a hand on her shoulder. “I mean it, your majesty. They were not worth your sweat.” She said, in a serious tone. “I heard on that ship, you know? That one of those criminals – Xena threw herself off the ship in a storm and went and rescued him from those rocks. And they tried to kill her. It's nuts, Gabrielle.”

Gabrielle steered her over to the well and they perched on it, watching Xena play with Dori. “We don't usually plan that stuff in advance.” She admitted. “And yeah, sometimes it bites us hard.”

Ephiny studied her in silence as the bard watched her partner and child. After a long moment, Gabrielle turned her head and looked back. “You're right.” The bard said. “We should be more careful.”

“Eph... t.. oh.” Pony came to a halt beside them. “Damn! There you guys are. Some people down by the docks thought you were in that fire!” She glanced at Xena, who was bouncing Dori lightly up and down in her arms. “They saw you go in the jail.”

“We did.” Xena confirmed. “Got out the back before it collapsed.” She remembered something else. “Some roughnecks were having a good time with them in there.”

“Ugh.” Pony winced. “Didn't like them but no one deserves that.”

“I think the fire got them.” Gabrielle said, quietly. “It was pretty bad in there. Started very suddenly.. almost like...” She fell silent. “Well, maybe they had some oil in there or something.”

“Lucky you guys got out.” Pony summed up.

“Gen'rl.” Bennu trotted up the steps. “Got that pitch up t'the top yonder. Kids got a big fire started. Hope they dont' burn thesselves up.” He adjusted his sling with a bit of impatience.

Pitch? The warrior was briefly confused. Oh. Right. Cait. Ships. Bluff. “Thanks.” Xena said. “What's the word from the gates? Spartans still behaving?”

Bennu nodded. “Getting themselves sorted.” He said. “Ready to come through.”

“Okay.” The warrior said. “Get all the fighters together in that big square. I want to talk to them before we do this. The barriers ready?”

“Aye.” Bennu replied crisply. “We'll be waitin for ye, Genr'l.” He turned and headed off, towards the road heading to the entrance to the city. (Xena was about to speak, when Iolaus' voice sounded suddenly from the steps of the hostel. She looked up, to see him descending the steps, visibly happy, with Hercules a pace behind him.

“Hey!” Iolaus waved. “Look who I found!” He pointed behind him.

“Ah.” Gabrielle muttered. “Guess he did come back.”

“Guess he got put someplace better than we did.” Xena growled.

“Xe.” The bard put on a welcoming smile and waved. “Long time no see.”

Hercules exchanged wry looks with them. "Sure has been." He agreed. "Hello, longer for you folks." He greeted Ephiny and Eponin.

"Hi there." Ephiny amiably replied. "It has been a while."

Gabrielle leaned close to her partner. "We're not going to tell everyone what happened, are we?"

"You want to explain it?" Xena uttered back.

"No."

"Me either."

Gabrielle let out a little grunt of satisfaction. Since no time had passed, and everything had gone on like nothing had happened, better for everyone if they pretended it had. So as though she hadn't seen Hercules in years, she stepped over and gave him a hug.

She felt him sigh, and as they parted she met his eyes, seeing worry and frustration there. "Good to see you."

He made a face, his back to the rest of the crowd so only she could see it. "Gonna introduce me to your new family member?"

"Sure." Gabrielle turned. "This is Rusty the pony." She scratched the animal on the forehead. "Isn't he cute?"

Hercules cleared his throat, but chuckled.

"And this is our daughter, Doriana." Gabrielle completed the introductions, turning and tweaking Dori's booted foot. "Dori, say hello to our friend Hercules."

"Hi." Dori wiggled her fingers at him, safe in her perch in Xena's arms.

"Hello there." The demigod walked over and waved back. "It's nice to meet you, Dori." He extended one hand and watched as it was grabbed and tugged. "You're a lucky little girl, aren't you?" He glanced at Xena, who was watching with an expression of indulgence. "She's gorgeous."

"We think so." Xena bounced her daughter up and down a little. "And she got to ride her new pony today, didn't she?"

"Yes!" Dori grinned widely. "Wusty goes so fast!"

"Why don't we go inside." Gabrielle suggested, pointing at the inn. "We can bring Hercules up to speed and check in with everyone before all the stuff starts."

"Mama, I'm hungry!" Dori announced. "K'n we get some fishes?" ("And we can get Dori some lunch." Gabrielle concluded.

They put Rusty in the barn and trooped up the steps into the inn's main room, where a lifetime ago Xena remembered having breakfast. She set Dori down on one of the benches and sat down next to her, resting her arms on the table as her little gang sorted itself out.

Hercules came over to share her bench. "Hi."

"Hi." Xena watched Gabrielle go over to rummage around at the table they'd set all the found food onto. "So what actually happened? This war stopping?"

Hercules sighed. "You tipped the balance." He said. "They were trying their best to make this the showdown. Athena was all pissed off you broke up her Amazon scam."

"Screw her." Xena said bluntly. "Pair of stupid whore bitches."

Hercules eyed her.

"I've had it up to here." Xena put her hand up to the level of her beautifully shaped eyebrows.

"Anyway." The demigod cleared his throat. "When you showed up and cut the deal with the Spartans, everything went nuts up there. They convinced Zeus you were interfering with their contest and then Ares and Aphrodite got into the mix saying you couldn't care less about them and the next thing I knew Zeus decided to call you up there."

"Boo, look!" Dori displayed a piece of pear. "Mama got dis. You want some?"

"You go ahead, munchkin." Xena ruffled her hair. "I'll get mine later."

"Then after you met with him." Hercules accepted a mug of cider from a tray Gabrielle held out. "Thanks."

"Here." Gabrielle handed Xena a pocket sandwich and gave one to Dori. She sat down next to Xena and took a bite of her own, chewing it with stolid enjoyment. "You know what? This tastes a heck of a lot better than that stuff did up there."

Iolaus came over and put a tray of bread and cheese down, nudging Hercules and pointing to it. "So. How'd it go?"

Xena and Hercules exchanged glances, and he shrugged a little. "Didn't get much headway." He answered. "But with all the stuff happening here, I didn't have to. Thanks to our friends." He lifted his cider mug in Xena and Gabrielle's direction.

"Well, I gotta say – Xena said for me to stick with her and I'd end up seeing you sooner rather than later and boy, she was right." Iolaus gave Xena a smile and a toast of his own. "Glad I'm not in Athens." He gave his friend a dour look. "Much less in a dress."

Hercules had the grace to blush.

Gabrielle leaned on the table and peered at him. "What?" She turned and looked at Xena.

"I was going to let him borrow one of mine." The warrior responded. "Been a while since I was asked for advice on how to be a lady."

Hercules covered his eyes. Gabrielle looked from Iolaus to Xena, then she sat back and folded her arms over her chest, visibly struggling to stifle a laugh.

"Hey, they were looking for a woman to lead the army." Hercules said. "I figured at least it might distract them."

"Me in a dress, definitely would have distracted someone." Iolaus agreed. "Y'know, now that I think about it, maybe that would have worked since they'd all have been too busy laughing to fight."

"Well." Hercules slowly traced the handle on his mug with one finger. "I think once this part of the Spartan army sets sail, maybe this war will just peter out." He glanced at Xena. "Their idea was to land in Thrace, pick you up as a leader, and sweep through to Athens, pinning them in the city."

"But we blew their plan." Gabrielle said.

"Exactly." The demigod nodded. "So now all we have to do is let them through, and go home."

Ephiny leaned back on the bench next to theirs, letting her hands drop to her knees in relief. "So it's going to work."

Everyone was focused on Hercules, and he suddenly seemed to realize that. He straightened and lifted his mug. "There's no reason for it not to, now."

Now that it didn't matter to Mount Olympus. Gabrielle nevertheless touched her mug to his and

then to Xena's. Now that the two goddesses who were pushing and prodding their subjects were no longer around.

Now that they weren't the after dinner entertainment.

Gabrielle took a swallow of her cider, savoring the pungent taste. Maybe they'd won this time.

**

Gabrielle managed to get away for a few minutes, ducking into the barn and crossing over to the small area they'd set aside as their own.

Xena had gone to talk to the fighters. Dori was already in the barn busy with her new friend, and she looked up as her mother entered. "Mama, look!" She held up the currycomb the bard knew was from her partner's kit, and then continued to brush out Rusty's coat with it. "Boo showed me."

"She showed me too, honey. A long time ago." Gabrielle went over to see how her daughter was getting on with the job. "He looks so pretty."

"Good!" Dori patted Rusty's neck.

Gabrielle watched her a moment more and then she turned and went over to the joined pallets they'd left only that morning yet a lifetime ago for her. She sat down on the edge of them and exhaled, waiting for her whirling thoughts to settle.

There was a lot to think about, and she hadn't had much time to do any of that. Things were moving too fast.

She looked down at her hands, her eyes moving over the surface of her skin. Even the smallest of her scars had vanished and thinking about that made her feel a little weird.

Getting them hadn't been pleasant. Each one represented some dangerous moment in her life, from the trivial to the near mortal and she'd come to look on them as a visible mark of a lesson learned or a sacrifice made.

To have them gone felt strange. She looked at her shoulder, obscurely glad to find her tattoo still in place, though that had been as much of a painful addition as some of the others.

"Well." Gabrielle touched the skin on her thigh, which once had held the ragged scar of a boar's tusk and now was smooth. "Guess it could be worse." She muttered. "At least it'll make cold mornings better for Xena."

"Mama?" Dori poked her head around the half wall. "Whatcha doing?"

"Just talking to myself, honey." The bard leaned back, extending her legs and crossing them at the ankles. "You know mana does that sometimes."

"Where's Boo?"

"Just talking to our friends." Gabrielle said. "She'll be right back."

"Okay." Dori disappeared back into the stall.

She lay there for a moment just breathing. Sucking in air that smelled of animals and manure, rich and pungent and real. She could smell her own skin, and the salt from the sea, and, nearby the leather saddles that were slung over the divider.

She could feel the discomfort of a piece of straw poking her in the back of her thigh and the sense of being a little tired and it all felt wonderful.

Mount Olympus had been terrifying. Not only because of the sense of sterile remoteness, but because she knew she didn't belong there and there was always that chance she would look up

and find herself in a different place, without Xena.

Just like they'd been taken, and put back. Just like that. Taken from here, and away from her daughter on a whim.

Just like they tried to separate her and Xena, not honestly not through battle but through trickery.

She'd learned a lot about the gods, and Olympus and Elysia.

"Mama, we go home now?" Dori came pattering around the divider and jumped up on the pallet next to her, sitting down with a thump. "Wanna ride Wusty real fast."

"We're going home soon, sweetie." Gabrielle patted her on the back. "Maybe tomorrow, we'll go down to the ocean. You remember that? You and Boo swam all over the place."

"Yes!"

"Then we'll go home with our friends." Gabrielle was looking forward to the trip. "And once we take our friends home, maybe you and I and Boo are going to go on a really long trip. What do you think of that? "

"C'n we take Wusty?"

"Sure."

Gabrielle wished it was already over. She wanted to be gone from Thema.

"Mama I love Boo." Dori commented.

"Me too, honey." Her mother replied. "And she loves us. Did you know she told the King of the Gods she'd rather be with us than stay with him on Mount Olympus?"

"Go Boo."

"Go Boo." Finally, Gabrielle smiled. "Your Boo rocks my world, you know that, Dori?"

"Boo Boo Boo." Dori flopped back on the pallet on her back, and wiggled her feet in the air.

A prickle along her skin made her look up sharply, just as a pink flare happened and then Aphrodite popped into view. "Ah."

"Hey!" The goddess was in a very good mood. "Why'd you take off so soon? You didn't get to party with us!" She bounced around in the air, and wiggled her fingers at Dori. "Hey cutie!"

Gabrielle regarded her. "Got tired of being a pawn and wanted to get back to my kid." She answered honestly. "That sucked."

"Aw c'mon.. you guys did great!" The goddess of love stretched out on her side in thin air. "You aced it! You won the whole pineapple! "

The bard gave her a dour look.

Aphrodite rolled over and put her chin on her hands. "Pissed, huh?"

"When I get torn away from my child, and then have a bunch of bored gods try to separate me and Xe for eternity.. yeah, it gets me mad." Gabrielle said. "Pissed enough to consider spending the rest of my bard career convincing people to find other gods to worship."

"Hey." Aphrodite frowned. "Don't get all radical on me, okay? "

Gabrielle straightened up and rested her elbows on her knees. "So what was your angle on this? Why were you banished?"

“Oh.” The goddess made a flicking motion with the fingers of one hand. “It was a mess.” She admitted. “But you guys were great. You really came through, you know? I was like sooooo tired of hearing those two bitching!”

“How?” The bard asked, in a quiet voice. “How did we come through? I thought they were betting about who could lead a battle better or something like that. We had nothing to do with it.”

“Yeaeaaahh... that’s how it started.” Aphrodite said. “But then when you and your babalicious one skewed that all up, we all got in a huuuugge fight.” She said. “We’re talking like bolts flying everywhere, statue arms flying off, the three headed dog piddling on the altar... crazy stuff.”

Intrigued despite herself, Gabrielle cocked her head. “Fight about what?”

“About you, baby.” The goddess said. “You and your squeeze. I finally got like totally ticked off and told everybody they were all off base and you two put loooooooveee above everything else.”

Gabrielle put her arm around Dori. “We didn’t always.” She said, very quietly.

“Yeah but you’re so over that.”

A faint smile appeared. “True.”

“So then everyone got all pissed with me and it wasn’t lookin good for the Goddess of Love when if you can believe it... my bro stepped up and said, yo.. she’s right.” Aphrodite buffed her fingernails on her diaphanous silk. “Like you could have tripped over the tongues hanging out.”

Gabrielle could well imagine it. “Wow.”

“Yeah, so the bet became, will she or won’t she and baby your baby came through like whoa.”

“She did.” The bard smiled a little more. “She blew me away.”

“Oh please.” Aphrodite rolled her eyes. “Tell me you didn’t see that coming.” She rearranged herself on her floating cloud of nothing. “Daddy was sooooo ticked off. He wanted to see those two fight it out. But he did like your snookie a lot.”

“Mine.” Gabrielle stated.

The goddess chuckled. “So anyway, we’re sorry you had to blast off like that. Bro wanted to gloat.”

“I can imagine.” The bard said, dryly. “We didn’t have a choice, though. We sort of just ended up back here and then almost died again. Wasn’t a lot of fun.”

“C’mon, didncha like our pad?” Aphrodite pouted.

“It was beautiful.” Gabrielle said. “I just couldn’t stop thinking about all the friends I left behind here, and what was going to happen to my little girl.” She gave Dori a hug. “And I didn’t belong there.”

The goddess gave her a sober look. “Xena sorta does.”

“I know. But she decided not to stay.” Gabrielle took a breath, and released it. “So... I’m kind of in a space where I need to find something I believe in that’ll let us be together if that happens again.”

“Hm.” Aphrodite assumed a very unusually serious expression. “You mean that.”

Gabrielle nodded slowly. “I do.” She paused and studied her visitor. “Aphrodite, have you ever been in love?”

Aphrodite blinked a few times, then shook her head rapidly. “Chick, I am the goddess of love.

Remember?"

"I know. But have you ever been in love yourself?" Gabrielle asked. "Really in love, like I am with Xe?"

The goddess inhaled to answer, then she paused. "Why do you want to know? I mean like... of course I know what love is."

The answer was an answer in itself. "Aphrodite." The bard stood, keeping her hand on Dori's shoulder. "Love is a great gift."

"I know." The goddess smirked. "You're welcome."

Gabrielle sighed. "It's been the greatest gift of my life." She said. "But it's also been the cause of my greatest pain."

Aphrodite looked at her a little uncertainly. "We talking whips and chains here?"

"Mama." Dori was apparently bored with all this adult talk. "I'm going to go play with Wusty." She trotted out and around the divider, and a soft pony nicker was heard.

"No whips or chains." Gabrielle walked over to where the goddess was floating. "It's like lighting your soul on fire, Aphrodite. It's intense. It's all consuming. It makes you so happy." She looked steadily at the floating woman. "And when you lose it, part of you dies inside, and the pain of that hurts so much all you want to do is scream."

Aphrodite's face wrinkled up. "Ew."

The bard studied her, and nodded. "So I have to believe you .. and your family have never known what that feels like." She concluded. "Because if you did, maybe you would be a little less frivolous with your mortal playthings."

The goddess stared at her. "You have like no idea what you're talking about."

Gabrielle sighed. "No, you have no idea what I'm talking about." She said. "Aphrodite, can't you all please just leave us alone?" She asked. "I'm tired of hurting."

Aphrodite scowled at her. "Y'know we don't mess you up on purpose."

Gabrielle looked steadily at her.

"Okay, well, I don't." The goddess amended. "But hey, lighten up, babe." She reached over and patted Gabrielle on the cheek. "Maybe now that I've got a couple of mortal sibs, that'll take over the talk around the dinner table, hmm?" She wiggled her fingers. "Gotta go. Bye!" She kapofed out, leaving behind the scent of lavender in the air.

Gabrielle sighed.

"Mama. Look who I found?" Dori called out. "Look!"

Gabrielle turned her head, to see Ephiny standing behind her daughter, with a half stunned and half embarrassed look on her face. How much had she seen?

How much did Gabrielle care? "Hey, Eph." She returned her friend's look. "C'mon over and sit down before any more of them show up." She went over to her bags and hauled one up onto the pallet, rooting inside as Ephiny slowly came over.

"Boom boom..." Dori left her new discovery and went to the hay net instead, tugging some of the substance free and heading back over to her pony with it. "Wusty, got some stickies for you."

Ephiny sat down on the pallet, her eyes never leaving Gabrielle's face. "That was... um.. "

“Aphrodite, yeah.” Gabrielle removed a neatly folded bundle from the bag and set it down. “How much did you get of that?”

The Amazon folded her hands on her knee. “How much did I hear or how much did I understand?” She countered. “I got the last part. That was a zinger. That whole part about being in love and all that.”

Gabrielle got out of her traveling clothes and put on a light but padded shirt on, brushing a bit of grass from the front of it. Then she paused, and sat down. “When that jail collapsed, something happened.”

“Uh huh.” Ephiny murmured encouragingly.

“Xe and I died.”

The Amazon regent blinked a few times.

“It’s all a part of this whole thing with the war.” The bard said. “It all got wound up in some bets between the gods and they brought us to Mount Olympus to talk about it.”

Ephiny looked around, then back at her. “You went to Mount Olympus?”

“Yeah.” The bard said. “So anyway, there was this..” She paused, as Ephiny reached out and took hold of her wrist. “What?”

“What was it like?” Ephiny asked, curiously. “You got to see the palace of the gods? Zeus? All that?”

Gabrielle nodded.

“What was it like?”

What had it been like? Gabrielle got up and went over to the bundle, unwrapping it. “It was big. A lot of pretty grass, and marble, and all that. Zeus’s palace is on the top of a hill, and it’s got places for all the other gods to sit in it.” She said. “We didn’t really stay around that long to be honest.”

Ephiny hiked one knee up and rested her elbow on it. “I guess not, since we didn’t realize you.. um.. were gone.”

“No, Zeus put us back right where we left from.” Gabrielle said. “Only this time we got out. “

“Wow.”

Gabrielle removed her skirt and pulled on a pair of leggings. “I got to see an old friend from Potadeia. “ She said. “And Xe got to talk to her brother Lyceus.”

Ephiny covered her eyes. “That sounds so weird.”

Gabrielle opened the bundle and shook it out, gazing at the coat of leather scale armor a moment before she got it over her head and settled it against her body. “Yeah I know. It’s hard to talk about this stuff because everyone looks at me like I’ve got two heads.” She muttered.

Ephiny put her hand down and watched her friend. “So what did Aphrodite mean when she was talking about mortal siblings? She mean you and Xena?”

Gabrielle looked up from buckling the belt on her armor. Her face scrunched into a half horrified, half amused expression. “Oh heck no.” She shook her head. “She meant Artemis and Athena.”

The Amazon blinked again. “They’re... mortal?”

“I think so.” The bard tugged the armor straight and reached up to free her short cropped hair

from the back of it. “They lost the bet I guess. Anyway, after that they just sent me and Xena back and here we are.”

“Here you are.” Ephiny mused.

Gabrielle sat down to tie the laces on her boots, tucking the leggings inside them. “I figured I’d end up being in the front lines with Xena when that army comes through. If they start shooting at us I thought I’d give Xe a break and not make her work so hard.”

“They’re really mortal?”

The bard looked at her. “I think so.” She said. “So maybe now that they are, Sparta and Athens will forget about the war. They were the ones prodding them into it.”

Ephiny gazed at her friend. Then she put her arm over Gabrielle’s shoulders and patted her knee. “Your majesty? Do me a favor?”

“Uh sure.” Gabrielle half turned to look her in the eye. “Name it.”

Ephiny put her finger over Gabrielle’s lips. “Don’t tell me anymore.” She felt the surface under her touch twitch and saw the wry expression in the bard’s eyes. “At least not until I can have a nice, big, cold mug of ale while you tell me the rest, mkay?”

Far off, a horn sounded.

**

Xena rambled down the steps from the hilltop along the back side of the inn, past the spot she and Gabrielle had been ambushed at. The afternoon sun slanted halfway down the far walls and in intermittently splashed over the warrior’s skin as she made her way down.

She was glad of the few minutes alone before all the craziness started again. It felt good to have the cool air brushing against her, and she barely felt the jar as she moved over the stone steps at a pretty good clip.

It felt good to be alive. Xena smiled at the many layered meaning to the thought. Mount Olympus had been interesting but she’d been unable to really enjoy the experience between her worry over Gabrielle and her anxiety over what would happen back here in the city once their deaths had been discovered.

All in all, she felt she’d done pretty well in the business. She’d learned a little about herself, and a bit about Gabrielle and they’d gotten back in fair shape despite everything.

There were talks ahead, between her and the bard. Xena understood that while she’d always had a sense of the truth behind who she was, Gabrielle maybe hadn’t been so clear and she could sense the bard was disturbed.

Maybe about her. Maybe about her choices. Xena didn’t have it in her to be bothered about either thing since one she couldn’t change and the other she wouldn’t. So what if Zeus had said she couldn’t come back to Olympus?

Boring place. Not her style.

So what if he said she couldn’t enter Hades realm? Let’s see him stop her, if it came down to Gabrielle walking through some door they thought she couldn’t.

So what if Elysia really didn’t seem to be where they’d end up? Who’d want to? Xena almost laughed, feeling an unusual sense of freedom.

She reached the bottom of the steps and dropped off the last one, uncoiling up into a lazy somersault, turning and twisting through the sunbeams before she landed on the road and

reviewed the preparations that had been made.

The main road had been lined with wagons, blocking access to the side streets and funneling all traffic down through the portal that led to the waterfront. Behind the wagons were merchants and workers, busy stacking heavy crates between the wheels and shafts, leaving space between them in the road for four men to walk abreast.

Xena climbed up the sloping surface, enjoying the walk and the surge of energy she suspected was an aftereffect of their experience. She felt almost bouncy, and she started a cheerful whistle as she passed the blockades and spotted the bundles of arrows and stacks of spears on either side.

“Xena.”

The warrior didn’t even feel bad when she recognized Denius’s voice. She paused and waited for him to catch up to her, before she started walking again. “Yes?”

“I owe you an apology.” The patrician glanced to either side. “It seems your plan – it makes sense now that I have had a chance to cool my thoughts and review it.”

“Thanks.” Xena replied.

“I had a chance also to go look at the Spartan army.” Denius said. “It is formidable.”

“Spartans are good soldiers.” Xena said. “They fight and die hard. But their goal isn’t to fight and die hard here in the back end of Thrace, since their initial mission failed and they need to move on.”

Denius nodded. “They thought to take Thrace.”

“Actually they were after me.” Xena replied mildly. “They’d been told by their oracles that the only way they could succeed was with a great woman warrior leading them, and I was the first one they thought of.”

“Are there others?”

“Women war leaders? Sure.” The warrior said. “I’ve known some of the good ones.” She added. “But lately I’m the best known, and unfortunately, they know where I live.”

Denius nodded. “That’s true.”

They arrived at the central square before the gates, and found it full of fighters. Xena’s brows twitched, and she surveyed the crowd – surprised to see many new faces in half and full armor, along with her conscripts and the force Gabrielle had brought with her.

To one side, she spotted Jessan and his cohorts, holding a thick row of logs in place as two of Jens’s men wedged very big merchant wagons on either end. Scattered here and there she saw a few of the Amazons Pony had found, working hard at moving things.

The conscripts were there, in their newly minted armor and Xena could sense the excitement rising as they spotted her. That perked her ego’s interest and she went to the pedestal in the center of the square and bounced up onto it, standing brace legged with her hands on her hips.

Denius came to a halt nearby, and Jens joined him, along with Jessan.

After a moment, everyone focused on her, and fell silent.

“All right.” Xena said. “Good job, everyone. Path to the waterfront looks great.” She looked around. “We open the gates just at sundown. I’ll ride with their commander down to the waterfront.”

The soldiers remained silent, listening.

“Once the army is on the docks, bring all the wagons down to the port gateway and block it.” Xena said. “Then we’ll gather on the heights overlooking the docks until they load onto the ships and leave.”

Jens stepped forward. “What if they turn on us, Xena?”

Xena half turned to face him. “Then we fight.” She swiveled and let her eyes track over the group around her. “We fight, and kill as many of them as we can.”

Jens nodded.

“Guarantee the guy leading them’ll be the first one to die.” Xena added, with a sexy smile. “Because he’s the one who gave his word they wouldn’t.”

She could feel that stir of excitement around her, and she only barely kept from drawing her sword and doing a few tricks for what she sensed was an appreciative audience.

She and Gabrielle had that, at least, in common. “So split up and get behind the wagons. Be ready.” She hopped lightly off the pedestal and headed for the gates, intent on taking a peek out to see how the Spartans were doing.

Denius and Jens hurried after her, catching up as she circled the wagon nearest the gate and paused to study the best place to look out from. Then she shrugged and went over to the gate itself, taking a long step before she reached it and launching up into the air, catching one of the crossbeams.

She pulled herself up and got her feet on the beam, then jumped for the top of the gate, grabbing the spikes that lined it and holding herself up to look between them.

Her fists gripped the iron, and she relaxed the rest of her body, crossing her ankles as she peered out and reviewed the Spartan formations. They had lined the siege engines at the rear, the structures stripped of anything useful – a good sign.

Meant they were leaving them behind. Xena nodded to herself. She spotted the Spartan commander on his horse to one side of the legions, leaning on his saddlebow as he talked to four other men in captains trappings.

The rest of the soldiers were drawn up in marching order, standing or kneeling in place with their gear bags strapped to their back. A half dozen wagons were in the rear, with men around them making repairs. The wagons were covered, and their contents were tied in place with thick brown ropes.

So far, she saw nothing that made her think the Spartans were going to do anything but what they said they would.

However. Xena’s nose twitched. She had a gut feeling they would. They didn’t like to lose any more than she did, and the way she’d set up their pass through the city would feel like a loss to them.

Xena pulled her boots up against the gate and released the spikes, kicking backwards and launching herself up and into a pair of backflips that ended with a twist bringing her to her feet facing away from the entrance as she landed.

“What do you think, Xena?” Denius asked, approaching her warily as though expecting her to bounce off again somewhere without warning.

“They look like they’re packed up just ready to move.” Jens said. “Leaving the big stuff behind.”

Xena nodded, dusting her hands off. “Yeah.” She agreed. “Make sure there are plenty of torches lined along the way down.” She pointed. “I don’t want them to know how many soldiers we

actually have.”

Jens nodded. “A lot of the townsmen joined up.” He commented. “Didn’t know we’d get so many.”
“True.” Denius agreed.

Xena had noticed that herself. She studied a few of the men in armor around her, and liked what she saw. The gear was worn, but had been taken care of, and the bodies inside it looked like they knew what to do with the swords and maces strapped to them.

Curious, she walked over and intercepted one of them. “Hey.”

The man didn’t brace to attention, but when his eyes met hers he straightened up. “Aye?”

“You’re from the city.”

The man nodded. “I own a tavern, mid town.” He said. “Usta be a mercenary though. Retired here, years back.”

Xena studied him. “Lot more like you here?” She asked, in a casual tone.

He lifted one shoulder in a half shrug. “Some.” He said. “Not a bad place to end up in. See things, market’s good.”

This wasn’t a man she knew. Xena acknowledged she’d known a lot of hack fighters in her time, but one of her many skills was remembering faces even after all these years and she didn’t remember this one. In his reaction to her, she figured he didn’t know her aside from her name either.

“Figured I’d put the old stuff on.” He glanced down at his armor, then back up at her, with a rakish grin. “S’prised it still fit. But feels good, you know? You don’t forget.”

He flexed his hand and Xena knew exactly what the sensation he was feeling was. “You don’t forget.” She agreed, giving him a clap on the shoulder. “Thanks for giving us a hand.”

The man grinned. “Same t’you.” He lifted his hand and touched his temple, then continued on with the hank of rope he’d been carrying.

Xena watched him go, and then she turned and started strolling down the row of wagons, studying the men behind them.

“Seems like some good men here.” Jens commented, as he fell in at her heels. “My fellows were glad to see them. They did what they could with the conscripts but truly, Xena, it wasn’t much.”

“No, it wouldn’t be.” Xena mused. “Those kids didn’t want to be here. They just had the bad luck to miss the last set of boats.”

“Aye.”

They passed a couple of the Amazons and two of them paused, and stepped out into the roadway. “Excuse me.” The one nearest to Xena said. “Can we talk to you for a minute?”

A bit startled at finding Amazons with manners, Xena felt her eyes widen as she slowed to a halt. “Sure.”

“Just asking. Is it true our queen and her consort died in that jail fire?” The woman asked. “That’s what they told us.”

Ah. “It’s true.” Xena said.

“Do you know why they were in there?” The second woman asked. “They wouldn’t let us near to ask them.”

“Yes.” The warrior said. “They tried to kill me, and my partner.” She answered. “They set part of the inn at the top of the hill on fire.”

Surprisingly the two Amazons didn't seem surprised to hear it. The closer one, a tall, spare woman with carrot red hair shook her head. “Must have really lost their minds.” She said. “We left a week after they did – tried to catch up with them and convince them to turn back but it was too late.”

“Really.” Xena folded her arms. “Some friends of mine were trying to do the same thing.”

The other woman, a shorter, heavier Amazon with curly dark hair nodded. “Queen Regent Ephiny and her partner. We heard about it.” She said. “It was like they'd gone a little crazy, you know? The emissary from Athens arrived, and then the next thing we knew we were going to war. Crazy.”

“They made a good offer.” Xena said.

“It wasn't that.” The taller woman eased closer. “I mean, yea, the idea of land and all that was attractive, but really what they said was that if our queen went to war with them and got the other tribes to go too, they'd name her the head of all the Amazon tribes in this part of Greece.”

Xena's brows contracted. “What?”

The smaller woman nodded. “Yeah, that was the deal. That's why they were so torked off about meeting up with Regent Ephiny. They thought she was horning in on the arrangement.” She said. “So they figured they'd stick with them, and then get rid of them when they could.”

Xena actually blinked at her in disbelief.

“We thought you should know that.” The taller woman said. “That's probably why they tried to hurt you. They were so hung up on that, even after everything. We heard them talking last night. They wanted to get the town to turn on the Spartans and they knew there's no way they would if you were around.”

“And get themselves killed?” Xena managed to get out. “What did they think that was going to accomplish?”

“Make them heros.” The smaller one said, succinctly. “Get them in with Athens, and all that.” She indicated Jens, who was waiting quietly behind Xena. “That guys knows. If they coulda pulled it off, it would have gotten them in big.”

Xena turned and looked at Jens. “Were you planning something like that?” She asked, in a flat voice.

Jens met her eyes. “There was talk of it last night at the cookfire.” He answered, straightforwardly. “And there is merit in the idea, but no, Xena. I had no plans of such, and would not have let my men join in any such scheme against your wishes.”

Did she believe him? Xena studied the Athenian soldier intently, watching his body language and the pulse point she could see clearly at his throat. “That's good.” She said, after a long pause. “Because trust me. I'll join the Spartans if that happens and a lot people here'll die the hard way.”

Jens took a breath. “Would you truly, Xena?”

“Sure.” The warrior said, with a grin. “I don't owe Athens anything.” She glanced around. “I'm doing this because these people here don't deserve to be slaughtered as part of anyone's power play.” She told him. “And the people who came here with Gabrielle are here for us, not for Athens or Sparta. They'll fight whoever I do.”

Jens nodded. “Understood.” He said. “But Xena, I will not lie to you and say we don't want there to be battle here, preferably under your direction. It goes against everything I am to let those men

walk through here and escape on ships towards my capital.”

Xena nodded. “I know.” She said. “But you’ll have to trust me when I tell you we all win if we hold our swords here.”

The Athenian captain grunted. “I will have to take your word for it.” He said. “Let’s just hope the Spartans do as well.”

Xena turned back to the Amazons. “Thanks for the information.” She said. “I really appreciate it.”

The two grinned at her. “Hey, we know whose favor matters. Better than they did.” The taller one winked at Xena, then they went back to their task.

Ah heh. Xena reached up and pinched the bridge of her nose, then she gestured for Jens to keep walking along the ranks. “Gonna be an interesting night.”

**

“Mama, c’n we take Wusty?” Dori patted the nose of her new friend.

Gabrielle glanced up from adjusting her armor. “Let’s leave him here to rest while we take a walk down by the water, okay? Maybe you’ll find something nice to bring back for him.”

Dori reluctantly left the stall and joined Gabrielle at the door to the barn, blinking a little as they exited into the late afternoon sun. They waved at the Amazons nearby, then started walking down the path to the waterfront.

Gabrielle wasn’t really sure why she wanted to. She hefted the staff she held firmly in one hand and kept walking, arriving down at the waterfront as the sun’s light just started changing from a rich yellow to a golden tone.

There hadn’t been any sunsets in Olympus. So maybe that was why- she wanted to watch that change that marked time the Olympians didn’t care about. “Look Dori – There’s a pelican.”

She indulgently watched her child chase the bird down the dock, its frantic waddling making her grin. She took up a perch on the seawall, bracing one foot up on top of it and wrapping her arms around her knee.

“How will this day end?” Gabrielle mused. “Will this be one of those stories where I end it with a moral? Like, violence isn’t the answer, or is this one of the times I have to remember gory details?”

Off towards the harbor entrance, she could see the hulk of the ship that had brought Xena back, tumbled over onto its side and half sunk. If she tipped her head back, she could see the watchfire on the top of the cliff, dark smoke rising from it from some unknown source.

“Mama!” Dori came running back down the piers. “Look what I found?”

Gabrielle eyed her hand warily. “What did you find? Something nice?”

Dori held up her treasure. “It was over dere.”

The bard took the item and examined it. It was a button, a wooden roughly round shape hand carved with the image of a flower in the center. “Oh my goodness, that’s so pretty, Dor.” She said. “I wonder where it came from?”

“Mama make a story?” Dori asked invitingly.

“You want me to make a story about how this got here?” Her mother asked. “Or who made it?”

“Yes.” Dori nodded. “Mama knows. Mama make a good story.”

Gabrielle turned the button around in her fingers, grimacing at a sudden tightening in her chest

as she thought about the casual request and remembered what it felt like to think she'd never be able to do this again.

Who would Dori have asked for stories? She sighed silently.

"Mama?"

"Sorry honey." Gabrielle managed a smile. "Mama's just had a long day." She studied the button. "Do you know what kind of flower this is? This is the kind of flower grandma has in her garden, isn't it?"

Dori peered at the button. "Grandma has that?"

"Grandma does. She uses it to make tea sometimes. It tastes like pepper." Gabrielle could almost taste the spicy, fragrant beverage, whose pungent steam eased even the worst head congestion. "Okay, I'll tell you a story about how a pelican caught a cold, and his best friend the sailor made him feel better. That okay?"

"Go mama." Dori seated herself on the wooden planks, looking up at her with an expectant grin.

Gabrielle smiled back at her, grateful beyond words that she was here, seated on the hard rock wall in the light of a dying day that could end up in battle and able to tell her daughter a simple child's tale. "Once upon a time there was a pelican named Helican."

Dori giggled.

A soft footstep made Gabrielle paused, as she recognized a familiar presence. She looked up to see Xena settling herself against the wall nearby, her pale blue eyes tinted hazel in the sunlight. "Hey there."

"Boo!" Dori scrambled up and ran over to the warrior, holding her hands up. "Dup!"

Xena picked her up and cradled her in her arms, then she moved up to where Gabrielle was seated. "Hey." She eyed her partner's armored body. "What's that all about?"

"Eh. Seemed like what I should wear for tonight." Gabrielle patted her chest. "Give me a little more protection than two bits of cloth and a complete lack of sense."

Xena chuckled. "You look good in it." She commented. "I'm looking forward to leading the Spartans down here with you next to me."

"Mama, story!" Dori gave both her parents a fierce scowl. "No gush!"

"Aw, honey. I'm sorry." Gabrielle reached over and tousled her hair. "I just wanted to say hi to your Boo. I missed her."

"For all of a half candlemark?" One of Xena's eyebrows hiked.

"Every damn moment." Gabrielle studied her partner's profile. "Aphrodite showed up and freaked Ephiny out."

"Ah."

"I think I pissed her off." The bard admitted.

"Ephiny?"

"No."

"Ah." Xena settled Dori onto the wall, then hopped up next to her. She rested her hands on the wall and leaned her weight on them. "She say what happened to the other two?"

"Mama!" Dori pouted.

“Just a minute, Doriana.” Gabrielle let her voice drop a little, and take on a rare hint of sternness. “You’ll get your story just as soon as I’m done talking to Xena.”

Dori pouted harder, then she turned and snuggled against Xena’s leather covered body, curling up on the top of the wall and putting her head down on the warrior’s leg.

Gabrielle was quiet for a moment, then she sighed. “What would have happened to her, Xe?” She asked, softly. “She needs us so much.”

Xena ran her fingers through Dori’s dark, disheveled hair and merely nodded.

“Aphrodite said Artemis and Athena lost the bet in the end so Zeus made them mortal.” Gabrielle went on, after a pause. “I guess Aphrodite had something to do with it too. She and Ares.”

“Mm?”

“Yeah. I wasn’t really listening to be honest. I just kept thinking of how pissed off I was about being dragged into their stuff again.”

Xena watched her partner’s face, seeing the shadows masking the usually sunny good nature there. “Hey Mama.” She patted the bard’s foot. “Let’s hear the pelican story.”

Gabrielle met her eyes for a long moment, and then she smiled, lifting one hand and acknowledging the gentle nudge. “Xe, I haven’t gotten to the point where I can just let things go like you do. I need to work through this.”

Xena closed her hand over Gabrielle’s knee. “Tomorrow.” She said. “Don’t think about it tonight, We’ve got a lot on our plate right now and you don’t want to be distracted.”

No, that was true. Gabrielle admitted to herself. She certainly didn’t want to be distracted when she was watching Xena’s back. Her eyes drifted over her soulmate’s sun profiled body. Or any other part of her, for that matter.

“Gabrielle?”

“Okay.” Gabrielle tweaked one of Dori’s toes through the soft leather of her boot. “Once upon a time there was a pelican named Helican.”

Dori sat up to listen, wriggling around to sit between Xena’s knees as the warrior circled her with both arms. “Good!”

“Helican was a very stubborn pelican, and even though his mama told him not to fly out in the rain he decided he would fly out anyway, and chase some fishes.”

“Bad buppit!”

“Remember that when mama tells you not to swim in the rain puddles back home.” Xena whispered to her, getting a sudden grin from her partner on hearing it.

“Yeah, Boo, remember that.” The bard shook a finger at her. “Anyway, one day Helican went out to chase some fishes, and it started to rain a very very cold rain. But Helican chased the fishes anyway, and just as he caught the fishes, he started to sneeze!”

The sun’s golden warmth settled over them, as the salt air carried Gabrielle’s words to the seagulls drifting overhead

**

Gabrielle settled herself onto Shadow’s back, glad she had her leggings on as the cooler wind of the oncoming twilight blew against her body. She idly played with one of the reins, waiting for Xena to join her.

Her partner was standing nearby, one hand curled around Io's bridle, and the other resting on her hip as she talked to Jens and Jessan. She'd put a cloak on, and the sleek fabric curled itself around her in the wind, outlining her powerful legs as it fluttered against her in the breeze.

She'd convinced Dori to stay in the barn, guarding her new pony, with Bennu and one of his men guarding the barn. Two birds had been knocked off the branch with that stone, as it both protected her daughter and kept the injured captain out of the battle if it happened.

Bennu hadn't been fooled. But he also hadn't been able to say no to something he knew was so important to them.

Ephiny and Eponin were in full leathers and weapons, getting ready to join them on the horses that Cait and Paladia had ridden to the city. Those two Amazons were up on the bluff, getting ready to put a plan of Xena's into action and glad enough to be doing so.

Ephiny wandered over and patted Shadow. "Ready?" She asked the horse's rider.

"As I ever am for these things." Gabrielle leaned on her saddlebow.

"Nice sword." Ephiny eyed her queen's back.

The bard glanced at it over her shoulder. "Yeah, Xe thought since I had the armor on, I should add that just in case."

"Just in case?"

"Just in case she needs a spare." The bard clarified. "It's light enough not to bother me having it back there too much." It felt a bit strange, having that weight there though, and she found herself adjusting her shoulders a little realized the motion was very much like the one Xena did all the time.

"You look good as a weapons rack." The regent said. "Want a couple of my daggers for her?"

Gabrielle chuckled. "She's got enough of her own, thanks."

"Let's go." Xena said, raising a hand to her two captains and turning to mount Io. The horse tossed his head as his rider vaulted into his saddle, his ears briefly flicking back and forward as Xena seated herself and swirled her cloak into place around her.

"Eph." Gabrielle put her hand on her friend's arm. "You can stay here with Bennu if you want. No one's asking you to romp around with us on this one."

Ephiny smiled up at her. "I appreciate that, my friend." She patted Gabrielle's thigh. "But it'll be twice as stressful for me to stay here, then go. Pony's got my back."

"Okay." Gabrielle completely understood. "Please be careful."

"You too." Ephiny gave her a wink and turned, heading over to where Pony was standing with the two horses.

Gabrielle smiled, and then she turned as Xena and Io arrived at her side, all shifting motion and energy. "We heading up?"

"We are." Xena said. "Let's hope this is just ends up being a bore." She leaned over and gave Gabrielle a kiss on the lips. "But if it doesn't, keep your head down."

"Only if you keep yours the same." The bard reached out and snagged her partner's cloak, dragging her back over and returning the kiss. "Where you go, damn it, I go." She said, after they parted.

"You betcha." Xena whistled, and lifted her hand, and the group moved out, riding along the road and making the turn to head up through the portal to the waterfront and up the carefully

constructed road from the main city gates.

Gabrielle rode next to her partner, in the very front row. Behind them were the Athenian soldiers, and then the Amazons both theirs and the ones they'd picked up along with a silent, brooding Milena. Jessan's group rode in single file down the ranks forming a very large furry barrier, with Jessan himself riding to Xena's left, and one of his biggest soldiers to Gabrielle's right.

Xena's militia was bringing up the rear, their armor covered in the distinctive hawks head tabards and in truth, they were a pretty formidable looking little force.

Torches lined the path, and now that the light was fading they threw flickering shadows everywhere making it difficult to discern what was behind them.

Exactly what Xena had intended.

The conscripts were scattered along the route along with the volunteers from the city, manning the wagons and settling themselves into place. Behind them were merchants and city dwellers, each with a stick, or a stave, or a pitchfork in their hands.

There was an air of edgy energy to the crowd. Xena could almost smell the tension, the desire for battle flooding the city and her body twitched, wanting to respond to it. The thought fleetingly occurred to her that with the additional men at arms, her bluff wasn't so much a bluff now.

Maybe she could take them, if she wanted to. Xena scanned her little force, and a tiny smile appeared. Or maybe she'd just stick to her word and end up the night in one piece, in a hot tub somewhere.

As they cleared the riverfront portal, Iolaus and Hercules joined them, neatly guiding their horses into place as Hercules fell in next to Xena as Jessan made room for him. The mare Iolaus had rescued seemed mostly recovered, her elegant head turning as she watched the crowd.

Hercules had picked up a tall bay horse with a calm disposition, who didn't even turn a hair at the equine Io's inquiring snort. "Pretty good plan, Xena." Hercules commented. "Surprised the heck out of everyone up there, I'll tell you that."

"Sure beats a siege." Xena replied. "They don't know what we got, and we've actually got more than they imagine we do. I know they're already beaten. They won't live this down, especially when word gets to Athens they snuck in the back door."

"They were being guided." The demigod said, dryly. "Artemis figured if she could get you to accept the Spartan's offer, she gets Thrace and a surprise attack. Not a bad plan either."

"Unless you know me."

Hercules chuckled faintly. "I should have just come and got you when I went to Olympus. Saved everyone some time"

"Why were they trying to blast you?" Xena asked, turning her head. "What was that all about?"

Hercules sighed. "They don't particularly like half god bastards up there."

"Really." The warrior drawled, her lips twitching a little.

"It reminds them how close they really are to being mortal." Hercules continued. "Zeus is my father, and yet, I bleed like a stuck pig when an arrow hits me. I think it scares them."

"So they work that out by blasting you?"

Hercules gazed at the square they were approaching, and the gates beyond them. "Proves I'm not one of them." He said, with a brief smile. "I can't blast back with anything but words." He glanced over at her. "But you know, I keep trying. They're the only family I've got now."

Xena caught his eye, then she leaned forward a little and peered past him at the quietly riding Iolaus, then she looked back at him and lifted one eyebrow.

Hercules scratched the bridge of his nose. "Blood family." He amended with another sigh. "And shows how much I've lost it when I need to be kicked in the rear by you about that." He added in a barely audible mutter Xena heard clearly.

The warrior patted his leg. "Hey I learned the hard way." She shifted a little in her saddle, as they came into the square. The sun was just dropping below the horizon and already shadows filled the space surrounded tightly by armed men.

Xena signaled them to stop. "Everybody ready?"

The roar that responded surprised her. Xena let the echoes die down, then she set her boots firmly into her stirrups and signaled the men at the gate. "Open er up!"

The big bars holding the gates closed began to creak back, pulled by the rope and pulley system on either side. Xena watched it briefly, then she turned her head to regard her partner. Gabrielle was also watching the gates, her fingers toying with the reins draped down Shadow's neck.

Unfamiliar profile, with the scaled armor and the sword. Xena's brow creased a little and she tried to decide whether she liked it or not. The bard's staff was strapped to Shadow's side, but with her garb even that looked out of place. "Hey."

Gabrielle turned her head and looked over at her. "Hey."

"You okay?"

"No." Her partner smiled, after a brief pause. "I was just thinking that I want to be on a beach, in the sun, with you." She said. "Naked."

Xena kept her eyes firmly on Gabrielle's face, not daring to look around at the people listening. She'd been caught speechless, and she knew the bard knew that, from the tiny mischievous glint in her eyes.

Fortunately, the opening of the gates drew everyone's attention forward. Xena gathered her reins and got ready to move, wishing it was already all over.

And thinking about the beach.

**

Continued in Part 28

A Queen's Tale

Part 28

The Spartan army was drawn up in marching array, their shields firmly in place, spears bristling over them. The mounted warriors were lined up on the edge of the foot soldiers ranks, fully armored and apparently ready for battle.

Nice show. As a warrior, Xena could appreciate the well ordered formation and the proud stance of the men. Despite their mad dash across Thrace after her partner, and despite the compromised situation they were in, they held their heads up high and wore their colors with honor.

She respected that.

Xena tucked Io's reins in one hand and gave the stallion a signal with her knees, and he started forward, his head up and ears pricked as his nostrils flared to catch the scent of the enemy horses.

Xena muffled a smile, watching her horse. Io wasn't the largest stallion in their group – he was a

hand at least shorter than his father Eris whom Jessan was riding and he was younger than most of the others. But he had a brash attitude as though he thought he was the biggest baddest horse around— almost as though he knew his status was tied in with who he had on his back.

Very different than Argo. Her mare was old enough and experienced enough to take charge on her own.

“Looks like they're ready.” Hercules commented. “Hope this goes smoothly. I'm pretty damned tired of this game.”

Xena eyed him thoughtfully. “Need a vacation?”

“I need something.” The demigod replied in a dour tone.

They passed through the gates and as they did, Xena's force spread out a little, breaking into a canter as their leader did and turning their stately march into something a little wilder, the ground thundering under them in the twilight.

Gabrielle blinked a little into the wind, keeping up with Xena but not with her partner's plans since from the look of it, they were about to attack the Spartans. There really wasn't time to ask though, and the hoofbeats made it impossible anyway. She watched Xena's body posture instead, seeing a relaxed swing to her shoulders that reassured her.

She knew what her partner looked like when she was about to draw her sword intimately. She could picture in her mind the arching of her back and the shift of the muscles visible over her leathers that would end with her hand on the hilt and the flicker of steel as the blade emerged.

There was none of that tension present in Xena's tall form, and in fact she had her sword hand resting casually on her thigh as though they were out for an afternoon ride at home.

So Gabrielle kept her staff in place, and tried to relax into Shadows smooth gait as they approached the enemy army. The Spartans looked imposing enough, and she could see spear tips shivering a little in the twilight as they waited to see what Xena and her force were going to do.

There were a thousand of them. Gabrielle was riding with a group that were barely two score and to even consider that they were going to attack the army was bare insanity.

Yet, watching the Spartans, she realized that insanity or not, they were facing the possibility that Xena was going to do just that.

And that, the bard realized as well, was something they were scared of.

Xena judged her pace exactly. At just exactly the moment when the Spartans had to react, she held her hand up, palm forward and let out a whistle, and the force slowed from a canter to a walk, and then came to a halt as she clenched her fist.

They stood there, the wind fluttering over them, blowing her cloak back and her hair out of her eyes. “C'mon.” She crooked a finger at Gabrielle, and nudged Io forward, while turning her hand back flat to the rest of the group.

There were four Spartans in the lead, and Xena and Gabrielle approached them at an amble, coming to a stop well within weapons reach of the first rank of soldiers.

Thurdor was one of the four. He removed his helmet and studied them, with an impassive expression on his face. “You have given your word to me that we will pass through unhindered.”

Xena straightened a little and sat back in her saddle. “I have.” She agreed. “And you have given me your word you will pass through that city and draw no weapons against the people inside.”

“I have.” Thurdor confirmed. “Then shall we begin? Night draws near and we do not wish to spend it here on Thracian soil.” He stared right into Xena's eyes. “Under the sword of a Thracian

warlord.”

Xena merely smiled, refraining from denying the description. Then she lifted one gauntleted hand and as she did, she half turned Io and gestured towards the city gates. “We'll escort you.” She said. “Follow my lead and you'll end up safely on the waterfront.”

Thurdor brought his horse up next to hers and regarded the group she'd brought from the city. “These are your people.” He said. “But ... is that not Hercules, there?” He indicated the demigod, who was patting his horse's neck. “What is his part in this?”

Gabrielle guided Shadow over and stopped on Xena's other side. “He's a friend of ours.” She said. “He wants this to end peacefully, just like we do.”

Thurdor turned his head and looked at her. “So it makes a good story for you, Gabrielle?” His voice was faintly ironic.

Gabrielle shook her head. “I'm not a storyteller today.” She said. “Today I'm one of Xena's captains.” She looked steadily back at him. “And an Amazon queen.”

Thurdor's brows creased.

“And a mother.” The bard continued. “Whose child is in that city. So if anyone makes a wrong move in there, I will stop them.”

The Spartan leader regarded her in silence for a moment. Then he returned his attention to Xena. “Let this begin.”

Xena felt there had been enough theatrics as well. She made a parting gesture with her hands, then she turned Io and started back towards her force, as they all shifted and moved aside to let the Spartans through.

Only Hercules and Iolaus remained, waiting for them.

Thurdor fell in beside Xena, his three captains waiting for them to get a few paces away before they followed, one raising his hand and clenching his fist to signal the army to move.

Xena was aware of the motion at her back. She kept her body relaxed though, glancing to her left where Shadow was walking resolutely next to them. She could see Gabrielle's profile, and after a moment, the bard glanced back at her, giving her a quick wink before she returned her attention to the gates.

It was hard not to smile. Gabrielle had her act down so pat, wearing her armor so naturally, her head held high and the leather woven tokens of her queen's rank draping across her shoulders.

Then after a brief moment, the thought occurred to her that it really wasn't much of an act anymore. That despite the wink, her partner wasn't pretending anything she really wasn't now. One of her captains? Gabrielle had led the force they were now approaching from Amphipolis with skill and courage equal to any. Amazon queen? She'd answered her own challenge, now hadn't she? No matter how she'd done it and Xena had no illusion that if it had come to fighting, the sturdy, feisty woman at her side would have held her own.

She wasn't really sure whether to feel more proud, or more sad. There was a little of both in her heart at the thought.

As they reached her lines, Hercules and Iolaus joined them in the front, the demigod bringing his horse up on the other side of Thurdor in silence. That made the Spartan look from one side of him to the other, a sober expression on his face.

Xena's little force fell in line one at a time as the Spartans marched past, forming a very thin buffer on their edge as they all moved towards the city gates. The portal was wide open,

bracketed by torches that lit the opening with a garish orange glare.

Now it was almost dark, and the shadows danced across the ground as t/hey approached the walls – the lingering twilight just outlining the bodies waiting on the top of the battlements with weapons to hand.

Okay. Xena quietly took a deep breath, and released it. Now came the truth of it. She flexed her right hand inside it's glove and her body responded to the scent of expectation on the wind. She felt her spine straighten and her knees dropped a little, ready to clamp down on Io's sides to give her balance to use both hands to fight with.

She had said – to them all, and to herself, that she wanted no part of this war. No part of the fight she could sense trembling on the air and that was true. Xena drew in a deep breath and felt the familiar rush of blood to her skin. That was true, but it didn't mean she wouldn't savor the battle if it forced itself on her.

She was what she was, after all.

Out of the corner of her eye, she spotted Gabrielle's hand loosening the ties on her staff, though the bard's head was up and her eyes fixed on the path to the waterfront. She pressed her knee against the wood to hold it in place, and shifted the reins to her left hand, letting the other drop to rest casually on the weapon.

No one talked. They passed through the gates and into the central square. Xena pointed towards the road to the pier and Thurdor nodded, glancing at the blockade on either side of it. After a moment, he nodded again, this time apparently in grudging approval.

They filed down the sloping surface, as the city rose around them, the wagons and defenders lost in the shadows from the torches planted every other bodylength.

Far off, there was the sound of the sea, but with the wind at their backs there was no smell of salt on the air.

Xena let her head sweep casually right to left, watching the men behind the wagons. They were all tucked away behind the wood, crossbows resting on the tops of the full beds, eyes watching the Spartans intently.

Some of the eyes curious, but some hungry, their expression reflecting the desire to face this enemy no matter how many of them there were. Mercenary instincts, Xena knew, died very hard.

To shoot the Spartans though, they'd have to get past Xena's forces. Just like, to get at the city defenders the Spartans would need to get past the same, and Xena had made sure all the people with her were armed to the virtual teeth and as imposing as she could manage.

She wasn't taking any chances aside from the obvious one.

They were halfway down now, and slowly, she could sense people relaxing around her. Thurdor reached up and scratched his neck, shifting his armor a little, as he peered forward towards the lower gates to the waterfront.

The entire Spartan army had entered the downward path, and Xena turned, glancing behind her as she saw the city forces fall in behind them, exactly as she'd told them to.

So far, so good.

It was full dark now. Above them, the sky was clear, and stars were starting to emerge. Xena glanced up at them, their pinpoints dimmer and less clear than she remembered from Mount Olympus. Not so vivid, or.. She glanced over at her partner. Would they ever be able to just lay under those stars, and play that game now?

A seagull called, and Xena focused her attention back on the road. "When we get to the bottom." She addressed Thurdor. "They'll close the lower gates. Then I'll signal my people on the ridge to let the ships in."

Thurdor nodded. "Many speak of your prowess in weapons, Xena." He commented. "Not so many your strategic skills. They should." He looked to his right and left. "I could not have done better." Now he looked back at her. "Why not just engage us? Surely Athens would reward you for such a win if you did and despite what we were told, this city is surprisingly well defended."

True. Xena flipped a bit of Io's mane over to the other side of his neck. "I gave my word." She glanced at the Spartan. "And the truth is, this war serves no one's purpose."

Thurdor nodded again. "Today, for the first time I thought of home." He said. "Of my family." He added. "It was strange, but the men did as well. I heard them singing songs of our lands as we got ready to march." He leaned forward and looked past Xena to where Gabrielle was quietly listening. "I too, have children."

"Glad you're going to get home to see them?" Gabrielle asked. "I know I would be."

The Spartan gave her a wry look. "Those ships will not take us home." He said. "Surely you both realize that? We leave here, to go to Athens."

"Do you?" The bard answered, with a gentle smile. "Maybe you could talk the captains into going home. I bet they'd like to do that too."

Thurdor stared at her. "We are at war."

"Do we have to be?" Gabrielle replied. "You don't really want to go to Athens. I've been there. It sorta stinks."

"Gabrielle!" Jens objected, from his spot just to her left. "That's our home!"

"I know." The bard gave him a sympathetic look. "And I'm sorry, but it really does. You can smell that place for three days on the way there. Poor Xena got sick as a dog when we were in the city for the games."

Jens frowned at her. "Athens is very beautiful." He protested. "Besides, is not your Academy of Bards there? Your scrolls and all that?"

"Scrolls don't have noses." The bard muffled a grin.

Xena was watching Thurdor from the corner of her eye. His face was thoughtful, and there was a thick, heavy crease in his brow. "C'mon." She addressed him. "You're not a new kid at this." She said. "You know this whole damn thing's a bust."

He sighed. "Somehow, it seemed like a good plan, at the start." He said. "Now... it's truth. My heart is no longer in it."

Amazing what not having gods in the mix could do. Xena looked up to find Hercules watching her past Thurdor's shoulders. She shook her head and smiled, and felt at last the sea wind on her face as the breeze changed directions and they passed through the lower portal to the waterfront.

There, six wagons were waiting, with men guarding them, bundled figures perched on top. The breeze brought them the scent of decay, but Thurdor exhaled, and nodded one more time as he glanced over at Xena. "You gave your word."

"I did." Xena said. "Though, you might think of giving them a pyre here." She gave a light whistle, and her escort peeled off, moving to line the edge of the waterfront, blocking the paths upwards towards the escarpment.

Thurdor motioned to his captains, and they rode on slowly towards the wagons as the troops

filed into the big open space near the docks. Everything had been cleared out of the way, and they spread out as they moved, some going over to the water and looking out into the harbor.

Xena stayed where she was, watching the Spartans file past. She was aware of Gabrielle sidling up next to her, expecting and getting the warmth of the bard's hand on her thigh. Without looking over, she covered the hand with her own, wrapping her fingers around her partners and clasping them.

"It is going to make a good story." Gabrielle said.

"Long as they don't go and attack Athens, and you and I end up fugitives for the rest of our lives." The warrior responded wryly. "Sure."

"Eh. There are worse things that could happen." Gabrielle responded. "We could go live somewhere else where they've never heard of us. Start fresh."

Xena turned her head and regarded her partner. "You really want to do that?"

Gabrielle watched the Spartans for a while in silence before she sighed. "Part of me wants to, yeah." She said. "Amazons are pissed at me. Amphipolis is probably pissed at us, Athens is going to be mad at us... gods are mad at us... what the heck. Let's go live somewhere else."

Xena studied her in silence.

Gabrielle looked up at her after a minute of that. "Or... maybe I'm about to cycle and I'm just cranky as heck." She admitted. "I don't really want to leave everyone behind."

Xena patted her on the back. "We'll work it out." She said. "Let's get these guys out of here and then we can relax and celebrate for a while." She half stood in her stirrups, looking past Jessan's tall form to see the last of the Spartans clear the lower gate, which was swung promptly to behind them.

City defenders immediately lined the top of it and more appeared on the upper slopes of the hill, setting themselves into position and readying weapons.

Impressive. Xena looked up to the top of the slope, spotting Bennu standing up there, his arm still in a sling. She saw him turn to face her, and he raised his hand in a casual signal, which she returned. "Looks like everything's okay up there."

Gabrielle had been watching. She smiled and waved at Bennu, then she returned her attention to the Spartans. They were all milling around in the big open space, and some were taking their packs off and sitting down, apparently unfazed by the watching city defenders.

The plan was going to work, she realized. The Spartans didn't seem to want to fight, and even the men in the city she'd sensed really did want to were quiet. Even Jens. She looked at the Athenian captain, who had taken off his gauntlets and helmet and was ruffling his sweat stained hair.

He seemed to sense the attention, and he looked over at her. "Did it really smell so bad?"

Gabrielle chuckled briefly. "Most big cities do to us." She relented. "We're so used to traveling in the wild, or living in small towns. Even Amphipolis was getting bad there for us for a while, before the floods."

"Huh." Jens watched the Spartan army settle. "Last night, I was all for ambushing this lot." He admitted frankly. "But then, when they came in the gates, it seemed to me that our word was given, as Xena had said and breaking that would be no honor to us." He stretched in his saddle. "As the sun was setting, I lost my stomach for it."

"Just want to go home?" The bard asked.

Jens nodded. "They will likely need us in Athens at any rate." He said. "If this legion goes, another will come. War is inevitable."

Gabrielle considered that. Was war inevitable? Now that the gods had abandoned their interest, it seemed that the soldiers were less willing to fight. Was that true, or just coincidence? "Mmph."

"Stay here." Xena patted her on the leg. "Be right back." She turned Io and cantered him over to the wagons, where the Spartans were gathered examining their fallen brothers. The stench was intense when she got there, but the men of war, just as Xena, was used to the smell and ignored it.

Thurdor turned as she arrived. He took a step back from the wagon and regarded her. "If there is wood, we will make a pyre for them, near the water. You have my gratitude for treating them with honor."

"Good choice." Xena said. "I doubt your ship captains would appreciate you bringing them onboard."

The Spartan nodded. "There is truth in that." He said. "Though we could carry them to Spartan waters, and bury them in Posiedon's realm. Still, the flame is cleaner." He looked out into the harbor. "But I see there will be trouble getting the fleet in. You have blocked it."

"Sure." Xena put her fingers between her teeth and let out a loud, long whistle, followed by two shorter ones. "But I keep my promises, Thurdor." She shaded her eyes, looking at the shadowy figure of the wrecked hulk blocking the passage. In the distance, she heard a grinding, grumbling sound and as she did, they all did.

"What's that?" One of the Spartans asked, looking around. "A trick?"

In the dark it was hard to tell what was happening. Suddenly there were more noises, cracks and thumps and everyone started looking around, grabbing for weapons and ducking.

Xena remained where she was though, watching the harbor. Abruptly a hissing sound crackled over the waterfront and everyone dove for the ground instinctively, as that was followed by an echoing reverb, then the sound of something breaking apart.

Xena pointed at the entrance to the harbor. The shadow of the old hulk was moving, in two huge sections as it seemed to come to life and rush towards the cliff at a startling speed.

"By the Gods!" Thurdor yelled. "It's some magic!"

The two sections of the ship plowed through the water and smashed abruptly into the cliff face, with a thundering roar and a crash that sent a rolling wake towards the waterfront.

The Spartans bolted back from the seawall, throwing their arms over their heads as the waves crashed against the stone, exploding over it and showering them with seawater so violently the spray from it reached even to where Xena was, dusting the warrior with a cold mist of salt water.

The harbor entrance was now open.

Xena blinked the salt out of her eyes and gestured towards it. "Get your men ready to board those ships." She said. "Got it?"

Thurdor now stared at her with something like awe. "Yes."

The warrior turned and gestured towards two of the militia. "Tell them to bring down firewood." She said. "Near the last dock."

"Gen'l." The men saluted, and rode off towards the back gate, where the jail had been.

Xena watched them go, then she sidestepped Io away from the wagons, up onto a little rise she

could see the entire waterfront from, stopping there in the flickering torchlight as shadows obscured her features.

Hercules leaned over towards Gabrielle. "How did she do that?" He whispered.

"I have no idea." The bard murmured back. "I'm just glad this is all over."

Hercules grunted. "Yeah." He slowly looked around. "Me too." His brow creased. "Me too."

**

By the time the third set of three ships came in, everyone was starting to unwind. Xena was still on Io's back, but she'd stripped off her gauntlets and let her boots loose from her stirrups, relaxing in her saddle as she watched the loading continue.

Half of the Spartan soldiers were gone, and the waterfront was getting emptier. Some of the remaining men were gathered quietly around the smouldering pyre at the far end, the rest were seated in formation, their arms wrapped around their knees, waiting.

Denius rode his tall bay horse over to where Xena was, drawing up to a halt as he came to her side. "Xena."

The warrior turned her head. "Half done."

"They came through meek as lambs!" The patrician chortled. "Fantastic!"

Xena nodded briefly. "Good end to it." She said. "Once they clear the harbor, we can stand down."

Denius leaned closer to her. "We could have taken them, Xena. The men all know it." He said. "Such a pity we didn't."

Xena looked at him. "They marched down here like that because I gave my word they'd be safe." She said. "Not because of the force in the city. It would have been real different story otherwise."

"Yes but.."

"No buts." The warrior looked annoyed. "Their captain and I made a deal."

"But Xena." Denius seemed oblivious to the dour glare he was getting. "Imagine what a boon that would have been for Athens? An entire Spartan army – defeated! By the gods, they'd have showered us with honors and coin."

Xena fought the urge to knock the man off his horse. "They'll have to settle for having Thema in one piece and no captured Spartan territory between here and the edge of Thrace." She answered dryly. "Sorry if that disappoints them."

"Hm." Denius didn't get the sarcasm. "There is that, yes." He conceded. "This would have been a great loss, certainly." He added. "But the way they came in.. maybe they would have been stopped by the walls in any case."

"They wouldn't." Xena shook her head. "Go outside and look at the siege engines again that they left behind." She leaned forward a little, spotting Gabrielle approaching. "The walls wouldn't have lasted a candlemark against them."

"So you say." Denius frowned. "But some say they bought you, Xena. So you let them go."

Xena merely looked at him.

Denius shrugged. "All have their price."

"Do they?" Xena turned her head and let her eyes follow her partner as Gabrielle gently guided

Shadow around to her other side. "Maybe I was bought. Not by them though." She met the mist green eyes gone amber in the torchlight. "Hey."

"Hey." Gabrielle hauled something out of her saddlebag. "Everyone up there's starting to party." She said. "They've got ale barrels and cookfires starting, while my poor general sits here in the cold, wet wind without so much as a cracker."

"Did you bring me crackers? I'm all for em. I'm starving." Xena smiled. "Hand em over."

Gabrielle drew her hand out of her bag and passed over not crackers, but a pocket sandwich, the scent of freshly grilled lamb drifting up from it. "Here you go." She watched her partner take the offering, and immediately bite into it. Then she leaned forward and looked at Denius. "What was that about someone buying Xena off?"

Denius looked a little uncomfortable. "Some have said it." He answered stiffly.

"Would some like to be made out as skanky cowards when this story gets told?" Gabrielle asked, with a kind smile. "I'm sure it could be arranged."

He gave her a dour look.

Gabrielle's expression grew serious. "We saved this town, Denius." She said. "We saved Thrace from being invaded. We chased the Spartans out, and probably ended the war." She added. "There was no sell out here, even if the Spartans had Xena's price, and they don't."

"You would, of course, say that."

"I would." The bard said. "Because I do have that price."

Xena merely munched on her sandwich, content to listen to the drama. She reached over and snagged the wineskin hanging on Shadow's saddle ring and uncapped it, taking a mouthful and swallowing it down. "Yeah." She said, after a long moment of silence. "She bought me down by a creek in the ass end of Thrace couple years back. Never did get her money's worth."

Gabrielle chuckled softly, under her breath.

"I suppose we shall see whose truth is heard, when it's all done." Denius said. "For me, this night should have ended far differently." He pulled his horse's head around and left, angling towards the lower gates.

"Ugh." Gabrielle sighed. "What a creep."

"Got another one of those?" Xena dismissed the creep. "I feel like I haven't eaten for a week."

Gabrielle produced another sandwich, then took one out for herself. They stood quietly together, watching the Spartans while they ate. "This was a good plan, Xe." The bard finally said. "I'm really glad it worked out, and no one had to get hurt. I feel really good about that."

"Me too." Xena agreed. "Everyone won here. Even if they don't realize it, or want to admit it." She took another swallow of wine. "How's Dori doing?"

"Wondering where her Boo is." Gabrielle replied. "She wanted to come down here with me, but I figured it was still a little too unsettled."

Xena regarded her somberly.

"And she might scare the Spartans." The bard concluded. "I didn't want to mess up your plan."

Xena smiled as she finished off her sandwich and let her eyes travel over the crowd again. Her people, the ones Gabrielle had brought, were still forming a barricade between the Spartans and the city defenders, but as she was, they were also relaxing on their horses, talking casually with each other.

The city defenders were still lined up on the edges of the waterfront, and Xena watched them closely for a minute, before she tapped Gabrielle on the knee and jerked her head in the direction of the wall. "Let's go take a ride." She turned Io's head and they started towards where Jessan and Ephiny were idly chatting.

Gabrielle willingly followed, one hand clasping the reins as she popped the last mouthful of sandwich onto her tongue, enjoying the wood grilled taste of the lamb.

She was tired, and looking forward to the end of the night when they could go find a nice spot to lay down and relax, maybe even back in the barn. She'd seen Ephiny's scandalized look when she'd realized where her queen was sleeping, but Gabrielle was long past caring what others thought about her status.

Or lack of it. Or whatever. She just wanted to curl up someplace dry and warm, with Xena next to her. It had been far too long a day.

Xena lifted her hand in greeting as they closed in on the wall.

"Hey, guys." Jessan waved back. "Looks like this is going pretty smooth, huh?"

Xena looked around, settling her boots in her stirrups. "I told them it better be." She said. "Told Thurdor he better make sure his troops didn't get any ideas. A deal's a deal."

Jessan nodded. "I think he got the message." The forest dweller said, in a placid tone. "Especially after you waved our hand and made that ship fly apart. Pretty cool."

"Yeah." Ephiny agreed. "Scared the crap out of everyone, but cool."

Xena shrugged slightly. "Had to move it." She remarked. "You all see where Hercules went?"

Ephiny pointed. "He's down by the pyre." She said. "Iolaus is with him. They were talking to some of the city guys down there." She leaned forward on her saddlebow. "We've gotten a room for you two rigged up, by the way." She gave Gabrielle a wry look. "Please don't turn it down."

"Hey c'mon, I like barns." Her queen mock protested. "Some of my best times were had in b.." She looked over at Xena, whose hand was covering her mouth. "Wmfh?"

Ephiny chuckled. "Yeah, I heard about those initials carved in the timbers of Cyrene's barn." She teased. "So is it true?"

"That our relationship was consummated in the hayloft of my mother's barn? Yes." Xena removed her hand, feeling the heat as her partner blushed. "It was the closest thing we had to a home at the time."

Jessan laughed.

Xena chuckled also. Then she regarded the harbor. "Looks like one more set of ships and we're done." She said. "Jens, pass the word back – the city defenders can stand down. Let em go get out of that fake armor before it chafes em to death."

The Athenian captain moved a bit closer. "Sure of that, Xena? They're not quite done down below." He indicated the Spartans. "Though, they've been quiet, I'll say."

"And I'd like it to stay that way." Xena replied. "Get those guys to their cups. And Jens.. " She leaned forward towards him. "Find the conscripts. Any of em who were under arms during this... let em go."

He studied her. "That's not the law, Xena. They were to be brought to Athens."

"They had their war." She said. "A lot of em died. Let the rest go."

His eyes met hers for a long moment. "I thought you turned down the leadership of the war,

Xena?" But his lips twitched into a reluctant smile. "Seems to me you ended up doing it anyhow." He gathered his reins. "If I find any of the miserable cowherds, I will release them. They didn't have the make of soldiers in any case."

Xena watched him ride off, and then she sighed.

"He's right." Jessan said. "You are in charge, Chosen."

Xena sighed again. "I'm always in charge." She complained. "Everyone bitches about me being an overbearing battle whore but when do I get a chance to be anything else?" She spread her hands out in appeal. "I didn't see anyone else holding up their hand to be in charge around here."

Everyone chuckled. Gabrielle patted her partner on the thigh comfortingly. "You really tried to stay out of it this time, hon. This was really all my fault."

Xena rolled her head to one side and gave her partner her most droll look.

"Actually." Ephiny cleared her throat and raised her hand. "I think this was my fault, my queen. Not yours." She said. "I'm the one who decided to try being the good guy for a change."

"Well, you know, I could have just let you." Gabrielle eyed her. "I didn't have to send Xena."

"You also didn't have to go find the Spartan army either." Her partner reminded her.

"And we didn't have to come with you, Gabrielle." Jessan threw a fang into the ring.

"Hmm..." Ephiny's eyes twinkled gravely. "And I guess Xena didn't have to take over an Athenian warship and come find us."

"You all done yet?" Pony had been sitting on her horse just behind Ephiny, to all intents and purposes half asleep. "It' aint' no one's fault. This crap just happens to us. We should just get used to it."

Gabrielle chuckled softly. "Yeah, we sort of accepted that a while ago." She confirmed. "Pony's right. It's really no one's fault. It just is what it is." She was aware, in her peripheral vision, of the listening city defenders just on the other side of the wagons and then, also, of Milena who was just on the outside of the torchlight, watching them.

She wasn't really sure what to make of either. The defenders were listening, no doubt but she couldn't read their expressions, and she wondered if the edgy restlessness she sensed was really them just wanting to end their vigil or something more sinister.

Mercenaries were funny that way. Gabrielle tucked away the bag she'd brought their food in and checked the ties on her staff as she idly listened to the banter now between her friends.

Xena was right, she realized suddenly, to send the defenders home. There were too many of them, too close to the Spartans and she felt her nascent warrior instincts bristle as she picked up something... a smell? A sound? That made her back stiffen and brought her head up as she swept her eyes across the area.

The others were still just talking, so what was... ah. Gabrielle exhaled slowly, watching the edges of her partner's sensitive ears, just visible to her, cup the air as without moving, Xena's body completely altered its posture. She saw Xena's head turn just slightly, and caught the glistening of the torchlight reflecting off her eyes as they moved.

And yet, nothing around them stirred out of place. None of the rest of their companions seemed to sense anything, even Jessan was leaning back in his saddle, trading a joke with Solari.

Gabrielle looked back at Xena, to find her partner peering back at her, one eyebrow slightly raised. The bard shrugged faintly in response, and saw a furrow appear above Xena's eyes.

Then the feeling slowly faded, and the sounds of their companions became normal again. Xena rested both her hands on her saddlebow and frowned, her body shifting a little restlessly.

Gabrielle wasn't sure what that was all about. She felt the tension leave her body though, and she focused again on what was going on around her. The three Spartan ships were slowly making their way out of the harbor, and now only one last group was left on the pier.

Thurdor was among them. She could make out his tall figure leaning against a pylon, but he looked at ease and she even thought she heard a faint echo of laughter from the Spartan troops. So the tension hadn't come from them. Gabrielle casually turned her head and regarded the group around her, likewise untroubled.

Her eyes lifted and she studied the makeshift wagon walls, seeing the city defenders starting to thin out as Jen's men moved along and dismissed them. Everything seemed to be winding down, and a brief gust of wind from the landside brought the sound of a pipe playing up the hill.

Everything seemed calm. Gabrielle looked back at her partner, who was still leaning on her saddle, eyes slowly sweeping the waterfront. Everything except for the two of them, apparently. She edged Shadow over until her knee was pressing against Xena's and leaned towards her a little. "What was that?"

"Good question." Xena muttered, under her breath. "Maybe nothing."

"That both of us imagined?" The bard whispered. "Or was I just reacting to what you felt?"

Xena thought about that for a long moment. "Damned if I know." She finally responded. "Just nerves maybe. I want this thing over."

"You and me both, partner." Gabrielle turned a little, to face their companions. "Hey, you all want to hear a new story I'm working on?"

"Don't we always?" Ephiny turned, and the rest of them focused on the bard, pleased looks of anticipation on their faces. "Best way I can think of to pass the time."

Xena leaned over and tapped Gabrielle on the knee. "No chickens." She said, firmly. "And no cows."

**

Xena guided Io down towards the piers where the last of the Spartan ships were almost finished loading. The faint sense of unease was still with her, but so far there had been nothing around her that seemed to be causing it. In a quarter candlemark the Spartans would be gone, and Jens had reported back that he'd sent the city men home with no incidents.

She wasn't stupid enough to ignore the warning. That same tingle up her spine had saved her life on more than one occasion, and there were still things that could go wrong.

"Xena." Thurdor greeted her as she arrived at dockside. The Spartan general had his helmet off, and was supervising the loading of the last of the horses. "So we are almost at the end of this."

"Almost." Xena dismounted off Io's back and walked over to him. "I'm glad it all went right." She watched the sailors busy on the deck. "Hope you have smooth seas."

"As you did not?" Thurdor asked. "I had heard a tale from some of the dockmen." He indicated the wharf workers, busy with their ropes. "They tell a strange story of storms and shipwrecks, and that you sailed the hulk blocking the harbor in and swamped our ships at dock with it."

Xena glanced out over the water. Her sailing on the ship was already fading into the past for her, the struggle and the dangers dismissed as was her habit. Even the close brush with death was already almost forgotten as just a hazy situation that ended up all right.

No sense in dwelling on it. "Your ships weren't expecting an Athenian brig of war to come hauling into the harbor, that's for sure." She remarked. "They were stuck nose to the dock."

"They weren't expecting yourself either." Thurdor said. "What is the truth of it, Xena? We would have paid you handsomely to join us, I know the offer. You said yourself this wasn't your war and yet, here you are leading Athenian forces." He studied her. "I am just curious for myself. I want to understand this most ferocious adversary before me."

Xena leaned against the post, the wind off the water fluttering her cloak and blowing her hair into roguish disorder. "Lets just say I pick my wars." She drawled. "I fight when I have to, but not for anyone's coin." She half smiled. "I never did. I never wanted anyone to have a hold on me."

The Spartan nodded. "I was against asking you." He said, candidly. "I argued with our council over it."

"Smart man." The warrior smiled fully.

"But now that I have met you." Thurdor continued. "I feel they were right, and I was wrong, and I wish you had accepted our offer." His eyes met hers. "You inspire the warrior in me, Xena. I want to fight alongside you, and go to battle with you because you have something so very few do."

A little surprised, Xena cocked her head in question.

"You believe in yourself." The Spartan said. "Without question. You trust in your decisions and because of that, Xena, those who follow you also trust." He smiled. "It is a great thing to trust in the one who leads you. I try to give my men reason to trust me so, but I do not in return trust those who give me orders. You understand."

"I do." Xena replied quietly. "And that's why I wouldn't take anyone's pay to fight. I don't trust anyone to tell me what to do." She pushed off the post. "Especially not any council." She extended a hand to him. "Your ships ready?"

He clasped her arm. "Good fortune to you, Xena. I hope our paths never cross in war."

"Same to you." The warrior said. "And if you keep your men out of Thrace, we probably never will." She released his arm and took a step back as he turned, moving to the gangway and climbing up onto it. The Spartan captain was waiting for him and as he boarded he turned, waiting as they cast off the gangway and let the ropes go. The oars slowly moved the ships back and Xena watched them go into the moonlit harbor with a small exhale of satisfaction.

"Good riddance." One of the dockworkers said. "Too much fightin. Need merchants back in here agin."

"Yah, like that one that went out, took all the water w'im. Barstards." The man standing next to him said, spitting on the ground. "Never a thought for us."

Xena eyed them thoughtfully. Standing in the shadows as she was, the men weren't aware of her presence.

"Thought they'd burn the place down." The first man said. "Good job that Xena come in here. Got smarts, that one does." He dusted his hands off and started down the pier. "C'mon, let's get us a mug. Job here's done."

Xena chuckled softly, and patted Io's cheek. "Yeah, that Xena." She murmured. "She's a bright one, huh, Io?"

The horse nibbled her cloak, shaking his head.

The warrior sighed. "Now let's see if I'm bright enough to figure out what's really wrong before something else bites me in the ass." She swung herself up onto the stallions back, and started him

towards the road up the hill.

**

Gabrielle closed the door to the stable, keeping hold of Dori's hand with one of her own. "Honey, I know you want to stay with Rusty, but you need to come with mama now, okay?"

Dori produced a pout. "Mama, Wusty's lonely!" Gabrielle knelt down on one knee. "Dori, he'll be fine there, with all our horses to keep him company. Shadows in there, and Iolaus, and Gray Lady, and Hercules's horse too. He has lots of other horses to talk to."

Dori looked sadly at her mother.

"You can ride him tomorrow, when we leave." Gabrielle ruffled Dori's hair. "You want to be with me and Boo, right? We're going to a nice place our friends found for us, so we can get a good night sleep."

"Boo's coming?" Dori allowed herself to be sidetracked.

"She's on her way now." Gabrielle held her hand out. "Let's go get ready for her. Maybe she'll go to fishes with you."

Dori scowled, but she took her mother's hand and walked with her as the bard stood and started up the steps to where Ephiny was waiting. "Okay, lead on."

"She's a tough case." Ephiny grinned at her.

"She is." Gabrielle agreed. "She's got a one track mind sometimes. Wonder where that came from." She exchanged wryly knowing grins with her regent. "Hey, you didn't have to get our gear. You guys were busting your tails all day. We could have grabbed it."

"Gabrielle." Ephiny pushed open a door at the top of the steps they'd been climbing. "For one thing, it gave us a chance to scope out the area and for another, give us a break. One time we treat you like a queen ain't gonna kill you."

Gabrielle lifted her free hand and laughed gently. "Okay." She followed Ephiny into a large room, with a table and chairs in it, and past that, two more doorways. "This place was empty?"

"Completely." The regent agreed. "Pony dug up some groom or something who said the poobah who lived here left on the ship before ours. Heading to Athens. This was a vacation villa, apparently."

"Ah." Gabrielle looked at the expensively plastered walls. "I see."

"Anyway, we got everyone bunked down around this place." Ephiny pushed one of the far doors open. "I know you two can take care of yourselves, but something in the vibe here has me twitching."

Gabrielle released Dori's hand. "Look Dor, our friends brought your toys up here, and set up a bed for you. Wasn't that nice? Say thank you to Auntie Ephiny." She glanced around the room, which also held a big, comfortable looking bed and a big garment chest that seemed the right size to dump lots of armor on top of. "Nice."

"Dank oo." Dori gave Ephiny a grin, her good humor evidently restored. "Mama, where's Boo?"

"She'll be here in a minute honey. She was just talking to Hercules downstairs." Gabrielle reassured her. "Go get your things out and I'll help you change."

Dori went over to her bags and sat down next to them, rooting inside enthusiastically.

Gabrielle and Ephiny exchanged amused looks. Then Gabrielle went over to the long wooden

chest on the other side of the room, where her own bags were. “Xe and I picked up a little trouble on the wind too. We couldn’t figure out where it was coming from though.”

“Us either.” Ephiny sat down on the bed. “Its just making us nervous. And by us, I mean me, Benny and Jess.”

Gabrielle unbuckled the belt holding her armor around her and then loosened the leather strap holding her sword to her back. She removed both and shifted her shoulders a little, feeling a bit lighter now that the weapon was off her back.

“May I?” Ephiny got up and came over, holding her hand out for the sword. “You have no idea how weird it is for me to see you with that on.”

“About as weird as it is for me to have it.” Gabrielle confessed. The bard handed the weapon over. “I forgot I had it on for a while.” She lifted the scale armor over her head and set it down on the press, ruffling her hair out from her collar and feeling the cool breeze from the window a little chill against her scalp. “Glad we didn’t need it.”

“Beautiful work.” Ephiny was examining the blade. “Reminds me a little of Xena’s.”

Gabrielle untied the padded shirt and removed it, leaving her in her wraps and leggings. She set the padding down next to the armor and stretched, glad the weight of it was off her frame. “Yeah it does a little.” She agreed, rubbing her arms. “Any water in that other room?”

Ephiny grinned. “How about a bathtub?”

“Ungh.” Gabrielle let out a half grunt, half groan. “I’m all for it.” She glanced over at Dori, who was sitting on the ground playing with Flameball. “Whatcha doing Dor?”

Dori looked up. “Flameball wants to know about Wusty.” She explained. “I’m telling him, mama.”

“Oh, okay.” Gabrielle said. “Good girl. I’m going to go right in the other room, okay? You can come find me when you’re done.” She watched her daughter go back to whispering to her stuffed toy, then she followed Ephiny out of the bedroom and into the other chamber, which held the promised tub and plenty of clean linen.

“Oo.” Gabrielle stuck her hand in the already filled basin and felt the warm water. “Xe’s gonna love this too.” She told her regent. “Too bad I don’t have any bubble bath with me.”

Ephiny paused in mid motion and looked at her, both brows lifting. She watched Gabrielle’s face relax into a grin and shook her head. “Anyway I figured I owed you one, for all this.” She strolled over to the tub and leaned her forearms on it, gazing through the faint wisps of steam at the woman on the other side of it.

The candlelight in the room outlined the bard’s body as she shifted a little. “We’d have been dragged into it anyway, Eph.” The bard said. “If it wasn’t you, it would have been something else. As it was, going after you put Xe in the right place at the right time to stop it, so who knows? Maybe it was meant to be.”

Ephiny made a face, then she frowned a little, and leaned forward, peering at Gabrielle’s now bare neck.

For a minute, Gabrielle wondered what she was looking at, then she remembered. “Scar’s not there.” She said, in a matter of fact tone. “That was one of the things that happened when we.. um...” She paused. “Had our little adventure earlier today.”

She didn’t really want to say die in front of Dori. She wasn’t sure how much her daughter would understand, but she figured it wasn’t time yet to explain to the child what that really meant. She’d seen death, Gabrielle knew, but seeing it happen to others and thinking about your parents going away and never coming back were two different things.

Wasn't it?

"Yeah." Ephiny murmured. "I didn't get that lucky when I had that bad time in the mountains." She skirted around the subject as well.

The head injury, given to her by Paladia. Gabrielle nodded. "No, me either, and Xe still had hers when she came back that other time." She said. "I think going to Mount Olympus had something to do with it. She hadn't been there before."

The regent nodded. "I noticed the mark on Hercules neck is gone." She said. "But hey, that's cool for you guys, huh? Scars are no fun."

"Feels a little weird." Gabrielle acknowledged. "Xena noticed mine first.. the ones on my back are gone." She touched the back of her neck. "But I think she's going to appreciate it with hers more. Cold mornings were getting pretty tough for her. Especially that knee from Athens."

Ephiny looked at her for a long moment in silence. "Cold mornings are tough as Hades for me." She finally said. "I can't even imagine what it would be like for someone who's been through everything she has. But yeah, I thought she looked a little ragged around the edges on the ship."

"Yeah?" Gabrielle's brow creased.

"Yeah." Ephiny nodded. "Not... I mean, she was doing all her usual stuff. I just got the feeling she was having a little harder time than usual at it."

"Well, she had a tough time, too." Gabrielle stripped off the rest of her garments and lowered herself into the tub, reveling in the warm, clean scented water. "Between the fights and the storms and everything. Sounds like it was pretty rough couple of days. She said she thought she twisted something saving that guy on the rocks."

Ephiny tossed her a lump of soap and a cloth. "And she was worried about you." The regent smiled. "She seemed to perk up soon as you got to the city."

Gabrielle scrubbed the leather stains off her arms, sparing a moment to think of that meeting in the square, and the knee shivering relief they'd both shared. "Likewise." She admitted. "I had Dori to distract me, but still." She ducked her head under to wet her hair, surfacing and wiping the water out of her eyes. "I was sure glad to see her." She finished, in a quiet tone.

"Well." Ephiny smiled at her. "On that shipwrecked ship out there? So was I."

"You have to tell me that whole story." Gabrielle reminded her.

Ephiny wandered over to the window in the room, peering out. "Ah. Here comes your consort now."

Gabrielle smiled. She quickly washed her hair, then she got up and out of the tub, wrapping herself in a clean sheet of linen just as she heard Xena's distinctive footsteps crossing the outer room. "In here, hon."

Ephiny turned and grinned. She leaned back against the windowsill and watched as Gabrielle's attention went to the door exactly at the moment Xena stepped through it, the warrior bringing a perceptible edgy energy along with her that eased as soon as she met her partner's eyes.

"Everything calm down there?" The regent asked, amused to see Xena's attitude alter from warlord to seductress in the blink of an eye as she stopped just inside the door and gave her towel wrapped partner a head to toe review. "Outside, I mean."

Xena turned and glanced at her. "Apparently." She drawled.

Gabrielle tucked the end of her linen in and walked over to her. "Did you see the nice tub Ephiny arranged for us?" She reached up and unlatched the catches on Xena's cloak. "And there's an

equally nice bed in the other room.”

The warrior encircled her with one arm and gracefully inclined her head to give her soulmate a kiss. “What tub?” She gazed intently into Gabrielle’s eyes. “All I see is you.”

The bard’s expression shifted from faint surprise to wide eyed bemusement. “Xe.” She murmured. “Yeesh.”

Xena chuckled. Then she turned her head and regarded Ephiny. “Thanks.” She indicated the room with her free hand. “I tripped over six of my militia on the way in here. Everyone else on the roof?” She gave the regent a wry look. “Not that I object to getting a decent night’s sleep, but was that really necessary?”

“Yes.” Gabrielle poked her. “We both think something’s not right here, Xe. What’s the chance you’ll get any rest at all otherwise?”

“You really want to just rest in that nice bed?” Xena’s blue eyes widened in mock astonishment.

“Xena.”

“Yeesh, Gabriellllle?”

The bard put her hands on her linen wrapped hips. “What in the world’s gotten into you?”

Xena grinned evilly.

“Gods.” Gabrielle covered her eyes. “Let me go get Dori for her bath.”

“Nah.” Xena ruffled her wet hair. “G’wan and relax. I’ll get our tiny terror and get her cleaned up since I need to.” She let her arm rest on the bard’s shoulders. “That room out there’s perfect for a meet. Stick your head out the window and have everyone c’mon up here in a candlemark. Let’s talk about this place.”

Ephiny accepted the instruction without comment and ducked outside, heading for the outer door rather than the window.

Gabrielle looked up at Xena. “Hey.”

“Hey.” Xena smiled at her. “Did I embarrass you?”

The bard’s eyes warmed. “No.” She pressed her cheek against Xena’s forearm. “Of course not. How could you telling me you think I’m attractive be embarrassing?” She countered. “I was a little surprised. Not embarrassed.”

“Mm.” Xena gently tickled her partner’s pink tinged ear. “Feel better? You haven’t worn that stuff in a long time.”

“It was okay but I was glad to get out of it.” Gabrielle bumped her gently towards the door. “C’mon. Dori was asking for you.” She led the way back out into the big chamber, then angled towards the bedroom door. Ephiny’s words niggled at her conscience though. “How are you feeling? It was a long day, huh?”

Xena didn’t answer right away. She put her hands on her partner’s shoulders as they entered the other room, and squeezed them a little. “Actually.. I feel great.” She admitted. “Probably because I didn’t have to spend the night hacking people’s heads off.”

“Boy isn’t that true?” Gabrielle sighed. “You were running around all afternoon though.”

“Not the same as fighting.” Xena released her and swiveled, looking for their offspring. “Hey Dor!”

“Boo!!” Dori scrambled to her feet and made a rush for her buddy. “Boo, you take me to

fishes?" She reached up and was grabbed and boosted up almost to the ceiling, making her squeal in delight. "Eeeeeee!!"

"How about you settle for a bath, hm?" Xena tossed her up and then caught her. "You ready to come have a bath with me?"

"Yes!" Dori giggled. "C'n we go fly?"

"Maybe. If we get both of us all clean." Xena tucked her against one shoulder and then went to their bags, grabbing a linen tunic and a jumper before she turned and headed back for the tub, whistling melodically.

Gabrielle leaned back against the press, crossing her arms and regarding the now empty doorway. Regardless of the uncertainty in the city, her partner appeared to be in a very good mood. Not having to fight a war certainly helped, but she sensed a warm energy there she'd missed lately.

It occurred to her that despite the very very long day, she really didn't feel that tired either. Was it a leftover from their adventure?

Eh. Gabrielle smiled as Ephiny reappeared. Who cares? She decided to enjoy it while it lasted. "Any chance of.."

"They're bringing some food and drink up." Ephiny neatly cut her off, with a knowing grin. "They found some provisions in the basement of that inn next door. Probably won't be as good as what you could cook up but it might be edible by the time it gets up here."

The bard chuckled. "I'm glad it turned out good tonight." She regretfully put aside her sleeping shift and drew out a tunic instead, sliding it over her head and snugging the belt tight. "But I really wish it was tomorrow and we were all getting out of here." She sat down on the press and put on her soft indoor boots, then she ran a comb through her wet hair to order it. "Before everyone remembers it was me that led that army right to the gates."

"We'll be glad to be gone too. This place wasn't much fun for us." Ephiny took a seat in the low slung chair in the room, near the window.

"How are you feeling?" Gabrielle glanced at her friend.

"Wiped." Ephiny admitted, with a smile. "I'd forgotten how the first couple months kick the crap out of you. Least the stomach problems settled down." She extended her legs and crossed them at the ankles. "Otherwise not bad."

The bard got up and went over to the bed, sprawling on it on her side facing Ephiny. She propped her head up on her hand and exhaled. "I remember what that was like. Or.. " She smiled a little. "I remember what the tired part was like, and I remember having to mix up herbs for Xena for the other part."

"Pony's glad she doesn't have that in common with her." Ephiny grinned easily. "And I am too - that's just a little too weird for me, you know what I mean?"

Gabrielle's eyes twinkled a little. "It is weird." She agreed. "But at the beginning it really wasn't for us, because Jessan's people have that happen too, and they told us about it. So we didn't freak out." She gazed past Ephiny for a minute, then refocused on her. "Then."

Ephiny tilted her head. "Then?" She inquired. "Was there a point you did?"

The bard nodded. "Remember when the village got captured?"

Ephiny winced.

"Well, remember that we met up with Jessan and his family outside the cave? He told me then it

was a little weird, because usually that sort of stuff didn't happen unless both partners were the parents of the child." Gabrielle got the whole sentence out, managing to keep her tone normal.

Ephiny leaned on one arm of the chair. "And you both didn't think you were at that point?"

Gabrielle remained silent, her face pensive.

"You knew." Ephiny answered for her, after a while. "Even when you were telling people it was Toris."

The bard exhaled after another long pause. "Yeah I knew." She admitted. "In my heart, I knew. I think Xena knew too, but neither of us wanted to really admit it."

"Because of Dahok?" The regent asked softly.

"No." Gabrielle shook her head. "To be honest, Eph... other people thought about that. Jess did. You guys probably did, but I never worried about that at all." She studied her friend's face. "We didn't – it was more about if we did talk about that it led into stuff about Xena she's not really comfortable with."

"Her being part god?"

Gabrielle nodded. "It freaks her out." She explained. "Actually, it freaks her out more than it does me, but then I'm not the one who has to face that in myself."

Ephiny nodded a little. "She told Gran she had Ares blood."

"Did she?" Gabrielle mused. "Well, even on Mount Olympus she didn't want to go into it and finally I was just like.. Xe, c'mon."

"Yeah" Ephiny leaned forward. "I remember asking her about it once. She froze up. Didn't like me asking."

Gabrielle nodded. "She doesn't like it. But I mean, there we were on Mount Olympus, and she's walking through walls of lightning and everything and it was just... " She sighed. "Then she just said it – about having god's blood and it sounded so weird it was almost worse."

"I can't imagine her saying it." The regent said. "Freaky."

"Really freaky. But then, everything was." Gabrielle admitted. "I was scared, and thinking about Dori, and.. then on top of it we had to go stand before the Gods and that was a whole other freak out."

"I bet." Ephiny muttered.

"She stood up to them." Gabrielle said. "They were really jerks, you know? Messing with us because they're all bored up there and don't have anything better to do." She paused and regarded her regent's expression. "I guess it's that old thing though. Zeus liked the attitude."

"Figures." The regent frowned. "Guys. They're all alike."

The bard nodded slightly. "He offered her a spot up there. Said she could stay." She met Ephiny's eyes. "He was going to send me back here, said we'd never end up in the same place anyhow. I couldn't stay there. Xe couldn't end up in Hades realm...she'd end up in some limbo or something otherwise."

Ephiny's jaw dropped a little. "What?"

"Yeah." Gabrielle looked past her out the window, where the dark sky was visible. "But Xe turned him down cold."

"Sure she did." The regent shifted, seeing the tears rolling down her friend's face. "Gabrielle?"

She reached over and touched the bard's hand.

"She told him she'd rather just spend her life with me down here, then eternity with him." Gabrielle's gaze shifted to meet Ephiny's. "She didn't even think twice."

Ephiny remained silent, merely shaking her head a tiny bit.

"I would have made the same choice, you know?" Gabrielle said, softly. "But just hearing it like that from her..."

The regent squeezed her hand, then reached up and gave her a pat on the cheek. "So, you're finally convinced she's yours?" She grinned, seeing the mixture of embarrassment and acknowledgement on her queen's face.

Gabrielle sniffled, and passed her free hand over her eyes to wipe the tears from them. "So anyway." She said. "That's what stopped the war. Aphrodite got into the whole mix and she told them... I guess she told them love meant more to us than anything else."

"And it does." Ephiny finally smiled, as her nape hairs relaxed. "Wow."

"Yeah." A grin appeared on Gabrielle's face, lighting it up all the way. "Wow."

Ephiny settled back in her chair, watching the joy dance in the depths of her queen's eyes. As well it might, after they'd both been through. But the whole idea of standing on Mount Olympus, challenging the gods?

Brr.

Just... brrr.

**

The scent of roasting meat drifted in the window. Xena could hear the sounds of her forces outside as well, low voices and the clink of ale mugs, mixed with the rasp of leather boots on stone and the subtle soft clash of armor.

Comfortable and familiar. Xena felt a sense of security knowing the people around her were friends, but still, in the back of her mind was a gently thrumming warning – frustratingly without a specific source.

She'd walked through the city, and slipped in and out of the shadows, listening to the city defenders and the residents who were working to put things back in order after the sailing of the Spartans.

Didn't seem to be them. Xena heard a lot of comments but most had been at worst, neutral about them and at best... The warrior wrinkled her nose at the remembered, often ribald compliments. So if not the city, then who or what was triggering her senses?

"Boo, I brushed Wusty real good." Dori was standing in the tub, her hands on the edges watching Xena towel herself off. "But mama made me leave him in the barn!"

"Sure she did, shortie." Xena responded. "You ever see me bring Argo into our house?" She paused to study the scar free skin on her arms and shook her head a little.

Dori bounced up and down a little, a frown on her face as she pondered this blatant logic.

"Didja?" Xena ruffled her hair somewhat dry. She'd never considered her scars as ugly or unsightly, just the markers of a life spent fighting and in truth, she had fewer than her history might have indicated. Not having them felt strange, and as she looked down the length of her tall frame it was a little difficult to get used to seeing all that unblemished surface wrapped around the more familiar bone and muscle under it.

Weird.

However. The warm bath had felt good, and the combination of the pleasant texture of the linen and the cool breeze from the window felt even better. “Hmm?” She looked up at her daughter, her brows lifting in question.

“No.” Dori admitted grudgingly. “But Boo, he’s gonna get lonely!”

Xena wrapped the towel around her and tucked the end in to keep it in place, then she walked over to the tub. “Listen, shortie.” She combed her fingers through her daughter’s wet hair. “I love horses too, y’know. But I don’t live with em. Rusty can talk to all the other horses. You get to stay here in this swanky place with your mama and me.”

Dori pouted.

“Ah ah.” Xena put her fingertip on the child’s nose. “I want your mama to have a good nights rest, okay? She’s worked really hard here.”

“Okay.” Dori relented. “We go t’morrow?”

“We do.” Xena lifted her out of the tub and carried her over to where the stack of linen was. She set Dori down on the chest and picked up a towel, drying her off. “We’re going to go home with all our friends. You like that idea?”

“Yes.”

Xena ran a comb Gabrielle had left in the bathing room through her hair, then she did the same for Dori, smiling a little as Dori laughed and clapped her hands, dancing from one foot to the other. “Hey, you dance just like your mama, you know that?”

“Go mama!” Dori burbled, rambling around in a circle wiggling her behind.

Xena bit the inside of her lip to keep from cracking up, since her daughters motion really was Gabrielle’s image. “You have to do that for mama later, shortie.” She finished toweling the child off.

Dori finished her dance and leaned against Xena’s tall body. “Boo h’com they were all mad today?” She looked up, her clear green eyes reflecting in the candlelight. “Everybody was making a loud yell, and mad.”

“Who was mad, Dor?” Xena sat down on the chest and Dori climbed into her lap, settling down as Xena wrapped her arms around her. “The people here were mad?”

“Mens.” Dori said. “All mad.”

Xena studied her daughter. “Well.” She said. “I think they were mad because they thought they were all going to have to fight. To go boom.”

“Boom.” Dori nodded.

“But I made it so they didn’t have to.” Xena said. “I told everyone not to go boom.”

“H’com?”

Xena had to think about that. “How come I wanted them not to fight?”

“Boo goes boom. Mama goes boom.” Dori replied. “Fun? H’com you didn’t want to go boom?”

Hm. Xena studied her daughter’s face bemusedly. Tough explanation. Dori saw her and Gabrielle spar on almost a daily basis and knew they enjoyed it, she’d lived in or near the Amazon village and seen the same, and down in the village where the militia drilled in the afternoon amid good natured teasing and laughter.

Xena herself enjoyed fighting, and resisted lying about that to her offspring.

So how to explain? “Going boom is something we do.” Xena said, slowly. “Your mama and I do it when we have to, and we practice, which can be fun.” She went on. “But it’s not fun when someone gets owie. Right?”

“No, Boo. No fun.” Dori shook her head. She knew what owie was, having seen her parents get injured enough times. “Don’t like that.”

“Okay, so I thought if we all started to fight today, a lot of people would get owie. Maybe mama and me too.” Xena explained. “So I decided it would be better if we just had fun and didn’t fight. Got that?”

Dori nodded. “Good.” She decided, giving Xena a hug.

Xena hugged her back, then she stiffened, looking to her right just as Ares appeared in a for him restrained blue flash. He sauntered over to where she as seated and leaned against the chest. “I was wondering if you’d stop by.” The warrior said, in a mild tone.

Ares smiled. “You missed the party.” He winked at Dori, who was regarding him with wide, green eyes. “Hey kid.”

“Hi.” Dori responded, safe in the cradle of Xena’s arms.

“I wanted to get back to this party.” Xena remarked. “Have fun?”

Ares chuckled. “Yeah.” He admitted. “Woulda been better if you took Daddy’s offer.” He said. “But seeing those two lose out to baby sister was a kick.”

“You knew I wouldn’t.” Xena found she actually didn’t mind Ares presence for a change. “Wasn’t that the whole point? “

“Sure.” Ares extended a finger and watched Dori grab it. “I knew you’d be stupid enough to turn him down and go back to being a dirt grubber with your babe. “ He glanced up at her. “But I still had hope maybe you’d see the light and act in your own best interest for a change.”

Xena wasn’t even offended. She smiled at him. “C’mon, Ares. You can’t have it both ways. Either I won your bet for you, or I didn’t.” She said. “You didn’t really want me to stay up on Mount Olympus and I didn’t want either of your sisters to get your job.”

“True.” The god admitted. “But it would have made it interesting up there, gotta say that.” He played tug with Dori. “You’d have kicked their asses anyway. I had a side bet on that.”

Xena rolled her eyes.

“It was a bummer.” Ares said. “I was really working this Sparta thing. I dig those guys. They love war. Not like those Athenian losers.”

Xena cocked her head in inquiry. “So how did Athena and Artemis get involved in that anyway?” She asked. “I thought you had that all lined up.”

“Thanks to you? I did.” Ares’ lips moved into a grim smile. “Then that whole little incident happened.”

Incident? Oh. “The valley.” Xena said.

“Yeah. Bad enough those losers didn’t pay any attention to my croaking.” Ares said. “But after I got back up there I found them divvying up my stuff.”

Xena’s eyes opened a little wider.

“Nice, huh?” The god said. “They didn’t figure I was coming back. So the two butch bitches got

into a knockdown about who was going to be goddess of war. “ He glowered at Xena. “And daddy thought it would be entertaining to let them fight it out.”

“I see.” Xena murmured.

“Bitches. Screwed up my nice war.” Ares said. “So yeah, I’m glad they ended up down in some pig sty somewhere. Hope a couple of big cowherds find em and rape em.”

Xena winced. “Not nice, Ares.”

The god shrugged. “Neither was them tearing up my bedroom and kicking my dog out.” He said bluntly. “No sympathies from me. Sorry babe. My turn to laugh at them.”

“How long will he leave them mortal?” Xena asked.

Ares shrugged again. “Beats me. Until he gets bored.” His brows quirked. “Better watch out. They know you’ve got experience with that whole mortality thing. They may come looking for you to help them.”

Xena groaned, and rolled her eyes. “Like I would, after what they did.”

Was there a twinkle in Ares’ eyes? “Well, babe, you did help me out and we haven’t always been best buddies, now have we?” The god asked. “They know you’re a sucker.”

Xena studied him. “You’re different.”

They looked at each other for a long period of time, enough for Dori to get restless and start to squirm in Xena’s arms.

Then Ares smiled. “Same to you.” He finally said. “But watch out. Those two are gonna hold a big time grudge.”

“Got cha.” Xena bounced Dori in her arms. “You hungry Dor? I think I smell dinner coming outside.” She darted a glance at her visitor. “Wanna join us?”

“Xena. C’mon.” Ares chuckled. “You had what we eat up there. You think I want mortal food?”

“It tastes better.” The warrior informed him. “I got bored of that stuff up there after what.. a day?” She stood up, cradling Dori. “Besides. Your brother’s here. Think of the entertainment possibilities.”

Ares tipped his head back and laughed, the sound echoing off the marbled walls.

Xena chuckled briefly. “I gotta go.” She said, as his laughter wound down.

“Ah well. Me too.” He sighed. “It was pretty good having dinner last night and not having a bitchfest.” He said. “But it’s too bad you split so fast. Just seeing the old lady frothing would have been worth it.”

He straightened up. “Anyway, I’ve got wars to instigate and acolytes to ravish.” He said. “See yah, ya little monkey.” He addressed Dori. “Maybe you and I can have some fun when you grow up.”

His eyes darted up to Xena’s face, but the warrior merely returned his look with a mild expression. After a moment of silence, he snapped his fingers, and disappeared.

“Boom.” Dori commented. “Hungry, Boo.”

“Me too, shortie.” Xena headed towards the door. “Let’s go get mama and find our friends and get some food. Okay?” She picked up their clothing on the way out.

“Okay!”

**

Its finally the end of one of the strangest days of my life. Between dawn and now, I died, went to Mount Olympus, came back, and helped avert a war.

Not bad for one day. There's so much that happened, I think I'll wait to write about all of it until we get back home and I can sit down and think about it. Especially some of the stuff that happened on Mount Olympus.

Ephiny said something tonight that really hit me. I was telling her about how Xena turned down Zeus's offer to let her stay on Olympus and she asked me if I finally was convinced Xena was mine.

Did I doubt that before? Or did she just think I did because of everything that happened to us. I wasn't surprised when Xena told him no, just like I knew for sure she'd never leave me there and stay in Elysia.

But you know something? In the very back of my soul I did feel this little zing when she said it. It wasn't surprise, it was something else. Joy? Relief? I can't really tell.

I think it's more like.. the feeling you get when you know something, but everyone else doesn't, and then they find out. Sort of a .. 'yeah!' feeling. A 'see? Toldja! Kind of thing.

So, it's not so much that I was finally convinced, but that I could tell people that and they'd be finally convinced. You know?

Gabrielle looked up from her diary as they entered. "Hey you two." She greeted them. "Nice bath? I could get used to that tub."

Xena chuckled. She carried Dori over to the long bench and set her down on it. "Ours isn't bad." She said. "And it's got running water." She reminded her soulmate.

"Yes it does." The bard agreed. "Eph went to get Pony. I was just getting caught up on my writing." She indicated the book. "Did I hear another voice in there?"

"Ares." Her partner promptly supplied. "Stopped by to warn me about his sisters, and gloat." She pulled Dori's jumper on and set her down on the floor. "There ya go little frog. Go play."

"Ah." Gabrielle nibbled the end of her quill, watching Xena as she removed her towel and picked up the long tunic she'd taken into the bathing room with her. The candlelight gilded the warrior's body, only the dark patch of the tattoo on her breast marring the surface. "He have anything else to say?"

Xena glanced up from fastening her tunic. "The usual." She came over and sprawled on the bed next to her soulmate. "Gave me a hard time about turning Zeus down."

The bard cocked her head. "I thought the whole point of that was we won his dumb bet for him?"

"Mmhm." Xena nodded. "It was. He just wants everything."

"Ah." Gabrielle reached over and tickled Xena's nose with her quill. "He can't have you."

"Nope." Xena caught the end of the quill in her teeth, then released it. "I invited him to have dinner with us and he split."

Gabrielle laughed softly. "That would have been really weird, honey. You'd have totally freaked all our friends, and pissed off Hercules." She saw the mischievous glint in her partner's eyes. "Xena."

"I said he left." Xena smiled. "But c'mon, it would have been fun to watch." She reached out and stroked Gabrielle's calf. "He sounds really mad at his family." She said. "But having been up there... they're cruel, Gab. All of them."

“Even Aphrodite.” Gabrielle nodded gently. “I should have asked her about that, when she came here to see me. We talked about love, but what does that really mean if you're immortal?” She studied her partner's angular face. “I realized something. Of course they have to mess with us. All they have up there is each other.”

“The only thing that's permanent for them is them.” Xena agreed. “We're just fleeting distractions. We come and go and they go on.”

“Wow.” The bard mused. “But Xena... we go on too. We know that.” She said. “Look at those people from Elysia, who were serving the gods. We knew those people.”

“But not everyone goes there.” Xena rolled onto her back and studied the ceiling. “You know, I once heard something. I was somewhere and I heard about this belief.. these wise men who were telling people when they died, they went to a place to wait, and then they got reborn.”

“Reborn?”

Xena nodded. “Yeah. You just kept going through lives, until you got to a point where you caught a clue then you went somewhere else.”

“Huh.” Gabrielle thought about that. “Would you know who you were if you were born all over again? Or would you just be...” She stopped speaking, her eyes meeting Xena's as the warrior head turned towards her. “Or when you met people you shared this thing with you'd feel like you knew them?”

She could feel the prickle as her nape hairs lifted, and the cool breeze from the window hit the skin on the back of her neck, a flash of memory bringing into her mind's eye the moment she and Xena had met.

The moment her life had begun, wasn't that what she'd told Jess?

Xena released a breath. “Eh.” She shrugged, breaking the tension. “Or it was just a crazy story from some drunk old guy.” She turned her head, as Dori came over with Flameball. “Whatcha got there, Dor?”

“Hey people, dinner's here.” Ephiny's voice called in from the outer room, and there was the sound of people entering, and boots scraping against the stone.

Gabrielle closed her diary and put it on the low bench next to the bed. She got up and went over to where Xena was sprawled, crouching down to look her partner in the eye. “I'd spend ten thousand lifetimes with you.” She leaned forward and gave Xena a kiss, then she stood up and walked out of the room.

Xena smiled, watching her until she disappeared. “You ready for dinner, Dori?” She asked her daughter. “I bet they found us some honeycake.”

“Boo, Flamby wants a horsie too.” Dori said, earnestly. “You get him one?”

The warrior rolled up off the bed and extended a hand. “I'll see what I can do.” She waited for Dori to clasp her fingers. “Maybe we can train a squirrel to take him around with you.”

“A pony Boo!”

A pony for a stuffed animal. Xena mused, as they entered the main room, where dozens of people were already gathering around the table.

Almost as crazy as being perpetually reborn.

**

Continued in Part 29

A Queen's Tale

Chapter 29

Gabrielle replenished Xena's goblet and sat down, taking a sip from her own and nibbling on a bit of stewed duck on her plate.

Dinner had turned out more expansive than she'd imagined – though the ingredients had been eclectic, everyone had pitched in with their own favorite ways of cooking and so the result had been quite a number of reasonably good dishes for everyone to share.

So it had been nice. Instead of the expected confrontation with the city elders and their representatives from Athens everyone had just settled down at the table, shared the flagons of ale and talked about what tomorrow might bring them when the sun rose on a new day.

Dori had been put to bed, and now Gabrielle was settled next to Xena in the center of one edge of the square table and pretty much anyone who had anything to do with their part of the war was there too.

Even Denius. The Athenian patrician was sitting a few chairs down from them, having a discussion with one of the city men, and Jens.

Just past him on the corner was Milena, with a few of the Amazons that had offered to fight for them in the city, and seemed to be getting friendly with the girl.

Gabrielle was glad. Milena was talking to one of them, and it was sort of a relief to have her focused on something else other than Xena – who hadn't given the kid so much as a glance the whole night.

Gabrielle remembered what that felt like. She smiled and leaned on the chair arm closest to her partner, watching as Xena's hand lifted and reached out for hers, lacing their fingers together in casual affection.

She did remember, but it had been a very long time since for either good or bad Xena had been indifferent to her.

Xena's fingers squeezed her hand, and she looked up to see the warrior's eyes twinkling, shifting towards the table, then rolling a little.

A very long time indeed. Gabrielle lifted their joined hands and kissed the back of Xena's, then pressed it against her cheek. "Should I tell a story?"

Her partner tilted her head slightly. "I'd rather we wrap this up." She murmured. "Go take advantage of that nice soft bed."

Gabrielle produced a grin in response. "Right there with ya."

"Damn well hope so." Xena took a sip from her goblet, then sighed, surveying the room.

On Xena's other side Jessan was using a bunch of leftover shishkebab sticks to demonstrate some kind of formation to Bennu, with Iolaus listening with interest a seat or two down.

Hercules was sitting right next to Xena, sipping from a goblet with a quiet, pensive expression on his face. "Hey." He leaned on the arm of his chair closest to the warrior. "Isn't that the guy who was prodding everyone to attack the Spartans?" He indicated Denius.

"Yeah." Xena nodded. "He's Athenian council. Changes his damn mind every half candlemark."

"He asked me to lead the city guys against them." Hercules confided. "I think I insulted him when I answered." He shook his head. "Crazy."

"I'm not sure what his game is." Xena answered honestly. "I met him here in the city, he was

waiting to head to Athens. Said he lives around these parts.. but he also said he's in the council and owns a bunch of these ships."

"He's not familiar to me." Hercules said. "I know most of those guys, but not this one. And by the way, who's the kid over there? She does look familiar."

Xena glanced over. "Ah. Well." She leaned back and crossed her ankles. "According to her, she's a by blow of some top dog in Athens."

Hercules studied the girl, his sandy brows contracting. "I have seen her before." He said finally. "I just cant remember where. I thought Io said she was mixed up in some crime?"

Xena shrugged. "Depends how you define it. She scammed the council out of something. Probably just a bag of coins. She was traveling with a couple of guys."

"Eh." Hercules finally shook his head. "It'll come to me." He glanced at Xena. "Let's get this over with, huh? I'm trying to get used to being back down here."

"Okay." Xena stood up at her seat and waited, letting her gaze scan the crowd as they rapidly quieted, turning their attention to her. "Been a long day." She said. "I know there are people here who think we should have taken a different path with the Spartans, but the fact is, people, we did the right thing today."

One of the city men looked at her, meeting her gaze unflinchingly. "We'd have fought with em."

Xena nodded. "I would have too. But I didn't have to, and you didn't either so in the end no one died today."

Gabrielle very gently cleared her throat.

A brief smile crossed Xena's face. "A lot of people would have."

"We could have stopped them though." Denius spoke up. "It is outrageous that we allowed them to escape. You may have the say here, Xena, but in Athens it will be a different matter."

"You're an idiot." Xena replied, in a mild tone. "Maybe I should just kill you and save myself a lot of trouble."

Gabrielle covered her eyes with one hand.

"You dare." Denius stood up, angrily.

"Shut up and sit down." Xena told him. "You want to know what would have happened if you'd attacked the Spartans after we promised them safe passage? There'd have been a lot of dead bodies around and the huge advantage Athens gained would have been lost."

"What advantage?" Denius shot back, but sat down at the same time. "We look like idiots!"

Xena pushed her chair back and little and circled in back of Gabrielle's, seeing the Athenian flinch as she approached. "No." She said. "Sparta looks like idiots. They broke the war treaty with Athens by invading." She ticked off a finger. "They charged through Thrace trying to find some random woman to lead their army." She ticked another finger. "They let themselves be faked out and ended up having their surprise attack ruined." She paused, now right behind Denius. "And at the end of the day, they had to agree to passively march down to their ships and run away from us."

Denius was hitched around halfway in his chair, watching her nervously. "But now they can go attack us!"

"They won't." Xena shook her head. "Athens knows what they did. By this time, the ambassadors from Sparta are red faced on the steps of the council chambers or maybe even in jail. They gambled. They lost."

Denius stared at her, with a frown.

“What do they have to lose then, Xena?” Jens asked, in a quieter and more respectful voice. “Why not just go and attack Athens?”

“Because the guy leading them isn’t stupid.” Xena told him. “He knows what he has there is a resource of his state, and you don’t waste resources just to salve your ego. Not when you’ve been around as long as time as he and I have.”

Denius grunted.

“It’s hard, Xena.” Jens said. “As a man of war, it’s hard for me to stand by and watch my enemy escape me.”

Xena leaned on the back of his chair. “Jens, take it from someone who’s been there and done that. Enemy ‘s a very ambiguous word.”

“What do you mean?”

Xena went back to her chair, leaning on the table and aware everyone was concentrating on her. “Lets say... all of a sudden we get attacked by Persia.”

“Persia?”

The warrior nodded. “They’d love Greece.” She said. “So let’s say one of the Persian king’s armies and their horse brigades attack ... Athens. And Athens reaches out and asks Sparta for some help.”

“Hey!” Jens stood up. “Xena, all respect to you, but we would never do that!”

The warrior gave him a wry, droll look. “Jens, the Spartans are a lot more like Athenians than the Persians are. Trust me. You would.”

Denius was nodding. “They say politics make very strange bedfellows. Is that what you mean, Xena?” He sat back in his chair, looking more confident. “That someday, we will need to ask, and then this deed we have done here will be remembered?”

Gabrielle smiled kindly at the man, resisting the urge to give him an encouraging a little applause. “I’ve seen that happen.” She remarked.

“So have I.” Ephiny chimed in. “You know, we were at war with the Centaurs for many years, and through mutual need, we found a way to live together in peace.”

Everyone’s head swiveled and they regarded he Amazon regent. Then they all refocused on Denius and Xena.

“So yeah.” Xena said. “Sometimes, kicking people’s ass isn’t the only way to win.”

There seemed to be some doubt. Gabrielle started the process of sorting through her stories, narrowing down her choices to ones that might prove her partner’s point without being overly obvious about it.

She stood up, twitching her tunic straight and stepping up to Xena’s side, resting a hand on her partner’s back. “Sometimes, violence isn’t the answer.” She paused then took a breath, but didn’t need to continue because for a change, it was okay.

Jens nodded. “I understand.” He said. “It’s something to consider, if I ever should find myself in such a place.” He sat down and lifted his mug, tipping it in Xena’s direction.

“There is truth in that.” Denius agreed. “I hadn’t thought of it quite that way, but I can see where we could find an advantage in it. A good advantage.”

A round of clanking mugs went around the table, and everyone relaxed. Xena glanced at her partner, getting a tiny shrug from the bard before they both resumed their seats.

“Now what?” Gabrielle muttered.

Hercules promptly stood up. His tall, muscular bulk immediately drew attention as well, and the noise faded out again. “People. Let me say how glad I am that everyone did the right thing here, and it ended up a peaceful resolution. There were a lot of things at stake here, and trust me when I tell you this city ended up very lucky.”

“Yeah.” Iolaus spoke up. “You all have NO idea what Athens was spared because of this.”

“So I suggest that everyone go and get a good night’s sleep, and tomorrow we’ll help with putting everything right before we leave.” Hercules concluded. “Been a long day people. Everyone’s earned their beds tonight.”

Xena watched the crowd, seeing the reluctantly pleased faces as they responded to Hercules speech. There was still something not quite right. She could sense it, she knew Gabrielle could, and she suspected Hercules could as well.

But it wasn’t in this room. Even Denius was relaxing, lifting his mug and leaning back in his chair, as the chatter resumed, and the demigod next to her sat back down with a grunt.

Xena gave him a slap on the shoulder as she moved past, going over to where Jessan was sitting, crouching down and resting a hand on his chair arm as she spoke to him.

Gabrielle quietly resumed her seat, leaning on the arm of it, and pulling her legs up in rakish comfort. She caught motion from the corner of her eye and turned her head as Milena stepped up next to her. “Hello.” She kept her voice mild.

Milena studied her briefly. “They tell me you’re in charge of the Amazons that live near you.”

“That’s true.” Gabrielle responded. “The tribe lives in the mountains above Amphipolis.”

Milena nodded. “That’s what those women said back there. They said I would have to ask you if I wanted to go live with those Amazons.”

The bard watched her face, mist green eyes faintly reflective in the torchlight. “Why?” She asked. “I thought you lived in Athens. Why come live out in Thrace?” Her gaze flicked around, but the others around her were distracted. “Sit down.” She offered, pointing at the chair next to her.

Milena did so. She had an expression that seemed halfway between embarrassed and discomfort. “I guess you would ask that.” She said. “I don’t really expect you to understand but..” She paused, as Gabrielle lifted her hand up. “What?”

“You don’t expect me to understand?” Gabrielle asked. “Is that because you’ve got some really complicated former life or just that you think I’m a yokel?” She asked. “Aren’t you a little young to have that much complication in your life?”

Milena turned red. “That’s not what I meant.”

“Ah. Then you think I’m a yokel.” Gabrielle folded her hands over her stomach. “But go on, give me a try. You never know.”

The girl frowned. “I don’t think you’re anything. I just don’t think there’s a place for me in Athens, and I wanted to give this a try.”

Gabrielle regarded her thoughtfully. She suspected she knew the real reason Milena wanted to come live with her tribe, but since she’d left home for the exact same reason, she really didn’t have it in her to hold it against the kid.

Kid. The bard felt her face crinkle into a wry grin. "Amazon life isn't easy." She commented. "You'll have to find a place in the tribe, and contribute to it's wellbeing. We don't just let people hang out and laze around."

She sensed motion to her other side, and as she glanced that way, Pony settled against the table, saying nothing but projecting that irascible Amazon air with her folded arms and cocked eyebrow "Hey Pon."

"Hey your maj." Pony replied promptly.

"Eponin is our weaponsmaster." Gabrielle returned her attention to Milena. "She's responsible for teaching the tribe how to wage war." She explained. "She does a great job."

Pony grinned happily. "Wow. Nicest thing you ever said to me." She said. "Or about me. Or whatever." She looked over at Milena. "You looking to be an Amazon?"

Milena looked warily at her. "I was taught how to fight back in Athens." She said, and then hesitated. "But I've seen you people fight here. It's different." She looked back at Gabrielle. "I like to learn that."

Gabrielle wrapped her arms around her knee and thought about it. She studied Milena's face, and watched as the girl waited for her decision, without any signs of fidgeting. There was a lot of gray there, she recognized. This was no white fleeced lamb, and yet, she didn't think there was all bad there either.

Shades of gray. Something she was very intimately aware and used to. "You can come back with us for a trial." Gabrielle said, after a long pause. "That way we can both see if it's something you really want to do."

Milena looked surprised, but she just nodded a little. "Thanks." She said. Then she pointed with her thumb over her shoulder. "Those guys want to come too."

Gabrielle glanced past her at the Amazons seated down the other edge of the table, watching her covertly. She looked up at Pony in question, and the weaponsmaster half shrugged, but nodded. "Sure, why not." She concluded. "We leave tomorrow, so just be ready."

Briefly, Milena smiled, just a flash of good humor that went as soon as it came, as she turned and headed back to the group on the other side of the table.

"Got us some recruits?" Ephiny slid into Xena's chair. "Maybe we can kick those grandmas out and put these guys in their places."

"Eph." Gabrielle eyed her. "C'mon. "

"C'mon nothing." Ephiny said. "We have laws about that, y'know? For them to challenge you when the tribe was in mortal danger... that's grounds for expulsion. They know it."

Gabrielle blinked in surprise.

Pony cracked her knuckles. "Gonna have fun when we get back. "

Xena chose that moment to drift back over, leaning on the back of her soulmate's chair. "Party's over." She said. "Everyone go get some sleep."

"Yes, mom." Ephiny stood up and gracefully eased back out of Xena's slap range. "See you guys in the morning." She tugged Pony by her belt, and they started for the door, as most of the rest of the guests were also.

That left Xena and Gabrielle at the table, as the sounds slowly wound down to nothing save the scuff of boots and claws on the stone steps outside.

“So.” Gabrielle said, after a moment of silence. “Sleep?”

“Bed.” Xena held out a hand, wiggling her fingertips in invitation.

Gabrielle accepted the offer, getting up from her chair and joining her soulmate as she circled the room extinguishing the candles, letting darkness chase them into the still lit confines of the bedroom.

**

The candles had burned down another mark and the sounds outside had settled out to silence. Xena was stretched out on the bed, luxuriating in the feel of the cool linen against her back contrasting with the warmth of Gabrielle’s bare body draped over her.

It felt so different here, than it had on Mount Olympus. Xena idly studied the ceiling, her fingers gently tracing a mindless pattern on her partner’s back. She felt immersed in the scent of the flickering candles, the faint hint of lavender on the linen, and the earthy sensations of their recent lovemaking.

The night they’d spent up there – had felt good, but there was a certain veneer over it that put just a hint of separation between the sensation and them, as though the silence and the rarified air on the mountain had deadened their senses just a bit.

Just a bit, but she understood the difference now, and the richness of the feeling made her skin tingle. Everything here was now, and present, and real in a way nothing had been on the other side. Dinner had tasted far more intense, the smell of the city coming in the window hammered her nose, and the solid weight of Gabrielle covering her, their heartbeats thumping in twin rhythm made her ferociously happy.

Right now, she felt completely alive and she was enjoying it, a smile twitching her lips as she listened to the quiet night sounds around them.

“Xe?” Gabrielle shifted a little. “You’re not going to sleep, are you?”

“No.” Xena exhaled in contentment.

Gabrielle gently traced a line down her partner’s belly. “You’re waiting for something to happen.”

“Yeah.” The warrior admitted. “I don’t know what, but something’s brewing. I can feel it.”

“Is it really, or is it just that things usually don’t go our way and this time they did?” The bard asked. “And we just are waiting for the other boot to drop?”

“Eh.” Xena acknowledged the possibility with a lift and drop of her hand. “I went to visit the horses, and they were restless.”

Gabrielle considered that, content to remain where she was curled up against Xena’s body. “Maybe they just want to get out of here as much as I do?” She mused. “Or they don’t like the smell, from the fire.”

“Possible.” Xena said.

“You know what?” Gabrielle traced the dark pattern of the tattoo on her partner’s chest. “I don’t want anything to happen, Xe. I just want us to go to sleep, wake up, and leave.”

Xena exhaled.

“Don’t you?”

“I do.” The warrior said. “Hades, I wanted to suggest we just pack up and leave tonight, but we’ve got too many people to deal with.” She grumbled. “Damn it.”

“Mm.” Gabrielle smiled. “Boy, would I love to be on the beach with you tonight, just listening to the waves.” She said. “I remember that first time we stayed by the shore, and that first night, after we had that cookout.”

Xena rested her cheek against Gabrielle’s head. “I remember that too.”

She remembered the warm breeze, and the two of them sprawled in the sand, stuffed to their eyeballs and just a little drunk on the sweet summer wine they’d shared, casually reaching over and clasping each other’s hand just because.

They’d been through enough with each other at that point to not need an excuse, or want one, simply enjoying being together and at least momentarily at peace.

“So what do you think’s going to happen?” Gabrielle brought the question back around. “Do you still think those mercenaries here are going to start trouble? The Spartans are gone.. or do you think they’re not really gone, just hiding?”

Xena stretched her body a little. “Didn’t see much trouble from the city guys. No, I don’t think it’s something inside. Everything’s pretty calm. “ She said. “Honestly, hon, I don’t know what I’m expecting. I’m just twitchy.”

Gabrielle could feel it. Xena was restless. She could feel the motion in the body she was wrapped around, those little shifts of her partner’s muscles clearly evident under her touch. “Want to go out and go for a walk?” She offered.

“Mm.” Xena considered that. “Down along the waterfront? “ She mused. “We could climb up onto the escarpment and see if the Spartans are hanging around.”

“Don’t we have people watching up there?”

“Yeah.” Xena admitted. “But they could be sleeping. Cait and Paladia are over in one of the big bunk rooms sacked out.” She said. “Got some of the city guys to go up there but who knows. May have taken a wineskin up with them figuring everything’s over.”

“Hm.” Crazy enough, the idea of wandering outside with Xena seemed appealing to her. Even climbing up onto the cliff didn't sound bad. She made a picture in her head of what that would be like, standing there with Xena at her side, looking out over a hopefully moonlit sea. “Okay.”

“You’re not too tired?” Xena ran her fingers up and down the bard's bare back. “Long day.” She reminded her. “Longer for us than most.”

Gabrielle gently kissed Xena's shoulder. “I’m not really tired.” She said. “I think I’m still running on nectar or something. I might as well enjoy it while I can. What about you?”

“I feel great.” Xena said, after a small silence. “Maybe because I felt so crappy before it happened. Damn I was sore.” She mused. “That fight on the boat kicked my ass.”

“The one where they jumped you?”

“Yeah.” Her partner “Sure missed having you watch my back. Iolaus was there, but it wasn't the same thing.”

“No it wouldn't be. Hey Xe?” Gabrielle snuggled a little closer. “I was heading out here, and they were chasing us. A couple times I felt you.. I thought I felt you? Were you trying to.. dosomething?”

“Yes.” Xena answered in a mild tone. “I was on the boat and I was missing you so I.. well, I thought it was a dream because you were in Jessan's village. But I wanted to snuggle with you.”

“Wasn't a dream.” Gabrielle smiled.

“No, I realized that later. Then.. you were looking for a hideout. I tried to show you where to go.”

“Ahhh.” The bard rumbled softly. “The old fortress.”

“Yeah.”

“You know, Dori told me that night she saw you.”

Xena tilted her head and studied her partner. “She did?”

Gabrielle nodded. “She said she could see you in me when we were riding.”

Xena's face twitched a little. “Uh.” She grunted. “Well, I think I remember seeing through your eyes at one point. You looked down at her and she was looking up at your face.”

“I don't even remember that.” Gabrielle whispered. “I was so worried about them catching us.” She gave Xena a hug. “Thank you. I wish I could have returned the favor.”

“Eh.” Her partner sighed. “We survived.”

“We did. We're a good team, you and I.” The bard smiled. “Want to go for that walk now? Either that, or lets go spar in the courtyard or something. I'm twitchy too.”

With a smile, Xena gave her a one armed squeeze, then she released her as they both eased out of the bed, careful to be as quiet as they could. Xena went over to the long, low press and picked up her tunic, slipping it on and belting it as Gabrielle joined her.

They dressed in silence, sitting down together to pull on their boots and then getting back up. Xena lifted her sword up and removed a coiled leather belt she almost never used with it, threading the sheath onto it and buckling it over her back. She added a set of boot daggers and glanced over at the door, where Gabrielle was standing with her staff, waiting.

Moonlight was coming in the front window and outlining Gabrielle's figure and it made Xena smile to see the casual confidence in her partner's posture, fingers wrapped around her chosen weapon and leaning just a little on it.

She wriggled her shoulders to make sure her sword was in place, then she crossed the room to join the bard at the door. They walked through the big open room in front, then eased out the big wooden portal that led outside.

It was quiet. The city seemed to be sleeping, there was no music or noise from the lower pier area where the rougher of the pubs were and the stone streets were empty of people.

Xena proffered her hand, and after Gabrielle took it, she started along the walk that ringed the building they were staying in.

It was at the very very top of the hill, surrounded by a complex of buildings and rooms that held all their friends and supporters. At the edge of the compound was a gate, and that gate blocked entrance up the set of steps that led down the hill.

Someone, Xena reasoned, had needed or thought they needed protection. She lifted her hand and waved at the guard at the gate, one of her own militia. “Evening.”

“Gen'l.” The militiaman opened the gate and stood back. “Late, isn't it?”

“Yeah.” Xena agreed. “We're just going to take a walk.”

The militiaman's eyes flicked over the staff, and the sword on Xena's back, but he merely touched his head in respect, and swung the gate shut after they went through it.

A cool breeze was coming off the water, and it fluttered their clothes as they walked down the steps and onto the upper promenade where the inn was located. That was quiet also, the window

above the stable stained at the edges with smoke.

Xena detoured a few steps and opened the barn door, poking her head inside and checking on the horses. They all were standing in their stalls, ears up, and moving around in the straw. "Hey kids."

Io nickered at her, stretching his neck out and flaring his nostrils.

"Just taking a walk." Xena said, watching the animals closely. Even Rusty was moving around restlessly and the gray mare they'd rescued from Milena was rolling white rimmed eyes at her. "Hhm."

"What's wrong?" Gabrielle poked her head inside. "Oh." Even she could see the animals anxiety, the shifting of weight from foot to foot that reminded her of her soulmate's twitchiness. "They're upset."

"Mm." Xena nodded. "Let's go see if we can find out what they're upset about." She drew back and shut the door. They continued along the promenade and then started down the steps towards the docks.

"Why are we going down there?" Gabrielle asked. "If there's an issue, wouldn't it be the other direction? Up in the city?"

Xena nodded. "You'd think." She said. "And we will go up there, I just want to get up on the ridge and see what's going on from that perspective first." She clasped Gabrielle's hand gently as they walked, their light footsteps the only sound aside from the water.

No ships in port, no clanking of rigging or anchors. Just the lap of the water against the seawall and the sound of the wind as it brushed over them.

They walked past the pub, seeing men rolled up in sacks outside it asleep and ahead of them a dog trotted across the docks and disappeared behind a closed building.

The moon came out from behind the clouds and drenched them in silver unexpectedly. "Ah." Gabrielle turned her head. "It's really amazing how bright the moon can be sometimes, you know?"

"When it's full, yeah." Xena agreed. "I used to go sit on a rock on nights like this when I was leading my army, reading my battle notes." She said. "I like it. No one bothered me."

Gabrielle looked up at the moon, then at Xena, and shook her head a trifle. She remembered trying to read on those long nights and completely failing. The light just didn't allow it, but then, she didn't have Xena's eyes.

"I remember watching the flock on nights with a full moon." She reminisced. "It seemed to make the world so magical. Everything blue and silver, and the sheep out there shining white." She smiled briefly. "It was so peaceful out there. Just me, and the wind and the flock. No one yelling at me, or.. " She paused, then shrugged. "Anyway."

They walked along a few steps in silence. "I think I would have stolen your sheep." Xena remarked, giving her a wry look. "Sorry about that."

"Don't be sorry. You stole my heart and soul instead." Gabrielle smiled. "Isn't that better than a couple of stinky sheep?"

"Hhm..... who stole whose?" The warrior demurred.

Gabrielle chuckled.

Xena released Gabrielle's hand and draped her arm over her shoulders instead. They crossed the pier and reached the foot of the cliff, where the meager rope ladder hung. "You first." The warrior said. "I'll be right behind you."

‘Uh huh.’ Gabrielle studied her staff. Then she leaned it against the wall and started climbing, lifting her weight up the rough rope rungs bit by bit.

She felt the rope ladder steady and go taut as Xena's weight came on it behind her and that made it easier to climb so she proceeded upward with confidence.

Confidence because she could feel the pleasing sense of energy in her body and also because she knew Xena was behind her and wouldn't let her fall. She could hear the water crashing below her, but refrained from looking down at it. “Listen to those waves, huh?”

“Yeah.” Xena sounded a touch distracted. “Tides going out.”

They made it up to the top in short order, and Gabrielle moved away from the edge of the cliff to give Xena room to come up behind her. She could see the moon striping the water, and she walked closer to the far edge to see it.

Beautiful. Gabrielle smiled, seeing the sea spreading out to the horizon in front of her. “No Spartans.”

Xena came to stand shoulder to shoulder with her, head turning as she scanned the peaceful scene from one side to the other.

Up on the cliff, the winds were stronger, and the warrior blinked against it. She took a few steps more and looked down at the entrance to the harbor which was very satisfyingly empty of Spartans as well. She'd expected that, and hadn't thought the Spartans would stick around, or try to come back into the city, but you never knew.

Glad she'd guessed right, at least.

“Hey Xe?” Gabrielle had gone to the inner edge, and was looking down into the harbor. “Check this low tide out! You can see the broken up ship and everything.”

Xena turned and went to Gabrielle's side, looking down into the basin. The harbor was sucked almost dry of water, and she could in fact see not only the wreck of the ship, but rocks that dotted the bottom.

“Must have gone all the way out while we were climbing, but sheesh.” Gabrielle said. “I've never seen anything like that before. What do they do when boats are in there? Ground them? It wasn't like that earlier today... was it?”

Xena stared at the harbor, then she whirled and went to the other side, seeing the same drawing back of the waters exposing the shoreline in a strange, bare way. “What the...”

Gabrielle came to her side. “This is kinda strange huh?” She touched Xena's arm. “That can't be normal Xe. The ships would get cracked to bits. What's going on?”

Xena's ears pricked as she caught a sound out over the water, a rumbling rush that rang a sudden bell of memory. “By the gods, Gabrielle it's a tidal wave.” She grabbed the bard, hauling her along toward the rope ladder, right past the peacefully sleeping guard.

“A what?”

“Just MOVE!”

**

Gabrielle had never seen her partner move as fast as she was doing now. She closed her eyes as the ground came up fast, holding tight to Xena as the warrior let go of the rope ladder several body lengths up and plummeted through the air.

“Ground.”

The bard readied herself and bent her knees as first Xena's then her feet hit the ground, and they both recoiled. She felt Xena release her and then the warrior was bolting across the pier towards the stairs cut into the hill.

Gabrielle threw herself into motion after her, putting all her energy into catching up just as Xena let out a strong yell of warning.

The sound echoed against the stone walls, and as the warrior let out a second, the silence between them was broken by running boots and loud whistles.

She redoubled her efforts, but she was losing ground to her partner, who was now powering up the steps with a fluid motion that caused the moonlight she was running through to ripple over her like water.

"Get up!" Xena was yelling, now that people were pouring out of buildings at the alarm. "Everyone get up as high as they can!"

"What?" Hercules had come out on the balcony of the room he and Iolaus were sharing. "Whatsup??"

"Tidal wave!" Xena hollered back. "Big one!"

"Oh...crap." Hercules put a hand on the balcony and vaulted over it. "Iolaus! Get out here!"

Gabrielle reached the top of the steps and nearly plowed into Ephiny. "Eph!"

"What the Hades is going on?" The Amazon was out of breath. "Where were you? What's she yelling about?"

Gabrielle took a breath to answer, then realized she had no idea what to say. "Something's coming." She turned and pointed. "By sea."

"Something? What?" Bennu arrived, skidding to a halt. "What's going on little hawk?"

"Xena said a tidal wave." Gabrielle said. "Everyone has to get up as high as they can."

"Why?" Ephiny frowned "What's a tidal wave?"

"Never heard of it." Bennu added. "She sure?"

Gabrielle pinched her nose, counting to ten. "You know, one thing I've learned about Xena over the years. When she says run, I run." She turned Ephiny around and pointed at the steps. "Run." She grabbed Bennu's arm. "Just have everyone go to the top of the hill."

"But Gabrielle..." Ephiny protested.

"DO WHAT I SAY." Gabrielle lost her patience and bellowed the words, as loud as she could. "MOVE IT NOW!!!!" She gave Ephiny a push, as Bennu quickly headed in the direction she pointed, holding his arm awkwardly at his side.

"Okay!" Ephiny smiled, and then she turned and headed after him, trotting up the steps and waving the rapidly descending Pony back.

"Sheeps." Gabrielle let out a short breath. "Okay, now what." She turned and spotted more of the militia. "Guys! Get everyone and get them moving up the hill. Up to the top." She went to the edge of the promenade and looked down. "Hey!"

Men running across the dockside glanced up at her.

"Get up to the top of the city!" Gabrielle yelled at them. "Go that way!" She pointed at the sea gate, the one the Spartans had marched through earlier in the night. "Up to the front!"

'Gabrielle.' Paladia emerged from the gated walkway leading up into the inn. "Hey."

The bard turned. "Hey." She moved closer to the ex renegade and put a hand on her arm. "Where's Cait?"

"Idiot went down there." Paladia pointed behind her. "Went to go find some freaking people or something I tried to stop her."

Gabrielle's eyes met hers, and they both exhaled at the same time. Then Paladia, unexpectedly, smiled. "I kinda get you now." She said. "Can you get Xena to like call her back or something? She'll listen to her."

"C'mon." Gabrielle urged her back towards the door. "Let's see if we can get her back here. She might listen to me too."

Paladia regarded her. "Probably." She assented, getting out of the bard's way and following her to the door.

They ducked inside the passage and crossed the courtyard to the inner door, opening it and leaving the inn for the long, narrow crooked street that led down into the lower part of the city.

Gabrielle could hear Xena yelling above them, and she started down the lane, rambling quickly over the cobblestones as she evaluated the urgency in her partner's voice. "We better hurry."

"She's freaked." Paladia pointed up.

"Totally." Gabrielle agreed. "I don't know what's coming, but it sure isn't good." She glanced right and left as they headed down, surprised at the lack of people. "Where did all the people up here go?" She wondered. "Didn't anyone live here?"

"Heard they were all workin for the Spartans."

Gabrielle almost stopped walking. "What?"

Paladia nodded. "Some guy was in the bar tonight. He was drunk and talkin."

Spartans? Spies? Gabrielle shook her head, setting that aside for later. She reached the bottom of the road, and looked right and left. "Which way?"

"There." Paladia pointed at one of the buildings across the open way. It was a two story inn, and in front of it were a half dozen Amazons, a couple soldiers and a small gathering crowd.

Gabrielle heard a growing roar to her left, and she turned her head to look down through the gates. The road was relatively empty, only now were the ringing bells and blowing horns stirring people and bringing them out into the streets in sleepy confusion.

"There." Paladia pointed. "Nitwit."

Gabrielle spotted Cait arguing with one of the Amazons. "Cait!" She broke into a trot. "Hey!"

Cait turned and saw her. "Your majesty!"

"Everyone needs to get up the hill." Gabrielle. "Hurry up.. we don't have much.."

Paladia grabbed her without any warning and turned her. "That what we're waiting for?" She pointed.

The bard stopped, and stared, as a wall of water abruptly surged over the seawall and rushed up over the waterfront. "Uh oh."

The crowd hastened to join her, and for a long moment everyone froze. Then Gabrielle felt a jolt in her guts and started moving. "Go!" She started pushing them up the slope towards the front

gates of the city. "Hurry!"

A woman screamed.

"Move it! Hurry!" Gabrielle waved them forward then turned and looked up as something drew her attention that way. At the top of the hill, she spotted Xena's distinctive profile in the torchlight and felt a dire warning.

Grabbing the nearest two arms she started running, heading up the slope as the first rush of water started drenching the stones under her feet. It pushed against her the backs of her heels, then her calves as she herded people in front of her. "Move people!"

Screams.

Crashing sounds.

Gabrielle felt her heartbeat start to race as she shoved people up the slope ahead of her, hearing panic in the side streets they were passing. "Go up to the gate! Up to the gate!" She yelled.

A woman screamed behind her, but she felt the water grabbing at her legs and she surged faster uphill, her hands on Paladia and Cait's back as she shoved them ahead of her. "Move!"

"Moving!" Cait called back. "Oh my gosh what's going on?"

"I have no idea." Gabrielle almost stumbled, but kept going. The edge of the water swept past them and she saw something go crashing by in the opposite direction. It was big, and heavy, and she hoped no one was behind her in its way.

"The wagons!" Cait yelled. "Oh! Wait!"

"Just keep going!" Gabrielle craned her neck to see around Paladia's tall form. "Oh Hades!" She spotted the wall of wood heading their way. In the dark with the torches behind it she had a nightmare vision and remembered the river breaking the bridge and slamming it down towards her.

For a moment, she froze in mid flight, her mind skittering towards panic as the screams started echoing over the roar of the water now sucking at her hips.

Then a jolt of something flushed through her and she turned her head and spotted an escape. "There!" She grabbed Cait and Paladia's leathers and hauled them to the side. "There! Go!"

"Augh!" Paladia reeled, pulled off balance.

"Come on!" Cait spotted the crooked little side street and she darted into it, leaning forward and charging up the steep path.

Gabrielle hauled herself into the cul de sac after them just as a wall of wood skimmed past her, so close it scraped her hip and leg as she squirmed past, the water exploding up as the wagons hit it and drenching her.

But it didn't stop coming, she felt it surging after her as she climbed with her two Amazons up as high as the street went, which wasn't very. They stopped at a dead end, whirling to face the water as it continued to rise.

"Holy crap" Paladia coughed. "What is this?"

It was dark. Gabrielle felt her heart hammering in her chest as she tried to catch her breath. The water was already up to her stomach and she backed up until she was on the steps of the townhouse at the top of the rise.

She hammered on the door with her fists. "Hey! Let us in!"

There was no answer.

"I'll climb up there and let us in." Cait started scaling the outside of the building, finding handholds in the tiniest of crevices. "Hang on!"

Gabrielle turned and got hit in the chest with a surge of water. She could see it sweeping everything down the main road and then debris abruptly crested and headed their way, broken boxes barreling up at them. "Ah."

Paladia turned, "OH crap." She swiveled back. "Hey crackpot! We're gonna get creamed down here!"

"What?" Cait turned her head and her eyes nearly came out of their sockets. "OH no!"

Gabrielle grabbed the overhang of the door and pulled herself up out of the water, swinging back and then forward as she slammed her boots into the door with all the force she was capable of.

The shock nearly made her let go, as it traveled up her spine and she twisted in mid air, hauling herself back up and kicking the door again, as a wave of water slammed her in the back.

Maybe it was just that little extra impact, but as the water hit the door with her it exploded inward. Gabrielle released her hold and let the water take her inside, with Paladia hard on her heels.

"Nice!" The ex renegade roared. "Stairsr!"

They bolted for them and stumbled upwards as the water rushed through the lower level and smashed leaded glass windows out in the back. The structure shuddered and things started falling off the walls as they climbed up the steps to the second level.

Gabrielle ran to the window and looked out, the town outlined in silver hued moonlight. For a long moment she merely blinked then she leaned out and looked hard.

What she had first thought was moonlight was actually light reflecting off water, which had covered the town up to the rooftops everywhere any lower than where they were.

"Holy crap." Paladia was standing next to her, glancing aside as Cait crawled in the other window. "This is not good."

"Rather." Cait got to their side, and they all looked up as the building started creaking around them. "I've got a bad feeling about this place."

Gabrielle felt the wooden timbers move under her hands. "Yeah, me too." She looked back out, and saw a building collapse next to them. "Maybe we should climb up onto the roof?"

Across the tops of the houses she could see the hill that fronted the waterfront and on top of that hill, she knew Xena was safe, and Dori with her. The thought calmed her, then the sense of calm faded as the townhouse started to creak and shift.

The water just kept on coming. It swirled and sloshed and pushed against the stone and instead of subsiding, it rose higher and higher, almost like the ocean itself was overflowing its banks.

She turned and looked at Cait and Paladia. "We've got to get up higher." She said. "I don't know if the water's going to stop rising."

Cait peered out next to her. "This is terrible." She said. "Gosh everyone was sleeping."

Everyone except for her and Xe. "Yeah." Gabrielle leaned over the window sill, spotting a wall. "Let's try to get over onto that, maybe we can climb up onto that next roof."

Without waiting for or expecting agreement, she straddled the sill and swung out of the townhouse, grabbing hold of the edge of the roof as her feet found purchase on the slanted

surface.

She really didn't think about what she was doing, focusing on the wall and easing along towards it as she heard Cait and Paladia start to follow her. "Careful you guys."

"Too right." Cait was clinging to the sill. "You be careful your majesty!" She got out of the way as Paladia stuck her head warily out. "Sorry you had to come down at look for us. "

"What's the us, crackpot?" Paladia spoke up. "I told you not to go there!"

Cait exhaled. "I told you not to follow me so hush!" She said. "I had to straighten out that lot of women before they started trouble."

Gabrielle was interested, but not enough to lose her focus. "Let's talk about it later." She swung across the small open space between the townhouse and the wall and got her feet on it, shoving away from the house and catching her balance on the wall.

She waited for Cait to come near, then held a hand out to her. "Quick, Cait.. I think that house is... oh Hades!" She saw the house wall crumbling just as Paladia made wild jump at them, her legs and arms flailing.

Without really thinking about it, Gabrielle dropped flat on her stomach and reached out, clamping on with her knees as her hand tangled in Paladia's leathers just as the water surged and sucked the townhouse down away from them, to crash into the horrific flow.

Paladia twisted and turned in the water, getting flipped around and grabbing Gabrielle's arm. "Augh!"

"I have you." Gabrielle assured her, hauling the taller woman over to the wall. "Get up, quick.": She pulled Paladia onto the wall, scrambling to her own feet as the relentless water topped the wall and almost washed them all off. "Oh boy."

Cait balanced precariously and helped her partner up, as they followed Gabrielle's cautious progress along the wall, as it inched upwards. "Have you ever seen something like this, your majesty?"

"Cait, you know my name. Please use it." Gabrielle hastened up a few more feet as the water surged and washed over her boots. The wall wasn't wide, about half the width of her shoulders and she was afraid she was going to be washed off it at any moment. "And no, I sure haven't."

She looked up as she heard a shrill whistle over the sound of the waves. Putting her fingers between her teeth, she returned the signal.

"Was that Xena?" Paladia asked.

"Yup." Gabrielle pulled herself up onto a higher part of the wall, succeeding in getting herself completely out of the water. "That was Xena saying, 'Gabrielle! Where in the Hades are you!' she dropped her tone into her partner's range in mimicry. "Damn it !"

Paladia chuckled.

"And I answered.. 'over here, honey. Just trying to keep my ass out of the water." Gabrielle found another roof and boosted herself up onto it. This building had a flat top, and she walked across it to the far end to look out.

Paladia and Cait scrambled after her. "Whew." Cait came up next to the bard. "I think it's stopped rising."

"I think you're right." Gabrielle watched the water start to go out with a sense of relief.

Personal relief, since she knew it would only reveal the horrors the flood had caused as it sucked

itself dry. In the dark, all she could hear was the rush of the water and the screams of those caught in it, but she couldn't see much.

How many had been caught in their sleep, after all? Gabrielle shuddered a little.

'Wonder what happened to those other guys?' Paladia asked. 'We told em to stay up where we were. Idiots.'

'They were fighting.' Cait explained. 'They wanted to talk about going back with us but not have us hear it. I was trying to make sure they weren't making a mistake.'

'Well, let's get back up there. I'm sure there's a big mess to clean up now.' Gabrielle sighed. She walked to the edge of the building, looking for a way to climb down. The water was receding quickly now, pulling parts of walls, and wagons, and buildings along with it.

And people. Gabrielle thought she saw a body drifting past, a face that rolled up out of the black and caught a bit of moonlight, eyes staring right at her.

Gabrielle released a breath. Then another form sped past, this one moving.

'Oh, let me go see if I can help them.' Cait started forward, surprised when a powerful arm blocked her.

'No.' Gabrielle shook her head. 'Waters moving too fast, Cait. If you go in, we go in after you and all three of us are going to be in trouble.'

Paladia turned to face Gabrielle. 'Someone finally has some damned sense here. Holy crap.'

'Well.' Cait murmured.

'And then if we get in trouble. Xena will dive in after us, and she's got Dori with her.' Gabrielle concluded. 'That's a lot to risk.'

'You don't got to make excuses.' Paladia said bluntly. 'You're right. Diving in after that chick would be nuts.'

'But..' Cait said. 'We're supposed to help people. Isn't that what you always say in your stories?'

'Yes.' The bard smiled briefly. 'I do say that. If someone charged at you across this roof with a spear I'd step in front of you.' She crossed her arms. 'But I've come to value my life enough not to randomly throw it away in a lost cause.'

'Are you sure it would be a lost cause?' Cait frowned.

'I've been in that kind of flood.' Gabrielle said. 'So yes I am sure.' She unfolded her arms and dropped to her knees instead, leaning over the edge of the roof. 'There's an open window here.'

She grabbed the edge of the surface and swung herself over it, lowering her body to dangle over the water before she got her boots on the window sill and then ducked to enter.

It was a bedroom, and it was empty. Gabrielle cleared herself out of the way. 'C'mon guys.' She called back, before she left the bedroom behind and walked through the inner door into a very dark hallway.

Something came at her fast, so fast, she only barely had time to register it, and start to bring her hands up before it hit her.

**

Gabrielle felt the impact almost as soon as she registered the sound of motion and felt her body react to the danger without any conscious direction on her part.

She'd asked Xena once, how she managed to make the right moves at the right time when so many things were going on around her and the warrior had looked puzzled, and shrugged. You just do it, she'd told Gabrielle and in this blink of an eye moment, the bard understood.

She just did it. Her body half turned and she ducked her head as something came whistling past her ear, stinging the edge of it. 'Hey!' She let out a yell, throwing her hands out. "Stop it! Who are you?"

"Hang on your Majesty! We're coming!" Cait called from outside.

Gabrielle smelled steel and leather very close by and she dropped to her knees, as a body hit her and knocked her over onto her side on the ground. She twisted over and put her arms up just in time to block a heavy blow.

Ow. Gabrielle grabbed the iron bar that had just hit her with one hand and punched blindly with the other. She felt her knuckles impact something somewhat softer than her hand and the weapon in her grip wrenched back out of her fingers as her opponent jerked out of the way.

She got up and tried a kick, feeling a jolt as her boot hit bone and she heard the sound of a body knocked offbalance. She dodged to one side as she sensed a strike, hearing a heavy blade skin past her and bury itself in wood.

She slammed her body against where she thought the hilts might be, and was rewarded with a grunt of pain and a giving sensation, along with a faint crack. She reached for the sword she felt pressing against her hip but was knocked offbalance as she was hit from behind.

Damn. Gabrielle ducked and dropped again, feeling arms pass over her head grasping for her as she lunged forward, spreading her own arms out and wrapping them around her opponents hips and shoving them against something in the room that scraped and squeaked as it took their weight.

Hands grabbed her, and she could hear an almost animalistic growl as she rolled to one side and wrenched herself free. Her senses told her a wall was nearby and she felt motion to her left as her opponent dove at her.

Getting her feet under her, Gabrielle shoved away from the ground just as a heavy body flew past her, making a resounding noise as it hit the wall. The bard landed in a crouch and straightened, bringing her hands up in a defensive posture.

Damn, she wished she'd remembered her staff. No matter it would have been useless and dangerous in their escape from the water, she missed having it's solid security clutched in her fingers.

A thumping behind her and a breathless gasp almost distracted her. "Careful Cait." She said. "Someone in here's armed and desperate."

"Right." Cait came to her shoulder in the darkness, a whisper of familiar sound prickling Gabrielle's senses as she drew her blade from it's sheath. "Could you step back a bit then? Just in case I don't want to splatter you."

with an unseen grimace, Gabrielle did, her head cocked to listen for their attacker.

Several moments passed however, with nothing more than the sound of heavy breathing. Gabrielle slowly relaxed and let her hands drop. "Anyone got a striker? There's a torch there by the window."

"Got it." Paladia answered from behind them, just before the sound of a flint being hit was heard. After a brief pause, the inside of the building lit with the pale amber of torchlight.

The room was a mess. Two chairs lay shattered, and a table was heeled over to one side, it's leg

broken into splinters. Things were scattered over the floor, and near the far stone wall lay a big, heavy body covered in armor with a long blade still clasped in its fingers.

As they watched the body twitched and the knife dropped to the wooden floor with a dull clatter.

Paladia joined them. 'Creepy.' She said, briefly.

"Spartan." Gabrielle acknowledged softly. "Guess there were some of them still around." She turned in a circle and regarded the room. It had, apparently, been providing a hiding spot for the man for some days.

There were supplies strewn across the room and in one corner were piled valuables from the household – apparently the man was ready to make a profit while he was at it.

"All right, well." Gabrielle glanced around at the room, spotting a spear leaning against the back wall. "Could you guys please tie him up? I'm going to grab that." She walked across the space and grabbed the spear, which had a thick enough shaft to almost match her staff.

"You want to leave him here?" Cait asked. "I remember the lot said you decided not to do that when we were leaving Amphipolis."

Gabrielle glanced back over her shoulder. "That was different." She said. "Go ahead and tie him up and let's get out of here. I think the water's down enough to go to the street."

"Right." Cait went to the bed in the room and pulled the sheet off, taking her blade out and slitting it into strips. "Pally, grab hold."

Gabrielle watched them for a moment, then she went to the door and opened it. To her surprise, it opened right onto a stone outside stairwell, and she emerged into the moonlight and walked to the edge of the steps and looked down.

The street, as she'd hoped, was empty of water, though she could see the shine of it further down. She decided she'd lead her little group down to the main road and see if they could make it to the road that led back up to the summit.

In the distance, she could hear screams and calls for help, and as they faded, she put her fingers between her teeth and let out a whistle of inquiry.

There was a long pause, then she heard an answer, the short, high pitched sounds that meant her partner was very busy and couldn't take time to talk. "Hurry up guys." She called back. "I think they need our help back there."

"Sorry." Cait emerged, followed by her taller partner. "He started getting up a bit. Pally had to squash him."

Wasn't a mental image Gabrielle really wanted. "Let's go." She led the way down the steps and then to the street. The cobblestones were drenched, and there was debris everywhere, broken boxes, and bits of building that they dodged as they moved down the slope.

Windows were thrown open along the way and heads were stuck out along with arms that pointed in the direction of the port. Horns were blasting from all directions and now she could hear hoofbeats.

She hoped it wasn't Dori on Rusty.

"That was weird." Paladia said. "Who ever heard of the water coming up like that?"

"Xena, apparently." Gabrielle said, as they reached the corner and started down the wide boulevard leading to the port. There was still water down at the end, she could see the moonlight reflecting off it and judged it was just far down enough for them to make the narrow lane that led up to the inn.

The city looked strangely clean. The main street was scoured of everything and the moonlight was glistening on the stones under their feet as they headed quickly downward.

Past the gates they could see debris in the harbor area, hulks of wagons and barrels and Gabrielle shook her head at the destruction she could see all around her. Homes were collapsed on either side of them and they could hear people crying.

Suddenly, the screams got louder, and the horns started to blast again so loudly they echoed off the wall. Two men who had started down to the port gate turned and started running back towards Gabrielle as fast as they could.

“Uh oh.” Paladia said. “That don't look good.”

“OH my gosh.” Cait pointed. “The water's coming back!!”

They were lower down on the road than before, and Gabrielle briefly froze, as she saw the foamy rush of the water heading towards her with incredible speed. Did they have time to get back to where they were?

A piercing whistle.

“Sheeps.” Gabrielle grabbed Cait's arm. “Run for it! That way!” She pointed to the narrow and crooked lane that was the service road up the hill and started in that direction, running full out.

The water caught them not two steps up the street and picked them up in a rush of cold, shockingly salty power.

Gabrielle released the spear she'd been holding onto as she fought to keep her head up out of the water, the swirling surge unexpectedly pulling her down as it lashed against the walls.

It was shocking, the power of it as it sucked her under and she was only barely able to grab a breath before the darkness surrounded her.

A younger self would have panicked. Gabrielle remembered a trick Xena had taught her and she squinted her eyes open, letting a little held breath out and aggressively following the bubbles motion. She felt something approach and turned her shoulder at the last moment as the water slammed her against the wall.

She kicked off it, sweeping her arms down and pushing herself to the surface, her head popping out of the froth as she sucked in a lungful of air.

Shaking the wet hair from her eyes she whirled in the water, spotting Cait and Paladia behind her struggling towards a wall sticking out in the flow. “Get to the lee!” She yelled, as the current carried her away from them.

She saw them grab hold then she had to turn around for fear she'd smack into something, and she saw a pole sticking out of a wall rapidly approaching her. Taking a breath she readied herself then as it passed over her she lunged out of the water and grabbed hold of it, barely able to keep her grip as surge reluctantly let go of her body.

She dangled there for a minute, then she swung her legs up and got them over the pole too, feeling the scrape of the wood against her skin as she pulled herself up and onto the top of the pole and lay there, catching her breath.

Sheesh. “Maybe we should have just stayed in bed.” Gabrielle muttered. She lay on her stomach on top of the post and pushed the wet hair from her eyes as she looked up the road to see how far the water had gone.

It was still rising. The power of the water was terrifying, and she watched as the walls were being undermined, slowly toppling into the street and being taken away by the current as she

watched.

But at least she was now on the street that would end up with Xena. All she had to do was wait for the water to subside again. She turned her head and peered down the street, relieved to see Paladia's pale head poking out from behind the wall.

Cait waved at her.

Gabrielle lifted a hand and waved back.

What a nightmare. The bard rubbed the salt out of her eyes and licked her lips of the same substance, wondering how much longer the horror would continue. There were people out there trapped, she was sure, who needed help.

It would be a long night of cleanup and now, she blinked slowly as she realized that given their own wishes they'd have been out on the beach tonight in the direct path of it.

Probably would have killed them.

Gabrielle heard a scream and she looked up to see a low porch shearing off into the water with two figures on it. The figures parted as the water grabbed them, and she was just in time to see one of them flung free, its size marking it as a young child.

"Mama!" The shrill voice echoed over the rush of the waves. "Mama!"

Gabrielle didn't really think about what she was doing before she was gathering herself up and fixing the position of that tiny head as she got herself ready to go into the water after it. She saw the pale hand wave frantically and then she was launching into the air, falling feet first back into the dark water below her.

She plunged into the water and stroked strongly upward, keeping her head almost above the surface as she spotted the child going under.

She ducked under herself, forcing her eyes open and seeing a brief glimpse of a round, white face, and a hand sweeping by her. She reached out and grabbed the hand, hauling the body back towards her and forcing her head back up out of the water.

The child's head followed, eyes round and wide and terrified as they stared around at the walls.

"Easy." Gabrielle gasped. "I've got you."

It was a little blond haired boy. "Mama?"

"She'll be here in a minute." Gabrielle turned over onto her back as the surging water swept them forward. She curled her arm around the child and held him up out of the water, craning her neck so she could see where they were going.

She saw the wall break loose and head for them just as the water's forward motion seemed to hesitate and her chances were radically reduced as she looked quickly around for something to grab hold of.

"Mama!" The child hollered in fear. "Mama where are you?"

"Take it easy." Gabrielle ducked debris and caught hold of a wagon jammed in a doorway, swinging around it as the water now started to recede and suck against her.

She braced herself against the wood, holding the child as the pull of the current pressed her against the creaking surface and started to drain back, dropping enough for her feet to gain purchase on the ground a moment later.

She heard screams far off. A man's howl of despair and all around the noise of structures collapsing into the water as it undermined their surfaces.

The water dropped past her waist, and she put her fingers into her mouth, letting out a long whistle, then two short ones.

No answer.

Gabrielle felt her heartbeat pick up. There could be many reasons Xena didn't respond, of course. She could be in the same sort of situation, her hands full, or .. Anyway. Lots of reasons.

"Mama!" The little boy hiccupped. "Mama.. oh Mama where are you?"

Probably being sucked out to sea. Gabrielle's conscience weighed heavily on the thought but she let the boy down as the water level went below her knees. "Okay, honey. Take it easy. Your mama will come get you as soon as she can."

The boy looked up at her. "Who you?"

Gabrielle knelt next to him. "My name's Gabrielle. What's yours?"

"Alfin." The boy hiccupped again. He was younger than Dori, maybe three or so, and cute as a button with his spikey blond hair and round face. "Wanna go get my mama."

"Okay." Gabrielle stood up and eased around the wagon, relieved to see Cait and Paladialosing towards her against the current. "You guys okay?"

"Fine thanks." Cait eyed the boy. "You gave us quite a turn diving in the water though. "

Gabrielle sighed. "Sometimes I can't keep my accidentally heroic side under control." She muttered. "Did you happen to see..."

"That way." Paladia turned and pointed towards the end of the street. "Tried to grab hold of em, but it was going too fast."

The bard exhaled. "Okay, let's go up to the top of the mountain." She said. "Alfin, maybe we can see your mama from there."

Both Amazons looked at her. Gabrielle looked back at them. "Let's go." She said, starting up the slope. "Before that water comes back and makes it all a moot point."

"Right." Cait pushed her hair out of her eyes, her boots slipping a little on the steep slope. "This really is just rot, you know?"

"Yeah." Gabrielle plucked the sodden fabric away from her body and leaned forward, her free hand captured by Alfin. "This is not good."

Paladia cursed. "Aw crap."

"What?" Gabrielle looked up and almost stopped walking, as she spotted what Paladia had. At the top of the street, near the entrance to the inn were several shadowy figures, obviously armed.

Obviously waiting for them.

"Well." Cait said. "At least we'll get a fight out of it."

"Great." Gabrielle muttered. "Just great."

**

Continued in Part 30

A Queen's Tale

Part 30

"Here comes another one!" Hercules yelled, as he held on to part of a wall. "Hang on!"

“Hanging!” Iolaus shook the water out of his eyes. “Hey can you tell your uncle to cut it out? We got the picture! He's pissed!”

Hercules shoved a sack full of sodden grain into place against the wall. “I’m a little busy right now.” He grabbed another sack and slung it to his left. “Besides, after how I left the last time I don’t think he’d be listening much.”

“Ah.” Iolaus dragged a crate over and shoved it into place. The wall seemed to be supported, and he walked to the edge of it and looked past, towards the harbor. It was literally boiling with water, the moonlight creepily shining down on frothing white-capped destruction as it rushed against the city's walls and collapsed them.

They were high enough up on the hill to escape the waves, but the structures around them were crumbling from the force below, and now Iolaus had to wonder when it would stop. He glanced up the path, to the wide eyed faces watching as the top of the hill was dense with frightened city dwellers.

Down below, he could see bodies rolling in the surf, and already the piers were clogged with broken wagons and stores, parts of the city that had been sucked back out by the water but trapped in the harbor.

Pretty horrific. Iolaus turned his head as motion caught his eye and he saw Xena emerge from a building, a body cradled in her arms. He watched as the warrior climbed up the steps just ahead of the advancing water. “Careful, Xena!”

Xena gave him a short nod as she gained the relative safety of the promenade, and laid the huddled figure down. “That’s the last one.” She said. “Everything lower than that’s gone.”

Hercules shook his head. “Where’s Gabrielle?”

“On her way back.” Xena glanced reflectively over her right shoulder. “No wonder the damn horses were jittery. Look at that water.”

“Glad we had them in the stable up here.” Iolaus commented. “Poor things.”

Hercules shoved a last sack into place. “Place is a wreck and I’m sure they’ll be itching to blame us for it.. probably think I pissed off Zeus.”

Iolaus grimaced. “Maybe they won’t.”

“Tidal wave destroying the city right after we let the Spartans walk through it?” Hercules eyed Xena. “What do you think?”

“What do I think?” Xena put her hands on her wet linen clad hips. “I think us warning them gave most of the town a chance to get out of the way. They want to blame us for that, fine.”

“Right.” Iolaus agreed immediately. “She’s right, Herc. I saw a lot of people get out and head for the gates.”

“Meh.” The demigod grunted. “Don’t know why Poseidon would get his nose out of joint about this whole thing anyway. He wasn’t even around up there. Aphrodite told me he was off creating some new island or something.”

“Probably heard I was here.” Xena remarked dryly. “He’s not a fan.”

“They were calling you Poseidon’s Bane on the ship.” Iolaus recalled. “That must be an interesting story.” He watched Xena’s face. “Or should I just ask Gabrielle?”

A dark brow twitched. “I haven’t told her that one.” Xena admitted. “Those were definitely my wilder days.”

Hercules reluctantly chuckled. "Yeah, you've become so much more sedate." He looked around, but the chaos seemed to have settled for the moment. The water was receding again, and he walked over to where Xena was standing to peer down at the harbor. "Okay, where do we go next?"

Xena stiffened, and she half turned, her hand already going for her sword hilt as the area around them suddenly erupted into motion, doors in the inn opening and men in dark armor pouring out. Her eyes took in the blocky bodies, and unmarked arms and then she didn't have time to think about it as they were attacked without a word.

"Sorry I asked." Hercules grabbed one of the attackers arms and whirled the man against the wall he'd just finished shoring up.

"Me too." Xena hard her sword out and she was busily engaging three soldiers, skillfully moving them into position so her back was to the inn's wall. Two of them were trying to rush her, and she ducked a sword and kicked a groin with consummate grace as she deflected the blade of her third opponent.

She spotted a man about to smack Iolaus in the back and grabbed a dagger from her boot, letting it fly as she dodged a mace that whistled past her left ear.

There were at least two dozen of them. Xena grabbed the closest and head butted him in the face, making him flail his arms to keep his balance. She grabbed the axe in his left hand and swung it under his return blow, chopping at the second man's hands as he tried to get hold of her.

She heard him curse, and smelled blood. There was no time to enjoy it though since the third man jumped on her back and tried to bear her to the ground.

Xena bucked him off much like Argo would have, and then she slammed an elbow into his jaw, and gutted the second man with her sword. The axe she took a short grip on and slashed open the third man's face, smashing her body into his and knocking him backwards.

A low growl escaped from her throat as two more men dove at her. She crouched and jumped, kicking out as the soldiers crashed to the ground under her and nailing her first adversary in the throat.

She dropped onto the fourth and fifth man before they could roll out of the way and went down on one knee, chopping the back of one's neck while she stabbed the other in the back.

Blood flew everywhere. Xena yanked her weapons free of the two bodies and launched herself to her feet to meet five more men heading her way.

A shuddering jolt went through her and she paused, identifying the cold fear as Gabrielle's. She started towards the inn's passageways, dodging the oncoming soldiers but then stopped when she saw a female form blocking the way to the back street.

"Oh no, Xena." Artemis drew her sword and stood in front of the door. "This is retribution. I'm going to enjoy not only watching you die here, but watching you die knowing your precious bedmate is behind this door getting gutted by my sister and her men."

"Artemis!" Hercules yelled.

"Stay out of this, little man." The now mortal goddess warned. "You're already on the edge with Father. Keep out of my business or you know what's going to happen." She motioned to the soldiers. "Stop her! Kill her! It is my command!"

The soldiers redoubled their efforts immediately. "Yes, my goddess!" One called out. "We obey!"

Xena was too busy to get involved in the discussion. She powered through the first of the soldiers, cutting him open from throat to groin before she kicked him out of her way and moved to

meet the others. She was aware of some level of Iolaus arriving to help her, the blond man's face now set and hard and lacking any semblance of his usual good nature.

The soldiers all threw themselves against the two of them, and Xena steadily battled back, her own frustration replaced by a cold anger. She handed Iolaus the axe and drew her boot knife, going into close order fighting in a blur of rapid hand motion that send spatters of blood everywhere.

There were a dozen, and they were coming at them with grim determination and thorough them Xena could see Hercules standing, staring at Artemis with an indescribable expression.

No time to think about it. Xena threw an emotional surge of encouragement towards her partner and started hacking her way through the crowd, her sword moving in a blur as she blocked a sideswipe then reflected the blade forward to stab the man in the eye.

She ripped the weapon back and turned, ducking and shoving her knife hand into the gut armor of her next opponent, her momentum giving her enough force to penetrate the hardened leather.

The man staggered back and took her knife with him. Xena released it and balled her hand into a fist instead, slugging the bearded fighter who replaced him in the nose.

She brought her sword up into position just in time to block an overhand slash then turned her shoulder and slammed into the man, knocking him back a step and giving her a little more room to work in. "Stupid bastards."

"Mindless idiots." Iolaus was right next to her, stabbing one of the men in the side. "They don't care what they're doing, just following her orders. Sheep!"

'She's a goddess!' The man in front of Xena spoke for the first time. "Blasphemers!" "No she isn't." Xena boxed him in the head with the hilt of her sword. "And in a minute I'm gonna prove that to you when I gut her on my way out that door."

The man actually stopped in mid-motion, shock showing on his face. Never being one to look a gift horse in the ass, Xena smashed her blade down on his arm and sent his sword flying. Then she over-handed the blade into his throat, shoving forward as he threw his hands up and reached for her.

She kicked him back off the sword and whipped her own around in a circle and half turning as she saw Hercules stir from his stillness and start towards Artemis.

Time slowed. Xena ducked under a spear and saw the demigod pick up a sword on the ground from one of her many kills as he bypassed two men fighting Iolaus.

"What do you think you're doing, Hercules?" Artemis yelled.

"Choosing." Hercules replied, the words echoing a little in Xena's ears. "Get out of my way, Artemis."

It was weird, and strange, and the sounds around her faded out to shadows of clashing, as Xena kept fighting while her senses absorbed this out of time experience.

She was aware of Iolaus fighting next to her, and she was aware of the soldiers coming at her with swords and maces. Her body understood what to do with them though and she was almost a watcher outside herself as she parried the swords and returned their attacks with powerful, automatic grace.

Exact and almost effortless. Xena was aware of watching herself fight for the first time, and for a very brief time, it was fascinating and she gained an wholly unexpected understanding of how others saw her.

Twisting and turning, motion never stopping, one blow connecting to a parry connecting to a roundhouse kick then to a duck that allowed a sword to pass over her head so close a few hairs floated free in the wind of it's passing.

And yet, part of her stood quietly, watching as Hercules gripped the sword in his hand and started up the steps, his tall, broad frame splattered in some of the blood from her victims.

She could sense Gabrielle fighting. She could feel her partner's anger, the powerful emotion flushing out any sense of fear and it occurred to her that whoever the bard was facing off against might be in more trouble than she was.

Did Gabrielle really need someone running to her rescue anymore?

Did Gabrielle really want someone running to her rescue anymore?

Artemis raised her sword and the next moment she and Hercules were battling each other, in the tight confines of the doorway and sound flooded back in and Xena was in the middle of the fighting fully again.

Three men landed on her at once. She felt blades pressing against her and she remembered almost too late that she wasn't wearing her armor, quickly twisting her way out of their grasp before they could slam her into the ground.

Or worse. She grabbed the nearest and turned, pulling him over her shoulder and dumping him on the stone then rolling him into the path of the other two, who hopped and lunged to avoid tripping over him.

Threw their blades out of alignment. Xena took advantage of that by wrapping both hands around her sword hilt and bracing her legs, sweeping the blade around in a circle and cutting right through the first man's neck and deep into the torso of the second.

The head went bouncing off as the first man's body dropped and the second dropped his sword and reached out at her, his eyes wide in shock.

Xena kicked him off her blade and overhanded it into the collarbone of Iolaus's opponent, who was grappling with the blond man.

Then the rest of them were turning, and rushing back towards the door. Xena put her hand on Iolaus' back and they bolted after them.

"Herc!" Iolaus let out a yell. "Look out!"

Xena saw the borrowed blade in the demigod's hands raise up and then the rest of the fighters were on him, grabbing his arms and crashing up the steps in a tangle of armor and chaos.

"Bastards!" Iolaus waded in and grabbed one of them by the belt, hauling himself backwards and pulling the man with him. "C'mere you damned cowards!"

Xena didn't waste time talking. She stabbed the closest one to her in the kidney and cut him open, then kicked him out of the way and hacked at a second, slamming the hilt of her sword into someone's neck and grabbing a mace from someone else's hand and whacking them on the cheek with it.

Someone screamed, loud and high pitched.

Xena ripped the last soldier out of her way in time to see Hercules' sword plunging down towards Artemis' chest as the mortal goddess squirmed and held her blood covered hands over her head in fear as the blade arched down towards her.

No. A jangling warning rang in Xena's head, sharp and distinct and irresistibly compelling.

Nothing could have stopped him, and yet Xena did. She launched herself forward and got her arm wrapped inside his, and used her weight to throw him back against the wall as they both tumbled off balance and ended up crashing to the ground together in a tangle of long limbs and blood.

Iolaus ripped past them and stopped, sword outstretched and knife in his other hand, drenched in gore as he got between the attackers and his friends, chest heaving.

“Sorry.” Xena released Hercules and moved clear. “Just didn't think that was a good idea.” She put a hand on his shoulder. “Even though I would have done it.”

Hercules lay on his back, breathing hard and staring at her, His sword was gripped in his hand, but the edge trembled against the stone, making an odd, softly rattling sound.

Xena rolled up to her feet and made for the door, jumping right over Artemis's prone body and hitting the door to the inn with her shoulder. The wooden panel exploded inward and she was through it before anyone could react, slamming the door behind her.

Iolaus flexed his hand on his sword hilt, flicking his eyes between the prone Artemis and the remaining soldiers, who were standing, unsure of what to do.

Six of them left from two dozen. The stone floor past them was littered with bodies and the rock itself was stained black with blood. Iolaus was equally stained, even his pale hair was darkened with it. “You okay, buddy?” He asked Hercules, without turning around.

Hercules pulled himself upright and stared bemusedly at the sword clasped in his hand. “Yeah, I'm fine.” He said, leaning to one side so he could watch Artemis. “Bitch.”

Artemis slowly lowered her hands and stared back at him. “You were going to kill me.”

“You bet.” Hercules said. “You get tossed on your ass down here because of your own arrogance and so you destroy everything around you because of it? Destroy people? Yeah.” He said. “I'd have gladly skewered you like the pig you are.”

Artemis kept staring at him, an expression of horror and disbelief. “You would take their part?” She pointed at Iolaus. “The son of Zeus? Their part?”

“My mother's part.” Hercules said. “My wife's part.” He extended his hand and clasped Iolaus's booted leg. “My friend's part.” He nodded. “Yes.”

“We're your family” Artemis hissed.

“He's my family.” Hercules answered, not looking at Iolaus. “And he doesn't try torturing me every time we meet so I think I like it better that way.”

Artemis remained silent, turning her head to glance at the remaining soldiers.

“There's only six left.” Iolaus said. “You might want to tell them to go sit down before there's less than that.” He seemed to stand a little taller, his head lifting with an expression of somber pride.

Artemis looked past them, to the bodies on the ground. She seemed confused, “They were supposed to stop you, until I could enjoy seeing Xena experience her mate's death. But they didn't.”

“No, they didn't.” Hercules now looked disgusted. “They died. You wasted their lives for nothing.”

Hercules got up. “You better hope nothing happened to Gabrielle.” He said. “You'll pay for that with more than your life.” He went to the door and opened it. “C'mon Iolaus.”

“What about these guys?” Iolaus pointed his sword at the soldiers.

Hercules looked at them. “Go take care of your former comrades.” He told them. “I don't think

we'll have much that can burn here for a while.”

For a moment, the soldiers stared at him, then the one nearest let his head drop. He turned and walked away, and after another pause, the rest followed him.

Gabrielle could see the outlines of the men waiting for them, and figured they were Spartans. She kept hold of Aljins hand as they trudged up the slope, finally reaching a bit of stone that wasn't drenched with water. “Let me do the talking.” She advised Cait and Paladia.

Paladia snorted.

“All right, if you let us do the fighting.” Cait replied.

Gabrielle snorted.

“Well that's settled then, isn't it?” The young Amazon added, cheekily.

The bit of black humor helped. Gabrielle kept her head up and her eyes pinned on the nearest man as she approached. “Excuse us.” She said politely. “I need to get up that stair.”

The sound behind her and Cait's sudden intake of breath sealed the sense of danger. But Gabrielle kept her body relaxed, and her eyes on the first of the soldiers.

“Your majesty.” Cait murmured.

“Yes, I know, Cait.” The bard said. “I'm sure we're surrounded now by a bunch of big, armed men since we're a very dangerous combination of three women and one little boy.”

The soldier's face twitched.

Cait and Paladia edged up on either side of her, as soldiers closed in from behind. Gabrielle got in front of Aljins and wished she had her staff in her hands as the soldier near the door drew his sword. “I guess you're not going to get out of our way, huh?”

“No they are not.” A tall figure emerged from the shadows. “That's not their purpose.”

Gabrielle looked steadily at Athena. “No.” She said. “I guess their purpose is to do your dirty work isn't it?”

“They do my will.” The mortal goddess said. “And my will is that you should die, here, in the street, in this crappy little town.” She indicated the door. “While your precious creature is held inside there, unable to save your ugly little ass.”

“Why?” Gabrielle took a step forward, releasing the boy's hand. “Stay here, Aljins.”

The boy clutched at her. “Where's my mama?” He asked. “I want her.”

“She's dead.” Athena told him, with a smile. “Drowned. Sorry about that kid.”

Gabrielle's eyes narrowed and she felt her nape hairs lift, when something occurred to her. “You don't know that.” She said. “Aljin, don't listen to her.”

“I don't?” Athena smiled again.

“No.” The bard shot back at her. “You don't know that any more than I do.”

Athena shifted her grip on her sword. “You don't know anything.”

Gabrielle turned in a circle, seeing the men shifting, anxious for the word to attack. “I know anyone who tries to hurt me is going to end up dead.” She put her back to the narrow wall “Do you really think they'll be able to hold Xena back, over there?”

Athena laughed.

Gabrielle turned her head and looked full at the mortal goddess. "You really think so?" She asked her directly. "Aren't you forgetting, Athena? You're mortal here. She isn't."

She felt a little shock go through the crowd around her. "What makes you think you can stop me, much less her?" She put her hands on her hips. "What a bunch of frauds you and your family are."

"Oh my goodness." Cait murmured. "Pally, we're in something here."

"Just keep your mouth shut." Paladia muttered back. "That really Athena?"

Cait managed an unobtrusive shrug. "How would I know?"

"Kill her." Athena pointed her sword at Gabrielle. "She mocks the gods." She waved the men forward. "Kill all of them, and I will reward you."

The men surged forward. Gabrielle pulled her companions behind her and threw her hands out towards them. "Stop!" She yelled. "What price is your life? What good is any reward if your head's cut off?"

The men didn't pause, and in a moment Gabrielle changed her stance from warding off to battle, ducking the sword of the first soldier to meet them and squirming past him between the heavy, armored bodies.

The man whirled to follow her but she was on his back already, jumping up and grabbing him by the back of his armor and throwing her body weight back as hard as she could. He reeled and stumbled, in the chaos waving his sword back and forth and cutting one of his own men.

"Yah!" Cait stabbed a second. "Pally get the little fellow out of here!"

"Screw you." Paladia slammed an elbow into the eye socket of one of the soldiers and grabbed his sword from him as it nearly impaled her. "He's over there. Take his chances." She gripped the sword and faced off against two of the men, catching sight of Gabrielle pulling her opponent over backwards in her peripheral vision.

Unreal. She remembered thinking of Gabrielle as this slightly crazy, overtalkative wench more hot air than anything and then had to change her mind about her not once, but a half dozen times as she'd seen her then go and do things like she was doing now.

Gabrielle had the soldier on the ground, and she was twisting his mace out of his hand, dropping right straight down with her knee onto his throat.

"Kill them!" Athena screamed.

People were idiots. Paladia stabbed at the soldier trying hard to overwhelm Cait. She hacked at his arm and then punched him, smacking the sword into another soldier rushing in on her right.

Gabrielle got her hands on the mace and swung with it, nearly overbalancing herself but smashing the head of the weapon into the soldier about to stab her. He reeled back, clutching his head, as Athena's yelling rang out over them again.

She could hear the sound of the waves, coming back.

Somewhere, people were dying.

Gabrielle ducked under the soldiers return slash, and bolted up the stone road, heading for the mortal goddess. She lifted the unfamiliar weight of the mace in her hand and let out a yell of her own, seeing Athena's eyes go wide as she brought her sword up to defend herself.

She was filled with a cold, clean anger. "You stupid bitch!" She slammed the mace against the sword. "All you can think about is having people killed who are worth a dozen of you!"

"I'll... ' Athena backed a step and parried the rush. "I'll kill you myself then! Look what you did to us! You did this! You made us like this!"

"Oh no' Gabrielle dodged the sword and swung the mace, smashing through Athena's guard and hitting her in the ribs with it. "That's for the Amazons!"

"Ahh!" Athena screamed.

"Damn stupid.." Gabrielle let the rage take her, feeling a rush of strength in her arms as she whacked the goddess again, hearing the crunch of bones. "Stupid venal... selfish... arrogant... take that for what you were doing to Hercules!"

"Ahh! Help! Help me!" Athena called out. "Men! To me! Help!"

Gabrielle swung the mace and it took the sword out of Athena's hand, sending it clattering down the stone road as the sound of boots rang out as the soldiers ran to their mistresses aid.

She whirled to meet them, bringing the mace up as she braced her legs and focused on the closest soldier, with a complete lack of fear that was surreally liberating.

She could smell the salt of the sea, and hear Cait's yell as she hit the men from the rear and in the fringes, the sobbing cries of the little boy.

Kill her? Oh no. Not this miserable creature, or her faceless thugs.

Gabrielle deflected the sword blow and shifted, moving to one side as a second hit the stone wall where she'd been a moment earlier and then, in the middle of parrying another strike she felt her senses prickle and knew there was danger at her back.

Athena yelled in triumph just as the door to the inn's back corridor opened.

"Die!" Athena drove the sword right at the slim, tensed back in front of her, lunging forward and putting all her weight behind the blow only to be yanked backwards with such force it threw her back against the stone with a sodden crack.

She slid to the ground, and the sword came loose, rattling softly.

Xena casually thrust her sword through her belt to hold it and swaggered over to the fallen woman, picking her up by her shirt and lifting her up. She shook Athena roughly as her head wobbled and then slammed her back against the door, her feet dangling a foot shy of the road.

Pale, ice blue eyes bored into hers as Xena held her there until she saw what she wanted in Athena's golden ones.

Fear.

"Feel that?" Xena asked, tightening her grip. "I want you to know what it feels like to have someone a lot stronger than you hold your worthless life in their hands." She lifted the goddess and slammed her back against the wall. "Feel it?"

Athena twitched, then let her hands drop.

"You can't stop me." Xena thumped her. "You can't save yourself." She thumped her again. "If I want to kill you, or break you, or cut your tongue out you couldn't do anything about it."

The goddess swallowed. "I won't always be mortal." She finally growled.

"That's my point." Xena said, in a surprisingly mild voice. "When you have the upper hand again, remember what it feels like not to." She stared at Athena, then finally released her to drop to the ground.

"You'll pay for that, Xena." The goddess said, her voice serious.

"I pay for everything." Xena replied. "Oh. By the way, speaking of paybacks." She uncoiled and sent an overhand right into Athena's jaw, a double crack sounding loud and startling as her hand hit the goddess, and the goddess's head hit the wall. "That's for giving Gabrielle a hard time."

She watched the woman slowly slide down the wall into a crumpled heap, senseless. Then she booted the sword she'd taken from Athena up and caught it, turning to face the rest of the group.

The bright moonlight showed a sea of pale faces watching her, the soldiers shifting from foot to foot, unsure of what to do.

Xena stepped out onto the street, her body covered head to toe in battle gore, blood staining her skin a deep, rusty brown. Without a word, she stepped up next to Gabrielle and twirled Athena's sword in her hand, staring evenly at the now halted soldiers.

The waves surged up and lapped at their boots, as they stared at her.

"Hope you boys can swim." Xena said, after a long silence. "We've already got enough bodies that look like you in there to burn."

The man in the front, the one who Gabrielle had pulled over backwards, and whose mace was clasped in the bard's hand, licked his lips. "We serve the goddess."

Xena looked at him, turned, around and looked at the slumped, unmoving figure against the wall, then looked back at him. "Really?" She raised an eyebrow. "Looks like you need to find a better one than that.."

"Truly.. " One of the others. "She is mortal, as the bard said." Their eyes shifted to Gabrielle, who was standing in the shadows, unmoving. "What trick of the gods is this?"

"A trick of the gods." Xena acknowledged. "Ready to see a few more?"

The soldiers started to back away. They dropped their weapons and held their hands up, moving backwards into the rising water without taking their eyes off that tall, bloody figure at the top of the steps.

Suddenly the walls were thick with Xena's men, tall furred figures, and half armored, weapons raised. "Should we kill them, Chosen?" Jessan called, from the rampart.

Xena exhaled, and rested her free hand on her partner's shoulder. "Just catch them, and tie em up." She said. "Enough people died today."

Gabrielle let her hand fall, with the mace in it. The head of the weapon clunked to the ground and she sighed, closing her eyes to let the flashes of red fade. "Thanks Xe." She murmured.

The warrior squeezed her shoulder. "That's what I'm here for." She said. "You okay?"

"No." Gabrielle muttered. "I'm going to throw up. Move."

Xena released her shoulder and started massaging her neck instead. "Easy. Given everything on me a little upchuck wont make it worse." She shoved Athena's sword under her belt next to her own. "Good job."

Gabrielle half turned and leaned her head against her partner's shoulder, savoring the simple contact. "Damn it, Xena." She exhaled. "I really am going to throw up."

The warrior put both arms around her and pulled her close, watching over her shoulder as Cait and Paladia made their way over. Behind them a step or two was a small boy. Xena had no idea where he fit in, but she gave the two Amazons a smile and a nod. "Hades of a way to end the night, huh?"

She felt Gabrielle's body start to relax against her and she kept up her gentle rubbing, working to

ease the painful tension she could feel in the bard's neck.

"What were those waves, Xena?" Cait asked. "They're terrible." She politely kept her attention on the warrior, not on the quiet figure in her arms.

"Going down now." Paladia commented. "Wasn't as high this one."

"They're called tidal waves." Xena explained, watching her men take the soldiers into captivity. "I saw them once, out at sea. Saw the water just get sucked back off the land, and then the waves came." She mused. "Scared the Hades out of me."

"Well, yes." Cait turned around, looking down the crooked, tiny street where the water had once again receded. "Terrible."

The boy edged around her and stared up at Xena with huge, scared eyes. "Who're you?"

Xena studied him. "Xena. Who are you?"

Gabrielle lifted her head at that. "His name is Aljin, Xe. He got separated from his mother in the flood." She glanced down at the boy. "He's been really brave." She exchanged looks with Xena. "Maybe we can go find his mother now."

Xena looked up, to see Cait and Paladia watching her, that look of knowing in their eyes. "Sure." She said. "Let's go get Dori. She can help us look."

Gabrielle extended her hand to the boy, and they walked slowly up the last of the steps to the door, bypassing the silent, still figure to one side of it.

"She was mean." Aljin spoke up, as they were about to walk through into the inn. "I'm glad you made her shut up." He looked up at Gabrielle. "You got her good."

Gabrielle managed a smile. "Yeah, I sure did." She felt Xena's arm settle around her, and the nightmare started to fade. "I sure did."

They entered the inn, with Cait and Paladia following them, leaving the battlefield at least temporarily behind.

**

Gabrielle was glad enough to be sitting in the stable, one knee hiked up with her elbow resting on it as she watched Dori patter around Rustys stall.

Outside it was too loud, and too chaotic, and she was simply grateful to Xena for taking over and handling everything, leaving her to chill out a little inside.

"Mama, did you see the fishes?" Dori poked her head out of the stall. "They was big! Come right up on the street!"

"I saw them, honey." Gabrielle said. "I was with Cait, and we saw lots of fishes."

"Boo made everybody go up up!" Dori came over and explained. "She was flying! I wanted to go too!"

The bard studied her daughters bright, interested face. As always, when faced with utter catastrophe Dori had taken it all in stride, more upset about any possible harm to her new friend and missing out on playing with Xena than anything. "I know." She reached out and touched Doris leg, rubbing the soft skin with her fingertips. "Boo will take you flying soon, honey. Shes got a lot of work to do first."

Dori sat down in the straw. "I saw Boo go boom, mama." She related in a serious tone. "Boo was real mad."

Gabrielle had seen the pile of bodies, and Iolaus' grim face as they came through the inn. Hercules had taken his half sisters someplace, and she hadn't yet had the guts to ask about them. "Yeah I know, Dori" She watched her Dori play with her hand, her tiny fingers moving the ring the bard wore around in a circle on her finger. "Boo had to make everyone safe."

"Cat was saying mama went boom too." Dori looked up.

Gabrielle exhaled. "Mama did." She admitted. "Mama got very angry at some bad people, because they wanted to hurt mama and Boo. So I hit them."

"Go mama." Dori grinned.

"Where were you watching from, Dori? From up at the top of the hill?" Gabrielle asked, internally wincing at the thought of what must have been a bloodbath, given how much gore was covering her partners body and the nicks in her blade shed have to polish out.

But then, half of the men who'd attacked them had died. At least one at her own hand. She'd grown out of the anguish that might have once caused but it still made her grimace at least inside.

"Eff said I had to stay up dere." Dori frowned. "I wanted to go help Boo."

Good for Ephiny. "Well, its better that way, honey." Gabrielle felt her throat closing a little. "Everyone wanted to make sure you were safe, with all the water going on, and everything."

Hm. Dori grunted a little. "Too much fishes, mama."

"Yeah there sure were, huh?" Gabrielle pulled her over and hugged her, giving her a kiss on the top of her head. "Cmere and give mama a hug and make me feel better."

Dori willingly complied, giving her mother a kiss on the cheek. "Mama owie?"

The bard closed her eyes., then opened them right away, when echoes of that anger flashed red against her closed eyelids. "Yeah." She said. "Mamas not doing great right now."

"Go get Boo? Make mama feel good?" Dori suggested.

"No need, munchkin." A quiet voice sounded from the door. "I'm here."

Gabrielle looked up to see her partner entering the barn, shutting the door behind her. Just the sight of her did, in fact make her feel better and she managed a smile as Xena crossed the floor and settled down next to her in the straw. "Hey." She reached up and tweaked her nose. "You're wet."

"Hey." Xena was, in fact, drenched, her dark hair dripping with what smelled like fresh well water. "Just got a chance to clean up, thought Id come find you."

"Boo, all the bad mens gone?" Dori asked.

"Yeah, they are." Xena ruffled her hair. "All gone." She caught sight of the tense grimace that flashed over Gabrielle's face from the corner of her eye. "Hey, did you brush Rusty today?"

"Boo I did!" Dori scrambled up . "Wusty, show Boo how pretty you are! She rambled back into the stall and started talking to the new pony.

Gabrielle leaned her head against Xena's shoulder, ignoring the dampness. "How's it going out there?" She asked, after a brief pause.

"I'm more interested in how it's going in here." Xena reached over and cupped the side of Gabrielle's head, brushing her thumb over the chilled skin of her cheek. "You're cold."

Gabrielle exhaled. "I am." She murmured. "All through."

“Let me change so I don't make it worse.” Xena got up and stripped out of the wet tunic she was wearing, trading it for her old gambeson, tucked in the saddlebags they'd left in the stable. “Damn that feels good.”

Gabrielle watched, with a tired though appreciative smile. “You're so beautiful.”

Xena paused in mid motion, looking around the stable. Then she raked the tangled, wet black hair out of her eyes, and put her hands on her hips. “Gabrielle, c'mon.”

“You are.” The bard half shrugged. “Even in that.”

“Well, they say love is blind.” Xena took off her boots then returned to Gabrielle's side, settling back down in the straw and opening her arms in invitation. “C'mere.”

Gabrielle slid over and let herself be wrapped in warmth, gratefully accepting the comfort. “Thanks, Xe.” he murmured. “I needed a hug.”

Xena smiled faintly, savoring her newly found appreciation for this very human sensation. Gabrielle's body was chilled indeed, and she rubbed her partner's arms to warm her. “Glad that's over.” She said. “Water's gone all the way back down, doesn't look like it's coming back.”

“Great.” The bard nestled closer. “Hope nothing else happens.”

“Me too.” Xena could feel the faint tremors running through her partner's body, and her brows contracted a little. It wasn't that cold in the stable. “You okay? You didn't get hurt out there did you? Besides all those scrapes?”

“Ungh.” Gabrielle exhaled. “My soul hurts, Xe.”

Ah. The warrior sorted through her possible options. “Wanna talk about it?” Bittersweet tang of memory. The bard felt a little, warm jolt inside from it, remembering the times they'd traded that question. “What a crummy end to a crummy day.” She said, after a long pause. “I feel like I've been turned inside out and shaken like your mom's hearthrug.”

“Someone once told me.” The warrior rubbed her back gently. “That being alive at the end of a day was enough to make it okay.”

Gabrielle smiled faintly.

“And today that sure has meaning for me.” Xena concluded. “Being alive here, with you, makes it a damn good day.”

The bard felt warm tears tracking down her face. “You're the one with the words for a change, huh?” The body she was curled up against vibrated slightly as Xena chuckled. “It really got to me today, Xe. I was so mad I wasn't thinking straight.” She played with one of the buckles on Xena's outfit. “That hasn't happened to me in a long time.”

Xena seemed to consider this in silence for time. “Tough situation.” She finally said. “You had a dozen men trying to kill you, Gab. Hard to overreact to that, you know what I mean?”

Gabrielle nodded. “I know. I just don't like how I felt when I was going after Athena.” She admitted. “I was out of control. I could have killed her.” She paused, mouthing over that statement again. “I could have, Xe. Not in a fight, because I took her sword away, but... I could have kept hitting her.”

“But you didn't.” Xena responded. “Could doesn't count. We both could do a lot of things. What counts is what you did, and what you did was survive and protect the people with you.”

Long speech for Xena. Gabrielle pondered it gravely, giving it the consideration it deserved. From the edges of her hearing she caught the sound of Dori warbling to her pony, and the crackle of the hay they were seated in, and the world shifted just a little for her. “Hm.”

“You did the right thing.” Xena squeezed her a little. “You would have stopped.”

Gabrielle looked up at Xena's shadowed profile. “It's not going to matter, Xena. We're targets now anyway. They won't ever let us live in peace.” She watched the warrior's profile, seeing the honest confirmation there.

Xena sighed. “I kept Herc from killing Artemis. Maybe it'll count.” She conceded the point with a brief lift of her hand. “Besides, it's not like they left us alone before.”

“Mmph.” The bard let her head rest back against her partner's collarbone. “Why did you stop him? She asked. What would have happened?”

Xena fell silent again, her face tensing into a frown. “I don't know.” She admitted. “I just felt them dying here would be trouble.” She said. “Well, more trouble.” She clarified, seeing her partner's wry expression. “I really don't know. I didn't think about it.”

“You just knew.”

Xena paused, then nodded.

“Well.” The bard took a breath, and released it. “Maybe I did too, because I sure did turn my back on her instead of killing her and almost got killed myself.”

“Those guys were attacking you, hon.” Xena riffled her fingers through the bard's hair affectionately. “Wasn't a good place to turn your back to anywhere to be found.”

Gabrielle thought about it, then she reluctantly nodded. “I guess that's true, huh?” She said. “But just when I realized how bad a spot I was in there you were.” She looked up, watching Xena's dark lashes flicker in the torchlight. “There you were, and boy was I glad.”

“Mm.” The warrior curled her arms around her and exhaled. “Funny I'd just wondered before that if you wanted to be rescued, or if you'd just rather handle it on your own now.” She mused. “You knew she was behind you. I saw you start to react as I came through the door.”

Gabrielle stared off into the distance.

For a brief moment, she thought about what it would be like for her if Xena wasn't around. If the warrior had taken Zeus' offer and stayed in Olympus, and she'd come back alone, and could only depend on herself.

Could she have handled Athena?

Would she have cared? “Xe.” She finally said. “I never want to not have you be there for me. Rescue my crazy butt any time your heart desires.”

Xena hugged her. “My heart desires you every damn minute of the day.” She assured her partner. “So I'll be there.”

Gabrielle took solace in the warmth of Xena's embrace, and the melancholy sweetness of the words they were exchanging. Love was, she'd finally realized, when you could accept the idea of someone taking care of you not because you couldn't, but because it was their privilege to.

Because they wanted to.

Funny how life taught you things.

She gently patted the warrior's side, and decided to change the subject a little. “Did they really get Poseidon to destroy this place, Xe? Just because they were pissed at us?” Gabrielle asked. “I think that's what's bumming me out more than anything. We worked so hard to keep this town safe, and they just trash it on a whim.”

Xena scratched her on the back of her neck. “Anything's possible, but.. She considered. Doesn't

have to be Posiedon. Sometimes stuff like this just happens.”

“Really?”

The warrior nodded. “I remember .. there was an earthquake once someplace I'd been.” Xena said. “Ground shook like crazy, parts of it opened it... and then we could see a tidal wave going out across the water. Wasn't any gods... no one was pissing anyone off. Just happened.” She pointed at the horses. “They knew. They feel stuff like that.”

“They did.” The bard said. “They were really nervous... oh.” She inhaled a little. “Xena, it's like when a big storm's coming. They know.”

Xena nodded. “They just know.”

“Like you.” Gabrielle considered that, already aware that her mind was shifting from it's depression to a more normal pattern, and more than aware that was Xena's motive in her unusual chattiness. A surge of utter love overcame her, and she reached around Xena's body and hugged her as hard as she could. “Ungh.”

Urf. Xena responded to the squeeze. “I know it's been a tough day.” She kissed the top of Gabrielle's head. “But we made it. Let it go.”

Gabrielle sighed. “It's so hard.”

“I know.” Xena eased her back so she could look into Gabrielle's eyes, dim and bloodshot in the low light. “But it's done. We'll deal with whatever happens.”

She watched her partner's body posture carefully, seeing the relaxation on either side of her neck she was hoping for. She leaned forward and kissed her on the lips, tasting the faintest hint of sea salt on them. “Like we always do.”

When they parted, Gabrielle looked up at her and just for a moment, that feckless kid from Potadeia was there, with that open, soulfully trusting look that had changed Xena's world once up on a time. Then the bard smiled, and leaned her head back on her chest, her body finally relaxing fully.

Feel better? Xena asked.

Gabrielle considered. “Yeah.” She nodded. “Yknow it used to get me crazy when you'd just tell me to move on, but I think I finally get it. You really cant change stuff that happened.”

Xena chuckled faintly.

“I mean, I knew that in my head.” The bard explained. “I really did, Xena. Its kinda obvious. But theres a difference between knowing something in your head, and understanding it in your heart.”

Ahh. Xena settled her head against her partner's contentedly.

“I guess its the difference between knowing, and believing.” Gabrielle added, after a moment.

Mm. Xena grunted thoughtfully.

“Sort of like..” The bard regarded her profile. “We always knew about you.” She saw the quick reaction, and the flicker of emotion in her partners pale eyes. “But even after Dori, we never really .. we just talked around it.”

After a moment, Xena simply nodded.

“You still don't like it.”

Xena cleared her throat a little. “Sometimes you're forced to face things. You don't have to like them.”

Gabrielle patted her on the side gently. "But it makes you feel different now, doesn't it? You know inside."

She slipped her hand under the worn fabric and touched Xenas skin, finding it warm and silky textured. "Your attitudes a little different."

Her partner was quiet for a long time, the faint twitches in her face showing thoughtfulness. Gabrielle waited patiently, hearing the steady heartbeat under her ear that meant it was just that, and not upset. "I'm fine with it, by the way." She said after a while. "I always was, Xe."

"I know." Xena finally answered. "I guess it is what it is." She said. "I'm not sure if it just made me more.. " She frowned. "More confident or just over it all."

"Mm." Gabrielle grunted softly.

"Knocked any of the awe left out of me." The warrior clarified.

Ahh. "Never thought of it like that." Gabrielle mused. "But you know, I think I feel that way too." She turned her head and regarded her partner thoughtfully. "I'm still a little in awe of you though."

Xena rolled her head to one side and gave her a very droll look.

Gabrielle grinned, finally, a twinkle appearing in her tired eyes. "You know its the mortal part of you that makes you so special, don't you? Just like with Herc. The god part kinda doesn't."

Xenas eyebrow quirked up. "Really?"

"Theyre jerks, Xe."

"So Im just a little bit jerky?" But the warrior smiled. "Nice."

"Xena."

Xena finally just shrugged. "Yeah, I feel different." She admitted. "Cant really say what the difference is. Maybe it was just going up there and back." She said. "Maybe I understand a lot more." She flexed her hand, examining the back of it. "I like it."

"Healing up probably didn't hurt." Gabrielle captured the hand, turning it over and kissing Xenas palm. "Sure made me feel better."

Xenas face took on a thoughtful expression again. "Maybe I got some time back up there." She said, after a pause. "They say every cloud has a silver lining."

Her partner laced their fingers together and smiled. "You've been the silver lining to my life." Gabrielle said, in a mild tone. "So Ill take it."

"And the black cloud occasionally." Xena said with a faintly wry smile.

"Back at you."

Their eyes met, and the silence lengthened. Gabrielle felt a sense of peace return to her, and as she watched the torchlights shadows shift across Xenas face, she smiled. They would go on.

They would live life, and deal with whatever came at them. Gods or wild goats, it just would be what it would be.

"Mama." Dori trotted out into the open space in front of the stall. "Wusty just made a poo! Wanna see?"

Gabrielle started to silently laugh, her body shaking.

"Leave it where it is, shortie." Xena muffled a laugh herself. "Mama doesn't need to see it. She's

had enough horse crap to deal with today.”

Dori came over and sat down in the straw. “Mama feel better?” She inquired.

Gabrielle let her laughter wind down. “Mama's fantastic, honey.” She patted Dori's knee. “Boo fixed me right up.”

“Boo fixes evrything!” Dori plucked handfuls of straw and threw it up in the air. “C'n we go home now mama? You said we could in the mornin and look!”

She pointed at the stable window which was, in fact, showing the light of dawn. “Can we go? Huh? Now now now???”

Xena reached over and grabbed her daughters foot and tickled it.

“Eeee!” Dori snatched her appendage back. “Boo! No itch!”

“We've got to help our friends here today first. Xena told her. “The water made a big mess, Dori. We need to help clean up and then we can go.”

Dori pouted. “No fun.”

“Sometimes life isn't all fun, sweetie.” Gabrielle untangled herself from Xena's embrace and stood up. “That's just how it goes. Besides, mama needs to go take a nap for a while. I had to race the fishes a lot last night and I'm kinda tired.”

“Hungry?” Xena asked.

“That too.” The bard heard her guts grumble, and gave her partner a wry look. “Let's go see whats up.” She offered Xena a hand up. “I guess life's moving on.”

Xena took her hand and allowed herself to be hauled to her feet. “After you, my queen.” She gestured towards the door, following Gabrielle and Dori as they pushed the door open and let the dawn light in, walking out to see what the day held.

**

Gabrielle leaned gingerly against the promenade wall as she gazed out over the harbor.

It was almost unrecognizable. The savage waves had taken out most of the land between the harbor and the hill, and the tide now lapped at the bottom of the steps leading up to where she stood.

Of the wooden piers, and the road, and the buildings lining it – there was nothing.

Part of the outer cliff wall had collapsed, denting that side of the harbor with rockslides and providing a sluice for the waters coming in through the harbor entrance.

“Wow.” The bard murmured. “Those Spartans got out just in time.”

“They sure did.” Xena agreed. “Got in, got out, when word gets to them about what happened here, they'll think that damn captain was blessed by the gods. He'll be a hero..”

“Mama, there's fishes.” Dori pointed, to where sure enough, some fish were leaping out of the water, the early light reflecting against their scales. “Can we go catch them?”

She thumped Xena's sides, from her spot perched on the warrior's shoulders. “Boo.. go fishes?”

“Not right now shortie.” Xena cupped her hands over Dori's knees. “I just got dry.”

Gabrielle eased closer and draped her arm around her partner's waist. “Can they rebuild the pier?”

Xena studied the space. "Maybe." She said. "Tough to get anything down to it. They have to rebuild the road and docks on pylons I guess."

"We're not going to do that."

"No." Xena agreed. "We're not."

They walked along the promenade, towards the edge of the hill that faced the inner part of the city. The gates the Spartans had marched through were gone, and a good part of the wall that held them.

The lower levels of the streets that branched off the main road were in shambles, houses torn apart by the force of the water, or collapsed due to the walls themselves crumbling into pieces.

There were bodies bobbing in the cluster of wreckage near the bottom of the hill. The harbor itself was full of parts and boxes, pieces of someone's home, some ones wagon.

Sad. Gabrielle exhaled. She let Xena guide her back along the wall and then up the steps to the place they'd started the previous night out. The steps were lightly traveled – most of the people who'd taken refuge on the top of the hill had gone back down into the city to salvage what they could.

They found Ephiny up at the top of the hill, seated on the wall watching what was going on down below.

"Hey." Gabrielle greeted her.

'Ahh there you are." Ephiny swiveled around on the wall to face them. "Our nations first family."

"Eff!" Dori waved.

"Where's Pony?" Xena asked. "Thought she'd be up here."

Ephiny crossed her arms over her chest, and smiled. "She's up near the gates." The regent related. "Busy spreading the word about how our queen whomped the poo out of Athena for trying to throw the Amazons into the Spartan spears."

"Gods." Gabrielle covered her eyes with one hand.

Xena chuckled softly.

"Ephiny, that's not the smartest thing to do." The bard said. "When Athena and Artemis become gods again, they're going to remember that."

Ephiny shrugged. "Talking about it's not going to change what happened." She patted Gabrielle on the arm. "So you might as well get the props for it."

"Dori and I are going to go scrounge." Xena said. "We'll bring you back something." She headed off towards the hilltop building, leaving Gabrielle and Ephiny behind.

"Tactful." Ephiny gave the retreating woman an approving nod.

Gabrielle took a seat on the wall next to her. "Crazy day huh?"

Ephiny chuckled. Then she gave her queen a sideways look. "You doing okay?" She asked. "All kidding aside, I know that had to be rough." She paused. "On top of an already crazy day."

The bard tilted her head to one side and regarded her friend. "I'm okay." She said, after a pause. "I felt really down after the fight, but Xe pulled me out of it." She admitted.

"She took those Spartans apart going for gateway." Ephiny commented. "I haven't seen her fight like that since the war. Happened so fast everyone could hardly get down there in time."

“Mm.” Gabrielle could picture it in her mind's eye, right down to the ferocious grin. “This is going to sound strange, but I think dying was good for her this time.” She reflected. “In a lot of ways.”

“Not the least having you with her.”

Gabrielle tilted her head in acknowledgement. Then she looked up at Ephiny. “We need to talk about that promise I made to you.” She watched the expression on the regent's face. “Not surprised?”

“Gabrielle.” Ephiny half turned, so she was facing her queen. “The fact you promised at all, and spent time there was more than I really expected.” She looked her friend right in the eye. “We both know how it is with you.”

The bard looked at her with that little, charming smile.

“The kids were telling me some of the stuff going on.” Ephiny continued, not by any means immune to that smile. “I don't think the tribe's ready for you anyway.”

“Some are.” Gabrielle replied. “The younger ones are, Eph. I could see the split forming there.” She said. “There are kids taking arms now that have only known me and you in charge.”

“Huh.”

“You could see it when I got challenged.” The bard went on, in a serious tone. “Afterward, all the youngers were around, guarding my quarters.”

“Really?” Ephiny asked, fascinated. “I guess I shouldn't be that surprised, but you know, I am.” She shifted a little. “I figured the elders are shook up about the move. It's all changing around them, and it wouldn't have taken much to set them off. Letting singles have quarters? Yeah, that would do it.”

Gabrielle rolled her eyes.

“When you get older, kid, you don't like things changing like that.” Ephiny put a hand on her queen's shoulder. “Take it from me.”

“Yeah, grandma.” Gabrielle smiled. “But you know something Eph.. you have to change to live. The world doesn't stay still, it keeps moving and you need to move with it. That spot you were in, towns were closing in on all sides. What would they have done when goats and sheep started stampeding through the village?”

“Shot them and ate them” Ephiny replied, with a twinkle.

“Not with those cooks.” Gabrielle muttered.

They both chuckled. Then Ephiny cleared her throat. “So what's up with you? Aren't you going back to Amph? I don't need you living there in the damn village every minute, Gabrielle. You're close enough by.”

Gabrielle got up and turned to face the rising sun, blinking a little in it's warmth. She let the rays soak into her skin, thinking about what answer to give to Ephiny.

They had a responsibility to go home, she knew that. They needed to make sure their families were safe, and see their friends safely back home. But she knew if there had been a ship in the wreck left of the harbor she and Xena and Dori would be glad to hop on it.

Finally she sighed, and turned. “We are going home.” She said “I just don't know how long we're going to stay there.” She hooked her thumbs in the tooled leather belt around her waist. “For a lot of reasons. This thing with the gods isn't over, and the last thing I want to do is make the tribe a target again.”

Ephiny considered that, watching Gabrielle's expressive face. There seemed to be a little more depth there than she remembered, just one more layer of shadow in those pale eyes. The bard didn't seem any the worse for wear though, even after the long day.

Long day, and long night. "We can talk about it when we get back there." Ephiny gently sidestepped the question. "We'll work something out."

"I'm sure we will." Gabrielle smiled. "We always do."

"True." Ephiny smiled back. "Besides, who knows what we'll be going back to? Those kids might have had their own revolution there and we could get back to the whole lot of them wearing long dresses and baking cakes."

Gabrielle started laughing, the sound ringing out and echoing against the stone. She wrapped her arms around her bare middle and leaned against the wall.

"Oh, c'mon. The cooking's not THAT bad." Ephiny protested with mock exasperation. "Give me a break, Gabrielle. No one's died from it."

The bard sat down next to her, letting her laughter wind down. "No, they haven't." She admitted. "You know, but I think one of the things that struck me about the tribe is.. " She paused.

"Yes?"

"They're in a bad mood most of the time." Gabrielle blushed a little, unaccountably. "I don't mean.. well, everyone's grumpy."

Ephiny frowned a bit, her pale brows bunching. "No they aren't .. are they?" She looked up at Gabrielle in mild wonder. "There's the usual scrum and the squabbles, but that's..."

She stopped, and bit her lip. Then she met her friend's eyes. "You know, I've lived like that so long, almost all my life. It just seems normal." She said. "But it isn't normal, is it? Not to you?"

Gabrielle rested her hands on the wall, leaning on them a little. "I like being happy." She said, after a pause. "I think I also like people around me being happy. Not constantly, because people just aren't."

"Mm."

"But having people around me in a constant state of... of needing, or wanting...of not being happy gets me a little crazy." Gabrielle said. "I think that's why I don't like spending much time in the village."

"Huh." Ephiny murmured.

"So when I was there before." The bard continued. "I think I was trying to change things that might make some people happy. Like having private space, or good things to eat." She reached over and clasped Ephiny's hand. "I really didn't mean to tear apart traditions, Eph. Honestly. It wasn't about that."

"I didn't think it was." The regent responded mildly. "We don't really have a tradition of bad cooking, for one thing. Esta's in hospital, and the damn old fool refused to teach anyone because... well, because it's the one thing she can do."

"But Eph." Gabrielle turned towards her. "It's not like you get thrown out of the tribe if you don't have a special skill."

Ephiny looked at her. "Actually, Gabrielle, you can get thrown out of the tribe for exactly that."

The bard blinked at her. "What?" She stared at Ephiny. "Are you kidding me?"

The regent chuckled wryly. "You know, it's so basic to us. It's not written down, so it's not

something you would have come across in the scrolls. But yeah.” She said. “You need to be useful to stick around. Some kind of skill. Fletching, or fighting, or cooking or building treehouses, or something. No one gets a free ride.”

Gabrielle merely blinked at her.

“Of course, if you're born into the tribe, you get a pass until you come of age, but then you need to apprentice out, or show a skill, or..” Ephiny shrugged. “Or you go find some other way of life.”

“Sheeps.” Gabrielle lifted her free hand and covered her eyes.

“I mean, think about it, Gabrielle. It's not like we have a huge amount of resources to spend on people who don't contribute.” Ephiny sensed the bard's dismay. “So sure, everyone needs to pitch in. So Esta figured if anyone could figure out how to cook better than her, she'd be replaced.”

“No wonder they all freak out about Xe.” Gabrielle murmured. “Oh Hades that explains so much.”

“Oh.” Ephiny thought about that. “Huh. Maybe.” She sounded surprised. “Sorry. I guess I always assumed you knew.” She patted Gabrielle's hand. “But I guess it never did come up because ... well, I mean...”

“Because I have skills.” Gabrielle murmured. “At least I do now.”

“Mm.” The regent eyed her. “And you came with a big stick even before you learned to use one.” She watched Gabrielle's head come up, and turn so their eyes met. “Since we're being honest....I was there in council when Terrais choice came to the question.”

She studied Gabrielle's face quietly, as the growing light outlined it's now adult planes. There was no surprise there, which didn't surprise her.

“You took me because of Xena.” The bard stated. “Because she's a much better friend than an enemy.”

Ephiny nodded. “That's pretty much what Melosa said.” She agreed. “And a lot of people disagreed with her, but she was the boss.” The regent's eyes twinkled a little. “I think that was the moment I decided I wanted to go for being the boss. I really liked the idea of standing up there in the chamber and telling everyone what to do.”

Gabrielle smiled. “Sorry I got in your way.”

Ephiny laughed, a loud and joyous sound. “No no no..” She waved a hand. “You don't get it. You didn't... you gave me the best of both worlds.”

They were both silent for a few moments, thinking.

“remember.” Ephiny went on, in a musing tone. “I remember when Velaska had taken over, after Melosa died, and all of us who ... who weren't in her camp got together and tried to figure out what to do about it.”

Gabrielle gazed quietly off into the distance. “You know it's still hard for me to think about that time and not start crying.”

They both fell silent again.

Then Gabrielle cleared her throat a little. “You wanted Xena to come fix Velaska.” She glanced up at Ephiny. “That's why you sent for me.”

Ephiny hesitated, then nodded. “And we ended up getting that.” She said. “But the truth was, Gabrielle, after that point... you were the queen.”

“Why?” The bard asked. “It was Xena who fixed Velaska. I didn't do anything for the tribe.”

The Amazon smiled, a touch wistfully. 'Why? Because that was when we all fell in love with you, Gabrielle. With you, and this great, terrible, fantastic love story unfolding before our eyes.' She reached over to clasp the now wide eyed and silent bard's shoulder. "And you did something. You brought Xena back."

Gabrielle folded her arms around her stomach. "Probably a damn good thing for everyone that she found a way to come back." The bard said, in a sober, quiet voice. "I would have made a lousy queen back then."

Ephiny nodded. "We would have been in a bad place." She acknowledged. "But you know, even then we'd have figured something out, Gabrielle. Like we always do."

Her queen smiled, a thousand emotions present in those eyes. "Probably." She said. "But that's in the past. So let's see what we're going to do when we get back. Maybe it's time I turn you over my right for good."

"Who says I want it?" Ephiny responded with an arched brow. "Maybe I want to move down to Amphipolis with Pony and raise goats."

Gabrielle's arms shifted and she planted her hands on her hips, tilting her head with her own brows hiked.

The regent shrugged. "You never know."

A loud whistle drew both their attention, and they looked up the hill to see Xena standing on the upper walk looking at them. The warrior spread her hands in question, then curled her finger at them in a come hither gesture.

"Let's go." Ephiny stood up. "I'll take second breakfast. C'mon."

The two women strolled up the path, as the sun climbed higher overhead and the city started to wake up around them.

**

It was quiet up on the top of the hill. Gabrielle mopped up some of the gravy from the stew someone had put on with a bit of bread, keeping an eye on her partner standing on the other side of the room.

Two of the city council were talking to her. The warrior had her arms folded, but her posture was relaxed, her body at ease in its casing of padded cloth.

It didn't look like trouble. The city councillors, all of whom who lived up in the higher portions of the city, hadn't lost as much as many others had. Mostly storefronts, some of them, on the first level of some of the streets and wagons.

No sign of Denius. No sign of Jens, for that matter. Gabrielle wasn't sure if they'd taken the opportunity to leave the city before sunrise, or if they were somewhere in the city, helping out.

Or even, if something had happened to them, in all the flooding.

Gabrielle picked up a cup of cider and took a sip. The stores they'd found in the city and brought up to the houses they'd commandeered hadn't been touched. Even the room she and Xena had relaxed in after the dinner hadn't been touched, and if she wanted she could go right back in there, close the door, and take a nap.

That thought seemed very attractive at the moment. "Hey Dor." Gabrielle turned to her daughter, who was busy with a cup of milk in the seat next to her. "Would you like to go take a rest with me?"

Dori looked up at her. "Go sleep?" She seemed incredulous.

"I know that sounds crazy huh? It's all sunny outside." Gabrielle grinned at her. "But you know, mama's tired. You got to sleep last night I didn't."

Dori considered this. "Okay." She put her cup down with exaggerated seriousness. "Go sleep with mama."

Gabrielle got up, her motion immediately drawing Xena's attention. She pointed at the room behind them and saw look of understanding cross her partners face, then she retreated with Dori into the bedroom and shut the door.

It was quiet in the room. Dori went over and lay down on her little bed, leaving her mother to crawl into the bigger one, as a gentle sea breeze blew through.

"Mama?"

"Yes, honey." Gabrielle was incredibly happy to let her body relax as she lay on her back on the bed.

"C'n we bring Wusty up to our house?"

Gabrielle indulged herself for a moment imagining their home with a pony in the corner of it.

Pony, okay. Pony poop? Not so much. Gabrielle decided, stretching her body out to it's limits and feeling the pleasant ache of muscles well used. Then she sighed.

"Honey, I don't think we can do that. None of the rest of the horses live with us, do they?" Gabrielle smiled, as she studied the timbered and whitewashed ceiling. "Do you miss being home?"

"Yes." Dori responded. "I miss my friends, Mama. Want to show them Wusty."

The bard turned her head and looked over at her daughter. "You do huh?" She said. "You have a lot of friends at home."

Dori nodded. "Fevver friends, and down the hill friends, and my friend up up." She said. "He goes up by our house Mama, so Wusty can too! They can be friends togever."

Ah. Dori's friend. "We haven't seen your friend in a long time by our house honey. I think he went back to be with his mama and papa." At least, the bard hoped that's what happened to the young creature. There were big hunting cats on the hill. "Maybe we can find out how he came to visit us, and visit him back."

Dori clapped her hands. "Miss him, Mama. He was fun."

Find the way down for the little guy, and maybe make sure there wasn't a way up for any remnants of the rest of the vally inhabitants. Gabrielle put her hands behind her head and felt her body start to relax.

She had thought she knew what their near future was earlier, but now, lying her and listening to Dori, having spoken to Ephiny.. she wasn't so sure. She felt very torn. Part of her wanted to leave Greece behind, and set out on roads unknown with Xena, but now part of her was looking forward to seeing home and family, and sorting out the Amazons.

And then, there was Dori to consider. She'd just been reminded that though she and Xena loved the traveling, there was a reason to be grounded in a home surrounded by friends and family.

Was it fair to take Dori away from that?

Was it selfish of her and Xena to want to take off? Leaving their family, their friends, the Amazons... all behind?

Gabrielle nibbled the inside of her lip. Then she sighed. "I'm glad we're going home too, Dori."

She said. "I'd like to have our breakfast on the porch, watching the birdies in the morning, wouldn't you?"

"Yes, mama." Dori came over and pulled her way up onto the bed. She bounced over to where her mother was lying and sat down next to her. "I want to go fly with Boo, and show Wusty to my friends, and catch fishes. No more run run run."

Gabrielle turned her head and studied Dori's face.

"No more running around, huh?" Xena slid onto the bed on the other side of Gabrielle. "What do you say about that, mama?" She rolled over and put her head on The bard's stomach, letting her legs dangle off the bed. "I know you had other ideas."

Gabrielle regarded her soulmate's beautiful profile. She lifted her hand and stroked Xena's cheek, watching those pale blue eyes watch her. "What do you say about it?" She countered. "It's our choice, not my choice."

Xena's lips twitched into a smile. "I want to go home." She said. "For as long as the Fates let me." She half turned on her side. "I want to just live."

The bard exhaled. "Is it so selfish of me to want to take you and Dori and just go somewhere else?" She asked. "I feel like I'm going crazy again, Xe. Part of me wants to go back to Amphipolis, and take care of the Amazons and see what we're doing to do for the harvest and all that..."

"But part of you wants to follow Posiden's Bane out there and have adventures." Xena tickled her around her bellybutton. "I get it."

"Do you?" Gabrielle eased up onto her elbows and regarded her partner. "What does that mean for me, Xena? That I'll always want what I don't have?"

"You have me." The warrior protested mildly. "And Dori."

"Boo?" Dori looked over at her buddy, having been bored to distraction by the talk. "C'n we go home now?"

'Soon, shortie." Xena told her. "You ready to ride Rusty all the way home?"

Dori grinned. "Yes!"

'You have to stay near us, Dori." Gabrielle warned. "Don't you think you're going to go running off by yourself just because you have your own horse, okay?"

Xena chuckled.

"Shh" The bard pinched her.

"Okay mama." Dori said. "C'n we go now?"

Gabrielle's lashes fluttered. "You want to go, Boo?" She glanced back down at Xena. "I'm not going to get my nap, am I?" She could see the restlessness in Xena's body and felt a certain itch to move herself.

"Let's get the group together and move out." Xena said. "We can always stop later, once we clear out of the city area."

Gabrielle studied her face. "You think we should get out of here."

Xena nodded in silence.

"Then lets go." She patted Xena on the shoulder. "You ready to go, Miss Doriania? Should we go get you things and your pony and go?"

“Yes!” Dori scrambled off the bed and headed for the door at a run. “Go go go!”

“Whoa!” Gabrielle rolled over and hauled herself out of the bed with Xena a bare step behind her. “Grab our stuff.” She hopped a little as they collided. “Dori!!”

Xena skidded to a halt and grabbed their bags, then bolted out after her partner. “Damn it.”

Gabrielle circled the table “Is it right for us just to leave like this?” She asked, as they ducked through the door and headed for the outside.

“We should leave.” Xena said. “Before the city gets itself together and starts looking for someone to blame.”

‘Ah. I see. You mean they haven't yet?’

“No.” Xena let out a low whistle as they cleared the doors, and from positions around the hill militia came running. “Not yet. They were looking for Hercules.”

“Oh.”

“So was I.” Xena said. “No one's seen him.”

“Where's Iolaus?”

“Him either.”

“Ah heh.”

“What's up?” Ephiny caught up to them.

“We're outta here.” Gabrielle told her. “Gather everyone up, let's move.”

“Bu.. uh.. b..” Ephiny paused, then simply closed her mouth and turned, putting her fingers between her teeth and letting out a much louder and more strident sound. “I'll send Cait over to get the fuzzies.”

Xena led the way down the steps, catching up with Dori as she rambled towards the stables. She scooped the child up as she passed, making her squeal with delight She loped down the steps, catching sight of the rest of the militia heading towards her.

Why were they running? Who knew. Xena just felt like it, and the motion satisfied something inside her as she reached the bottom of the steps and pulled up to avoid crashing into Bennu. “Get things together.” She told her captain. “We're moving out. Heading down the coast back towards Amphipolis.”

“Right you are, Genr'l.” Bennu looked pleased. He was in his militia tunic, though his shoulder was still in a sling. “More'n ready to head home.” He headed off towards the courtyard. “Get the boys moving, meet ye up at the gates, yeah?”

‘Yeah.’ Xena called after him. “Be right there.”

“What's up?” Pony took the last step from the lower harbor at a jump. “We leaving?”

“Yes we are.” Gabrielle confirmed. “Xena thinks it's a good idea.”

“Me too.” Eponin came over to her, lowering her voice. “There's a lot of mad people down near the lower gate, and where the water pulled all that stuff down.” She indicated the lower level. “Lost a lot of family and stuff.”

“Looking for someone to blame.”

Pony nodded. ‘You got it, your maj.’

Gabrielle studied the wreckage. "I can't even say they're wrong." She exhaled. "Though Xena thinks the waves were natural." She took hold of Pony's arm. "Go get Eph. We'll get the horses ready."

"On the way." Pony took off up the steps leaving the queen to dodge the growing number of militia and head into the stable.

Inside, she looked quickly around. Iolaus and Hercules horses were missing, she noted, and she felt annoyed that they had just left without talking to them. "Plenty of space in here now."

Xena was saddling Io, while Dori was dancing around Rusty in a happy circle. Gabrielle went over to Shadow, giving her mare a pat on the nose as the gray horse nuzzled her. "Are we overreacting?"

"Do you really want to stay here?" Her partner responded pragmatically. "If we end up sticking around, we'll be here for a moon trying to clean this place up. And we'll get goat poop for it."

Gabrielle reached for Shadows saddle blanket and settled it on the horses back. "Well, yeah... but we've done that before Xe." She said. "When did it matter what was in it for us?"

"I don't want anything from them." Xena cinched Io's saddle snug and hooked her saddle bags to it. "I just don't want them coming after us either. Been a long day and night, not in the damn mood to have some patricians chewing my ass."

"Ah." Gabrielle sorted the argument around as she finished buckling her saddle. "Okay."

"You want to stay here?" The warrior looked up, a little temper flaring.

"Did I say that?" The bard shot back at her. "I'm just asking a question. That allowed?"

"Look, Gabrielle." Xena leaned her arms on Io's back.

Gabrielle ducked her head under Shadows so she could see her partner. "I'm looking, Xena." She said. "You know you really look cute in that outfit. It shows off your legs."

"Mama, ready!" Dori marched out of Rusty's stable with the pony ambling after her nodding his shaggy head and looking around. "Boo, see how pretty he is?"

Xena regarded her family. A smile crossed her face, and she lifted a hand in Gabrielle's direction. "Thanks for reminding me to change." She pulled her leathers out of her saddlebag.

The bard leaned against Shadow's warm side, and smothered a grin, as the possibility she was going to get her wish anyway occurred to her. They would leave and head toward home, but there was a lot of ground to cover.

Anything could happen.

**

Gabrielle carefully guided Shadow down the steep and twisting path on the other side of the inn. Parts of the walls had fallen in, and the path was littered with debris. She had one hand wrapped in her horse's reins, and the other firmly clasped on Rusty's bridle as the pony ambled next to her with Dori on his back.

She had an uneasy feeling. Most of the doorways were empty of doors, and empty too of people, sludge and refuse from the floods clogging the road and making the way down treacherous for the horses, though not too bad for their riders.

Xena was moving along with Iolaus a horse length in front of her, casually shoving aside the larger pieces of debris to clear the way.

She had her leathers on, and her armor over them and Gabrielle was idly enjoying the distinctive

swagger they gave her partner as they moved down the slope.

They were alone heading down. The rest of their group, the Amazons, and Forest dwellers had kept their horses in stables nearer to the gates of the city, so they'd taken their gear and headed up to meet them, agreeing to gather just in front of the main entrance.

That left her, and Xena and Dori to lead their horses down from the inn, in a cone of somewhat prickly silence.

Prickly, because there was something creepy about the path. Maybe it was the blood stains they'd passed over, or the emptiness of the street.

Gabrielle wished she had a hand free for her staff. The spot between her shoulderblades was burning as though unfriendly eyes were poking her there.

"Mama." Dori broke the silence. "Wusty likes happles."

"Mm." Gabrielle nodded. "I know he does, honey. All the horsies like apples, right? Don't you have fun giving them to all your horsie friends at home?"

"Gogo."

"Especially Argo." The bard smiled, as she saw Xena's head half turn towards them. "Argo loves apples. You want me to tell you a story about how I found that out?"

"Yes!"

Xena started chuckling. "I remember that story."

"I bet you do." Gabrielle heard the warm tones enter her voice. She remembered it well herself, that long ago day far off now when the discovery had led her to try an apple filled pastry on Argo's rider with equally spectacular results.

Xena licked her lips, and gave her a wink.

"So one day, Xena and I were walking along the road." Gabrielle told her daughter. "And it was a really really really hot day."

"Really hot." Xena agreed. "So hot I tricked your mama into taking her clothes off and going in the water naked for me."

"Tricked?"

Xena grinned. Then she cleared her throat. "Hey Gabrielle.. go in there and get under those branches. I'll cut the apples down with the chakram." She mimicked herself of the time. "I'm tired of rabbit."

Gabrielle chuckled.

"Tricked mama?" Dori looked puzzled. "Mama likes fishes."

"I dind't always." Gabrielle told Dori. "Did you know your Boo taught me how to swim, just like she taught you how to swim?" She glanced ahead, glad they were almost at the bottom of the hill. She could see a bit of the road down below and the sound of hammering rang out in the still air. "So anyway, we were walking down the road on that really hot day when your Boo spotted some apples high up in a tree, right near the top."

"Go climb." Dori said promptly.

"Well, the problem was, there was a big flood" Gabrielle demurred. "And the branches of the tree were out over the water, and the water was very very deep."

“And your mama, naked in the sun there was very very beautiful.”

Gabrielle glanced over at Xena who had paused, waiting for her to catch up. She could see those eyes watching her, an expression of indulgence on her face. “C'mon, Xe.”

“Cmon nothing. You were.” Xena waited, then started forward as they reached the bottom of the hill and emerged into the sunlight at the base of the broad avenue running down to the pier.

Running down now, right into the water not two horse lengths from where they were standing. A ramp going right into the gray green water, which lapped at the cobblestones.

“I remember watching you coming back out of the water with all those apples and thinking... Xena, it's too damn bad you're too damn old for that kid.” The warrior led the way up the avenue. “Cause she's adorable.”

“Mama, where's the story?” Dori frowned.

“Your Boo stole it.” Gabrielle said. “Just like she stole my heart when I met her.” She came to walk side by side with her partner. “I know I've said this before, but you were never too old for me, Xena. I'm glad you gave me a chance to grow up though.”

Xena smiled. She looked around, seeing the empty streets on either side. “Quiet.”

Gabrielle shaded her eyes. “Not up there.” She pointed at the top of the road, where it evened out and spread into the big central square of the city. A crowd was up there, the edge of it visible to them as they continued to climb.

“You're right about that.” Xena frowned. “What's going on up there I wonder.”

“Trouble?” Gabrielle knotted Shadows reins around her wrist and reached for her staff. “Cmon, people. Let's not start this stuff now.”

“Bad mens, mama?” Dori was watching her unstrap her staff.

“Just stay up on Rusty, honey.” Gabrielle watched Xena loosen her sword in its sheath and check for her chakram. “It may not be bad men. Maybe they're having a party.”

Xena looked at her. Gabrielle shrugged. “You never know.”

As they got closer, it became apparent that there was some sort of excitement going on, and instinctively Gabrielle drew herself and by extension Rusty and Dori closer to Xena as they came up to the top of the slope and moved into the square.

Up this high on the hill, there was little sign of water damage. Only the mud remnant in in the cobblestones, and the disarray of the blockades and wagons that had fenced in the Spartans.

The city gates stood wide open, and as Xena straightened to her full height she could see a group of sodden, unhappy looking men sitting in a cluster outside. She spotted her own militia near the gates, appearing nothing more than curious.

“Huh.”

“What's gong on?” Gabrielle resisted the urge to mount Shadow so she could see better.

“Not sure.” Xena started edging her way through the crowd. “Excuse me.” She tapped a man on the back. He turned with an annoyed expression, but quickly ducked out of the way when he realized who it was.

He pushed his neighbor aside, and pointed, and a path opened up in front of the warrior with alacrity. Xena led Iolaus through it, motioning Gabrielle to follow her. “Stay close.”

“As a tick.” Gabrielle returned her staff to its holders and took a good hold on Rusty's bridle as

she made her way through the crowd behind her partner. Halfway to the center, the crowd stirred and Jens eased into the opening, holding a hand up.

“Jens.” The bard glanced after Xena. “What’s up? Didn’t know where you guys went.”

“We got conscripted. “ Jens made a face. “Recovering the treasures of the city with Denius. But then we heard what was going on up here so we came up to see.” He turned and walked with Gabrielle. “Incredible, huh?”

“What is?” Gabrielle said. “We just got here, I’m not sure w..” She paused as they reached the edge of the crowd and emerged, to find Xena standing in an open space with at least a dozen of the city elders, facing a bedraggled figure.

Xena half turned as Gabrielle came up next to her. “Seems like we’re not the only ones who were affected by the waves.”

Gabrielle, blinked, recognizing the Spartan commander.

“It’s just as you said, Xena.” The city elder spoke up. “You said they wouldn’t be able to come back and attack us, and you were right!”

The rest of the elders murmured, and nodded, and gave Xena very approving looks. “And warned us all.” Another said. “Xena, we owe you much.”

Gabrielle’s eyebrows twitched.

“You were right not to trust us.” The Spartan commander addressed Xena. “We weren’t more than a league out of port, when the ship captains made it up to come back in the night, and attack.” He looked like he’d been run through a pestle. “I argued, but could only get my own captain to stand off. We took our ship to the north while the rest went to the south, and then.. “

“And then Posiedon smashed them to bits against the cliffs!” Denius shoved his way through the crowd. “We have seen the debris! At last, the gods spoke truly in our favor.” He spotted Xena. “You spoke truly, Xena.”

“Oh boy.” Gabrielle muttered under her breath.

The Spartan commander nodded. “We were saved, by our sheltered position beyond the point. The rest are nothing but splinters. Our force is lost, and my word is perjured.”

Xena was a bit bemused by this unexpected ending. “It’s not your fault they were idiots.” She told the man, but he held up a hand and she fell silent.

“I was their leader.” He said, looking Xena in the eye. “It was my fault, Xena, just as it would have been yours had we been attacked while we moved through this city.”

Xena studied him, then she nodded. “You’re right.” She said, “But you turned the ones you could touch.” She saw Jessan and his warriors join the militia near the wall. “Why come back here?”

“Where else would we go?” The man said. “To go back to Sparta would mean our death. To stand in the way of the Athens navy, would be our death. So we came here, and hoped if we threw down our arms we could stay here.”

“Here?” Denius sounded startled. “In the city?” He looked at the elders, then out at the group of men seated outside. “But... “

“We are just soldiers.” The man said. “Most of us are veterans. I see many such here, who thought to retire. After this fight... it’s the best of what’s left to us.”

“Hm.” The elder looked thoughtful. “You would fight for us?”

“If needed.” The commander said. “But we would hope to live simply.”

Denius nodded to himself, watching the man.

Gabrielle eased forward, handing Rusty's reins over to her partner. "Hang on to this." She went up to the Spartan commander and studied his face. He was grizzled, and old, and she could see the weariness in his eyes.

He was, she thought, an honest man. "Are there still Spartan forces here in the city hiding?" She asked, in a quiet, steady voice.

Xena merely watched, moving over to put her arm around Rusty's neck much to Dori's delight.

The Spartan met her eyes. "Yes."

A little reaction ran through the crowd and they started muttering. Denius put his hands on his hips. "So. Not so very honorable after all."

"They were not my men." The Spartan replied, lifting his hands and letting them drop. "They were led by some of our younger captains, who thought they were being directed by Artemis. At least, that's what they were told." He half shrugged. "Yes I knew about them. They were not part of our bargain though, now were they Xena?" He looked at the warrior. "We spoke only of the men I led."

"That's true." Xena admitted.

"So are you coming back here, asking to be let in – so you can find and lead them and attack people?" Gabrielle asked. "After all, we're just the enemy, aren't we?"

Denius looked at Gabrielle, his head tilted a little to one side, his expression a little surprised.

"I kept my word." The Spartan said, stiffly. "You saw it."

"You kept the letter of your word." Gabrielle stared evenly at him. "But you knew there was still a force here. Maybe you were hoping they'd break out when you came into the city, and start attacking us."

"But they didn't."

"No, they didn't." The bard said. "Because Xena and Hercules were here, and they were afraid." She took a step back. "But what happens when we leave? When it's just the city, and you, and those cowards hiding in the streets?"

The Spartans face twitched. "Nothing will happen. We wish to stop fighting."

"That's not true." Gabrielle took a step closer to him. "I know it's not true, because you're afraid right now. I just insulted you, and insulted your culture and you won't make one move towards me because Xena's there and you know she'll take your head off."

The crowd was silent, watching and listening to the bard in fascination. Denius folded his arms over his chest, and shook his head.

Gabrielle turned her head towards her partner. "I say kick them out, Xe." She said. "I wonder if they split off and were lucky, or if they were just lucky."

The Spartan lunged and Xena's sword whistled out at the same moment, his forward motion stopped cold as the flat of her blade smacked him in the face in a backswing that continued and threw him over onto his back on the muddy cobblestones.

Gabrielle hadn't even twitched. The sword, in fact, had passed over her head and stirred the pale hairs at the top of it. "On second thought." She glanced over at Denius and Jens. "Maybe you should keep them locked up and turn them over to the Athens Navy when they get here?"

Denius nodded, his lips twitching into a reluctant smile. "They will make valuable hostages." He

agreed. "Perhaps enough to rebuild the waterfront."

Jens was also nodding. "That's more like it." He agreed. "I will take responsibility for them, Xena." He addressed the warrior. "We will ransom them." He and one of his lieutenants went over and grabbed hold of the Spartan.

Xena studied the fallen man, feeling more than a touch disappointed. She had liked him. Her eyes shifted to Gabrielle's, as the bard watched her. But Gabrielle had seen the truth of it, lacking the sympathy she felt for another old campaigner like herself.

She'd acted like an Amazon queen, matter of fact. Able to make judgments. Fearless. Confident. As Xena studied her partner's face, she saw the quick wink and the twinkle appear in those eyes, and the tiny tip of the bard's tongue as she stuck it out at her.

And as ever, essentially Gabrielle.

"That's settled then." Xena said. "I think it's a good plan. Spartans will pay good coin for them regardless just to find out what really happened here." She gave Denius a shrewd look, and he nodded, his lips pursed together. "So we'll be getting out of your way now, and heading home."

Ephiny and Eponin pushed their way through the crowd and ended up at Gabrielle's side. "Nice one." Ephiny whispered in her ear. "I didn't figure that guy like that."

"Me either." Pony muttered.

"Xena, won't you stay a while as a guest of the city?" Denius asked. "You really did allow us all to escape the danger."

"Not all." Gabrielle interrupted gently. "People died here."

Denius looked at her. "No one that mattered." He said, bluntly. "Only the dregs. We're better off without them. In fact, the whole city seems cleansed."

Gabrielle's whole body twitched into motion and then stilled, as Xena's hand settled on her shoulder. The cold anger she felt made her want to kick Denius, but the pressure against her skin was definite and precise, and she understood the signal.

No words needed. She didn't even have to look up at her partner. She sensed Pony and Ephiny close in though, and if she glanced to her right, she knew she'd see Pony's hand on her sword hilt.

"Denius." Xena said. "We're leaving. Thanks, but no thanks. I used to be one of those dregs, and frankly, I'd rather help them, than you." She let out a whistle. "Let's go people." Her eyes flicked to the city elders. "Good luck."

They moved past them, joining the militia and Jessan's group at the gates, and moving through them. Xena glanced at the group of Spartans as they went past. They were all just slumped together, visibly exhausted, and many had injuries. "They definitely were in a shipwreck." She commented.

"Yeah, I think that's true." Gabrielle agreed. "Those waves were real."

The men didn't even look up as they passed, or react as Jens led a group of the city guard out to take them into custody. They staggered to their feet and allowed themselves to be pushed along with no resistance.

"Xe?" Gabrielle studied them.

"Mm?" The warrior was adjusting her sword sheath.

"Was I wrong about that guy? Those people look all in. Maybe it was what they said." Gabrielle

found herself swamped by a wave of self doubt suddenly. "I just thought for sure they knew something when he admitted he knew Spartans were still in the city."

"Hmm." Xena rumbled under her breath. "You could be, but I wouldn't bet on it."

"You think they'll really be able to ransom them?" Gabrielle mused.

Xena rested her hands on Iolaus' saddle. "I think it's going to be a toss up who ends up ransoming who." She replied cryptically. "But it's not our issue."

Gabrielle looked intently at her, then she slid one arm around Xena and gave her a quick hug.

The group gathered around Xena, who was still on foot. They waited for the soldiers to retreat back into the city, then everyone sort of took a breath, and looked at each other.

It was midday. Xena tilted her head back and regarded the sun. "We've got about four hours riding, and then we can take a break." She pulled herself up into Io's saddle. "Let's move people."

"Go go!" Dori agreed, as they milled around, and got ready to ride off. "Go Go go!"

**

Concluded in Part 31

A Queen's Tale

Part 31

Gabrielle felt the rays of the western slanting sun warm her shoulder blades as she guided Shadow after Xena's lead along a hedge covered ridge. "Careful, Dori. Stay on that side of me, okay?"

Dori was seated on Rusty's back, looking supremely happy. She had the pony's reins clutched in her fingers, and was rambling along at her mother's side, the breeze off the water blowing her dark hair back. "Mama! Look!" She pointed up. "Birdie!"

Gabrielle tipped her head back and regarded the bird soaring overhead. "It's a seagull." She noted. "Let's hope he doesn't decide to make a mess on us like last time."

"Not unless he wants to be dinner." Xena called back over her shoulder, her free hand dropping casually to rest on her boot knife.

"Oh, hon, no." Gabrielle grimaced. "They don't taste good." She said. "Even their feathers smell bad."

Xena chuckled.

They were riding along a relatively steep ridge that overlooked the sea, the city of Thema already far behind them. Their little army was spread out behind their leaders, riding in twos and threes, bodies easy in the saddle as they made their leisurely way along.

No one was in a rush. The pace was steady, but relaxed. There was an attitude of shadows left behind, and a profound content to be headed into the setting sun, heading home.

Gabrielle was glad they were on the move. There had been an undercurrent in the city as they left that had been a little disturbing to her, and though it felt in a sense that they were dodging some consequences, she was in a place where she really didn't care.

They'd left the Athenian soldiers behind. Jens had said he'd wait for the Athenian Navy, and get a

ride home from them once they arrived. He also promised Xena he'd make sure the real story was told to those who had reason to care about it.

Gabrielle hoped he would keep his word. She liked Jens, but she knew clearly where his loyalties were laid, just as he was sure of hers.

Eh. It would be what it would be. "Hey Xe?"

Xena reined in Iolaus, and half turned, looking inquiringly back at her.

The bard guided her horse up next to her partners. "Where do you want to stop for tonight? You're not thinking of riding after dark are you?"

"Nah." Xena eased Iolaus forward. "See where the hill slopes down up there?" She indicated some distance ahead. "We'll go down and camp on the beach."

"Boo, we go fishes?" Dori was riding up near Iolaus' head. "Hungry!"

"Soon, shortie." Xena smiled indulgently at her. "You having fun there with your buddy?"

Dori reached forward and patted Rusty on the neck. "Good boy!"

The pony arched his head around and regarded her with a look of equine amusement. He flicked his shaggy ears and wiggled his nose, reaching down to nibble a bit of the rough sea grass they were riding through.

"Is the beach safe?" Gabrielle lowered her voice. "What if those waves come back?"

"It's a sheltered cove." The warrior shrugged off the danger. "The coast curls around there, see?" She pointed along the edge of the rocks. "There."

"Oh, wait, yeah." Gabrielle stood a little in her stirrups. "Okay, looks good, Boo. Let's go to fishes." She turned and waved the group forward. "Up there, guys. That's camp for the night."

Ephiny waved back at her. "Lead on."

Gabrielle took that at face value, and tightened her knees, prodding Shadow forward on the trail. A quarter candlemark later she was starting down a gentle slope towards the promised sheltered beach, seawater lapping very sedately at its shores.

The sandy area was wide, and it butted up against a cliff that extended down the coast, with only the small slope they were on giving easy access to it. Gabrielle could already see the darkened recesses of caves promising shelter, and she drew in a breath and exhaled, feeling a certain tension relax.

End of the day. She slowed her pace as she approached the water, eventually pulling Shadow to a halt as she spotted an ash stained circle of coral apparently long used as a firepit. "Looks like we're not the first here."

"No." Xena slid down off Io's back and caught Rusty's bridle. "This spot okay with you, Doriana?"

"Boo! Fishes!" Dori jumped off her pony's back and raced towards the water. "Gogogogogogo!" She pattered into the gentle wash just a step ahead of her mother, who grabbed her and lifted her up just as a wave would have taken her head over heels. "Mama!" She complained. "No!"

"Hold on there little girl!" Gabrielle swung around with Dori in her arms and sloshed back out of the water. "Not yet you don't. We've got a lot of work to do before we play."

"Mama!" Dori protested vigorously, wiggling her body and legs and almost knocking her mother off balance. "Go fishes!!!!!"

The bard wrapped her arms around her child and continued on, aware of the lazily amused expression on her partner's face. "You could help" She gave Xena a pointed stare. "Boo."

Xena was leaning against Io's side. At the rebuke she pushed off the animal and held her arms out. "Gimme." She took Dori and cradled her, bouncing her up and down a little. "Didn't you hear your mama?" She asked the now giggling child. "Are you being a terror?"

Gabrielle bumped them both and circled them with her arms, giving them both a hug. She looked past Xena's shoulder to see the rest of the group settling down, picking one or the other of the small caves to put their gear in, talking in low tones.

The Amazons were gathering dried driftwood for the firepit. Jessan and his crew were gathering all the horses, and hobbling them. The militia were fanning out and setting a watch.

"Xe." Gabrielle leaned against her. "You know what?"

"What?"

"It's nice to have people."

"Eh?" Xena lifted Dori up onto her shoulders, where she settled happily, drumming her heels against the warrior's armor. "What are you talking about?"

Gabrielle turned her around and pointed. "People." She said. "We have people, Xena. The militia, the Amazons, our friends. Our family."

Xena cocked her head a trifle.

"I'm babbling, huh?" The bard steered her towards the last of the caves, a large opening that had the setting sun lighting it up in tones of gold and rust. "Okay never mind." They walked inside and found it to be a nice sandy cavern indeed, with some flat, water worn rocks to sit on and the scent of salt and dried seaweed in the air.

It was quiet, and had an air of wild peace about it. Gabrielle circled around, her wet boots rasping against the sand. The walls had a pleasing, striped pattern and she ran her hand over one, feeling the weather softened stone warm under her touch.

"I'll get our bags." Xena said, from behind her. "Dori's gonna help me. Right Dor?"

"Boo boo boo." Dori bounced a little on Xena's shoulders.

"Okay." The bard turned and regarded the space, her thoughts slowly moving from the disconnected dreaminess of imaging to the more practical matter of setting camp, and getting some dinner started. She edged out of the cave and walked over to the firepit, where Pony was making good progress in starting the driftwood aflame, her hands striking sparks into dried seaweed kindling that Cait was holding still.

Familiar faces. Familiar tasks. The bard paused and watched, smiling a little as Ephiny came up next to her. "It's going to be a pretty sunset." Gabrielle commented.

"You know, it's so nice to be out of that town, and out of that mess, I wouldn't care if it was overcast and snowing." Ephiny replied. "I swear I wouldn't."

Gabrielle chuckled.

"Its like this for you, isn't it?" The regent asked. "After all the stuff you get into?"

"Just a quiet night, and a pretty sunset, and life goes on?" Gabrielle folded her arms over her middle. "Yeah." She savored the warmth of the sunlight gilding her, and the softness of the sand under her soggy boots.

"Well, I sure appreciate it." Ephiny bumped her shoulder with her own. "All in all, job well done,

in my view.”

Gabrielle considered that. From the corner of her eye, she spotted Xena easing into her line of sight, and her attention focused on her partner, who was leaning casually against the rock, giving her a saucy, sexy look, her face cast half in shadows.

“Gabrielle?”

“Eh?” The bard jerked out of her bemused haze and turned her head towards her friend. “Sorry.” She apologized. “Long day, you know?”

Ephiny snorted, muffling a laugh. “Gabrielle, you know, you should watch yourself in a mirror when you look at Xena sometime.”

“Huh?” The bard blinked. “What are you talking about?”

“Gabrielle.” Ephiny gave her a despairing smile and rolled her eyes. “C’mon.”

The bard chuckled herself, glancing down and drawing a line in the sand with the toe of her boot. She could sense Xena’s eyes on her, and felt the flush of warm blood along her skin. “My heart’s a pretty open scroll.” She admitted. “Always has been.”

“Wish the rest of us had taken another road?” The regent teased her. “Don’t think I don’t know tall dark and dangerous is behind me making eyes at you.”

Gabrielle started laughing gently. She shook her head and exhaled, letting the salt breeze and the curls of smoke from the fire wash over her. “You know, it was a job well done, Eph. We did the right thing.”

“We did.” Ephiny agreed. “Felt right, you know?”

“Yes, I know.”

“Felt right, not fighting. That’s strange for an Amazon to say.” Ephiny went on. “But I was in that town, and listening to those people, and you know something? They were tired of it.”

Gabrielle cocked her head in question. “Tired?”

“Mm.” The regent crossed her arms around herself. “Tired of all the coming and going, the people heading out to Athens demanding things from them, the chance of attack.” She slowly shook her head. “One of the innkeepers there was talking to me before we left. Said at first, the war seemed exciting. They thought they’d have a lot of business from it.”

“Well, they probably did.” Gabrielle glanced aside as Xena came over, with Dori cradled in her arms. “Xe said the place was packed when she got here. No rooms to be had.”

“Yes.” Ephiny agreed. “They were, we had to practically buy straw place in the stables when we got here, and not just because we were wild and dirty women.”

“Jackasses.” Xena commented.

“Bothered those featherheads more than me.” The regent grunted. “Anyway, this guy said after the first rush, it just became a lot of people who felt they should get everything for free because they were going off to war.”

“Ah.”

“Lost their taste for it.” Ephiny summed up succinctly.

“Probably that’s when Ares went...” Gabrielle started to speak, then fell silent. “When he was with us in the valley.”

Ephiny glanced sideways at her. “You never did say what that whole thing was about.”

“Probably never will.” Gabrielle answered shortly. She was aware of her friends startled look. “Sorry.” She said, after a brief silence. “Just wasn’t something I want tell.” A warm touch appeared right across her lower back, fingers slipping with easy familiarity under her carved leather belt.

“It’s okay.” Ephiny bumped her again. “Pony’s just dying of curiosity and she wanted me to ask. She knows there had to be more to it that her and Gran sliding down a waterfall then ending up in the grass looking at the boots of the God of War.”

Gabrielle looked up and into her friends eyes. “She doesn’t want to know.” She said, quietly.

“Really?”

“Really.” Xena intoned, her low voice burring a little.

“Okay.” The regent acquiesced. “Consider the matter closed.” She said. “But maybe someday, when you and I are old grandmas sitting on a porch somewhere you’ll tell me.”

Gabrielle put a hand on her shoulder. “Eph, if you and I ever make old bones, I swear to you I will.”

The Amazon chuckled wryly, conceding the point. “C’mon over to my cave.” She invited. “I’ve got a half keg of nice cider to share with you.”

“Mama, fishes?” Dori batted her eyelashes at her mother. “Pwwwwweeeese?”

“I’ll take her.” Xena grinned tolerantly

“No, I’m half drenched already. You get those leathers wet you’ll be squeaking all night.” Gabrielle took Dori from her mildly startled partner’s arms and headed for the surf. “C’mon, Doriboo... let’s go swimming. See what we can catch for dinner.”

“Squeeeee!!”

Xena watched for a moment, her hands on her hips, then she glanced sideways at Ephiny. “Cider?”

“C’mon.” Ephiny led the way into the cavern the Amazons had chosen, the one next to the big one everyone had left for Xena and Gabrielle. There were bodies busy inside, Cait and Paladia were kneeling near the far wall, unpacking supplies, and the stragglers from the city who were intent on joining the Nation were bringing in waterskins.

Milena was with them, her lithe figure standing out in it’s mismatch of town clothes and half armor, picked up from soldiers in the fighting. She seemed quiet, and somewhat remote, but was exchanging some small talk with the other newcomers.

Everyone looked up as Ephiny and Xena entered, and most eyes remained on them at least furtively as they crossed the sand floor and settled down on a rock near the back of the cave. Xena stretched her long legs out and leaned back, as Cait brought over a couple of mugs.

“Gosh, I’m glad that’s over.” The young Amazon said. “Too many odd things, don’t you think?”

“Odd things.” Ephiny mused, taking the cup and sipping from it. “Thanks Cait.” She added, belatedly. “I’m glad it’s over too. Way too much excitement for these old bones.” She glanced at Xena. “Which I already have even if the love of your life doesn’t.”

Xena rolled her eyes and gave the regent a droll look. She took the cup from Cait and swirled it. “Thanks.” She said. “Siddown, Cait.” She patted the rock next to her.

Pleased though surprised, the girl complied.

“Didn’t mean to tick off her nibs.” Ephiny said, after a moment.

“You didn’t.” Xena shook her head. “She’s had a tough couple of days.”

Cait sat quietly, just sipping her cider.

“Her tough couple of days would be the death three times over for the rest of us, you realize.” Ephiny said. “Xena, go get her out of the water and put a real smile on her face for me, willya? I still feel like a dipshit for getting us all into this.”

The warrior crossed her legs and the ankles. “Give her a minute to grab some dinner.” She leaned back against the rock wall. “I can hear Dori squealing. Usually means she’s got hold of something.”

“She fishes?” Ephiny allowed the subject change, and smiled, watching Xena’s angular face crease into an easy grin. “Like you?”

“Just like me.” Xena’s grin deepened. She lifted her free hand and wiggled the fingers. “Gotcha!”

Ephiny started laughing.

“G’wan. Go watch.” The pride in Xena’s voice was unmistakable. “With any luck they’re doing it naked.”

Dead silence in the room. Everyone pretended not to look at anyone, then every looked at Ephiny. The regent drained her cup with theatric slowness and put it down on the rock.

Then she slapped her knees with her hands and stood up, letting her eyes roam around the cavern. After a fascinating moment of silence, she put her hands on her hips. “Would you all prove yourselves Amazons, grab your breasts and move if you really want to see?”

Everyone froze, except Xena, who dissolved into silent laughter, laying back against the rock and holding her stomach.

“Well???” Ephiny barked. “Are you Amazons or milkmaids!”

Pony entered the cavern at the moment, with a fish in one hand, and a fistful of seaweed in the other. She looked at the crowd, then at her partner. “Mmoooooo!”

A moment later the cavern was empty, except for Xena’s still laughing form, and Cait sitting quietly drinking her cider.

Xena’s chuckles wound down, and she remained where she was, looking up at the ceiling. “Crazy women.”

“They are a bit.” Cait agreed. “Do you like them?”

The warrior folded her hands over her stomach. “I like some of them.” She allowed. “I like Eph and Pony. Solari. Few of the others. Got some good people in the tribe.”

“Got some not so good ones too.” Cait said. “There are a lot of selfish, mean people around sometimes.”

Xena twiddled her thumbs. “I can be mean and selfish.” She said. “People do what they do, Cait. They want what’s best for them, at least what they think’s best.”

“So it’s all right they tried to hurt Gabrielle then?” Cait studied her supine companion.

“No.” The warrior said. “But that’s part of what the Amazons are. In their heads, they think they’re doing what’s best for them, and for the tribe.” She turned her head and looked at Cait. “I don’t like it, but I do understand it. So does Gabrielle.”

“Hm.” Cait frowned. “I do wish I’d been there when they tried that. Don’t you?”

Xena’s face took on a thoughtful expression. “Could have been the best thing to happen to both her and the tribe.” The warrior said, unexpectedly. “They’re used to thinking of her as a convenient front, and me as the danger behind the throne. Maybe now they realize she’s got teeth of her own.”

“They know she can fight, Xena.” Cait’s brow creased.

“Not what I meant.” The pale blue eyes regarded her. “I want them to be afraid of her. Not just of me.”

“Hm.” Cait pondered the idea. “I hadn’t thought of it quite that way.”

Xena smiled. “Gabrielle hasn’t either.” She conceded. “Yet.”

“Hm.”

**

From where she was, Gabrielle could see the arc of the sky, an inky black curtain shot through with vivid sparkling lights, safe and remote. There were voices all around her, clusters of friends and her family scattered around the cookfire and low laughter that tickled against her ears.

Solari was sitting next to Bennu and Paladia, throwing dice. Some of the militia were sparring lazily with each other near the water.

Jessan and his crew were sprawled in the warm sand, counting stars.

It was a pretty night. Gabrielle licked her lips, tasting a hint of the fish she’d caught for the common dinner fire, six big and very tasty monsters who ended up grilling very nicely. They’d had that, and some waybread along with Ephiny’s cider and she was pleasantly full and just a touch sleepy.

Tomorrow they would ride, and maybe end up in some nice meadow, amongst wild apple trees. Xena had mentioned such a spot, and casually said they should stay clear of towns just in case.

Just in case. The bard wiggled her toes. Just in case someone had their stories wrong, or old information. She had no intention of facing the treachery they’d found on the way to Thema. Better to go home the wild way, the back way, and wait for things to settle down.

The real story would percolate out from the port city, and even if it didn’t, Gabrielle was perfectly capable of spreading the story she wanted heard her own self.

After all, she was the Bard of Athens, wasn’t she? Gabrielle chuckled softly under her breath. Maybe when they were closer to Amphipolis, they’d stop in. Maybe at Potadeia, to let her family know everything was all right.

The thought of being home, of being in their cabin, surrounded by the wild forest was beginning to really appeal to her. That wasn’t unusual – usually when she was away from home she wanted to be there, it was only when she was there that she wanted to be somewhere else.

This felt a little bit different though. Gabrielle exhaled. She wanted to be on their porch, with a cup of mint tea in her hands, listening to the birds sing as the sun rose. Hearing the soft patter of leaves overhead.

She wanted to finish some of the things she’d started. Maybe put some long range plans into work.

How to reconcile this wanting with the equally deep need she thought she had for seeing new

things? The bard stared quietly into the fire. Did that wandering urge mean more to her than Doris's need to be with her friends?

More than Xena's need to be the queen of her mountain? The bard's lips twitched faintly. Was it worth the risk they both took exposing themselves to every dark force they found on the road?

What was life worth, really? Especially if you knew what death was like?

The fire snapped and sent sparks skyward, and she idly followed them with her eyes, which opened a little wider when a trickle of warm breath stirred her nape hairs.

Xena settled into the sand behind her, draping an arm casually over her stomach. "Dor's finally asleep."

"After you let her ride that pony again or not?" Gabrielle dropped her head back against her partner's shoulder. "I thought I heard little pocky hoofbeats."

"You did." Xena confirmed.

"Sucker."

Xena tilted her head forward and caught her partner's earlobe in her teeth, then she gently suckled on it, eliciting a faint subvocal sound from the bard. Gabrielle's body relaxed against her in a rush of warm contact.

"Mind if I ask you a question?" Xena leaned on one arm, nibbling the edge of Gabrielle's ear.

"Nuh uh."

"How come you let the kid come back with us?"

Gabrielle shifted a little, lining her sight to match her partners. "You mean Milena?"

"Uh huh."

Gabrielle thought about that. She could see Milena across the firepit, sitting with some of the new recruits. She'd gotten out of her mish mash of armor and was just in a light tunic, looking slight and pale against the weatherworn Amazons next to her.

Cute kid. The bard studied her. A beautiful face, and a lithe body that promised strength. "Well, I could just say it's because she asked." She laid her hand over Xena's. "Seems like a lost sort of soul. Maybe she'll find what she's looking for with the tribe."

"I know what she's looking for. So do you." The warrior pointed out.

"Mm." A sweet smile crossed Gabrielle's face. "I think maybe the truth is I wanted to mark how far we've come... well, I've come really... to where all I can feel is sorry for her."

"Could be annoying as Hades for me."

Gabrielle glanced over her shoulder, watching the flame's shadows flicker over her partner's face. "Xe, I never thought you minded people lusting after you." She said. "Do you?"

A smile slowly appeared. "Nah." Xena's lashes flickered as she blinked a few times. "I just don't have much taste for kicking lovesick kids out of my way anymore."

One of Gabrielle's very pale eyebrows lifted sharply, then after a brief pause, she grinned.

Xena blew gently in her ear.

"Do you want me to tell her not to come?" The bard asked, in a serious tone. "People who annoy you sometimes end up regretting it." She said. "In a permanent sort of way."

Xena didn't even so much as flinch. "Now that." She disengaged her hand and lifted it, riffling through Gabrielle's hair. "Should tell you just how far we've come, you and I." She let her hand slide down and cup the bard's cheek, then she leaned forward and kissed her.

Ahhh. Gabrielle half turned, letting her hand drop onto Xena's hip as she leaned into the pressure, savoring the passion of it. She took a breath and looked up as they parted a little, seeing the look of gentle humor in her soulmate's eye. "I love you."

"I love you too." Xena touched her nose to Gabrielle's. "Let's go continue this discussion on our bedroll." She got to her feet and pulled the bard up with her, giving the others around the fire a casual wave. "G'night folks."

They left the circle of firelight and crossed the sand to their rocky haven, into a cozy darkness broken only by the camp light fluttering in one corner.

**"She sure aint a shy village kid anymore, huh?" Pony crossed her booted legs and tipped her mug in the direction of their departing leaders.

"Hasn't been for a while." Ephiny gazed fondly after them. They were heading off to their cave hand in hand, for once completely unselfconscious, and the campfire outlined them in crimson shadows as they wound their way through the crowd. "I think I'm liking her more and more every day, Pon. "

"She did great on the way to the city, according to the kids and Soli." Eponin said. "She even told Fuzzy to off one of the guys that tried to ambush them in the woods near home."

"She knows." Ephiny responded. "She's got it in her. I knew it when she went after that bitch in the war. You remember?"

Heads were leaning closer to them, and Ephiny had noticed. The new recruits, and Milena in particular had edged over to listen.

"Sure I remember." Pony held up her end, her golden eyes shifting to the listeners and back to her partner's face in a mere flicker of motion. "Who could forget that? She led us to where they had Xena like they'd painted a big red stripe right across the ground."

"Who had Xena?" Milena asked, glancing to either side of her as two of the other newcomers shifted closer. "You don't mean she was captured do you?"

Ephiny took a sip from her mug and eyed the girl. "Matter of fact, she was." The regent said. "During the war with Andreas. There was an ambush."

"Xena went out to draw them out. She knew it was coming." Pony put a different slant on it. "She knew they were after her, and she wanted to find out what was going on with Andreas army."

Ephiny nodded. "She didn't want any of us to risk it so she did. And they got her."

"Oh." Milena muttered.

"We didn't know where they took her." Pony said. "But Gabrielle did."

"They seem pretty close." One of the newcomers said. "Doesn't seem posed."

Eponin and Ephiny exchanged looks. "Posed?" Pony queried.

"You know what I mean." The woman said. "You guys have been around. Sometimes it's all a game, you know?"

Ephiny studied her for a minute, then she nodded. "I know what you mean." She said. "We had something like that way back when." She took a sip of her cider. "Sometimes, a queen will pick a consort strictly for how they fight." She explained to Milena. "They want someone to answer

challenges for them.”

“Yeah.” The stranger Amazon nodded. “Our queen was like that. No love lost there.”

“Challenges?” Milena watched Ephiny’s face closely. “What is that?”

Oh kid. “Sometimes, an Amazon will decide they can do a better job running the tribe than the person who carries the right. So they challenge them for it.” Ephiny said, evenly. “They fight.” She clarified. “Sometimes, to the death.”

“Really?” Milena’s face twitched a little. “So Xena fights for her?”

“Not always.” Solari spoke up from her shadowed corner. “Gabrielle can kick ass all on her own. I seen her do it.” She leaned forward and circled her knees with both arms. “I’d welcome her at my back anyday.”

“Xena welcomes her at her back.” Pony said. “That about says it, y’know?”

“Well.” One of the recruits shrugged. “No diss on her for having someone to fight on her behalf. Lots of queens do that in our part of the world. Sort of a business thing.”

“That ain’t what it’s like here.” Pony said. “Xena and Gabrielle are tight.”

“Wouldn’t blame her for picking Xena.” The Amazon said. “She’s pretty kickass. I saw her taking out those soldiers up on the hill. I’ve never seen anyone fight like that before.”

“You won’t.” Pony smiled. “Xena’s one of a kind.”

“Until Dori grows up.” Ephiny said. “Big X better keep her sword sharp. She’s the only one who’s going to be able to spar with that kid I’ll tell you that.” She paused, then a faint smile touched her lips. “Though her mama’s no slouch either.”

A silence fell. Ephiny waited it out, watching their new recruits as they puzzled through her words and wanting to know which one of them would have the guts to ask.

“So.” Milena cleared her throat. “Xena’s not her mother? Looks just like her.”

“Well.” Ephiny twiddled her thumbs. “Gabrielle carried Dori and gave birth to her.” She said. “But they’re both her mothers.”

“Xena adopted her you mean.” One of the recruits said. “You make that official really? We never did.” She glanced at her companions. “The kids just became children of the tribe but yeah, she’s right. The kid looks just like her. They find a guy like that for it?”

“No. That’s not what I mean.” The regent responded. “Dori has two mothers. She’s Xena’s kid as much as she is the Queen’s. There was no guy involved.”

Silence.

“Cool, huh?” Pony finally broke it. “Like I said, they’re tight, you know?”

Silence.

“So anyway, back to that story about the war.” Ephiny said. “There we were, Xena’s missing, and the next thing I know...”

Solari sat back to listen, keeping her eye on the newcomers and especially Milena. There was a sharpness in her expression that rang a warning, She had seen the kid watch Xena earlier, and Solari was more than experienced enough to know a lustful glom when she saw one.

No penalty for that. Lots of people she knew wanted to jump into the sack with either their queen or her consort, or both. But the kid had a sneaky look Solari just didn’t like.

A quick shift of her eyes showed Pony also watching, her honey colored eyes narrowed.

Might be trouble. Like they didn't already have enough of that waiting back home? Solari wondered if bringing in new, and smartass blood was a good idea right at the moment.

She watched Milena turn her head slightly, watching the two shadowy figures standing outside the last cave. Xena and Gabrielle had paused to watch the moon rise, the warrior's arm draped casually over her shorter companion's shoulders.

Gabrielle circled Xena with her arms, and leaned against her, the silent happiness visible even in the low light.

It made Solari smile. But she noticed some others who definitely didn't.

**

Inside the cave Gabrielle could hear the surf still, but the omnipresent wind was cut off, and they both walked together to the furs spread out just to the outside of where Dori's folding bed was and settled down on them.

Gabrielle rolled over onto her back and wriggled her butt a little into the sand, which was more than deep enough to make a comfortable bed for them. It was nice to be quiet, and alone and she savored the soft rustle as Xena stretched herself out next to her, the warrior's long, bare legs extending just past her vision. "So."

"So." Xena reached over and unbuckled her belt. "Where was I?"

Gabrielle turned on her side, and plucked at the laces holding Xena's leathers on. She watched the surface under the hide move as the warrior took a breath, and released it. "Seriously Xe. You want me to tell the kid to take a hike?"

"Nah." Xena shrugged. "I don't care."

Gabrielle studied the candlelit face across from her. After a moment, Xena's lashes fluttered, and she looked up as their eyes met.

Clear depths. The blood burnished soul in them so profoundly evident.

Gabrielle tangled her fingers in the leather laces and tugged, seeing the smile appear on her partner's face. "Eh. If she messes with you, I'll kick her butt."

Xena chuckled, and resumed her removal of Gabrielle's clothing. The scant fabric still held the scent of the sea, and she watched a faint trail of goosebumps appear on the bard's belly as she slid her fingers under the belt and pulled it free. "Cold?"

She eased over and nibbled the soft skin around Gabrielle's navel, glancing up mischievously as she felt the bard's ribs expand outwards as she drew in a quick, short breath. "Hm?"

Her partner's eyes were half shut, and her nostrils were flared a little. "No." Gabrielle responded, clearing her throat a little. She was propped up on her elbows watching and as Xena resumed her nibbling, she let her head drop back, then settled down onto the furs as her hands reached out to respond to Xena's touch.

With a slight pouncing motion, Xena got both arms planted on either side of her willing victim and slid a thigh between Gabrielle's. She bit the lacing holding the bard's top on and tore it free, then delicately catching the edge of the fabric in her teeth and moving it aside.

Gabrielle's eyes closed. Her hands eased the loosened leathers down Xena's body as the warrior moved upward.

Xena continued her exploration, putting gentle pressure with her thigh as she felt Gabrielle push back against her, the bard's touch caressing her skin as she caught one of her nipples in her teeth and teased it.

She could feel the surge of passion through their connection and it set her guts on fire.

They fed off each other like that. It made it more intense and far more personal somehow, and Xena felt her own breathing speed up as Gabrielle's did, and the bard's hands cupped her breasts in reciprocation.

"I love you." Gabrielle breathed the words into her ear. "More than life."

Xena smiled, her eyes closing, savoring the literal truth of the words. "And I love you." She eased forward and kissed Gabrielle on the lips. "More than living forever."

She felt Gabrielle's lips move under hers, stretching into a distinct smile. Xena lifted her head a little and looked down into her partner's eyes, finding them open and waiting, the look of complete joy in them making her catch her breath.

So incredible, with all the darkness she lived with, to be able to produce that gorgeous spark of light. Xena returned the smile, then she ducked her head to kiss Gabrielle's lips again, almost lurching forward in surprise when the bard's arms wrapped around her and hugged her so hard it almost pulled her over.

The bard's head pushed into her neck, and Xena felt her body jerk and realized she was crying. She wasn't sure what was happening, but she returned the hug, folding her arms around Gabrielle's body and pulling her close.

She couldn't feel unhappiness from her. Not grief, or anger either. Only joy, and so she wondered if it was true that you could just want to cry from that.

She never had. Xena rocked them both a little. In the most joyful moments of her admittedly dark life, she'd often passed out cold. Was that better than crying?

"Oh." Gabrielle drew a shaky breath. "Sorry."

"You okay?" Xena asked, cautiously.

The bard drew in another breath, sliding her hand up to clasp Xena's shoulder. She squeezed it. "I'm okay. I'm just..." She sniffled a little, then exhaled. "Sorry. I can't believe I did that."

Xena cradled her gently, as Gabrielle relaxed in an almost boneless way against her. "It's all right." She said. "Feel better now?"

Gabrielle cleared her throat a bit. "I wasn't feeling bad before." She muttered. "As a matter of fact." She rubbed her face, then left her hand there, shading her eyes.

"But?" Xena felt the deep breath, and the slowly deliberate exhale.

The bard shifted, her hand coming to rest against Xena's collarbone. "You know, Xena... it just struck me that ever since the day we met, something in me was waiting for the other shoe to drop."

Xena's brow creased sharply. She paused, then tentatively stroked Gabrielle's head. "We've had a lot of things drop on us." She ventured. "But what brought that up?"

Gabrielle remained silent for a long moment. "That something I just realized.. " She got out, then stopped again. "That I... that you..." She stopped again.

Xena studied the bent head tucked against her chest. "You finally realized I'm really never going to leave you?" She asked, in a gentle voice.

The bard started crying again.

Now Xena did too, a few, quiet tears that slipped down her cheeks, to slide unnoticed into Gabrielle's pale hair. She wasn't sure if it was sadness or joy. Sadness that her soulmate had hidden that fear deep inside for so long, or joy that she'd finally figured out a way to allay it.

Maybe it was just relief.

Maybe she'd been waiting for that other shoe too.

Or maybe they were both just exhausted after a long couple of days.

Xena sighed. "You're stuck with me. Get used to it." She gently scratched Gabrielle's back with her fingertips. "Stuck with me forever, my friend. Like it or not."

The bard exhaled, the warmth of her breath tickling against bare skin. "I'm sorry, Xe."

"For what?" Her partner asked.

Gabrielle rubbed her face and sniffled. "I feel like such an idiot." She muttered. "How could that still have been stuck in there." She wiped her eyes with impatient fingers. "How far have we gone together? What haven't we done for each other by now, Xena? That I should still think.."

"But you don't." Xena interrupted gently. "Isn't that what you just said?"

"But I did."

"But now you don't."

Gabrielle sighed. "Xena."

"I know." Her partner rested her head against the bard's. "Everyone always thought you were thelovestruck, self sacrificing one of us." She paused, and reflected. "No one ever expected me to be capable of anything like that. Even you."

Gabrielle went very still.

"Even me." Xena went on. "Never figured it." She tilted her head and looked at Gabrielle's shadowed profile. "I saw your face when I told them off up there."

Gabrielle leaned her head back and returned the look. "It happened too fast for me to even be scared." She said. "I didn't know what to say. Didn't know what I could say, that wouldn't sound so damn self centered it would embarrass both of us."

"Would you have begged me not to stay?"

"Absolutely." The bard answered without hesitation. "I would have cried my guts up at your feet." She rested her cheek against Xena's breast. "You know that."

"Mm." Her partner nodded. "I know. "

"That why you said no?"

Xena smiled, a little. "No." She gazed fondly at her soulmate.. "I said no because I didn't want to stay there." She watched Gabrielle watch her, a look of dreamy, complete openness on her face. "I said no because I knew it would separate us, and I didn't want that. I want to be with you."

Gabrielle smiled. Her expression lightened into one of contented happiness that lit her eyes from within and transformed her face.

Xena hugged her. "I should have told Zeus to kiss my ass a lot sooner."

Now the bard's body jerked with a completely different emotion. A muffled laugh emerged, and

Gabrielle took hold of one of her partner's hands and turned it over, kissing the palm with gentle passion.

"Now." Xena brushed the disheveled hair back off Gabrielle's forehead. "Where we we?"

"Before I lost my mind?" Gabrielle's lips twitched. "I was well on my way to being ravished by the most beautiful woman I know."

That got her one of Xena's full, happy, sexy grins.

"Thank you, Xena." Gabrielle said, in a more quiet, serious tone. "For blessing my life."

"Likewise." Her partner responded, in the same manner.

They regarded each other for a moment. Then Xena slowly rolled them both over on the furs, ending up pinning Gabrielle lightly down, braced on her elbows as she let her body slid up and over the bards. "Let's enjoy the moment."

"Let's enjoy all of them." Gabrielle reached up and cupped her face, drawing her down as their lips met and she arched her back, welcoming the heat as their bodies pressed together. "Every single one."

**

Gabrielle sat quietly with her back against the stone, her legs dangling off the boulder she was sitting on as she watched the sun rise and paint the water with tints of rose and gold. The cool breeze ruffled her hair and she rested her elbow against a bit of rock, feeling for the first time in a very long time a sense of personal contentment.

She was happy. Not with what she was doing, or where they were, or the future, or the past. She was just happy to be who she was, and she really wasn't used to that.

She had spent some time thinking after they'd finally sated each other, wrapped in Xena's arms as the warrior drifted off to sleep. About her life, and their future, and how some things now seemed to her to be different.

Maybe it was moving past the what ifs.

A soft crunch of boots against the sand caught her attention, and she turned her head to see Ephiny and Solari approaching. "Good morning." She greeted them with a smile.

"Morning, your maj." Solari returned the compliment. "You guys get a good night's sleep?"

Gabrielle grinned briefly. "Well, what sleep we got was good, yeah." She responded. "It was nice not to have either floods or battles or the odd Spartan disrupt us. "

"You said it." Ephiny leaned against the rocks next to her. "You must have been exhausted after all that stuff." She crossed her ankles. "I know I was, pregnant or not. Glad we're out of that place."

"Felt good just to chill." Solari agreed. "I was over all the creeps."

"Yeah, me too." Gabrielle said. "We'll stay along the coast for a while, then cut inland. We left a lot of debris in our wake on the way here."

Ephiny nodded. "The kids were telling me." She said. "We finally got around to sharing all the crap we've just been through last night over the rest of that cider." She grinned wryly. "Cait's so pissed off she missed your challenge and Paladia didn't."

Gabrielle returned the smile. "You know, I was trying to get inside those elder's heads and understand why they did what they did. But you know something Eph? There is no good reason. They really tried something that could have been very destructive for the tribe."

“Yes, they did.” Ephiny’s expression turned serious. “They need to be dealt with.”

“They will be.” The bard said. “Everyone wanted to use the Amazons for their own purposes in this war. Even the Amazons. It’s time they started becoming a people who can depend on each other instead of taking advantage.”

Ephiny cocked her head a little at her queen, blinking a little when Gabrielle turned her head and met her gaze directly. “You aiming to teach them how, Gabrielle?” She asked, after a moment’s silence.

“Maybe.” A twinkle entered Gabrielle’s eyes, and her face eased into a rakish grin. “Maybe instead of running off to some other place it’s time I tried to make the place I’m at better.”

Dori came running out before Ephiny could comment, the child completely naked with damp, disheveled hair. “Mama!” She held up something. “See what Boo made me!”

Gabrielle took the bit of driftwood, neatly carved into the shape of a seabird, and examined it. “That’s so pretty, Dor. Did you say thank you?” She set the bird down and picked Dori up, setting her on her lap. “Why are you running around with no clothes on? Did Boo forget to dress you?”

“Boo was tying her boots on.” Xena emerged from the cave in her leathers, her hair as damp as Dori’s. She leaned her arm against the rock and handed Gabrielle one of their daughters’ jumpers. “Someone didn’t feel like waiting.”

“That’s a very pretty bird you made.” Gabrielle traded the trinket for the jumper and started getting Dori into it. “Just like her birthmark.”

“Our birthmark.” Xena regarded Ephiny and Solari. “Morning.”

“Morning.” Solari grinned at her. “Did you make that last night?” She took the bird from Xena’s hand and looked at it. “Cool.” She glanced up at Xena. “You do all those little toys she has back home?”

Xena nodded. “Always been a hobby.” She admitted. “That’s how the whole damn thing with the horse started.”

“Yes. Xena carved her a pony.” Gabrielle ruffled her daughter’s hair affectionately. “And Dori decided she wanted a life size one, didn’t you?”

Dori grinned and bounced on her mother’s lap. “Go get Wusty, Mama! He c’n have breakfast with us.” She squiggled down off her perch and raced off, her small, bare feet kicking up little puffs of sand as she ran.

“Bet she can’t wait to show all her friends the little beast.” Ephiny said. “Toris’ boys will be green with envy.”

“Toris’ boys can’t ride any more than he can.” Xena said. “But yeah, she was just saying how she couldn’t wait to get home.”

“Me either.” Gabrielle spoke up. She took her partner’s hand and raised it, casually kissing the knuckles, then rubbing them against her cheek. “After this I really do want to get back there.”

“Make that three of us.” Ephiny leaned against the rocks. “What about you, Xena? Been a crazy couple of moons for you two.”

Xena put her hand on Gabrielle’s back. “We’ve got a lot ahead of us the next couple.” She said. “We need to make some changes around Amphipolis. I’m tired of sweating every time Athens burps.” She ran the edge of her thumb along the bard’s spine. “I can see some changes ahead.”

Gabrielle nodded, but she didn’t say anything.

Around them, the camp was stirring. Xena's militia were out and about, rebuilding the cookfire, and heading off towards a nearby stream with waterskins and folding buckets. One of Jessan's crew was wading into the sea, claws flexing as the sun painted his fur a pinkish russet.

The seagulls were wheeling overhead, and a bright, fresh breeze came off the sea, the tide lapping at the sand in tiny wavelets.

"Gonna be a nice day." Solari said.

Xena half turned and let out a whistle. "Candlemark, and we move out." She called over to the cookfire. "Get packing."

"Gen'l." Bennu raised his good hand in salute. "We go the coast road?"

"If that means fish for lunch, I'm all for it." Ephiny spoke up. "Those monsters you caught last night were fantastic, Gabrielle."

"Want to learn how to cook them next time?" The bard eased off the rock and flexed her hands, gently bumping against her partner. "We could get a head start on lessons."

The regent gave her a wry look, then smiled.

"Hey, I taught Xena to boil eggs the other moon." The bard announced. "She did a great job."

Several pairs of eyes swung to Xena, who smiled. "I promised her breakfast in bed for her birthday." The warrior said. "Something besides bread and cheese." She clarified.

"Hey I'm game." Solari said. "You gotta start somewhere right?"

Gabrielle chuckled. "I'm going to go get things packed up." She released Xena and the warrior started off in the direction of the horses. "Let's go people. Places to go, and things to see today."

**

They stopped at midday after a long, quiet ride to rest the horses and have some lunch. They had seen no other people on the way and now they were at the point where they would leave the coast and start heading inland again.

Gabrielle was standing in the shade of a scrubby tree, a waterskin in hand as she watched the waves come in and break against the rocky shoreline. After a minute she walked down and strolled along the beach, her eyes fastened on the ground.

"What's she up to?" Pony nodded in the queen's direction.

Ephiny was laying on her back in the grass, her ankles crossed. "Better not to wonder sometimes." She advised. "She's probably looking for rocks. That's where that kid gets it from y'know."

"Yeah." Pony stifled a yawn. "You don't see Xena carrying around bags of rocks."

No, Ephiny thought, you didn't see Xena doing that. She turned her head to look and found the subject in question standing nearby, Rusty's bridle firmly in hand. Dori was bouncing in the saddle looking like she was ready to take off again.

A pony. What had Xena been thinking?

Like the kid wasn't hard enough to catch and keep track of? She had to give her a damn pony? The regent shook her head. She hoped at least they would keep the critter in the barn down in town and not try to bring him up the mountain.

Knowing Dori she would want him in her bedroom.

**

Gabrielle walked along slowly, searching the ground. She spotted a bit of color and dodged a wave to skip over to it, bending down to pick up the seashell and taking a step back to examine it.

It was pretty and cone shaped, with a deep coral pink interior and orange stripes on the outside. She peered carefully the inside and waited, watching for any sign of life before attempting to stash it away.

She'd learned the hard way on that subject. There was no forgetting that smell after a long day in the hot sun.

She was around the corner of the rocks waiting for her treasure to dry when she heard the faint scuff of someone nearby. It wasn't Xena - and she didn't think it was Ephiny.

Friend? Or was it one of the newcomers with some other motive? After all, she and Xena had indirectly been responsible for their own queens death.

Friend? Enemy? Her hackles lifted and she felt that indescribable sense of warning that had developed so very slowly in her but now was distinct.

Enemy.

She set her body over it's center of balance and put the shell in her belt pouch, not really alarmed or worried. There were dozens of people nearby not to mention Xena and anyway she could take care of herself.

She'd proven that, hadn't she?

So she crossed her arms and waited, turning to face the direction the faint noises were coming from. After a pause, a figure came around the other side of the rocks and faced her.

Hera. Unexpected. Gabrielle felt her heart start to pound and she debated trying to simply escape by running. Should she call Xena? She felt her heart lurch and suspected she wouldn't have to.

A sense of the air compressing around her set off warning bells, and she felt a tingle against her skin.

"So. Mortal." The queen of the gods said. "Do not cry out. They cannot come aid you. Even your creature." She came to face Gabrielle and folded her hands, examining the bard as though she was some interesting insect.

"Why do you call her that?" No need to point out she needed no yell to alert her soulmate. "Its not her fault where she came from."

Hera approached her. "Because in my eyes these assignments are abomination. Do you know what that is? It is a corruption of our bloodlines and I will not have it.". She stopped within reach of Gabrielle. "Nothing against you, mortal. You have no blame in this."

"Don't I? I chose to love her." The bard said, feeling a layer of sweat start to appear along her spine.

"Did you?" Hera's eyes were cold, but there was a level of understanding there Gabrielle hadn't expected.

She took a breath. "What are you going to do?"

"Take that creature and the thing you have produced between you and remove them." Hera said, matter-of-factly. "I tolerate my husbands error because I must for his sake. But not them."

"Remove them?" She could barely get the words out.

"Send them to a place of nothing. They will see nothing, be nothing. Cease to exist so far as you understand it." Hera said.

"What happens to me?" Gabrielle put every ounce of effort she could in remaining calm.

Hera shrugged. "You may live out your mortal life as you see fit. As I said, I have no interest in you."

Gabrielle sat down on a rock. "So you are going to take away my family. My partner, and my child and leave me to live here without them?"

"I will remove this threat to my family's legacy, indeed." Hera said. "What you care to feel or do about it doesn't interest me. The only reason I am wasting my time telling you this is because I told my daughter I would. Now I have and so I will go finish this situation."

It was curious that again, she really felt no fear. Gabrielle got up and faced Hera. "You should care about what I will do. Was it Aphrodite? She knows." She put her hands on her hips. "You destroy my life, Hera, and I swear on the heart you're about to break I will bring down Olympus."

The queen of the gods stared at her.

"I will turn every being within the sound of my voice against you." Gabrielle took a step forward. "Just like I opened hearts for Xena I will travel to every point I can reach and show all of them this broken, piteous creature you are about to create and teach them to spurn you like they would a viper."

"Do you really think they would listen to you?"

Gabrielle swallowed a lump in her throat. "They'll listen to me." She said, her voice raspy. "They always have. Spilling my heart and soul out has always attracted a crowd."

Hera regarded her with a frosty expression. "I could just destroy you instead."

"The person I am will die either way."

Now, Hera's expression shifted to thoughtful. "So that was what my daughter meant. Your passions truly are the ruin of you mortals.."

Gabrielle lifted her head and looked the queen of the gods right in the eye. "They are." She admitted quietly. "But I feel sorry for you for not having them."

Then she let her hands drop to her sides and waited. She felt a warmth on her shoulders and though she knew it was the sun, the sudden emotion that went with it made her believe it was Xena's touch, and that she could feel her presence right behind her.

But this was her throw of the dice. Her sacrifice to make. Her threat. Her promise. And as she watched the goddess in front of her and saw the shift of her eyes, she knew this ancient force understood the truth of all of that.

There was both pity and anger in those frosty eyes.

"You would do well to keep your silence, mortal." Hera said. "Your threats are nothing to me. But it occurs to me that your creature might yet prove valuable to us. I will allow them to exist. For now."

And then she was gone.

Gabrielle felt her knees start to shake and she moved towards the rock to sit down but hadn't taken a step before she felt Xena's arms wrap around her. She exhaled and turned, lightheaded with relief.

"Damn." Xena uttered.

"How much did you hear?"

"All of it." Xena rested her cheek against Gabrielle's hair. "That took a lot of guts, my love."

"Ugh. Just glad she didn't call my bluff." Gabrielle buried her face into Xena's chest.

"Was it?"

The bard looked up and their eyes met. "No." She shook her head faintly. "It wasn't" She savored the hug that followed. "I think I just grew all the way up, Xe."

Xena hugged her again, then she wrapped her arm around the bard's back, steering her towards the path back to shore.

**

A seven-day later, they were heading up the river road, the bridge to Amphipolis in sight. It was late afternoon, and the sentries had already announced their presence, a set of strongly triumphant whistles that went flying up the water's path.

Home. Gabrielle stretched in her saddle, very glad to see the familiar outlines of the town ahead of them, along with the chance to get off Shadows back, and the prospect of a hot bath and a soft bed to come.

"Well guys." Jessan pulled up as they reached the fork that would either lead over to Amphipolis, or continue down around the mountain to the valley where his people made their home. "It's been fun."

Xena extended a hand to him. "Thanks Jess." She said. "I appreciate you guys taking the risk."

Jessan smiled his big, toothy grin and clasped her arm. "It was strange." He admitted. "I expected those people to freak out a lot more about us."

Xena had expected that too. "Maybe stories got out from the last war."

Jessan nodded. "Some of the guys in the town, those soldiers, they knew about us." He said. "Spartans did too."

"Really?" Gabrielle said.

The forest dweller nodded. "So it was okay." He said. "Maybe we'll take a chance again, travel around a little more." He leaned over and gave Gabrielle a hug. "Take care, little sister."

"You too, Jess." Gabrielle returned the hug. "Come visit us soon."

The forest dwellers moved on, heading away from them down the road that would swing around through the mountain pass and take them out of sight. Gabrielle watched them go, finding it strange and a little surreal to think that it had been so short a time before when she'd been running for her life down this very road.

"C'mon." Xena motioned the rest of the group ahead, a milling mixture of militia and Amazons, already looking forward to getting home.

As they approached the bridge, she could see a crowd gathering near the inn at the top of the slope, and Cyrene's familiar shape on the porch. "Look Dori, there's Grandma." Gabrielle pointed.

"Gramma!!!" Dori's eyes lit up. "C'n I go show her Wusty mama?" She asked. "And my friends?"

"Sure." Gabrielle judged the remaining distance, and decided not much harm could come of it. "Go on."

"Eeeeeee!" The child needed no further prodding. She took hold of Rusty's reins and booted the pony gently in the ribs. "Go Wusty! Go to grandma!"

The animal obliged, breaking into a canter as his rider aimed him across the bridge and up the slope. The crowd around the inn stirred, and from where she was perched on Iolaus' back Xenacould see her mother folding her hands in front of her in her best doting grandmother pose.

She'd never had a pony of her own. There hadn't been many in Amphipolis back then and most belonged to the better off merchants. She'd stolen rides not on them, but on the draft horses that worked in the fields when their owners weren't looking.

She'd graduated to a full size horse of her own at around the age of ten, when she'd stolen her one from some raiders who had camped out in the hills above the town. He'd been a scraggly cross grained beast, more willing to bite than run but she learned to stick on him and it had served her well in later years.

Dori would have the opportunity to learn the right way. Xena smiled as she watched her daughter pull Rusty to a halt in front of the inn, and was engulfed by the crowd and Cyrene's welcoming arms.

Mine, Boo? Mine?

Xena smiled more broadly. She loved the echo of those words in her memory.

The area around the town looked untouched. She could see the normal harvest activities going on, and it appeared the sojourn of the Spartans in the area had done little or no harm.

Xena was relieved. She hadn't thought the Spartan captain was lying, but you never knew with people. Although. The warrior considered. She'd made it pretty clear that if any damage had been done, she was going to take it out on them in blood.

Everyone had understood that.

She directed Io off the end of the bridge and onto the road leading up to the sturdy, though small gates. The militia with her were breaking ranks as their compatriots from the town started down to meet them, and then they were in the town, and she was jumping off Io's back.

Home.

In a flicker of focused attention, she took in the attitudes around her. The faces were happy and welcoming, and she sensed only relief and excitement at their presence. She felt her body relax and she ducked aside and grabbed Shadow's reins as Gabrielle slid down next to her, moving without hesitation through the crowd to where Cyrene was being shown her granddaughter's new friend.

"Welcome home lass." Johan came up behind her and patted her arm. "We missed ye."

Xena surprised him with a hug. "Glad to be back." She said. "I see the place is none the worse for it."

"Nah." Johan lifted a hand. "Buggers turned tail and ran, they did. Chasing down the little one." He indicated Gabrielle's pale head. "Didn't care a dinar for us, though your mother did her best, she did, to tempt em to."

Xena gave him a look. Johan shrugged, extending his hands out to either side before letting them drop. "Xena, she is YOUR mother, yah?"

"Yes." Xena sighed. "She is my mother. C'mon."

She guided him over to where Gabrielle was standing. "Mother." She greeted Cyrene.

"Welcome back." Cyrene said. "Glad you made it in one piece for a change." She studied her daughter. "You did, didn't you?"

“We did.” Xena said. “More or less.”

Cyrene rolled her eyes. “C’mon inside.” She took Xena’s elbow in her hand. “I just cracked a new keg open after the sentries said you were on the way.” She gestured at all the Amazons and the militia. “Everyone’s invited! First rounds on me.”

Two of the town grooms ran up, puffing. “Can we take the horses?” The first one asked. “We were just about to turn out the herd.”

Xena and Gabrielle turned over their reins, then regarded Dori, still perched on Rusty’s back. “Dori, why don’t you help them take care of Rusty, and make sure he has lots of nice things to eat, okay?” Gabrielle said. “Then come back here and Gramma might have some cookies for you.”

“Cookies for Wusty too??” Dori countered.

Cyrene laughed.

Xena glanced around, watching the militia disperse to their homes, surrounded by their wives and husbands. “I see you met the new member of the family.” She patted Rusty’s rump. “Cute, huh?”

Cyrene scratched the pony’s ears. “He’s adorable.” She said.

“Gramma Boo gave him to me!” Dori told her. “He’s mine!”

“I know, honey.” Cyrene smiled at her. “Xena made you a beautiful present, didn’t she?” She looked up at the warriors tall form, seeing the smile. “She’s such a good mother, isn’t she?”

Xena felt a prickle of what might have been embarrassment, but she accepted the profound compliment with a grin. “Takes one to know one.” She lifted Dori off Rusty’s back and set her on the ground. “Now, remember. You have to take care of him.”

“I will Boo!” Dori carefully took the reins and pattered after the grooms leading the other horses away, her pony following her with no prompting required.

“Mom. Thanks for the offer.” Gabrielle gave Cyrene a hug. “But we’re going to head up the hill to the village, and get our guests settled.” She indicated the Amazons they’d brought with them and Miliena. “I’ll come back down then and tell you the whole story.”

Cyrene drew her aside. “They’ve been real quiet up there.” She uttered into the bard’s ear. “Be careful.” She added. “We sent word you were on the way in but the runner said he couldn’t find a sentry there and didn’t want to risk just walking in.”

Gabrielle exchanged looks with Ephiny, who had eased closer, her expression altering to wary alertness. “Thanks mom.” She said. “We expected some kind of trouble.”

“Y’know, I used to get sorta insulted when Big X would say stuff like “Amazons.” Ephiny commented. “But right now? I get it.” She jerked her head at Eponin. “C’mon. Let’s go kick some butt, so I can chill out and get one of those bubble baths Xena’s always talking about.”

“Hang on.” Gabrielle ducked to one side and pressed her body up against Xena’s. “Xe, we’re going to head up the hill. Mom thinks there might be something squirrely going on up there.”

Xena gave her a dour look.

“Stay and get your ale.” The bard gave her a hug. “I’ll yell if I need you.” She paused as she saw Xena’s brows hike up. “The other kind of need.” She clarified. “Let me see if my bluff before I left had any legs.”

Xena didn't protest. But she saw Gabrielle's eyes watching her, and the faint, wry smile that reacted to whatever her face was showing. That instinct was bone deep, and they both knew it. "Be careful." She told her partner. "I have plans for tonight that don't involve you having any bumps or bruises."

The bard's smile eased and widened, and she gave Xena a pat on the side. "I will be." She bumped her gently, then slid past and gathered the Amazons around her, indicating the path through the town that led to the back entrance and the steep climb ahead.

Xena watched them disappear, then she turned and mounted the steps to Cyrene's inn, pushing the door open and going inside.

**

The town was relatively quiet, this close to the end of the day. Gabrielle lifted her hand and returned the waves as she passed a few of the inhabitants heading home, and she spared the town barn an affectionate smile as they walked by.

She could hear Dori inside, her high, piping voice alternating with the lower burr of the grooms and she caught a glimpse of two small bodies bolting for the door, their dusty brown hair familiar. "Hey guys!"

The two skidded to a halt. "Auntie Gabrielle!" The nearer one yodeled. "You back!"

"Yep!" Gabrielle pointed at the barn. "Dori's in there with her new friend. Go see."

The twins didn't need any further prodding. They bolted for the door and tugged it open, dashing inside as their voices rose in an excited clamor.

Gabrielle chuckled. "They're so cute."

"They are." Ephiny agreed. "They sure love their cousin. Listen to them." She smiled. "Does Dorilike playing with the kids down here more, or the ones up in the village?"

Gabrielle tilted her head, as they crossed through the back gates and started up the path. "I never asked her that." She said. "I'm not sure she favors one over the other. She really likes playing with Jess's three kids though. They go nuts together."

"They can keep up with her." Solari said. "Most of the rest of these guys can't. She's a powerhouse."

"Like her mothers." Ephiny said.

"Her mothers have trouble keeping up with her." Gabrielle muttered. She leaned forward a little as they climbed, her eyes flicking ahead to watch the path, not really sure what to expect.

She wasn't nervous. She had Ephiny and Pony with her, Solari, and Cait. Between the five of them she was pretty convinced they could hold off most of the tribe, and if it got really bad they could just hold them off long enough for Xena to get up to them from the town.

And then?

Gabrielle flexed her hands a little, suddenly aware of the fact that she was weaponless. It wasn't typical of her to carry her staff in the town, and she was a little disturbed to find herself considering the Amazon village a dangerous enough place to need her to.

But then, she hadn't left on the best of terms, had she? Gabrielle thought about what would have happened if she'd either backed down, or lost the challenge.

Ugh.

"Excuse me, your majesty." Cait squiggled past Gabrielle and took the lead on the path. "We

really wouldn't want any terribly nasty surprises. You can't tell when things get slippery on this walk, you know."

"Right you are, Cait." Solari slipped by Ephiny on the other side and joined the younger Amazon.

Gabrielle gave them both a look of tolerant amusement.

"Do we really think something's going on?" Ephiny lowered her voice. "I know there was that mix up when you left, but it's hard for me to believe any of that was really serious."

"Hard to say." Gabrielle replied. "They tried to send word up and no one was on sentry. Now - was that because there was something going on, or did the sentries respond to something going on, or were they asleep? Who knows?"

"Asleep?" Eponin's brows lifted. "Better not have been."

They approached the leveling of the path that split in two directions, one heading to the Amazon village, and the other leading up to Xena and Gabrielle's cabin. The bard wondered, briefly, if anyone had disturbed their home, but decided to wait until later to find out.

Everything she truly cared about had been with her anyway. Gabrielle drew in a breath and released it, then turned and they started up the path to the rise that led into the village.

It was quiet. The late afternoon breeze rustled through the branches, dislodging a few of them that felt with a gentle patter on the hard packed ground. It reminded Gabrielle that the year was turning, and her birthday was approaching.

"No guard." Ephiny didn't look happy.

"I'm going to kick some ass big time." Pony agreed. "What in Hades are they thinking?" They reached the rise and topped it, pausing to look down into the big central area before continuing.

A big group of women were in a circle, on the other side of the fire pit. There was a lot of motion, scuffling, and raised weapons and it became obvious there was a fight going on.

"Looks like we got here just in time for the fun." Solari commented. "That's Nala, holding them there. Let's go give her a hand."

"Lovely." Cait smiled, with absolutely no humor. "Right. C'mon, Pally."

Solari and Cait broke into a run, with Paladia reluctantly behind them. Eponin took after them and in a moment, they had far outdistanced the still walking Ephiny and Gabrielle.

"Idiots." Ephiny sighed.

"Xena once explained to me about chickens, and pecking orders." Gabrielle said. "And I yelled at her and said we aren't chickens, we are reasoning, thinking people who can make choices based on smarts, not a pecking order."

"You were wrong." Ephiny informed her. "Much as I love you, Gabrielle, and I do, there's more chicken in us than you know."

"Yeah." The bard agreed mournfully. "I realized that during this whole war thing. It wasn't about thought, or even personal gain. People just like beating the snot out of each other and coming out on top."

"Not always." The regent said. "Let's wait to see what the story is here. They could surprise us. "

They strolled across the square, watching as Pony, Solari and Cait reached the circle, bowling several women over bursting through it and jumping immediately into the scrum going on inside.

The new recruits were watching with undisguised interest. "This is more like it." One said.

"Fighters. I like that."

"Yeah." Another agreed.

"What's going on?" Milena asked warily.

Now the scrum turned into a melee, and yells broke out, the sounds of wood hitting flesh clear and sharp on the wind. Heads were turning, and eyes widening as they spotted both the regent and their queen approaching, and the watching crowd began to scramble, some pointing in their direction and others looking wildly around.

"I have no damn idea what's going on." Ephiny admitted. "But I don't think I like it. Whatever IT is."

Gabrielle was busy studying body language. It was obvious to her their arrival was a surprise, and it was equally obvious it was not a pleasant one for some. She could see a bunch of the old timers on one side of the circle, and on the other, her contemporaries led by Aalene.

Now they were close enough to see the middle of the circle, and Nala, bracketed between Pony and Solari, with Cait standing in front of all three of them with a knife in both hands, one with blood on it.

"Get back!" Cait repeated her yell. "I am not playing games!"

Nala was bleeding, a cut above her eye dripping freely down the front of her leathers, a chobogripped in each hand. She was breathing hard, and when her eyes met Gabrielle's there was nothing in them but utter, profound relief. "My Queen." She said, loudly. "Welcome home."

"Hm." Ephiny grunted. "The irony's a little crunchy."

Gabrielle approached the circle and it parted quickly before her, allowing her into the center. Six of the old timers were faced off against Nala, and their arrival had apparently broken up what looked like it might become a tail whipping.

She moved to the center of the circle and halted, slowly turning and surveying the crowd. Her head dropped just a little and the expression she felt shaping her face echoed an image in her mind of her partner. The one Xena used when she was really, really disappointed about something.

She put her hands on her hips, her body language fitting the expression and bristling with more aggression than she generally displayed.

The old timers glared at her. She glared back, her uncharacteristic silence making them drop their eyes after a long moment.

Ephiny folded her arms and waited, watching this new manifestation of their Queen with bemused interest. This was not Gabrielle the Bard. This wasn't even Gabrielle, partner of Xena of Amphipolis. This was something different, and she was curious to see where her friend was going with it.

Gabrielle pointed at Nala, then at Aalene, then circled her finger to include Pony, Ephiny, and herself. "My quarters." She said. "Solari, could you please get our new sisters, and prospective sisters settled? I'd appreciate it."

"Yes ma'am." Solari said.

"Cait." Gabrielle looked around slowly, then faced the young Amazon. "Keep an eye on things out here, would you?"

"Absolutely." Cait said.

"If anyone starts any trouble, stop it." The queen said.

"I certainly will." Cait stood a little taller, her face expressionless.

One more sweep of the chilly, mist green eyes of the crowd. "One candlemark. Meeting hall for the rest of you."

Then she turned and headed for her quarters, motioning with her hand for the small group to follow her.

Solari put her balled fists on her hips and glared at the rest of them. "You guys SUCK." She said, with startling violence. "You aint' worth the risks we took to get them damn Spartans out of here, and take care of them. And come back to find you ganging up on Nala?" She spat on the ground. "You make me embarrassed to be an Amazon."

"Shut up Solari." One of the old timers said. "Suck ass."

"No." Solari grew serious. "When I took my oath to obey the queen, there wasn't any out on it, like only when I felt like it, or when she agreed with me. You dried up old crap bags always talking up tradition? Try living the talk sometime."

"She's a fake!" The woman closest to her said.

"She's the queen." Solari answered, her voice steady. "She's the queen by right of caste, by the right passed to her by Terrais as she died, that was given her by Melosa. That's our law, if you like it or not. She's the queen, and her right's been proven a dozen times, Telas."

"The only reason she's the queen is Xena." Telas said, bluntly. "Otherwise that little fraud would be dead and you know it."

Cait stirred, and started forward, her body in liquid motion that stilled as Solari put her hand up.

"Yeah." The veteran warrior said. "She'd be dead a thousand times without Xena. So would we. So would Eph. And if you're so stupid you don't get that she's gonna come up here and stain that dirt circle red if you keep messing with that woman I don't know what else to tell you."

Telas spat.

"And anyhow, that woman you're calling a fraud was kicking the crap out of Artemis for not protecting us so you better watch yourself because let me tell ya, she doesn't need Xena to kick ass for her anymore."

"That's a lie."

"You're an idiot." Paladia commented. "You're all idiots." She added. "These people talk to gods and tell off gods and probably are gods so you should stop screwing around with them before you get your tits blown off."

Utter silence fell, and everyone left turned to stare at Paladia.

Cait sheathed both knives and politely clapped. "Oh, well done, Pally."

"Seriously." Paladia added. "Knock it off. You're gonna croak."

After an awkward pause, the crowd started to disperse, with uncomfortable expressions on their faces. Solari waited for them to leave, then she turned and regarded Paladia. "Nice" She said. "Yknow, you're all right." Then she pointed at the group living quarters. "Let's go people. YOU wanted excitement? Ya got it."

At last, only Cait and Paladia were left in the village square. "That really was quite good." Cait said.

"Should have kept my mouth shut and just let Xena cut em up. Be a lot quieter around here." Paladia grunted.

Cait stretched to her full height and leaned forward, giving her partner a kiss on the lips. "You're really not bad for a coconut palm."

"Psycho."

They moved off towards their quarters as an uneasy peace settled over the village.

**

Concluded in Part 32

A Queen's Tale

Part 32

Xena strolled through the quiet lanes that made up the upper town, Dori's hand clasped firmly in hers. Men were coming in from a long day in the fields, and she exchanged greetings as they made their way through the trees towards the back gates.

"Hey, Xena." One of the shopkeepers waved. "Welcome home!" The man trotted closer. "Took care of those Spartans didncha?"

"Yes, we did." Xena agreed. "And Dori helped, right shortie?"

"Yes!" Dori bounced around Xena in a circle. "Helped Boo make the bad men go away!"

The man chuckled. "I can see they'd be scared of her, that's for sure." He lowered his voice. "Is it true, what we heard? Merchant came through yesterday saying the war's simmered down a bit."

"Might be." Xena said.

"Good for us. More trading's coming this way, they said." The man smiled. "Word got round, maybe we got things worth trading."

Xena exhaled, but nodded. "Hope we have a good harvest season. I'm looking forward to a little more expansion this winter."

"Right way this time." The man nodded. "We pick who stays." He touched his forehead, then went on towards one of the small cots off the main lane, opposite the stable.

"Boo, c'n we go home?" Dori tugged on her hand. "Want to see the buppits!"

Xena allowed herself to be hauled along, pushing the gate open with one hand while Dori danced through it, taking a deep breath of the rich, woodsmoke scented air. She was sensing no particular anxiety from Gabrielle, and so she decided to take Dori up to their cabin, and then maybe stop by the Amazons if it seemed she was needed.

The path leading up was under her boots, when she slowed, and pulled Dori to a halt. "Hey shortie."

"Go go go, Boo!" Dori tugged somewhat ineffectively at her much taller companion. "C'mon!"

Xena studied her. "Want a ride up?" She offered. "Do a little flying?"

Dori stopped and reversed her course, holding her hands up and squealing in delight as Xena lifted her up and put her arms around her neck as the child's legs wrapped themselves firmly around her waist. "Ready?"

“Go go go!!!” Dori held on tight, giggling as Xena started up the steep slope, moving from a walk to a lope as the breeze picked up.

After she felt her body settle into the motion, she sped up, lengthening her stride and throwing herself forward and upward. Her lungs expanded and the wind blew her hair back and she felt a wild rush of energy as she pit herself against the mountain.

Dori’s yells of joy were carried back on the wind as she raced up the slope, passing the Amazon village in a blur, catching sight of the startled face of a sentry and the flicker of an upraised hand as she was already gone past.

“Go go go!!!”

She went. Xena bounded from rock to rock up the path, feeling a tingle on her skin as she sped up even faster, racing past the last bend and leaping up onto the flat rock at the top of the rise, exploding into the air and into the fading sunlight surrounding their cabin.

They flew through the air for a few moments, then she tumbled over and landed with a bounce, on level ground at the start of the lightly worn track that led to their porch.

“Yay!” Dori was delighted. “Boo that was fun!”

Xena drew in a lungful of air and released it, feeling her heartbeat settle immediately, and finding herself not even slightly out of breath. A soft chuckle escaped her, and she turned her face to the fading light, smiling into it. “Yeah, that was fun.”

Fun, and surprising, and a relief, as she savored the sense of renewed vitality, appreciating belatedly how much of that she’d lost over the last while.

Just little by little, until she’d really started noticing the effort, and getting tired out faster. She remembered having to bolt up here for some damn thing or other and being so out of breath Gabrielle had teased her about it.

She’d blown it off, made a joke of it, and Gabrielle had given her a big hug, but looking back, Xena acknowledged the sting and the realization that what she’d feared for so long was finally happening to her.

Hey. Everyone got old. Right?

Well. Xena spun unexpectedly in a circle, then crouched and shot skyward, hearing Dori squeal as she whirled in a somersault then twisted in mid air to land, only to launch backwards into a series of flips that ended up just in front of their porch, amidst a torrent of laughter from her daughter.

Dori hugged her around the neck. “Boo, you are the best!”

Xena smiled. “Thanks.” If she had to lose Elysia, then damn it, she’d take the apparent years she’d gotten back as a trade off.

She let Dori down and followed her scampering form towards the cabin, which was still, and quiet and apparently untouched since Gabrielle had left. “Dori, wait for me.”

Apparently. Dori turned and looked at her, then took a step back.

Never paid to take chances. Xena eased in front of Dori and went to the door, laying her fingertips on it and cocking her head. After a moment, she pushed against the surface and let it open, a gust of familiar scented air emerging.

She walked inside and swept the area with flickering rapidity. Her senses remained quiet, and she relaxed. “C’mon in, shortie.” She stepped forward as Dori pattered in behind her. She paused to poke her head in Dori’s room, then in the bathing room, but all was in order.

Almost order, there was a slight disarray from Gabrielle's packing, some things were missing, no doubt down in the village in the queen's quarters but everything else was in its place.

Home.

Dori went into her little room, as Xena knelt before the fireplace, taking pieces from the wood pile and stacking them in place, setting the kindling just so and reaching for her flint to strike the sparks to start it.

"Boo, will you help me find the buppits?" Dori poked her head out. "I miss them!"

"Sure." Xena gently fed the fire with dried moss. "We should get all the puppies and bring them with us when we go find mama. You think that's a good idea?"

"All?" Dori's eyes widened.

"Sure." Xena grinned to herself. "It'll be fun. Right?" She looked sideways at her daughter, who was giving her a slightly puzzled look. "Did mama ever tell you about how your Boo likes to play jokes?"

"No." Dori shook her head.

"She's a smart woman." The warrior chuckled, standing up and dipping the water put in the cistern, then setting it to heat near the newly born fire. "C'mere, and siddown." She settled on the low slung couch, and Dori climbed up next to her. "My turn to tell a story."

"Wait Boo!" Dori got down and ran into her room. She came back with Flameball, shoving him up on the couch and climbing after him. "Okay. He wants to hear Boo's story too!"

Xena ruffled her hair. "Once upon a time, your mama and I decided we were going to have a big party." She said. "We asked all our friends to come here, and watch us get married."

"What's married?"

"It's when two people really like each other, and decide to live together." Xena said. "So we had a party, and all our friends were here, including your Aunties Ephiny and Pony."

"Eff!"

"Right." Xena paused, taking in and releasing a breath. "Well, your Aunties were giving us a hard time about it, so I decided to go to your Gramma, and get some of her cake icing."

"Yum!" Dori grinned widely. "Can we have cake now?"

"I'm sure Gramma has some. We can get it later." Xena said. "So I got some icing, but I knew everyone would be watching me, right? So I had to find someone to help me play the joke with it."

Dori nodded.

Xena leaned over a little and tweaked her hair. The story had gone some place she hadn't expected, but now that it had, it seemed right. "So I found a friend to help me. He was a little boy, and his name was Solon."

Dori cocked her head. "Lolo?"

"Your cousin Solon is named after him." Xena said. "Your uncle Toris knew that the first Solon was someone very special, so he named Lolo after him, so we'd remember him."

Dori's big, green eyes studied her seriously. "He go away?"

Xena nodded. "He did." She felt, finally, a sort of peace about it. "Something bad happened to

him, and he went to another place. A really nice place, like your mama told you about when we were in the big place, where it was hot. You remember that?"

Dori nodded.

"Solon was my son." Xena gently took Dori's hand in hers. "I'm sorry you didn't get to know him. I know you would have had a lot of fun together." She watched Dori blink, then squirm closer. "He would have been your big brother. Like Lolo and Ly are brothers, or me and your uncle Toris."

"Will he come back Boo? So we c'n play?"

Xena gave her a hug. "No sweetheart, he can't. But he's in a nice place, and someday, you may get to meet him after all." She thought about Elysia. "Or maybe you both will end up someplace else that's even nicer."

"Want the buppits." Dori said. "Want someone to play with all the time."

Ah. The warrior paused and glanced down at her. "Well, I'll talk to your mama and we'll see what we can do about that." She gave her a kiss on the head. "Anyway, Solon helped me play the joke. He took Grandma's frosting and he put it where he knew Auntie Pony and Eff would find it and they did."

"Uh oh."

Xena smiled. "That's right. They had a lot of fun with it, because you know how good Grandma's frosting is, right?"

"Yum!!!"

"But I made it blue." She leaned over and whispered the words. "So the next day, what do you think happened?"

Dori giggled. "They were all blue?"

"They were all blue." Xena agreed. "They had blue spots here.. " She put a fingertip on Dori's nose. "And blue stripes here.." She ran her finger across her cheek, making her giggle. "And their tongues were all blue." She stuck hers out.

"Boo that's funny!" Dori said. "C'n we do that?"

"Shh. We can." Xena whispered. "But you can't tell anyone or it won't be a surprise."

"Boo you tell good stories!" Dori told her. "Good as mamas!"

"Shhhhhhh." Xena narrowed her eyes. "You can't tell anyone that, either okay?"

Dori giggled. "Love you Boo." She reached around Xena and gave her a hug. "You make everthing good."

The water pot rattled gently. Xena returned the hug and released her, then she got up and started the process of making a cup of tea. A moment later, she felt a prickle against her senses and she turned just in time to see Aphrodite pop into view.

Best of all evils? Eh. "Hi." Xena said. "Siddown. Want a cup of tea?"

Aphrodite stopped in mid motion, staring at her in unbridled disbelief. "Who are you?" She asked. "And what have you done with Xena?"

"Hullo." Dori went over and tugged at a bit of the floating goddesses pink silk toga.

"Hey there, kiddo." Aphrodite allowed herself to be distracted. "Don't you look cute?" She looked

back at Xena, who was still holding the cup of herbs. “You’re not bitching at me.”

“No.” Xena went back to her tea. “What can I do for you?”

The goddess settled to her feet, then she went over and seated herself like a regular person on a chair, patting her lap. “C’mere, cute stuff.” She lifted Dori onto her lap. “Xena, you’re freaking me out.”

“Sorry.” Xena sat down with her liberally honey laced tea. “Didn’t mean to.” She leaned back and took a sip of the herbal mixture, the touch of mint and lemongrass in Gabrielle’s favorite mixture comforting on her tongue.

Aphrodite studied her. “I just came to say I’m sorry.” She said, in a quiet and very serious tone. “Getting the rents involved was a real bad idea.”

“Yeah.” Xena sighed. “Didn’t really need to get on Hera’s hit list.”

“She’ll chill.”

“Probably not in my lifetime.” The warrior responded mildly.

The goddess sighed. “You know something, I finally get it.” She said, glancing down and tweaking Dori’s ear. “The little one was right. We really don’t understand that whole love you till death whatever stuff. We just don’t.”

“I know.”

“Kinda sucks.” Aphrodite studied her. “But it kicks your ass, don’t it?”

Xena nodded. “Worth it though.” She said.

“Anyway.” The goddess glanced away. “Like. If you could help my half bro out with those screaming mortal chicks he’s carrying around, me and Ares would appreciate it.”

“He coming here?”

“Yep.”

“If I can help, I will.” Xena said.

Aphrodite stared at her. “Are you smoking something?” She said. “Like, what’s in that cup?” She demanded. “Where’ the rude, crude leather chick?” She asked Dori. “You know whats going on, cutie pie?”

Dori looked up at her in puzzlement.

“Y’know, Aphrodite.” Xena felt a gentle tug. She stood up and swirled the contents of her cup. “I’m not always a homicidal maniac with lethal combat skills. Sometimes..” She shrugged. “I’m just some innkeeper’s kid with a partner and a family.”

The goddess studied the tall figure in front of her. She watched Xena’s head tilt slightly to one side, as those clear, blue eyes gazed back at her – for once quiet, and calm, with no anger showing at their edges.

Xena, at peace.

Aphrodite smiled. “Yeah I get it.” She set Dori onto her feet. “So anyway, thanks for the girl talk. Tell your main squeeze I stopped by.” She snapped her fingers and disappeared.

Dori gazed at the empty space. “Boo, dat’s a weird people.”

“You said it.” Xena finished her tea. “C’mom, munchkin. Let’s go find your mama and go get some cookies.” She put the cup down and held her hand out. “Wanna fly some more?”

"Go get frosting!" Dori yodeled. "Go go go!"

**

Xena settled into the chair behind the table nearest the kitchen, the familiar contours of the seat neatly accommodating her long frame. She picked up the mug of ale her mother had deposited and took a sip, leaning back and surveying the room with a sense of wry satisfaction.

Amphipolis was a small place.

"So." Cyrene took a seat next to her "You're back."

The servers were circulating around them, passing out mugs to the militia men who had come in with Xena and the other stragglers who would never turn down a free drink.

Toris came in from the kitchen and circled the table and clasped his sisters shoulders, before taking a chair next to her. "Welcome home, sis."

"Thanks." Xena smiled at him.

"So what happened?" Cyrene prompted. "All we know is that after Gabrielle left, the Spartan army took off after her fast as their little block heads could go."

"We tried to stop them." Toris spoke up. "Mother rode out there on Argo and told them there was gold, and silver, and the gods only knows what up in the hills and they were idiots to pass it by."

Xena looked at Cyrene, Her mother shrugged faintly.

"I even told her to tell them there was a Hestian Virgin temple up there." Toris added. "I figured, what the Hades, right?"

Xena covered her eyes briefly with one hand.

"They wouldn't have any of it. Idiots." Cyrene said. "All they could think of was that they had to get hold of Gabrielle. Single minded morons."

Xena took a sip of ale. "By that yard stick. I'm a single minded moron myself." She remarked dryly. "I'm pretty sure the feeling was mutual though."

Toris laughed. "It was crazy." He said. "They were watching for her, watching the out roads but then one of the Amazons came down and told them she left out the back way and they took off."

Xena's eyes narrowed.

"First time I heard Gran curse like that since the twins were born." Her brother said. "She pulled the woman behind the barn and killed her." He added. "Gutted her with a work knife."

There was a little silence. Then Xena cleared her throat. "Saved me the trouble."

"It was a little shocking." Cyrene admitted. "But i can't say I'm sorry to have seen it happen. They took one of the mules and dragged the body back up to the village and left it there."

"There was more than just her that wanted to do it." Cyrene said. "But she got to her first. Wasn't expecting it, that's for sure. I saw her face when Gran took hold of her and dragged her out of sight."

One of the servers came over and set a platter of bread, cheese, and sliced vegetables down on the table, giving them a smile. "Good to see all the faces back here." She said. "Glad everyone came back safe."

"And Xena was just going to tell us how that came about." Cyrene firmly took control over the conversation. "Xena?"

The warrior's lips twitched. "You know I'm not the storyteller in the family." She said. "Gabrielle'll make a better tale of it." She sat up a little. "Anyway, I went off after Ephiny and Eponin, and ended up in Therma. Heard tales of Amazons being taken aboard one of the ships so I decided to get on the next one and see if I could find them on the docks in Athens."

"Athens." Cyrene made a face. "Rather not see that place any time soon."

"I never made it there." Xena said. "Midway we ran into a storm, then found a ship that had foundered in it. Turns out Ephiny and Eponin were on it."

"So you did rescue them?" Toris grinned. "Everyone had bets you would."

Xena nodded. "We turned around and went back to Therma, and got there just in time to meet Gabrielle and the rest of them."

"I see. And the Spartan army?"

"We cut a deal with them. I let them get on their ships and leave if they went quietly, and they did." Xena said. "So that's that. Then we came back here."

Her mother and brother looked at her. "Why do I think there's more to that story?" Toris queried. "A few details left out?"

"We'll get the whole thing from Gabrielle." Cyrene patted him on the knee. "At least we know everything's all right, and they didn't chase you back here."

"No." Xena said. "They won't be back. At least not for a while."

"Hey. I heard some of the guys that came back with you talking about Artemis and Athena... what was that all about?" Toris asked. "And they said Hercules and Iolaus were there too, and a tidal wave."

"A few details." Cyrene commented dryly.

Xena smiled and leaned back again, hitching up one boot to rest on her knee and propping her elbow on it. It felt good to be home, with the familiar shape of the inn around her and her family there.

Her family. Xena studied the two faces opposite her briefly. The stamp of family resemblance was strong there. Toris shared Cyrene's face and squarely built frame, and he was tall like Xena was, shared the dark hair and blue eyes but...

But.

Xena took a breath in and released it, understanding in her heart now there was something she didn't share with either of them. Something she really had known all along, but put the difference down to her nature and the path she'd taken way back when.

Always a lie. Toris and Ly had always been her half brothers. Ly had known, had sensed it. Had told her in the darkness of one of those dark nights they'd spent together when her skill with arms was becoming so very evident.

"Someday, Xe." Ly had said. "You'll go places I can't follow you. But it won't be for lack of trying, and if I can be, I will be there for you."

And he had been. Xena gazed quietly into her mug. Someday, Cyrene and Toris would join him, there in that gentle, peaceful place.

They'd tell stories of her.

"Hey, Xe?"

Xena looked up, as Toris touched her arm. "Sorry." She took a sip of ale. "Long couple of days."

"I bet." Her brother said. "So - what's going on with the gals up the hill? Gran said she doesn't even want to talk about it. She said last night she was damn glad she decided to get out of there."

"Change." Xena said briefly. "Before she left, Gabrielle wanted to make some changes up there. Small stuff. The older crowd flipped. One of them challenged her."

Cyrene straightened up. "What?"

Toris nodded. "Gran said something about that, she was laughing about it though."

"Wasn't really funny." The warrior said. "Not with everything going on. Gab pulled out a sword and I guess it made the woman back down. Didn't figure her to bear steel."

"But... I didn't think..!" Cyrene's brow creased.

"She doesn't." Xena said. "But they didn't know that, and after all." She shrugged self deprecatingly. "I did teach how to fight with everything else."

"Well, now I really want her to get back down here we'll be all night catching up." Cyrene stood up. "Let me see what's going on in the kitchen."

Xena drained her mug and stood up. "I'm going to go get my kid and take our stuff home. We'll be back down for dinner."

Toris nodded, and also stood. "I heard there's a pony in the family now. Going to introduce me?"

Xena chuckled, as they walked together to the side door, and went through it.

**

Gabrielle circled her worktable and sat down, leaning her elbows on the surface and folding her hands together as the rest of them filed in and took seats on various stools and the floor.

Nala had a cloth held to the cut on her head and she exhaled heavily as she sat down on the low bench near the fireplace. "My queen, please believe me when I say I have never in my life been happier to see anyone as I am to see you."

Gabrielle smiled briefly. "Thanks." She said. "I think."

Ephiny went behind Gabrielle and opened the small cabinet near the wall, extracting a flagon and some glasses.

"It's been a really tough time." Aalene spoke up. "I'm glad you're back too." The young Amazon ran her hand through her curly blond hair. "I really didn't think it would get so.. so.."

"Out of hand?" Ephiny spoke over her shoulder.

"Ugly." Aalene corrected her quietly. "I'm used to things being out of hand, you know?"

Gabrielle, surprisingly, chuckled at that. "So what happened? I figured someone went and told the Spartans where we went. That what caused all this?"

"No." Nala examined a cut on her hand. "I mean, yes, someone did. Elisa, did. She's the partner of the idiot... the person who challenged you, your majesty."

"I see."

"That's the first one we'll talk to." Eponin grunted.

"Can't." Aalene shook her head. "She's dead."

Ephiny turned around and stared, and Gabrielle's eyebrows lifted. "Spartans?" The regent

guessed. "Confused the message with the messenger?"

"No." Nala shook her head. "Granella Down in the town. Heard her squeal and put a blade in her from front to back."

"That's what freaked everyone out." Nala continued. "They dumped the body outside the gate there, and then we heard the town told the Spartans to come up and get us."

Gabrielle felt rather nonplussed. "Come up here and get us?"

Aalene nodded. "Not.. " She lifted her hands. "It was your family, you know? They were just trying so hard to give you a head start. They told the Spartans about the silver, and all that. Trying to get them to stay here."

"Yes." The bard murmured. "We heard that from the Spartans. They said the people here were trying to distract them."

"So anyway, word got around that the town was throwing us to the wolves - people got some crazy on." Nala said. "Until the Spartans left, and then Gran came up here and told us what was really going on."

"I see." Gabrielle said. "Well, that's sure not what I intended."

"No, we knew that." Aalene said. "But everyone down there's pretty pigheaded." She blushed a little. "No offense."

"None taken." Their queen smiled. "Xena's the most pigheaded of them all and I love her dearly anyway." She paused. "I'm sure if she'd been here, and I'd been trying to escape, the Spartans would still be hammering at the town gates, if not our front door up here."

"Or they'd be dead." Pony said.

'Anyway." Nala sighed. "Things got crazy. I told the whole bunch of them if they wanted to just get the Hades out. Just leave, go find another tribe, whatever. Nothing was holding them here.."

"But something was." Aalene broke in. "The valley."

"Ah." Ephiny grunted.

"They wanted all the loot?" Pony said.

"They wanted what they figured was their share." Nala agreed. "And they weren't leaving without it, and that meant they figured they should take over the place."

Gabrielle got up and started pacing.

"We disagreed." Aalene said, quietly. "Me and the rest of the youngers." She clarified. "That's what we started calling ourselves, cause we weren't the elders."

"They figured they had the right." Nala said.

"They didn't." Ephiny came over, putting a glass down on Gabrielle's desk and handing another to Pony. She went back and got three others, and distributed them. "They broke our laws."

"I guess they figured.."

"There's no figuring" Pony said. "It's in the scrolls, there in that cabinet." She pointed at a wooden case in the corner of Gabrielle's quarters. "Bunch of old crocks. Bet they don't even know what's in em."

Gabrielle hitched her thumbs into her leather belt. "Well. I don't know some of the stuff that's in them. There's a lot of those damn things, and half of them are rubbed out." She went back to her

desk and sat down. "But what are laws, really, other than just general agreements by people who live in a community on how to coexist with each other and by that view, they're not doing much for us now are they?"

"Hum." Ephiny grunted.

"So maybe we need some new laws." The bard concluded. "Because from what you told me if I have to enforce the ones in that cabinet I'll have to order half the tribe killed." She studied them all. "I don't really want to do that."

"Be kinda tough to do." Nala conceded.

"No." Gabrielle leaned forward and studied them. "It wouldn't be hard at all.. well, it would be hard for me to make that choice, but Xe would do it if I asked her to."

Everyone fell silent.

"So." Gabrielle finally broke it. "Then we need to find a way to live together that accommodates these different viewpoints." She said. "And the gods know, if Xena and I could learn to live together, the Amazons should be able to."

She eyed Nala. "So, what did we walk into out there? Final confrontation? There were six of them, so it wasn't a one on one challenge."

Nala looked uncomfortable. So did Aaleene.

"Judgement?" Pony spoke up. 'Gang up?'"

Ephiny made a sound like a spitting cat.

Gabrielle looked from one to the other, then she looked over at Nala. She was about to ask what the heck they were talking about, when a memory of something Xena once had told her popped up. "Is that something like running the gauntlet?"

Nala exhaled, then she nodded. "Sort of. It's... I guess it's something that was made... I mean..."

"It's a check and balance." Ephiny said, in a crisp voice. "We have our right of caste, and we have our pecking order, Gabrielle. But there's a piece of the law that lets numbers override that. If enough of us want to overturn the sitting leadership, then they call for a judgement."

"You mean if.. the opposing party, I guess you can call it, can't come up with a single champion to challenge?" Gabrielle eyed them shrewdly.

Ephiny nodded.

"And they figured this was their chance because once we got back it was game over for them."

"Sure." Pony grunted.

"Either cowardly or opportunistic depending on your viewpoint." The regent commented sourly.

Gabrielle sat quietly in thought for a few minutes. Everyone else respected that, and remained silent as well, sipping their glasses of wine. Finally the bard sighed. "Ick."

"Yeah." Ephiny sat down in the stuffed chair near the window. "Makes me wonder if i really want to bring a kid up here." She laced her fingers together. "Maybe I was always really glad Xenon turned out to be a boy."

Nala looked embarrassed. "I'm sorry." She faced Gabrielle. "I'm sorry I couldn't keep it all together. I didn't know what to say to these people. They just kept getting angrier."

"Nothing we said was right." Aalene murmured.

Gabrielle got up and circled her desk, crouching down next to Aalene. She put a hand on the young Amazon's knee and gazed at her. "I know what that feels like." Her voice had dropped in pitch, and gentled. She included Nala in her regard. "So I want to thank you both for taking the brunt of what rightfully should have been on my shoulders."

Ephiny watched the two women melt under that gentle regard. Gabrielle at her most open and honest tended to be irresistibly compelling and she remembered seeing an angry and upset Xena be tamed with a single touch and that same entreating look.

It wasn't even calculated. Gabrielle wasn't trying to manipulate them.

"No, they were wrong." Aalene said. "No one should have had to shoulder that. They were mean, and self serving."

"They took advantage of what was going on to try and stage a coup." Nala added. "We weren't going to let them do that. This is our home. This is our family. We have a right to protect it."

Gabrielle smiled, the warmth of it bringing a twinkle to her eyes. "I know what that's like too." She said. "So - let's finish up our cups, and go to the meeting hall and see what we can make of this place. But so long as there are people like you here, I'm sure we can make something good together."

And with a few words like that, the regent marveled, they were sealed to her, and would gladly bend a knee to her, and die at her word.

Would she? Ephiny studied the shadowed profile of the kneeling woman. Would she lay down her life for Gabrielle? Step in front of a sword? An arrow? She thought about Xena, on that rope between the ships, a handsman from disaster. Would she risk for Gabrielle what Gabrielle risked for her?

Which side was she on? Elders or youngers?

"Hey Gabrielle?" Pony spoke up from her corner.

"Yes, Pony?" Gabrielle leaned her elbows on her knee.

"If you did decide to off them?" Pony cleared her throat. "You wouldn't have to bother the champ for that. I'd do it." She shrugged one shoulder. "Soli'd do it. Heck, Cait and her nutcase would do it. You're the queen. "

Gabrielle grinned at her.

"And, we may not always agree with stuff you do." Pony went on. "But like, I've learned the hard way you make decisions for the right reasons. You know?"

Gabrielle got up and walked over to her, motioning her to stand up. She faced Pony when she did, cocking her head a little upwards to meet the weapon's master's suddenly bashful eyes. "Thank you." She took Pony's hands in hers. "Though it's an amazing thing to me that I can finally in my heart appreciate dear friends offering to kill people for me."

Ephiny smothered a laugh and Pony wrinkled her nose up and grinned.

'Seriously. Thank you Eponin." Gabrielle leaned forward and gave her a kiss on the lips, taking a step back then quickly grabbing Pony's arms as her knees unlocked. "Whoa."

"Sorry." Pony blushed a deep, vivid red.

Ephiny covered her face with one hand, her shoulders shaking.

"You okay?" Gabrielle rubbed Pony's upper arm. "Sorry about that. Didn't mean to freak you out."

Pony cleared her throat and furtively looked around, then finally met the bard's gaze. "Didn't

expect you to do that."

"No, probably not." Gabrielle put her arm around Pony's shoulders. "C'mon, Eph. Let's go kids. Time to lay it on the table and sort this out."

She waited until they exited to add an arm around Ephiny, and they strolled together across the grass, the sunset light gilding them all and sending their shadows right across the square.

**

**

Gabrielle leaned back against her partners usual perch, her arms crossed casually over her chest as she watched the room slowly fill.

Ephiny was seated at the elevated table, her hands folded in front of her. Eponin had taken up a position to her left, a dour glare on her face and her hand resting prominently on her sword hilt.

Cait was standing to Gabrielle's right as though in a mirror position, watching the crowd. Solari was leaning against the back wall, quite near the entrance as she watched everyone come in and take their seats.

There was a seriousness about them all that touched Gabrielle. It was serious to her too, of course, but there was a sense also that she had gotten sight of a bigger picture and she no longer felt any sense of anxiety at the mix of attitudes facing her.

When she'd left the village she'd been very conflicted. About her place in the tribe, the tribes place in her life, and a hundred different dreams tugging her in all directions. Standing here now, though, she felt a sense of self confidence that both bemused and surprised her a little.

Paladia ducked inside the room and plodded doggedly up to where Gabrielle was perched, brushing past the bristling Eponin and climbing up onto the raised dais. "Hey, listen."

"I'm listening." Gabrielle responded amiably.

Unaccountably, Paladia gave one of her quirky grins at that. "The guard said to tell you they just saw Xena hauling butt up the hill like she was being chased by harpies."

"She wouldn't run from harpies." Gabrielle responded without hesitation.

Paladia stopped and tilted her head. "You seen them?"

"Uh huh."

"Ugly?"

"Oh yeah."

"Anyway they said to tell you." Paladia concluded.

Cait sidled over. "Do you suppose something's wrong?" She asked. "Shall I go check?"

"Nah. She's fine." Gabrielle reassured them. "She's probably just playing with Dori." She could sense happiness coming from Xena, a bouncy delight that made her smile. She recalled their words at parting down in the town. "C'mon, people. Get moving in here."

Finally, the room was almost full. Gabrielle pushed off the padded ledge she was leaning against and strolled forward to the edge of the platform, just in front of the table. She let her hands drop, hooking her thumbs into her belt as she waited. She studied the faces as the murmur of conversation dropped off and their attention focused on her.

"Okay people." Gabrielle said, after a brief pause. "The last time I stood up here, I told you I was leaving. I told you that I was a target of the Spartan army, and that my intentions were to remove myself from here so no one would get hurt."

Renas the elder stood up. "The town down there didn't buy into that. They tried to get the Spartans to come up here and destroy us."

Gabrielle waited for the murmur to die down. "The people in the town, specifically, Cyrene, did everything they could to keep the Spartans from going after me, including offering you up as a sacrifice. Yes."

Absolute silence.

"Xena's mother values me more than she does the tribe." The bard went on, in a mild tone. "That's a fact of life, people. Just like it's a fact of life that I value Xena more than I do anyone in this room."

Renas didn't seem to know what to respond to that. She looked like she'd been expecting Gabrielle to make excuses.

"Do you all want me to lie?" Gabrielle scanned the room. "Want me to tell you that because I happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, that I'd give up the love of my life, or my family, for the good of the tribe?"

"Gabrielle." Ephiny had stood up behind her. "You sent the love of your life into mortal danger for my sake." She had a wry look on her face. "Can't have it both ways."

"I don't." Gabrielle half turned, so she could watch both Ephiny and the crowd. "You are family to me, Eph. You and Pony, and Cait, and the people who have brought themselves into my life as friends." She glanced out at the crowd. "But the 'tribe' is not my family. The 'tribe' is a group of people I'm responsible for in some way but a good part of whom not only doesn't care about me, but would actively prefer I was dead."

Silence again.

"YOU can't have it both ways." Gabrielle went on. "You can't plot against me, and challenge my authority, and want to get rid of me and then expect me to feel bad when my family... the people who do care about me, throw you under an oxcart on my behalf."

Renas slowly sat down.

"But if you are my family." The bard said. "Then you can expect me to sacrifice everything for you."

Ephiny looked down at the table, her fingertips pressing lightly against it. Pony merely stood quietly nearby, watching Gabrielle, the faintest hint of a smile on her face.

"So." Gabrielle turned forward again. "Let's talk facts. I am the queen." She paused briefly. "I carry the right of caste. You are stuck with me."

Cait smirked a little, and glanced at Paladia, who had remained up on the raised platform next to her.

"And if you are stuck with me, you are also stuck with what I bring with me, which is my family. Cyrene is my family. The militia is my family. Xena is my family and my consort." She looked now at Renas. "That brings me to another subject. Before I left, a bunch of you decided, despite the danger we were all in, to challenge me for my right."

"It's our law." Renas muttered.

"No it's not." Ephiny spoke up again. "Sorry, your Maj, but i want to speak."

"Hang on." Gabrielle held a hand up. "You'll get your chance." She looked at Renas. "Renas, if your little gang had killed me, just what do you think would have happened to you? No matter what you think the Amazon law says?"

"Same thing that happened to that git who sold Gabrielle's plan to the Spartans." Pony said, briefly. "You think anyone down there cares about Amazon law?"

Gabrielle glanced at her, then back at the room. "She's right." She said. "I know that to a lot of you here, the tribe is your whole world. I understand that." She paused. "But you probably better realize that in that big old wider world out there a whole lot more people know and care about me, than they do about you."

Shockingly egotistical, Gabrielle thought. And quite surprising to the Amazons based on the facial expressions she was seeing. "So yes, no matter what the law here says, I'm above it. Xena's above it. We're not Amazons. We belong to the wider world and to the greater good and that's something you all just have to deal with, or you need to go somewhere else." She concluded. "Because I am the queen. I carry the right of caste, and I intend to keep it that way."

Mixture of reactions. Some surprised her really. She could see grins on the faces of those younger she always knew were with her, and resignation and anger on the faces of some of the older, but the primary reaction it seemed was relief from the rest of the tribe.

She wasn't really sure why, though. From the corner of her eye she could see Ephiny nodding slowly, and she thought Pony was pleased. She hadn't really pre thought out what she was going to say, but spoke from the heart, and tried to keep it honest, and all in all, she thought it hadn't gone too badly.

No one had rushed her with a sword, anyway. A flicker of motion caught her eye, and she looked at the doorway just as Xena slipped inside, carrying Dori. The warrior's hair was windblown, and she had just a light tunic on with no weapons.

The blue eyes met hers, and one winked. Xena took a seat at the very back, in an empty row and set Dori on her lap, her arms wrapped around the child to keep her still.

"So is what you are saying, Gabrielle, that you can't be challenged?" Renas spoke up. "That our laws mean nothing to you?"

"No." The bard shook her head. "What I am saying is, if you decide to challenge me, you need to accept the consequences both for yourself, and the tribe, because the response will not adhere to Amazon law."

Xena gave her a thumbs up. Gabrielle tried to muffle a grin, and only partially succeeded. "So let me give you a better option." She kept her body posture open and relaxed. "Talk first. Then fight."

"What?" Renas frowned. "I tried to talk to you."

"You tried to talk at me." Gabrielle shook her head. "That's why I didn't listen to you. When people say 'it's like this just because I say so, or because that's how it's always been' I don't buy it. Not from anyone." Her eyes slipped back to her silently laughing partner. "Isn't that true, honey?"

The room all turned, startled to find the warrior in their midst.

"Damn true." Xena acknowledged. "The only way to win an argument with her is to be right."

"Mama!" Dori squiggled.

"So you are telling me if we disagree, I should come in and argue with you about it?" Renas almost spluttered in disbelief.

"Yes." Gabrielle said. "That's exactly what you should do. If your arguments make sense, maybe I'll

agree with you, or maybe we can agree to disagree. But talking.. communicating with each other is the only way to stop this crazy stupid cycle of resentment that mounts until someone is dumb enough to pick up a sword and take a swing at me."

"Breaking the cycle of violence." Ephiny muttered just loud enough for her to hear. "Finally come full circle."

Finally come full circle. It almost made her start laughing. "No one has to stay and put up with me." Gabrielle said. "There's a bunch of tribes out there, who live the way Amazons always have, and keep the old ways."

"Got that right." Eponin grunted. "Bunch of jackasses."

"Since when are you a radical?" One of the older Amazons asked. "Eponin?"

"Since we met up with a pack of those other types." Pony stared her right down. "And got knocked over the head and tied up, on the way to be sold to Athens so they could get some extra feathers for it."

"What?" Renas blurted.

"We were kidnapped." Ephiny folded her hands together. "Taken onboard a ship on the way to the capital. The queen of the tribe who took us was going to hand us over as spies for the Spartans so she'd get credit in her march to be named overall queen of the Amazons."

"What?" Now Renas stood up, and so did several others. "Named by who?"

"Athens." Pony. "Nice, huh? Real traditional." She put her hands on her hips. "We go out there to try and warn them and they do that."

"Well.." Renas looked nonplussed.

"So yeah, i'm not so into the tradition stuff now. I got over it." Pony concluded.

"She should pay for that." Renas said.

"She did. I killed her." Ephiny commented.

Another period of silence. Most of the crowd looked uneasily from their regent to their queen, who was quietly watching her as well.

"And then I stood by and let the rest of them drown when the ship went down. Had no interest in saving their sorry asses." The regent concluded. "After Xena risked her life rescuing us, I wasn't going to see her risk anything for them. So I get what Gabrielle said about family, y'know?"

Heads turned to look at Xena who merely nodded.

Renas sat down again. "It's so much to think about." She said, after a moment. "It's so hard to know what the right thing to do is."

Gabrielle realized at this point she had a choice to make. There were two paths she could lead them down, one that would have her ordering Ephiny to bring the laws she knew so well to bear, and placing the Amazons who had challenged her under the regents sentencing.

The other path was more complicated. She could wipe the slate clean at this point, and it was unclear where that would lead them to. Maybe it would mean the break up of the tribe.

Maybe it would change what it meant for those who remained to be Amazons.

Gabrielle studied the faces opposite her. "What's it going to be, people?" She asked. "I think a lot of the problems some of you have with me stem from the fact you think I'm not strong enough to be an Amazon queen." She sensed the reaction and saw it, ripping across the crowd. "You want

me to prove that's not true? I see four of you who were part of that plot here in the room."

They stirred uneasily, and exchanged glances.

"You want me to be a traditional Amazon queen? It's within my rights to punish you, for endangering the tribe. You want me to ask Xena to execute you?"

Absolute shock.

"That's in the law, right Eph?" Gabrielle half turned, to see widened hazel eyes watching her.

"Yes." Ephiny managed to respond.

"Xe?" Gabrielle met her soulmate's eyes. "C'mere."

Xena stood up and put Dori down, leaning over and whispering something to her before she straightened and made her way up the aisle through the now frozen crowd up to where Gabrielle was standing. Dori watched for a moment, then she turned and ran out of the room, the patter of her footsteps as much a warning as the tolling of a bell.

Xena was unarmed, but it didn't matter and everyone there knew it. The warrior turned when she reached the platform and stood there, sweeping her gaze over them before she looked up at her partner, and quirked an eyebrow at her in question.

"What's tradition worth to you?" Gabrielle stared at Renas. "Worth your life? Put up or shut up. It's time."

A figure stirred in the back of the room and stood. Gabrielle recognized it as the woman who challenged her, and she slowly drew in a breath as she walked forward through the crowd and faced her. "Mara."

Mara stared at her. "So our choice is to accept your new ways, or keep our traditions and take the consequences. That right?" The woman said, looking right into Gabrielle's eyes. "That what you're saying?"

"That's it." Gabrielle agreed. She could sense the tension rapidly growing in the room, and knew a brief moment of sadness as she realized where the situation was likely going.

She'd had a chance, to have it end right. But there was also that part of who the Amazons were that never had accepted her.

The part that was convinced that no matter what the evidence, she didn't have it in her to truly understand the warrior spirit that defined them.

The part that believed she was wholly a storyteller, and nothing more.

Mara gestured rudely at her. "This time, I'm calling your bluff, Gabrielle." The woman said. "I say we keep our traditions, and our laws." She stood a little straighter. "Now you put up or shut up. You've posed long enough."

"You really think I'm posing?" Gabrielle could sense the eyes on her, and knew she had the future resting in her hands in a very personal way.

"I know you are. You faked me out the last time. Not this time." Mara said. "You said it yourself. You're not an Amazon. You haven't got the guts to be."

And so, there it was. Gabrielle sensed her partner shift next to her, as without moving the warrior prepared herself to act. From the corner of her eye, she could see the planed features twitch, and saw Xena's breathing change just so very slightly.

Ready to defend her. Anyone in the room could see it.

But she didn't want to be defended. Not this time.

"Xena." Gabrielle said, quietly and clearly. "Execute her."

The woman didn't even have time to prepare herself. In a flicker of motion, almost too fast for the eye to follow, Xena lashed out and caught her on the point of her chin with such savage power she broke her neck before her victim could so much as take a breath.

Between one breath and the next. Just that quickly.

The body dropped at Gabrielle's feet.

The queen looked up and took in the utter shock facing her. "Be careful what you ask for." She said, in a very calm voice. "Anyone else think I'm bluffing?"

Renas sat down, refusing now to meet her eyes.

Gabrielle absorbed the silence, taking slow and deliberate breaths. "So." She felt a sudden warmth as Xena's hand touched her knee, just a random contact briefly grounding her world. "Meeting's over. I'll be in my quarters tomorrow if anyone wants to talk."

After a long moment, the Amazons slowly got up and started to file out, not without a lot of backward glances at the woman standing on the platform, and the tall figure standing on the ground next to her.

Only Solari stayed, watching each face as it passed.

Gabrielle held it together until the last one had left, then she felt her knees unlock and would have dropped to the ground if Xena hadn't sensed it and grabbed her, stepping up onto the platform and pulling her close.

"Wow." Pony motioned to Cait and Paladia. "C'mon. Let's take out the trash."

"Rather." Cait's eyes were rather wider than normal, and she hurried to join the weapons master, tugging Paladia behind her as they circled the fallen form.

"Xe." Gabrielle felt herself start to shake. "Get me over to that damn water basin."

She barely made it in time, before her body convulsed and she lost what little was in her stomach, retching so hard she saw stars clearly defined on the inside of her closed eyelids.

"Easy." She could barely hear Xena's voice for the roaring in her ears. "Breathe, Gabrielle. Take a deep breath."

She couldn't. Her body was in such complete rebellion she was caught between throwing up and crying, the reality of what she'd just done rendering her nearly helpless.

"Hey." Xena's voice was right in her ear. "Gabrielle."

A touch at her neck, and the sudden tingle of pressure points. The need to retch eased and she felt Xena's body warm hers as her partner cradled her gently. She took a deep breath, then another, as the stars faded in her vision and the roar receded in her ears.

"Easy." Xena gently kneaded the back of her neck.

"You send Dori down to mom?" Gabrielle whispered.

"Yeah."

"Thanks."

"Just breathe. Stop scaring the daylights out of me."

Gabrielle complied, feeling her heartbeat slow. She opened her eyes and looked up, seeing nothing but Xena's concerned face very close to hers. "Sorry." She put a shaking hand on her own stomach. "Sorry, Xe. Sorry I .. "

"Gabrielle." Xena interrupted her. "Shut up."

The bard buried her face into the light fabric on her partners shoulder and obeyed. She didn't have to tell Xena anything.

Xena knew.

Finally the shivering stopped, and she felt the tension relax. She opened her eyes again and exhaled, looking past Xena's shoulder to find Ephiny next to her, just sitting there holding her hand. "Ugh."

"That was very gutsy, my friend." The regent said, in a mild voice.

"Wasn't what I was after tonight." Gabrielle sighed. "Damn it."

"I know." Ephiny nodded. "But it was the only thing you could have done and remained queen. There was no backing down from that, Gabrielle."[]

"I know." Gabrielle's eyes shifted to her partner. Xena was seated on the edge of the platform, still cradling her in her arms. "Sorry I had to ask you to do that, sweetheart."

"I'm not." Xena replied. "But I am glad you didn't stop for lunch first."

Gabrielle blinked, then she couldn't prevent a brief smile from appearing. "Xe."

Xena leaned over and gave her a kiss on the forehead. She could feel the warmth coming back into Gabrielle's body, and the color of her skin was returning to normal. The bard stirred a little, and she helped her sit up, keeping her hands on her partner's shoulders as she ran a hand through her hair. "Better?"

"Yeah." Gabrielle exhaled. "Sorry i freaked out."

"Battle shock." Xena said. "You'll be fine."

Ephiny handed over a skin. "Apple juice. Take a sip."

Gabrielle complied, cautiously. Her stomach agreeably accepted the sweet juice though, and she swallowed a second mouthful with less hesitation. She became aware of the silence in the hall, and the rich golden sunset pouring in the windows, and the beautiful depths of Xena's eyes as they watched her.

The warrior stifled a yawn. "Hades of a welcome home, huh?"

Gabrielle found herself smiling. "No place like it." She agreed. "Can't wait to see what happens tomorrow."

**

Xena caught her mother's eye as she entered the inn, strolling through the late night customers and ducking into the kitchen. It was quiet and empty in there, only the night hearth lit with it's ever present pot of odds and ends mildly bubbling.

After a minute, Cyrene entered, dusting her hands off. "Well, there you are." She walked over and gave her daughter a hug. "Have I said it yet? I'm very glad you're back, and all in one piece for a change."

Xena returned the hug, then she perched on the edge of one of the worktables. "I hear you tried to keep the Spartans here."

"I did." Her mother answered straightforwardly. "I have a few people here more than pissed off at me for it and you know what? I don't give a damn."

Xena smiled. "She only just made it to the city." She said, after a pause. "They chased her right to the gates. I had to lead a force out and stop them. So thanks." She eyed Cyrene. "I don't really want to think about her and Dori getting caught by those bastards. By the time they caught up to her they were shooting blindly."

Cyrene sobered. "I didn't hear that."

"Lot of stuff happened." Xena acknowledged. "It'll probably take her a while to tell it all... some of it she might not."

"Huh." Cyrene went over to a pot near the fire and poured something out of it into mugs. She brought them back over and handed Xena one. "Things go alright up there with those women?"

Xena's lips twitched. "It worked out. I had to break someone's neck, but it's quiet up there now. Gabrielle cleared up some problems."

Cyrene sighed. "I almost went up there and broke some necks myself." She admitted. "Ridiculous, pissy wenches. I can't believe they sold out to the Spartans."

"Gran took care of it."

"She certainly did." The innkeeper nodded. "Scared the pants off your brother. He wasn't expecting that at all."

Xena sipped the mulled cider, feeling the warmth travel down and gather in her belly. "No, I guess he wouldn't."

Cyrene studied her face, then, with a slight frown, she got up and picked up a candle, holding it closer, then she reached up and touched the skin above Xena's left eyebrow.

Xena stayed still, watching her quietly.

Her mother cocked her head. "That hoof scar's gone." She said. "You've had that since you were six years old."

"Yeah." Xena kicked her leg out a little, glancing down at her bare thigh. "They're all gone." She hiked her knee up and displayed it, the white scar tissue from her injury in Athens nowhere to be seen. "We had a little problem happen when we were in the city."

Cyrene looked at her intently. "Problem?"

"Mm." Her daughter nodded. "Had a building fall in on us and we ended up on Mount Olympus." She glanced up at Cyrene's face, seeing a look of honest startlement appear. "Wasn't one of my better moments."

"By the gods." Cyrene whispered.

"Well, yeah." Xena said. "was all about the gods. Zeus decided he wanted to see us." She watched her mother lift her hand to her mouth, her eyes full of awe and something close to fear. "Anyway, it was all a screwup and we got sent back, but we lost the scars."

She had been debating with herself, how much to reveal to Cyrene - trying to judge by how much her mother seemed to be willing to reveal to her. How much did her mother know? How much did she suspect?

Cyrene exhaled. "Xena." She put her hand on Xena's and turned it over, looking at the palm. "Is Gabrielle all right?"

"She's fine." Xena smiled briefly. "It was all tangled up in this damn war.. and Hercules, and..."

well, anyway." She paused. "Might not be the last we heard of this."

"Ah." Cyrene leaned against the worktable. She pondered the words for a few moments. Then she looked up to see those pale eyes watching her, and a wry smile appeared on her face. "Sit down." She gestured to the kitchen worktable. "We probably need to talk."

**

Gabrielle was glad enough to leave the village behind for the night. She walked quietly across the central square, aware of the eyes watching her, and the murmured greetings announcing her presence.

She returned them. The attitudes she'd encountered were perceptibly different, there was a wariness, and a respect there in some faces she hadn't see before and Gabrielle was aware that things would never be the same for her with the Amazons.

And that was okay. She passed through the campfire as she headed towards the entrance to the village, feeling the warmth of the fire as she circled it, and watching her shadow dance off into the darkness.

That was okay, because she understood that something had really needed to change. Either that change might have been her relinquishing her right, or going in the direction she had, but Gabrielle had realized she had come to a point in her life where she had to grow.

She'd wanted to remain in place, she reasoned. THAT was why she wanted to go with Xena and Dori into the world, and just go around exploring things. That was a part of her life she cherished greatly, and the urge to go back to that simpler, in some ways happier time was understandable.

Understandable, but impossible. Gabrielle exhaled a little. It was time for her to grow up, and take charge, and accept the responsibility of the titles she'd frivolously shrugged off for so long.

Unfair, to let Ephiny take all that on, and not have the title. Unfair to the tribe, to force them into an absentee leadership.

After Ephiny gave birth, and had time to deal with her new infant, there might then be another change, but for right now?

"Suck it up, Gabrielle." The bard muttered to herself.

"Your Majesty?" Pasi, one of the younger Amazons stood up. "Did you say something?"

"No." Gabrielle grinned briefly. "Just talking to myself." She glanced around. "I do that sometimes."

She studied the group of youngsters - all of whom were watching her intently.

They were clustered around one of the smaller fires scattered around the periphery of the big square. Nearby were some of the group quarters, and Gabrielle figured they all probably lived in them and had developed a group relationship. "What are yo guys up to?"

They all looked happy for the attention. "We're just relaxing." Pasi said. "It's been a rough moon so far."

"We have some new wine from the merchant train." One of the others spoke up, a little shyly. "Would you like some, your majesty?"

Gabrielle smiled, and returned the few steps needed to join the group, taking a seat on one of the round log stools common to the village. "Sure." She rested her elbows on her knees, meeting the curious eyes.

They were all either around her age, or younger. Gabrielle suddenly felt a little pang, realizing

how long it had been since she'd had a group of just friends her age to pass the time with.

Back in Potideia. All the girls in the town roughly the same age had gathered to talk, and share gossip, make whispered remarks about the young men of the town, and share their lives - her and Lila included.

She hadn't of course shared her troubles with her family. The rest of them hadn't either, just frivolous, superficial chatter. It wasn't as if she couldn't talk to Xena, or to Dori, to Eph or the folks down in the town.

But it wasn't this. Gabrielle took the cup she was offered, and sipped it. It was raw, and sweet, and burned a little going down. "So what did you guys think of what happened tonight?"

Pasi eyed her. "Do you really want us to tell you?" She asked. "Most of the time when the elders ask us stuff like that they want to hear what they want to hear, not what we think."

Gabrielle smiled at her, the bard's pale eyes visibly twinkling. "Definitely want to hear what you have to say."

"Thought so." The second woman said. "I'm Verga, by the way. I don't think we ever talked before." She extended an arm, which Gabrielle gripped and released. "I was in the same group that took feathers with Cait."

"I do remember you." Gabrielle said. "You sucker punched Pony." She said. "YOU know how much I got to hear about that?"

Verga laughed. "About as much as we all heard about you taking Xena as your consort." She replied. "OMG. I almost took to drink to get away from it."

The group relaxed, the darkness, and the crisp popping of the small fire bringing an unexpected intimacy.

"Yeah, I know that wasn't the most popular of my unpopular decisions." Gabrielle leaned back, extending her booted legs and crossing them at the ankles. "But I was glad they accepted it. Xena and I.. that's not negotiable."

Pasi cleared her throat. "The new chicks." She said. "We were talking. They said you could have just named anyone as consort. You didn't have to do that, what you did with Xena. Is that true?"

Gabrielle nodded. "It's true." She said. "Ephiny and I talked about it, but I really wanted the tribe to accept her."

"Why?" Verga asked. "It just pissed a lot of them off."

Why? Gabrielle pondered that question. "Just because." She answered honestly. "There wasn't really a reason behind it. I love her. I knew I wouldn't name a consort because I'm just not into the stuff for show. If I could get her to agree to it, I wanted to do it."

"A lot of people thought what you did tonight was really cool." Pasi changed the subject after a short pause. "I thought it was, because now everyone will go back to just doing stuff, instead of it all being nervous and up in the air."

"They're scared." Verga clarified. "I heard one of those old tarts saying that." She cleared her throat. "But can I ask you something?"

"Sure." Gabrielle swirled her wine in its cup.

"HOW come you didn't do it yourself?" The young Amazon asked her. "Kill her, I mean. That would have really scared them. Maybe enough to shut them up for good."

Gabrielle took a sip. It hadn't occurred to her, honestly, to do anything other than what she did, in asking Xena to be her executioner. The warrior had expected it.

Should she have?

Could she have?

"That's a good question." She responded finally. "You know something? For a really long time when I traveled with Xena I was blood innocent. We went around, and I learned to fight, sure, and the gods only know we were in and around enough death and all that, but there was this line."

"She did the killing." Verga said, bluntly.

"She did." Gabrielle agreed. "Xe's very good at it. For a long time, I thought that was just driving her into Tartarus, you know?" She glanced at the women, who were silently fascinated. "Then I finally understood Xe just doesn't have the same moral structure that I do. It doesn't bother her to kill people. She doesn't think about it. Goes right past her." The bard flicked her fingers near her ear. "I don't."

Pasi nodded. "Cait was saying that. It changes stuff."

"It does." Gabrielle nodded slowly. "It changes everything. So even though now, I can take someone's life, and I have, it bothers me a lot in here." She touched her chest. "Xe knows that. So if I'd done it, and not asked her to, not only would I have hurt myself, I'd have hurt her too."

"Huh." Verga grunted.

"I turned myself inside out throwing up afterward as it was." The bard said, wryly. "It's just not a part of who I am as a person. No matter how much fighting I do."

"Your majesty." Pasi said.

"Gabrielle, please. We're just people talking here." The bard said.

Pasi paused. "Gabrielle." She said. "Are you really going to stay here with us now?"

An owl hooted nearby, and Gabrielle felt the gentle breeze come down the mountain, ruffling her hair and bringing just the faintest hint of another fireplace to her nose. "Yes." She answered. "I am going to stay here, and try to work to make this a good place for you all to live in, where you'll be happy, and where the tribe will grow and thrive." She could see the smiles appearing. "You like that idea?"

"We do." Verga nodded. "I know it pissed them others off, but it's like now maybe we have a voice here. You know?"

A voice. Gabrielle grinned. "Well, I want everyone to know they can come up to me, or come into my quarters, or stop me on the way across the plaza anytime, and talk. I like that."

"Do you?" Pasi cocked her head curiously.

"Yep." Gabrielle felt a gentle tug, as though someone had passed by and tapped her on the shoulder. "I really do." She stood up and set her cup down on her seat. "But right now I need to go tuck my kid into bed, and spend a little quiet time with Xe. been a really long day."

"Good night!" The group chorused. "Thanks for stopping by us." Pasi added with a shy grin. "See you tomorrow."

Gabrielle lifted her hand and waved, then she turned and disappeared into the darkness, heading for the path up the mountain.

Verga exhaled. "She's all right."

"She's honest." Pasi said. "Most of those other guys, they talk crap just to hear themselves, and put on airs. When she talks, she says real stuff."

"And she's really cute." Verga grinned.

They all chuckled.

"I think this is going to work out pretty cool." Verga said. "At least for us."

**

Xena climbed up the path for the second time, this time at a far more sedate pace. She had Dori, asleep, cradled in her arms and she moved through the shadows with steady confidence.

She crossed through the flat area that split off towards the Amazon village, and exchanged a signal of recognition with the Amazon once again on guard. The woman stepped out into the path and the warrior slowed as she approached, recognizing Solari. "Hey."

"Hey." Solari responded. "Gabrielle's still talking to folks in there. Everything's cool."

Xena nodded. "Things settle down?"

"Oh yeah." Solari agreed. "Even the elders shut up. Her Maj kicked major butt there."

The warrior smiled.

"Impressed the newbies." The Amazon went on. "Even that weird chick. She still has the hots for you, though."

Xena sighed.

"Hey, c'mon, Xena. Half the nation does." Solari grinned. "It's a compliment." She glanced around. "Can i walk you up to your place? I'll make points with her maj."

The warrior snorted a little, then chuckled. "C'mon. I've got some wine up there. Share a mug with me."

They walked together up the hill, dodging the gently moving limbs as the moonlight splashed among them. Xena found herself a little glad of the company, glad, in fact, that they were once again at home surrounded by friends and family. "How's the attitude in there?" She jerked her head back towards the village.

"You know, better than I figured." Solari said. "I wasn't sure what those damn hidebound women were going to do with that, but you know, her maj got some serious brass nipple points with that whole thing."

"Huh." Xena grunted.

"That was nice work you did." Solari said, after a pause. "Fast and no mess."

Xena wasn't sure how to react to that, since she didn't often get complimented on her assassination skills quite so bluntly. "Woman was an idiot." She said, briefly. "I need to get Renas aside and find out what the Hades her beef is."

"Figurehead." Solari said, succinctly.

"But what would she get out of if?" Xena pushed open the door to their cabin as they reached it, and held it as Solari came past her. She carried Dori into her bedroom and set her down in bed, tucking the covers around her.

Dori curled up immediately, clutching the stuffed dragon Xena put next to her. She opened her eyes, blinking a little. "Boo?"

"Right here, little one." Xena smoothed her daughter's disheveled hair back. "Go to sleep. I'll be right in the other room, waiting for your mama to come back."

"Boo c'n we go in the lake tomorrow?" Dori asked. "Want to show my friends how to go to fishes."

"Sure." Xena smiled. "We'll take all your friends, and Rusty too. How about that?"

Dori grinned. "Good!" She put her head down and squiggled closer to her toy, closing her eyes as Xena stood up and watched her for a moment.

"You glad we're home, Dori?" Xena asked.

Dori's eyes opened again. "Yes." She said. "C'n have fun now."

Xena smiled, and turned, walking back into the main part of the cabin. Solari was waiting patiently by the fireplace, examining a glass goblet. "Bet your glad to be back here."

She went over and retrieved a wineskin, pouring a mugful and handing it to Solari before she poured her own and gestured to the seats near the fire. "Siddown."

"Am I glad." Solari mused, as she took a seat and leaned back. "Y'know? I don't know."

Xena lifted a dark eyebrow. She studied the dark haired Amazon curiously, seeing a definite thoughtfulness in her face.

She liked Solari. Always had. The Amazon had always been one of the stalwart, straightforward women who'd stood by first Melosa, then Ephiny and Gabrielle, staying out of the politics and just being a strong right arm when one was needed.

"I was glad her Maj let me go with her." Solari said. "I was over all the henpecking. Most of them were blaming me anyhow, said Gabrielle was changing stuff up because of me."

"About the housing?"

"Yeah."

Xena took a sip of her wine. "She probably did." She said. "She likes you. If she thought that would make you happy, she'd do it."

Solari, surprisingly, blushed.

"That's Gabrielle." The warrior bit off a smile. "I think they're probably jealous."

"Eh." Solari grunted. "Maybe. Guess I get to find out now though. Pon said she picked out a little place near the back of the square for me." She said. "Went back and checked it out. It's nice. Gonna be nice to go back there after a day and chill."

"Like we do here." Xena indicated the cabin around them. "Gab knows what it's like to live rough. She appreciates the privacy. Probably thought you would too."

Solari took a swallow of her wine. "Good stuff." She lifted the cup in Xena's direction. "Not like that stuff you gave us that one time."

Xena's very blue eyes twinkled. "Hey I drank it too." She issued a mild protest. "Boy did I regret it the next morning."

Solari grinned "Me too."

**

Gabrielle felt the presence as a prickling of her senses, and before she could think about what it was her body was reacting to a threat.

She ducked and threw herself to one side, feeling a whisper of motion as something went past her ribs and thunked into a tree behind her.

The fitful moonlight broke through and she saw a figure outlined in it, tossing something to one side and coming at her with quicksilver speed.

She set herself and waited, leaning a little forward as the figure closed in with her and a flash of metal showed against the leaves. Gabrielle let it come past her and then she grabbed quickly at the arm driving it, half turning and throwing her weight against her oncoming enemy.

She felt the impact, and heard a grunt, as her fingers closed hard on her attacker's arm and shoved the knife their hand away from her.

Fingers at her throat. Instinctively she sucked in a deep breath and punched with her free hand, feeling her knuckles meet flesh as the grip on her neck loosened. She punched again, as the attacker tried to wrench free, using her body weight to slam the arm she had hold of into the tree and scrape it against the rough bark.

Another grunt. Gabrielle opened her hand and shoved it hard at roughly the level of her own collarbone and felt skin under her fingers. She clamped down hard on what she realized was a throat, lunging forward and forcing her attacker backwards.

Dead silence. ONLY the sound of their boots scuffling in the leaves and then the crunch as Gabrielle drove her adversary against a tree and slammed forward, getting her forearm across the figure's throat and leaning hard.

The figure struggled, knee raising to kick. Gabrielle felt it move and blocked it with her own thigh, then shifting to slam her kneecap into her opponent's gut.

Gasping.

"Had enough?" Gabrielle said, in a conversational tone. "I keep doing this, I'll probably break something and the nearest healer is someone you really don't want to see right now."

The figure twisted and lunged against her. Gabrielle went with the motion, and then slammed her opponent back into the tree. "C'mon."

The figure went still.

Gabrielle squeezed the fingers of her left hand as hard as she could, hearing a stifled curse and the sound of a knife falling to the ground. She shifted her left boot over and covered it, the thick hilt evident under her arch.

Then she pushed her assailant over a body length, into a pool of moonlight. She was completely unsurprised to see Milena's glowering face reflected back at her, and felt actually, oddly relieved. "So that's how you thank me for the hospitality? Xe was was right. I should have said no."

Milena tried to yank herself free, but Gabrielle held her against the tree with ease, trying to decide what to do with the little idiot. "I'm warning you."

"Shut up. Shut up you bitch. I wanted you dead." Milena hissed. "I will kill you. I won't stop trying until I get you and then she's mine."

Gabrielle held her still. "You're really that stupid, huh?" She mused. "Kid, what the Hades is wrong with you?"

"Nothing!" Milena growled. "I just want what I want. I will have it if I have to cut you to chunks to get it."

Gabrielle studied her, the bard's blond head cocking slightly to one side. "No you won't." She said, leaning closer so they were eye to eye. "Because I'm going to kill you first."

Milena went absolutely still, her eyes widening in the dim light.

"Ah." Gabrielle said. "Didn't expect that, huh? Let me tell you something, you little stinker." She leaned closer. "She's mine." The bard's eyes slitted. "In this life. In the next, in Tartarus or beyond."

Milena stared at her.

"So I'm going to do her a favor and kill you before she has to and believe me, kid. She will." Gabrielle whispered. "Rip your heart out right through your chest. I've seen her do it."

The pale eyes shifted and looked down.

Gabrielle didn't loosen her grip. "I understand what it is to want her, Milena." She said. "But she's not yours for the taking."

Milena looked up at her. "Would you really kill me?"

"Yes." Gabrielle answered, without hesitation. "Because I know what having something happen to me would do to her and you're not worth it."

"What an arrogant bitch you are." The girl said. "You think you're the only woman in the world for her?"

"Yes." Gabrielle answered again. "I do."

Milena lunged at her again, twisting and yanking with all her strength to get away from Gabrielle's grip. Gabrielle shoved her away, then as the girl came at her, she grabbed one of her arms and turned in a circle, using Milena's own momentum and the weight of her body to pull her around and send her head first into the tree.

She bounced off it and Gabrielle caught her in mid air, grabbing her by the back of the neck and throwing her against the trunk as hard as she could.

Her scream was cut off short and she slid down the trunk, hands twitching. Gabrielle released her and let her fall, seeing a splash of blood flicker into view in the moonlight.

Running footsteps, light and controlled. Gabrielle took a step back and lifted her hand as Cait came barreling right at her, the young Amazon's hair plastered back by the wind. "Cait."

"Oh my gosh." Cait hauled up and let out a whistle. "Where's the blood guards... hello! Hello!"

"It's okay." Gabrielle tried not to look at the still form. "I'm all right."

Cait knelt by Milena, and touched her. "Well, I thought this would be trouble." She frowned. "Bother."

More footsteps, and then there were a half dozen bodies in the clearing, and Ephiny was pushing her way through, her curly hair in complete disarray. "What in the Had... Gabrielle! Are you okay?"

Gabrielle folded her arms around her chest. "Yeah." She said. "It seems our guest thought they'd do someone a favor and knock me off."

Ephiny stared at the still form. "Well, y'know..."

"Yeah, Xena was right. As usual." Gabrielle sighed. "Boy that gets annoying sometimes."

"Well, she won't be doing anyone any favors any longer." Cait said, standing and dusting her hands off. "Good job, that."

"She jump you?" Ephiny moved closer to Gabrielle and lowered her voice.

"Shot at me with a crossbow, then tried a knife." Gabrielle answered, shortly. "Anyway. Put her on a pyre, I guess."

"Leave her here for the foxes." Cait objected. "She isn't worth the wood."

Another few sets of footsteps sounded and then Nala and Renas edged into the torchlight being held by the guard. "Oh." Nala frowned. "That one."

Renas stared at the body, then glanced at Gabrielle.

"Seems she wanted me out of the way." Gabrielle said, slowly, meeting the elders eye. "You wouldn't know anything about that, would you, Renas?"

Everyone fell silent. Renas stared at the queen for a long moment, then she looked away. "No." She replied quietly, "I don't, your majesty."

Cait grunted in satisfaction.

"Well." Gabrielle took a breath and released it. "It's been a very long day. Cait, please take her back and see she's burned."

"I will." Cait glanced around. "You lot, give me a hand, will you?" She motioned to two of the older women.

They hesitated, then nodded, and joined Cait in picking up Milena's body, as the rest slowly started to disperse.

Ephiny remained, standing at Gabrielle's side. "Surprised all the action didn't bring Big X running."

Gabrielle exhaled again. "She's there." She said, in a quiet tone. "Xe?" She lifted her voice a little, and a breath later she felt Xena's warmth pressed up against her back, and strong arms wrapping around her. "That was my fight. I really wasn't ever in any danger. was I?"

"Anytime you fight, there's danger." Xena said. "But she tangled with someone way out of her league and paid the price."

Gabrielle grunted. "Yeah." She sounded disgusted. "Can we go home now? I've had about enough of being me for today."

Xena gave her a hug, and patted her side. "C'mon." She guided her towards the path up to their cabin. "I've had those kind of days."

"Ugh."

**

Xena drizzled a bit of honey into the cup she was stirring, sniffing the steam interrogatively before she turned and handed it to her partner. Gabrielle was curled up on the couch, her elbow resting on the arm of it, as she watched the flames in pensive silence.

She'd changed out of her traveling clothes and they'd taken a bath, now the firelight revealed them just as two women in plain shifts, barefoot and casual together as the night closed in around them outside. "Gabrielle?"

Now, those grave eyes lifted and looked up at her as she took the cup. "Thanks." Gabrielle waited for Xena to sit down next to her with her own tea before she shifted a little and faced her. "I think I'm glad this day's finally over."

"Mm." Xena lifted her cup in Gabrielle's direction, then took a sip. "Glad we're here."

"Me too." Gabrielle studied her tea.

"But?" The warrior gave her a little nudge.

“But nothing. I was just thinking.” Gabrielle said. “About tonight. “

“Ah.” Xena extended her legs out over the bear rug. “What about tonight?”

Gabrielle shifted a little closer, putting her hand on her partner’s and lacing their fingers together. “You didn’t stop me.”

“No.” Xena put her feet up on the sturdy table, its edges cautiously padded for Dori’s sake. “Why should I have?” She asked.

Gabrielle thought about that for a while. “Boy, have we come a long way.” She finally said, her face twitching into a wry grimace.

“From me kneeling in the moonlight? Yeah.” Her partner acknowledged. “I look back and I’m not sure I even know who that person was anymore.”

“Me?”

“Me.” Xena turned her head and regarded her soulmate. “Knowing what I do now? Boy was that hypocritical of me, y’know?”

“Hm.” Gabrielle frowned.

Xena put her hand on the bard’s knee. “But anyway, no. You were right. That was your fight. Not mine.”

Gabrielle shifted and turned so she was facing Xena. “I don’t know if I agree with that.” She protested. “You could have....”

Xena’s brow twitched. “Given the subject of what you were arguing about? What was I supposed to say?” She asked. “What part of that argument would you have liked my comments on?” She eyed her partner. “Hm?”

Gabrielle’s eyes dropped to one side, then she peered up through her disordered bangs, a faint, embarrassed smile tugging at her lips. “Was I lying?”

Xena rested her wrist on Gabrielle’s shoulder, her fingertips gently brushing her cheek. “No.” She said, in an affectionate tone. “Everything you said was true. She would just never have stopped trying to change that, Gabrielle. I would have killed her, if you hadn’t.” She added. “I probably should have, when she was holding a knife to my throat.”

Gabrielle went still for a moment, then she looked sharply at her soulmate, one blond brow hiked.

“Had my hands full steering a ship at the time.” Xena’s dark lashes fluttered in bemused acknowledgement. “Had a scratch from it you can’t see anymore.” She touched her own neck.

“I’m never letting you go anywhere without me again, Xena. I miss too damn much.” The bard grouched. “And you NEVER tell me all the details.”

Xena cleared her throat. “At any rate, you were ready to do what you did. Me stopping you would have been pointless.”

“Hm.” Gabrielle nodded slightly. “I’m trying to figure out how I’m supposed to feel about this, Xe. It’s so different than how I felt earlier tonight. This sort of... I guess it almost... I don’t know.” She paused for a long moment, and Xena waited patiently for her, tracing a gentle, idle circle against her skin.

“I don’t know.” She finally repeated. “I think I sort of feel relieved.”

Xena kissed her gently. "Don't take this the wrong way." She prefaced her words. "I'll be happy to kick asses in your behalf until we're great grandparents if you want and I can."

Gabrielle studied her profile. "Xena, do you honestly think that's going to happen?" She asked. "Us being around long enough to see great grandkids, I mean."

"Now? Maybe." Xena replied. "Anyway." She returned to her previous thoughts. "I'm glad you showed those damned Amazons you can take care of things yourself."

"Why?"

Xena put her cup down and slid closer, gently cupping the back of Gabrielle's head and kissing her. "Takes away any crazy ideas of solving their problems by getting rid of me." She said, after they parted. "In any way."

Gabrielle licked her lips, savoring the tingle in her guts as her mind started to shift from the long day. "You really think they'd try that?" She asked, in a doubtful tone. "Xe, they're scared of you." She said. "Those of them who aren't madly in love with you that is."

"I know." Her partner leaned forward and gently rubbed noses. "But now they live here. When they only saw you every ten moons, it was different."

"Ah. Heh." Gabrielle grunted. "I'm more real now."

"Really real now." Xena agreed. "You're here, you're making changes, you have your own agenda, and people." She tilted her head and nibbled Gabrielle's ear. "One hand that probably scares the crap out of them. On the other, it makes you more familiar in terms of the politics."

"You think so?" Her partner mused. "Do I have an agenda?"

"Did you realize you promoted Cait to senior tonight?" Xena countered, with a slight smile.

"I did? I just asked her to take care of .." The bard frowned. "When did I do that?"

"Twenty warriors of the nation standing around you including your regent and you ask Cait to take charge." Xena rested her head against Gabrielle's. "Hon you just promoted her to Queen's chief guard, about what Pony is to Eph as weapons master."

Gabrielle eyed her, almost squinting as their glances met at very close quarters. "I hadn't really thought about any of that." She admitted. "I just knew Cait would do what I asked her to do."

"I know." Xena's eyes twinkled a little. "But that's what I meant about you having your own people. You jumped her over a lot of women because you trust her. It's not wrong. It's just going to rock the boat. "

"Gods." Gabrielle muttered, covering her eyes with one hand.

"Hey, they took it." Xena ruffled her hair. "She gave orders and they listened. It's not like Cait's a lightweight. They already respect her as a fighter."

Gabrielle reached up and stroked her partner's cheek. "I'm glad I picked a beautiful, smart consort who knows about all that stuff."

Xena produced a particularly sexy grin at the words. Then she sobered and her expression altered into something more serious. "I know this wasn't what you had in mind."

The bard's expression, though, was contented. "No, it wasn't." She acknowledged. "I really did want to take you, and Dori, and go somewhere else. But you know, Xe, that's a really selfish idea." She touched a finger to her companion's lips, stilling her speech. "It is. Selfish because I know Dori wants to play with her friends, and like it or not, i'm the queen of those Amazons, and because I know you want to stay here."

Xena's pale eyes dropped, then lifted.

Gabrielle traced the outline of her lips with her index finger. "So I'm going to be the queen for a

while, let Dori grow up here riding her pony, and having her friends and try to make you as happy as I can."

Xena gently captured Gabrielle's finger in her teeth, and bit down lightly on it. Then she opened her jaws and let it go. "That'll work for now." She said. "Im' not sure the Fates will let that go on forever though." She studied her partners face. "And who knows what's going to happen with our friends from Olympus." She demurred. "But I've got a few ideas about things I want to do around here and I'd like a chance to try em out."

"We'll take what we can get." Gabrielle set her cup down and focused all her attention on the tall body next to her. She wound her hand in Xenas then responded to the tug as her partner stood up and headed for the big, fluffy bed.

Through the long nights sleeping on the ground, Gabrielle had dreamed of that bed, matter of fact, and now she climbed into it and sprawled at her length over it and let out a sigh of appreciation. "Will I blow my new image if I sleep in tomorrow?"

Xena chuckled. "Don't worry about it. It'll take em till well after lunchtime to cough up the guts to come talk to you."

Gabrielle grinned. "Think so? Really? I don't know, Xe. I think maybe some of them think it's mostly an act with me,still."

"Well." Xena paused at the edge of the bed, hands on her hips. "If it is, you've got that role nailed now. But I think most of them know better. "

"Do they?"

Blue eyes twinkled in the candlelight. "I* know better."

Gabrielle blinked. "Wow."

Xena rolled into the bed after her, ending up on her side with her head propped up on her hand. "Wow?"

"Wow that was a pretty darn cool compliment." Gabrielle reached over and gently tweaked her partner's nose. "Thank you." She let her eyes half close, and exhaled. "Ugh."

"Tired? Xena asked.

Gabrielle stretched her body out and relaxed again. She looked up, her eyes tracing the dimly seen rafters of the roof of their home, set in place by Xena's hands and so, perfect in their symmetry.

She was glad she was home. There was a comfortable solidarity about the cabin, tucked away as it was here near the top of Xena's mountain.

Xena's mountain. Gabrielle thought about that. Sort of like their own little Mount Olympus, wasn't it? She smiled at the thought. Even if they had wood walls instead of cool marble and her hand painted mats for decoration, and Xena's little carvings everywhere.

Every corner of it was a part of them.

Was she tired? Her body wasn't, really. Despite the long day, and the traveling, and the unexpected battle. "My head's tired." She finally said. "I don't want to think about stuff anymore tonight."

"Good." Xena promptly reached over and untied the laces on her shift, pulling them loose. "I don't want to think any more tonight either."

Gabrielle felt the fabric loosen around her and she extended her hand to loosen the ties on Xena's

shift. She rolled onto her side as her shirt came free and ran her fingers through Xena's hair, feeling it soft and silky against her skin as Xena's hand came to rest with casual intent on her hip.

The warmth of the touch made her inhale, and she closed her eyes as Xena's lips gently explored hers.

She could taste the faint hint of mint from the tea they'd shared, a homely normal flavor so different than the ethereal drink of the gods and that made her think all over again about that choice.

That choice, and other choices her partner had made.

She paused and eased her head back a little, so she could look Xena in the eye. "Could I ask you something?"

Xena regarded her wryly. "Could I stop you?"

Gabrielle grinned briefly in acknowledgement then sobered, her eyes searching her partners face. "Why me?"

Xena was silent for a moment, her brow creasing as she cocked her head slightly to one side. "Why you what?" She asked, in a puzzled tone.

Gabrielle lifted her hand and laid it against Xena's cheek. "You could have anyone, Xe. Anyone you wanted. Why me? That's what that poor kid wanted to know. Why me? Why not her? Or anybody else?"

Xena's eyes shifted and she looked past Gabrielle's shoulder, her brow knitting even more tightly. "Why you?" she murmured softly.

Gabrielle gently brushed her thumb over her skin.

Then Xena lifted her head and looked back at her, pale eyes ochre in the candlelight. "Why not you?" She questioned. "What did that kid have that you don't?" There was blunt, honest puzzlement in her tone. "Why even ask me that?"

Gabrielle's lips twitched a little. "So nothing even a little special, huh?"

Those pale eyes dropped again. After a moment, Xena exhaled a little. "When I met you." She said. "I was in place in my life where I'd given up on the idea that anyone would love me for who I was." She paused. "For what I was."

Gabrielle felt the motion under her hand, the clenching of muscles just under the skin - but she remained silent, waiting.

'And you did." Xena looked up at her. "That made you special, but honestly Gabrielle it didn't make a damn difference. I had no reason. I just fell in love with you even though I knew it was a stupid thing to do for both of us. I just didn't..." She paused. "I couldn't stop or change it, and even in the worst times we had I didn't want to."

No, that was true. Gabrielle felt that in a deep, inevitable way. "You don't choose what path your heart leads you on." She leaned forward and rested her forehead against Xena's. "Sorry I asked that. It's a sort of dumb question." She sighed. "I'm not really sure what's wrong with me tonight with all this stuff."

Xena studied her, reaching over and rubbing her thumb against the furrowed forehead. "Crossroads." She commented briefly.

"Yeah." The bard answered, after a brief silence. "Even though I know there's really no choice walking through those things scares me crazy sometimes."

Xena reached around her and pulled her close in a hug. "I love you for who you are, y'know."

"I know." Gabrielle felt a little silly. "Anyway, sorry." She cleared her throat. "Listen.. um.. I've been thinking about Dori."

"Uh huh?" Xena rolled onto her back, pulling Gabrielle with her into a squash as she amiably went with the subject change. "What about her?"

"I think she needs a baby brother or sister." Gabrielle got the words out in a bit of a rush, the combination of mild embarrassment and the sudden clench of passion as Xena's hand cupped her breast making her squirm a bit.

"Uh huh. We talked bout that already."

Gabrielle sucked in a breath as one of the warrior's long legs slid between hers, and Xena nibbled her neck. "B.. w yeah, I know but ... I was thinking.."

"Were ya?"

"Ung." Gabrielle managed to keep focused. "Maybe we could try the tree again. With the apple."

Xena kissed her. "Okay." She nibbled the edge of Gabrielle's very sensitive ears. "But maybe this time you give me the seed."

Gabrielle went absolutely still. She opened her eyes, still breathing fast, and found Xena looking back at her, the faintest of smiles on her lips. "W...what?"

Xena's brows lifted.

The bard shifted a little, studying her face. "I didn't think you.. " She faltered. "I mean.. you want..."

"I think I might." Xena apparently understood the fragments. "Give it a try, anyway."

Gabrielle exhaled, feeling more than a bit of shock. "Xe, I dont' think I ..." She faltered again. "I mean, with you it's..." She stopped speaking, resting her weight on her elbows and looking at Xena. "You serious?"

Xena nodded.

Wow. When they'd spoken about it, the few times they had, Gabrielle remembered the definite, absolute negative vibe she'd gotten – to find that now turned upside down surprised her.

Shocked her, in truth. She watched the angular face, seeing the faint motion of the muscles under the skin as Xena watched her back. Had the trip to Mount Olympus really changed that much? "Really, Xe?"

"Seems weird, huh?" Xena replied, in a mild tone. "Maybe I've gotten so many damn second chances I figured what the Hades. Why not?"

"I don't think I can do that." Gabrielle said. "Maybe that's why not? I'm not you."

"Guess we'll find out." Xena went back to her assault. "You never know till you try." She rolled them both over and settled herself gently over her partner's body, pinning her lightly down. "But not tonight." She grinned. "Tonight you're mine."

Gabrielle hesitated, then she wrapped her arms around Xena's waist and grinned back. "Now that I can do." She agreed. "No more tal.. pumpf."

**

It was a wash of beautiful morning sunlight that woke her. Gabrielle felt the warmth of it on her

face, and she turned over to escape it, snuggling up against Xena's body with a contented grunt.

What a night.

Her body still felt all sensitized from it. Gabrielle let her eyes drift closed, and savored the feeling, letting her mind drift back to their talk.

Had Xena really said what she thought she'd said? Gabrielle lay there quietly breathing for a moment. She'd always taken it for granted that, if they were going to try and have another child together, that she'd be the bearer.

Hadn't been a question. Xena had said, point blank, she wasn't interested, in fact, that she thought she was too old for it.

Gabrielle opened one eye, to study the light dappled profile on the pillow next to hers. That hadn't been how she'd put it, she'd said she didn't think her body was capable of it anymore, but that's what she'd meant.

And, maybe she'd had a point. Her cycles had never been regular, after all.

But now? Gabrielle traced the dark brows, and the equally dark lashes. Now maybe she wanted to try it. Maybe Dori had changed how she felt.

Maybe enough time had passed after Solon's death. Gabrielle had look away from her partner's face thinking that, still feeling the pain of it.

She was glad for Xena, if that was the case. Gabrielle knew she loved Dori, completely and absolutely just as she'd promised she would but...

But.

Gabrielle felt tears stinging her eyes, thinking of her soulmate being made whole, in this last, most profound way. There was a place in both of them that would dearly cherish having that shadow eased and Gabrielle couldn't pretend that the thought of Xena cradling a newborn of her own didn't light her heart with joy.

But.

Could they really do that? Could she really.. Gabrielle took a little breath. It was one thing when she'd had Dori, and they'd realized who really had for want of a better term, fathered her. That was one thing, because Xena had gods blood in her and because she'd willed it to happen.

She didn't have gods blood. She couldn't do what Xena did. Xena knew that. Gabrielle felt the body next to her shift a little, and then Xena draped an arm over her and drew her closer.

She felt suddenly rather small, and inadequate. If Xena really wanted this, she really wanted to be able to give it to her and yet...

And yet.

"Ggggabrielle."

The low rumble tickled her ears. Gabrielle tilted her head back and peered up. She could see a lazy blue eye watching her from under a half lid, yet she felt as open and exposed as she ever had- sensing that Xena knew exactly what she was thinking.

Did she?

Then, abruptly, her ears registered the utter quietness of the cabin around them, and the lack of Dori's presence, and she surged up in alarm only to be held in place by Xena's arm. "B... Do.."

“Down in the stable, with the pony.” Xena informed her, the warrior’s eyes now firmly closed. “Relax.”

“Ugh.” Gabrielle collapsed back onto the soft surface, as her heartbeat settled. “Sheesh.”

“You said you wanted to sleep in.” Her partner gathered her up in her arms and tugged the covers closer. “Took her down to play with the twins. They were all cleaning pony crap when I left.”

“Toris watching them?”

“Uh huh.”

Gabrielle relaxed, and closed her eyes. She could hear the birds chirping outside, and the sound of crickets, and just beyond that the rustling of the leaves in the breeze that was coming in the window and ruffling her hair.

She could feel the warmth of Xena’s arm, draped over her and knew a moment of perfect contentment. “Thank you for indulging my slothdom.” She let her hand rest on Xena’s side.

“Slothdom?” One blue eye appeared, examining her. “We didn’t go to bed until just before dawn, Gabrielle. “

Gabrielle grinned rakishly. “Heh.” Then she let her head rest against Xena’s arm, her thumb rubbing lightly across the skin on her bare ribcage. “Ah, Xe.”

“What’s up?” Xena gave her a scratch on the back of her neck.

“Just me.” Gabrielle responded. “Being me.”

Xena chuckled softly. “Still freaked out?”

The bard lay quietly for a few minutes. “I just don’t want to disappoint you.” She said, after a while. “I know that sounds silly after all this time and everything.”

“What makes you think you will?”

Gabrielle looked up at her. “Xena.” Her voice was wry but affectionate. “You know.. um.” She took a breath. “We could find another way. Like what I was thinking. Before.”

“I don’t want to find another way.” Xena pulled her over and gave her a kiss. “Its you or nothing.’

“Xe.”

Xena laughed, a light and unusually happy sound. “Would you relax? If it happens it happens, Gabrielle. Lighten up.”

Gabrielle sighed. Then she took a breath to comment and ended up having to use it to squeal, as Xena slid one hand down the back of her leg and tickled her on the back of her thigh. “Yow!!!

©©H (this is Mocha’s contribution to this manuscript)

She tried to grab for a bit of sensitive flesh but Xena had her tangled up in the light cover they were under and she squirmed and rolled over, only to have her navel attacked as Xena kept her own knees out of range. “Ooorrrr.... Xena!!!”

“Hehe.” Xena deftly got her arms around her partner and held her still, one hand with it’s wiggling fingers exposed in the sunlit air.

Gabrielle accepted the distraction. What choice did she have, really? Was there a point to arguing about it? “I’m gonna...”

“NO you’re not.” Xena rolled out of bed as she evaded her struggling bedmate and scooped her

up, whirling her into the pool of sunlight from the window and kissing her with a fiercely joyous passion.

“Whoof.” Gabrielle blinked as they paused for breath. “That sure beats tickling.” She wrapped her arms around Xena and hugged her. “How about a splash in the spring before breakfast?”

“Or as breakfast? I saw some elderberries out there last night.”

They ducked out the door and circled the cabin, climbing the rise to the tree shrouded dell where water softly bubbled, emerging from the rocks and spilling into the deep, clear spring that supplied their cabin.

“Ahh.” Xena stepped down the neatly arranged rocks and into the pool, pausing halfway in and diving the rest of the way in a scattering of cold drops.

Gabrielle took her time following, letting her skin get used to the chill before she arrived at the bottom of the hewn steps and submerged, ducking her head under the surface and blowing a storm of bubbles from her nose before she came back up.

The air was cool, the pool half shadow and half sunlight and she could taste the mineral tang on her tongue as she licked droplets off her lips.

Xena came up from another dive, shaking her head and sending water flying as she spread her arms to either side on half submerged rocks, half in shadow, half in sunlight. She leaned back and extended her legs forward, her skin glistening. “So.”

Gabrielle swam over to her and leaned on a sun warmed rock. “So.”

They studied each other. Gabrielle realized she was getting used to not seeing any scars on her partner. It no longer seemed weird to her and she smiled as she let her hand rest on Xena’s now unmarked knee.

The air had a slight crispness to it, and she could feel in the movement of it the signals of the change of seasons. That meant the end of summer and the approach of harvest season and she found her mind jumping ahead to plans for them, for the tribe, and for their extended family.

Thoughts of traveling were fading, she realized. She even found a measure of excitement in the thought of reshaping the Amazons, and rebuilding some of the growth in Amphipolis that Xena had mentioned.

She looked up at her partner. “Know something?”

“What?”

“I want to rebuild that theatre, Xe. I want to bring those kids back who wanted to learn to act, and see what we can do with them.”

Xena’s face creased into a smile. “I want to hear your stories in it.” She said. “Know what I was thinking?”

“What?”

Xena put her hands behind her head and leaned back. “Too easy, those Spartans getting through from Thrace. We should build some relationships back there.”

Gabrielle felt a faint prickle down her spine. “Relationships?”

Her partner nodded. “They’re closer to us than Athens.” She said, briefly. “Maybe they’re interested in a little trading.”

Gabrielle watched the pale eyes drifting casually around, then back to her. “Maybe an alliance.” She said. “Athens hasn’t done much for us, that’s for sure.”

“Maybe.”

“We could get ourselves in trouble with that.” The bard said, in a mild tone.

“Gabrielle, we get ourselves in trouble with pretty much every damn thing we do including picking flowers.”

Well, that was true. Gabrielle had to acknowledge. She settled herself next to Xena and regarded the sun splashed foliage that surrounded their home with a freshly appreciative eye. “You know, it’s really pretty up here.”

Xena regarded her. “Here?”

“This place.” Gabrielle gestured towards the hillside their cabin was built on. The cabin was set on a level portion of the hill, surrounded by an open space of wild grass around it. The spring they were in was within easy reach, the wood and hammered metal piping that brought water into the cabin circling around the back behind where Xena was leaning.

Tall trees ringed the area and as the sun squirmed through them and lit the water’s surface, Gabrielle felt herself relax and finally settle into the space, knowing a sense of home in it consciously for the first time.

More than their first cabin down the mountain. More so even than Amphipolis itself, or the village she’d founded just down the path with the Amazons. It moved from being the place she stored her things between adventures to a place she belonged in an odd prickling rush that sort of surprised her.

Was she growing out of being a vagabond? Gabrielle smiled a little as she felt the warmth of Xena’s arm as it draped over her shoulders and she willingly gave into the pressure and half rolled over in the water to give her partner a hug in return.

Maybe it would be nice to settle down for a while and enjoy this beautiful space.

“Y’know what?” Xena kicked up a bit of water with her foot.

“What?”

“I was just thinking. When Hercules shows up here with his sisters.” Xena mused. “You think we could put em to work in mom’s kitchen for a while until I figure out how to get them fixed?”

Gabrielle lifted her head and peered at her partner’s face, seeing that mischievous glint in those very blue eyes and that little smile that never meant anything but trouble.

And then again..... She returned it with one of her own. “Heck, why not? Maybe they could help out in the stables too. Get them a nice good taste of mortal life. “

“Maybe they can act in one of your plays.”

“Let’s not get too crazy, okay?”

“They could play the pile of horse manure I fell in with that damn cow.”

“Heh.”

**

The end. (for now)